

House of Bishops Pastoral Letter for the General Election – What it Says

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Audience

“This letter from the Church of England’s House of Bishops is addressed to all members of the church...we hope that others, who may not profess church allegiance, will nevertheless join in the conversation and engage with the ideas we are sharing here” (*from the introduction*).

“This letter is intended to help church members and others consider the question: how can we negotiate these dangerous times to build the kind of society which many people say they want but which is not yet being expressed in the vision of any of the parties?” (paragraph 3)

The right and duty of the Church to speak into political debate

“the church has an obligation to engage constructively with the political process, and Christians share responsibility with all citizens to participate in the democratic structures of our nation. We offer these reflections because we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is enormously relevant to the questions which the coming Election will throw into sharp relief.” (paragraph 21)

“Christ’s incarnation confirms the fundamental truth that every human being is created in the image of God. Because of this, we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is the starting point for all of the church’s engagement with society, politics and national life...Christians everywhere and throughout the ages have prayed, as part of The Lord’s Prayer, “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done, on earth as in heaven”. That is why politics and the life of the Christian disciple cannot be separated. That is why the church calls its members to play a full part in the political life of the nation and to support politicians and the government with their prayers.” (paragraphs 11,12)

“The claim that religion and political life must be kept separate is, in any case, frequently disingenuous –most politicians and pundits are happy enough for the churches to speak on political issues so long as the church agrees with their particular line.” (paragraph 7)

“The churches are among the most historically embedded and well established of the intermediate institutions, and remain among the most effective, so we are naturally keen to see the contribution of the churches to society, culture and the nation recognised and supported.” (paragraph 82)

“It is the duty of every Christian adult to vote, even though it may have to be a vote for something less than a vision that inspires us”. (paragraph 118)

“The advice of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians may help to defend us against the temptations of apathy, cynicism and blame,” (paragraph 126)

The CofE’s Political Neutrality

“Anglicans do not have a single view on which political party has the best mix of answers to today’s problems” (paragraph 2)

“If anyone claims that this letter is “really” saying “Vote for this party or that party”, they have misunderstood it.” (paragraph 4)

“We are emphasising an approach to politics which can trace its roots on both left and right and which could be embraced by any of the mainstream parties without being untrue to their own histories.” (paragraph 92)

“On both sides of the house, in the Commons and in the Lords, there are members who broadly share the perspective we have outlined here. More work along similar lines is being done in think-tanks, academic groups, and among some journalists and local activists. But, so far, these discussions have been confined to the margins. We aim here to push those ideas toward the centre of political conversation”. (paragraph 96)

The questions Christians should ask of candidates for election

“If anyone claims that this letter is “really” saying “Vote for this party or that party”, they have misunderstood it.” (paragraph 4)

“At this election, we can sow the seeds of a new politics. We encourage voters to support candidates and policies which demonstrate the following key values:

- Halting and reversing the accumulation of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, whether those of the state, corporations or individuals.
- Involving people at a deeper level in the decisions that affect them most.
- Recognising the distinctive communities, whether defined by geography, religion or culture, which make up the nation and enabling all to thrive and participate together.
- Treating the electorate as people with roots, commitments and traditions and addressing us all in terms of the common good and not just as self-interested consumers.
- Demonstrating that the weak, the dependent, the sick, the aged and the vulnerable are persons of equal value to everybody else.
- Offering the electorate a grown up debate about Britain’s place in the world order and the possibilities and obligations that entails.” (paragraph 120)

Our political culture, parties and democracy

“We live in challenging but hopeful times. All political parties struggle to communicate a convincing vision. People feel detached from politics. Alongside a healthy openness to new ideas, worrying and unfamiliar trends are appearing in our national life. ..The issues around the election call for a fresh moral vision of the kind of country we want to be.” (paragraph 1)

“We should neither hold politicians to a higher set of moral standards than we expect from ourselves, nor allow them off the hook by treating political life as if it were outside the demands of morality.” (paragraph 14)

