



Christian
Perspectives on
Public Affairs

evangelical alliance
uniting to change society



News and Christian Comment

Lest we forget! 1967-2007

Most national commemorations mark the triumphant end of some aggressive action by man against man, the day when peace was at last established, or a dictatorship overthrown, or apartheid repudiated, or slavery abolished. With a mixture of joy and penitence the nation unites to praise God in the knowledge that one more human abomination has been consigned to history.

This year we will be commemorating in the United Kingdom a truly unworthy aspect of our past but which, unlike the tragedies above, is still with us today. On October 27th it will be four decades since the passing of the Abortion Act 1967, which formally legitimised the destruction of the most helpless of all human life, the child in the womb. Over 6.6 million unborn babies have been aborted since then, 6.6 million unknown, unnamed innocents.

Far from things changing for the better, the annual abortion figures in the UK are escalating. Multiple abortions are on the increase, younger and younger girls are ending up in the clinics, morning-after-pills are distributed by school nurses. Most pregnancies are terminated with minimum if any deference at all to the law. Eugenic abortion is available up to birth.

There can be no joy whatsoever in our hearts as we prepare for the 40th commemoration of the Abortion Act, only an overwhelming sense of sadness and immeasurable loss. The damaging impact of abortion on the medical and psychological health of the women and families involved, on the medical profession, and on the integrity of society itself is incalculable. And it would be impossible to quantify the value in human terms of the millions who have been denied the chance to live.

For some in this country there will never be such a thing as too many abortions. They continue to argue that there are not enough, either in this country or in the developing world. Like Marie Stopes International, who are holding a conference to 'celebrate' the Abortion Act, with the participation of Amnesty International, Catholics for a Free Choice, The Guttmacher Research Institute and International Planned Parenthood. On the platform will be the inevitable UK pro-abortion notables such as Anne Quesney, Ann Furedi and Barbara Hewson, pressing for ever more liberal provision of abortion. David Steel, described grandly as the Architect of the Abortion Act, has a prime role on the day, and the ITN newscaster Jon Snow will chair one of the meetings.

What are we going to do? We, for the purpose of this call to action, are an alliance of pro-life organisations gathered under the umbrella group Alive & Kicking. The Evangelical Alliance is a member, along with CARE, the Christian Medical Fellowship, the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship, the Guild of Catholic Doctors, LIFE, ProLife Alliance, CORE, Student LifeNet and the recently formed Real Choice. And we are calling on individuals everywhere to express their support.

Now is absolutely the right time to turn back the tide of abortion. In the heart of the nation, in the soul of every sensible man and woman of fair mind, there is an understanding that abortion was never meant to be an unrestrained right and never should be. Even those who consider the practice a sad necessity are worried that the law is being abused in a way which should not be tolerated. And nobody but the absolute fanatic would ever suggest that the experience of abortion is something a woman easily forgets.

Many of us want to see abortion confined to history forever, but realise that that possibility is still as yet a dream. The immediate response has to be to work to make abortion as rare as possible, which is exactly the mission of our alliance. We are working through the political system, through cooperation with the media, through exchange with other pro-life groups and through communication with the public at large. The core message of Alive & Kicking is based on the common agreement that nobody but a dedicated extremist can view abortion as a good thing, that we must tackle the problems that lead women to contemplate such a tragic end to a pregnancy and find real solutions long before they reach the abortion clinic. This way the abortion numbers will at last begin to fall.

For the first time since 1990 there is a real possibility that abortion will be on the political agenda, as part of the Human Tissue and Embryos Bill. The Commons' Science & Technology Select Committee is completing an inquiry into abortion as *PQ* goes to press.

Alive & Kicking has a very precise strategic campaign plan in place and urges readers to contact them if they would like to discuss details. They will forward relevant briefing material. All offers of support will be most welcome with plenty of hands-on work to go round! For details see the back page for contact details and information regarding events surrounding the Commemoration of the 40th Anniversary of the Abortion Act.

We believe that women, their unborn babies, their families, and society itself deserve much better than abortion, and that it is for us to make this happen.

