

## **Christians in Politics? New Frontiers Conference, 19 March 2005**

Let me just begin by welcoming the fact that this conference is taking place, and that so many people are here. I am delighted to be here, and I want to try this afternoon to make a case for Christians engaging with politics - for Christians to share alongside others with the hard labour which goes in to the decisions which shape our society. Those of us who are involved as Christians in politics will often have deep disagreements about policies - about what is right and what is wrong. We need to remember that the unity we have in Christ is deeper. And we mustn't allow the fear of disagreement to stop us getting involved.

I was particularly pleased when Simon Allen asked me to come along today, because I guess my starting point for politics was pretty similar to the starting point of many people here. I had always been interested in politics, and supported the Labour Party, but did nothing about it as a student. I spent all my spare time in the CU, but, one summer, now 29 years ago, I went to help out on a tent mission in Forest Gate in East London, working with a little gospel hall there. It was only two weeks, but I was hooked. I was also very influenced by the wonderful book written by David Sheppard, who died last week, about his experience of work in Canning Town in East London, "*Built as a City*". For the first time after that mission I could see how what I believed, and the way I believed I should live my life, could make a real difference. Out of the work of the team which led that mission, of which Leng, my wife, who's here, was a member, came a new church. When I graduated and got a job in London, I went and joined the church, and have lived in East London ever since. And, because I wanted to be involved in the life of the local community, I joined the Labour Party.

### **Christians and politics**

There is a tendency for us as Christians to separate ourselves from politics, confining our interest to often narrowly defined issues of moral conduct. But more and more Christians are seeing that the economy, housing, development and the alleviation of poverty can be as much of a matter for concern for believers as euthanasia or abortion. There is no shortage of examples from our history to encourage us. The progressive political current in Britain has been substantially shaped and influenced by people whose starting point has been following Jesus. One of my ministerial responsibilities at the Treasury is for the Office of National Statistics. Recently I was at a lecture given in the City of London by the Government Chief Statistician, Len Cook, and he pointed out that one of the key early drivers for the collection of national statistics in Britain was the select committee work by Lord Shaftesbury on the employment of children in factories in the middle of the nineteenth century. Righting wrongs is a big theme in our politics, and it is largely Christian in origin.

This is not just a historical phenomenon. Today the potential role for Christians in politics is growing rather than declining. I was recently at a meeting in the House of Commons where Lord Shaftesbury's heirs, the modern Shaftesbury Society, was presenting its work. They shared the platform with an official from one of the Government's Regional Development Agencies, the South East Economic Development Agency, who explained why the Agency had decided to work alongside faith based organisations. The reason, she said, was that they had identified absence of hope as one of the key barriers to achieving the regeneration of disadvantaged communities, and that they now saw working with churches and others as one of the keys to putting that right.

There is today in Government and among politicians a new recognition of the importance and the value of faith in our society. Our society has big challenges ahead. I want to see the followers of Christ taking advantage of that new recognition and contributing to formulating the answers which we come up with, just as they did so effectively in the nineteenth century. Three major issues come to mind:

- How far are we prepared to constrain economic growth in order to safeguard the environment?
- How much personal freedom are we prepared to give up for a higher level of security?
- Will Britain try and go it alone in the world, perhaps staying close to the US, or will we focus on building partnerships with the UN or European Union?

We can all see how important each of those is. There are no easy answers to any of them. It is important that we grapple with these issues, not just as individuals, but as a church community. Some of the potential for Christians engaging in politics is being realised, but there could be much more. The potential is much greater than most Christians realise.

I want to suggest three key contributions for Christians in helping to build our politics

- To help build respect for politics
- To help build trust in our society
- To help build a climate for change.

Let me say a little about each of those three key contributions.

### **Building respect for politics**

Politics can be seen as a dirty, secular business, far removed from respectable Christian activity. I recall a CU friend of mine saying to me after I joined the Labour Party: *"I am sure there are still good people left in there."* It was the kindest thing he could think of to say. And it is not just amongst Christians that there is a wariness of the politicians. A recent poll showed that only 24 per cent trust Government Ministers to tell the truth. We come out better than estate agents and tabloid journalists, but only just, and we are behind almost everyone else.

There is a much greater recognition in politics today that the churches have a great deal to contribute. In the past, many in the Labour Party would have thought about churches as organisations preventing the kind of changes which the Party wanted. Today there is recognition that the opposite is true. That does reflect a profound change. In part it reflects a welcome humility - a recognition that the Party and the Government are not able alone to deliver whatever they might like - but that there needs to be partnership with others. It reflects an articulation of political aims in terms of community impact rather than just in harsh economic terms. And partly also it is that, in the Labour Party, the people who have been chosen as leaders are people today who see the Christian faith as the principal source for their convictions and their values.

