

The Christian Contribution to New Labour Sarpsborg, Norway, 28th September 2002

In 1997, it was 23 years since the Labour Party had won a British General Election, and 18 years since Labour had been in Government. But on that day in June 1997, Labour won a landslide victory without precedent over the past half century. A few days later, the new Parliamentary Labour Party was addressed by the new Prime Minister. Because so many Labour MPs had been elected, beyond all expectations, the customary room in the House of Commons was simply not big enough. Instead, we were all summoned to Church House, a few yards from the Houses of Parliament, and the Prime Minister spoke to us there.

Labour had won its last really big victory, in 1945 - over 50 years previously. That Labour Government achieved a huge amount, laying foundations for a better life for ordinary people in Britain, many of which remain today. But it only lasted for a few years. The Labour MPs disagreed among themselves. They allowed themselves to be portrayed as arrogant. One of the Labour MPs had said after the 1945 General Election: "We are the masters now". That Labour Government was followed by a Conservative Government which lasted for 13 years.

So the New Labour Government in 1997 wanted to establish a very different record. The Prime Minister's message at Church House in 1997 was not that we were the masters now, but that we should be the servants of the people. And in language lifted straight from the New Testament letters of St Paul, he said that each MP should be an ambassador for the Government in his or her community and in all that we did. The Leader of the Labour Party was on that day using language very different from the language of most of his predecessors. By doing so on that occasion and others, sometimes to the irritation of his own supporters, he was able to reach out and build linkages with groups who had not previously supported the Labour Party - and so to achieve not just that one election victory, but a second victory, almost as big, last year. The Labour Party had never before in its 100 year history achieved two convincing election victories in a row.

It is important to recognise that Britain is a highly secular nation. Britain is not like the United States, where faith is part of normal public discourse. Church attendance is regularly reported to be declining. Key political commentators who have supported the Government's policy programme have been fiercely anti-religious. Labour has tended to be regarded much more as a party of opposition to the established churches than of support for them. So it is surprising that faith has proved to be so significant in the success of its progressive political programme.

But I want to argue today that Christian faith provided three vital contributions to the success of New Labour - contributions vital to its initial electoral success, and to its subsequent success in Government too:

- Christian faith provided leadership, as a remarkably large proportion of the Government's leaders professed an active Christian faith;
- It provided a new language, like the Prime Minister's talk of servants and ambassadors, which allowed new policies to be communicated successfully, without awakening memories of past political disputes and mistakes;
- It provided vitally important new linkages to groups and communities whose support proved to be critically important.

Leadership

There is nothing new in leaders of the Labour Party professing Christian faith, as Graham Dale's book "God's Politicians" has powerfully demonstrated. The Labour Party at its foundation in 1900 was a coalition of Marxists, Christian Socialists and Fabian middle class intellectuals. A historian famously claimed that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than Marxism. The founder of the Labour Party, a patriarch in Labour's history, Keir Hardie, wrote in his diary in 1877 at the age of 21: "Today I have given my life to Jesus Christ". He was influenced by the campaigns of the American evangelist Dwight Moody in Scotland. Towards the end of his life, in 1910, he said "The impetus which drove me first of all into the Labour movement and the inspiration which carried me on in it, has been derived more from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth than all other sources combined".

In the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, though, the Christian strand in Labour thinking was muted. The Christian Socialist Movement was founded in 1960, but it was not influential in the Labour Party and the Christianity spoken of by its leaders did not resonate with ordinary Christians.

In 1992, after a disastrous fourth successive election defeat, that changed. John Smith became Party leader. He grew up in the Church of Scotland and his faith featured in his leadership campaign. In an interview with a Scottish newspaper at that time, he said: "Just as the Christian stands by the fundamental tenets of Christianity, so the socialist should stand by the tenets of socialism. For me, socialism is largely Christian ethical values".

John Smith viewed politics as a moral activity and passionately believed in the need to tackle problems neglected under the Conservatives. Unemployment had rocketed since the Conservatives gained power in 1979, and they seemed happy to sacrifice people's futures for financial efficiency. Social deprivation had intensified as the Conservatives withdrew benefits, taxed those who were least able to pay, and appeared to abandon whole communities. Mrs Thatcher's insistence that there was "no such thing as society" was consistent with the cry that "greed is good".

