



Christian
Perspectives on
Public Affairs

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News and Christian Comment

Defending Free Speech Again

Following months of lobbying and debate in both Houses of Parliament, last week the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill finally completed its parliamentary process incorporating a precious clause to preserve freedom of speech.

The Government claims that this new piece of legislation builds on a 10-year programme of criminal justice reform aimed at rebalancing the system in favour of victims and the law-abiding majority. Amongst a wide variety of measures the Bill

- Introduces a new criminal offence of incitement to hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation
- Clarifies the law on self defence, articulating the state's responsibility to stand by those acting in good faith when using force in self defence
- Introduces new civil penalties for serious breaches of data protection principles
- Abolishes the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel
- Reinstates the statutory ban on industrial action by prison officers

The Evangelical Alliance, along with a number of Christian organisations, and supported by some prominent sections of the gay community, had long been urging that whilst legislating to outlaw incitement to hatred on grounds of sexual orientation the Government should ensure that genuine critique and disagreement with views on the subject may continue to be freely expressed.

The Government had listened to concerns expressed early on in the process by including essential safeguards before incitement to hatred could be proved. Accordingly, the first safeguard built in to the Bill required that illegal conduct needed to be threatening – rather than abusive or insulting, as in the case of race hate legislation. Secondly, for a prosecution to be successful, intention to incite hatred must be demonstrated.

Where difficulty was encountered however was over the inclusion of a third safeguard to preserve freedom of speech. Christian groups worked hard to persuade the Government that such a saving clause, similar to that included in the Racial and Religious Hatred Act, should be introduced. This was in response to concerns, well documented in recent years, about over-zealous actions by the police anxious to show they were responding to allegations of unacceptable behaviour. The problem was that many such claims were subjective or malicious or trivial in nature. A series of cases in which innocent law-abiding Christians were interrogated by the police had occurred. Perhaps the most prominent of these was the well-publicised example of the Bishop of Chester who was questioned by police following alleged comments regarding the ability of practising homosexuals to change behaviour.

A free speech clause was therefore deemed essential to ensure that the new offence, which rightly outlaws incitement to hatred against gay people, did not result in the criminalisation of disagreement with homosexuality and the consequent chilling or silencing of valid views. A reasonable, commonsense free speech clause was rejected under whipped Government voting in the Commons, but with opposition led by Lord Waddington, the House of Lords supported the clause. Though the Government attempted to overturn the clause at the behest of gay lobby groups like Stonewall, the Lords robustly stood their ground with a good majority and the Government eventually gave way, ironically voting the clause through by a big Commons majority to get the Bill on the statute book. Whilst the Conservatives allowed free conscience voting, the Government and Liberal Democrats tried to whip votes and it was notable that there were many rebels and abstainers. Liberal Democrats particularly found themselves in tension over official support for Stonewall and their traditional commitment to freedom of speech.

The important saving free speech clause reads:

"In this Part, for the avoidance of doubt, the discussion or criticism of sexual conduct or practices or the urging of persons to refrain from or modify such conduct or practices shall not be taken of itself to be threatening or intended to stir up hatred."

This moderate and sensible free speech clause will certainly not afford any protection for persons who threaten violence against gay people, and rightly such persons will face prosecution under the law. However, the right to robustly critique homosexual behaviour, for example in pulpits or in print or in academic debate, has been preserved and the police and the prosecuting authorities will need to have full regard for this clause before acting on complaints. The prayers and efforts of many Christians in helping to achieve such a favourable outcome must be acknowledged, along with the many Lords and MPs who stood up for the fundamental principle of free speech.

PQ from Westminster

Trust in Legislators - Tim Farron, MP

Recent weeks have unfortunately done little for the way Members of Parliament are perceived by the public. The Derek Conway situation set us back a long way, and he was duly suspended from Parliament for paying his sons for work that they apparently did not do. I would like to think that people understood that this was the exception and not the rule, but I doubt that we've been so lucky. The vast majority of MPs work extremely hard, and those that do employ members of their own family (and I hasten to add that I don't!) expect them to work as hard as any other secretary or researcher.

