

How Steering Committee Works

COME PREPARED

All Steering Committee members are reminded that they should come prepared:

- to have read and thought about the papers in advance;
- to have notified the office of anything they want to raise that is not on the agenda.

REGARDING VOTING & DECISION MAKING

Generally we have to distinguish:

- a) strict consensus (the veto);
- b) Quaker business methods;
- c) broad consensus, that is "The feeling of the meeting".

Strict consensus is what sometimes happens when governments meet at the European Union and elsewhere. No decision is taken unless every member is prepared to accept it. In effect that gives any one who is prepared to hold out a "right of veto". Some libertarian groups also use it; but there is an assumption that any disagreements will be talked out in detail until everyone agrees. This can be very time-consuming.

Quaker business meetings are regarded as meetings for worship. The aim is not to come to a consensus, but to discern what is the will of God on this issue. This depends on everyone taking part sharing certain common religious / ethical beliefs. The discussion is controlled by a clerk, who will, after a certain amount of time, attempt to draw up a minute of "the feeling of the meeting". The draft minute is then read to the meeting, and may be discussed, or amended, before being accepted. Strictly, the clerk should not allow any new matters to be brought in at this stage. Ultimately, the clerk may reach a decision even though a number of those present disagree. This happens quite often on contentious issues.

Broad consensus is my term for what most people mean by "consensus". After an appropriate discussion, if a "feeling of the meeting" is emerging, some attempt at a decision may be made. Those who disagree may accept that they have been out-consensused, but should feel that their objection has been heard. Frequently, those who have not spoken will be asked to make their position clear. This may lead to an acceptable compromise, or even to a creative new approach that is better than any first suggestion. A decision to wait for more information is often appropriate.

CAAT:

CAAT has always used broad consensus in its decision-making. The arguments against voting are:

- voting often leaves the defeated minority dissatisfied;
- it does not lead people to look for a creative solution;
- it can put people into rigid minority/majority camps;
- incompetent chairs/ facilitators can use voting to force decisions through before the meeting has properly considered the alternatives.

Consensus properly conducted should give an opportunity for all concerned to be heard. It allows the development of alternative options - compromise, creative alternative or a decision to delay. There is a link to Quaker methods with the moral implication of looking for "the will of God in the meeting". (Translate this into your personal belief / unbelief system.) It is the way CAAT has always done things, so any change should be made only after discussion and a decision by Steering Committee.

FACILITATION

In parallel with this, high standards of meeting facilitation are needed to make any method work.

The facilitator should have prepared in detail how to present each item. He or she should explain to Steering Committee how the discussion is to proceed. One agenda heading sometimes covers two or more linked items, or needs two or more decisions. There are several options:

- treat the two items as one;
- a general introduction, followed by discussions of each item, leading to separate decisions;
- a general discussion of the issues followed by specific decisions;
- deal with each item separately.

The facilitator needs to state what she or he thinks the alternatives are, and what the emerging consensus is. When it is time to finish to come to a conclusion, the facilitator should state what s/he thinks the proposal is, ask the opinions of those who have not spoken, express an opinion on the feeling of the meeting, and gain acceptance for it as a decision.

Finally, the evaluation item should be taken seriously and not just be a chance to thank the facilitator before heading for the pub or the train.

DEMEANOR

When making a contribution to the meeting, Steering Committee members should be calm and measured. Racist or sexist language, or verbal abuse of other individuals, is unacceptable.

If any member feels any other members' behaviour during a meeting is offensive, she or he should express that immediately. The facilitator should respond to this, and be able to count on the backing of all other members at the meeting. The person causing the offence can be asked to leave if necessary, with agreement from the group.