



Christian
Perspectives on
Public Affairs

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News and Christian Comment

Budget 2006

Chancellor Gordon Brown delivered his tenth Budget statement on Wednesday the 22nd March 2006.

It was a vintage performance with the Chancellor resting more than 15 pages of dense notes on his customary pile of books for ease of reading. However despite its superb delivery, and reams of apparently record beating statistics, by now it seems commentators had grown wise to reading between the lines of the Chancellor's script.

The Chancellor did not appear to be raising much in the way of direct extra tax, but 'fiscal drag' will kick in again as Mr Brown once again failed to raise tax thresholds in line with income, thus giving him much needed margin to deliver on increasingly expensive continuing spending commitments.

There were relatively few major spending alterations, a notable exception being £34bn extra for schools over the next five years with a surprise policy promise to increase spending per pupil to match private school levels.

Churches and Christian groups will be pleased that VAT payable on church renovations will continue to be refundable. Even more substantially the Treasury announced the setting up of a dedicated office for the voluntary sector, to include faith as well as non-faith charities. This office will advise on such matters as gift-aid and will conduct a nationwide consultation with the voluntary sector aimed at informing spending decisions.

There were more positive moves on research and development spending and encouragement for innovation and science. There was more money for hopeful Olympic athletes as well as counter-terrorism. Pensioners will receive free national bus travel, but no extra help with pensions or council tax this year.

One key question highlighted during the Budget debate related to the manifest inefficiency of government spending. The National Health Service situation was glaringly absent from the Chancellor's speech. The NHS has managed to swallow a massive doubling of Government spending since 1997 (currently £96bn) but many NHS trusts have fallen heavily into the red and are now laying off substantial numbers of staff.

Herein lies a key problem for the Chancellor. Despite his largesse in spending on key government areas, he is often at the mercy of civil servants, Public Private Finance Initiative contractors, and the UK's stubbornly low productivity figures to actually deliver on-the-ground improvement. The Chancellor was also accused of backdoor privatisation and short termism by selling off up to £30bn of public assets to fund what Opposition parties label his 'tax and spend' programmes.

Yet despite the criticism and the appearance of worrying economic trends, as a whole the UK economy has continued to hold up and the bubble has not burst. Each year the Chancellor comes to announce the records he has broken, and each year his critics line up to predict that after trading on his inheritance his 'luck' will run out this year and the debts will catch up. However, no such disaster seems likely to occur – at least, not yet. By way of comparison, the Chancellor strikingly pointed out that (despite public spending deficits) government debt in Britain remains lower than in the USA, Germany, France or Japan.

But away from the promised spending figures and their application a key feature of Gordon Brown's budget statements is their increasingly political, not simply economic, messages. As Anatole Kaletsky suggested, the Chancellor's budget is now "more about political theatre than economic substance". This should come as no surprise from a Chancellor who expects to succeed Mr Blair as Prime Minister sooner or later – but certainly before the next election.

Now indisputably the longest serving Chancellor on record (overtaking David Lloyd George), his supporters are keen to present him as the most brilliant and successful as well. To his detractors, much of his success is attributed to the fortunate timing of his appointment in inheriting a strong economy from the Conservatives. They prefer to portray him as interfering with the economy and business, and responsible for an unwelcome increase in red tape. Furthermore, they highlight his record in generating what many regard in the longer term as the unsustainable rocketing in government expenditure, much of it based on borrowed money, with the only eventual outcome being a devastating crash.

But the fact is that general elections are the ultimate verdict on budgets. In the final analysis, voters remain the definitive fiscal judges in deciding which political party has the right to spend taxpayers' money. Which means that if the current Chancellor becomes Prime Minister he will still be justly rewarded if his economic policies stand the test of time. Conversely, his chickens will come home to roost.

This month we feature on the back page of *PQ* brief responses to the Budget from Liberal Democrat and Labour perspectives. Next month's edition will feature a Conservative perspective.

