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Perspectives on  
Public Affairs

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News and Christian Comment

## Party On?

**A**fter a long hot political summer the political parties made their usual autumnal trip to the seaside, or in Labour's case, to Manchester!

Party conference season had begun. However nothing was quite what it seemed this time around.

First up were the Liberal Democrats with their new 'old' leader Sir 'Ming' Campbell, Ming the merciful did away with the pseudo socialist pledge to raise taxes and appeared to move gently to the right of the Tories. This was novel considering that the Liberal Democrats under the amiable Charles Kennedy had managed to be so amiable that they made inroads into traditional Conservative areas, even though the party appeared to be left of Labour.

Such are the exceedingly narrow margins of ideological difference in today's political spectrum. Move one policy and you leapfrog right over entire political parties. The contemporary popularity of the centre ground of British politics, once the mildly mocked preserve of the Liberal Democrats predecessors, the SDP-Liberal Alliance, is now their greatest achievement. However, it is perhaps also their greatest weakness. Labour and the Conservatives are now firmly aiming for the middle ground as well. Where do the Liberal Democrats go from here? Ming seemed still to be finding his feet, transitioning from being an excellent and safe pair of hands on foreign affairs to forging a direction for a disparate party. Mr Campbell has at least the benefit of vast political experience, but that comes at a price. He was photographed with some young attractive female Liberal Democrat candidates and MPs. One wag pointed out that it failed to make him look young and did more to make him look like their grandfather. Still, age isn't a bad thing, as the newly enacted Government anti-ageing legislation makes clear.

This is positive news for the youthful Mr Cameron and his perhaps rather more mature Conservative party delegates as they took to the beach in Bournemouth. Would the new Conservative leader, who has made such an impact in just one year, make waves at his first party conference as leader? There was a healthy juice bar, a parking lot of eco-friendly cars outside the conference centre, and a highly commendable project converting an old church into a community centre, which delegates, including shadow cabinet ministers, donated hammer and saw time to complete.

However, one thing that could not be overlooked, despite being the most youthfully-minded Conservative conference for years, was the

average age of the delegates. The Conservative party have a long way to go to match the youthful optimism of their gifted new leader with their average age of membership, though engaging youthful interest in politics is probably a crisis that is affecting all the political parties.

The one conference that forsook a traditional seaside locale for the bright, edgy, urban city lights of freshly prosperous post-industrial Manchester was Labour's. The city centre may be trendy and reinvigorated, but would the ruling party find the 'renewal' that it was looking for? Messrs Brown and Blair, for long the political double act that not only dominates new Labour but the nation as well, had come to their own unique bilateral dénouement. We witnessed the by now traditional rousing leadership-in-waiting speech of Gordon Brown. It was easily good enough and wide-ranging enough (beyond his finance brief) to be that of a future Prime Minister. He knows it, we know it, but Tony Blair also knows it.

The Prime Minister rose to deliver a valedictory performance that was as accomplished at public oratory as Ming Campbell is fluent on foreign affairs or David Cameron inspired at public relations. Mr Blair seemed to leave such a positive impression on delegates that a leaked quote from an aide that 'the public must be left wanting more' seemed to turn into momentary reality. But despite the well delivered words, and his obvious trumping of Gordon Brown, for Blair's critics the bigger questions remain.

The ongoing reform of education and the NHS, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, all loom large. Potentially even more serious is the issue of party funding and the Labour loans affair with an ongoing and detailed police investigation that could damage particularly Labour but also all the main political parties.

The largest unresolved issue was the fact that this was Tony Blair's last conference oration. Next year there will be another leader, and the messy leadership spat at the end of the summer reminds us that there are no certainties in politics, no matter how gifted or experienced or young the hopefuls. John Reid, Alan Johnson, David Milliband, Gordon Brown, Ming Campbell, David Cameron, or someone else entirely could be our Prime Minister within the next few years.

Perhaps Mr Blair might take the opportunity to remind them that whilst a week - especially one as important as party conference week - can be a long time in politics - a year can also be a very short time in politics. Based on the summer just gone and the party conference season that has just passed we could be in for one of the most interesting years of recent times in British politics.

