

Quakerism and Politics

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The Howard M. Jenkins Professor of Quaker History and Research at Swarthmore College, Frederick Barnes Tolles, presents the seventh Ward Lecture. Choosing as his subject Quakerism and Politics, he combines the several interests in which he has had extensive scholarly training. His three academic degrees from Harvard University were taken in the fields of American Civilization and American History. In 1948 the University of North Carolina Press published his book *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia*. Subsequently continuing his interests in research and Quakerism, he has written *Slavery and the Woman Question: Lucretia Mott's Diary*, *George Logan of Philadelphia*, *James Logan and the Culture of Provincial America*. His excellence in the areas of research and in knowledge of Quakerism was recognized by his election to the presidency of the English Friends Historical Association, for which he gave the historical address at the Friends Tercentenary Celebration in 1952.

Quakerism and Politics

Though we are cautioned in our books of discipline against observing special “times and seasons,” Friends have been busy during the past few years celebrating a series of significant anniversaries, and more are in the offing. In 1948 North Carolina Friends observed the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of their Yearly Meeting. In 1952 we all united in celebrating the three hundredth birthday of Quakerism in England. Two years ago, Irish Friends observed the tercentenary of Quakerism in Ireland. This year Friends in New England honored the first Quaker “Publishers of Truth” who arrived in North America three hundred years ago. Next year, the two hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of William Penn’s coming to the Delaware Valley, and the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of John Greenleaf Whittier, the Quaker poet, will, no doubt, be noticed with suitable ceremonies. I should like to call your attention to two minor Quaker anniversaries that occur this autumn. Neither is likely to attract much public attention. I mention them chiefly because they have a striking relevance to my theme.

I

It was three hundred years ago, in October 1656, that George Fox had a memorable interview with Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England. It was one of the great moments of a great century, for here, face to face, were two of the most powerful personalities of the age, the one the military dictator of the British Isles at the pinnacle of his worldly power, the other a crude, rustic preacher who had just spent eight months in one of England’s foulest prisons. They met in Whitehall, at the very heart of the British government. Fox bluntly took the Protector to task for

persecuting Friends when he should have protected them. Then characteristically he set about trying to make a Quaker out of Cromwell, to turn him to “the light of Christ who had enlightened every man that cometh into the world.” Cromwell was in an argumentative mood and took issue with Fox’s theology, but Fox had no patience with his objections. “The power of God riz in me,” he wrote, “and I was moved to bid him lay down his crown at the feet of Jesus.”

Cromwell knew what Fox meant, for two years earlier he had received a strange and disturbing missive in which he had read these words:

God is my witness, by whom I am moved to give this forth for the Truth’s sake, from him whom the world calls George Fox; who is the son of God who is sent to stand a witness against all violence and against all the works of darkness, and to turn people from the darkness to the light, and to bring them from the occasion of the war and from the occasion of the magistrate’s sword...¹

The man who persisted in calling himself the “son of God” – he later acknowledged that he had many brothers – was demanding nothing less than that the military ruler of all England should forthwith disavow all violence and all coercion, make Christ’s law of love the supreme law of the land, and substitute the mild dictates of the Sermon on the Mount for the Instrument of Government by which he ruled. In a word, Fox would have him make England a kind of pilot project for the Kingdom of Heaven. Fox was a revolutionary. He had no patience with the relativities and compromises of political life. His testimony was an uncompromising testimony for the radical Christian ethic of love and non-violence, and he would apply it in the arena of politics as in every other sphere of life. It is not recorded that Cromwell

took his advice. Neither is it recorded that Fox ever receded an inch from his radical perfectionism. The absolute demands he made upon Cromwell just three hundred years ago may stand as one pole of Quaker thought on politics.

Now I would draw your attention to another anniversary we might appropriately observe this autumn. It was just two hundred years ago, in October 1756, that the Quakers abdicated their political control of Pennsylvania, and the “Holy Experiment” in government in the Valley of the Delaware came to a close. For three quarters of a century, first in West New Jersey, then in Pennsylvania, Friends had been deeply involved in the day-to-day business of politics – winning elections, administering local and provincial government, struggling for power among themselves, contending with non-Quaker politicians, squabbling with neighboring provinces, wrangling with the imperial authorities in Whitehall. Though William Penn had founded his Quaker Utopia by the Delaware on the proposition that government was “a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its institution and end,” neither he nor his successors had pretended to maintain George Fox’s absolute witness.

As office-seekers they had often fallen short of perfect Christian charity in their relations with their opponents. As office-holders they had often found it necessary to compromise their highest principles in order to stay in office. As judges they had sentenced men to death. As legislators within the British Empire they had appropriated funds with which the Crown had carried on its wars with France and Spain. In some degree every one of them had come to terms with the world, had compromised the purity of his religious testimony as a Quaker. But they had created in the American wilderness a commonwealth in which civil and religious liberty, social and political equality, domestic

and external peace had reigned to a degree and for a length of time unexampled in the history of the Western world.

