

Introductory Statement by the Bishop of Leicester

Tuesday, 17 February 2015

Each day when Parliament is sitting, the Duty Bishop in the House of Lords prays that the House should “*Lay aside all private interests, prejudices and partial affections*”, so that it may serve “*the public wealth, peace and tranquillity of the Realm, and the uniting and knitting together of the hearts of all persons and estates within the same.*” This prayer points Parliament towards a search for the Common Good and towards political virtues which reach beyond narrow Party interest, tribalism and short term advantage. It is a call to resist the reduction of politics to seeking self interest as the only clear moral imperative.

This letter seeks to work out the implications of that for the conditions of our day. It recognises the strength and depth of the alienation and disillusion with politics and the absence of attractive visions of the kind of society and culture towards which the Parties might be working. We encourage the kind of political vision which affirms the bonds which tie us together. We note that the grander visions of 1945 and of 1979 can no longer deliver a sustainable society in which all can flourish. A new vision is required in which neither the State nor the market can accumulate the kind of unfettered power which divide people from one another and defeat hope and purpose. In particular we seek to resist politics as an extension of consumerism in which Parties tailor their policies to attract tightly defined electoral groups, appealing to sectional interests in pursuit of a narrow slice of swing votes.

In this letter we seek to work out these political principles in terms of some major policy areas. We point to the almost intractable inequalities which continue to widen and which undermine our sense of nationhood and of common citizenship with a common purpose. On immigration we resist the growing appetite to exploit grievances and find scapegoats while understanding the need for a debate which is realistic about the significant changes which have occurred in the last two decades. Moreover we extend these principles to a discussion of Britain’s place in the world, calling for a more open, realistic and informed debate about the realignments of global power and their implications for our country.

We recognise that in many parts of the world cruel and distorted religious visions can exacerbate rather than resolve conflict. We dare to believe, however, that the Church of England in all regions of our country operates as glue supporting and enabling the invisible but essential connections which create identity in our regions, cities, towns and villages. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the highly diverse urban communities such as my own city of Leicester.

In that city, in one month’s time, we shall lay to rest the mortal remains of King Richard III in our Cathedral. He died in battle towards the end of a long English Civil War in which conflicts and differences were violently resolved. For five centuries we have been learning the painful lessons required of effective democratic government. We do not claim to offer a “God’s eye view” nor to endorse any particular political prospectus, but rather to encourage a renewed political culture in which the lessons for today can be learned. It is our hope that this letter will serve that purpose.