

Faith: helping build a politics based on hope

IPPR, 29 January 2009

I am delighted to have this opportunity of speaking on this topic. I warmly welcome the interest that IPPR is taking in the impact of faith on public policy, on identity and the public realm, and I am grateful to Professor Michael Kenny in particular who invited me to contribute to this series.

A politics based on hope

We can all see the scale of the challenges ahead for politics. On the world economy; with unemployment rising across the developed world; on the conflict in the Middle East; on tackling climate change and global poverty; in addressing youth violence in areas like the one I represent in East London, where Stephen Lewis was stabbed after leaving a church hall party last weekend. It would be easy to lapse in the face of challenges of that magnitude into cynicism or even despair – to conclude that nothing can be done by politicians effectively to resolve these enormous challenges.

But it is the calling of politicians to figure out how to tackle them – to identify solutions and to work to implement them.

It is the calling for progressive politicians to be hopeful – to work out how we can address them together much more effectively than if individuals try and address them alone. We don't accept, for example, that the right response to the current economic crisis is to let it run its course. Our view is that Government can make a difference, standing alongside people through this period, working together to rebuild growth in the economy and to create new jobs.

What I want to argue today is that the faith communities offer a rich resource of hopefulness which, in progressive politics, we need to tap into and draw upon. The faith communities have not always been seen as the natural allies of progressive politics. Indeed, in the United States, there has been a powerful alliance between Christian organisations and conservatism. We saw that alliance loosening with the election of Barack Obama.

Faith communities have a great deal to offer us, not least in their resource of hopefulness, as we build a new politics based on hope to respond effectively to the challenges we face. They can form the basis for a broad coalition of hope.

There is a twofold challenge here. A challenge to progressive politicians to show they recognise faith-based

perspectives and contributions as valid and mainstream, rather than irrelevant and marginal. That means recognising that faith cannot be relegated to the private sphere – and as IPPR has already argued – addressing faith literacy in central and local government, so that officials can deal intelligently with input from faith communities. And it means thinking hard about identity, recognising the part faith plays, and getting beyond ‘We don’t do God’.

And a challenge to faith communities and their members. To recognise that, in democracy, people are entitled to hold strongly divergent views. It is right to work with people you disagree strongly with on very important subjects, in order to make real in a community the hope which faith instils.

Faith in Britain

It may strike some as a bit odd to hear a politician in 2009 speaking of faith communities as a resource, when their numbers are surely in terminal decline. We have been regaled for years with statistics of falling church attendance, and the clear assumption that faith is on the way out.

But the number of people in Britain who identify with faith – who see faith as the starting point for their thinking about

the world and their judgments about right and wrong, indeed as the key to their whole identity – remains very large. In London, in areas like the one I represent, the number seems to me to be rising not falling. And faith groups are growing in confidence to venture into the public square and to serve their wider communities.

We overcame stiff opposition from the Conservative benches to include a voluntary question in the last census on faith. 90% of respondents answered the question. Over three quarters identified themselves with one of the major faiths. Many were shocked how high that figure was. I read an article by one commentator who concluded people must have misunderstood the question.

I think they understood the question perfectly well. I don't think the influence of faith is in decline. One thing that's changed is that secularly inclined commentators used to patronising Christian faith have found it much harder to deal with Islam in that way. Muslims in Britain have helped faith gain a new voice and a new confidence. And that's good for progressive politics, because, as Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it in the IPPR book, *"Religion is an agent of social change, the most powerful there is"*.

Christian faith as a source for a politics based on hope

The continued, significant influence of religion in the public square has a lot to do with the hope inspired by faith. I have been a Christian since my mid teens and I have always found what the Bible says on this to be particularly inspiring. From the beginning of Peter's first letter:

[God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

1 Peter 1.3-4

And Paul's letter to the Romans speaks about "*hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the Kingdom of God*", Romans 8.20-21.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has described Christians as "*prisoners of hope*". But what does this mean for politics? The hope of the Bible is often characterised as "*pie in the sky when you die*". Doesn't this kind of hope actually discourage people from working to change things for the better here and now?

But that misrepresents the hope of the Bible. Its not a wishy washy kind of hope that things might get better some day. It's a down to earth, roll up your sleeves, work hard kind of hope. Tom Wright, the Bishop of Durham, in his book *"Surprised by Hope"*, emphasises that hope in the Bible is about the earth being renewed. He put it like this:

"People who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present."

Certainly we see today as in the past a rich profusion of initiatives to tackle social challenges which have as their starting point, as their motivation, faith in and worship of Christ. I think its one of the most hopeful developments of our time.

Pope Benedict's second encyclical, published in November 2007, is on the theme of Christian hope. He says this:

"Christian hope does not mean living in the clouds, dreaming of a better life. It is not merely a projection of what we would like to be or do. It leads us to discover seeds of a new world already present today ... This hope

is, in addition, a source of energy to live differently, not according to the values of a society based on the thirst for possession”

The mirror of hope is resilience. When you believe things can and will get better, it doesn't make you weak it makes you steely.