When the Quaker lawmakers of Pennsylvania, just two hundred years ago this autumn, stepped down and gave the province of Pennsylvania into the hands of “the world’s people,” something went out of American political life – something that we have been two hundred years trying to restore.² The relative testimony of the colonial Pennsylvania politicians may stand for us as the other pole of political thought and practice in the Society of Friends.

Between these two poles Quaker political attitudes and behavior have oscillated, and the main purpose of this lecture is to trace historically the path of that oscillation, to underline some of the dilemmas in which Friends have found themselves in relation to politics, and, if possible, to draw from the record some conclusions which may have contemporary relevance.

II

We must begin by recognizing how thoroughly primitive Quakerism shared the spirit of millennial hope, the exhilarating atmosphere of expectancy that marked the middle years of the seventeenth century. It was a period, like the early years of the Christian church itself, when many religious people in England looked for the imminent return of Christ on the clouds of glory and the prompt establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It was the period of the Barebones Parliament, that curious collection of assorted fanatics who hoped to usher in the Rule of the Saints in England. It was the period of the Fifth Monarchy Men, those violent zealots who planned to enthrone King Jesus in succession to the late Charles I.

The apocalyptic imagery of the Books of Daniel and Revelation worked like yeast in English minds and the

radical ethics of the New Testament were spawning visionary schemes for the root-and-branch reform of English society. The Quaker movement, we must recall, grew out of the same Puritan soil as these other manifestations of left-wing Protestantism; its early leaders shared fully in the apocalyptic excitement, the zeal for social reform, the identification of politics with religion.³

“Laws and decrees shall be changed and renewed,” exulted Edward Burrough. “Every yoke and burden shall be taken off from the neck of the poor; true judgment and justice, mercy and truth, peace and righteousness shall be exalted; and all the nations shall have judges as at the first and counselors as at the beginning.”⁴ When George Fox “was moved to sound the day of the Lord” from the top of Pendle Hill, he was not behaving exactly like a twentieth-century Philadelphia Quaker, but he was acting quite in the spirit of the time.⁵ And when William Tomlinson cried out: “Woe, woe, woe, to the oppressors of the earth, who grind the faces of the poor,” and warned that “God will in time hear the groanings of the whole creation, and then, woe, woe, woe, to you who have been such oppressors and hard-hearted task-masters,” he was speaking in the authentic vein of prophetic Christianity and adding one more Quaker voice to the chorus of social protest that reached a crescendo in England at the end of the 1650’s.

It is now pretty clear, despite the reticence of Quaker literature on the subject, that in the critical year 1659, just before the Restoration of Charles II, the Rump Parliament made a remarkable proposal to the Quakers – “nothing less than that they should aid in a sweeping reorganization of ... the Commonwealth government – a reorganization in which justiceships would be given to Friends or to others sympathetic to the Quaker movement.”⁶ What is more, many Quakers were prepared to rise to the challenge and take their part in administering the Holy

Commonwealth. Friends in Somersetshire described themselves as “ready (for Truth’s sake) to serve the commonwealth to the uttermost of their ability,” and it seems probable that five Friends in Westminster and seven in Bristol were actually appointed commissioners of the militia. The French ambassador wrote home that the hard-pressed government was relying for its support on the Quakers: “The Spirit of God, by which they are ruled,” he reported, “now permits them to take part in the affairs of this world, and the Parliament seems inclined to make use of them.”

We are accustomed to think that the early Friends stood aloof from politics, and we find it hard to see how men who had renounced force could justify administering the militia. Yet given the apocalyptic atmosphere of the time, it is not impossible to understand how Friends could have agreed to accept public office, even to take up the magistrate’s sword, in the interests of establishing the Rule of the Saints. For once the regime of the righteous was set up, all swords would, no doubt, be turned into plowshares and all spears into pruning hooks. After all, one of the earliest epistles of advice to Friends, the ancestor of all our books of discipline, the famous letter sent out from Balby in Yorkshire in 1656, had recommended “that if any be called to serve the Commonwealth in any public service, which is for the public wealth and good, that with cheerfulness it be undertaken, and in faithfulness discharged unto God: that therein patterns and examples in the thing that is righteous, they may be, to those that be without.”⁷

But the revolution of the Saints did not come off. Instead the unsaintly Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660, and Puritan apocalypticism fizzled out in the absurd and abortive little rising of the Fifth Monarchy Men in January 1661. If George Fox had ever really favored Quaker

participation in the politics of the Saints, he had had by now some sober second thoughts; some scholars think the ten-week-long “time of darkness” into which he was plunged in the middle of 1659 was a time of inward struggle over this very issue. In any case, by the end of that year he was advising Friends everywhere to “keep out of the powers of the earth that run into wars and fightings” and to “take heed of joining with this or the other, or meddling with any, or being busy with other men’s matters; but mind the Lord, and his power and his service.”⁸

