

Churches Update

News from the Labour Party

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Ed Miliband: “Building The Good Society”

Labour’s Leader praises churches for serving the vulnerable and campaigning for fairness

The day after I was elected leader of the Labour Party last September, I told a congregation at Manchester Cathedral that Christians would play an important role in our party’s renewal.

That Sunday morning, I invited church leaders in the North-West to help Labour in speaking up for the vulnerable in tough times, and to reach out with us to build new relationships in communities up and down the country. I am delighted that so many people of faith are taking up that invitation, and that we have been joined by another 50,000 new members since last May.

The Labour Party and Christianity share a proud history and we share common values—values of equality, of social justice, and of compassion for one another.

“My task as Labour leader is to build a party ready to return to power again, one with a fairer vision for a good society.”

It is no surprise that church leaders have been at the forefront among defenders of the poor in the face of public sector cuts. The Conservative-led government is cutting too far, too fast and damaging many things we all hold dear. With so many families facing a cost of living crisis, we must press forward

to build a Good Society for the next generation; a compassionate society built on shared values; one that is more equal, more just and more considerate of others.

Building the Good Society means we must protect people from crime, as well as educating our young people and providing health and social care that afford dignity to all.

It means we should tackle the causes of poverty in this country, and break down the barriers that too often hold people back, so that the next generation can also fulfil what I call the British promise: that the next generation should always do better than the last. And it means we should conduct our politics honestly and



with a maturity befitting our centuries-old democracy.

But our shared values also dictate that we should do so with a proudly internationalist outlook, because we know the greatest global challenges of our age—climate change, disease, poverty, conflict—will all hit the poorest people in our world hardest. We in Britain should never walk by on the other side of such injustice.

I’ve been talking with people up and down the country—people of all faiths and none. Many have told me that Labour needs to offer hope for the future, and a strong, vibrant alternative to this government. Too many families are finding it difficult to make ends meet this Easter. It’s a squeeze that started in Downing Street, but it’s one that is hitting families on High Streets up and down our country.

My task as Labour leader is to build a party ready to return to power again, one with a fairer vision for a Good Society. With your help, and building on our shared values once again, I am confident we can win back people’s trust, build a community organisation based on our values, and become the voice of the people in tough times.

Inside:

- Labour’s *Keep the Promise* campaign on global poverty
- Stephen Timms MP’s take on *The Big Society*
- Jim Dobbin MP: working for the oppressed and vulnerable
- Leading the fight against child poverty

Labour launches “Keep the Promise” campaign

Labour’s Shadow International Development Secretary, Harriet Harman MP, has launched a new campaign urging the Government to keep its promise of spending 0.7 per cent of national income on overseas aid by 2013. The commitment was in both the Tory and Liberal Democrat manifestos and was also included in the Coalition agreement. Campaigners are concerned that the promise could be broken.

After the last election, the UK’s aid budget was three times the level it was in 1997. The Labour government was the first in Britain’s history to have set down a timetable for reaching the UN’s targets of spending 0.7% of GNI on international development.

Speaking at the launch of the campaign, Harriet said: *“The ‘Keep the 0.7/2013 Promise’ campaign sends a clear message about the importance of meeting the UK’s commitment to spending 0.7% of national income on aid by 2013. Around the world our aid has already made an enormous difference in helping people lift themselves out of poverty. We must not stop now. The fact that the two parties of the Tory-led*

Government agree on the 0.7/2013 target should not lull anyone into a false sense of security that its achievement is a foregone conclusion. The new Government has already frozen aid for the next two years—that is £2.2 billion less for the world’s poorest people. We must ensure the 0.7/2013 commitment is not this Tory-led Government’s next broken promise.”

In a letter to the Observer newspaper, a number of leading campaigners including the former chairmen of Make Poverty History and Oxfam GB, said that the Tories seemed to be pushing *“...crude attempts to export failed ideological or populist policies”* on aid. The letter went on: *“The welcome shift in Conservative policy to back the 0.7% promise in 2005 has been much vaunted by David Cameron—but despite repeated requests they have refused to clearly commit to ensure aid is not diverted for other purposes.”*

In the run up to the election last year, the Conservative supporting website, *Conservative Home*, indicated that 96% of Tory candidates believed that protecting the aid budget was not a priority.

