



May Day: Time for amendment of life

Joe Egerton

Joe Egerton draws on Christian political theology to analyse the post-referendum crisis in political authority in the United Kingdom. What needs to be changed for Parliament to function with the consent of the people and facilitate the agenda that the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, has set out?

There is an Absolution often used in Canterbury Cathedral: 'The almighty and merciful Lord grant us pardon and forgiveness of all our sins, time for amendment of life, and the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit.' The abrupt ending of the Conservative leadership contest and appointment of Theresa May to the office of Prime Minister will, one hopes, produce an at least temporary cessation of the civil hostilities that are tearing our country apart. This nation is being given time for amendment of life.

Anybody who disputes the need for this should read *The Telegraph* of Tuesday 12 July. The discontented are already crafting a betrayal myth – Andrea Leadsom is being portrayed as the victim of malign forces, bullied and harassed out of the contest. Opposite the editorial – which demands that the leaders of the Leave campaign 'must see a good share of the great offices of state' – the Conservative Party's Lord Tebbit declares that Theresa May will 'drive Brexiteers into the arms of Ukip'. He concludes his article with a passage insinuating that had Theresa May been Prime Minister in 1940, she would have surrendered to Hitler.

Few things are more lethal to a state than this level of division. One of the insights developed by Christian theology as it has responded to the horrors that uncontrolled escalation of political conflict have caused, is that the institutions of the state are necessary to fallen humanity because otherwise our pursuit of our private ambitions would lead – as Hobbes so



graphically put it – to 'a war of every man against every man'. Crucial to the legitimacy and efficacy of these institutions, however, is that they operate with an authority derived from the will of the people.

Legitimacy and authority

The relationship with the secular state has been an issue throughout the history of Christianity, which emerged in the shadow of the Roman

Empire. The synoptic gospels all record how Jesus dealt with the question of whether it is lawful to pay taxes – he asked for a coin and asked whose head was on the coin. When the answer came back, 'Caesar's' – it would have been the head of the emperor, Tiberius Caesar – he said, 'pay Caesar what is Caesar's'.¹ But Jesus then adds, 'Pay God what is God's'. Jesus left ample room to argue over the extent of this secular authority; but quite clearly secular governments are to be treated as legitimate institutions and are undoubtedly entitled to, for example, collect taxes. Jesus's answer to Pilate in John – 'My kingdom is not of this world...As it is, my kingdom is not from here'² is entirely consistent with this division between divine and secular authority.

In the next stage of the drama before Pilate, John records Pilate as asserting his judicial authority ('Don't you know that I have power to release you, **and** I have power to crucify you?') which elicits the response: 'You would have no power against me, unless it were given you from above.'³

Who has given Pilate power? St Paul in his Epistle to the [Romans](#) – written well before [John's Gospel](#) – gives the oldest Christian prescription for the way we should conduct ourselves with respect to the secular state:

Let everyone submit to the supreme authorities. For there is no authority except [that which comes] from God; and those which exist, are appointed by God... For the authority is God's servant for you, to bring about the good... It is necessary therefore to submit, not only because of the wrath of God, but also for the sake of conscience.⁴

There then follows a passage that must draw on the tradition recorded in the later synoptic gospels:

For this reason [you should] pay taxes; for they are God's ministers who are engaged on this very task. Repay your debts to everybody, tax to the taxman, and excise duty to the excise-man, reverence to those to whom reverence is due, honour to those to whom honour is due.⁵

We need to consider with some care the actual word used by St Paul that is translated as authority: ἐξουσία. ἐξουσία – which is also what John attributed to Pilate – is the word used when, early in his [gospel](#), Mark describes Jesus going into Capernaum and teaching on the Sabbath in the synagogue:

And they were amazed at his teaching. For he was teaching them as if he had authority [ἐξουσία], not like the scribes.⁶

There is a distinction in Romans and in John between authority and naked power – the one Churchill drew when he described Hitler as a gangster who had seized control of Germany: Hitler did not have ἐξουσία.