Someone who believes in the Christian faith knows that history is in God's hands. That things will not always be how they are today – there will be justice in the future. Living in the hope of the future, that person starts to bring the future into the present – to punch holes into the here and now and let light bursts from the future shine in. Taking a stand, bringing God's future to bear. *“Thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.”*

That helps perhaps explain why Neal Lawson, describing himself as an atheist and a full time politico, has argued that religious leaders and faith communities are increasingly providing the moral leadership today.

I was a patron last year for Hope 2008 – a programme in which hundreds of churches helped their communities. The Prime Minister hosted a reception at 10 Downing Street just

before Christmas, to thank some who had been involved.

The Hope 2008 website contains video reports:

- **A rehabilitation project for homeless men in Manchester based on playing football together;**
- **A young girl, asked why she gave up a day to pick up litter, answering that its because she loves God;**
- **A youth café run by volunteers in Bridgend to help youngsters avoid drugs.**

In West Bromwich, rounding off the Black Country Hope 2008, we were told of a church offering to clear gardens for elderly people not able to do it themselves. One man, delighted, told relatives and neighbours. They scoffed, and assured him it must be a wind up – people simply don't do that kind of thing just out of kindness. But the church delivered, and the garden was cleared by an enthusiastic group in a day's work.

Clearing somebody's garden is not going to solve the world's problems. But the beneficiary is one additional man with a reason to disagree with Mrs Thatcher's nostrum that there is no such thing as society. His community now has just that little bit extra cohesion, because of what members of that church did. And they did it because the hope they hold as

Christians is the kind of hope which the Pope and the Bishop of Durham were talking about, which motivates people to work to make things better now.

A few weeks ago I joined the first foray of the Street Pastors in my area, going out onto the streets in Stratford at 10 pm on a Saturday night in distinctive blue jackets and baseball caps. I was there for an hour – they were out all night. It is another remarkable phenomenon. After rigorous training and with impressive volunteer leadership, they were just going out to talk to people. As they put it: *“Street Pastors takes practical hope to the pavement.”*

Faith and the left

On the left of politics, we have a lot to learn from groups like these for a deep-rooted, progressive politics based on hope. We often hear you shouldn't mix faith and politics – that it is unseemly to mix them, perhaps even dangerous. I take the opposite view – that faith is a great starting point for politics. And in particular, that faith offers a crucial contribution to a politics based on hope.

Its no coincidence that the last three leaders of the Labour Party have been people for whom faith has been the starting

point for their politics. Or now that Australia has a Labor Prime Minister for whom also faith has been the starting point, and who has argued that Christianity “*must always take the side of the marginalised, the vulnerable and the oppressed*”. Or that the United States has now as a Democrat President a man who learned his politics as a community organiser for a group of churches in Chicago.

Something important is happening here on the left of politics. Faith, often in the past derided as conservative or irrelevant or heading for extinction, now providing more and more of its leadership. In the Victorian and Edwardian eras, progressive politics and religious conviction were deeply inter-connected. After 1918 they weren't. Perhaps now what we are seeing is simply a return to a more normal relationship between them.

Barack Obama's book – “*The Audacity of Hope*” – has a thirty page chapter on Faith. He describes his efforts, after some failures, to talk sensibly to sensitive people about abortion – and to discuss with them different views about that subject while avoiding lapsing into the name calling which has so often characterised that debate. He describes his own upbringing in a sceptical household, and how,

working in black churches in Chicago, he shed scepticism and embraced Christian faith.

As Madeleine Bunting has argued: *“a liberal secular elite on both sides of the Atlantic is going to have to deal with a much more challenging form of religious belief than those they have been wont to ridicule among George Bush and his cronies”*.

The Matthew 25 Network was a Federal Political Action Committee on behalf of the Obama campaign. Its name is from Jesus’s remark about people who feed the hungry, visit the sick, give hospitality to strangers and visit people in prison: *“as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”*. They point out that *“Christians across the country are answering the Gospel call to care for our neighbour, especially the most vulnerable”*. They argued that those involved should vote for candidates who share their values, and their website presents Obama campaign points on Faith; Poverty and Economic Justice; Valuing Families; Creation Care – on environmental issues; and Moral Leadership in the World. This is a new and important channel for political communication that we need to develop, as we have been in the Labour Party Churches Updates in the past 18 months.

Other faiths are a resource too

I have spoken so far mainly about Christian faith. But much of what I am saying applies equally to people of other faiths. The faiths are different in profoundly important ways, but that doesn't mean, as some would have it, that they are always at loggerheads. They have in common a deeply held set of values which can help us build this politics that we need based on hope, this coalition of hope.