I love my job - to quote the late great David Penhaligon MP "It's a mystery to me why anyone would want to pay me for doing my hobby!", so I do not expect people to feel sorry for MPs. We are paid well for the work we do, and I for one count it as a huge honour to be able to serve my constituents. Sometimes it is difficult for the public to appreciate exactly what it is we do when perhaps all they see is lurid headlines and then the dismal and juvenile weekly knock about that is Prime Minister's Question Time.

I think it is absolutely critical that we restore the basic level of trust between politicians and the people. Politics in Britain is broken, Labour and the Conservatives have essentially governed in the same way, top down, centralising and increasingly obsessed with shallow, calculating presentation and spin without any trace of belief. We need to give politics back to the people and make it more open and accessible. This Labour Government has morphed into an Orwellian character, ceaselessly undermining traditional rights and freedoms for the sake of a few tabloid headlines.

It is no good to anyone if politics is the preserve of the few because by its very nature politics affects everyone, your local post office closing, the primary school down the road suffering falling pupil numbers because of the decline of the local community, global warming; like it or not, these issues affect you. I hope that over time politics can be repoliticised, returned to the people and removed from the hands of the spin-merchants (who do even more harm to public trust than Derek Conway)...if this happens our public life will be so much the better, and we may even see a return to public trust in our MPs!

Tim Farron is Liberal Democrat MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale

Keeping Adoption Agencies Open

Writing in the *Catholic Herald* on 2 May, Neil Addison, National Director of the Thomas More Legal Centre, declares that it would be disastrous if dioceses pull out of adoption work without a legal battle. So far, three Catholic adoption agencies have now either closed or changed their Catholic status as a result of the Sexual Orientation Regulations (SORs). The remaining agencies are now also considering their future.

The dioceses which have closed their agencies reached their decision because they considered they faced no alternative.

Neil Addison, a human rights barrister, argues that whilst the Church must, of course, obey the law, it should not merely acquiesce to the recent restrictions that many people believe to be unnecessary and doctrinaire without a challenge. The SORs cannot be looked at in isolation. Account also must be taken of human rights protections for religious belief, equality legislation prohibiting religious discrimination and the Adoption Act itself, which makes the welfare of the child the primary consideration. A balanced legal approach suggests that many questions remained unanswered. For example, is a decision by a Catholic adoption agency only to approve adoption by married heterosexual partners a "homophobic" decision? Or can it be shown objectively to be in the best interests of children? Would a refusal by a local authority to approve a Catholic adoption agency still be legal under religious discrimination law? And would a requirement that a Catholic agency approves single-sex parents be a breach of religious freedom protected by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights? For in a scenario involving a "cocktail" of law and competing rights there remains wide scope for legal argument, negotiation, balancing and compromise. Issues are frequently not clear-cut and Neil Addison believes ways may be found for while still operating in a manner acceptable to

adoption agencies to continue in business and competing rights there remains wide compromise. Issues are frequently not clear-cut and Neil Addison believes ways may be found for while still operating in a manner acceptable to Church teaching and in line with legislation. The law in the UK develops through case need to be willing to challenge officialdom the law adversely and unfairly affects the to challenge the application of the law. By appears to be giving up and walking away. If arguing its case in court, then it will appear Church may not always win, but if adoption deprived of these valuable services, at least, by the Government - not by the Church.

future of the Church and for Christian involvement in society. Neil Addison makes it clear he is not suggesting that the Church should adopt an aggressive or scaremongering attitude based on fighting every setback in court and challenging every decision it does not like on rights grounds. Such attitudes frequently alienate the public and often do not represent an authentic Christian response. However, there is a difference between being peaceable citizens and failing to challenge where challenge is appropriate. A danger in the present situation is that, if the Church does not put up a legal fight where appropriate, it may send out a signal that it will meekly surrender at the first sign of political pressure. Perhaps on a more fundamental level, if the Church does not respond robustly on issues like this, it will be failing to play its full part in the beneficial shaping of British society and in standing up for fundamental civil liberties such as freedom of conscience in the public arena.

By choosing to close its adoption agencies the Church appears to be giving up and walking away. If the Church is seen to do that, without at least arguing its own case in court, then it will appear as if it is unwilling to defend its own principles.