John Smith knew that the wrongs of Thatcherism could only be put right through a Labour Government. The party had to become electable again. He introduced the "one member, one vote" rule in the election of the party leader, reducing the power of trade union block votes and allowing the party to appear more representative of the nation at large. He recognised as well that a Labour Government would have to reach out much more widely than in the past - to work for example with business to tackle Britain's problems, rather than perceiving business as the enemy of Labour. John Smith's faith was at the centre of his approach.

John Smith died tragically in 1994, but his successor, Tony Blair, the principal architect of New Labour, is a Christian Socialist too. When Tony Blair recently took part in a series of three television interviews examining his five years in office, there were questions about his Christian convictions and their impact on his life, as well as on issues like health, education, the economy and crime.

In his book, "New Britain: my vision of a young country", Tony Blair set out the key principles of New Labour and gave a chapter to his Christian faith. He highlighted the importance he attaches to prayer and worship. He commented that the self-interest championed by the Conservative Party clashed with Christian belief, although he has always been careful to stress that no political

party has a monopoly on faith or morality, and to emphasise his respect for the sincerity of political opponents who profess faith themselves.

Tony Blair's faith has always been a major reason behind his opposition to Marxism as well as Conservatism. His ditching of the old Clause 4 of the party's constitution was a key step in forming New Labour. The clause dated from 1918 and called for the "common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange."

I have emphasised the role of party leaders, but others have provided leadership in New Labour from a Christian standpoint. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is the son of a Church of Scotland minister and has supported the Christian Socialist Movement. He has a powerful intellect and expresses deep political commitment to social justice and tackling poverty in terms drawn from faith and which make sense to people in churches. Paul Boateng, who this year became Britain's first black cabinet minister, has described Christianity as the "bedrock" of his life. "My faith gives me a sense of proportion," he has said. "Politicians address the issues of today and maybe tomorrow. Christ addresses issues that are for all eternity". David Blunkett the Home Secretary was once a lay preacher. Jack Straw the Foreign Secretary and numerous other members of the Government and Labour Members of Parliament point to Christianity as the source of their politics.

So Christian faith has inspired many of the leaders of New Labour. Christian influence has deep roots in the history of the Labour Party, but it is probably more apparent among Labour's leaders today than at any time since the party's earliest years at the start of the twentieth century.

Language

At point after point, the language of New Labour can be seen to have been drawn from the Bible. And it has been language which people who have not supported Labour in the past, nor been Christians either, have been able to relate to.

And the same has been true of the imagery of New Labour. Conservatives have tried to rubbish Labour among Christians and others by characterising it as lacking moral standards, as undermining family values, as threatening decency and stability. In the past it was very effective. But it has proved very hard for the Conservative Party and for Conservative newspapers to make those charges stick to a Prime Minister who is clearly devoted to his wife and three children - with a fourth child born last year - and who goes to church with them every week. They have tried to level those charges against him, but the charges have lacked credibility and been much less damaging against Tony Blair than they have been against some of his predecessors. It has been important too that the Prime Minister has not shied from expressing support for the institution of marriage in terms which are well received in church circles but sometimes less so among his political allies.

In his book, "New Britain", Blair wrote this: "Easter, a time of rebirth and renewal, has a special significance for me and, in a sense, my politics. My vision of society reflects a faith in the human spirit and its capacity to renew itself".

And around those ideas, drawn from the New Testament, there has developed a language for political change. The Government has introduced the "New Deal" for unemployed young people, the "Fresh Start" programme for failing schools. This

idea of new birth and renewal has proved an effective part of New Labour's language.