After the fiasco of the Fifth Monarchy rising, innocent Friends were taken up by the hundreds and imprisoned on charges of conspiracy to overthrow the government – charges based on a doctrine of “guilt by association” as far-fetched and vicious as that which has flourished in our own day. To clear themselves of suspicion a number of leading Friends, including Fox, issued a public declaration that they had never been concerned in any plots for the violent overthrow of the government, that indeed the Spirit of Truth would never lead them to “fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.”⁹

III

The traumatic experiences of the Restoration year had a lasting effect on the Quaker attitude toward politics. Many Friends reacted sharply against anything that smacked of partisan politics and took the position that a Quaker should have nothing to do with the politics of this world, that his citizenship was in another Kingdom. The words of Alexander Parker in 1660 may stand as representative of this attitude: “My advice and counsel,” he wrote, “is, that every one of you, who love and believe in the Light, be still and quiet,

and side not with any parties; but own and cherish the good wherever it appears and testify against the evil..."¹⁰

This attitude of aloofness and neutrality was the dominant one in the Society of Friends during the fifteen years following the Restoration. All the strength the Society could muster was required simply to survive, to weather the storm of persecution that Charles II loosed upon them. But political interests were not dead. Around the year 1675 some Friends at least began to show a new concern for politics. There was no dream of capturing England for the Kingdom of God now. The House of Stuart was too strongly entrenched. Moreover, Quakers were excluded from office by the requirement of an oath, which they could not in conscience take. And anyhow, the confident millennial mood of midcentury had passed forever. But Friends had meanwhile strengthened their own internal government by creating a network of Monthly Meetings all over the country with appropriate central agencies in London. Consequently, they now had the means of bringing their organized influence to bear on the British government at one limited but – to them – all-important point: religious toleration. Quaker action to bring an end to the persecution took two forms: on the one hand, an attempt to influence elections, and, on the other, an effort to influence legislation. In other words, Friends engaged in a certain amount of electioneering and lobbying.

In 1675, for example, the Second-Day Morning Meeting in London encouraged Friends to vote only for Parliament-men who would sign an agreement to work for toleration. Six years later, the Meeting for Sufferings was urging Quakers who had the franchise to vote for "sober, discreet, and moderate men ... that are against persecution and Popery, and that deport themselves tenderly towards our Friends."¹¹

William Penn was, of course, the most active political Quaker of the time. Everyone knows about his “Holy Experiment” in Pennsylvania (to which I shall come back presently), but before he set that experiment on foot he had a fling at politics in England. Though he had announced, just a few years before, that “it is not our business to meddle with government,” he took to the hustings twice – in 1677 and 1679 – in a vain effort to elect his friend Algernon Sidney to Parliament – Sidney who dreamed of transforming King Charles’s England into a republic.

Friends were clearly a political bloc to be reckoned with in those years. So active were they in the Parliamentary elections that the King’s friends actually promised Penn to free his people from persecution if he would pledge their political support or at least their neutrality.¹² And it has been plausibly argued that King Charles’s willingness to grant Penn a huge province across the sea was dictated by the hope of draining off to America a troublesome portion of his political opposition.¹³

But in the long run lobbying was for Friends a more congenial method of influencing politics than electioneering. Quakers had been engaged in lobbying – that is to say, in seeking to influence legislators by personal visits – ever since 1659, when a hundred and sixty-five Friends went to Westminster Hall and sent into the House of Commons a paper offering to lie “body for body” in jail in place of their imprisoned and suffering fellow Quakers.¹⁴ But after 1675 they intensified their legislative activity, seeking acts for the release of prisoners and the ending of persecution. The Meeting for Sufferings coordinated the work. The weightiest Friends in England, including George Fox and William Penn, busied themselves buttonholing Members of Parliament and appearing at committee hearings. The Yearly Meeting even rented a room in a coffee

house hard by the Houses of Parliament for a headquarters – a kind of Friends Committee on National Legislation office.¹⁵ An unfriendly observer noted sourly that “it was indeed somewhat scandalous, to see, when any Bill or Petition was defending, wherein the Quakers had their Account or Design, what crowding, what soliciting, what treating and trading there was by that sly and artificial set of Men...” And another critic observed that “Their broad Hatts, their short Crevatts, their dour Looks, [and] Subtil Carriages” were always in evidence when the House of Commons was in session.¹⁶

The legislative struggle for religious liberty was substantially won in 1689 with the passage of the great Toleration Act, but the lobbying efforts went on, until Friends were finally granted the right to substitute a simple affirmation for a formal oath in 1722. From time to time in the course of this campaign the Meeting for Sufferings urged Friends to write their Parliament-men on the subject.¹⁷ If anyone thinks the techniques of the FCNL are a modern innovation, he knows little of Quaker history.

IV

The Affirmation Act of 1722 finally gave English Quakers many of the privileges of citizenship they had hitherto lacked, including the right to sue in court and to vote without impediment (though not to hold public office). Curiously enough, the achievement of most of the privileges of citizenship was followed by a widespread disinclination to exercise them. Friends in England – I am leaving the American story to one side for the moment – were entering the age of Quietism. The feeling grew that a good Quaker should have as little as possible to do with earthly government, that he must avoid the temptations, the

distractions, the compromises, the corruptions of political life, that he ought to maintain his religious testimonies with absolute purity, in isolation, if need be, from the life of his time. He must be – it was a favorite phrase of the period – among “the quiet in the land.”

