

Faith in the Public Square at Westminster

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A survey of British politics under the title “Christian faith in Westminster” might take at least two possible directions. First, we could consider the role of Christian faith as a motivation and influence in the affairs at Westminster, the seat of British politics. Alternatively, we could approach the topic in a different sense: as a discussion exploring what faith – or confidence – Christians might place in the politics done at Westminster. This article attempts to do both, and, after setting the scene historically, focuses on some of the key personalities and recent trends in British politics from a Christian point of view.

Looking at Westminster, at that famous square, one is struck by two colossal buildings: the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey. Both in their gothic splendour represent two pillars of British public life: politics and church. Architecture is a good starting point for a discussion of faith in Westminster, even if it might seem rather odd. Churchill once said “We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us.” These sage words were uttered with great poignancy in a dramatic parliamentary debate in October 1943. Churchill took to his feet in the aftermath of the destruction of the House of Commons chamber by German incendiary bombs. The House was considering the question of rebuilding the chamber after its almost total destruction. From some quarters, proposals were made to embrace a more classical, conciliar, senatorial design such as had been favoured on the continent. Against that tide, Churchill insisted that the dimensions and arrangements of the old Chamber be preserved. Why? Churchill argued that in spite of – or rather because of – its many apparent imperfections, it had fashioned British Parliamentary democracy for the better. The fact

that the chamber was small and stuffy, far from being a problem to be remedied, was rather something to be cherished as it shaped the very character of our politics: adversarial; physical; robust.

Churchill knew, but many have since forgotten, that the shape of the building that has in turn shaped our politics, comes from the Churches in which Parliament once convened. Churches and church halls had long played host to Parliament. So, in a certain sense, the Church can be said to be part of the fabric of Parliament, part of its very DNA. But the extent to which Christianity remains an enduring influence, and continues to shape British politics today beyond simple historical fact, is hotly-contested territory and in good measure a matter of perspective.

Against the historical backdrop, there are those who see Westminster through an avowedly secular lens. Take, for example, Alistair Campbell, a significant figure in recent years, who was Prime Minister Tony Blair’s long-serving Head of Communications. In 2003, Campbell famously interrupted an interview with Tony Blair, when the journalist strayed into matters of faith, to announce ‘we don’t do God’.

Campbell’s remark is symptomatic of a prevailing tendency to sideline the role of religious faith in British political discourse in spite of strong evidence to the contrary. The remark is curious both in its subject and its timing. Its subject, Tony Blair, certainly did ‘do God’. Proof of this fact can be found in his frequent Church attendance and subsequent reception into full communion with the Catholic Church in 2007. And its timing in 2003 was at something of a high water mark of Catholic participation in public life. The leaders of two other major political parties, Iain Duncan Smith (Conservative) and Charles

Kennedy (Liberal Democrat), were practicing Catholics. Both these men were each, respectively, the first Catholics to lead their political parties since Catholic emancipation in 1829. In addition to the presence of Catholics and Catholic sympathisers in party political leadership, the Speaker of the Commons at the time, Michael Martin, was effectively the first Catholic to hold that high office since St. Thomas More.

Yet that was 15 years ago. If, according to Harold Wilson, “a week is a long time in politics”, does the scene described of significant Catholic representation at the highest levels of British politics belong to a previous era? Where are we now?

Unmistakably, we are in the midst of arguably the biggest political issue since the Second World War: Britain’s departure from the European Union, or “Brexit”. The decision (and its possible revision), as well as the terms and manner of its execution, dominate British political discourse such that it can seem as though there is little else besides. Whatever view one takes, these matters will be vital to the prosperity of the nation and Britain’s standing on the world stage for decades to come. Bluntly put, Christians are divided on this question and, likewise, Christian Parliamentarians. The situation simply does not lend itself to broad analysis and generalisations. Let’s, therefore, set this issue aside and try to look beyond the proverbial elephant in the room, even if everything that follows must be understood in the shadow of Brexit.

Strikingly, the current Prime Minister, Theresa May, has been called “Britain’s first Catholic Prime Minister”. The comment was made by her Cabinet colleague, Michael Gove, in an article for *The Times* newspaper. He claims that May is “an Anglo-Catholic rather than a Roman Catholic, but no less a Catholic for that.” In support of his bold moniker, he notes the influence of her father, Hubert Brasier, an Anglican

vicar who was very firmly in the high Anglican tradition resulting from the Oxford Movement. Gove also detects a strong Catholic theme in May’s interview for the BBC Radio 4 programme, *Desert Island Discs*, where among her song choices, she chose two hymns including “Therefore We, Before Him Bending”, sung during the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

May has certainly enjoyed good relations, on a personal basis, with Cardinal Vincent Nichols who, as Archbishop of Westminster, serves as President of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. In a letter following her appointment as Prime Minister, the Cardinal said he was “personally delighted” and noted the “maturity of judgement, the steely resolve, the sense of justice and the personal integrity and warmth you have always shown”. These impressions appear to be made on the basis of their collaboration on human trafficking as part of the Santa Martha group, under the encouragement of Pope Francis. However, two years into her premiership and amidst the





difficult compromises of office, whether that remains the view of the Cardinal today is difficult to know.