“In our experience, the great majority of politicians and candidates enter politics with a passion to improve the lives of their fellow men and women... with few exceptions, politicians are not driven merely by cynicism or self-interest. The low esteem in which politicians are held today has many roots. But simply blaming the individuals concerned is not an adequate response.” (paragraph 22)

“numerous polls show that a majority of people think that it will make no difference whichever party is in power. Our democracy is failing because successive administrations have done little to address the trends which are most influential in shaping ordinary people’s lives.” (paragraph 25)

“The different parties have failed to offer attractive visions of the kind of society and culture they wish to see, or distinctive goals they might pursue. Instead, we are subjected to sterile arguments about who might manage the existing system best. There is no idealism in this prospectus.” (paragraph 29)

“The time has surely come to move beyond mere “retail politics”, where parties tailor their policies to the groups whose votes they need, regardless of the good of the majority, whilst lobbyists, pressure groups and sectional interests come armed with their policy shopping lists and judge politicians by how many items they promise to deliver. Instead of treating politics as an extension of consumerism, we should focus on the common good, the participation of more people in developing a political vision and constructive ways to talk about communities and how they relate to one another.” (paragraph 32)

“When it descends into tribalism, politics ceases to be about wisdom, balance or humility.” (paragraph 42)

“Unless a political vision emerges which reaffirms the bonds which tie us together as a nation, as localities, as communities and as neighbours, we shall be left with the spectacle of politicians claiming more and more powers and yet achieving less and less that is worthwhile.” (paragraph 57)

“It is a deep irony that the whole political class is often regarded as an alien “other” by many sectors of the population.” (paragraph 76)

“Our country is hungry for a new approach to political life that will “change the political weather” as decisively as did the administrations of 1945 and 1979.” (paragraph 90)

“this may be an election that sows the seeds from which a new narrative might emerge. Or it may be an election which confirms people in cynicism and despair and sows a very different sort of seed from which may grow a tree of conflict, unrest and division” (paragraph 91)

“The election campaign is likely to entrench the apathy and cynicism with which many people approach politics today.” (paragraph 118)

“.. jargon and “on-message” glibness.. has come to characterise political language. Candidates who free themselves from clichés and party formulae may be showing the first signs of that human sympathy which would enable them to be real representatives of their constituents rather than simply needing our votes to gain power.” (paragraph 122)

The role of the state

“Christians should be wary of accumulations of power wherever they take place. They should be as reluctant to live under an overweening corporate sector as under an overweening state. Where the state or the market, or any other powers, claim too much and stifle human flourishing, people are divided from one another and God’s sovereignty is mocked.” (paragraph 16)

“we need a richer justification for the state, a better account of the purposes of government, and a more serious way of talking about taxation”. (paragraph 27)

“ Placing excessive faith in state intervention on the one hand or the free market on the other, politicians have focussed so much on the things they can control directly through economic and social policy that they have neglected to nurture, by word, example or policy, those aspects of life which governments can influence but not control.”(paragraph 41)

“different communities have different needs and may choose different priorities. If people feel part of the decision-making processes that affect their lives, there is no reason why, in many aspects of social policy, local diversity should not flourish.” (paragraph 54)

“Whether on the political right or the political left, it is a long time since there has been a coherent policy programme which made a virtue of dispersing power and control as widely across the population as possible. We have been offered salvation through the state and salvation through the market. Both emphases help clarify things that are true about the human condition, but neither tells an adequate story. Both have taken power and decision-making away from the levels of human interaction where people feel most able to become human together.” (paragraph 56)

“When law and regulation intrude too far into everyday life, they create a “chill factor” where anxiety about the rules prevents people acting freely, sensibly or with wisdom, even in areas which are not, in fact, governed by official regulations.” (paragraph 79)

The role of intermediary institutions

“individuals flourish best when they belong with confidence to networks of relationships, institutions and communities which extend well beyond the nuclear family but stop well short of the state or the corporation” (paragraph 58)

