

**Who is my neighbour?
A Letter from the House of Bishops to the People and Parishes
of the Church of England for the General Election 2015**

How should Christian men and women approach the General Election to be held on 7 May 2015? The Bishops have written a letter addressed to all members of the church - not a shopping list of policies but a call for the new direction that they believe our political life ought to take. The full letter is 56 pages of large font, so expensive in paper and ink to print, but well worth reading by those with access to the internet who can find it at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2170230/whoismyneighbour-pages.pdf> (or put "Bishops pastoral letter who is my neighbour" into a search engine). What follows is a summary of its contents which can be more easily printed and read by those without internet access. The section headings are taken from the letter and the numbers in brackets list the paragraph numbers. Some comments are picked out in the original letter and these are underlined below.

Who is my neighbour? (1-5)

- All political parties today struggle to communicate a convincing vision and people feel detached from politics. There is a growing appetite in our national life to exploit grievances, find scapegoats and create barriers between people and nations.
- Anglicans do not have a single view on which political party has the best mix of answers to today's problems but as bishops we support policies which respect the natural environment, enhance human dignity and honour the image of God in our neighbour.
- A fresh moral vision is needed: how can we build the kind of society which many people say they want but which is not yet being expressed in the vision of any of the parties?
- Pursuing the common good is a Christian obligation so we should use our votes thoughtfully, prayerfully, and with the good of others in mind, not just our own interests.

Christian faith and political activity (6-9)

- Religious belief of its nature addresses the whole of life, private and public. It is not possible to separate the way a person perceives his or her place in the created order from their beliefs about how the world's affairs ought to be arranged.
- On the global scene religion has a growing public profile and cannot be ignored as a political force. Some of this resurgent religion has been harmful but the challenge to politicians is to understand how faith can shape communities, nations and individuals for the good.

A Christian world-view (10-21)

- Every human being is created in the image of God so we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. We pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven".
- We take sin seriously: it is impossible for us to be starry-eyed about the potential of politics to perfect the social order or adequately reflect the Kingdom of God. We should neither hold politicians to a higher set of moral standards than we expect from ourselves, nor allow them off the hook by treating political life as if it were outside the demands of morality.
- The prophets speak out against traders who seek only profit and upset the rhythms of community life by their greed (Amos 8). Jesus is harsh towards leaders (including religious leaders) who seek power and privilege and neglect justice and mercy for others (Matthew 23). The Biblical tradition is not only "biased to the poor" but warns constantly against too much power falling into too few hands.
- The state of the world today reflects the fact that we live "between the times" – in a world where the Holy Spirit is alive and active, yet a world still characterised by the

persistence of sin. Because grace and sin are in tension in everyone, claims to have grasped ultimate truth for all time are bound to be wrong.

- We do not set ourselves up as possessing superior knowledge about the state of our world or the detailed policies that would make it a better place. But, the church has an obligation to engage constructively with the political process, and Christians share responsibility with all citizens to participate in the democratic structures of our nation.

Apathy, cynicism and politics today (22-32)

- Turnout at General Elections since the Second World War has fallen to below two-thirds of the population, in local elections far further; numerous polls show that most people think it will make no difference whichever party is in power.
- It is vital to find better ways of talking about the major questions which contemporary politics seems determined to avoid: we need a richer justification for the state, a better account of the purposes of government, and a more serious way of talking about taxation; and no one in politics today has a convincing story about a healthy balance between national government and global economic power.
- Most of all, we need an honest account of how we must live in the future if generations yet to come are not to inherit a denuded and exhausted planet.
- Our electoral system often means that the outcomes turn on a very small group of people within the overall electorate so parties generate policies targeted at specific demographic groupings, fashioned by expediency rather than vision or even consistency, thus treating politics as an extension of consumerism.