Her personal voting record suggests sympathy for the pro-life cause. In 2001 she voted against the extension of research on human embryos and against the creation of human clones. In 2008 she voted for a ban on animal-human embryos and so-called “saviour siblings”. On abortion she voted for a reduction in the time limit to 20 weeks, when the majority of MPs voted for 24. And in 2015 she voted in favour of banning sex-selective abortions and against assisted suicide.

In any event, Gove’s “Catholic” analysis seems a little fanciful. She may not be a Catholic but the Prime Minister’s understated Anglican faith is clearly important to her; of her faith, she once stated simply “It’s part of who I am”. Whether these Christian underpinnings extend to the government she leads is a moot point but there are grounds for hope.

There is also the figure of Jacob Rees Mogg who is frequently tipped for the leadership of the Conservative party. A key Brexiteer, he makes no secret of the depth of his Catholic faith – he tries to say the Rosary every day – and its implications on issues from abortion to same sex marriage. However, Rees Mogg has been clear that he does not see his role as one of proselytising, nor as a theological one. He recently encouraged pupils at a talk at a Catholic school to consider a reli-

gious vocation, which he believes is a “much higher form of service” than politics.

It’s difficult to say the same of May’s opponent, Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Labour Party. He comes from the hard left of a party that once had deep Christian foundations, historically “owing more to Methodism than Marxism”. Jeremy Corbyn has blankly refused to comment on his religious beliefs, even insofar as he may or may not hold them. When asked in 2015 whether he was an atheist, he responded: “There are so many things written about me that are unfair, unjust and ill-researched that it would be wrong. I’m not going any further than that, belief is a private thing.” He is known to have been raised in a strongly Christian family and is reported to have taken Holy Communion while attend-

ing a funeral of a Catholic trade unionist in September 2017, despite not being a Catholic. Whether fair or otherwise, he is widely supposed to be an agnostic.

Corbyn’s leadership of the Labour Party represents a radical break from the social market ‘third way’ policies of New Labour under Tony Blair, which Catholic commentators such as Paul Vallely read as being in great sympathy with Catholic Social Teaching. He recently signed a letter to the Home Secretary calling for a ban on prayer vigils outside abortion clinics. Indeed, there has been a palpable lament as Catholics have gradually dwindled in influence and numbers within an increasingly secular and dirigiste party.

Attempting to withstand this trend, “Catholics for Labour” is a new group or caucus launched at the Labour Party Conference last year. One founding member, Emma Lewell-Buck MP, said: “The Labour movement and Catholicism are firmly rooted in social justice, there are many synergies between the two.” Another founding member, Mike Kane MP, observed that the Labour Party ignores Catholic voters “at its peril”.

The move follows the efforts of so-called “Blue Labour”, promoted by Lord Glasman and others, which – taking its cue from Catholic Social Teaching – seeks to realign Labour away from freewheeling neo-liberal economics and back to an emphasis on families, communities and self-help. All of this is welcome news but

whether these initiatives live up to their promise remains to be seen. So far, there is precious little to show for such efforts.

Traditionally regarded as the third party in British politics, the Liberal Democrats are now so decimated that they verge upon being consigned to irrelevance. It can be described as a party in search of its soul, but that search has not been favourable to Christianity in recent years. The previous leader, Tim Farron, resigned in July 2017, essentially because he thought his Christian faith and his political party were fundamentally at odds. His verdict: it is not possible to lead the Liberal Democrats as a Christian, such is the hostility on the part of the party and the media.

How times have changed. The Liberal Party of old (before it became the Liberal Democrats in 1998) was a Party of conscience and proud of its Christian foundations – a tradition which stretched back to Gladstone and included Catholic luminaries like G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, as well as David (now Lord) Alton.

This noble tradition now appears in tatters. Liberal Democrats have proved implacable in their hostility to faith schools and have been insistent on imposing policies, such as abortion, on their members. Inevitably, this has made it a hostile place for Christians even if Vince Cable, the

current leader, has in the past hinted at his own faith. More recently, like Jeremy Corbyn, Cable also signed a letter calling for a ban on prayer vigils outside abortion clinics.

So, what is to be done? It will not do for all Christians to join the Conservative party, though many serious Christians seem to be doing so. And it seems simplistic at best, and cynical at worst, to suggest a sort of “Catholic entryism” as a means of overturning these regrettable shifts in the Labour and Liberal Democrats. But at the very least, the Catholics who are already present, especially at a Parliamentary level, need to step forward and speak up. After all, there is no reciprocal ‘quietism’ on the part of those who would oppose policies of concern to Christians, and who seek to exclude people of faith from political discourse.

Many conclude that a much-needed Christian renewal of British politics can only be brought about by a change in the Westminster electoral system. From “first past the post”, where there are 650 individual races which favour large and established parties, a shift to proportional representation would leave elections wide open and ensure that all voices were heard and represented, including that of Christians. There is a risk, however, that in such a system, Christian views would simply become one fringe interest among many.

Ultimately, if Christianity is to shape and fashion British politics in the way it once did, if we are going to “do God”, four things are necessary: prayer, evangelisation, catechesis, and the courage to apply our Christian faith to political challenges. This is no easy undertaking and will take time but it is vital to restore the confidence of Christians. More importantly, this undertaking is vital if we are to build the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. Put another way, and to misappropriate Churchill: society at large must be better shaped by Christian faith if we hope this to be reflected at Westminster and to shape British politics.

