

The bishops' letter to British politicians is a true act of leadership

By Jon Cruddas – published in The Guardian:

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This is a challenge to both left and right to develop a more generous politics and public conversation. As leader of Labour's policy review, I've learned a lot from it

I welcome the pastoral letter by the bishops of the Church of England at many levels.

It expresses concern about the condition of our country and its public institutions, so it is by definition political; but it is not party political – and is all the better for it. It is as much a challenge to the left, and our commitment to the state and centralisation, as it is to the right with its unquestioning embrace of the market. Its roots are far deeper than 20th-century ideologies, drawing upon Aristotle and Catholic social thought every bit as much as the English commonwealth tradition of federal democracy.

It is a profound, complex letter, as brutal as it is tender, as Catholic as it is reformed, as conservative as it is radical. It draws upon ideas of virtue and vocation in the economy that are out of fashion, but necessary for our country as we defend ourselves from a repetition of the vices that led to the financial crash and its subsequent debt and deficit. It invites us to move away from grievance, disenchantment and blame, and towards the pursuit of the common good.

It cannot be the case that any criticism of capitalism is received as leftwing Keynesian welfarism, and any public sector reform as an attack on the poor. This is precisely what the letter warns against, and it is a dismal reality of our public conversation that it has been received in that way.

I also welcome the letter as a profound contribution by the church to the political life of our nation. Christianity and the church have always been part of that story. Not as a dominant voice, but bringing an important perspective from an ancient institution that is present in every part of our country as a witness and participant. From the introduction of a legal order and the development of education, the church has been part of our body politic, so it is incorrect to say that the church should stay out of politics: it is morally committed to participation and democracy as a means, and the common good as the end.

One of the great things about faith traditions is that they do not think that the free market created the world. They have a concept of a person that is neither just a commodity nor an administrative unit, but a relational being capable of power and responsibility and of living with others in civic peace and prosperity. They also do not view the natural environment as a commodity, but an inheritance that requires careful stewardship. Conservatives and socialists have shared these assumptions and they could be the basis of a new consensus.

The bishops have said that the two big postwar political dreams – the collectivism of 1945 with its nationalisation and centralised universal welfare state, and the 1979 dream of a free-market revolution – have both failed and we need to develop an alternative vision. As we know, 1997 was not the answer either. The financial markets and the administrative state are too strong and society is too weak. The bishops are right to say that the “big society” was a good idea that dissolved into an aspiration, by turns pious and cynical. The answer is not to return to the old certainties, but to ask why things failed and how society could be made stronger. I think that Labour's policy review has made a strong start in this direction.

The letter has a lot of interesting things to say about character and virtue and how these are best supported in human-scale institutions; how the family is a school of love and sacrifice, and how we can support relationships in a world that encourages immediate gratification and is in danger of losing the precious art of negotiation and accommodation. There is not enough love in the economic or political system, and the bishops are right to bring this to our attention.

In another expression of the generosity of thought in this letter, the lead taken by Pope Francis in addressing economic issues has been embraced. When the banks are borrowing at 2% and lending to payday lenders at 7%, which lend to the poor at 5,500%, the bishops are right to call this usury and to say that it is wrong. They are also right to say that there needs to be a decentralisation of economic as well as political power. They are right to say that there are incentives to vice when there should be incentives to virtue. They are right to say that work is a noble calling, that good work generates value, and that workers should be treated with dignity. They are right to value work and support a living wage, and to build up credit unions as an alternative to payday lenders.

They are also right to point out that competition is opposed to monopoly and not cooperation, which is necessary for a successful economy: an isolated individual can never become an autonomous person. They are also right to remind us of the importance of place and to warn us against a carelessness to its wellbeing.

That is why decentralisation and subsidiarity are vital for our country, so that we do not become a society of strangers, but can build bonds of solidarity and mutual obligation.

Above all, the bishops are right to assert that autonomous self-governing institutions that mediate between the state and the market are a vital part of our national renewal. The BBC, our great universities and schools, city governments and the church are our civic inheritance, and vital to the wellbeing of the nation. All are threatened by the centralised control of the market and state. We cannot do this alone, and that is why politics – doing things together – is important; and that is why the body politic and not just the state is important. Our cities and towns cannot take responsibility unless they have power.

As the election approaches there will be a tendency to turn everything into a party political conflict. That is understandable, but there is also a place for us to engage in a longer-term conversation, a covenantal conversation, about how we renew our inheritance and rise to the challenge of living together for the good.

I have read the letter and learned a great deal from it. I will read it again and reflect on its teaching because the issues it raises will endure beyond May.

Issues of how to build a common life under conditions of pluralism, how to engage people in political participation and self-government, how to decentralise political and economic power, how to resist the domination of the rich and the powerful, how to renew love and work so that life can be meaningful and fulfilling. These are the right questions to be asking.

I am grateful to the bishops for challenging us to develop a better and more generous politics and public conversation. It is an act of leadership.