

Why it matters how we take decisions

About five years ago, a town poll was held in Bradford-on-Avon. As soon as the poll was announced, 'yes' and 'no' campaigns started to spread their respective arguments. Within weeks, their antagonism increased to such an extent that insults were thrown at each other, and the claims of what voting 'yes' or 'no' would be doing became ever more exaggerated. Townspeople with balanced in-between views were marginalised. In the end the project was voted against, leaving the strong minority of 'yes' campaigners exasperated. Bad feelings kept lingering on for years.

In many ways, this small-town episode was a miniature version of the Brexit referendum: it divided and polarised a community, rousing passions on both sides, and leaving no room for compromise. This isn't surprising when we look at the guiding principle behind both the town poll and the referendum: a simple 'yes' versus 'no' answer, then counting the votes, winner takes all.

Let's look at how we take our decisions in our own Quaker Meetings. We use a method called discernment that's been tried and tested for well over 300 years. When a Friend raises an objection, we don't just ignore this or vote it down. We listen to it, try to address it if possible, maybe by delaying a decision and testing it further. This is not to say that we cannot overrule an objection. After all, we're trying to discern the sense of the Meeting, God's will, what love requires from us. No Friend has the right to veto a decision that love requires from us. Yet we will never ignore any genuine fears or concerns.

We have this wonderful method to offer to the world. And, at the heart of it, the spirit to acknowledge those with differing views as being also children of God and to look at what unites us rather than focusing on our divisions. Can we spread this method and its underlying spirit to the wider world?



Klaus Huber