



REVIEW

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Time to Decide

As the General Election looms large it is an opportune time to consider what we want from the next Government and indeed why we should bother to be involved in the process of democracy at all.

Given the recent scandals surrounding MP's expenses and the disrepute into which this has brought politics, it is easy to understand the view which goes something like "they are all self-serving rouses and I want nothing to do with them". This of course plays into the hands of cynics who, for whatever reason, would rather we always had a negative or pessimistic view of everything from democracy to human nature in general. We as Christians, particularly in this Easter season, should have a different view of the world and of human nature. Our faith challenges us to be more open, more optimistic and to build a positive vision of the future.

In this edition there is an article by Paul Edwards discussing some of the imperfections of our democratic tradition but also emphasising the importance of being engaged. The bottom line of being involved is casting our vote. This newsletter advertises the recent statement by the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales entitled 'Choosing the Common Good'. It too underlines the responsibility of voting and gives a base from which to make informed decisions. Amongst other things this document presents some of the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching. Not least among these is the absolute priority to place the

poorest amongst us at the centre of our society.

The ethical value of any action or political policy has to be measured by its contribution to the wellbeing of the most vulnerable without forgetting everyone else. These unambiguous statements give us much pause for thought. It is not always comfortable to be faced with such a demanding vision. In the light of the forthcoming General Election it is important that we are involved in the process and that we should cast our vote. Our commitment may also mean that our involvement is deepened so that we can play our part in the building of a society which has the common good at the centre of its human preoccupations as well as the political priorities of the new Government.

The elections follow closely International Workers' Day celebrated on 1st May. The May Day Message from the World Movement of Christian Workers refers to *Rerum Novarum*, the first social teaching document. It reiterates the same uncompromising message that "no-one is allowed to violate with impunity this human dignity that God Himself treats with great respect". Whilst focused on the importance of our May election, the first of May opens up a horizon of international solidarity. With this in mind the MCW is supporting the World Movement's campaign to help rebuild the Movement in Haiti which was devastated by the earthquake in January 2010. An appeal for this purpose will shortly be circulated to members, supporters and friends so that we can make our contribution to this vital cause.

'Choosing the Common Good'

'Choosing the Common Good' is a statement by the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales which seeks to present some of the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching.

It anticipates the forthcoming General Election and is a contribution to the wider debate on the important issues of the moment. It also proposes a broader discussion about a shared vision for our society and suggests that now is the time to reflect on what sort of society we live in and how we would like it to be.

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"If voting changed anything they would make it illegal"

Emma Goldman (1869-1940) a Lithuanian born American international anarchist is often credited with coining the above title phrase which Ken Livingstone years later used for his book "If voting changed anything they'd abolish it" (1988).

This sentiment reflects a left wing critique of liberal parliamentary democratic systems. It argues that such systems do not bring about any real structural change in the distribution of income and wealth and as a consequence political power and influence continues to rest with an economic and political elite.

Recent global events would appear to give some credence to such a critique. The current economic system puts profits for a small elite before the collective need of the whole community especially the most disadvantaged members.

In a report entitled 'Unequal Britain'¹ Professor Peter Hills shows in stark terms the outcome of the obsession with the free market; 'Britain's richest 10% are now 100 times better off than the poorest'. This is the highest level of income inequality since the end of the Second World War, with individuals in the top 10% of the population each possessing total household wealth of £853,000. Moreover, this is a hundred times higher than the wealth of the poorest 10%, which is £8,800 or below (a sum including cars and other possessions). When the highest-paid workers, such as bankers and chief executives, are put into the equation the division in wealth is even more extreme, with individuals in the top 1% of the population each possessing total household wealth of £2.6m or more².

For thirty years the dominant political and economic doctrine has been that only 'free unregulated markets' can meet the needs of the people. Conservative and New Labour Governments have pursued with vigour the freeing up and deregulation of the market system, underpinned by large-scale privatisation of public services.

In 2006 the MCW published 'Reclaiming Time' a report which highlighted how many working people had, or were in danger of, being losers rather than

gaining through the 'freeing' of markets on a global scale. The report noted that the deregulation of markets had been built on the back of low pay, casualisation and contracting out of services and that workers rather than benefiting from an unregulated market had to work harder and longer to make ends meet. "In the last few years official figures show that 80% of earners saw very little real extra growth, with most winners in the top 10%..."³

For many years workers and their trades unions have been told by governments and employers that earnings have to be based on good performance: There can be no rewards for failure was their 'mantra'. Yet the reward for a catastrophic failure in the banking sector has led to the payment of huge bonuses even when the banks are making billions of pounds of losses. It is therefore no surprise that workers feel a strong sense of injustice.