Julia Millington, Director, Alive and Kicking

PQ from Westminster

Credit Crunch

In panic scenes reminiscent of the stock market crash of 1929, Britain witnessed last week the public effects of its first serious banking crisis since 1973. As thousands of Britons queued for hours outside branches of the Northern Rock Building Society desperate to withdraw their life savings from the troubled bank, financial experts, economists and political observers argued over whether Britain was seeing the beginning of a downwards economic spiral evidenced by a loss of trust in the banking system.

There has been a worldwide restriction in international liquidity following worries about sub-standard mortgage lending in the United States which has been dissipated through complex financial instruments throughout the world in ways that make it difficult to determine which banks have most ultimate exposure. This in turn has created problems for banks like Northern Rock which are particularly dependent on the short-term money markets to maintain their liquidity. However, the impact of such public manifestation of loss of confidence could be extremely costly – not just for one financial institution but for the whole British economy and government. Popular perceptions of the current Government are intensely bound up with whether Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling are seen as the best people to be handling economic crisis. The 1973 crisis was largely responsible for the demise of the Heath government in 1974, whilst Black Wednesday of September 1992 was a key factor in the subsequent collapse of the Major government in 1997.

The Conservatives have been quick to point out that Gordon Brown has presided over a ten-year period characterised by a massive rise in consumer credit. This has been manageable whilst interest rates remained low. But now they are at a six-year high as the Bank of England has pushed up interest rates to 5.75% following a jump in inflation – the fifth rise in 12 months.

A quick review of selected statistics can appear alarming. Total UK personal debt at the end of July 2007 stood at £1,355bn – the highest on record. Total credit card debt in July 2007 was £53.5bn. Plastic cards in issue were 181m in 2006. This works out at just under 4 plastic cards

for every adult in the UK. Britain's personal debt is increasing by £1m every 4 minutes. More than 80 %of Britons admit to regularly overspending – 26% apparently overspend to cheer themselves up when they are feeling low. 14,000 properties (77 a day) were taken into possession in the first six months of 2007 – a rise of 30% over 2006. There were 26,956 individual insolvencies in England and Wales in the second quarter of 2007, an increase of 4.2% on the same period a year ago. Recent research reveals that 2.48m (7%) people – are "very concerned" about their ability to manage debt, while another 24% are "concerned". According to a recent report by the Legal Services Research Centre, 89% of debt clients interviewed reported worrying about their money problems 'most' or 'all' of the time. The great majority of clients believed their health had been adversely affected by their debt problems. 48% of clients described the impact of problems on their health as 'great', and 43% felt that their health had suffered 'to some extent'. Around three in five clients reported having received treatment, medication or counselling as a result. 45% of clients stated that debt problems had a negative effect on relationships with partners. Almost half of people in the UK are getting stressed at least once a week according to the Samaritans. The biggest cause of stress for most people is money (51%). Citizens Advice says they dealt with 1.4m debt problems in the past year – 11% up on the previous 12 months and double the figure just eight years ago. This equates to 5,300 new debt problems a day. And so it goes on!

Though being in debt is no longer regarded negatively, the Bible suggests that debt can be a form of bondage. In particular, debt arrangements imposed on those unable to meet the terms are condemned. Obviously all credit is not bad in a capitalist democratic society. But when people are controlled by credit rather than credit helping them, an industry committed to encouraging people to borrow cannot be healthy. The Government may well find they are held responsible for a nation's credit woes.

Government on Trial over Gambling Act

On Monday 17th September an Evangelical Alliance Parliamentary Officer entered the labyrinthine world of leak-proof government communications, but only after signing a legal agreement to refrain from telling anyone anything for 12 hours. At an undisclosed but very smart central London location the much anticipated British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2007 was finally pre-released to a tightly controlled list of industry and charity representatives.

The secrecy proved effective as the report's conclusions were not leaked before the Gambling Commission and the research company, The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) were ready to tell us that problem gambling in the UK had remained at approximately the same level since the last survey in 1999. The nearest estimate for problem gambling in Britain remains at around the 1/4 million mark. As the Department for Culture, Media and Sport was quick to point out this is no cause for complacency and "the Government is committed to tackling problem gambling". NatCen and the Gambling Commission will now be working towards their next survey promised in three years time.