Visions worth voting for (33-42)

- Since the Second World War, two administrations have offered visions of society that "changed the political weather".
- Clement Attlee's Labour government of 1945 responded to the discontents of the Depression in the 1930s and the socially unifying experience of the War to establish the National Health Service, to make free schooling available for all and to implement the Beveridge Report of 1942 which argued for a state welfare system to combat the "Five Giant Evils" of Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness.
- In 1979, Margaret Thatcher's incoming Conservative administration was pledged to facilitate individual enterprise and a market freed from state interference.
- We are now as distant in time from Margaret Thatcher's first government as hers was from Attlee's. Both administrations changed the way people looked at society, politics, the role of government and the nature of human relationships. But today, neither vision addresses our condition.
- Part of our tragedy is that our politics has been incapable of holding a careful balance between different kinds of goods or virtues. Beveridge's enthusiasm for voluntary action was marginalised by the revolution in state welfare provision which his earlier report had initiated. Thatcher's market revolution emphasised individualism, consumerism and the importance of the corporate sector to the extent that, far from returning to Victorian notions of social responsibility, the paradigm for all relationships became competitive individualism, consumption and the commercial contract, fragmenting social solidarity at many levels.
- Our political life would be enhanced if we could acknowledge that a modern nation requires state-sponsored action to underpin the welfare of each citizen – but that this provision must neither supplant local voluntary action and neighbourliness where those things exist, nor ignore the way in which dependence on state provision can undermine individual initiative and responsibility.
- Our political life would be equally enhanced if it were possible to speak about markets, business and the profit motive as an impressively effective system of distribution in a complex society and hugely liberating of human creativity – but one which also tends to entrench inequality and diminish human sympathies.
- The way in which state welfare and market economics have been polarised in political debate has obscured an important point on which both Thatcher and Beveridge might well have agreed. Both understood that their approaches to the wellbeing of the nation

could not succeed unless social relationships were marked by neighbourliness, strong voluntary commitment and personal responsibility. These virtues must be practised, not just in pursuit of one's own well being, but for the flourishing of the communities in which one is set.

- This is the missing link which has prevented the state and the market alike from generating a better, more humane, society. Placing excessive faith in state intervention on the one hand or the free market on the other, politicians have focussed so much on the things they can control directly through economic and social policy that they have neglected to nurture, by word, example or policy, those aspects of life which governments can influence but not control.
- Adversarial politics, while necessary, has bequeathed us an adversarial approach to ideas, in which one's opponents must always be wholly wrong and criticism of one's own ideas is never legitimate. Creative attempts by politicians, mainly in periods of opposition, to challenge this trend have foundered under the pressures of day-to-day government in an unrelenting media spotlight.

A Society of Strangers? (43-48)

- Today, a fundamental question is about the extent of social solidarity in Britain. Are we a "society of strangers", or are we a "community of communities"? There is no doubt that we have become much more of a society of strangers through recent decades. That is one consequence of greatly increased physical mobility and the advance of communication technologies which allow all manner of superficial transactions without people meeting face to face.
- But we are also a society of strangers in a more worrying sense. Consumption, rather than production, has come to define us, and individualism has tended to estrange people from one another.
- The central character in the way we discuss economics and politics today is the autonomous individual exercising choices. While each individual must make a response to God's unconditional offer of love, in both Old and New Testaments the words for "choice" almost never refer to the choices we make – instead they are about our being chosen by God who is sovereign over all things.
- The extent of loneliness in society today, with the attendant problems of mental and physical health, is one indication of how far we have drifted into a society of strangers. And yet most people still find numerous ways of belonging amongst other people – through the workplace, through voluntary associations, through shared religious and other beliefs, through shared interests, and through shared places.

A Community of Communities (49-57)

- It would be easier for people to forge strong social bonds if we could recognise that a sense of "place" helps to form people's identity in community. People are not so much divorced from place as seeking a place where they can be most at home. Following the great rehousing boom of the 1950s and '60s, numerous studies explored the effect of dislocation on people and communities.
- The Church of England has always had a strong commitment to place through the parish system. We are present in every community of England. We therefore see day by day how important "place" is to all kinds of people.
- One important principle here is the idea of subsidiarity – the principle that decisions should be devolved to the lowest level consistent with effectiveness. Subsidiarity derives from Catholic social teaching, and it is a good principle for challenging the accumulation of power in fewer and fewer hands. It entails careful attention to the areas of life where we function best as a nation and other areas where people function best as members of something smaller and more local.
- As an example, "post code lottery" has become a term of disparagement for local variations in public services. But if people feel part of the decision-making processes that affect their lives, there is no reason why, in many aspects of social policy, local diversity should not flourish. Human life and creativity are inherently messy and rebel against the uniformity that accompanies universal solutions.