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PQ from Westminster

Care Not Killing

On 12th May the House of Lords will debate the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill introduced by Lord Joffe. Under the Bill a doctor would be allowed to give a prescription for a lethal dose of drugs to an adult patient who was 'suffering unbearably' from a 'terminal illness' who requested such a prescription and who 'did not lack capacity' to make such a request.

The Assisted Dying Bill, although not a Government proposal, has considerable public support. It could make progress in Parliament in 2006, and while it is unlikely to become law without Government support a real and serious risk remains.

With assisted suicide a doctor helps a patient to kill themselves by prescribing a lethal drug for the patient to take. Technically it becomes euthanasia when the doctor administers the lethal drug himself. However, there is no moral difference between the two. The doctor remains the agent of death.

The law has historically recognised the extreme vulnerability of the sick, dying, elderly and disabled. The present law reflects society's judgement that the lives of all patients are worthwhile, even if they might lose sight of their own worth and ask for their lives to be ended. If assisted suicide was legalised in this country the 'right to die' could easily become 'the duty to die', particularly for those who feel that they are a burden to loved ones or to society.

Doctors have a duty to alleviate suffering. They should kill the pain, not the patient. It is problematic that many patients do not have access

to good palliative care. Palliative care therefore should be extended and improved through increasing funding. The hospice movement exemplifies how people can die with dignity, peace and minimal suffering. Christians in particular are challenged to become involved in supporting it.

Supporters of the Assisted Dying Bill claim that a 'slippery slope' (as alleged in the Netherlands) would be avoided because the Bill follows the Oregon example. Assisted suicide has been legal there since 1997 where it is claimed there is no evidence of abuse. But the evidence from Oregon does not confirm Oregon to be abuse free. Legalising assisted suicide for the terminally ill indisputably represents a stepping stone to legalising euthanasia even though it may be euthanasia by the back door.

Care not Killing (CNK) is a new UK based alliance of individuals and organisations (including the Evangelical Alliance) with 3 key aims:

- 1) To bring together human rights groups, healthcare groups, palliative care groups and faith based organisations with the aim of promoting more and better palliative care.
- 2) To ensure that existing laws against euthanasia and assisted suicide are not weakened or repealed during the lifetime of the current Parliament.
- 3) To inform public opinion against further weakening the law.

For more information about the Bill and how to get involved in supporting *Care not Killing* please go to <http://carenotkilling.org.uk>

Challenging Bar Council Standards

It must not be forgotten that the rule of law is the foundation of a free society in which justice is realisable for those that have been wronged. If the Courts should fail to be robust and show favour to certain bodies, or if barristers were unable fearlessly to defend clients (even those deemed politically incorrect), the rule of law would be no more and shortly thereafter both liberty and prosperity would demise.

However, a fundamental question remains: who is to judge the lawyers? The traditional response has been - the lawyers themselves. But such systems of self regulation can only be justified where individuals adhere to a strong moral code and are prepared to act against their own interests.

In this context it seems the Bar Council is seeking to impose a new politically correct morality on our suffering country. Perhaps like the BBC, it represents a once great institution that many now fear could potentially exercise a greater negative than positive effect.

This personal story doesn't take place in Eastern Europe, but in the United Kingdom. The fact that it is true is illustrative of the current crisis in the United Kingdom's spiritual health.

I practice in the field of religious rights. Representing Christian organisations is a risky business nowadays. In a society that rejects the Judeo-Christian tradition and in which religious institutions have arguably fallen from their influential position as moral arbitrators, a barrister who practices in this field may be subject to many forms of animosity and needs a very thick skin.

I acted as defence Counsel in *DPP v Hammond* (in which a 68 year old preacher was attacked for saying publicly that homosexuality was wrong) and in *Amicus* (where religious bodies resisted legislation denying their freedom not to have to employ practising homosexuals). I was clearly in trouble in certain quarters. To some, such a legal practice appears unconscionable.