The Gambling Act came into force this month allowing for the liberalisation and expansion of gambling in the UK. Several years ago when Tessa Jowell, was steering the Gambling Bill through Parliament she said that any increase in problem gambling brought about by the new legislation would be unacceptable. It was the Evangelical Alliance which

pressed the Secretary of State for a baseline survey, following a meeting in February 2004.

The existing regulations have not improved the situation for the 1/4 million problem gamblers in the UK, but they have not made matters worse. Now is the time to prove whether or not the new Gambling Act will indeed increase problem gambling. The importance of this comprehensive survey must not be allowed to be undermined by the gambling industry and must act as a baseline from which the Government's Gambling Act will be held to account. As DCMS Minister Gerry Sutcliffe said "I welcome the Gambling Commission's prevalence survey, which establishes a useful benchmark against which we can assess the effectiveness of the new Gambling Act".

For the sake of the Government's reputation, and more importantly for the sake of those individuals whose lives are blighted by gambling addiction, the number of problem gamblers must decrease and the promises of funding to tackle addiction must increase over the next three years until the next Gambling Prevalence Survey.

The Evangelical Alliance participates in the Gambling Commission Advisory Group and will continue to speak out for the need to reduce problem gambling. The Government's new Gambling Act is now on trial to see if as a consequence the number of problem gamblers in the UK increases or not.

PQ from the Nations

Northern Ireland Rule By Review

There are many unique facets to the new political arrangement in Northern Ireland. Each constituency has six elected representatives – the most representation for any constituency within the United Kingdom. At times constituency matters outweigh party considerations, as in the debate about the situation of a National Stadium for Northern Ireland.

Another anomaly comes in the form of a devolved administration required to implement decisions and policies developed by previous Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office. So, Margaret Ritchie, SDLP MLA for South Down now holds the purse strings for a pre-devolution initiative which aims to encourage loyalist paramilitaries away from violence. However, the Conflict Transformation Initiative, as it is known, worth £1.2 million to deprived loyalist communities is under threat due to continued activity within loyalist paramilitary organisations, including trouble which led to violence in Bangor and Carrickfergus. Many criticised the initiative when it first emerged but it is the Northern Ireland Executive that must pick up the pieces.

Then we have the situation where only ten of 108 MLAs are not members of the four parties involved in the coalition government. While these ten have formed their own grouping within the Assembly's structures to ensure that their voice is heard, the group does not have the strength of numbers to form a functioning opposition.

Without an effective opposition how can legislation and decisions be challenged? Judicial review is the current instrument of choice in

this regard and there have been a plethora through the courts in recent months. Planning permission for a new John Lewis store outside Belfast; the appointment of an interim victims commissioner; the introduction of water charges; a moratorium on new build properties in rural areas; and of course, most recently the sexual orientation regulations for Northern Ireland have all been subject to scrutiny within the High Court.

Each of the judgements mentioned above has led to decisions being overturned, legislation being amended or recommendations being put to Government as to how business should be conducted. Cynics would suggest that to have such a range of recent legislation before the courts was just one strand of former Secretary of State Peter Hain's strategy to force local politicians to take local politics into their own hands. The more optimistic might suggest that this is simply an unforeseen and unfortunate consequence of direct rule administration. However, rule by judicial review is not the healthiest method of law-making in any democratic society.

Whatever your position there is no disguising the fact that the new Northern Ireland Assembly is heavily constrained by the decisions (particularly financial) and policies of the previous direct rule regime. The expectations and aspirations of the citizens under the authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly are high and yet it is easy to forget that this new administration is built on the shakiest of foundations in more ways than one. That is not to assume that failure is the only option. Rather the pace of progress may well be slow and laborious, but perhaps we'll make it after all.

Scotland Back to Reality.

To many, the surprise win of the Scottish National Party has particularly interesting implications for the future of governance in Scotland both in the short and long terms. At this point it is important that we begin to understand the short-term implications, as long-term cause speculation distracts from the important issues that face Scottish society at present. The debate on independence is undoubtedly important, but we may suddenly find that we have missed the key issues that are affecting Scotland right now.