The turning point came when John Smith became Leader of the Labour Party. It was John who said that *'Politics is a moral activity'*. I have been a member of the Christian Socialist Movement for over twenty years - it used to be a largely moribund organisation, remarkably influenced when I first joined it by people still

trying to get over the shock of the shattering discovery they made in the mid 1950s that Stalin had not after all been ushering in the Kingdom of God in the Soviet Union. But with John Smith and then Tony Blair, that all changed. CSM has always worked with a local church at the Labour Party conference to arrange a conference service - since John Smith, the party leader has always attended on the Sunday at the beginning of the conference.

It has been much more than a superficial show of support. My former boss for the two years when I was a DTI Minister, Patricia Hewitt, attended last year the conference of the *National Gospel Development Agency* in Leicester, alongside the Bishop. Patricia was a great boss for me. She is extraordinarily sharp. She cut her teeth as General Secretary of Liberty, or the National Council for Civil Liberties as it was then known, and as an aide to Neil Kinnock - who never attended the Labour Party Conference church service. Someone like Patricia would never in the past have attended a conference with *Gospel* in the title, unless it was about music. And it reflects that in this Government we have recognised that the network of committed people who gather in every community to worship God is an immense resource for bringing about changes which we and they believe should be brought about.

If there is today a new respect among politicians for the churches, recognition that we need the churches to help us bring about the changes we are aiming for, I would like to see a greater respect among the churches for party politics. To say that term, *party politics*, is almost to spit. But the fantastic impact of church projects on unemployment, on helping homeless young people, on poverty in Africa - none of these can be complete without political change, which only party politicians can deliver. We politicians are not simply vain wastrels stabbing each other in the back in order to climb up the greasy poll. Politicians I know give hugely of themselves for others in a way and at a cost that Christians are uniquely well placed to understand and to respect. And the changes we work for are needed to complement the churches' work too.

And that is one of the reasons I feel so strongly that Christians should be engaged in politics. What does it say if we as Christians who feel so strongly about right and wrong are simply absent from the hard work of making our society's big choices? It is costly work - how can we justify abandoning it? How can we complain about the result if we have vacated the pitch?

I don't believe that separatist Christian parties are the answer, like the Christian People's Alliance whose leader, Alan Craig, is a councillor in my home borough, the London Borough of Newham. As Christians, we need to be in the rough and tumble, in the mainstream of politics, working out the big issues alongside everyone else who is wrestling with them and not hiving off into a holy huddle on our own. God has called us to be salt and light in the world. I do hope that churches in this network will support those individuals who are called to follow that path. I have had wonderful support from my church and I have no grounds for complaint myself at all. I know I could not have survived without it.

I met this week with a friend - Stephen Beer, CSM vice chair and an employee of the Methodist Church pension fund which has been a creative and influential pioneer of ethical investment in the City. He has pointed out to me an interesting model from the Old Testament. Before the great confrontation on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, Elijah needed the assistance of a man called Obadiah. 1 Kings 18 tells us that Obadiah was in charge of Ahab's palace and that he was a devout believer of the Lord who had discretely hidden 100

prophets who would otherwise have been slaughtered by Ahab. Elijah asked Obadiah to tell Ahab where he was, and, rather reluctantly, Obadiah did so.

The prophet and the politician supported each other. There was an important role for both. Elijah the Prophet could not do what was needed without Obadiah the Government official. That is the relationship between churches and Christian politicians which I am arguing for today.

And by being involved on the inside, not just as critical observers from within the community, Christians can help build respect for the work of politics, and a wider recognition of its importance.

### **Building trust in our society**

The second area where I hope the Church can help is in building trust in our society. Christians can personify trustworthiness, and it is one of the main reasons I want to see Christians involved.

Today with 24/7 news coverage, everything we say, every slip we make is instantly relayed to the public. The media are much more interested in things which undermine trust than things which build it. But trust does need to be rebuilt. It will be a long and hard road, but it must be two way. Politicians must do more to deserve the trust of the church and the public, but the public must also be willing to trust.

Politics cannot work without trust. Iraq. 24 hour drinking. Trust is easy to destroy, but it's very hard to build. There are not many sources for building trustworthiness. Christian faith is one of them.