The Person in Community (58-64)

- Individuals flourish best when they belong with confidence to networks of relationships, institutions and communities which extend well beyond the nuclear family but stop well short of the state or the corporation. We are most human when we know ourselves to be dependent on others.
- Paradoxically, too much stress on the individual, and on the supposedly autonomous choices of the individual-as-consumer, has tended to diminish rather than enhance the moral significance of each unique person. It has led us to undervalue individuals who exhibit weakness, are dependent on others, or who try to live selflessly.
- There is a deep contradiction in the attitudes of a society which celebrates equality in principle yet treats some people, especially the poor and vulnerable, as unwanted, unvalued and unnoticed. It is particularly counter-productive to denigrate those who are in need, because this undermines the wider social instinct to support one another in the community.
- This is why it is important to move away from the focus on the individual to a richer narrative of the person in community. It is vital to move beyond the superficial equality of free consumers in a market place of relationships and to see the virtues in the relationships of family and community which are given, not chosen.

The community of nations (65-74)

- Good international relations require all nations to recognise their interdependence if the world is to remain stable or even to survive. World trade has demonstrated how intertwined the national economy is with other nations'. But our perceptions of cultural and political interdependence lag far behind.
- After the Second World War, the nations of Europe sought to rebuild for prosperity on the basis of their shared history and culture. That history is not an argument for the structures and institutions of the European Union as they now exist but it is an enduring argument for continuing to build structures of trust and cooperation between the nations of Europe rather than treating questions of identity and belonging only as political bargaining chips.
- The volatile areas of the world, where conflict or the threat of war seem endemic, are a constant threat to the stability of all nations – another reminder of our interdependence. Military intervention by states such as Britain is not always wrong but recent experiences show the difficulty of treading a line between legitimate defence of human values and interventions which further destabilise regions already devastated by conflict. We have discovered how acute is the risk of generating new resentments which intensify the threat to our own way of life.
- Our politicians have been reluctant to talk openly with the electorate about Britain's relationships around the world, the realignments of global power, a realistic role in securing a stable and peaceful world order and the tools we would need for the job. Shifts in the global strategic realities mean that the traditional arguments for nuclear deterrence need re-examining.
- People and nations are divided, not just by military conflict but by grotesque inequalities of wealth and power which have a profoundly destabilising effect. Supporting developing nations without creating unhealthy dependencies is politically challenging and yet absolutely necessary. For any party to abandon or reduce the commitment of 0.7% of GDP to overseas aid would be globally irresponsible in pragmatic terms as well as indicating that the moral imperatives of mutuality and reconciliation counted for nothing.

Equality – us and them (75-77)

- Inequality, whether global or national, can develop quickly but take a long time to overcome. In Britain, material inequality continues to widen.

- Stirring up resentment against some identifiable “other” always dehumanises some social group or people. Ethnic minorities, immigrants, welfare claimants, bankers and oligarchs – all have been called up as threats to some fictitious “us”. They become the hated “other” without whose presence among us all would be well.
- At first sight, the rhetoric of “us” and “the other” may sound as if it is talking about communities and significant social groupings – the opposite of individualistic politics. In reality, it represents no actual class or community but appeals to the individual’s ignorance of those who are different.