The reality of a minority government is a phenomenon that has rarely been experienced on a national level. The First Past the Post System almost always results in a majority government in Westminster, even though the percentage of votes gained is significantly less than seats won. Due to the youthful nature of the Scottish Parliament, a voting system of greater proportionality was developed. The resulting outcome in May 2007 was a government with no majority and only thirty-six percent of the seats. How on earth, one might ask, can an administration govern successfully if in reality they could never win a vote on the floor of the Parliament? The key word here is negotiation. A cynically uncommon word for those whose sole experience is Westminster. Bargaining, arbitration, compromise, reconciliation; all key words that must become the common vocabulary for the new administration. In any attempt to successfully pass legislation, the SNP administration must be willing to draw alongside the other parties and win their support. The administration must be eager and ready to hear opinions from all sides

of the table, and actively negotiate to gain their vote. This has repercussions within the committee environment. Such a narrow margin of victory for the SNP administration puts pressures on the party members in manning the committees due to the number of members who are subsequently involved in ministerial roles. Unlike in Westminster, backbenchers from the governing party must be willing to always follow the party line.

How do we approach the governing situation as Christians? Firstly we need to understand the importance of our involvement within the political process. Through engaging with the dialogue and debate rather than simply pointing a judgemental finger we can present a Christian voice that has a greater chance of being heard. Secondly, the nature of the new administration may increase their willingness to hear alternative opinions and voices, not simply from lobbyist or interest groups but also from individual members of the constituency, whether these issues are on a local or national level. Thirdly, the diversity of political opinion in Scotland presents a unique opportunity for Christians to present a unified voice on the serious social and cultural injustices that mar Scotland today. Christians from any political persuasion can begin to highlight viable alternatives to policy decisions being made at a national or local level. We must be ready and expect to speak clearly when members of the administration are willing to hear the views of the wider public. Through collectively speaking out, we have a much greater chance of our voice being heard.

PQ from Westminster

Three Legs Good - One Leg a Potential Disaster

Clearing one's desk prior to starting a new job can lead to producing work which is of a low standard. At the end of June, John Healey MP was told to clear his desk at the Treasury to take up a new post at the Department of Communities and Local Government. He wanted to sign off the "Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration" (SNR) and the car was at the door to take him to his new office. It is regrettable that he did not stay to complete the work or hand it on to a successor in its unfinished state, despite the delays already caused to its publication.

The SNR is an attempt to reconcile the regional agencies, networks and quangos that had been accumulating for nearly 15 years. The current structures have been in freefall since 2004 when electors in the North East rejected an elected assembly. This appears to have been the combined effect of those who hate the idea of what they understood to be more government; those who wanted a body with more powers than were on offer; and those who simply wanted to punish the government.

The need to 'de-clutter' the regional structures is a view that is held by all involved in these agencies as well as those opposed to regional working. Regional structures were introduced to strengthen economic well being and to aid regeneration and some have shown their potential to do just that, despite the profusion of agencies which have grown up in some regions.

The process of creating a strategic plan to determine housing and commercial developments as well as environmental protection and social provision has also shown some promise when compared to a nationally determined strategy and County-wide plans. These were being further enhanced by decisions on transport, health and skills. It is clear that even the largest Council cannot deal alone with all of the strategic issues which affect its residents, and Central Government is too far removed to be able to focus on local needs with any real clarity. However it is always easier to agree to change something than it is to ensure that the future is an improvement on the present.

The current arrangements which will remain in place until 2010 have been developed to create sustainable development following a three-stranded approach: social, environmental and economic. The SNR emphasises one of these strands almost exclusively and readers will not be surprised that this treasury-sponsored review has given precedence to the economic strand. Whilst the three-stranded model is not perfect (nor was it really balanced, even before SNR)

surely the authors of the SNR are being naïve if they feel that a single strand can be trusted to deliver these objectives more effectively. This would depend on some form of trickle-down from the wealth creators in each region to provide for social needs such as long term unemployment, and for those involved in driving the economic charabanc to simultaneously put their foot down and also check for emissions at the back of the vehicle.