# PQ from Westminster

## Ruth Kelly Stands Firm

Secretary of State for the Department of Communities and Local Government, Ruth Kelly, has announced that the Government's response to the public consultation on Sexual Orientation Regulations, originally expected in September, will be delayed probably until next year. This means that implementation of both the sexual orientation and the previously agreed religion and belief parts of the 2006 Equality Act will now be deferred until April 2007.

The Sexual Orientation Regulations, which are being introduced at the instigation of the European Union, will create a new offence of discrimination on grounds of someone's sexual orientation in the provision of goods, services, facilities, education or public functions. Apparently there has been a huge response by the public to the original consultation document entitled *Getting Equal* and the Government reputedly has been taken aback by the wide unanimity amongst religious groups of all descriptions alarmed by the religious liberty implications of the proposals. Some politicians have suggested that the proposals may not see the light of day at all, though this is unlikely. There are even reports of a Cabinet split with Tony Blair apparently supporting Ruth Kelly against Education Secretary Alan Johnson. Gay rights groups supported by some Liberal Democrats have reacted strongly at the news of a delay.

Much of this reaction is predictable given recent trends. Ruth Kelly delays implementing anticipated gay rights legislation and, evoking memories of the fate that befell Rocco Buttiglione in the European Parliament, immediately calls are heard for her sacking because she happens to have personal religious views. Gay rights groups are reported to be furious because they claim she has heeded protests against the draft regulations generated by people with religious objections.

## Faith School Quotas

Amendments to the Education and Inspections Bill will require new faith schools to admit up to a quarter of its pupils from families of other or no faith. This issue is grounded firmly within a debate of how faith groups in Britain can coexist within society.

The Education and Inspection Bill has nearly completed its Commons and Lords stages. Lord Baker tabled an amendment to the Bill obliging new schools of a religious character to provide for at least 25% of places to pupils who do not follow the religion or religious denomination of the school, and the Government has responded with its own proposal.

The Cattle Report, published in 2001 by the Home Office following racial tensions and riots in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, called for schools in which pupils were predominantly of the same faith or race to offer at least a quarter of places to pupils of other faiths or races. Such an amendment to the Bill would therefore result in the inclusion of other faith children in a school which, for example, has children who are predominantly Christians or come from Christian families with the objective of increasing community cohesion and reducing divisions based on religion or ethnicity.

Catholic, Jewish and Muslim groups oppose the idea of including a percentage of children who do not follow the religion or denomination of their school. However, the Church of England has pledged to offer at least 25% of new school places to non-Christian families. In a letter to Education Secretary Alan Johnson, the chairman of the Church's board of education promised that its admission policies would be transparent and inclusive. The Church board urged that children from families of other faiths or of none would form a proportion of the school rather than a quota, thereby eliminating a scenario in which places were left unfilled or Christian children were excluded.

Conclusion? Religious views mustn't be counted as valid. Indeed, the very holding of them disqualifies someone from public office.

Surely this represents double standards at their worst. There has been no similar attempt to highlight the fact that Angela Mason, former executive director of gay rights group Stonewall, is currently director of the Women and Equality Unit located in the Department for Communities and Local Government which is responsible for dealing with the Sexual Orientation Regulations consultation. Should she also be sacked? Ruth Kelly has a clear democratic mandate to listen to and reflect public consultations. She is not in post to implement a gay rights agenda. Respect for human rights implies everyone should be treated with dignity and respect and not to suffer unfair discrimination. But it needs to be remembered that the task of the law is to ensure that a fair balance is struck between various rights – including sexual orientation and religion and belief – whilst simultaneously preserving diversity and crucial civil rights such as freedom of conscience, speech and association. If Ruth Kelly is taking time to get the law right rather than making a rushed response to a rushed consultation she is evidently doing her job. She should be congratulated.