Thereafter, learned members of the Bar Council raised a prosecution against me for writing in *PQ*. Barristers are not permitted to discuss cases they are involved in. But the charge was ludicrous and

unsustainable. It was manifestly brought to damage my practice by some at the Bar Council who wish to promote a politically correct ideology. It was ludicrous because the case that I wrote about was finished in the United Kingdom courts. I had always sought written permission prior to writing an article and thus had no *mens rea* (mental intention) to offend. But the rules were applied in a fashion never seen before. Barristers repeatedly appear in the media with little or no sanction. Nevertheless, the Bar Council thought the breach so serious that I was charged to appear before a 'selected' Bar Council judge and face 3 months suspension, or alternatively go before a full High Court Judge and face debarment for life. Of course, the Council intended the former. I chose the latter.

During the process, the Bar Council argued that I had no right to a fair trial; they did not need to respond to any letters; they need not serve me with any Witness Statements; nor indeed observe basic legal norms.

Mr. Justice Hart heard the case on 4th May 2005 and was appropriately outraged by the conduct of the Bar Council and wanted to throw the case out. But this would have meant my accusers at the Bar Council had succeeded in their aim of harassment, and had avoided censure. I declined the offer of a 'strike out' and requested my prosecution go ahead. I wanted a fair trial. I wanted to ask the Bar Chairman some crucial questions.

The Bar Council were 'horrified' at this turn of events which meant exposure in the courts. They immediately dropped the prosecution against me, stating that they had reviewed the evidence and declared me innocent. A clear case of pretextual prosecution?

However, they refused an apology and payment of a year's legal costs (since that would have 'triggered' an inquiry into conduct). Accordingly, I have commenced proceedings against the Bar Chairman ironically to ensure its adherence to the rule of law. The point at stake here is that if unethical and unfair behaviour is allowed especially in such high places, it jeopardises all our freedoms.

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PQ from Westminster

New Building, new Bill for Wales

On Wednesday, March 1st, Wales awoke to a blanket of snow covering the ground. For the heavenly-minded amongst the 30-odd attendees of that morning's National Assembly Prayer Breakfast in Cardiff Bay, thoughts turned towards the Scripture that says "though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow". Was the snow somehow symbolic of a fresh start for the small nation of Wales?

Although some may read too much into those meteorological events, it was nevertheless a remarkable day for Wales celebrating the official opening of its new Assembly building. Throughout the morning and afternoon, the Queen, and other members of the Royal family mixed with Assembly Members, staff, the glitterati and indeed the *crachach* - a term we haven't heard since the days when Ffion Jenkins, William Hague's partner, courted the media to great effect - as a splendid array of talent was put on display for this momentous occasion.

In the midst of all the festivities though, Plaid Cymru Assembly Member Leanne Wood, stood outside protesting against the presence of the Queen (or 'Mrs Windsor' as Leanne insists on calling her), along with UKIP, who were protesting against the Assembly itself.

On a day of protocol and emotion, there were also refreshing touches of humour from First Minister Rhodri Morgan as he delivered his speech, even making the Queen laugh.

The new £67m state-of-the-art Assembly building, which houses the new debating chamber, is officially called the *Senedd*, which is the Welsh word for both senate and parliament. Rhondda Labour Assembly Member Leighton Andrews had fought a campaign against its use, claiming a nationalist agenda behind it, but *Senedd* prevailed.

That the opening of the Senedd happened at all was remarkable when one considers that the Welsh people voted against a devolved Assembly - giving it the powers and budget of the Secretary of State for Wales - by a margin of 4:1 in a referendum in 1979. An ongoing campaign for self-governance, however, led to a second referendum in 1997. This time, with Labour MP Neil Kinnock - an outspoken devolution critic - gagged, and with a Labour government obliged to fulfil its election promises, the people of Wales voted "yes", albeit by the slimmest of margins (50.3% for, 49.7% against).

The Government of Wales Act 1998 granted executive devolution to Wales - primary legislative powers still rested in Westminster but the Welsh Assembly had the authority to apply those laws to Wales. The National Assembly for Wales was set up the following year in Cardiff Bay with 60 members - the 40 constituencies that return an MP to Westminster now returned one to the Assembly as well, with an

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parties, was set up in 2002 to look into this and published its report two years later. It was further-reaching than many imagined, proposing,

additional 20 members being returned representing five regional seats and designed to ensure greater proportional representation.

