

Prospectus for a Quaker Think Tank

Keith Helmuth

Prepared for a 2003 gathering of Quaker ecologists, economists, and public policy professionals convened at Pendle Hill, Wallingford, PA, which resulted in the creation of Quaker Institute for the Future. <https://quakerinstitute.org/>

“Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism”

When Kenneth Boulding outlined his ideas on the “evolutionary potential of Quakerism” in the 1964 Backhouse Lecture ¹, he touched on a theme present from the beginning of the Religious Society of Friends. George Fox’s announcement that “Christ has come to teach his people himself” shifted the basis of spiritual life from a preoccupation with the security of “salvation” to an engagement with the process of learning. With this movement from a static conception of spiritual life to an open horizon of learning, Fox and his compatriots imbued Quakerism with the unique evolutionary potential identified by Kenneth Boulding.

In addition, early Friends had the prescience to see (later epitomized in John Woolman) that what they had discovered had a potential of universal scope—a characteristic of human development available to all persons, male and female of whatever culture or creed. Thus Friends, from the beginning, have been drawn to the frontlines of innovative learning, progressive education, and dialogic communication in the service of universal human betterment. While Friends are no longer unique in this orientation, a convincing case can be made that the evolutionary potential of Quakerism may yet enable it to play a useful roll with regard to a range of critical problems and the human future.

The Quaker approach to learning leads to a sense of collectively revealed understanding. Collectively revealed understanding, by the very nature of the process through which it emerges, tends to focus on the common good. And it is, above all else, a focus on the common good that must be brought into public policy if the catastrophic potential of current world trends are to be forestalled and better adaptations to our ecological and social realities are to be created.

World Trends and the Human Future

It is commonly noted by scholars of world trends that the current state of human social learning suffers a disconnection from the technological and economic dynamic of modern life. Lynton Keith Caldwell, a pioneer in public policy work, the inventor of the environmental impact assessment, and colleague of Kenneth Boulding, recently asked:

Have the evolved capabilities of the human mind and culture failed thus far to sufficiently equip humanity to comprehend and evaluate the consequences ... of its accelerating far-reaching impact upon its environment and thereby upon itself? ²

Jay Forrester, MIT system scientist, writes;

Our social systems belong to the class called multi-loop, nonlinear feedback systems. In the long history of evolution it has not been necessary for man to understand these systems until very recent historical times. Evolutionary processes have not given us the mental skill needed to properly interpret the dynamic behavior of the systems of which we now have become a part. ³

Forrester suggests that if humanity is to overcome this handicap it will be through an extended capacity for learning. This task is one for which Friends are especially well suited. A Quaker think tank could be a helpful way for Friends to take up this task.

World trends that are on a trajectory of ecological and social catastrophe are frequently concentrated in the control of resources and the operation of the economy. Much of the potential for positive human development along a path of ecological and social integrity is also focused on access to resources and the functioning of the economy. It is transparently evident that in both the deadlock of destructive interests and in the promise of ecologically sustainable adaptation, the operation of the economy is the key factor determining the human future. Public policy, guided by the common good, is the tool that can be effectively applied to this central dilemma of human adaptation. The market is often adequately self-regulating within a narrow range of production and

exchange, but it is often not self-regulating within the larger context of ecologically sound human adaptation and the overall human-earth relationship. This area of extended learning could become an important focus for a Quaker think tank.

Refocusing the Economics of Human Solidarity

Quakerism has a long history of concern with the economics of human solidarity, but in recent times a reticence seems to have grown up among Friends with regard to addressing public policy in this area. This reticence may stem, in part, from the legacy of the Cold War when an economic ideology and revolutionary movement that purported to claim the moral high ground of social and economic justice, pitted itself against the social organization and property relationships of the capital driven market economy. We all know how badly most of the command economies turned out, and how the leadership of many of these jurisdictions failed the moral claim with which their movement began. But we also know how badly, in many respects, things are now going for human solidarity, biotic integrity, and the common good with the drive for capital accumulation taking over more and more of the world's economic activity.