Debating the Big Society

A message from Stephen Timms MP, Labour’s Vice Chair for Faith Groups

A few weeks ago, the Institute for Faith and Culture hosted a discussion at Toynbee Hall in East London about the Big Society. The keynote speaker was Lord Nat Wei, a senior government adviser on The Big Society. I was invited to deliver the main response.

Nat is an impressive character. A few years ago, when I was Minister for Schools, I gave my backing to a new programme that he had helped to establish. The programme was called Teach First, and it has gone on to be a huge success in attracting high-quality graduates into the teaching profession. His vision of what can be achieved through voluntary projects has a great deal to commend it.

There is much in this vision that Labour signs up to. The previous Labour government was already actively encouraging voluntary groups like the ones Nat spoke about. Through our various New Deal programmes, the Government partnered with churches and other voluntary groups to help people into work. Initiatives like *Jubilee 2000* and *Make Poverty History* could not have been successful if churches and other groups had not pushed for action. We outlined our attitude to voluntarism in a government document, *Communities in Control*. So the Government is absolutely right to celebrate

and encourage voluntary groups. But there are two caveats to my enthusiasm.

The first caveat is that spending cuts are a real problem for voluntarism. After my speech, one of the panellists described how a church-based project in London, which I know well, is now *“a shadow of its former self”* due to funding cuts. The fact is that the third sector can only thrive with genuine government support. As Polly Toynbee commented recently at an event at Church.co.uk in Waterloo, *“how can they talk about creating a bigger society when they’re actually demolishing the one we’ve got?”*

My second caveat is this: what view of society are we working with? Is it a vision of individual consumers, which has marked the Conservatives’ thinking, or is there scope to take corporate life seriously? Maurice Glasman, an academic from a Jewish background, who has recently been made a Labour peer in the Lords, speaks of the *“Good Society”*, marked by mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity. These practices, driven by churches, trade unions and other groups, helped form the Labour Party. Only when rooted in such fertile ideological soil can The Big Society truly thrive.



Working for the vulnerable and oppressed

By Jim Dobbin, MP for Heywood and Middleton

As a Catholic Labour MP, I have sought to engage with all the Churches both in my constituency, particularly with *Churches Together*, and at a national and international level. I see the need to take this ecumenical approach because if we are ever to make good on our desire to work for a virtuous society to “*Cease to do evil...learn to do good, search for justice and help the oppressed*” (Isaiah 1:17), then all Christian groups need to work together. I know this especially through my work to help those in Britain who have had their lives wrecked by involuntary tranquiliser addiction where the long fight for justice has seen remarkably slow progress, but we fight on.

Recently I have campaigned actively to ensure children in the developing countries receive the vaccinations they need. Currently 30,000 babies die every year unnecessarily from pneumonia related illness which could be avoided with the supply of the Pneumococcal vaccine. I am surprised by how often it is said that the great idealistic battles are over when there is so much good work out there to be done.



Jim Dobbin MP with Kenyan MP Hon Ntoitha M'Mithiaru

I am aware that sometimes it can seem that it's all too much and that we can resign ourselves with the thought that what little we could do wouldn't make a difference. But I have seen over the years that even if we cannot do great things we can as Mother Teresa put it ‘*do small things with great love*’.

I know that the letters from Christians and the support that is given to MPs when they seek to do the right thing has immense value. I hope that the work I do and the values I seek to support of solidarity and equal human dignity including the frail and the unborn can add in some way to the common good that we all hope for.

News in brief

Yvette Cooper warns on human trafficking

Labour's Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, has warned that the Olympic Games in 2012 could turn London into a “*magnet*” for human trafficking unless ministers launch an urgent crackdown. She said “*The Government must wake up to the risk that traffickers will seek to profit from the 2012 Games and take action to make sure this event does not make the situation worse.*” The Government has only recently opted-in to the EU Human Trafficking Directive—which seeks to combat the trade in sex slaves—after pressure from Labour MPs.