Although this was a good start, the need was strongly felt to examine ways in which powers and electoral arrangements could be modified and enhanced. The Richard Commission, including specialists and representatives from all four

amongst other things, an increase in the number of elected Assembly Members from 60 to 80 and primary legislative powers.

This paved the way for the Secretary of State for Wales to publish a White Paper 'Better Governance for Wales' in July 2005, leading to the publication of the Government of Wales Bill five months later.

The new Government of Wales Bill is currently at committee stage in the House of Lords and will then need to be returned to the House of Commons and subsequently receive Royal Assent before becoming an Act of Parliament.

Its main elements include -

- A separation of the roles of the Assembly itself and the Assembly government
- A new fast-track system for Assembly-prepared legislation to be approved by the Commons and the Lords.
- A mechanism by which the Assembly would receive full law-making powers if a broad consensus voted for it in a future referendum.
- A shake-up of the existing electoral arrangements whereby at present candidates can stand in both a constituency seat and a regional seat.

This change seemed unfair on the opposition parties when first published, but it has become increasingly evident that the existing system is open to abuse.

Many think that the new Government of Wales Bill was a compromise between the pro-devolution Welsh Labour Assembly Members and the Welsh Labour turkeys-not-wanting-to-vote-for-Christmas MPs, who fear that their numbers would be culled were the Assembly to be given more autonomy.

Indeed, a recent poll indicated that 60% of Welsh people already want greater power given to the Assembly. Overall, Assembly Members feel that the Bill is a step in the right direction, although opposition Assembly Members especially would have liked to have seen greater powers given. Each of the four main parties in the Assembly has strong pro-devolution elements - even the Welsh Conservatives!

The Welsh Assembly can legislate in: agriculture and fisheries, economic development, education and training, environment, health, highways, housing, industry, local government, social services, sport, tourism, town and country planning, local transport, water and the Welsh language

Areas that remain within the control of Westminster consist of: benefits, broadcasting, constitutional matters, defence and EU matters, foreign policy, immigration and asylum, macro-economic policy, policing, social security and taxation.

And so, with things running smoothly, the parties get on with preparing for the Assembly Elections due in May 2007. Candidacy lists are being drawn up and next year will see some fresh faces competing for a seat in Cardiff Bay along with the return of familiar faces like Dafydd Wigley, hoping to gain a seat in South Wales Central. And, with a Sunday tabloid compiling a dossier on one of our prominent Welsh politicians, the next few months promise to be eventful. However, let's hope for the right reasons.

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PQ from the Nations

Scotland A Bolt from the Blue

Some of the critics were beginning to mellow. Perhaps the new building wasn't so bad after all; perhaps the tourist benefits make it worthwhile; perhaps we could just about absorb the costs. Anyway, other projects like Wembley and the Olympics will soon steal the limelight.

And then it happened. A roof beam swung down within a whisker of the Conservative group at Holyrood (no-one, in our hearing at least, made any link between Conservatives, beam, and divine judgement). After the initial shock, it seemed to take days of musing by hard-hatted civil engineers to establish the cause and discover the missing link. For a few days the politicians looked as if they would be back on the road again, but then they settled for squeezing in to a meeting room at Holyrood.

What it meant was the Scottish Parliament was back in the news for all the wrong reasons. A cluster of media stories emerged about the architect's other faulty ceilings – and continued with the globetrotting antics of the First Minister and his holidaying deputy, leaving a vacuum in leadership.

The incident is gone now and being forgotten. But there is still that sense of things not being quite proven yet, patterns not yet settled, value needing to be demonstrated. As the Presiding Officer put it at the beginning of the last session, 'It's time for us at Holyrood to raise our game'. A serious and continuing challenge for the politicians!