The key New Labour idea of people's rights being matched with their responsibilities is drawn from a similar source. The Labour Party has traditionally championed people's rights, and Christian Socialists have been inspired by the prophets' ringing calls for justice in the Old Testament - by Isaiah's call for God's people to "learn to do right, seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless and plead the cause of the widow", and his injunction that God "requires you to share your food with the hungry and provides shelter for the poor wanderer". But with New Labour, that has been matched by an emphasis on people's corresponding responsibilities, by assertions like the one in Genesis that "The Lord took man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it". And so, for example, the Government has explained its policy on welfare as "work for those who can work and security for those who cannot". That has proved an effective formulation and given the Government a third way between the opposed political positions of on the one hand providing generous benefits and on the other insisting that people should go out and get a job.

It is arguable whether the substance of the Government's policies has been drawn from the teaching of the Bible. My point is a different one - that a Biblical language has proved to be effective in communicating political ideas in a very secular modern Britain.

Linkages

The conservative newspaper the Daily Telegraph carried an interview with Tony Blair at Easter 1997, just before the General Election, and it gave the article the headline: "It is impossible to be a Christian and a Conservative". This statement provoked outrage among Conservatives and was widely condemned, although the text of the interview showed that Tony Blair had said no such thing. Personally, I was thrilled by it! For years, we had allowed the Conservative Party to claim the moral high ground, to present itself as the party of morality, while carrying out policies of selfishness - systematically reducing, for example, the share of Britain's national income being committed to overseas development.

Now, with that interview, the boot was on the other foot. The Conservatives were having to defend themselves against charges levelled on a moral basis, and Labour was able to reclaim political territory which had been ceded to the Conservatives generations before. John Smith's 1992 lecture to the Christian Socialist Movement which marked the turning point in relations between Christianity and Labour had been called "Reclaiming the Ground", and a great deal of ground was subsequently reclaimed. The change opened key new linkages, first with the churches, but before long well beyond them too.

It wasn't just that Labour worked hard at its relationships with the churches. There was also growing disdain for the Conservative Party on the part of the churches. It had generally been assumed that the Conservatives were the pro-Christian party and Mrs Thatcher had encouraged that view. She famously quoted St Francis of Assisi on her arrival in Downing Street for the first time in 1979. In reality, that association was always a pretty superficial one. Scepticism within the churches grew as unemployment increased from 1979, and a real split was highlighted in 1986 when the Church of England published an influential report, "Faith in the City", arguing that urgent action was needed to address the problems in Britain's inner cities. The report was supported by mainstream Anglican leaders, but it was denounced by Government representatives as

"Marxist". The rift was never fully healed. Later, the Conservatives lost church support at a more popular level when they championed shops being free to open on a Sunday. And then a succession of Ministers - including some of those who had been most vocal in calling for the restoration of family values - were exposed as having had colourful extra-marital affairs of various kinds.

In the preparation for the 2001 election, the Christian Socialist Movement carried out a series of dialogues with leaders of the main Christian denominations and with leaders of the other major faiths in Britain too - the Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Jewish communities, and produced a compendium of their views about what the next Government should do. It was published under the title "Faith in Politics" and was a good example of working at links with organisations beyond the normal reach of the Labour Party.

It is at first surprising that dialogue with the churches should prove so significant. Not many people in Britain go to church. The votes of church goers are not in themselves a large element in an election outcome. But what proved to be the case was that dialogue with the churches opened doors to a much wider constituency which was comfortable with the moral starting point and the terms in which that dialogue was couched.

It has been possible for New Labour to move the dialogue with the churches beyond the family values agenda where the Conservatives always try and keep it. We have seen church groups establishing projects to help unemployed people into work; to provide housing schemes for homeless young people; to work with drug abusers. The New Labour Government has offered partnership to those initiatives, and celebrated the social contribution of faith-based welfare projects, rather than wanting Government agencies to take them over.

Perhaps the most important development of the dialogue between the Government and the churches was the Jubilee 2000 campaign. The campaign, as you know, was for Britain and the other wealthy nations to cancel the debts owed to them by the poorest countries in the world. It created great enthusiasm in Britain, with huge rallies, human chains and letter writing campaigns. It did not involve just the churches, but about 80% of those who were involved were from the churches and it brought them together for a political campaign in a quite unprecedented way.