I was very nervous when I joined the Labour Party, after I left college in 1979. I had spent all my spare time as a teenager and as a student in church and Christian Union circles. What would all these aggressive left wingers whose ranks I was joining in the Labour Party make of a holy Joe like me?

The Labour Party at that time was full of hot headed ideologues. There were Marxists and Trotskyists of many hues. Some of them took the view that their cause was so right that any means to pursue it was justifiable. The choice between honesty and dishonesty was simply a choice between which was most likely to deliver the desired end result. Not surprisingly, there was not very much trust around.

What I found when I got to know my new party colleagues was that their reaction to me was rather surprising. They knew that I had a rather odd ideological commitment, that I was a Christian, and that this was reflected in going to church and attending church meetings. But it was no odder than the numerous other ideological commitments which were widespread at the time. And at least, they thought, with a Christian, the individual was probably going to be reasonably trustworthy. And that view led to my being chosen for various tasks, and twenty five years later to my being a Minister in the current Government.

We often debate the Christian position on the big issues of the day. We see the Christian contribution as being to secure a particular policy. The test for whether Christians are influential is whether particular policies are adopted or not.

I think that is a misunderstanding of the Christian contribution. It's the way we do politics which can be so radically different, just as much as the policies which

are adopted. Christians can bring trustworthiness. That is where we can make a huge contribution. Without trust, politics is doomed to fail.

Politics works well when it is based on a real understanding of people's needs. Christians are better placed than most to understand those needs, and to care about them. Politics needs to be based on relationships with people and communities. They are the kind of relationships which participation in churches brings about. And trust is built when people stand by their word. Christians have a greater motivation than others to be truthful and so to earn the trust of others.

So by being involved, Christians can help to contribute trust to our politics, to create trustworthiness, and to help build our politics.

### **Building a climate for change**

It's no coincidence that, among the areas where I feel most proud of what this Government has achieved, there are two where the churches have been very influential.

The first is the assault on unemployment. From 1979 to 1997, there were always over a million unemployment claimants, and for a while there were over three million. I saw in my community what that did to people. Today it has been for some years below a million, it fell again this week to just over 800,000, and we have set the target of 80% of the working age population being in work, up from about 76% now. For the first time ever, unemployment is lower now in Britain than in any of the other big industrialised countries. Long term youth unemployment has been almost eradicated.

What has that got to do with the churches? The climate within which it was popular and therefore possible to deliver the measures which have brought those changes about were the two major churches' reports - on *Faith in the City* in the 1980s and *Unemployment and the Future of Work* in the 1990s. They were the broad based calls to action which the Government in 1997 was able to respond to.

I've watched the New Deal being driven forward with real passion at the heart of Government. And some of the most imaginative and most effective contributions have been from the churches - Pecan in Southwark and the diocese of Birmingham are two examples I know well. But, more broadly, church reflection and church influence have been very effective in creating the climate within which sympathetic policies could be developed and then put into effect.

The diocese of Birmingham tends to pick up the New Deal participants nobody else will touch. On one occasion, they were asked to find a New Deal placement for a young man who was due in court shortly to be tried for 117 offences of burglary. He was placed on a project to decorate a church complex in Edgbaston - and he turned out to be a superb painter, a skill he had developed while imprisoned at a young offender's institution. He struck up a friendship with the part time church administrator, who was also the husband of the vicar at the church, and when the time came for him to go to court for his trial, the administrator went along to speak up for him and to ask the court that, despite all these dreadful offences, he should be given another chance.

The court, perhaps rather surprisingly, agreed. The young man was given another chance. The painting project was completed and to an extremely high standard. And the young man has since apparently started up with a couple of others a painting business of their own.

And at the ceremony to mark the conclusion of the work, one of those who turned up was the young man's mother. She sought out the church administrator and she said to him; *"When you went to court to plead for my son to keep his job, you saved his life"*. And I think we should have politicians who will make it their business that Government creates opportunities for lives to be saved in that way.

The second area of policy I wanted to refer to is the progress we have seen on international development. Britain took the lead in responding positively to the Jubilee 2000 campaign. 80% of the activism there was from Christians. It was the influence of Christians which created the climate within which Government will act. The Government has relieved \$70 billion worth of debt so far and is providing up to 100 per cent debt relief for those countries committed to using the proceeds to benefit the poor. We can see the benefits for example in Uganda where there are now three times as many children in primary schools.