A serious and continuing challenge to another group too – other people who need to raise their game. This is a much greater challenge for us, the people who elect the politicians. And no more so than for Christians and their churches, many – perhaps most – of whom don't rightly know how to begin to be involved in the political process. Our disconnectedness leaves us isolated and angry, leading us into one-off, knee-jerk protests and placards. We respond only to the flashpoint issues of ethics and sexuality, and leave to others the basics of creating and developing a society which allows people to flourish and grow. Thus we slip too easily into behaving like an aggrieved, reactionary minority group, which plays into the hands of a pluralist political establishment. We find ourselves labelled as those with religious interests, and consequently kept at arms length.

The resurrection came as a bolt from the blue to its first witnesses. In raising Jesus from the dead, God showed he is passionate about every dimension of our lives and our living. That dividing line between the so-called sacred and the secular has left us feeling disconnected at work and at home, and especially in political engagement. Removing this hurdle is the key to recovering our sense of citizenship and responsibility. The resurrection leaves Christ and his people free to be involved in every dimension of life, in every aspect of society.

May you know the power of his resurrection this Easter!

Wales The Bonfire of the Quangos

Guy Fawkes Night is still many months away and fireworks and bonfires are not uppermost in people's minds....that is, unless you are Welsh.

April 1st was the date chosen for an historic event, one long-predicted and looming on the horizon for years....an event that will go down in history as "the bonfire of the quangos".

Turn the clock back to 1995. The Conservatives have been in power for 16 years and Wales' public life is ruled by a small number of unelected individuals who preside over "quangos" (semi-autonomous, non-governmental organisations). Ron Davies, the then Secretary of State for Wales, speaking at the National Eisteddfod, argued that the answer for Wales was to have a devolved Assembly and to hold a "bonfire of the quangos".

Labour promised in their 1999 Manifesto to bring about a reduction in their number, but a House of Commons Public Administration Committee report published two years later found little evidence that it had.

Then, on July 14th 2004, two days before the Assembly's summer recess began and during the last open plenary session of the term, First Minister Rhodri Morgan announced that three quangos – the Welsh Development Agency (WDA), ELWa – an education body – and the Wales Tourist Board, would be scrapped and their staff and functions absorbed into the Assembly Government's civil service from April 1st 2006. The three bodies, in the words of

Rhodri, represented "two thirds of quangoland in Wales" with a combined staff of 1600 and annual budget of £920m. Not only were the opposition parties caught by surprise, but so were the quangos, being notified only minutes beforehand, and prompting the WDA's Chief Executive to resign on the spot.

Opposition Assembly Members were predictably up in arms – many smelt a rat and accused Labour of insidiously trying to exert greater political control over Wales. Feelings of anger and frustration were tangible as nothing could be done until the Assembly resumed two months later.

The scrapping of the WDA was by far the most contentious. Established in 1976, credited with the creation of hundreds of thousands of jobs and securing billions of pounds of investment for Wales, the WDA as a brand was recognisable throughout the world. What many couldn't see was how the functions of the WDA could be fulfilled in the Assembly's civil servant culture with its emphasis on compliance – the antithesis of

all things innovative and entrepreneurial.

The passing of the months since that announcement has been kind to Labour however. Opposition parties eventually agreed, albeit begrudgingly, that the abolition of the quangos was necessary in principle, although each one disagreed with either the way it had been done or certain aspects of it. It wouldn't be politics otherwise!

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PQ from the Nations & beyond

Northern Ireland A Question of Poverty

Poverty is not a work which one automatically associates with Northern Ireland. However this week saw the launch of the latest report on Child and Family Poverty in Northern Ireland¹. The government sponsored research carried out by Save the Children and the Equality and Social Inclusion in Ireland Project suggests that 110,000 children and young people in Northern Ireland live below the poverty line. A further 60,000 miss out on things many take for granted like school trips or family outings.