Many politicians, economists, and corporate leaders are acting as if, having vanquished an economic ideology that claimed the moral high ground, the moral high ground, *ipso facto*, disappears. But, of course, it does not disappear. The reality of the common good and the questions around improving and advancing social justice do not go away. They land squarely in the lap of the victorious free market capital accumulating culture whether it likes it or not. There is nowhere else for them to go. It is the nature of the case in this contest that the winner inherits the moral assignment of the common good.

There is no other authority or leadership remaining to pick up the mandate and carry forward the obligation for advancing human betterment. This is why certain high profile figures of international finance and investment, such as James Wolfensohn (World Bank), Joseph Stiglitz (formerly World Bank) and George Soros (Soros Fund Management) are now warning that unless the capital driven economy can change from

its present winner-take-all trajectory to an orientation of equity, widely shared benefits, and service to the common good, it will chaotically deconstruct more and more of the social economy on which the capital economy rests, and likely trigger its own self destruction. This is a case that should be of special interest to Quakers, and apply with particular cogency to the whole Religious Society of Friends. Quakers have a long tradition of advancing human betterment, and a long tradition of its members professionally involved in various aspects of the capital driven economy, the present writer included.

From the point of view of human betterment and the common good, economics is a social science, and applied economics a moral discipline, as Adam Smith—the foundational thinker of capitalism—and his compatriots knew very well. And being a moral discipline, economics is precisely the arena where religion enters most fully into the service of the world. It is in this arena of analysis and policy articulation that Friends can find a more fully rounded expression of the peace testimony as it develops within the economics of human solidarity.

Quakers should be no more inclined to leave economics to the economists than they are to leave religion to the priests. Economics has become, in effect, the established religion of the modern world and now needs the same wind of reform that Friends brought to religion in the 17th century.

Extended Learning, Economic Behaviour, and Human Adaptation

The emergence of public policy into a full understanding of its ecological context, defines a new horizon of engagement with economics. The emergence of economics into a full understanding of its ecological context defines a new horizon of engagement with public policy. Like the entwined strands of the genetic code, public policy and economics together govern expansion and contraction of the common good, starting with access to the means of life.

Understanding human economic behaviour and public policy within the full ecological context of the common good provides the fundamental grounding and practical orientation for the work of human adaptation and re-adaptation—the work of the human-earth relationship. The growth of this ecological awareness advances the moral horizon of the human world.

Because the ecological context of biotic process has a characteristic integrity, an expanding ethic of enhancement has now emerged within the field of the human-earth relationship. In 1945 Aldo Leopold, conservation biologist and author of *A Sand County Almanac*, framed this ethic in a succinct and enduring way: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁴

The question of the human-earth relationship and the questions of human adaptation and re-adaptation within the ecological integrity of biotic process, are paramount to the future of human settlements and their global interaction, paramount to an understanding and practice of the common good. To paraphrase Aldo Leopold we can say; a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of human communities. It is wrong when it tends otherwise. In a time like the present, when a focus on human solidarity and the common good is a preeminent requirement for human survival in any meaningful and acceptable sense, this is the ethic, the moral template against which all public policy must be gauged and evaluated.

Despite this emerging understanding, it is obvious that in many areas of decision making the common good is not the guiding context. Some areas of decision-making are actively opposed to the advance of the common good. The United States is now engaged in a political situation that casts a diminishing light on the moral, legal, social, economic, and ecological understandings of the common good. With regard to the now dominant political context, former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, uttered the defining words when she said; “There is no such thing as society.” Meaning that, in her view,

social reality is composed only of individual and special interests competing with each other.

Competing Trajectories

There is a developing contest between the ecology of the common good and the triage of special interests. The so-called political realists say the triage of special interests has always been the way of the human world and it is naive to think it could ever be otherwise. The folks trying to be ecologically objective about the human-earth relationship and equitable human development say it is naive of the political realists to think the globalizing trajectory of the capital driven economy can carry on its resource extraction and wealth accumulation without triggering environmental catastrophe and societal disintegration.

