

## **Transatlantic Progressives: Work with the Christian Left All Souls College, Oxford, 20 January 2007**

I want to make at the outset essentially four points:

- First, that faith is important on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular, it's more important on this side of the Atlantic than we often acknowledge.
- Second, that faith can and should be a source of progressive values, not of bigotry. This year's celebration of the abolition of the slave trade 200 years ago, as a result of a mass movement within the churches, is a much better reflection of their potential contribution to national life than the demonstration last week against the sexual orientation regulations. And Neal Lawson was right to argue in the Guardian recently that it is today increasingly faith which is the source of moral leadership.
- But - third - that progressive politicians too often find faith a problem. The reserve and ignorance which result too often constrain the effectiveness of progressive politicians - especially in recent years on the other side of the Atlantic. Neal Lawson speaks of *"the overly rationalist view of some on the left that fuels their distaste for anything vaguely spiritual"*.
- And - fourth - that this is a problem we need to fix. Because we need the moral confidence and leadership, and the values which people of faith can bring to progressive politics - and we need the electoral support which comes with them.

### **Faith is important**

So, first: faith is important. We all know about the importance of faith in the US, with a large proportion of the population in church each Sunday. It is a far larger proportion than in the UK. But let's not mistakenly conclude from that that faith is not important in Britain too.

In the 2001 census we included for the first time a voluntary question on faith. 10% of people declined to answer and another 10% or so said they had no faith. But 78% claimed adherence to a religion - 72% to Christianity and 3% to Islam as the second biggest religion. I was astonished at the time how big that figure was. Some have claimed people must have misunderstood the question. I'm certain they understood it perfectly well!

Some 200,000 people belong to the Labour Party. Membership is often compared unfavourably to the million members of the RSPB. But the Church of England alone has 1.7 million people attending services at least once a month. I spoke at a seminar at the Greenbelt Christian Festival last August, alongside the US Christian activist and anti-poverty campaigner Jim Wallis, and 2000 people turned up. Compared with institutional membership and participation elsewhere in Britain, the numbers actively involved in faith are actually pretty big.

In 1968, the sociologist Peter Berger, predicted that *"[by] the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture"*. 30 years later he took a different view: "the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever". That is true in the UK today as in the US.

### **Faith is a source of progressive values**

And second, that faith is a source for progressive values. The *Make Poverty History* campaign drew the vast majority of its energy and its fire power from the churches. 80% of those who turned up to form human chains, who sent letters to

their MPs and who lobbied the G8 summit 18 months ago were from the churches. It was people of faith who opened up new space for progressive politics in cancelling the debts owed by the poorest countries, increasing international aid and advocating the millennium development goals.

And around the UK and the US there are church-based initiatives pre-occupied with getting unemployed people back into work, providing homes for people who have none, helping disengaged youngsters get back into education. They would mostly not identify themselves as belonging to the 'Christian Left'.

But we should see them as our allies - as sources of support for tackling social exclusion. It is a progressive social movement. We need them on our side, and not seduced by the ardent attentiveness of compassionate conservatives like Iain Duncan Smith. Neal Lawson's article focused on religious leaders, but ordinary members offer a great deal.

30% of my constituents identified themselves as Muslims in the 2001 census. Its not just the Christian Left but distinctive faith communities which can work together for progressive values in the future.

### **Too often, progressive politicians find faith problematic**

But too often, progressive politicians find faith - frankly - an embarrassment. I mentioned Jim Wallis earlier and he wrote in his 2005 book *God's Politics*:

*The Democratic candidates in 2004, in contrast, seemed uncomfortable with the subject of religion ... For too many Democrats, faith is private and has no implications for political life. But what kind of faith is that? Where would America be if the Rev Dr Martin Luther King had kept his faith to himself?"*

He illustrates the problem with Howard Dean, who had a problem positioning himself on faith and made matters worse, trying to correct it, when he announced that his favourite New Testament book is Job (which is in the Old Testament.) Wallis concludes: *"The Bush administration's failure to support poor working families should be named as a religious failure ... The failure of the Democrats to consistently [define such issues in moral terms] is not just a political miscalculation. It shows they do not appreciate the contributions of religion to American life."*

Too many accept uncritically Polly Toynbee's gross caricature. In the context of the sexual orientation regulations, she wrote about the faith communities: *"Given an ounce of power they abuse it to deny basic liberties. Last year, they rallied to refuse the right to die with dignity. Now they are back harassing gays."*

If we succumb to that kind of characterisation then, we, equally, will let the Conservatives off the hook and hand an army over to our political opponents - as we did throughout the 1980s.

New Labour, through Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, has handled this much better. It is a key reason why we have done better politically than the Democrats over the past decade. John Smith started it with his lecture to the Christian Socialist Movement in 1992, "Reclaiming the Ground", referring to all the political terrain occupied by people of faith which we had vacated in the years before he became leader. But both our parties need to learn those lessons.

Kevin Rudd, the new Leader of the Australian Labor Party, referring approvingly to Jim Wallis's book, wrote as a Christian last October that in both the US and Australia: "*we see today the political orchestration of various forms of organised Christianity in support of the conservative incumbency.*" Its our job to stop it happening here.

### **We need to fix the break**

This is a task we can't afford to duck. David Cameron's Conservatives are learning effective opposition. They are everywhere, taking the fullest advantage of the absence of time consuming responsibilities, as we did in the run up to 1997.

hrewdly, they are making a beeline for the faith communities. They are courting the faith-based social initiatives, investing time on black church leaders, offering interviews with high profile politicians to the Islam Channel, and so on. We need to recognise the seriousness of the challenge.

We need to affirm that faith is a great starting point for politics. We need to encourage people of faith who want to tackle poverty to reach the conclusion that our party is the place where they can do it. We need to acknowledge that the values which animate our progressive politics are derived from faith - to acknowledge, for example, just how much the faith communities have made possible with *Make Poverty History*. And we need to give those campaigners somewhere to go next politically.

We need to take the time to visit churches, mosques, temples and synagogues - and listen attentively to what the people there have to say to us. We need to make it clear that we do not regard them as Polly Toynbee's bullying bigots.

When we do those things, we are not just communicating with the limited number of people who see faith as the key to their identity - those who are really committed on faith. We are reaching out much further than that. Because faith provides ideals and values, and a language to talk about them, which people who don't go into a church from one year to the next nevertheless are comfortable with and can support.

Working with the faith communities - and, indeed, going beyond the Christian Left identified in this session's title - is indispensable in building the progressive consensus which alone can bring about the kind of changes all of us came into politics to achieve.