Last week the Government launched its 'Renewing Communities' action plan, aimed at tackling disadvantage in working class Protestant communities, deemed to have missed out on other initiatives designed to deal with this problem. Recognising that there has not been the capacity within these communities to avail fully of all the funding and development opportunities open to them, this £33 million package seeks to redress the balance. Education, health, youth provision and vocational training are all to be targeted by the new measures.

There are those who will point to developing countries and indicate that we do not have an understanding of true poverty here in Northern Ireland. But poverty is not always a financial measurement. For example, what the 'Renewing Communities' initiative cannot address is poverty of aspiration. While it is laudable that resources will be pumped in to youth and education services, creating the leaders for tomorrow, a whole generation, those who should be leaders today, are bypassed.

In Northern Ireland we also suffer from poverty of trust. Last week the

Prime Minister Tony Blair and Taoiseach Bertie Ahern outlined their plans for the 'ultimate decision' – make or break time for the Northern Ireland Assembly. This type of poverty was highlighted both in their joint statement: 'trust will not build itself in the absence of positive engagement by all parties'; and, in Mr Blair's own speech:

"Above all, this is a moment to let the process be governed not by suspicion but by the faith that the other does want this to succeed. I don't say suspicions will not still be there. Just don't let them prevail..."

We also suffer from a poverty of hope. The word from the man, and woman, on our streets as reported in local media following that announcement, held out little possibility of a resolution to the Stormont impasse, the increasing problems of criminality and the continued influence of paramilitaries.

In the end money can only address the symptoms of financial poverty. Addressing the root causes of poverty of all types will take something more powerful. As we approach Easter, with its message of hope and new life we, as Christians, through our churches and as we live and work in our communities have access to a much greater resource – the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. It is our responsibility to use it wisely and graciously to transform the society around us, however small the part may be that we have to play.

¹Child & Family Poverty in Northern Ireland, Eithne McLaughlin & Marina Monteith, (Belfast: QUB, 2006)

Religious Liberty Open Doors

Since David Cameron's visit to the UK office of *Open Doors*, he has written to Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, asking him to send a rapporteur to do a fact finding visit to Eritrea to investigate the current status of Christians living there. He also signed a petition which will be presented to the Eritrean ambassador in London, protesting the wave of persecution facing Eritrean Christians today. The crisis started less than three years ago, following a government decision that all churches not associated with the officially approved Lutheran, Orthodox and Roman Catholic denominations must close down. Since then, a wave of arrests has seen at least 1,752 Eritrean Christians imprisoned solely for their religious beliefs.

It is estimated that around 200 million Christians around the world are being persecuted simply because of their faith. In many Islam-dominated countries, Christians are severely persecuted. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, it is illegal for Christians to gather together or to sell Bibles, and conversion to Christianity carries the death sentence, as it does in Iran. In Pakistan, Christians can be sentenced to death on the unsubstantiated word of just one male Muslim for supposedly blaspheming Muhammad. In Indonesia, entire villages have been 'cleansed' by those wanting to establish an Islamic state. And in Nigeria, schoolchildren have been burnt alive in buses and thousands of men, young and old, have been brutally murdered in attacks on Christian villages. Even in countries with supposed freedom of religion, such as Turkey or Egypt, Christians experience discrimination, harassment and marginalisation.

Communist North Korea remains the worst perpetrator of persecution against Christians, where an estimated 50–70,000 of the total 200,000 who suffer in harsh concentration camps are Christians. As Christianity is seen as one of the greatest threats to the regime's power, the government will arrest not only the suspected dissident but also three generations of his family in an attempt to root

out the 'bad influence'. In places like Colombia, Christians are the targets of vile abuse and murder by guerrilla groups because they stand up for peace and righteousness, whilst they face extreme discrimination and harassment in Buddhist Bhutan or Hindu India.

More than 50 years ago, when Christians living under atheistic communist regimes were being imprisoned, tortured and martyred, a young Dutchman known as Brother Andrew moved to support his fellow Christians behind 'the Iron Curtain' who he wanted to help. He began 'unofficially' delivering Bibles, first to Poland, then to part of the Soviet bloc. As he did so, he discovered Christians, who despite their bravery and commitment to their faith, often felt isolated and vulnerable and were extremely grateful that people in the West knew about their plight and were willing to help. With the release of Andrew's first book, *God's Smuggler*, in 1967, a network of Christians around the world emerged to support persecuted Christians, which was called *Open Doors*.