The SNR doesn't provide a detailed plan (indeed it is woefully weak in how to address these concerns), but the broad brush strokes are evident on this canvass: the existing Regional Assemblies will disappear. At their best they brought together elected politicians with partners focused on social issues (including faith), economic matters and environmental needs. All of these are elected

or appointed in different ways. They meet to determine plans that allow the politicians (and their officers) to work at their best, but ensure that they do not fall back on their parochial laurels, and that the final result is one that all three strands of sustainability are able to be rightly proud of.

The existing Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are to take over the roles of the Assemblies and the Learning and Skills Councils. The RDAs are built on a corporate model and whilst the directors of these companies are drawn from a range of backgrounds, they are appointed by a secretary of state and are not accountable to local people in any way.

The plan is to hand to the Local Authorities, responsibility for the economic well being of their areas, along with the budgets currently controlled by the RDA. This builds on the recently established Local Area Agreements. At the same time the decision making for transport, housing and social structures which has been controlled by Local Authorities, albeit influenced by many partners such as those with a faith background, is to be handed over to the RDA who are tasked with making these decisions based on economic criteria. If this appears to be topsy turvy, the reader is beginning to understand why John Healey should have been forced to stay at his desk in early July until the review made sense. It is significant that the current economic partners are aghast at this turn of events and indeed whilst all affected agree that reform was needed, none appear to support this approach.

Ian Chisnall

*Deputy Chair of the South East England Regional Assembly
Chair of the Social and Environmental Partners on the Assembly*

The plan is to hand to the local authorities responsibilities for the economic well being of their areas, along with the budgets currently controlled by the RDA.

PQ from the Nations & beyond

Wales Heritage v Culture

September 18th marked the tenth anniversary of the Welsh vote for devolution. A night of high drama and tension in 1997 saw the "yes" vote prevail by the slimmest of margins, and the course of Wales' political destiny was set.

Ten years down the road, and confidence in the Assembly has grown, with polls showing that increasing numbers of people in Wales are behind devolution.

The third Assembly is now in full swing and the protracted, post-election period of uncertainty in May and June, when the Welsh public were not sure what coalition government would be formed, now seems light years away.

With the Assembly now operating with powers granted under the Government of Wales Act last year, we are already beginning to see some changes from last term.

One difference is that the portfolios of the Cabinet ministers now no longer have to mirror the various Committees. Rhodri Glyn Thomas, for example, has been named Minister of Heritage. Heritage, as a ministerial post, is not found in the committees, although Culture is. Under the previous Assembly, there was both a Minister and Committee for the rather awkward Culture, Welsh Language & Sport.

It will be interesting to see what difference this will make for the

Church. In the previous Assembly, religion did not clearly fit into any one committee box, but instead straddled a few, primarily Equality and Social Justice. Under a more favourable administration, however, Christianity ought to have been given greater recognition under Culture, in light of the unique and immense role that the Christian faith has played in Welsh history.

Under heritage – a new buzz word – it is much harder to deny Christianity its rightful place. There are of course the many revivals, the most recent of which was in 1904 and which led to the start of both the Apostolic Church (a world-wide movement with 110 churches in the UK and working in 40 countries) and the Elim Pentecostal movement (started by a convert from the revival, George Jeffreys). The Evangelical Movement of Wales, which has had a significant impact on Wales, was birthed in the 1950s and there is also the inspirational story of Mary Jones, who, in 1800 at the age of 16, walked 25 miles across the countryside to buy a copy of the Welsh Bible because she didn't have one. So we could continue.

We anticipate fruitful times of engagement for the Church with the Welsh Assembly. The results of Wales' first faith audit, conducted by EAs Gweini, are expected in the upcoming months and will show that the church's contribution to Welsh civic society is not confined to the past, but is vibrant and active in the present.