We saw this attitude taking root among the English Friends at the time of the Restoration in 1660; in the eighteenth century it became almost a dogma. Listen to Samuel Scott, a fairly typical “public Friend,” on the Parliamentary elections of 1780:

The parliament being dissolved, a general election is coming on: the devil cometh forth, and hell from beneath.... It becometh not the members of our society to meddle much in those matters, or to be active in political disquisitions ... in respect to elections, we ought to go no farther than voting for the candidates we best approve, and declaring our preference of them, without endeavouring by any other means to influence others. “Israel is to dwell alone, and not to be mixed with the people.”¹⁸

Some Friends even counseled against voting. Here is the advice of Thomas Shillitoe, an extreme Quietist, in 1820:

“Friends, let us dare not meddle with political matters. ... Endeavour to keep that ear closed, which will be itching to hear the news of the day and what is going forward in the political circles.” Friends, he thought, should be resolutely oblivious to the world around them. “Avoid reading political publications,” he warned, “and, as much as possible, newspapers.”¹⁹ The religion of these Quietist Friends was a tender plant that must be carefully guarded against blighting contact with “the world.”

V

The climate of English Quaker opinion on politics did not change until well into the nineteenth century. After the passage of the great Reform Bill of 1832 it became possible at last for Friends to qualify for Parliament by taking an affirmation in place of an oath. The first Quaker to take a seat in the House of Commons was Joseph Pease, who was elected in 1833, though his father, his mother-in-law, and his Monthly Meeting all tried to dissuade him from entering the hurly-burly of public life. He sat in the House for several years, always wearing his plain Quaker coat, steadfastly declining, in Quaker fashion, to use formal titles of address even in Parliament.

Ten years after Joseph Pease broke the ice, a Quaker statesman greater than he – indeed one of the towering figures in nineteenth-century British Politics – entered Parliament. I shall not recount the story of John Bright’s career or attempt to catalogue his achievements. I will simply mention some of the liberal causes for which he struggled nobly and, in the main, successfully: the abolition of compulsory Church rates or tithes, against which Friends had long borne a testimony; the repeal of the Corn Laws, which were taking bread out of the mouths of the poor: the extension of the franchise, which had hitherto been denied to many poorer folk in town and country; the emancipation of the Jews, who had been subject to civil disabilities based on prejudice; the abolition of capital punishment, still a subject of political debate in England; justice and fair treatment for the People of Ireland and India, who in different ways were suffering from oppression; steadfast opposition to the Crimean War, a war which modern historians unite in condemning as unjust and unnecessary; the humanitarian protest against the wanton bombarding of Alexandria in 1882, the issue over which he resigned

from Gladstone's cabinet. Every one of these causes was in harmony with his humane and pacifist impulses as a Quaker. William E. Gladstone was not merely indulging in the conventions of funeral eulogy when he said of Bright "that he elevated political life to a higher elevation, and to a loftier standard, and that he ... thereby bequeathed to his country the character of a statesman which can be made the subject not only of admiration, and not only of gratitude, but of reverential contemplation."²⁰

Yet John Bright himself would have been the first to admit that he had not been a completely "consistent" Friend throughout his long career in politics, that the testimonies of his religious society were counsels of perfection which a practical politician could not uphold in all their purity. He had, for instance, approved the bloody suppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. He had been a warm supporter of the North in our fratricidal Civil War, writing to John Greenleaf Whittier that "war was and is the only way out of the desperate difficulty of your country," and to another correspondent that "I want no end of the war, and no compromise, and no reunion till the Negro is made free beyond all chance of failure."²¹ And in his social philosophy he was so much the captive of the *laissez faire* doctrines of his time as to oppose every effort to limit by law the number of hours women should work in factories.²² In other words, one cannot overlook the plain fact that Bright's contributions as a Quaker statesman, notable as they were, were achieved at the sacrifice of consistency as a Quaker.

Since John Bright's time there has been an unbroken tradition of political Quakerism in England. More than sixty Friends have held seats in Parliament – and they have held them right through two World Wars. Scores, probably hundreds more have served on county councils and in other posts in local government.

Meanwhile the official attitude of London Yearly Meeting has changed slowly from one of reluctant acquiescence to one of whole-hearted endorsement of political activity. The London Discipline of 1861 took pains to point out some of the duties of public office that would be inconsistent with Quaker principles – administering oaths, enforcing ecclesiastical demands, calling out the armed forces – and warned Friends to consider seriously “whether it is right for them to accept an office which involves such alternatives.” Furthermore, the Discipline went on, still under the sway of the Quietist fear of “the world”: “When we consider the seductive influence of popularity, and the self-satisfaction consequent upon the successful efforts of the intellectual powers, even in a good cause, we feel bound with affectionate earnestness, to caution our friends against being led to take an undue part in the many exciting objects of the day,”²³

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the Yearly Meeting was offering advice in quite a different vein. “The free institutions under which we live,” read the Discipline of 1911. “give many of our members a direct share in the responsibilities of government, and in forming the healthy public opinion that will lead to purity of administration and righteousness of policy. This responsibility belongs to them by virtue of their citizenship, and our members can no more rightly remain indifferent to it, than to the duties which they owe to their parents and near relatives.” “In view of the opportunities for public service opened to Friends during the last half century,” it went on, “we desire to press upon them the duty of qualifying themselves, so that they may be ‘prepared unto every good work.’”²⁴ The change from the cautious spirit of the Yearly Meeting’s advice just half a century before is too striking to miss.