Of course, one lesson to be learned from this sequence of events is that public views matter and that Christians, like other members of the public, must not remain amongst the silent majority if they wish to preserve traditional freedoms. When the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association complains publicly that Christians are protesting in too high numbers the latter realise that they must be doing something right. We recommend that believers everywhere not only continue to express their views to their MP, but write to encourage Ruth Kelly.

Some argue that faith schools themselves create segregated communities by dividing children in terms of religion, encouraging mistrust and ignorance. Furthermore, some believe that these amendments won't increase social cohesion but instead undermine dialogue between community faith groups. The idea that, for example, Christian children may be excluded from Christian schools is thought by some to be ridiculous. And the view that Christian children may be forced to go to a Muslim or Sikh school is incorrect. There will be no quotas. Nor will the 25% rule be mandatory. Local authorities will be empowered to require schools to comply but local people will be able to appeal to the Secretary of State if there is strong local opposition.

The proposal that a quarter of faith school pupils will be children of a religion other than that taught or encouraged by the school, or of no religion at all, begs the question of whether children of no faith or of other faiths have to take part in religious services or practices. An Islamic school due to open in Leicester in 2007 has reportedly called for head coverings to be a compulsory item of the school uniform for all girls, whether they are Muslims or not. This would have major implications for interfaith relations if true. It is surely inappropriate to expect children to adhere to religious practices in school which neither they nor their parents follow at home, and parents should still be able to withdraw them.

As the Church of England recognises, the inclusion of children of other faith or no faith families should lead to better understanding of these pupils' backgrounds. Indeed, such children and their families should benefit from the good moral values, sense of individual responsibility, community participation and secure learning environments that Christian schools promote.

# PQ from Westminster

## If you care, count

A huge rally to stop climate change is planned for Trafalgar Square on November 4. Richard Chilvers of Tearfund asks if you'll count?

What makes your blood boil? A refereeing decision? Traffic jams? Someone jumping ahead of you in the queue? Global injustice?

What would make you turn up to a rally in central London? Thousands supported the Make Poverty History rallies in London and Edinburgh last year. It sent a powerful signal to the government that Christians and others wanted their politicians to take action.

Tearfund is now at the heart of a new campaign to make the UK government take action on climate change. I Count is the campaign of Stop Climate Chaos – the coalition is a group of development and environmental charities which is determined to persuade the Government to tackle climate change.

I Count is staging a huge event in London's Trafalgar Square, on Saturday 4th November from 1–3pm. In the Square you'll find music, film, special guests and speakers. There will also be a service in St Martins in the Fields from 12.30 dedicating the event and the campaign to God. After the event there will be refreshments at a nearby church and an opportunity for Christians to find out more.

Climate change is already affecting the world's poorest people much more than those in the West. Global temperatures rose by 0.6°C during the 20th Century and as a direct result, those who are least able to cope are experiencing changing rainfall patterns and ever more extreme weather events such as floods and droughts. According to the World Health Organisation, 150,000 people die every year as a direct result of climate change and the vast majority of these are in the developing world.

An 82-year-old farmer in northern Ethiopia, Mr Mengesha, recently told us that 30 years ago his harvest lasted his family for more than two years, but now erratic rains mean his sons barely harvest enough to last them seven months. Planting and harvest are fine-tuned to specific times of year, so when rains arrive late and finish early, poor farmers can expect drastically reduced harvests. Pastoralists in Ethiopia and Kenya are facing calamities as a result of extended droughts and erratic rainfall. We hear similar stories from most of the communities we serve.

The UK Government has recognised the need to act both domestically and internationally to cut carbon emissions, launching a public awareness campaign to get the nation thinking about climate change, and taking a strong stance at international meetings.

Yet despite the Government's public and private efforts to get people on side, the UK's emissions reduction record does not match its rhetoric. The Government will not meet its own domestic target of reducing carbon emissions by 20 per cent by 2010, even with the new measures it is planning. After some quite strong performances in CO2 reduction up to the late 1990s, emissions levels are now on the rise again. Although proposed policies should see the UK meet its agreed Kyoto target of a 12.5 per cent greenhouse gas reduction by 2010,

there is still a danger of missing even this goal, unless current trends reverse.