PQ from Westminster

Open Doors

In Bangladesh, 2 May 2008, Muslim villagers eager to rid the area of the Christian work of a local pastor gang-raped his 13-year-old daughter and left her unconscious in front of his house. In China, Shi Weihai (37), the owner of a bookshop close to an Olympic venue in Beijing, was re-arrested in March for publishing Bibles and Christian literature, even though he had been released in January due to "insufficient evidence." His lawyer reports that he is unwell, but the authorities are refusing to provide medication.

The fact that 200 million members of our Christian family face the possibility of persecution every day is a challenge to our understanding of what it means to be a member of that family - and a challenge to commitment and action, to live as authentic disciples of Jesus Christ.

Open Doors has been part of that challenge and part of the response for more than fifty years. In 1955 a Dutch missionary discovered that Christians in Communist countries were desperately longing for supplies of the Bible - and so he took a suitcase full of Christian literature behind the Iron Curtain. He became known as Brother Andrew - 'God's Smuggler' - and even now, at the age of 80, he remains committed to daring to go where few Christians have been - whether to meet the Hamas leadership in Gaza or a radical madrasa in Pakistan.

Fifty years later Open Doors is serving persecuted Christians in around fifty countries: in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Whether the oppression comes in the name of communism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam, or simply from the abuse of national or local power, where the people of God are under pressure, Open Doors stands with them, responding to their cries for help and shaping its response under their guidance.

Prayer is an essential component of any response. Open Doors provides information that prayers are timely, informed and effective weapons in the spiritual battle.

In 2007 Open Doors received over £5 million in gifts from supporters, enabling support to be channelled to make a significant difference to our sisters and brothers in the Persecuted Church.

Equipping

Distributing Bibles and Christian literature Open Doors for over 50 years - it is one of vital to overcome all the barriers that whether state prohibition, cost, access, 5.8 million pieces of literature were including Bibles, children's literature and training materials.

Strengthening

Open Doors offers training in effective church leadership and discipling others. Special seminars equip entire congregations to grow in their faith as they face persecution. And with most persecuted Christians unable to read, literacy programmes help believers to study God's Word for themselves. In 2007 more than 100,000 Christian leaders were helped by Open Doors' courses and seminars.

Supporting

Persecuted Christians are vulnerable: families can lose their breadwinner due to imprisonment or murder; violence can force them to flee or lose their livelihoods; state harassment can make employment difficult; whole communities can be marginalised when disaster strikes. Open Doors is there to offer practical help to widows, to orphans, to the victims of violence or natural disaster. More than 140,000 individuals received assistance from Open Doors in 2007.

Encouraging

Open Doors exists to build fruitful relationships: coming alongside the families of those imprisoned or killed because of their faith; sending small groups to encourage and pray with those who suffer; prompting the Church in the UK and Ireland to write letters, to pray, to sign petitions - and to be encouraged by those whose commitment to Jesus is truly costly. In 2007 over 7,400 letters and cards from Open Doors' supporters were forwarded to Christians suffering for their faith.

Being there with those who suffer is a vital task. Open Doors is enabling many to build personal relationships with persecuted Christians, by travelling to share encouragement, to pray, to bring Bibles and other literature. And many also volunteer to bring the Persecuted Church into the life of their own church family, sharing news for prayer and exploring the lessons to be learned from our sisters and brothers.

Advocacy

It is vital too that Christians raise their voice on behalf of the voiceless. In April Open Doors organised a simple protest outside the Chinese Embassy to speak up on behalf of North Korean refugees - many of them Christians - who escape to China and if captured, are repatriated to face certain imprisonment and often death. This month we are highlighting the recent drive by the Algerian authorities to close churches - over half the Protestant churches in Algeria have been closed in the past six months. Please write a letter to the Algerian ambassador to the UK - details are at www.opendoorsuk.org/advocacy.

"Our very mission is called 'Open Doors' because we believe that any door is open, any time and anywhere...to proclaim Christ." Brother Andrew
 "Christ has put each part of the church in its right place. Each part helps other parts. This is what is needed to keep the whole body together. In this way, the whole body grows strong in love." Ephesians 4:16 (New Life Version)

By Stephen Rand

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PQ from the Nations

Northern Ireland Open for Business

Northern Ireland is open for business. That was the message to 120 business executives from 80 US companies who arrived in Northern Ireland last week for a major investment conference. The conference, announced last December by First Minister Ian Paisley and deputy First Minister during a joint visit to New York, also marked the first anniversary of the restoration of devolution.

