



Labour and the Common Good

John Battle

Former Labour MP John Battle is the final Party representative to offer *Thinking Faith* readers an opportunity to see how his Party's policies reflect the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. As UK voters prepare to cast their ballots in the General Election, he argues that Labour's commitment to alleviating child and family poverty and to redistributing income in favour of the poorest, best represents the preferential option for the poor.

In his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI urges confidence in the future:

The complexity and gravity of the present economic situation rightly cause us concern but we must adopt a realistic attitude as we take up with confidence and hope the new responsibilities to which we are called by the prospect of a world in need of profound cultural renewal, a world that needs to rediscover fundamental values on which to build a better future. The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build a positive experience and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes *an opportunity for discernment in which to shape a new vision for the future.*
(*Caritas in Veritate*, 21, original emphasis)

This citation forms the final statement of the election statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Choosing the Common Good*. Perhaps it should have been put around the country on poster hoarding sites. Focusing on 'Britain Today', the bishops suggest that 'the period before a General Election is a time to reflect on what sort of society we live in and how we would like it to be. It gives us the opportunity to renew our energies and to work for a better future'.

Pope Benedict, in his 'social justice' encyclical, was not simply presenting answers to the banking crisis or



the credit crunch, nor endorsing or condemning any fiscal stimulus (such as the VAT reduction to keep trading going), but rather completely shifted the terms of the reflection onto a theological plane – so the bishops in their statement have attempted to change the terms of the debate. It is not therefore a check list against which individual party manifestos should or could be measured; rather it is an insistence on the Church's fullest traditions of

getting back to theological, basic principles. Just as the Pope surprised many by his insistence on discussing 'Charity as Truth', so too the bishops have introduced a new emphasis on virtue in public and private life, turning us back to explore the old values of prudence, courage, justice and temperance in a contemporary political, economic and social context. Such an emphasis could not be more timely. The great cultural critic, Raymond Williams, writing in *Towards 2000*, commented that 'the settled pessimism of so much of the culture of the late twentieth century is in effect an absolute loss of the future; of any significant belief that it can be both different and better. The projection of dates is now more often an anxious calculation of the possibilities of mere survival.' Sadly, not least under the scrutiny of the twenty-four-hour, twenty first century media, that 'settled pessimism' seems to have shifted to sheer cynicism with hopelessness and fear the common keys of commentary.

Yet the inner city constituency of Leeds West, which I represented as a Labour MP for over twenty years, although it is still struggling to pull out of the last deep recession of the 1980s, is not overwhelmed by pessimistic cynicism. Rather the opposite. Leeds West is a 'pizza slice' wedge reaching out from the city centre, through back-to-back terraces and tower blocks, out through council estates and some sub-urban semis until you reach the inner ring road. The four council wards that make up Leeds West include some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Leeds. Unemployment is higher than the Leeds average, but average wages in Leeds West (£13,500) are just over half the Leeds and national average. When I was first elected in 1987 we were a 'low wage economy', often with women working for less than £1 an hour. Underpaid, home-based 'piece' work was common. Leeds West is home to a huge remand prison, HMP Armley, and the refugee and asylum reception centre for the whole of West Yorkshire. It is blessed by churches and chapels of every Christian tradition, by mosques, temples and Gurdwaras. Twenty six languages are spoken within a mile of my home. Worryingly, schizophrenia rates are eighteen times the national average in the terraced streets around the prison and fewer youngsters in Leeds West go on to further and higher education than from any other constituency in Britain. Its local economy is dominated by light industry and the 'service sector', public and private, caricatured by one tabloid as 'white van man land plus the Asians'. Working for low wages was a primary cause of poverty when I was first elected.

Since 1997, however, to help to improve youngsters' educational reach and stabilise families living in our neighbourhoods, every single primary school has been either rebuilt or refurbished. Two new high schools opened their doors last September, one of them an academy for the performing arts. We have two new district Health Centres offering patient treatment in the community and a brand new sports centre opening this summer. Sure Start (to be abolished in Conservative plans) has made a tremendous local impact, as have family-friendly working hours and better childcare provision locally. Thousands of families, children and pensioners have been lifted out of poverty with increases in child benefit, with child tax credits, working and pension tax credits and most significantly the introduction of the national minimum wage, which has done much to tackle poverty

amongst those working. I recall introducing a national statutory minimum wage bill into Parliament back in 1988, which was to be voted out at the time by Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs on the grounds that it would interfere with the labour market and would result in lost jobs. It is now accepted, and has not led to job losses: 29 million people are in work today – that is two million more men and women providing for their families than in 1997.