In many respects the international community looks to the UK for an example to follow. The unfortunate reality now is that our Government is criticising others to justify its own poor record. The Government has declared publicly that the UK is responsible for only 2 per cent of all CO2 emissions. True as it may be, this still makes us the world's seventh-largest polluter, quite disproportionate to our population size – something that is not so readily divulged.

The Government has failed to build on the good foundations it set and complacency has crept in.

The *I Count* event precedes the next round of climate change negotiations. Tearfund has been urging Christians to lobby the Government in the lead up to the meeting of the UN's Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) in Nairobi.

The UK Government will be at the table, and Tearfund is making three key demands in the lead up to the COP.

- Firstly that the Kyoto Protocol agreement on reducing carbon emissions, which ends in 2012, will be renewed and improved.
- Secondly, Tearfund is urging the UK government to use its influence to help poor communities adapt to climate change. The Least Developed Country Fund and the Special Climate Change Fund need more finance. In addition, a Programme of Work to help countries adapt to climate change must get more funding.
- Finally, Tearfund is lobbying for adaptation to climate change to be central to all future development work.

Paul Cook, Tearfund's Head of Policy, said: "Climate change is already damaging the fight against poverty and if urgent action is not taken at the COP in Nairobi, precious advances will be lost. The UK government must take a lead in helping poor communities adapt to climate change as well as doing all we can to limit the future devastation that will be unleashed if we don't rapidly reduce our carbon emissions."

Will you count?

To find out more, visit [www.tearfund.org/4nov](http://www.tearfund.org/4nov) or [www.icount.org.uk](http://www.icount.org.uk) You can also order *For Tomorrow Too* – a free resource for Christians to help us live responsibly in a world of climate change. Contact Tearfund on 0845 355 8355 or order online at [www.tearfund.org/ftt](http://www.tearfund.org/ftt)

Richard Chilvers is senior media officer at Tearfund



**Thousands supported the Make Poverty History rallies in London and Edinburgh last year. It sent a powerful signal to the Government that Christians and others wanted their politicians to take action.**



# PQ from the Nations

## Northern Ireland Deal or No Deal?

**D** *Deal or No Deal* is a new television programme credited with revitalising the media career of Noel Edmonds. Contestants must negotiate their way through a series of choices and decide which one out of 22 boxes holds the key to their fortune. In the background a banker attempts to do a deal with contestants making them an offer they cannot refuse.

Ever since the Government set its 24 November deadline for the Assembly in Northern Ireland *Deal or No Deal* has been the political game played out in Westminster, Stormont and now St. Andrews. Up until the 12 October it looked like 'No Deal' would win the day. Now it seems the tables have turned.

Of course, the 'St Andrews Agreement' is a misnomer of sorts. The DUP and Sinn Fein have until 10 November to consult with their respective constituencies and decide if they do actually agree with the Government's new solution for Northern Ireland.

In his statement to MPs in the House of Commons earlier this week, Secretary of State Peter Hain argued that events at St Andrews represented 'the fulfilment of the hopes expressed on Good Friday eight years ago.' He went on to say that the fundamental principles of the Good Friday Agreement – including consent; commitment to peaceful and democratic means; sharing power within a stable, inclusive partnership government; equality and human rights for all; and mutually beneficial relationships

developed between north and south, east and west – 'will always remain the bedrock and foundation of the political settlement in Northern Ireland!'

This endorsement of the fundamental principles of the Good Friday Agreement is vital for the SDLP and UUP who now find themselves on the margins, but who undoubtedly deserve credit for the part they have had to play in bringing negotiations to this stage. If Ian Paisley and his party accept the Government's recommendations on 10 November they do so on the foundations of a settlement brokered by others.

While it is important that the views of the DUP and Sinn Fein are made clear to the Government by 10 November, what about the 50% of the population who voted for other parties during the last Assembly election in 2003 or the third of the population in Northern Ireland who chose not to vote at all?

