

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party



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“Stand up for what you believe”

Gordon Brown calls on Christians to make positive difference in society

In an interview broadcast in August, Prime Minister Gordon Brown spoke exclusively to Premier Christian Radio about the role of religious faith in our political system. Drawing on his experiences and upbringing, the Prime Minister insisted that religion and politics cannot be kept separate, and that Christian convictions can have a positive impact in our communities.

Gordon was interviewed by Premier’s Victoria Laurence at 10 Downing Street. Writing about her experience afterwards, she commented: *“What I discovered was a very likeable man indeed. During the interview he came across as compassionate and he even admitted to his least proud moments as Prime Minister”*.

Gordon began by outlining what first motivated him to get involved in politics. He explained: *“I was always interested from my upbringing in Kirkcaldy in tackling problems of unemployment and poverty and social injustice, and I was always interested in development and how we could help – particularly having listened to missionaries coming back from Africa – how we could help develop Africa. So that’s what led me to politics”*.

“I think the role of religion and faith in what people sometimes call the public square is incredibly important”

He rejected the idea that Christians should separate their religious faith from their political beliefs. *“I think it’s impossible,”* he said, *“because when we talk about faith we’re talking about what people believe in, we’re talking about the values that underpin what they do, we’re talking about the convictions that they*

have about how we can make for a better society”.

The Prime Minister recalled the influence the churches have had on his own political action. He highlighted the role of ‘Faith in the City’, a report published by the churches in the 1980s which examined a number of social problems including unemployment. He explained that the report continues to influence his



Victoria Laurence interviews Gordon Brown for Premier Radio

political priorities today, particularly in his response to the global economic downturn. *“We’re trying to make sure that we don’t return to a generation of lost opportunities and lost hopes – a wasted generation where young people are unemployed,”* he said.

He also commended the role played by local churches in the downturn, adding: *“I think what the churches, the faith groups and others can do to make a difference there, is something that is incredibly important to the health and cohesion of our society as well as to opportunities for young people as individuals”*.

Asked whether the Government’s efforts to eradicate global poverty will be compromised by the global economic climate, the Prime Minister was firm: *“Our responsibilities to the poor are even more acute and obvious at a time when people are facing difficulty”*. Referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan, he added: *“We cannot walk by on the other side”*.

The Prime Minister concluded the interview with a call for the station’s listeners to get involved in their communities. *“People should stand up for what they believe,”* he said. *“In the end, our communities will be strengthened by the involvement of people of faith in them, and our society will be better because people with convictions about what a good society means are playing a part in creating that society”*.

Rewiring the global economy

The Christian Socialist Movement, the Christian organisation affiliated to the Labour Party, held its annual Tawney Dialogue in Parliament in May.

This year's dialogue was entitled 'Rewiring the Global Economy', and featured panellists Rt Rvd Stephen Lowe, the Bishop of Hulme, and John McFall MP, Chair of the Treasury Select Committee. The two speakers discussed why the recession had come about and the role the Church can play in helping to rebuild the global economy.



Bishop Lowe warned that governments must seek to prevent banks from returning to "business as usual" once the economy returns to full growth. He urged the banking sector to be built on relationships rather than only on profits.

John McFall, a high profile voice on the economy, argued that the crisis had eroded many people's trust in the economic actors that are involved in the market system. He said: "The economic crisis has led to a serious break in trust between the banks and customers, financial services and the population". In particular, he noted that there was a shortage of ethics within financial markets and that this acted as a direct challenge to the Church to be a force for good.

There were also contributions from Stephen Timms MP, Labour's Financial Secretary to the Treasury, Rachael Maskell, the Vice Chair of CSM, and Helen Goodman MP. The floor was then opened to questions from the floor.

For more information visit www.thecsm.org.uk

Building a future for children today

A message from Stephen Timms, Labour's Vice Chair for Faith Groups



The Bible says a lot about poverty. That is one of the most important reasons why many of us joined the Labour Party. According to the American Christian activist Jim Wallis, poverty is the second most prominent theme in the Old Testament, after idolatry.

