



CNI

CNI PRESS WATCH -

Why we ultimately need more religion in Northern Ireland politics, not less

The Churches would be abdicating their fundamental responsibility if they didn't give their adherents a moral lead at election time, writes Martin O'Brien, in the Belfast Telegraph.

Elections and polls are a big deal. They are important and they have consequences. Sometimes those consequences are greater than at other times and they are not always foreseen.

Ask Arlene Foster, who won all before her in the Assembly election a year ago - only to throw it all away by a mammoth miscalculation eight months later.

Ask David Cameron, who gambled everything on calling a referendum on membership of the European Union, only to plunge these islands into probably our greatest crisis since the Second World War.

Depending on your point of view, this latest election is a direct result of Cameron's reckless folly or commendable courage.

So, in four weeks' time and for the fifth time in two years, we have the opportunity - many would say the privilege given the number of dictatorships in the world - to participate in the democratic process and freely cast our vote in a poll that will affect our lives for good or ill in ways that cannot be foreseen.

General Elections in the UK are normally held in early summer; nine of the 12 that have been held since 1970 have been in May or June, and those are the two months that traditionally see the meetings of the national decision-making bodies of our main Reformed Churches.

Indeed, the Church of Ireland General Synod was held in Limerick last week - the first time the Synod has taken place there - and it debated a motion its supporters believed highlights the need for greater pastoral support and public

affirmation of "legally recognised" same-sex relationships.

This obviously encompasses married gay members of the Church in the Republic and those in civil partnerships here in Northern Ireland where the DUP, controversially deploying the Petition of Concern, has averted a change in the definition of marriage that has, let us not forget, been upheld by Jews, Christians and Muslims for millennia.

Whether this is a necessary or desirable use of the PoC is quite another matter. Would a genuinely free vote, without whipping, as advocated by the UUP to their credit, be a more sensible way to approach such issues where personal conscience is so critical?

The question of same sex marriage, salient here because we are now the only jurisdiction in these islands where it is not available - though it is legal in only around 20 of the world's 196 countries - is just one of a host of issues that has exercised the Churches in their representations to government both here and in Westminster in recent years.

Another such issue, even more controversial and more important, is abortion.

When clergy intervene on such moral issues here and in other countries such as the US, some are almost driven to apoplexy and find it so unpalatable that they scream that the Church should "keep out of politics".

One recalls the intervention of Bishop Noel Treanor of Down and Connor during the European election and local election campaign, when he reaffirmed Catholic teaching on abortion and marriage, and a subsequent BBC Spotlight debate.

Reviewing the debate, the late and much missed Liam Clarke wrote in this newspaper that Diane Dodds (DUP) and Jim Allister (TUV) "were all for the Bishop's right to intervene - which Martina Anderson of Sinn Fein and the SDLP's Alex Attwood, both of whom back gay marriage, were sniffy about at best.

"Anna Lo of Alliance - was the only one to take on the Bishop in a full-frontal attack, calling his words 'church dictation'."

Rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's, (Mk. 12:17) in other words striking the right relationship between Church and State and wider society, between the sacred and the secular, has been probably the greatest joint

challenge for religious, political and civic leaders alike in the 2,000 years since Jesus gave that immortal answer to the Pharisees and Herodians who were trying to trap Him.

While there may be honest disagreement around where that balance is struck, there can surely be no one who can seriously suggest that Church figures haven't just the right but the duty to tender moral guidance to their adherents at election time, when citizens choose their actual lawmakers.

Indeed, it would be pusillanimous, some would say sinful, for Churches to shirk their duty and fail to address the big issues of the day through the prism of Christ. The Churches' record in this area is mixed, with the Roman Catholic Church both here and in Great Britain, taking their lead ultimately from the Pope, and the Church of England, to the fore in the run-up to elections.

Ahead of the most recent Assembly election there was a comprehensive 7,000 word "pastoral reflection" by the Catholic bishops in Northern Ireland which posed 10 questions for candidates and asserted: "Voting for those who govern our society is a moral act. Each vote cast, or not cast, potentially influences the values that will shape future law and policy."

At the heart of that document was an affirmation of Catholic Social Teaching which speaks to the dignity of every human person and underlines the commitment to serving the Common Good which before the 2001 General Election Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor described as not "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" but "the sum of all those social conditions which allow the human dignity of all to be respected, and their basic needs to be met, while giving men and women the freedom to assume responsibility for their own lives".

Another important contribution came from the Christian Public Policy charity CARE which created a website "engage17" which tasked itself with "equipping Christians for the NI Assembly Elections" and produced excellent guidance and information, particularly for young people voting for the first time.

The suddenness of the General Election has taken everyone on the hop and that includes the main Churches in Britain, who normally start planning their election guidance many months, if not longer, in advance.

In 2015, the Church of England bishops published a powerful 52-page 20,000-word pastoral letter two and a half months before the

election, calling on the political parties to discern "a fresh moral vision of the kind of country we want to be".

Also invoking 'The Common Good' they said: "The privileges of living in a democracy mean that we should use our votes thoughtfully, prayerfully and with the good of others in mind, not just our own interests."

One wonders what the bishops will be able to come up with on this occasion to give voters pause for thought.

If it pricks the conscience, as previous contributions have done, the hope must be that they will get a good and fair hearing amid all the customary clamour of elections.

- **Martin O'Brien is a journalist and communications consultant and a former award-winning BBC producer**

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