Religious Liberty Protests in Burma

Burma has recently come to the forefront of concern for human rights, in light of the military regime's violent crackdown on peaceful protests that began on the 19th August against a 500% increase in fuel prices. Such is the extremity of the situation, that Gordon Brown has called on the UN Security Council to consider "the grave situation" in Burma "at the earliest opportunity" and has personally promised to raise the situation with other world leaders. This is the first time a British Prime Minister has issued such statements on Burma, which came after a major campaign by Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) and Burma Campaign UK to put pressure on the British Government to lead calls for the UN Security Council to discuss Burma. .

Brown isn't the only one reacting. Last week President Bush and British Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague also issued statements and the US First Lady Laura Bush personally telephoned the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in regard to the current crisis in Burma.

So far, hundreds have taken part in the demonstrations on an almost daily basis, across the country. On the first day of the demonstrations, 150 of the 400 people demonstrating were arrested. The peaceful protestors, including many women, have been attacked with iron rods and bamboo sticks; those injured in the crackdown have been denied all medical treatment, including for such severe injuries as broken legs. Almost all the leading pro-democracy activists have been detained; they face jail sentences of up to 20 years. Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi, leaders of the 1988 democracy movement, are among those arrested. They have already served over 15 years in prison and endured horrendous torture. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the

National League for Democracy, remains under house arrest, as do more than 1,200 political prisoners. Torture is widespread and severe.

The military regime in Burma has one of the worst human rights records in the world, particularly against ethnic minorities. Rape is used as a weapon, child soldiers are regularly conscripted, human minesweepers are employed and since 1996 over 3,000 villages in Eastern Burma alone have been destroyed. Across the country, 1 million people are displaced, either in relocation camps controlled by the regime, or trapped in the jungle with no access to adequate food, shelter, medical care or education. CSW fund a Christian relief group, the Free Burma Rangers, who deliver much needed food and medical aid to the displaced people.

Christians in Burma are not targeted to the extent that they are in other countries, yet the regime is still ranked by the US State Department as one of the worst violators of religious freedom in general. From time to time churches and especially house churches are raided and shut down, and in certain towns practicing Christianity is specifically forbidden. Christian-run orphanages have also been ordered to shut down, leaving many children abandoned. Importantly though, our concern for Burma does not just extend to Christians but to all those affected by the brutal regime, unable to have the freedom to protest peacefully without violent consequences. Let us continue to ensure that the government does not forget Burma and encourage them do everything they can to keep it on the UN agenda.

For some suggested prayer points for Burma, please see the back page.

Prayer, action and breaking news...

Prayer Points for Burma

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) recently held a day of prayer for Burma and has suggested some of the following prayer points:

- An end to the violent assaults on peaceful demonstrators, and the disbanding of the junta's civilian proxy organisation the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) which is carrying out many of the attacks.
- The release of democracy leader and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, in her 12th year of house arrest, and all those who have been detained.
- An end to the military regime's attacks on ethnic minorities and the continuing violations of human rights, including the use of rape, forced

labour, torture, human minesweepers, the forcible conscription of child soldiers, religious persecution, the destruction of villages, crops and livestock, the displacement of civilians and extra-judicial killings.

- Action by the international community, including the British Government. Burma should be addressed as a matter of urgency by the UN Security Council and the European Union, and pressure be put on China, India and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) to use their influence with the regime in Burma.

For more information about CSW visit <http://www.csw.org.uk/>



Alive & Kicking

For commemorative events and contacts see: www.timeforchange.org.uk/events

Vigil, March and Service at Westminster Cathedral, London

A vigil will take place in Old Palace Yard, opposite Parliament and immediately adjacent to Westminster Abbey at 2pm on Saturday, 27th October 2007. The gathering will be addressed by MPs, Peers and church leaders.

Service at Salford Cathedral, Salford, Greater Manchester

A service of remembrance, repentance and healing for 40 years of abortion - Saturday, 27 October 2007 at 10am

Bethesda Chapel, Royton, Oldham

Meeting of remembrance at Bethesda Chapel, Dogford Road, Royton, Oldham - Saturday, 27th October 2007 from 6pm

Service of remembrance, Burnley

A service of remembrance, repentance and healing for 40 years of abortion St Andrew's C of E church, Duke Bar, Burnley - Sunday, October 28th 2007 at 6pm

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