This important distinction runs through later Christian tradition. The emperors were given their offices by the Senate and the people of Rome. There was of course an element of coercion, but nonetheless there was a recognition that consent is necessary for legitimacy.

The idea of law being created by consent of both notables and the ordinary people is set out by St Isidore, the last of the Western Fathers, and reaffirmed by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*.⁷ This emphasis on consent was developed by the

Dominican and Jesuit theologians who wrestled with these issues in the 16th century when the answer one gave to the question, 'by what authority does a ruler govern?', had consequences.

[Robert Parsons and the concept of Parliamentary sovereignty](#)

The Parliaments that meet in Westminster and Edinburgh have a long history⁸ with the English Parliament gaining and losing power, a phenomenon that partly reflected the power of the monarch. The power of Parliament was eroded – although not quite eliminated – during the Tudor period; Henry VII's first parliament was known as 'The Obedient Parliament'. But only Parliament could pass laws and the memory of a more powerful Parliament remained – even Wolsey had been unable to persuade the Commons to repeal the Act of Richard III establishing the principle of bail, and Elizabeth I was only able to secure the passage of the Act of Supremacy through the Lords by arresting bishops.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the English Jesuit [Robert Parsons](#) drew on this tradition, first by reaffirming (in a work written with others, *The Conference on the Next Succession*) the right of the people of England to change their government and then, in *The Memorial*, the central role of Parliament itself as the fount of all laws and settled orders. These books became canonical texts for those who challenged divine right, absolutist theories. The greatest defender of divine right was Sir Robert Filmer who fulminated against the Puritans and the Jesuits – he meant, of course, Robert Parsons – for their insistence on the rights of Parliament. Yet Parsons was vindicated in the 19th and 20th centuries as civil liberties and social reforms were implemented by increasingly representative Parliaments.

[The restoration of Parliament](#)

The referendum has demonstrated a deeply divided state – the two kingdoms, the principality and province that make up the United Kingdom are in deep dispute over membership of the European Union. London is divided from much of the rest of England. And very deep social and economic divisions have become highly visible. If we do not find a way to reconciliation then in a few years' time there may be no United Kingdom, and hatreds threaten terrible things in the rump English state.

The recent disarray on both sides of the house indicates that Parliament has clearly failed to discharge its primary function: to represent the nation as a whole, so that everybody can have confidence that their government is at least listening to their concerns.

There is no effective opposition because the parliamentary Labour Party does not accept the legitimacy of the man elected by the national members of the party. The same could have happened with the Conservatives, with the result that the whole structure of government, dependent as it is on a Parliamentary majority, collapsed. It is still possible that a factious minority will make Theresa May's position impossible.

Mr Aaron Banks of UKIP claims to have details of some 40,000 Conservative members⁹: that is a large percentage of a depleted membership. There is a real possibility that the selection of Conservative candidates could be unduly influenced by UKIP, and that of Labour candidates by Momentum.

The candidate selection process is, in any event, unsatisfactory. Party members are too few to represent even the generality of party supporters in most constituencies. Voters understandably feel excluded, which means that Parliament is not operating with the consent of the people, the voting public.

An obvious and urgent reform – one that meets the objective of obtaining a House of Commons whose members have the consent of the people they represent – is to replace Schedule 2 of the Registration of Political Parties Act (which gives the registered party leader or nominating officer the power to appoint the party's candidates) with legislation that provides for proper open primaries to select party candidates. This would mean state funding but a pound or two a head seems a small price to pay.

A second reform is to complete the process of giving the Commons control of its agenda, one of the key reforms proposed by Robert Parsons in the *Memorial*. In 2010, thanks to [Dr Tony Wright's](#) work in the previous Parliament and Sir George (now Lord) Young's determination to see reform through, the Commons set up a Backbench Business Committee that allocates some of the house's time – what is now needed is a fully fledged business committee to ensure that the Commons can allocate time to give effective scrutiny to contentious issues.