Despite the current difficulties in the global financial system and the slowing US economy, expectations of 30 – 50 executives were greatly exceeded as Northern Ireland was once again showcased to potential investors. Treated to both the old and the new, delegates were brought to various venues in the Greater Belfast area including the Folk and Transport Museum for a taste of the past, and brought to more modern times at Stormont and the BBC studios at Blackstaff House.

This is not the first event of its kind but this time there was one significant difference. Relative political stability and the absence of systemic violence meant that the call for investment presented an opportunity for local politicians and business leaders to market Northern Ireland in terms of all it has to offer, rather than merely seeking a sympathy vote or an encouragement to end hostilities.

While the impact and effect of the conference will not really be known for another three to five years several companies took the opportunity to announce major investment packages already in place. Fujitsu will create 150 jobs in the information and technology sector in Belfast and Londonderry with an £8.8 million package. Bombardier Aerospace will invest £70 million on the development of their new CRJ1000 regional aircraft and the US firm Cybersource will also create 56 jobs in the near future. All this is good news for a Northern Ireland still heavily reliant on employment in the public sector and the general consensus at this stage is that the conference has been more successful than was anticipated.

Nonetheless there are at least two words of caution. First, the experience of over 900 workers at the Seagate Technology plant in Limavady should not be forgotten quickly. Following an announcement in the run up to Christmas last year the factory will close later this summer. Seagate received millions of pounds of incentives to base their operations here but even that was not enough to combat global economic forces. Investment is welcome but we must remember it can be a fickle friend.

Secondly, many of the jobs associated with last week's announcements involve those who are highly skilled in specialised areas. It is encouraging that the Government is already looking at the current training programmes on offer to ensure that they match industry needs. However, there remain those who are long term unemployed with low educational skills and who will not necessarily benefit from this influx of jobs. The danger of the gap between those people and the employment market widening further cannot be ignored.

Yes, Northern Ireland is open for business, but investment in factories and industry is not enough. To remain open we must invest in our people as well.

Scotland One Year On

Arguably the Scottish National Party administration was voted into power a year ago on the back of electoral dissatisfaction with Labour at a UK level. The concept of Scottish independence was, in all probability, only in the minds of staunch SNP supporters who only represented a small minority of the electorate. SNP support has therefore rested on their ability to successfully govern within a devolved parliament where they do not have a majority of seats. One year on since their dramatic win and support for the SNP continues to grow proving outright that they seem to be doing things right. The First Minister Alex Salmond continues to enjoy positive ratings, while more people say they would now vote for the SNP that actually did so a year ago. Not only have they been able to run a country but they have also continued to develop and enhance the conversation on independence. Their National Conversation has moved past stage one and into stage two allowing for continued press coverage and maintaining the debate within the minds of the general populace.

One might expect that tactically the unionist parties would try and avoid enhancing the conversation on independence and instead focus on gaining credibility amongst the electorate. The development of the Calman Commission on devolution recognised the need to review the powers of the Scottish Parliament and was clearly implemented as a means of counteracting the SNP's National Conversation. The Commission was predicted to be the long-term focus for the Scottish Labour Party and their leader Wendy Alexander who, since taking over as leader, has had a somewhat tremulous reign. Over the last year Labour have tended to focus their efforts on claiming that the SNP are an administration of broken promises. Alexander's decision therefore to run headfirst into the independence debate by declaring her desire for an early referendum to clear the air could have been a political master-stroke. Labour MSPs around Holyrood recognised that this could be an opportunity to call Alex Salmond's bluff and declare a "bring it on" mentality. Unfortunately it seems to have backfired, enlarging the gulf between the Labour Party north and south of the border and putting independence right back at the top of the public mindset.