In a recent report, 'Below the Breadline', Barnardo's profiled a 14 year old child, the oldest of four. For his recent birthday, he was only given one present: a ten pound note from a friend. But he decided he should give it to his mother, towards the cost of school uniforms for the younger children.

In 1999, Tony Blair committed the Labour Government to eradicating child poverty in Britain by 2020. Since then, the number of children below the poverty line has fallen by half a million. A further reduction of half a million is expected from changes already announced. But a lot more work will be needed to hit the 2020 target.

So in June, we published the Child Poverty Bill. It spells out the target, and makes it legally binding. We are the first government in the world to introduce legislation of this kind. The bill places a new duty on

local authorities. It recognises that national, devolved and local government, the NHS, jobcentres and the police all have a part to play, working together to lift children out of poverty. Others such as voluntary organisations and businesses have important roles too. In fact, child poverty is everybody's business.

Under the bill, the Government will have to publish a UK-wide child poverty strategy within a year of the legislation gaining royal assent. It will need to be updated every three years until 2020, ensuring child poverty stays high on the policy agenda. The strategy will set out steps to improve wider outcomes for children because child poverty is about more than just low incomes, vital though that is. A new Child Poverty Commission will advise the Government on the strategy.

The number of children in poverty doubled under the last Conservative government. We mustn't allow it to happen again. The bill aims to establish a progressive consensus that child poverty should be tackled by everyone, because eradicating child poverty is at the heart of Labour's ambitions.

Sarah Brown meets Pope Benedict XVI

Whilst Prime Minister Gordon Brown was attending the recent G8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy, his wife Sarah had a private audience with the Pope. The visit formed part of a busy schedule for Mrs Brown and the wives of the other G8 leaders during the three day summit. It was the second time that Sarah had met His Holiness, the first time being in February along with the Prime Minister. The group were given a tour of St Peter's Basilica and shown around the Vatican's gardens, which are closed to the public.

Sarah was later presented with the Annual Papal Medal. The medal has the bust of the reigning Pope and the year of his papacy engraved into it, and is struck each year to commemorate ecclesiastical, social and political events. Later that day, Sarah visited the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome to learn about their work fighting HIV/Aids in Africa.

Over the course of the week, the Prime Minister's wife also visited the earthquake hit town of L'Aquila to meet those affected by disaster and to speak to local authorities about the progress of the rescue efforts. In



addition, she travelled to Rome to visit the headquarters of the World Food Programme. Sarah ended the trip by accompanying her husband around Onna, a small village which was completely destroyed by the earthquake in April. The couple spoke to residents of the community whose lives had been devastated since the earthquake had struck.

News in Brief

Churches take the lead in debt counselling

Christian groups have long been many people's first port of call when experiencing debt problems, for example through debt counselling. Earlier this year, Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, announced a new national money guidance service which will provide free advice. The service will be paid for by a levy on the financial sector. Stephen Timms MP, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, said: *"Many Christians are active in credit unions and in debt counselling, and these new national services will support their work and help tackle the causes of people's financial problems"*.

Fighting for a global climate deal

In December, world leaders will meet in Copenhagen to reach a deal on how to combat climate change. Climate change is already having a significant impact on the world's poorest people, and it is essential that the whole world acts now. The Labour Government has announced that it will be pushing for an agreement that is: *ambitious*, by limiting climate change to two degrees; *effective*, through monitoring and carbon targets; and *fair*, by supporting the poorest countries to cut their emissions. Ed Miliband, Labour's Climate Change Secretary, has urged the public to send a strong message to world governments by signing an on-line pledge. To find out more about what you can do, visit www.edspledge.com.