Perhaps the most critical test of any Quaker's devotion to his traditional religious testimonies comes in wartime, and this is especially true for the Quaker in public office. A student at Swarthmore College several years ago tabulated the votes of the Quaker Members of Parliament on crucial measures during the two World Wars. She found about what one might expect: that some were consistent pacifist Quakers throughout, voting for no military measures and vigorously defending the rights of conscientious objectors; that some were pretty consistently unpacifist and unQuakerly in their attitude, supporting nearly all the war government's measures; and that some were simply not consistent (i.e., on some issues they voted their Quaker consciences and on others they did not).

From her analysis she concluded that it is not inherently impossible to be a consistent Quaker pacifist in government, even in war-time: here the notable career of the late T. Edmund Harvey, who sat in Parliament during both World Wars, was her chief exhibit. On the other hand, she was obliged to grant that if one is to avoid mere negativism and obstructionism, it is often necessary to be silent and therefore, to a degree, uninfluential with respect to most major issues and to concentrate one's efforts on such minor though important problems as securing fair treatment for CO's.²⁵ The experience of the English Quaker M.P.'s suggests that the path of a religious idealist in practical politics is not an easy one.

VI

So far I have focused on the relationship of English Quakers to politics. I can deal with the American experience more briefly, though it is far from a simple story. The elements are the same, but the historical development

of attitudes is curiously different; in fact, the American experience reverses the British to produce a kind of historical counterpoint. For Quakers on this side of the Atlantic were becoming more and more deeply involved in politics just when their British cousins were detaching themselves from it; later, American Friends reacted towards Quietism and non-involvement as the English moved away from that attitude and began to take an active part in government.

There were four American colonies in which, for longer or shorter periods, the powers of government were in Quaker hands. In Rhode Island between 1672 and 1768 ten Quakers served for a total of thirty years as Governors, and other Friends held office as Deputy-Governors and Assemblymen.²⁶ West New Jersey, especially during its first quarter-century, from 1674 to 1702, was in every sense a Quaker colony.²⁷ Everyone knows that Pennsylvania was controlled by Friends from its founding in 1682 down to the middle of the eighteenth century.²⁸ And there is no need to remind North Carolinians of the brief but important Governorship of that able Quaker administrator John Archdale.²⁹ Obviously there are plenty of materials here for the study of Quaker experience in government, and they are far from having been exhausted by historians. I shall limit myself to one point, the same point I discussed in connection with John Bright and the other Quaker M.P.'s – the inevitability of compromise. I shall draw my illustrations from what is usually, and rightly, considered the most successful Quaker experience in government – William Penn's "Holy Experiment" in colonial Pennsylvania.

As a concerned Friend William Penn gave his allegiance to the fundamental principle of Christian pacifism. So, as individual Friends, did most of his associates and successors who dominated Pennsylvania

politics for three quarters of a century. But as responsible legislators and administrators governing a constituent part of the British Empire, they found it impossible in practice to maintain that principle without abatement or compromise.

Compromise indeed was built into the very foundations of the “Holy Experiment”: by his charter from King Charles II Penn was given power “to levy, muster, and train all sorts of men ... and to make war and pursue the enemies and . . . put them to death by the law of war ... and do all and every act which to the charge and office of a captain-general of an army belongeth.” In other words, his authority, like that of the President of the United States, included the powers of Commander-in-Chief of the army and navy.

Penn apparently had no scruples about accepting this authority, which was an essential condition of his receiving the colony for his “Holy Experiment.” No doubt he believed there would be no need to exercise it in a Quaker commonwealth. But events and the logic of Pennsylvania’s status in the British Empire showed otherwise. When Britain went to war with France or Spain, as she did four times during the next seventy-five years, orders came from London to put the colony in a posture of military defense and to contribute funds for the prosecution of the war.

The Quaker rulers of Pennsylvania knew they might lose control of the colony and be forced to abandon their “Holy Experiment” if they did not comply. They grew adept at the politics of shuffle and evasion, but in the end they usually found ways to meet the military demands. The usual formula was to grant money “for the Queen’s use.” No one was deceived as to the use the Queen would make of the money. But, as one of the leading Quaker politicians put it, “we did not see it to be inconsistent with our principles to give the Queen money notwithstanding any use she might put it to, that being not our part but hers.”