Evidence of disagreement is already emerging in the old tried and tested ways. Incendiary devices have detonated in DIY stores and these attacks have been blamed on 'dissident' republicans. In the run up to Christmas this is a very real concern for retailers across Northern Ireland.

Will the St Andrews Agreement revitalise power-sharing in Northern Ireland? There are still those who need to be convinced. Deal or no deal? There is still time for it to go either way.

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## Scotland

We hope to resume articles from Scotland in next month's edition of PQ.

# PQ from the Nations & beyond

## Wales Consultation

The Rt. Hon. Lord Geoffrey Howe gave a fascinating lecture recently, weeks before his 80th birthday, in Cardiff's prestigious Temple of Peace.

Speaking on re-creating Britain's Foreign Policy, he touched upon the relationship between America and Britain which, he said, was unique but not special. In order to emphasise his point, he elaborated on the events that led up to the American invasion of the former British colony of Grenada in 1983, months after Howe had been appointed as Foreign Secretary in Thatcher's Cabinet. Despite giving assurances to the Commons that no invasion was being planned, he was told by an American diplomat hours later that an invasion would indeed be taking place. The British, said Howe, had not been consulted.

Similar accusations of a lack of consultation have been made recently in the National Assembly for Wales. It has become increasingly evident that the relationship between the Assembly's Presiding Officer and Deputy Presiding officer has been deteriorating for a long time, with a recent episode of BBC Wales's flagship political programme Dragon's Eye revealing that the two have not met face to face since April of this year. A simple communication breakdown seems to be at the heart of much of this and Dr. John Marek, the Deputy Presiding Officer, has complained openly on more than one occasion that he has not been consulted by Dafydd Elis-Thomas, the Presiding Officer, on issues before important decisions were made.

This has been a rather unsightly and yet oddly interesting spectacle in the opening weeks of the new term, with party conferences still

under way and the build-up to next May's Assembly elections not yet in full swing.

The Assembly has aspirations to be an example of transparent and open government, and this was even taken into account in the design of the new debating chamber of the Senedd, which attempts to discourage an adversarial and confrontational approach to debate in the plenary sessions. While much communication between Assembly Members from different parties upholds the high standards of the Assembly, recent ripostes between Marek and Ellis-Thomas have been a strange anomaly to this.

Stakeholders in the public and voluntary sector were similarly disappointed recently when proposals for the new Convergence Programmes for Wales were revealed. The European-funded programmes will carry on from Objective One funding, and will take place over a seven-year period. Although the initial announcements were made in late July, it was only in September that consultation events were held around the country in order to inform organisations of what the programmes entailed. With mere weeks remaining for responses to be submitted to the consultation document, many felt angry that they had been left out of the process and had not been consulted.

At a time when politicians are striving for credibility with a democratic mandate, it would make sense to take the public more seriously.

## Religious Liberty Belarus - The Story Continues

In March this year, we carried an article on the continuing struggle in Belarus for religious liberty after the flawed elections earlier that month. We also highlighted the charges faced by Sergei Tsvor, pastor of the Minsk-based Good News Church as a result of his church being refused registration. Now it seems that further problems have beset the Church in Minsk.

Belarus's current laws on religion mean that no church can rent a public auditorium without government consent, and meetings without prior written permission are only allowed at crematories, graveyards, pilgrimage sites and officially authorised church buildings. Nor can a church hold a service in its own building without obtaining prior permission from the state. It is this latter law that has proved most problematic for the New Life Church in Minsk. Known as the 'cowshed church', the New Life Church bought a barn and its surrounding property three years ago, having spent 1999-2003 holding services in car parks, woods, or anywhere they could, after being forced to leave the building they were renting due to restrictions in legislation. However, the authorities have denied the church the right to have services in its own building, refusing to authorise the building as a church building. An official who previously issued the church with official permission has been fired. While this goes on, a Belarusian Orthodox church is allowed 'to meet without disturbance in a converted railcar less than a mile away'.