Examples of how the Church can engage in such debates have, over recent years, been few and far between. But encouragingly at a recent two day conference called 'Church Without Walls', the SNP Minister Bruce Crawford and Labour MSP Malcolm Chisholm hosted a seminar directly addressing the issue of Scottish independence. The seminar provided an opportunity for the 7,000 plus conference delegates to engage with the debate over independence and were encouraged to take part in deciding a 'vision for Scotland's future'. Examples such as this typify a renewed willingness of Scottish politicians to hear from a wide variety of voices within Scottish society, even though the media may try to convince us otherwise. Although some may be fearful of the system, the Church has an opportunity to be at the forefront of a debate that could fundamentally transform the United Kingdom.

PQ from the Nations & beyond

Wales Gweini's Expanding.... Waistline

Gweini, co-founded by Evangelical Alliance Wales and who recently produced the acclaimed Faith in Wales report, is currently in the process of expanding its policy team. The reason is simple – there are so many areas of Christian activity to represent and network that it is impossible for a small number of individuals to do the work on their own.

One of the better ways of communicating this to our constituents is by making reference to the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council (VSPC). This is a key body that maintains dialogue between the voluntary sector and the Welsh Assembly Government and is made up of 24 representatives of voluntary sector networks (representing 24 areas of voluntary sector activity), three representatives from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and the Minister responsible for the voluntary sector – Dr. Brian Gibbons.

Those 24 areas are – 'advice & advocacy', 'animal welfare', 'art, culture & heritage', 'asylum seekers & refugees', 'children & families', 'community', 'criminal justice', 'disability', 'education & training', 'employment & social enterprise', 'environment', 'ethnic minorities', 'gender', 'health, social care & wellbeing', 'housing', 'intermediaries', 'international sector', 'older people', 'religion', 'sexuality', 'sport & recreation', 'volunteering', 'Welsh language' and 'youth'.

The VSPC is helpful to get an overall grasp of the work that Christians are doing in the voluntary sector in Wales, and of the overall extent of our potential involvement in society.

By way of contrast, the ministerial portfolios of the National Assembly of Wales and the departmental briefs of the Welsh Assembly Government are subject to change; the VSPC, on the other hand, is more permanent. Moreover, the ministerial portfolios and the WAG departments are purposely different from each other so as to stimulate creativity and avoid sterility.

The attempt to capture the breadth of Christian involvement in society is not a new one – Youth With A Mission, for example, developed a teaching in which they talked of the seven Mind Moulders – areas of society in which the church was to exert influence. These mind-moulders were the arts, business, the church, education, family, government and the media.

Practically all of the VSPC areas have a fascinating history of Christian involvement. Even animal welfare – one that some might snicker at as being slightly irrelevant – boasts Francis of Assisi and William Wilberforce amongst past adherents. A lesser known fact about Wilberforce, for example, who was known primarily for his campaign against slavery, was that he co-founded the RSPCA – the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals.

Volunteers have already come on board to cover the areas of 'health, social care & wellbeing' and 'criminal justice', and they are doing an excellent job as they have begun to network Christians in Wales working in these fields.

Religious Liberty Focus on Jordan

Jordan is probably not a country that springs instantly to mind when one thinks of religious persecution, yet a recent case has highlighted that this is a country we need to be praying for. Mohammad Abbad is one of only a few Jordanians who have converted from Islam to Christianity and for this he is facing charges of apostasy. If convicted, he could lose legal custody of his children, his ID and passport will be removed, and he may have his marriage annulled.

Abbad converted to Christianity several years ago while abroad and went on to marry a Christian woman. He received heavy criticism from his family but it was not until last month that things really turned for the worse. Abbad and his wife invited another couple who had converted to Christianity and were experiencing intense persecution to stay with them for a while. But when the relatives of this family found out, they violently attacked Abbad, his wife and son.

On arrival at the local police station to report the incident, Abbad discovered his father lodging a complaint about his conversion and demanding custody of his grandchildren. Rather than his own case being investigated, Abbad found himself brought before an Islamic court on charges of apostasy. In theory, sharia law in Jordan only applies to personal issues such as marriage and divorce, but it can also include custody of children, hence this case was able to be raised. Abbad was taken to prison and on the way fainted from the severity of his injuries and eventually had to be taken to hospital where he was kept handcuffed to the bed.

Abbad was eventually freed when an in-law paid \$14,000 for his release, but he had to flee Jordan. A subsequent court hearing was held, with the couple absent, and the judge issued warrants for their re-arrest and ordered Abbad's father to produce his son's marriage certificate to annul the couple's marriage. Abbad and his family are currently unable to return to Jordan and it may never be safe for them to do so.

