



How do we do a politics for the common good?

Revd Dr Sam Wells

David Cameron today returned to Downing Street as the leader of a Conservative majority government. Revd Dr Sam Wells argues that it is not the responsibility of our new government – or of any politicians – to weave the common good into the fabric of society: ‘Doing a politics of the common good means starting at the bottom’.

In February the House of Bishops of the Church of England issued a pastoral letter on the 2015 General Election called *Who is my Neighbour?* They were concerned that many in society are isolated and that many have become cynical and apathetic towards politics in general. They were aware that churches are among the most influential intermediate institutions in civil society that can awaken and mobilise people in a spirit of mutual benefit and shared wisdom. They identified a number of areas where public discourse seems to fall short of the politics to which they aspire. To restore a true politics they sought to reverse the accumulation of power in too-few hands, to disperse decision-making to include those most affected by decisions, and to affirm distinctive and local communities. They sought to reassert the language of the common good that regards people as more than self-interested consumers and recognises the vulnerable and weak as persons of sacred worth. And they sought a more mature estimation of Britain’s place in the world and its corresponding possibilities and obligations.

Behind the bishops’ letter, it seems to me, lie two convictions that might encourage a spirit of humility toward the events of this election. The first is that the great events and transformations of our era are largely beyond politicians’ control. The dynamics of climate change, the ferment of religion and war and terrorism



and social tension that leads to great waves of migration, the 2008 crash and its ramifications, the effects of globalisation: these are bucking broncos that politicians try to ride and direct but continue to surprise and outwit us all. They’re not things a prudent and imaginative budget or autumn statement can deal with. The second is that the things the bishops are mostly concerned about aren’t centred on Westminster politics.

They’re about the wider social fabric, about local initiative and character, about enriching the fruitfulness of communities and valuing the stranger and the weak. Politicians can foster a culture where such things can thrive, but what Westminster can’t do is create such things when they’ve been eroded, or flourish when the political soil such things provide doesn’t exist. Of course we’re all invested in the wellbeing of the economy and jobs and growth and inflation, and of course we’re all concerned about the process of government and the rule of law and good legislation. But the bishops point us to see that if we don’t replenish our institutions and put energy and initiative into the associations and collaborations that make up civil society, government will have no soil to grow in and regardless of economic recovery we shall be living impoverished lives.

So, yes let’s work towards a decent wage for all, but let’s all ensure we each do something each week which benefits others that we don’t expect to be paid

for. Yes, let's protect public services, but let's make sure we each know our neighbours and their children and don't assume it's just the school and the social workers' job to make sure the family next door are ok. Yes, let's ask our politicians to work towards a sustainable immigration policy but let's also work with our faith community or community centre or sports club to create a space of hospitality for those trying to make a new life in a sometimes hostile climate.

How do we do a politics for the common good? We can't expect politicians to make a better world or make us better people. Doing a politics of the common good means starting at the bottom, building coalitions, alliances and associations across communities of interest and identity, awakening and mobilising energy around common concerns and issues, and bringing in national politics when our local initiatives invite and require it. That's what the Jubilee 2000 campaign did, and that's how it became

the envy of every political party. Politics begins when you realise if you want power, you have to work together and find common goals. Politics comes alive when you feel within you and see around you the empowerment that comes from a valley of dry bones starting to sing and dance with the energy of making a difference and bringing about change. The common good doesn't mean handing the new government on a platter a raft of policies that are sure to work. It means a nation in which every single person knows the joy of turning powerlessness to empowerment, and where every citizen discovers the energy that comes from bringing about a good greater than just their own.

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