In addition those MPs involved in the parliamentary expenses scandal by their behaviour have created a sense of mistrust and must bear considerable responsibility for damaging the reputation of parliamentarians as a whole. However, despite much of the mass media being culpable in fostering such images it is a gross injustice to tar all politicians with the same 'dirty brush'. From personal experience of politics and as a trade unionist in the public sector I have met and known decent people who were politicians from all mainstream parties. Nonetheless, it is no surprise therefore that these events have added to the growing disenchantment with politics.

Yet even before the above episodes the turn out at general elections has fallen from 77% to 61% since 1962. European elections and local government elections in 2009 only attracted 30% to 34% of the electorate. It is unlikely that this is attributable to anarchists like Goldman and more likely because of perceptions that "they are all the same"... "they are only in it for themselves"... "they have done nothing". Nevertheless, Livingstone was elected twice as Mayor for London (2000-2008) and so despite the title of his book he clearly believes voting can change things and whatever your personal politics some change was evident during his time in office.

At the time of writing it has been announced that

¹ Released January 2010

² The Guardian 27th January 2010

³ MCW Review no.39 April 2009

there will be a General Election on the 6th May 2010 in tandem with local authority elections. Thus, as we are given the opportunity to elect a new national government and local councils it presents a major challenge to overcome scepticism and engage with the process as it exists. Whilst it may be hard to mobilise voters to go out to the ballot box one thing is certain; the top 10% mentioned above will be voting, every last man and women of them! We all need to make it our responsibility to do the same.

In 1996, the Catholic Bishops' document 'The Common Good' cautioned against cynicism towards those engaged in public life whilst reminding us of the strong Christian tradition of active engagement in politics and political parties. With all its imperfections our current political system is one of the means to have a political influence.

It is worth remembering that in many countries of the world millions of people are denied the right to elect their political leaders and opposition to the political elite is violently oppressed. Even in Britain full universal suffrage has only existed since 1928, less than 100 years. Our challenge is to make decisions about whose policies best serve the collective good. All the major political parties are to a greater or lesser extent wedded to the free market economy and thus policies will be about managing that system. Given the level of country's

debt, we can expect the next government to pursue massive reductions in public spending. However, even the International Monetary Fund (IMF), not noted for supporting Keynesian economics, recognises that huge cuts in public spending will threaten an economic recovery.

There remains a huge need to confront economic and social inequality as a question of justice. As the history of Europe illustrates social and economic inequality can be the breeding ground for extremism and intolerance. The more extreme parties will be seeking to exploit and push a nationalist and xenophobic message which sadly will resonate with those who have not experienced many benefits from the policies of the last 30 years.

The MCW believes that that we have a responsibility to engage in politics as a legitimate expression of our faith. We are convinced that there are many women and men throughout the UK (many of whom are members of MCW) who are engaged in local and national politics for the benefit of the wider community. They see their political engagement as a response to Christ's call to renew the face of the earth, building the kingdom here on earth where there are no strangers, where no-one is excluded and where the needs of all are met by collective justice. In a world dominated by the globalization of the economy there is an ever-increasing need for women and men of good will to work and struggle collectively for the common good of all and not just the few.

Let's help to rebuild the MCW in Haiti

For many years the MCW has participated in the annual international solidarity campaign. This year's appeal is to assist the Movement in Haiti to rebuild.

As we all know, Haiti, one of the poorest countries in the world, was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in January 2010. Despite the billions of pounds raised by aid agencies and governments, none of this money is going to be used to support and sustain a movement that calls, trains and sustains Christian worker leaders who are crucial for the effective future development of the country.

The MCW of Haiti had an office with minimal resources for coordinating their national movement. This office was destroyed in the earthquake and communication with members and groups is very difficult. Those members who survived want to reconstruct the movement and the appeal is to support their efforts.

An appeal letter will be circulated in the near future to all our members, supporters and friends. You are urged to be as generous as possible so that a sizable contribution can be made to the vital need to rebuild the MCW in Haiti.



Movement of Christian Workers



Message on the occasion of May 1st 2010 International Workers' Day

This message from the World Movement of Christian Workers expresses solidarity with all working women and men around the world in the light of the unemployment and poverty which are being accentuated by the world economic crisis. It highlights the consequences this can have for children, young workers, families and their communities.

The core message is to have solidarity with all people of the world in working towards an economy that supports people and social life. Also one that proposes a fairer distribution of riches and produces the necessary wealth in a way that is decent and respectful of the dignity of all working women and men and of the environment.

View the full message at: www.mcworkers.org

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