I was a Minister at the Treasury when the campaign was at its height. They organised postcards for their supporters to send in to the Treasury with £1 coins sellotaped to the back, with the request that the coin should be used to help pay off the debts of the poorest countries. It was a powerful campaign. It acquired an added authority when a postcard was sent in by the mother of the Chancellor, Gordon Brown!

As the Millennium Deadline approached, Gordon Brown agreed to address a big Jubilee 2000 rally at a church in Westminster. In the end, so many people attended that they took over a second church - and Gordon Brown had to give his address twice. He was able to announce that Britain would no longer collect the interest on the debts it was owed from any of the poorest countries in the world. It was a powerful moment of connection between the Government and a large and influential body of passionate campaigners who were jubilant at the message he brought to them.

The influential left-of-centre journalist Will Hutton drew attention to what was happening in Jubilee 2000 in an article in 1999. "I doubt many readers know the

Old Testament books of Leviticus, Exodus and Deuteronomy any more than I do", he wrote. "but ... at the end of an increasingly secular century, it has been the biblical proof and moral imagination of religion that have torched the principles of the hitherto unassailable citadels of international finance - and opened the way to a radicalism about capitalism whose ramifications are not yet fully understood ... The Left of Centre should take note; it is no longer Morris, Keynes and Beveridge who inspire and change the world - its Leviticus."

The Government has been careful to establish a good record on overseas aid. Whereas under the previous Conservative Government, aid as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product fell inexorably, under New Labour it has risen steadily and figures announced in July show it continuing to rise for the next three years.

The Prime Minister made an early commitment to work for the abolition of child poverty in Britain within twenty years. Gordon Brown sees widespread public support for that goal as a key vehicle for gathering support for a range of progressive policies both in the UK and internationally. One of the Government's first acts in 1997 was the creation of the Social Exclusion Unit in the Prime Minister's office to tackle poverty and disadvantage - picking up language about social inclusion and exclusion which was derived from Catholic social teaching.

Britain has always been class ridden, and political allegiances have tended to follow class boundaries in quite a predictable way. But Tony Blair's approach was different. He took the view that anybody could be persuaded that the policies of New Labour were right - nobody at all should be regarded as a lost cause. He set about persuading business leaders that they should be involved in working to give jobs to unemployed young people - and he succeeded. He travelled around the world to speak to Rupert Murdoch, owner of Britain's biggest selling newspaper and for as long as anyone could remember a supporter of the Conservative Party. Sure enough, the paper supported Labour in 1997 and again in the election last year.

Some have interpreted this willingness to work with people who in the Labour Party were often seen as beyond the pale as cynical power grabbing. It can equally well and perhaps better be understood as coming from a Christian view that every person is made in the image of God and that nobody is beyond salvation. Whatever its origin, it was an effective approach to building political support across a broad spectrum.

I have focused today on the political gains from New Labour's engagement with the churches. Of course there are tensions too. The reduction of the age of consent for homosexuals from 18 to 16 - bringing it into line with heterosexuals - was deeply unpopular with many churchgoers. While the Government was widely seen as having done well in response to the Jubilee 2000 campaign, it is much less clear whether the same will be said about the response to the current Trade Justice Campaign. And there is deep unease in the churches and in the mosques at the prospect of war with Iraq. But there is little real sign as yet that the political territory among the churches which has been regained by the Labour Party in the last ten years is being reclaimed by the Conservatives - although they are today working hard at trying.

Conclusion

Tomorrow morning is the Sunday morning of the annual conference of the Labour Party. There will be, as there is every year, a conference church service, organised by the Christian Socialist Movement, and attended by the Prime

Minister and his wife, plus a forest of photographers. John Smith attended it too. I first attended the service as a delegate to the Labour Party Conference in 1983, when Michael Foot was the Leader, and at that time there was no question of the leadership being represented - barely either of any element of the party's leadership.

This change in attitude to Christianity on the part of Labour's leaders has been much more than just a superficial change. It has provided a significant part of the inspiration of New Labour - its ideas and its language - and accounts also for a significant part of its success.

I wish you success for the process of change you are undertaking in Norway - this great process of engaging with the people and the institutions of Norway - and I wish you well for the election which will follow.

Thank you.