Giving Theresa May a chance

We face major challenges – a politically and socially divided country, a massive trade deficit, a large budget deficit making us dependent on 'the kindness of others', too few opportunities for too many of our young people, a health service that is struggling to deliver. We have a massive and terrible migrant crisis – we may have drownings in the English Channel to add to the shameful Mediterranean death toll. We have Mr Putin threatening Eastern Europe and the Baltics and helping Assad bomb hospitals in Syria. We have Chinese, Japanese and American armed forces turning fire control radar on each other's planes and ships.

The referendum campaign has done huge damage to the reputation of politicians for truthfulness. However, Theresa May quite clearly commands the support of more MPs than any other possible Prime Minister and in that office she is entitled to the respect which St Paul says is due to her.

Christians may in particular think that Theresa May's family background – she is the daughter of a vicar – will have given her a true understanding of what it is to serve. Church of England incumbents make a huge contribution to the wellbeing of everyone who lives in their parishes – not just those who attend church or profess the Christian faith. This is the real work of Christ and it is this that Theresa May grew up witnessing day after day.

Theresa May has also set out her vision of reform, the success of which depends on the workings of an authoritative Parliament that truly represents and serves the people. It is not entirely original – she is repeating the substance of what one of the greatest Party Chairmen said to a Conservative conference as the party and government set out to find a new agenda after de Gaulle vetoed Britain's application to join the European Community. Theresa May echoes Iain Macleod when she says:

In Britain today, if you're born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others. If you're black, you're treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you're white. If you're a white, working-class boy, you're less likely than anybody else to go to university. If you're at a state school, you're less likely to reach the top professions than if you're educated privately. If you're a woman, you still earn less

than a man. If you suffer from mental health problems, there's too often not enough help to hand. If you're young, you'll find it harder than ever before to own your own home. These are all burning injustices, and... I am determined to fight against them.¹⁰

There are of course many things that Theresa May has said and done with which Christians can disagree. But no Christian can disagree with this agenda. We know that Theresa May will not succeed on her own. We should pray that she is given the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit and implore the saints to come to her aid so that she might facilitate amendment of life in these islands.

Joe Egerton was Conservative candidate for Leigh in 1992 and worked for successful Conservative candidates in 2010.

¹ These are the words in Matthew 22; Mark 12 is 'What belongs to Caesar pay to Caesar'; Luke 20 has 'Pay back Caesar's property what is Caesar's'. (I am using Nicholas King's translation, which follows the original Greek closely: this is available from Kevin Mayhew publishers both in separate volumes for the New and Old Testaments or as a single volume.)

² John 18

³ John 19

⁴ Romans 13:1-5

⁵ Romans 13:6-7. The historical context matters. Romans is generally dated to around 58AD, the early reign of Nero. Nero had just permitted the Jews (including the Christians) to return to Rome: they had been thrown out by Claudius (reigned 41 to 54AD)⁵. So Paul was writing some years before Nero started to persecute the Christians – leading to a rather different view of Rome in the book of Revelation.

⁶ Mark 1:22

⁷ ST I^a-II^ae q. 90 a. 3 s. c.; I^a-II^ae q. 95 a. 4 co. Some English translations obscure what is clear in the Latin – what Aquinas attributes to Isidore is the proposition that law should be something to which the body of the people have given their consent.

⁸ Although the present Scottish Parliament was established by the Scotland Act 1998, it has always claimed to be a revival of the Scottish Parliament that met until the Act of Union of 1707. Its revival was resisted by among others the present author in the 1970s when the Scotland and Wales Bill was abandoned after the Callaghan government failed to secure a timetable motion (guillotine) and the Scotland Act 1977 was repealed in 1979 after the YES campaign despite achieving a narrow victory over the No campaign failed to obtain the support of 40% of the electorate. However, no responsible unionist now suggests the abolition of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh or questions its legitimacy.

⁹ *The Andrew Marr Show*, 10 July 2016.

¹⁰ Theresa May, leadership bid launch speech, 30 June 2016: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-mays-tory-leadership-launch-statement-full-text-a7111026.html>