A large part of the work of *Open Doors* still involves printing and delivering Bibles and other teaching material for Christians behind closed borders. 5.4 million Bibles, books and literature were delivered in 2005. However the work has expanded in many other areas. Christian believers are often discriminated against educationally and in their employment. In 2005 *Open Doors* helped around 120,000 individuals and 2,700 families to earn a living through literacy livelihood training, as well as, assistance with agriculture and small enterprise projects. Being informed is key in deciding how to help. The *Open Doors* 'Frontline' magazine brings the latest stories from the field and provides plenty of suggestions as to how to become involved. *Open Doors* also have a team of over 40 people who can speak or show videos at churches or groups. Prayer is also very important and the number one request from persecuted Christians, is that they will stand firm in their faith.

Open Doors website address is www.opendoorsuk.org

Responses to the Budget

This month we have asked two MPs, representing Labour and the Liberal Democrats, to give their responses to the recent Budget. Next month's edition will feature a Conservative perspective. All three are Christians who seek to serve God in the context of the parliamentary process.



Andy Reed is the Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament for Loughborough. He is currently Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship, having served for 2 years as Chair. He comments:

The Budget is an excellent chance to demonstrate good stewardship and presents us with an opportunity to tackle issues of poverty and suffering in our nation and

abroad. I couldn't be more pleased that we have done so much to ensure the economy stays on line to tackle the scourge of pensioner poverty and child poverty we inherited. We've seen steady economic growth over the last eight years, which enables individuals to become more responsible and self sufficient – allowing us to focus help towards the less fortunate.

I believe that biblical attitudes towards the poor and marginalized are reflected in this Budget. James tells us the "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27)." Orphans and widows exemplify societies most vulnerable, and though I would never claim "pure and faultless religion" as the stated motivation for the budget, I deeply believe that the intentional effort to extend a hand to the most vulnerable in our nation is laudable. Much more is left to do, both as a government and as the body of Christ to live by Godly economic principles that put others first and care for the weak. Record commitments to domestic and international education, alongside child care, nursery, Sure Start and other great programmes are just the beginning. I'm very proud and believe its right that the Budget goes so far to provide every child born in Britain the greatest chance of fulfilling their potential.



Steve Webb is Member of Parliament for Northavon, Liberal Democrat Shadow Health Secretary and Treasurer of Christians in Parliament. He comments:

This Budget was a chance to tackle real problems such as the massive burden of personal debt, the unfairness of the tax system and the challenge of climate change. Against this test, it was a failure.

The Chancellor made no mention of the slavery of personal debt, which stands at £1.2 trillion. Consumer debt has driven the UK's economic boom but the legacy for many families is bankruptcy and repossession.

The scrapping of the pensioners' council tax rebate was disappointing as it means many pensioners face a £200 rise in their bills this year. The council tax system needs replacing by a system based on ability to pay. Indeed, the whole tax system places an unjust burden on the poor, as the top 20% of earners pay less of their income in tax than the bottom 20%. The Liberal Democrats do not see the need for the tax burden to rise, but do believe it should be distributed more fairly.

Environmental issues were also skimmed over. Green taxes are falling as a share of overall taxation and the measures announced were little more than a token gesture. As stewards of creation, I would like to see a proper system of green economic incentives – actively encouraging people to change the way they live, in terms of gas-guzzling cars and cheap flights – and ensure that the polluter pays.

Happy Easter!



Easter is the time when Christians all over the world especially remember that God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to die for every person in it. They also celebrate the fact that God raised Jesus from death to proclaim his power over the sin and death that characterise the condition of the human race and acknowledge with gratitude God's love and salvation that offer hope for everyone.

We would like to wish all our readers a very Happy Easter!

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