“It is vital to move beyond the superficial equality of free consumers in a market place of relationships and to see the virtues in the relationships of family and community which are given, not chosen.” (paragraph 64)

“we need new, informal and independent structures, small enough not to need every activity to be codified, through which we can learn to work together in trust, not just according to rules.” (paragraph 81)

“A thriving society needs many intermediate institutions, including those who disagree with each other and pursue incompatible goals. A culture in good order needs that kind of diversity and capacity to argue about what makes a good society.” (paragraph 82)

“Intermediate institutions are too often overlooked by policy-makers, so they struggle to be as influential and beneficial as they might. Housing Associations are a good example. So are Credit Unions” (paragraph 83)

“It is precisely this ability to make, and break, alliances – so that people can work together on issues they share, but may not be on the same side on other issues – which makes intermediate institutions, and the voluntary sector generally, so crucial to a flourishing democratic society.” (Paragraph 89)

“the ideals that The Big Society stood for should not be consigned to the political dustbin – they could still be the foundation for the new approach to politics, economics and community which we seek.” (paragraph 95)

“Virtues are nourished, not by atomised individualism, but in strong communities which relate honestly and respectfully to other groups and communities which make up this nation.” (paragraph 123)

The role of the family

“We are most human when we know ourselves to be dependent on others. That is something we first learn in families, if we are fortunate enough to experience the blessings of family life. And families are not only for children.” (paragraph 59)

The economy

“The problem is that no one in politics today has a convincing story about a healthy balance between national government and global economic power.” (paragraph 26)

“Our political life would be equally enhanced if it were possible to speak about markets, business and the profit motive as an impressively effective system of distribution in a complex society and hugely liberating of human creativity – but one which also tends to entrench inequality, diminish human sympathies and, unchecked, damage the conditions for its own flourishing.” (Paragraph 39)

“Consumption, rather than production, has come to define us, and individualism has tended to estrange people from one another. So has an excessive emphasis on competition regarded as a sort of social Darwinism. (This is a perverse consequence of allowing market rhetoric to creep into social policy. For an economist, competition is not the opposite of cooperation but of monopoly).” (paragraph 45)

“Both Credit Unions and Housing Associations work best when there is “buy in” from a broad social spectrum. They are institutions with a strong unifying potential.” (Paragraph 83)

“We are living through both a banking crisis and a housing crisis” (paragraph 84)

“It is to the credit of our politicians that the impact of the crisis has been less severe in Britain than in some other European countries.” (paragraph 106)

“It is to the discredit of our politicians that a financial catastrophe which threatened the stability of the world at large has become a political football rather than a concerted effort to bring the nation through the crisis with as much of its social fabric as possible intact.” (paragraph 106)

“Debts, whether national or personal, are rarely good news. Indebtedness means handing power over one’s life to the creditor – widespread indebtedness is another manifestation of the accumulation of power in too few hands. This is as true for nations as for individuals and families” (paragraph 107)

“It has been widely observed that the greatest burdens of austerity have not been born by those with the broadest shoulders – that is, those who enjoy a wide buffer zone before they fall into real need. Those whose margin of material security was always narrow have not been adequately protected from the impact of recession” (paragraph 110)

“economics must be understood as a moral discipline. A thriving economy needs investors who look to the long term. But when the economy has pursued short term profit and stopped thinking long term, people’s rational behaviour follows suit” (paragraph 116)

Poverty & Inequality

“The Biblical tradition is not only “biased to the poor”, as often noted, but warns constantly against too much power falling into too few hands. When it does, human sympathies are strained to breaking point.” (paragraph 17)

“In Britain, material inequality continues to widen”. (paragraph 75)

“It is unsurprising that communities which have faced deindustrialisation, the destruction of familiar streets and housing, whose pride in work and craftsmanship has been destroyed by the shift from manufacturing to services and for whom poverty has never been more than one step away should find the rapid shift to a multicultural society difficult to assimilate” (Paragraph 105)