Presently, the legislative “dodges” became more ingenious. During King George’s War the Quaker Assembly voted four thousand pounds for the purchase of “bread, beef, pork, flour, wheat and other grains”; and when the Governor interpreted “other grains” to mean gunpowder, no Quaker legislator is known to have objected. By 1755 the Assembly was appropriating as much as fifty thousand pounds – a huge sum considering the time and place – “for the King’s use.” In the following year Pennsylvania found itself actually at war with the Delaware and Shawnee Indians. By now the time for shuffling and evasion was past: Quakers simply could not administer a province at war. And so the majority of the Friends stepped down from office and the “Holy Experiment” was over.

I have stressed this single point of compromise with the peace testimony – and I could have shown it in other areas as well – not to pass judgment on the political Quakers of Pennsylvania. They had a noble and forward-looking experiment in government committed to their hands. I am not disposed to blame them for wanting to preserve the substance of that experiment as long as they could, even at some cost in terms of consistency with principle. I merely wish us to be clear that even in William Penn’s, Quaker Utopia the exercise of political power involved compromise, involved some abatement of Quaker ideals.³⁰

In 1758, two years after the Quaker abdication in Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting advised its members to “beware of accepting of, or continuing in, the exercise of any office or station in civil society or government” which required actions inconsistent with Quaker testimonies. The pendulum had swung sharply away from political participation, and I think it is fair to say that American Friends have tended almost from that day to this to avoid direct participation in politics, at least in the sense of seeking elective office.

The strong feelings of North Carolina Friends on this subject a hundred years ago are reflected in the unequivocal language of the Yearly Meeting Discipline of 1854: "It is the sense of the Yearly Meeting, that if any of our members accept, or act in, the office of member of the federal or state legislature, justice of the peace, clerk of a court, coroner, sheriff, or constable, that they be dealt with, and if they cannot be convinced of the inconsistency of their conduct, after sufficient labor, they be disowned."³¹ Philadelphia's attitude, a century or more ago, was only a little less sweeping: Friends were advised under pain of disownment "to decline the acceptance of any office or station in civil government, the duties of which are inconsistent with our religious principles"; furthermore they were urged not "to be active or accessory in electing or promoting to be elected, their brethren to such offices or stations in civil government."³² Quietism in relation to politics had become the rule among American Friends just as British Friends were beginning to break away from it.

In recent years the official attitude of many American Yearly Meetings has swung over to a position not unlike that of London Yearly Meeting, though this shift was neither prompted nor followed, as in England, by any significant migration of American Quakers into public office. In 1927 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting declared its belief that "the Kingdom of God on earth is advanced by those who devote themselves with unselfish public spirit to the building of a high national character, and to the shaping of a righteous policy of government both at home and abroad." It urged Friends "to be active in the performance of all the duties of good citizenship," and defined the duties of good citizenship specifically to include office-holding.³³ In 1945 the Five Years Meeting, representing the great majority of American Quakers offered similar advice: "It behooves all Friends,"

read its Discipline, “to fit themselves for efficient public service and to be faithful to their performance of duty as they are gifted and guided by the inspiration of God.”³⁴

The book of *Faith and Practice* issued by the reunited Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1955, repeats the earlier advice about accepting office when summoned to it, but adds a cautionary proviso: “Necessity for group action,” it suggests, “may, however, present difficult problems for the office holder who seeks to be single-minded in his loyalty to God. A prayerful search,” it goes on in slightly cryptic language, “may lead to a suitable adjustment which need not establish a precedent but should be kept before the Father in Heaven for further light.” But, “It may become necessary,” the statement concludes, “to sacrifice position to conscience and expediency to principle.”³⁵

VII

This sober advice calls to mind a wise passage from Rufus Jones:

There has always been in the Society of Friends a group of persons pledged unswervingly to the ideal. To those who form this inner group compromise is under no circumstance allowable. If there comes a collision between allegiance to the ideal and the holding of public office, then the office must be deserted. If obedience to the soul’s vision involves eye or hand, houses or lands or life, they must be immediately surrendered. But there has always been as well another group who have held it to be equally imperative to work out their principles of life in the complex affairs of the community and the state, where to gain an end one must yield something; where to get on

one must submit to existing conditions; and where to achieve ultimate triumph one must risk his ideals to the tender mercies of a world not yet ripe for them.³⁶

If anything is clear from our quick historical survey, I think it must be this: that there is no one Quaker attitude towards politics. Historically, Quakers can be found practicing and preaching almost every possible position from full participation to complete withdrawal and abstention. Rufus Jones has isolated for us, in the passage I just quoted, the two polar extremes. I would just underline the dilemma implicit in his description. If a concerned Quaker (or any man or woman committed to an absolute religious ethic) decides to enter practical politics in order to translate his principles into actuality, he may achieve a relative success: he may be able to raise the level of political life in his time, as John Bright did, or maintain a comparatively happy and just and peaceful society, as the Quaker legislators of Pennsylvania did. But he can apparently do it only at a price – the price of compromise, of the partial betrayal of his ideals. If, on the other hand, he decides to preserve his ideals intact, to maintain his religious testimonies unsullied and pure, he may be able to do that, but again at a price – the price of isolation, of withdrawal from the main stream of life in his time, of renouncing the opportunity directly and immediately to influence history.

