

SPECIAL AGENDA III

PRIVATE MEMBERS' MOTIONS

**MEMBERSHIP OF ORGANISATIONS WHICH CONTRADICT THE DUTY TO
PROMOTE RACE EQUALITY**

A background paper from Vasantha Gnanadoss

1. Introduction

This motion is seeking to initiate internal action by the Church of England that would carry a clear message to society at large. It would be a message about the Church's stance on organizations that are judged to oppose the promotion of race equality. The motion is based on policy adopted several years ago by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

2. The ACPO policy

In 2004 the Association of Chief Police Officers adopted a policy statement as follows.

'The Association of Chief Police Officers is committed to full compliance with the duty to promote race equality established in the Race Relations (Amendment Act) 2000.

It is therefore national policy, under the provisions of Regulation 6, Police Regulations 2003, Police (Conduct) Regulations 1999 (as expanded by Schedule 1 of the 2004 Regulations) and the Police Support Staff Conditions of Service, that:

"No member of the Police Service, whether police officer or police staff, may be a member of an organization whose constitution, aims, objectives or pronouncements contradict the general duty to promote race equality. This specifically includes the British National Party."

In view of the importance on public confidence of meeting the general duty, it is anticipated that non-compliance will result in dismissal."

Four years on, Chief Constable Peter Fahy, one of the chief architects of this policy within ACPO wrote that

"Police forces are under a legal obligation to promote racial equality and so felt justified in putting in place the ban. It felt controversial at the time and we had rumblings of legal action but in practice we have not had a challenge and symbolically it is very powerful."

The policy was applauded by Sir Ian Blair, speaking at a Synod fringe meeting in February 2008. He made clear that the policy "had played a part in changing the

public's perception of the police and thereby had contributed to improved recruitment figures for black and minority ethnic officers."

This Private Members' Motion is asking the House of Bishops to formulate and implement a comparable policy for the Church of England.

3. The Church's general duty to promote race equality

In Revd Simon Bessant's Private Member's Motion on Community Relationships, passed on 9 February 2004, General Synod noted the success of the British National Party in local elections in parts of Lancashire and went on to affirm that

'any political movement that seeks to divide our communities on the basis of ethnicity is an affront to the nature of God revealed in creation and Scripture and is a grave danger to harmonious community relationships; consequently voting for and/or supporting a political party that offers racist policies is incompatible with Christian discipleship'.

This makes it clear that, whilst the police's general duty to promote race equality is underpinned by an Act of Parliament, the Church's general duty to promote race equality is underpinned by theology and scripture and rests ultimately on the Gospel. In both cases, the commitment to that general duty, if genuine, will find expression in specific policies and programmes and this motion is asking the House of Bishops to formulate and implement a specific policy comparable to that of ACPO.

4. The need for resolute action

The need for resolute action to resist the tactics of organizations 'whose constitutions, aims, objectives or pronouncements contradict the general duty to promote race equality' is widely recognised, though the danger of complacency is ever present too.

Replying to a House of Lords debate on 'The Churches Role in the Civic Life of the Nation' in May 2006, the Archbishop of Canterbury said, "It is true that the Methodist Church, the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church all issued denunciations of the BNP, through various bodies and leaders, in the run-up to recent elections. It is also true that more concerted action on that is needed from the Churches. I take that very much to heart and promise that it will be picked up."

The danger of complacency was highlighted by the Archbishop of York in an advertisement he placed in his local newspaper urging voters to come out against the BNP in the May 2007 local elections. "My hope", continued Dr Sentamu, "is that as you cast your vote on Thursday you do so with your eyes wide open so that our city does not sleepwalk into a wall of hate."

His Holiness the Pope, speaking in New York in April 2008, gave a reminder of what is at stake when he spoke of his teenage years in Germany as "marred by a sinister regime", whose "influence grew, infiltrating schools and civic bodies, as well as politics and even religion, before it was fully recognised for the monster it was".

Also in April 2008, in an open letter, the Bishop of Durham wrote: "None of us can be complacent. Opposing the BNP isn't simply a matter of saying 'the status quo is working fine, so please reject the BNP'. It should be a matter of saying 'What does a healthy society look like and how can we make it clear to our whole population that we are working in the best ways towards that goal?'"

I know that a number of other bishops and dioceses have taken initiatives in relation to the BNP and other organizations, as of course have other Christian denominations, ecumenical organizations, and other faith communities.

5. Tactics employed by the BNP

Of special relevance to this motion are some of the tactics adopted by the BNP, which in recent years has sought to identify itself as Christian, and sometimes specifically with the Church of England, in order to further its agenda. Anyone doubting this has only to look at BNP websites and blogs. The BNP Deputy Leader's blog, in an item posted on 9 June 2008, begins an explicit attack on this motion by saying that 'A member of the General Synod rang me to express his disgust' (that the motion is on Synod's agenda).

Late in 2005, the Church Times reported a call from the Archdeacon of Reigate and me that the Ministry Division should 'take a stronger stance on racism in the ordained ministry' and adopt 'a strong policy line on membership of the British National Party'. The same Church Times report referred to a response by the Bishop of Chelmsford. Subsequently, the BNP newspaper for January 2006 carried an item that appears to have been based on the Church Times report. The item in the BNP newspaper was headed 'House of Bishops rejects witch-hunt against BNP clergy', and the opening sentence makes an implicit claim that there are 'members of the British National Party within the Anglican clergy'.

In March 2006 came the news, initially from Lincolnshire, of the setting-up of the so-called Christian Council of Britain. It was reported that this was an organization very closely associated with the BNP and that its leader, styled the 'Revd' Robert West, had defected to the BNP from another party.

Members of Synod will no doubt be aware of examples of such BNP tactics at a local level. One example given to me was from the Queensbury Ward of Bradford, where a BNP leaflet described one of its Councillors as a committee member of the Friends of Holy Trinity Church, who 'is delighted to have been accepted on the Friends committee', and who 'spends most of her spare time raising money to repair the church to prevent it falling down'.

Although the Churches have issued statements disassociating themselves from the BNP and the Christian Council of Britain, more definite action is needed to remove the perception of a link. For example, it was reported in April 2008 that some Muslims in Kingston Deanery (Diocese of Southwark) perceived the BNP as a Christian party, leading to negative feelings towards churches in general.

In November 2008 the urgency of further action was highlighted by the leaking of names of BNP members. In a list that may be accessed on the internet, five names

appear with the title 'Rev' or 'Revd', and these have been called 'vicars' in some press reports. Although in fact only one of these persons may be found in Crockford's (and is not a serving minister), I believe there is a risk that an impression of BNP links with the Church of England could result.

6. The benefits from passing this motion

There are particular benefits from the Church taking resolute action akin to that of ACPO. If General Synod passes this motion and the House of Bishops takes the action requested:

- it will make it much more difficult for the BNP or similar organizations to exploit the claim that there are Anglican clergy or church representatives who support them;
- it will be clear to all that the Church has set its own house in order in the spirit of Synod's 2004 resolution on Community Relationships;
- local church initiatives to oppose the BNP will be strengthened by this symbolically powerful decision.

7. A comparable policy

This motion requests the House of Bishops to formulate and implement for the Church of England a policy comparable to that of ACPO. It is recognised that there are significant differences between the Church and the police, for example in disciplinary procedures, and that is why the motion speaks of a comparable rather than an identical policy. The differences do not detract from the need for resolute action by the Church.