There is fear amongst local churches that Jordan is gradually becoming less tolerant of non-Islamic religions. Further reports from Jordan also suggest that an evangelical church has been closed down and that the permits of foreign Christian families have not been allowed to be extended because of their work with Christian churches and suspected work of evangelising Muslims – claimed to represent a threat to the stability of Jordan. Many Muslims suspect that people are actually paid by missionaries to convert to Christianity.

Yet, in theory, Jordan's Constitution guarantees freedom of religious beliefs and both the government and the King have announced their intention for the right to freedom of expression to be anchored in law. In practice, this right still remains restricted, with security forces able to carry out arbitrary arrests, little action taken against "honour" crimes, and the censoring of printing houses. Furthermore, even though the Constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief, the country's official religion is Islam which forbids conversion to another faith, thereby creating a serious tension within the country.

While Jordan may not be our first thought when we think of religious liberty issues, evidence suggests that Christians and evangelical churches in particular, are increasingly coming under pressure. Let's pray that this tide will turn again and that the King and the government will work to ensure that freedom of expression prevails in practice. The vast majority of people in Jordan have never heard the gospel, yet there is believed to be a great openness to it. We need also to pray for sensitive witness to Muslims and for protection from persecution for those who do convert.

If you would like information about how you can petition the Jordanian authorities about Mohammad Abbad's case, please email s.clark@eauk.org

Prayer, action and breaking news...

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill Update

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill is now before the House of Commons Second Reading taking place on Monday, 12th May. At Second Reading MPs vote on the principle of the whole Bill. This is usually a formality and then the Bill goes through to its Committee Stages, Report and Third Reading where MPs can vote on specific amendments.

For the first time since 1990, the Bill provides MPs with an opportunity to vote on the issue of abortion. The abortion vote will take place on May 20th.

The Alive and Kicking coalition are inviting people to sign a petition to lower the upper limit for abortion for normal babies from 24 weeks to 20 weeks at: <http://www.the20weekscampaign.org/register/>

You can also sign the Alive and Kicking Abortion petition at <http://www.aliveandkickingcampaign.org/petition/>

Christians are urged to continue to pray and to lobby MPs and campaign on these vital issues at this time. A key point to make is that there appears to be insufficient parliamentary time to debate fully the issues at stake. To illustrate this point, 700 hours were spent discussing the fox hunting bill and in contrast only a few hours have been allocated next week for abortion.

London Mayoral Election Update

The Evangelical Alliance together with London Churches hosted a hustings event for the London Mayoral Elections on 23rd April. The evening was a great success, with candidates Ken Livingstone, Boris Johnson, Brian Paddick and Alan Craig all present. Each candidate had two minutes to tell the audience what they felt makes a great city, before questions were put to them. All the candidates expressed support for the work of faith communities in London.

May 1st saw Boris Johnson, the Conservative candidate elected. Just last weekend, Boris appeared at the Global Day of Prayer, held at Millwall stadium, an encouraging indication that he really does intend to support the work of faith communities. Mr Johnson invited the 20,000 people present to pray for him, and in particular for his work in reducing gun and knife crime in the capital, and for all those who hold elective offices in government. Finally, Simon Hughes, the Liberal Democrat MP for North Southwark and Bermondsey, prayed for Mr Johnson, which as many people commented, was probably the first time a Liberal Democrat had publicly prayed for a Conservative, showing how Christianity has the power to unite people across parties.

New CSW Report - No Place to Call Home.

CSW's latest report, No Place to Call Home is a detailed report of experiences of apostates from Islam, and the failures of the international community to address this issue.

The report covers many issues including: the right to choose a religion; apostasy in Islamic theology; shari'a law; state responses to apostasy and social reactions to apostasy.

Written by Ziya Meral, himself a convert to Christianity from Islam, the report is informative and inciteful and calls on Muslim nations, the international community, the UN and international media to resolutely address the serious violations of human rights suffered by apostates.

You can download a copy of the report at:

<http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=94&search>



Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson at the Evangelical Alliance Hustings at St-Martin-in-the-Fields.

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