Tony Blair speaks at home of Alpha course

In July, Labour's former leader and Prime Minister, Tony Blair, spoke at Holy Trinity Brompton about the link between Christianity and politics. Tony recalled the "joyful, assertive" faith he developed whilst a student. He explained that he reads his Bible daily, and that when he was Prime Minister he often turned to the story of Jesus calming the storm when events looked bleak. He also spoke about his Faith Foundation, which aims to promote respect and understanding between religions and to encourage inter-faith cooperation on global problems such as poverty.

Dignity for older people

The Government is consulting people across the country for their views on how to structure and fund a new National Care Service to be created in England. Christians have long been at the forefront of campaigns for dignity for older people, including in recent debates over assisted suicide. In December 2008, Gordon Brown made clear his own opposition in an interview with Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor. He said: *"Well I'm totally against laws on that. I think this debate about assisted suicide, it's not really for us to create any legislation that would put pressure on people to feel that they had to offer themselves because they were causing trouble to a relative or anything else. So I think we have got to make it absolutely clear that the importance of human life is recognised"*.

Alexander warns on international development

Douglas Alexander, Labour's International Development Secretary, has warned that any future Conservative government is likely to compromise Britain's contribution to international development. He made the comments in a discussion with the BBC's Simon Mayo at Greenbelt, a Christian arts festival held annually in Cheltenham.

Since 1997, the Labour Government has led the world in helping to transform the lives of some of the poorest people in the world. Britain has played a key role in writing the UN Millennium Development Goals and led the G8 negotiations in Gleneagles in 2005, when world leaders agreed to write off the debts of the poorest countries, whilst significantly increasing aid to those who need it most.

Douglas reported that, by next year, the UK's aid budget will be three times the level it was when Labour was elected into government in 1997. He also explained that the current Labour government is the first in Britain's history to have set down a timetable for reaching the UN's targets of 0.7% of GNI on international development. Referring to the pressures of the global economic crisis, he added: *"aid should not be sacrificed when it's needed more than ever"*.

In contrast to Labour's attitude on foreign aid, Douglas cited the findings of a new poll for the Conservative-supporting website, Conservative Home, which indicated that 96% of Tory candidates at the next election believe that protecting our aid budget should not be their priority. Commenting on this result, he said: *"There are very sharp political choices. We made our choice, and our choice is to say it's not just morally right, it's economically wise for us to continue the path that we've started"*.



The Conservative Party has said it will 'ring fence' the international development budget but has refused to match Labour's commitment to cap additional funds for developing countries to adapt to climate change. Douglas questioned whether a future Conservative government would effectively cut Labour's aid budget by double counting funding for climate change. This criticism was also recently made by Oxfam.

The Ministry for Overseas Development was first created by a Labour government in the 1960s, but was folded back into the Foreign Office in 1979 following the Conservatives' election. A separate department was again created—with cabinet minister status—following Labour's election in 1997, but Douglas expressed fears that a future Tory government would abolish it again.

He said: *"Consistently when Labour has been in power we have pushed up the proportion of aid that we've spent, and consistently, when our main opposition party has been in power, that proportion has come down"*.

We want to hear from you

More than ever before, the Labour Party is committed to listening to and learning from those of religious faith—including those in our churches. We realise that many of you cannot commit to supporting any particular political party. Even so, we are interested to hear what you have to say, and to help you to continue your valuable work across the country.

There are a few things you can do to help us in this work.

- 1. Tell your friends about this newsletter.** We want to be in dialogue with as many people of faith as possible. Encourage others to join our mailing list at www.labour.org.uk/faith.
- 2. Ask to display this newsletter in your church.** Ask your church leaders if they are willing for this newsletter to be displayed so that others in your church can read about what Labour is doing.
- 3. Tell us how we can help you.** Write to Stephen Timms MP (Vice Chair for Faith Groups), c/o The Labour Party, 39 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0HA. Alternatively, email stephen@stephentimms.org.uk.

To join the Labour Party visit www.labour.org.uk/join or telephone us on 08705 900 200.