

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL – NEW FOREST GROUP

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 17TH OCTOBER 2016

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

This being our AGM, I have to make my Annual Report to you, our membership, on our activities over the last financial year. I shall try not to intrude unduly into your enjoyment of the rest of the evening.

As I always, it seems, have to say, this has globally been another interesting but very sad and difficult year for human rights. Amnesty has, as it should have, been focused on specific individuals subject to particular mistreatment, abuse and injustice, but these examples have generally been dwarfed by ongoing horrors in many of the world's most beleaguered trouble spots, including Yemen, Libya, the Philippines, Sudan, Somalia, Colombia and, above all Syria, where we are subjected daily to heart-rending visions of so many people, many of them dust-covered, injured and thoroughly-traumatised children, being pulled from the wreckage of collapsed buildings, reeling from the relentless and patently illegal assault of the Syrian army, together with their Russian and Iranian partners in crime. The world watches, but has neither the power nor the will to stop the tragedy. The ability of Amnesty, and especially of small groups like our own, to make a meaningful contribution to solving these crises is obviously extremely limited. But that shouldn't blunt our outrage nor ever cause us to be so discouraged that we simply stop caring. Nor should we ever stop trying to carry Amnesty's fundamental message to our community here in the New Forest. Amnesty supports the generally sympathetic stance towards Syrian refugees of the UK Government and by many local authorities (e.g. Malvern and St Albans). There is a clear distinction to be drawn between the genuine plight of civilian refugees from the armed struggles and the economic migrants seeking often illegally to enter the UK. AI locally is considering what detailed and practical steps we can take, as a Group and as individuals, in conjunction with local Councils, to help and support individual Syrian families. I have written to both of our local MP's asking for help and information concerning the facilities believed to be available from the Government.

Amnesty in the UK now has some 270,000 members and supporters, and some 2.5 million world-wide, though I'm never sure what this new phrase "and supporters" actually means. There are something over 500 paid-up members of AI in the New Forest, of which just under 70 pay their extra sub to belong to their local Group. It would help us in many ways if we found a method of raising this percentage. As we sit comfortably and safely in Lymington, we should recall that many of our fellow Amnesty members around the world do their work in countries where there are severe human rights abuses and where campaigning or even belonging to Amnesty carries considerable health risks. While we have issues in the UK, such as resisting attempts to undermine our commitment to national and European human rights legislation (which has nothing whatever, as I always have to stress, to do with Brexit), these do not begin to compare with the huge difficulties and abuses faced on a daily basis by our fellow human beings in so many other countries.

We held our usual number of public gatherings during the year, the most successful of which was our hosting of Sir Vince Cable in March, where a gratifyingly full house heard him expound freely and frankly on the great human rights issues of the day and on what he felt the government should be doing about them. He struck a generally optimistic tone, telling us that we tended, perhaps inevitably, to focus on what was going badly, but that there were many instances around the world, particularly in Africa, where the situation had clearly improved. Many of the audience took advantage of his presence to walk away with signed copies of his latest book. It is a special pleasure to welcome Vince's wife, Rachel, to our gathering this evening.

In an imaginative new venture, we organised a summer fixture under the title "Amnesteas", offering complimentary strawberries and cream and holding an Amnesty poster competition using entries from local schools. This was an admirable concept, run by Jane Waller, but unfortunately attendance was poor, not helped by the mediocre weather at the start of the summer. In particular, very few of the parents of the poster designers turned up to view their children's handiwork. We should, though, persevere with the format, even if we have to tweak it.

We ran several sessions writing letters to prisoners of conscience around the world, most notably under a newly-purchased gazebo in the forecourt of Moore and Blatch in Lymington High Street on market day. We shall reappear, under the same shelter, on Saturday, 19th November. We shall perform a similar function at our forthcoming Christmas Social at The Monkey House, Lymington on Friday, 2nd December (complete with Lasagne).

We have an important lunchtime meeting coming up on Saturday, 12th November, where we shall be hosting Dan Dolan, the Head of Death Penalty Policy at Reprieve, the charity focusing exclusively on campaigning for an end to capital punishment around the world. Dan is number 2 to Clive Stafford-Smith, who has become an internationally-recognised and respected figure as the founder and chief spokesman for Reprieve at the highest levels of government around the world. Dan's particular area of interest in recent years has been the use of lethal injection as a means of execution in the United States. He will talk on the title "Will we see an end to the use of capital punishment in our lifetime?". This will be an excellent opportunity for our Group to bring its message to a wide audience and I am hopeful that we will attract another full house to the Community Centre.

We should remind ourselves that we have three basic, interlinked tasks as a community group. These are to bring Amnesty's message to the community of The New Forest, to support AI nationally and internationally in its campaigning on key human rights issues and to generate funds to take our work forward. We have contributed an average of well over £1000 annually to Amnesty over the last five years and as a Group we remain healthily solvent. We never charge for admission to our meetings, even when we are providing refreshments. I am grateful to our members for their generosity and support.

I must also express my particular thanks to our Treasurer, Guy Lawrenson and our Meetings Secretary, Lindy Capon. I also thank Jane Waller and Nicola Taylor for their valued contributions to the deliberations of our Planning Group, our de facto Executive Committee. Above all, I express my warmest thanks and appreciation to our indefatigable Secretary, Sue Lewis, who has held this post for an eternity and without whom very few of the things that need to be done would ever happen. Lastly, I thank all of you for your support of myself and of the Group which I count it a great privilege to chair.

Andrew R Parrish 17th October 2016