Labour looks into low-pay Britain

Angela Eagle MP, Labour's Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury has announced details of Labour's review into life on low-pay in Britain. The working group will form part of the Party's economic policy review. She said: “*The review will look at life in ‘low-pay Britain’, focusing on the challenges facing people and families on low pay up and down the country. Fairness and dignity in work is at the heart of the Labour Party's vision for a more equal and stronger Britain. Too many are stuck in low wage, long hour jobs without routes to better work and a better life. It's a fundamental Labour belief that work should pay and those who work hard should be properly rewarded.*”

Gordon Brown speaks about his personal faith

Former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has argued that politicians with religious beliefs should not have to leave their “*consciences at the door*”. In a lecture, hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, the former Prime Minister looked at the role of faith in politics. Mr Brown rejected both a theocratic approach to politics as well as the liberal secularism that is put forward as its alternative. He said: “*I believe we can build a faith politics which is both true to our religious impulses and compatible with the world in which we live.*”

Child Benefit proposals hitting families hard

According to research by the Christian charity CARE, the Government's policies on child benefit will hurt families in the poorest half of the population harder than richer families. Drawing on Treasury estimates they argue that 1.5 million families in the lower deciles are likely to be affected in this way. The report concludes that some of the Coalition's policies “*...trap a very large number of children in poverty and are morally destructive.*” Speaking to Churches Update, Labour's Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, Liam Byrne MP said: “*This is yet another Tory raid on family budgets at a time when prices are rising and people are feeling the squeeze.*”

Leading the fight against child poverty

Kate Green was elected as the Member of Parliament for Stretford and Urmston in Greater Manchester last year. She was previously the CEO of the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). She started her adult life under Thatcherism and recalls how this made her passionate about issues of poverty and inequality: *"I was part of a generation that worried we would never get a job. For the first time in my life I saw young people sleeping on the streets, many were out of work, and there was huge anger and hurt in working communities as whole industries were closed down."*

The experience of seeing inequality first-hand led Kate to become a passionate campaigner against poverty, and eventually the CEO of CPAG - the leading charity campaigning for the abolition of child poverty in the UK. During her time at CPAG the Labour Government passed the landmark Child Poverty Act. Speaking about the Act she says: *"It was a clever piece of legislation. It identified building blocks in the fight against poverty like education, housing and health and wellbeing. It also secured cross-party agreement on the important relative income poverty target."*

Kate is keen to emphasise the positive role that faith groups have played in the fight against child poverty: *"Groups like Church Action on Poverty, the Salvation Army, the Quakers and many others are extremely active in the pursuit of justice. One of the things about faith groups is that they have direct experience of struggling with the poverty that exists among their congregations and membership. They understand the real-life implications of poverty and provide personal testimony of the challenges faced by many children and families."*

And she believes that faith groups continue to have an



important role: *"Alongside caring for the marginalised, I hope churches and community groups will continue to be strong advocacy organisations. I want them to speak out about what they believe needs to change. I believe the fight against poverty sits right at the heart of what our faith communities stand for and they should continue to express their outrage that a rich country like ours still has such high levels of poverty. They really can provide a moral imperative for politicians to engage."*

Kate remains steadfast in her fight against poverty and inequality. She wants to see minimum income standards for families factored into how the Government understands social security: *"By helping the whole family, we help children. We need to be more ambitious than we have been so far. Poverty damages whole communities - I learnt that under Thatcher. I'm watching with anticipation the Church of England's 'Near Neighbours' project. Faith groups have been hugely successful working together in my very diverse constituency, and I think it provides an exciting opportunity nationally."*

We want to hear from you

More than ever before, the Labour Party is committed to listening to and learning from churches and faith communities. We realise that many of you cannot commit to supporting any particular political party. We are, though, keen to hear what you have to say, and to help you to continue your work across the country.

There are a few things you can do to help us in this work:

- 1. Tell your friends about this newsletter.** We want to be in dialogue with as many people of faith as possible. Encourage others to join our mailing list at www.labour.org.uk/faith.
- 2. Ask to display this newsletter in your church.** Ask your church leaders if they are willing for this newsletter to be displayed so that others in your church can read about what Labour is doing.
- 3. Tell us how we can help you.** Write to Stephen Timms MP (Vice Chair for Faith Groups), c/o The Labour Party, 39 Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0HA. Alternatively, email stephen@stephentimms.org.uk.

To join the Labour Party visit www.labour.org.uk/join or telephone us on 08705 900 200.