The Make Poverty History Campaign has been set up to coincide with Britain's Presidency this year of the G7. In 2000, the world set the Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015, amongst which are:

- Free primary education for every child in the world;
- Clean water for everyone;
- Halving the incidence of absolute poverty;

At the present rate of progress, those goals will be hit about 150 years after 2015. But they are not ludicrously expensive. At the moment, international aid worldwide amounts to \$50 billion per year. If we had another \$50 billion per year available - that is, if we could just double the amount of aid available, we could achieve those goals by 2015.

The pop star Bono came to our Labour party conference. He described seeing people queuing up outside a hospital in Malawi to die, three in a bed - two on the bed and one underneath it.

2005 is the crunch year for achieving the Millennium Development goals. We have proposed an international financing facility which - if all the countries signed up - would deliver the resources needed. This is an area I am working on and I would just like to outline how it will work.

At the Monterrey Summit in March 2002, the developed countries pledged an extra \$16 billion per year in international aid. Our proposal, developed and promoted by Gordon Brown, is that this assured stream of funding over the next thirty years should be used not simply to spend on development, but rather to pay off upfront loans which would allow us to spend much more money in the earlier years up to 2015. Because if we can spend not \$16 bn per year but \$50 bn per year between now and 2015, then we can deliver the goals. So the idea is to use money which has already been committed to lever in more money upfront which will allow us to achieve the goals. And with aid spending continuing to grow, it is expected that there would still be an increasing amount of aid spending after 2015 even after the interest payments have been taken out, but we will have been able to make a decisive improvement to conditions in the developing world from which the whole world will benefit.

Those are the kind of things which only politicians can do. The German finance minister complained recently to Gordon Brown that he was organising people to send him postcards. It all makes an impact! We have from time to time in the Treasury been deluged with postcards. I don't know if you can remember the

Jubilee 2000 postcard campaign when thousands of people sent us postcards with one pound coins sellotaped to the back. One of them came in from a Mrs Brown in Scotland, and the Treasury post room managed to work out it was actually from the Chancellor's mother!

The report of the Commission for Africa, set up by the Prime Minister, was published just two weeks ago. Christians should be in these fora, working for justice and change for the better.

Those are two areas where there has been passion at the heart of Government - where Christians in Britain have already created a climate where Government could act, and where - in the case of the International Financing Facility in particular, I hope will be able to contribute a good deal more this year. And I hope that Christians working in politics will be part of identifying further areas where the same passion at the heart of Government needs to be targeted in the future, and then to building the climate within which changes can be delivered by a governing party.

### **Conclusion**

So those are the three contributions I want to suggest the Church can make to building our politics:

- Helping build respect for the work of politics;
- Helping build trust within the operation of politics;
- Building a climate for change.

There is a lot at stake but there is a lot we can do too. And we need to be involved at the sharp end if we are going to do it.

If you walk, as I have on a couple of occasions, from the city Cambridge, north along the banks of the River Cam to Ely, you can see Ely Cathedral within a mile or two of starting out, rising up from the flatness which spans the horizon in every direction. It stands on the only high ground for miles, and you would be able to see it even without a cathedral on top of it. But, with the vast cathedral tower, it is an awe inspiring sight. In making that journey you spend the entire day, one footstep after another, drawing closer to this extraordinary building, until finally you climb up from the river, up the hill through some orchard fields, and enter at last the huge cathedral doorway. It is a beautiful cathedral, it occupied the skills of innumerable craftsmen and it has been a place of worship for countless believers throughout most of the past millennium.

But about half way along what is in one sense a rather dreary journey through the Fens, with just that cathedral to draw you on, you come across - just alongside the river, apparently in the middle of nowhere - another, more recent place built for worship. It is an abandoned Methodist chapel. Once in that place, a group of ordinary farm labourers - perhaps following a visit by John Wesley himself - these labourers had set out to follow Christ and had decided they wanted to build a chapel where they could meet and pray and worship and express their new found faith together. The building - not used now - is a reminder of the change in the lives of that group of people. A change which had come about when they came to believe.

And I used to wonder which of those two buildings for worship was the more impressive. In one sense, the answer is obvious. And yet the chapel has a good claim to the accolade too, absorbing as it did the faith and commitment of people who had never done anything out of the ordinary before. It testifies to the change

which occurred in their lives when they came to believe, a chapel built as it was not by royal decree and with the resources of the mediaeval church but through the determination of a small group of ordinary believers.

Those chapels, and the movement of faith which came out of them, transformed Britain's politics and transformed Britain. And we are still reaping the benefits in Britain and around the world today.

They were the New Frontiers churches of their day. It can happen again. And I hope that it will.

Thank you.