Let me call the two positions the relativist and the absolutist. And let me suggest that perhaps each one needs the other. The relativist needs the absolutist to keep alive and clear the vision of the City of God while he struggles in some measure to realize it in the City of Earth. And conversely, the absolutist needs the relativist, lest the vision remain the possession of a few only, untranslated into any degree of reality for the world as a whole. Which

position an individual Friend will take will depend, I suppose, on his temperament. For those of us who incline towards the more absolutist position, there is wisdom in the statement of Henry Hodgkin, the English Friend who was the first Director of Pendle Hill: "With my conception of the Christian life," he wrote,

I do not see that it would be possible for me to enter the world of politics as it is at present run. For example, anyone who wants to make his influence felt must be allied to a party and accept many compromises. He must use methods current in politics but, to say the least, highly distasteful to a moral man.... Time was when I felt that for anyone to embark on such a career was a comedown from the highest level of Christian living. While I am as far as ever from being able to go into politics myself, I should now hold that God may be just as truly revealed in a person who enters this field and accepts conditions which I could not accept as, let us say, a devoted evangelist.³⁷

Of course neither of these two polar positions is uniquely Quaker. The Mennonites in their quiet way have practiced the absolutist withdrawal from the world longer and more consistently than Friends have ever done. And many religious idealists have gone into politics at some sacrifice of their ideals to work for a relatively better world. I should like to suggest in closing that if there is any distinctive Quaker posture *vis à vis* politics, it is one which I might describe as the prophetic stance or the role of the divine lobbyist.

By this I do not mean approaching legislators for favors – though Friends have sometimes done that, as in the case of the Affirmation Act. I am thinking rather of George Fox in 1656 bidding Oliver Cromwell to lay down his crown at

the feet of Jesus, of Robert Barclay in 1679 standing before the representatives of the European powers at Nimwegen and calling upon them to settle a peace upon Christian principles, or Joseph Sturge in 1855 pleading with Tsar Alexander II for reconciliation with England, of Rufus Jones in 1938 interceding for the Jews before the chiefs of the Gestapo or Henry Cadbury appearing before the Military Affairs Committee in Washington or any Friend visiting his Congressman with a religious concern. All these, like the prophets of Israel, have felt a divine call to “speak truth to power,” to lay a concern upon those who are charged with the governing of men.” The Friends Committee on National Legislation is, in a sense, an institutionalization of this age-old Quaker practice.

There are grave perils and responsibilities in this role. There is the peril of hiding a selfish motive behind a facade of religious concern: a Quaker lobby must never fall to the level of the lumber lobby or the oil lobby. There is the peril of mistaking a personal impulse, no matter how altruistic, for a divine call, of becoming a mere busybody, troubling harassed legislators with trivial or irresponsible demands. And there is the responsibility of “earning the right” by a consistent pattern of religious dedication and service to speak to those who bear the heavy burden of political power.”

This kind of prophetic mission to the rulers of men is a distinctively Quaker approach to politics. When carried out under a deep religious concern by a person whose own life speaks of a genuine commitment to a spiritual vision, such an approach can be a way of avoiding the dilemma of isolation on the one hand and compromise on the other, a way of combining consistency of life with relevance to history. Like the prophet Zechariah before his king, Friends can still pronounce the timeless but always timely message: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord.”⁴⁰

Notes

1. *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls (Cambridge, England, 1952), pp. 274-75, 197-98.
2. On the withdrawal of Friends from the government of Pennsylvania see Frederick B. Tolles, "The Twilight of the Holy Experiment," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XLV (Spring 1956), 30-37.
3. The best account of the Puritan roots of Quakerism is Geoffrey F. Nuttall's *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford, 1946). For the social and political "climate" of the 1650's see W. Schenk, *The Concern for Social Justice in the Puritan Revolution* (London, 1948).
4. Both this passage and that from William Tomlinson below are taken from a revealing article by James F. Maclear, "Quakerism and the End of the Interregnum: A Chapter in the Domestication of Radical Puritanism," *Church History*, XIX (December 1950), 240-70.
5. *Journal of George Fox*, pp. 103-104. T. Canby Jones places Fox in relation to the eschatology of his time in "George Fox's Understanding of Last Things," *Friends' Quarterly*, VIII (October 1954), 194-206.
6. Maclear, *op. cit.*, p. 255.
7. *Letters, etc., of Early Friends*, ed. A. R. Barclay (London, 1841), pp. 280-81.
8. *Journal*, p. 358.
9. This familiar declaration has often been reprinted. See *Journal of George Fox*, pp. 398-404.
10. *Letters, etc., of Early Friends*, p. 368.
11. William C. Braithwaite. *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London, 1919), pp. 90, 98. Ethyn Williams Kirby gives a good account of "The Quakers' Efforts to Secure Civil