While impressive historical evidence can be marshalled to support the political realists, the ecological realists insist the larger question is whether an alternative evolutionary dynamic—a dynamic centered in the common good—can begin to offset the regime of special interests in a way that has an increasingly countervailing effect. This is not an exotic proposition. There are myriad examples at the local, regional, and even national levels where this latter course of socioeconomic development is being chosen. The question is, which tendency is on the rise, which trajectory will carry the human world and the human-earth relationship into what kind of future?

For at least the last fifty-five years various scholars, religious leaders and visionary political thinkers have told us the human world is at a crossroads. The question now is have we travelled so deeply into militarism and war, economic and social inequity, and ecological degradation that civil politics, the equitable sharing of the means of life, and the preserving of ecological integrity have no significant policy context from which to chart an alternative path leading away from societal catastrophe?

If we ask how it is that dominant groups in modern societies maintain their influence, one of the important answers is by their control of the narratives of change.

Change—continuous and inexorable—is the modern reality that gathers disparate groups into a social collective that can be used to direct cultural adaptation. The telling of convincing stories about how things are changing and how we must respond and conform to these changes is one of the main techniques of shaping cultural adaptation. Adapting to change through the purchase and use of products, including war-making products, is the story being used to shape and extend the culture of capital accumulation.

The growth of equity, the crafting of justice, the advance of the common good, and the economics of ecological sustainability is also a story about change, and it needs to be told in as many ways as possible and as convincingly as possible in order to counter the narrative of change that is leading to a fortress of privilege for some and to a diminished, insecure and increasingly desperate existence for many others.

The question of who can tell the most convincing story about social and economic change is not a contest between objective, realistic economists, politicians and corporate leaders on the one hand and un-objective, un-realistic humanitarians and environmentalists on the other. Both sides, for the most part, are generally objective. But they are objective about different realities.

“Objectivity is not neutrality”⁵, not in history, not in science and not in public life. It is perfectly possible to be objective about the protection of privilege. And it is, likewise, quite possible to be objective about advancing human solidarity and ecological integrity and about the keying of public policy to the common good. They are different moral realities. We make our choices. We decide how we will answer the question of the moral assignment. Nobody escapes. Different folks just answer the question in different ways. A Quaker think tank would be able to engage with the narratives of change in a way that sets the question of moral assignment at the forefront of its deliberations and communications.

A Test of Faith

It is not unreasonable to decide that the trajectory of militarism, entrenched inequity and ecological degradation has won the day and give up the struggle for an alternative path. It is becoming harder and harder to work with conviction for the alternative vision. The Religious Society of Friends has retired into periods of quietism in the past and it is not impossible that it may do so again. There is a certain kind of spirituality that argues for an enclave strategy when times are bad. When thoughts like this cloud the horizon, I often think of John Woolman and am heartened to imagine the closely reasoned things he would have to say about this “calamity”, a “calamity” he clearly foresaw in pretty much the terms in which it is unfolding.^{6, 7}

The rationale for this prospectus is based on John Woolman’s reading of spirituality—a reading that sees spiritual diminishment in failing to engage public policy for the common good; a reading that insists that no matter how bad the times it is both strategically and spiritually an error to give up on human solidarity and the common good. Strategically, we never know what turn of events will overturn a political reality that seems unalterably dominant. Spiritually, it is vital to hold human solidarity and a vision of the common good with unwavering focus especially when the lights of reason, good will, and compassion are being systematically dimmed and extinguished. Why would one even consider relenting? Why would one give up the core of faith and thus contribute to the acceptance of decision making through violence, entrenched inequity, and the disabling of ecological integrity?

Friends have been pioneers in a universal and transcendent experience of faith that makes human solidarity a first order reality. Under the imprint of the Divine human solidarity has been the focus that centers and balances all our work for human betterment. Keyed to this heritage and guided by this vision, a Quaker think tank could help to further activate the evolutionary potential still carried in the Religious Society of Friends.