“It has been widely observed that the greatest burdens of austerity have not been born by those with the broadest shoulders – that is, those who enjoy a wide buffer zone before they fall into real need. Those whose margin of material security was always narrow have not been adequately protected from the impact of recession” (paragraph 110)

“we have seen the burgeoning of in-work poverty – people who, despite working hard, cannot earn enough to live decently.” (paragraph 112)

“the Church of England has backed the concept of the Living Wage – an agreement with employers to ensure that all their staff earn a modest hourly rate that is sufficient for a full time worker to live decently” (paragraph 113)

Unemployment

“It is good that unemployment has not risen as high as was predicted, or as high as past experience suggested it would. Worklessness has long been acknowledged as corrosive of human dignity and sense of identity” (paragraph 111)

Welfare reform

“Our political life would be enhanced if we could acknowledge that a modern nation, where ties of kindred and neighbourliness are often very weak, requires state-sponsored action to underpin the welfare of each citizen – but that this provision must neither supplant local voluntary action and neighbourliness where those things exist, nor ignore the way in which dependence on state provision can undermine individual initiative and responsibility.” (paragraph 38)

“when those who rely on social security payments are all described in terms that imply they are undeserving, dependent, and ought to be self-sufficient, it deters others from offering the informal, neighbourly support which could ease some of the burden of welfare on the state.” (paragraph 62)

“Stirring up resentment against some identifiable “other” always dehumanises some social group or people. Ethnic minorities, immigrants, welfare claimants, bankers and oligarchs – all have been called up as threats to some fictitious “us”. They become the hated “other” without whose presence among us all would be well” (paragraph 76)

Health

“The extent of loneliness in society today, with the attendant problems of mental and physical health, is one indication of how far we have drifted into a society of strangers”. (paragraph 48)

“Most people, when asked, subscribe to some version of the idea that all people are created equal. Yet this is contradicted in the way that some categories of people are spoken about – people who are sick, disabled, terminally ill or otherwise unable to live the life that a consumer society celebrates; people who are unable to work, materially poor or mentally ill in ways which challenge “acceptable” ways of being unwell” (paragraph 61)

“If the care of severely disabled people, the terminally ill or people with dementia was shared in the context of a supportive network of friends, neighbours and allies, the fear of being a burden on others would not lead so many to undervalue their own life, even to the point of seeking to end it.” (paragraph 63)

Immigration

“There is a growing appetite to exploit grievances, find scapegoats and create barriers between people and nations.” (paragraph 1)

“Stirring up resentment against some identifiable “other” always dehumanises some social group or people. Ethnic minorities, immigrants, welfare claimants, bankers and oligarchs – all have been called up as threats to some fictitious “us”. They become the hated “other” without whose presence among us all would be well” (paragraph 76)

“Neighbourliness, then, is not just about what we do for others. It is also about what we are willing to receive from those we fear, ignore or despise.” (paragraph 102)

“The politics of migration has, too often, been framed in crude terms of “us” and “them” with scant regard for the Christian traditions of neighbourliness and hospitality. The way we talk about migration, with ethnically identifiable communities being treated as “the problem” has, deliberately or inadvertently, created an ugly undercurrent of racism in every debate about immigration. Crude stereotyping is incompatible with a Christian understanding of human social relationships” (paragraph 103)

“But we also challenge the assumption that to question immigration at all must always be racist.... Suspicion of people with other national and ethnic origins needs to be understood

without being endorsed or excused. We need a dialogue about migration which ceases to use people as political cyphers and looks instead at who is being asked to bear the cost of rapid social change and what resources of community and neighbourliness they need to emerge stronger from change” (Paragraphs 104-105)

Housing

“..today, attempts to address the shortage of suitable housing will create new problems if they neglect people’s attachment to particular places and the social networks they create there.” (paragraph 50)

“Policies which are careless of this attachment to place do not serve people well.” (paragraph 51)

“..Housing Associations work best when there is “buy in” from a broad social spectrum. They are institutions with a strong unifying potential.” (Paragraph 83)

“We are living through both a banking crisis and a housing crisis” (paragraph 84)