Strengthening institutions (78-87)

- Because a society centred on individuals finds trust difficult, laws, regulations and contracts have entered into many areas of life that were once governed by shared understandings of ethics and wisdom. When law and regulation intrude too far into everyday life, they create a “chill factor” where anxiety about the rules prevents people acting freely, sensibly or with wisdom – leading to “health and safety gone mad”.
- This is another reason why we need new, informal and independent structures, small enough not to need every activity to be codified, through which we can learn to work together in trust, not just according to rules. Such bodies – often called intermediate institutions – are a lot bigger than the family but far smaller than the state.
- A thriving society needs many intermediate institutions. The churches are among the most historically embedded and well-established, and remain among the most effective; other examples include Credit Unions and Housing Associations. We are living through both a banking crisis and a housing crisis. Institutions like Credit Unions and Housing Associations are important not simply because they are effective but because they embody the principle of mutuality – the common bond between people being the heart of the operation and not just a bolt-on accessory
- Our educational institutions – especially schools, with their vocation to be distinctive and inclusive – also do much to foster a community of communities. A good school nurtures each child, respecting their individuality and the traditions and customs – including the religious faith – in which they are growing up in their family, whilst introducing them to the practices of living among others with different backgrounds and histories. The purpose of education is not simply to prepare people to be economic units but to nurture their ability to flourish as themselves and to seek the flourishing of others.
- It is a fallacy to believe that a community of communities can be built from a position of assumed neutrality – acknowledging one’s own roots and traditions is a first step toward respecting and understanding the roots and traditions of others.

Disagreement, Diversity and Coalitions (88-89)

- The Church of England locally and nationally, has learned how to build constructive alliances with other voluntary agencies, charities and community groups. It is precisely this ability to make, and break, alliances – so that people can work together on issues they share while differing on other issues – which makes intermediate institutions, and the voluntary sector generally, so crucial to a flourishing democratic society.

Beyond “Left” and “Right” (90-96)

- Our country is hungry for a new approach to political life that will “change the political weather” as decisively as did the administrations of 1945 and 1979.
- Different parties will disagree about how best to put similar ideas into practice. We are seeking, not a string of policy offers, but a way of conceiving and ordering our political and economic life which can be pursued in a conservative idiom, a socialist idiom, a liberal idiom – and by others not aligned to party.
- On both sides of the house, in the Commons and in the Lords, there are members who broadly share the perspective we have outlined here. More work along similar lines is

being done in think-tanks, academic groups, and among some journalists and local activists. But, so far, these discussions have been confined to the margins. We aim here to push those ideas toward the centre of political conversation.

History in an old country (97-99)

- The aftermath of the recent Scottish referendum has thrown the constitutional arrangements of the UK into sharp focus. The idea that the future shape of the Union and the relationship between its constituents can be solved in weeks or months is a fine example of politics ignoring the importance of history in favour of the calculated advantages of the moment.
- There should be the widest possible consultation about the structures and constitution we need, in which as many people participate as possible, and where the lessons of history (and not just British history) are kept sharply in view.

Power, identities and minorities (100-105)

- One recurring theme of this letter is the need to combat the accumulations of power which leave too many people powerless.
- The question "who is my neighbour?" is a question that arises implicitly and explicitly in the fraught politics of migration and identity. The question "who is my neighbour?" led Jesus to recount the parable of the Good Samaritan. He makes two subtle points, first calling people to follow the example of the Samaritan, the foreigner who went to the aid of the wounded traveller; and secondly, answering the question by suggesting that neighbourliness may mean receiving care from a member of a despised social group.
- The way we talk about migration, with ethnically identifiable communities being treated as "the problem" has, deliberately or inadvertently, created an ugly undercurrent of racism in every debate about immigration.
- But we also challenge the assumption that to question immigration at all must always be racist. Major trends in migration have brought about immense social changes in many parts of the country, often impacting most acutely on communities which are least equipped to handle it. It is unsurprising that communities which have faced deindustrialisation, the destruction of familiar streets and housing and for whom poverty has never been more than one step away should find the rapid shift to a multicultural society difficult to assimilate. We need a dialogue about migration which looks at who is being asked to bear the cost of rapid social change and what resources of community and neighbourliness they need to emerge stronger from change.

