

DemFest, May 2016

RWF Report

60 was the 'viable' number Gladstone's Library needed - 116 bookings achieved so along with speakers, organisers and voluntary helpers about 150 participated over all.

Fine sunny weather helped, no doubt, too because a number came for the Saturday only.

For the great majority this was their first visit to Gladstone's Library with everybody finding it to be a wonderful place and location - 'a Welsh border-country gem'. DemFest was very much a cross-generational occasion with many under 30s attending and involved directly helping with the organisation and events.

The programme can be seen on RWF web, with a detailed report by *Assemblies for Democracy*. Our six RWF participant speakers/facilitators are very positive about event, confident that DemFest met RWF aims. More than that, several of the sessions at least were exceptional and wholly within a RW perspective - socially, politically and educationally. The '*What would a Democratic Education be like?*' session chaired/facilitated by Sharon, for example, with superb presentations - which merited follow-through in small group discussions. Others of similar quality included: *Futures of European Democracy* (DemSoc) ; *Democratic Participation: Breaking the Barriers* (RWF); Natalie Bennett was not only excellent in her session on *Democracy and the Environment* (RWF) but also contributed to several other sessions 'from the floor'.

The opening *Museums at Night: Democratic Readings* on the Friday evening, planned and organised by Gladstone's Library made for an excellent start and RWF participant readings (Ria's Tony Benn quotes, Joseph's RW: *Towards 2000* extract and Nick's on globalisation trends...) were especially pertinent but selections from other partners could easily have been RWF selections also - synergies and over-laps which continued throughout. The Saturday session with Peter Francis, Warden & Director of Gladstone's Library, talking about W.E Gladstone, explored with Derek some unexpected and fascinating connections with Raymond Williams' views especially on railways and 'parliamentary trains' which Gladstone initiated.

Our own two KW sessions, with Joseph and Sharon facilitating, engaged small but viable numbers (essential not to have too many so that each could engage with and contribute to fresh approaches and definitions related to *Democracy* and *Representation*.) Sharon has notes on the sessions for further work, with others now, leading to a posting on RWF KW pages. The RWF session led by Margaret Owen, international human rights lawyer, based on her experience in Syria where Kurdish women are laying building blocks for democracy, against the terrible difficulties in that war-torn country was, 'electrifying and inspiring', (David Whalley, our facilitator).

Given the experimental nature of this first DemFest there were some rough edges, sessions which did not work quite so well - unexpectedly high numbers attending 'discussion-based' sessions with 30 in a smallish room (a number having to stand), for example, on *Capitalism and Democracy* - which inevitably allowed time for only 'sound-bite' comments given that almost everyone present wanted to say something...; the session facilitated by Nick on *Culture and Democracy: Innovations and Adventures in the Arts* involving two richly experienced activists, talking about their work, could have gained from practical/visual/media presentation.

The financial viability of the project, keeping within RWF's budget, was crucial, of course. Given our limited financial resources recommendation for continued partnership support for DemFest must remain cautious but we strongly recommend provisional go-ahead for discussions on future potential.

RWF DemFest team.