Education

“Our educational institutions – especially schools, with their vocation to be distinctive and inclusive – also do much to foster a community of communities. A good school nurtures each child, respecting their individuality and the traditions and customs – including the religious faith – in which they are growing up in their family, whilst introducing them to the practices of living among others with different backgrounds and histories“. (paragraph 85)

“The purpose of education is not simply to prepare people to be economic units but to nurture their ability to flourish as themselves and to seek the flourishing of others.” (paragraph 85)

“All schools should try to model a community of communities and not a society of strangers.” (paragraph 87)

Environment

“We belong together in a creation which should be cherished and not simply used and consumed... As bishops we support policies which respect the natural environment,” (paragraph 2)

“Most of all, we need an honest account of how we must live in the future if generations yet to come are not to inherit a denuded and exhausted planet.” (paragraph 27)

“By enabling people to build a stake in the communities they are encouraged to live, not only for the day, but for their grandchildren’s future – and, on behalf of future generations, to cherish the created order rather than viewing our environment as a commodity to be consumed.” (paragraph 117)

Constitutional reform

“The idea that the future shape of the Union and the relationship between its constituents can be solved in weeks or months is a fine example of politics ignoring the importance of history in favour of the calculated advantages of the moment.” (paragraph 98)

“The impatience of politicians or the desire for party advantage must not be the driver for constitutional changes. There should be the widest possible consultation about the structures and constitution we need, in which as many people participate as possible, and where the lessons of history (and not just British history) are kept sharply in view.” (paragraph 99)

Britain’s global role

“Without a grasp of the power and meaning of religion, it is impossible to understand the dynamics of global politics today.” (paragraph 8)

“The problem is that no one in politics today has a convincing story about a healthy balance between national government and global economic power.” (paragraph 26)

“Global power is as unevenly distributed as global wealth and yet good international relations require all nations to recognise their interdependence if the world is to remain stable or even to survive”. (paragraph 65)

“the illusion that a nation can flourish without strong international alliances distorts the bigger picture of our shared humanity. World trade has demonstrated how intertwined the national economy is with other nations’. But our perceptions of cultural and political interdependence lag far behind.” (paragraph 66)

“..recent experiences, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, show the difficulty of treading a line between legitimate defence of human values and interventions which further destabilise regions already devastated by conflict.” (paragraph 70)

“Our politicians have been reluctant to talk openly with the electorate about Britain’s relationships around the world, the realignments of global power, a realistic role in securing a stable and peaceful world order and the tools we would need for the job.” (paragraph 71)

Europe

“That history is not an argument for the structures and institutions of the European Union as they now exist. But it is an enduring argument for continuing to build structures of trust and cooperation between the nations of Europe. Ignoring or denying the extent to which European people share culture and heritage suggests that questions of identity and belonging have no currency except as political bargaining chips.” (paragraph 68)

Defence and war

“Military intervention by states such as Britain is not always wrong. ...the nation should value and pray for military personnel who know that their lives depend on the wisdom and judgement of politicians. But our support should not be offered blindly” (paragraphs 70 & 71)

“Shifts in the global strategic realities mean that the traditional arguments for nuclear deterrence need re-examining” (paragraph 72)

International development

“The government is to be commended for committing 0.7% of GDP to overseas aid when budgets have been so hard pressed. For any party to abandon or reduce this commitment would be globally irresponsible in pragmatic terms as well as indicating that the moral imperatives of mutuality and reconciliation counted for nothing.” (paragraph 74)

Threat from extremism and religiously-inspired conflict

“The answer to “furious religion” (that is, the religious impulse turned in on itself or used to justify oppression and conflict) is not to marginalise religion in general or see religious faith as some kind of problem. It is to acknowledge that religious commitment is extraordinarily widespread and that people of faith within all the historic traditions have much to offer to a vision of a good society and a peaceful world.” (paragraph 8)

“The volatile areas of the world, where conflict or the threat of war seem endemic, are a constant threat to the stability of all nations – another reminder of our interdependence” (paragraph 69)