“Quaker Studies on Human Betterment” Revisited

In his later years, Kenneth Boulding convened a collegial effort he called “Quaker Studies on Human Betterment.” This proposal for a Quaker think tank picks up and builds on Boulding’s initiative. It surmises that among Friends there are a significant number of persons working in the areas of economics and business, social and ecosystem ecology, geography and human settlement, community development, education, computer sciences, media and communication, conflict resolution, health sciences, ethics and public policy who would be interested in participating in a Quaker network focused on public policy and the common good.

This proposal does not assume the creation of an “institution” or even attachment to an institutional context, although that might be an opportunity that would occur. It starts with a network communication model, and suggests the formation of task groups for addressing specific areas of concern, analysis, and communication. It starts with the idea of information and education outreach within the Religious Society of Friends. It starts by helping to develop an increased level of awareness and interest on issues of public policy and the common good that are within the action focus of a variety of Friends organizations in the United States and Canada: Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC), Quaker International Affairs Programme (Canada) (QIAP), Quaker United Nations Organization (QUNO). It would aim to draw increasing support to the activities and actions of these frontline Quaker organizations. It would do this by producing bulletins, reports, study materials and works of analysis for distribution and use within the Religious Society of Friends. It could contribute study group and conference leadership to this educational effort. Beyond this, it may evolve to directly engage and address public policy and the common good within national and international dialogues.

The Public Policy Cycle

In his book *Do Think Tanks Matter?*⁸, Donald E. Abelson identifies three stages of the public policy cycle: articulation, formulation, and implementation. Depending on their

expertise and resources, think tanks tend to specialize on entering the policy cycle at one or two of these stages.

Think tanks with a high-level of financial resources may work at contributing to all three stages of the policy cycle. Looking at Friends Committee on National Legislation (US) and the newly formed Quaker International Affairs Programme (Canada), it is clear their efforts are directed primarily to the formulation stage of the policy cycle, but with a strong component of background articulation. Entering the implementation stage generally requires the movement of think tank staff, or their allies in the academic, research, and business worlds, into government administration or government advisory positions.

A Quaker think tank on the common good would seem most naturally suited to enter the policy cycle at the stage of articulation—the stage of values, orientation, commitment, and education. In this capacity it would serve, first of all, as a support process for FCNL, QIAP and perhaps to some extent for QUNO. What a Quaker think tank might become in the course of its development (in following out its “evolutionary potential) remains to be seen. This proposal is only to suggest a way of beginning.

A Sense of Orientation and Beginning

The sense from which this proposal has grown is that economics is the key factor in many of the tangled dilemmas that plague the human-earth relationship and the social ecology of communities world wide. A Quaker think tank approach to these dilemmas might be usefully framed in the following way:

Economics of Equity (access to the means of life).

Economics of Environmental Justice (access to healthy environments).

Economics as a Social Science (economic decision making that promotes social health).

Economics as an Ecological Science (economic decision that promotes biospheric health).

Monetary System as a Technology of Social Trust (money as a common pool public resource)

Obviously, these elements could be framed in a variety of ways and additional elements are no doubt of critical importance to the theme of this proposal. The effort here is just to offer a potential opening, a way of looking at and approaching a serious and sustained effort to bring the full effect of the Quaker heritage to bear on issues of public policy and the common good through the collegial engagement of Friends already working in the relevant fields.

The Spiritual Dimension and the Religious World View

It may be asked why should public policy and a concern for the common good be seen as matters of religious importance and as matters of spiritual survival? To a certain extent this question has been addressed throughout this proposal. In addition, and in conclusion I return to Kenneth Boulding. He had the grace of expression to phrase the largest of thoughts and widest of concerns in the straightest most penetrating and enduring way. Forty years ago he spoke to the substance of this proposal in way that is still awaiting a full response.

I suggest the Society of Friends has a great intellectual task ahead of it, in the translation of its religious and ethical experiences and insights into a conscious understanding of the way in which the kind of love that we treasure and covet can be produced, defended and extended. A great part of this task no doubt lies outside of the Society of Friends, for instances in the development of the social sciences. Friends however have a unique opportunity before them in the decades to come. I believe the next major task of the Society of Friends is to mobilize this intellectual potential and catch a vision of the great intellectual task to which it is called. If it can respond to this vision its evolutionary potential may be great indeed.