The Jewish Socialist Movement – in the shape of its predecessor, Poale Zion – was one of the earliest societies affiliated to the Labour Party. The Christian Socialist Movement was founded in the early 1960s. I was involved five years ago in establishing Muslim Friends of Labour, now chaired by my fellow MP Mohammed Sarwar. Parmjit Dhanda, MP for Gloucester, chaired a meeting earlier this month of people interested in a Sikh Friends of Labour organisation which it is hoped to launch around Vaisakhi – exploring how the Sikh principle of Sewa, of selfless service to others, shapes engagement in public life.

I have a very personal vested interest in the efficacy of cross faith political alliance. I became the MP for East Ham in 1994, following the unexpected death of my predecessor. I

was the Leader of the local Council at the time. The person who urged me to seek nomination was Ahmed Din, Chair of the local Alliance of Muslim Associations. His argument was simple: “*You believe in God. We believe in God. We think you should go for this job.*”

Many people are motivated by faith to give financially to alleviate suffering - for example in Gaza after the recent conflict. The UK NGO Interpal is a channel for such contributions, very widely supported by Muslims in my constituency and elsewhere, and respected by other NGOs. But its continued operation is threatened by the withdrawal of facilities by UK clearing banks, because Interpal is on a US proscribed list. It wouldn't be right if mainstream routes for British Muslims' humanitarian contributions were blocked by unexplained concerns from outside the UK.

Employment policy

Let me give a couple of examples from my own ministerial work where I have seen faith contributing to and inspiring policy in this Government. The first is in welfare to work.

For most of last year I was Minister for Employment, and I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Employment Minister, Andrew Smith, when we were first elected in 1997. The New Deal was implemented with great urgency. And much of the inspiration – the broad-based, moral appeal on which it was based – was drawn from the churches’ report on *Unemployment and the Future of Work*. That set out the moral case that, in our prosperous society, it was wrong to be depriving large numbers of people for long periods of the means to earn a living. That report answered the previous Government’s claim that high unemployment was “*a price worth paying*”.

Many New Deal contributions have come from churches and other faith communities, drawing on deep resources of commitment to giving hope through work. So, for example, the *Way to Work* project at Whitechapel Mosque, working with Tower Hamlets Council and JobCentre Plus, has trained and advised workless people, and linked up with employers. It placed 62 people into jobs in two years.

In Australia, the biggest provider to the Federal Government of welfare to work services is the Salvation Army, and the Salvation Army has been looking at the possibility of entering that market in the UK, given the

launch later this year of the reformed Flexible New Deal.

The second biggest provider in Australia is Mission Australia, a descendant of the London City Mission.

The Bishop of Chelmsford, John Gladwin, introduced a debate in the House of Lords in October on the role of churches and faith communities in welfare. He was right to emphasise this is not about churches filling gaps in the welfare system, but about faith communities being local and offering a faith that motivates people into action.

I hope, recognising the reality of potential difficulties, we will see more in Britain of faith-based organisations helping people back into work; and arguing in public debate that helping people into work should be a high political priority. And I hope that people involved in those faith-based initiatives will want to advance through politics the aims which have inspired their work.

Tackling the world economic crisis

At the Treasury, I am helping prepare for the G20 summit in London at the beginning of April. The G8 summit under UK chairmanship in Scotland in 2005 made crucial decisions on development aid and debt relief, profoundly influenced

by the *Jubilee 2000* and *Make Poverty History* campaigns. There is today in Britain a broad political consensus that we should reach the UN target of 0.7% for international development aid as a proportion of GDP – and we are on track to do so by 2013 – which there certainly was not in the past. Under the previous Government, aid fell as a share of GDP year after year – it more than halved over that Government's 18 years. The change of public mood and the new consensus are the results of campaigning from the churches – accounting for an estimated 80% of those who formed human chains and turned up on huge peaceful demonstrations to press their cause.

And increasingly we are seeing similar concerns being addressed in other faith communities, with the work of UK NGOs like Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid. Speaking at the Inter-Faith conference in New York in November, the Prime Minister referred to the partnership between Muslim Aid and the United Methodist Committee for Relief in America, working to extend help to disaster victims in Asia.

In planning the G20 summit, we are underlining the importance of delivering the Millennium Development Goals, notwithstanding the extraordinary challenges we face now in the world economy. We want to be listening to voices

of faith in preparing the agenda, and listening to priorities being developed and articulated in the faith communities.

Conclusion

In these areas of policy – and in many others – we are confronted with formidable political challenges. But its our job to be figuring out solutions; developing new ideas to respond to new problems; offering honest and realistic hope to people experiencing anxiety or worse.

And we need to draw political support from people who define their identity primarily by faith, and address the misapprehension that progressive politics sees faith as an enemy. We need to be equipping our institutions to work respectfully with people whose starting point is faith, to be tapping in to the insights of faith communities – their moral perspectives, and the experiences of practical initiatives in the UK and abroad.

Because we will find in the faith communities a deep resource which will be invaluable to us in building – in a new generation – a politics based on hope.

Thank you.