Too often, equality and reducing poverty are conflated. It is true that Labour has not done enough to reduce the wealth and income gap between the top of the scale and the bottom – but is it also true that over 3 million in our society have been lifted out of poverty as a result of Government action. A next step – pledged in Labour's current manifesto – is to legislate to cap excessive interest charged on ordinary poorer families (without bank accounts) by doorstep lenders.

Tackling poverty in practice remains a Labour priority. Tax cuts for the 3000 wealthiest estates proposed by the Conservatives, and even the tax changes proposed by the Liberal Democrats would not help the poorest. Indeed, abolishing child tax credits and means testing child benefit will hit the poorest and lower incomes hardest. Claims to make taxation fairer have to be integrated with a necessarily complex and individually sensitive benefit system to ensure the unemployed, the sick and those with disabilities – the poorest – are not penalised the most. Too often the interaction between tax and benefits is ignored. In reality, Labour has redistributed income in favour of the poorest. Current Conservative proposals would do the opposite, and Liberal Democrat tax changes would also move resources away from the poorest, especially those working who currently don't pay tax. Alleviation of child and family poverty is and has been a practical Labour priority. Without careful scrutiny of how tax and benefit changes will impact on the poorest groups in society it is hard to see how closely any party's proposals can conform to the imperative in the bishops' document: 'If anyone is left out and deprived of what is essential, then the common good has been betrayed.' In other words, the Common Good and the preferential option for the poor so central to Catholic Social Teaching have to be translated into detailed tax and benefit budgets – and as the Institute of Fiscal Studies spells out, it is Labour that is the most redistributive to the poorest.

It found that the richest 10% of the population have seen their incomes in reality taxed back by 9% to pay for an increase in the incomes of the poorest by 10%. This by no means redistributes wealth and income as much as some of us would want but it is certainly tilting the system in favour of the poorest.

The bishops in their document stress the need to tackle climate change, and internationally Britain has taken the lead (in the face of increasing scepticism) in promoting agreements to tackle carbon emissions. Programmes are already in place to promote a green economy, including renewable energies and new green jobs. Similarly, Britain now has a record second to none in the world for its international development work through the specially set up Government Department of International Development, which works with national and local Church charities.

Of course this election takes place against the backdrop of the collapse of the banks, the credit crunch, the trebling of oil prices internationally, the increasing speed of technological development, the challenges of climate change and the rise of Asian countries on the world stage – particularly India and China. Nobody can be in any doubt that we are moving into a qualitatively different world. In the words of the poet, Paul Valery, ‘the future is not what it used to be’. A rush to reduce the debts built up in the tackling of international banking crises by swiftly cutting public services could tip our economy back into recession and deep structural unemployment. What’s more, claiming that the economy is ‘not the state’ totally neglects the contribution that the public sector actually makes to the wider economy, including supporting private sector business and jobs through public purchasing. For a decade, Labour has combined investment and reform, and improved public services including health, education and policing. The challenge now as Labour sets out is ‘to achieve even

higher standards in a period of constrained resources’. The focus needs to be on the future and on positively prising open future work and employment opportunities for our young people. It also should include, as Labour proposes (despite the resistance of Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition councils), getting on with building council houses now to take the pressure off families desperate for a home of their own but unable to buy.

But there is one other area of neglected Catholic Social Teaching that seems burnt out in Europe, but is of increasing significance in the rest of the world and is mentioned by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical: the need to support trade unions and the rights of people at work. I hope that renewing politics in the future will mean renewing and strengthening local government (unmentioned in the coverage of this election period, despite local council elections being held on the same day as the General Election) and also rediscovering what international ‘solidarity’ really means in practice in our globalised world of rapid change.

The final sentence of Pope Benedict’s *Caritas in Veritate*, paragraph 21, omitted in the citation of the English bishops, should perhaps be restated: ‘In this spirit of confidence rather than resignation it is appropriate to address the difficulties of the present time.’

John Battle was the Labour Member of Parliament for Leeds West from 1987-2010.

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the British Province of the Society of Jesus.