On August 17 2005 the Mayor's office of Minsk decided to make a

forcible purchase of the building and land for just \$17,000, despite its actual worth being \$800,000 according to recent estimates. For this kind of money one can buy little more than a room in a one bedroom apartment with a shared kitchen in Minsk. The church has appealed to all courts, including the Supreme Economic Court and the President, but to no avail. Without a place to worship or register, all the church's activities are illegal. The genuinely illegal nature of the Government's action has simply been ignored. On September 29 the authorities transferred the money to the church bank account, while New Life Church still refuses to give up its building or to sign the act of giving over. Yet on the morning of 11 October Minsk City Executive Committee sent three vans, a bulldozer and trucks to the site, where a hunger strike has been going on since 5 October, with an estimated one hundred and fifty five people participating.

Please pray for New Life Church and its hunger strikers - more updates can be found on their website at <http://www.newlife.by/eng/index.php> Please also consider writing a letter signed by as many people as possible in support of the church, to be sent to Administration of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 38, K. Marx St., 220016, Minsk, Belarus. Please e-mail a copy of your letter to the church themselves at [mail@newlife.by](mailto:mail@newlife.by). Letters to Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are also helpful.

# Prayer, action and breaking news...

## Prayer points: Tearfund and Faith and Nation

Following on from our article on page three, Tearfund have asked us to pray for their upcoming rally and conference. Please pray for the *I Count* rally:

- That it will make a political impact at home and abroad
- That the rally will be well attended
- That as in Edinburgh, Christians will be visibly involved

Please also pray for the UN summit on climate change (COP12) in Nairobi, Kenya, on 6-17 November:

- That the Kyoto Protocol agreement on reducing carbon emissions will be renewed and improved
- For tangible commitments to help developing countries adapt to the effects of climate change
- For Tearfund staff and partners attending the conference  
For more information on these events please see <http://www.icount.org.uk/>

The Evangelical Alliance's *Faith and Nation* report will be launched on October 23. Please pray for a successful launch and also:

- For attendees to get an informed perspective on evangelical contribution and commitment to social and spiritual transformation and religious liberty
- From the larger report that we will develop smaller papers that churches can use for discussion and prayer
- For successful *Faith and Nation* events including conferences and seminars around the country for the next year
- That church leaders and policy makers will reflect upon and use the conclusion and recommendations to inform public policy and to encourage active citizenship



### British Airways Discrimination

The Evangelical Alliance has written to the Chief Executive of British Airways to highlight the unlawful discrimination against Christian employee Miss Nadia Eweida who has been suspended for declining to cover up the cross on her necklace. British Airways claim that Sikh turbans and Muslim hijabs are OK because they cannot be covered up, whereas religious symbols in the form of jewellery can. However, this is patently discriminatory. In law, a hijab or a turban is just as much a religious symbol as a cross. If Muslim and Sikh members of staff are allowed to wear religious symbols Christians must be allowed to do the same. British Airways could probably legally justify banning all its staff from wearing religious symbols. What is unlawful, however, is to impose different and therefore discriminatory rules on members of different religious groups.

### The Gay Police Association: Double Standards?

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has decided not to prosecute the Gay Police Association (GPA) over the Metropolitan Police investigation of the GPA advert which appeared in *The Independent* newspaper on 29th June 2006. So far, Christians who complained about the advert have received wholly inadequate explanations from the CPS.

Referring to the notorious case of evangelical Christian Harry Hammond, who the CPS suggest was correctly prosecuted under the Public Order Act on the evidence of a handful of people who attacked him for holding up a sign protesting about immorality, the CPS now allege that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute the GPA.

The Evangelical Alliance has again sought explanations from the CPS. In particular, they have requested a clear statement regarding the differences between the two cases which lead them to such conclusions. As for lack of evidence or proportionality, surely the fact of 40,000+ complaints from people who felt insulted and distressed is evidence enough! What more evidence does the CPS require? So far the CPS has done little to allay suspicions of many of double standards in implementation of the Public Order Act. We continue to urge that what appears to be a manifestly inconsistent and illogical decision be reconsidered so that a judge can make a full and fair assessment of whether the criminal law was broken by the actions of the GPA.

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