Why, however, should a religious society have an intellectual task – surely this should be left to the universities! The answer is that the task in question is spiritual as well as intellectual, in the sense that it involves not merely abstract knowledge, but love and community. One of the great dangers is ... a break in community between intellectuals and the rest of society. The besetting sin of the intellectual is pride, and this frequently leads ... to disaster. It is part of the genius of the Society of Friends that it has been able to unite in a single fellowship of human affection and concern both intellectuals and those who carry out the great common tasks of life.

The great search of man today is for a human identity that will permit him to live in peace with all his fellows. [In] the Society of Friends we do have a foretaste of the “human identity” and the true world community for which we all long. In the establishment of this world community the Society of Friends has a great pioneering work to do.⁹

I have been suggesting that one of the things we could do with is an institute for the study of clouded crystal balls ... The great predicament of the human race is that all experiences are of the past but all our decisions are about the future. Unless we at least think we know something about the future, decisions are impossible, for all decisions involve choices among images of alternative futures. This is why the study of the future is more than an intellectual curiosity; it is essential to the survival of humankind itself.¹⁰

Closing Note

This sketch and proposal is based on my reading of the times and on my sense of a growing desire among Friends for a stronger and more keenly relevant address for our testimonies to issues of critical importance which often seem impossibly complex and

frustratingly elusive. My proposal is meant as a catalyst, not as a blueprint. I am more interested in galvanizing a working response to this proposal than I am in the form the project proposed might eventually take. As a member of the Quaker Eco-Witness coordinating group, I can serve as an initial coordinator for those who are interested in helping with the thinking and planning needed to begin a Quaker think tank.

References

1. Boulding, Kenneth E., 1964. *The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism*. Wallingford PA; Pendle Hill Publications.
2. Caldwell, Lynton Keith, 1999. "Is Humanity Destined to Self-Destruct?", Boston; *Politics and the Life Sciences*, Volume 8, Number 1, March 1999.
3. Forrester, Jay W., 1977. "Counterintuitive Behavior of Social Systems". *Technology Review*, Number 73,
4. Leopold, Aldo, 1945. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York; Oxford University Press.
5. Haskell, Thomas, L., 1998. *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History*. Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press.
6. Woolman, John; Philips P. Moulton, editor, 1971. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. New York; Oxford University Press.

And here luxury and covetousness, with numerous oppressions and other evils attending them, appeared very afflicting to me, and I felt in that which is immutable that the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast on this continent. Nor have I words sufficient to set forth that longing I then felt that we who are placed along the coast, and have tasted the love and goodness of God, might arise in his strength and like faithful messengers labour to check the growth of these seeds, that they may not ripen to the ruin of our posterity. (page 129)

Quoted from Woolman's reflections while on a journey to visit a village of Indigenous people who had been dispossessed of their prosperous lowland and costal settlement region and driven into the rough mountainous terrain of what eventually became north-central Pennsylvania.

7. Woolman, John, 1772, Sterling Olmsted, editor 1987. *Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind and How It May be Promoted*. Philadelphia; Wider Quaker Fellowship.

I have known landholders who paid Interest for large sums of money, and being intent on paying their debts by raising grain, have by too much tilling, so robbed the earth of its natural fatness, that the produce thereof hath grown light. . . . The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious Creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to Support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age. (page 6)

Quoted from "The Substance of some conversation between a labouring man and a man rich in money."

8. Abelson, Donald E., *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, Montreal, McGill-Queens University Press, 2002

9. Boulding, Kenneth E, *ibid.*

10. Boulding, Kenneth E., 1995. *The Future: Images and Processes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Keith Helmuth, Central Philadelphia MM, New Brunswick MM (Canada).
May 2003. Woolman references and quotes added, August 2022.
keithhelmuth@gmail.com