Debt and a humane economy (106-114)

- The last Parliament has been dominated by the after shocks of the economic and financial crisis of 2008. It is to the credit of our politicians that the impact of the crisis has been less severe in Britain than in some other European countries. It is to the discredit of our politicians that a financial catastrophe which threatened the stability of the world at large has become a political football.
- Debts, whether national or personal, are rarely good news. Indebtedness means handing power over one's life to the creditor – widespread indebtedness is another manifestation of the accumulation of power in too few hands.
- When the financial crisis first broke, the General Synod debated the likely impact and set down three criteria by which any austerity measure ought to be judged. They were: Is it fair – does it give priority to the vulnerable? Is it generous – does it embody the obligation to give and share our resources with others, especially those less well off? Is it sustainable – have the interests of future generations been factored in?
- These three principles are in tension with each other and have to be balanced together. They remain sound criteria for judging the present government's debt-reduction policies and they are useful questions to put to candidates in the forthcoming election.
- It is good that unemployment has not risen as high as was predicted: worklessness has long been acknowledged as corrosive of human dignity and sense of identity. But

instead we have seen the burgeoning of in-work poverty – people who, despite working hard, cannot earn enough to live decently.

- This is why the Church of England has backed the concept of the Living Wage. It represents the basic principle that people are not commodities and that their lives cannot adapt infinitely in response to market pressures.

Our grandchildren's future (115-117)

- Our grandchildren's future, not just the wants of the moment, must be factored into economic and political priorities. Economics must be understood as a moral discipline. A thriving economy needs investors who look to the long term rather than pursuing short term profit.
- People will commit to the long term if they have a stake in it. By enabling people to build a stake in their communities, they are encouraged to live on behalf of future generations, and to cherish the created order rather than viewing our environment as a commodity to be consumed.

The campaign ahead (118-126)

- It is the duty of every Christian adult to vote, even though it may have to be a vote for something less than a vision that inspires us. If the country is ever to enjoy a new politics which reflects our beliefs about human flourishing, we must work with others to make that vision attractive, imagine how it might be made real and help those with a vocation to political life to argue for better ways of doing things.
- At this election, we can sow the seeds of a new politics. We encourage voters to support candidates and policies which demonstrate the following key values:
 - Halting and reversing the accumulation of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, whether those of the state, corporations or individuals.
 - Involving people at a deeper level in the decisions that affect them most.
 - Recognising the distinctive communities, whether defined by geography, religion or culture, which make up the nation and enabling all to thrive and participate together.
 - Treating the electorate as people with roots, commitments and traditions and addressing us all in terms of the common good and not just as self-interested consumers.
 - Demonstrating that the weak, the dependent, the sick, the aged and the vulnerable are persons of equal value to everybody else.
 - Offering the electorate a grown up debate about Britain's place in the world order and the possibilities and obligations that entails.
- We believe that these points are crucial if politics is to rise above its present diminished state. Indeed, we can develop those ideas further. In July 2014, the General Synod debated how the church contributes to the Common Good. That debate suggested some further signs that political policies were moving in the direction which this letter outlines. They included:
 - Acknowledging the depth of insecurity and anxiety that has permeated our society after decades of rapid change, not least the changes brought about by the banking crisis and austerity programme.
 - Recognising people's need for supportive local communities and that the informal and voluntary sectors hold society together in ways which neither the state nor private enterprise can match.
 - Recognising that people need a sense of place and of belonging.
 - Addressing the culture of regulation and litigation when it acts as a "chill factor" on voluntary involvement, where anxiety about potential litigation can be a brake on local action.
 - Reflecting the obligation to secure the common good of future generations, not just our own, and addressing issues of intergenerational justice. This must include a responsible approach to environmental issues.
- This letter is about building a vision of a better kind of world, a better society and better politics. Underlying those ideas is the concept of virtue – what it means to be a

- good person, a good politician, a good neighbour or a good community. Virtues are nourished, not by atomised individualism, but in strong communities which relate honestly and respectfully to other groups and communities which make up this nation.
- Religious traditions like the Christian faith try to be repositories of virtue – ways for people to learn who they are, how they relate to each other and how they deal with difference and disagreement. The religious life is not just grounded on belief in God – it is grounded in practices of prayer and service, through which people learn to reflect on the deep nature of themselves, others and the world at large, under God, and work together for greater human flourishing.

The advice of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians may help to defend us against the temptations of apathy, cynicism and blame, and instead seek – because we are disciples of Jesus Christ who long for a more humane society – a better politics for a better nation.

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.
Philippians 4:8

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