

Report of Share & Tell session on “Exploring Legitimacy through Quaker Eyes”

Facilitator: David Tehr (WARM)
Session Length: 90 minutes

Topic: Exploring Legitimacy through Quaker Eyes
Attendance: 20

Quotations from A.D. Lindsay’s book “The Essentials of Democracy” (2nd edition Sept 1935, from his series of 5 lectures at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania in 1929), plus the photo below helped a discussion to proceed on certain aspects of Friends thoughts on what helped make a government (and consequently its laws) more or less “legitimate”. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.217874/page/n7/mode/2up>



The Speaker is the person who presides over the House of Commons.

In the House of Commons. The distance between these two red lines is two swords lengths. In the old days when MPs used to carry swords, it was dangerous if they got angry with each other. So these two lines are here to remind MPs that they shouldn't start a fight, and they can't go over this line when they are speaking in a debate.

All Friends except one felt the Australian custom of compulsory attendance at the polling booth on election day was a good thing. The one Friend who spoke against this idea felt it forced people who had little or no idea of the political landscape to make decisions they were not capable of making. Those in favour felt: it gave a better mandate to the winning party; made governments and citizens more responsible; and made political debate more civil (instead of having to “anger” citizens enough to get out and vote.

Likewise, all Friends except one (the facilitator David Tehr) felt that some form of proportional representation (i.e. multi-member electorates) was a better and more representative manner of electing parliamentary representatives than the majoritarian (or single-member electorate) method.

David Tehr spoke passionately against the idea of proportional representation saying it too often caused minority governments which would then have to do “back room deals” post-election, which would hamstring governments fulfilling their election promises, and muddy the waters of accountability. It also too often gave minority parties a balance of power, which gave them influence way beyond what was deserving. With a two party system that had a strong and encouraged alternative government, “minority” issues that were reasonable had to be addressed by both parties (since elections are won and lost by small margins) whilst other “minority” issues that were not reasonable could be sidelined without need of censure.

A younger Friend expressed their distress at not being able to fully understand the complexities of modern representative democracy. It is obvious that this session raised more questions than it answered.