- and Religious Liberty, 1660-96" in the *Journal of Modern History*. VII (1935) 401-21.
12. Kirby, op. cit., 402, 405-408.
 13. Fulmer Mood. "William Penn and English Politics in 1680-81," *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, XXXII (1935), 3-21.
 14. W. C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, Second Edition, revised by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge, England, 1955), pp. 454-55.
 15. *The Short Journals and Itinerary Journals of George Fox* ed. Norman Penney (Cambridge, England, 1925), pp. 190-92, 218.
 16. Kirby, op. cit., p. 413.
 17. Ibid., p. 418.
 18. Samuel Scott, *A Diary of Some Religious Exercises and Experience* (London, 1809), p. 12.
 19. *Journal of the Life and Labours of Thomas Shillitoe* (London, 1839), I, 224.
 20. Quoted in Rufus M. Jones, *The Later Periods of Quakerism* (London, 1921), II, 633. The best account of Bright's career is still George Macaulay Trevelyan's *Life of John Bright* (Boston and New York, 1913). But Margaret E. Hirst's *John Bright* (London, 1945) is an admirable brief biography.
 21. Margaret E. Hirst, *The Quakers in Peace and War* (London, 1923), pp. 285-87, 288-91.
 22. Edwin B. Bronner, "John Bright and the Factory Acts," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, XXXVIII (1949), 92-102.
 23. *Extracts from the Minutes and Epistles of the Yearly Meeting ... Relating to Christian Doctrine, Practice, and Discipline* (London, 1861), pp. 123, 124.
 24. *Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends of London Yearly Meeting*, Part II. *Christian Practice* (London, 1911), p. 126.

25. Betty Ann Hershberger, *A Pacifist Approach to Civil Government: A Comparison of the Participant Quaker and the Non-Participant Mennonite View* (typewritten B.A. thesis, Swarthmore College. 1951).
26. Rufus M. Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies* (London, 1911), Part I, Chapter VIII, is the best account.
27. John E. Pomfret, *The Province of West New Jersey* (Princeton. 1958) makes this amply clear.
28. Isaac Sharpless, *A Quaker Experiment in Government* (Philadelphia. 1898), though written nearly sixty years ago, is still a very useful book; a briefer account, also by Isaac Sharpless, will be found in Jones, *Quakers in the American Colonies*, Book V. There is a short narrative in my *Meeting House and Counting House* (Chapel Hill, 1948), Chapter I.
29. The ten pages in Jones's *Quakers in the American Colonies* (340-350) need to be amplified by some Quaker scholar.
30. For a thoughtful critique of Quaker participation in Pennsylvania politics from the Mennonite non-resistant point of view the reader is referred to two articles by Guy F. Hershberger: "The Pennsylvania Quaker Experiment in Politics, 1682-1756," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, X (1936), 187-221; and "Pacifism and the State in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Church History*, VIII (1939), 54-74.
31. *The Discipline of Friends, Revised and Approved by the Yearly Meeting, Held at New Garden, in Guilford County, N. C., in the Eleventh Month, 1854* (Greensboro, N. C., 1855), p. 16.
32. This advice appears in the *Rules of Discipline* of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting before the Great Separation and was retained in both Orthodox and Hicksite Disciplines for a considerable period thereafter. North Carolina's discipline was later (1870) revised to bring it

- essentially into line with the Philadelphia advice.
33. *The Book of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, 1927), pp. 57-58.
 34. *Faith and Practice of the Five Years Meeting of Friends in America* (Richmond, Indiana, [1946]), pp. 38-39.
 35. *Faith and Practice of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, 1955), p. 42.
 36. *Quakers in the American Colonies*, pp. 175-78.
 37. Quoted in F. W. Sollmann, *Religion and Politics*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet Number 14 (Wallingford, Penna., n.d.), pp. 5-6.
 38. Clarence E. Pickett gave some examples of Quakers visiting heads of states in his Ward Lecture, *Friends and International Affairs* (Guilford College, 1952). I have collected some other examples in "Friends and the Rulers of the People," *The American Friend*, New Series, XXXVI (1948), 134-35,153; and "The Dream of John Woolman," *AFSC Bulletin*, October 1951, pp. 19-20.
 39. Cecil E. Hinshaw has some pertinent observations on this subject in his Pendle Hill Pamphlet (Number 80), *Toward Political Responsibility* (Wallingford, Penna., 1954), a pamphlet, incidentally, which presents a point of view not unlike the perfectionism of George Fox in the 1850's. Bertram Pickard in an earlier Pendle Hill Pamphlet (Number 16), *Peacemaker's Dilemma* (Wallingford, n.d.) suggests another, less radical way out of the impasse. Walter C. Woodward made a helpful contribution to the discussion of this problem in his essay on "The Individual and the State" in *Beyond Dilemmas: Quakers Look at Life*, ed. S. B. Laughlin (Philadelphia, 1937), pp. 205-27: he acknowledges, however (pp. 215-18), that Friends have not succeeded in transcending the crucial dilemma outlined above.
 40. Zechariah iv. 6.