

FAITH IN POLITICS

Preparing Churches for the General Election 2010



Introduction

It is easy to forget the remarkable power of our democratic process. At least once every five years we are given the chance to vote. All citizens, regardless of wealth or status, have an equal say in deciding what our common future should be.

Of course, this is not to forget the realities of political life: the scandals, the broken promises, the personalities and opportunism. But politics is more than this – it is how the national community operates, expresses its values and has the power to change the world.

A General Election will be held sometime before 3 June 2010. Christians across the country will be campaigning for different parties or standing for election. Churches will host hustings meetings where candidates can be questioned by local voters. And voters will have the opportunity to decide who they wish to vote for, and which parties' policies most closely match their own hopes and values.

People will take a range of subjects into account when they decide how to vote. This briefing outlines some of the key policy areas, but it does not cover every subject or every detail. For each subject it provides a background, raises some key issues and suggests a series of questions for personal reflection or to ask of party candidates.

This booklet is aimed particularly at Christians. It has been prepared by individuals from within the Churches or Church agencies who have expert knowledge in their fields. It does not represent a 'Church' view or support a party line. However, it does aim to help Christians engage with a range of important issues facing our country however they may decide to vote.

You might wish to use this booklet when preparing for a hustings meeting. If you would like to arrange a hustings meeting through your local church or Churches Together group, you can find guidance notes and advice at www.churcheselection.org.uk. You can also publicise your hustings event there, or find out what is happening in your constituency.

Further information and resources – including a regular newsletter and blog, and an analysis of the parties' manifestos, as well as issues not covered in this publication – will be available throughout the election campaign at the Churches' election website – www.churcheselection.org.uk.

A note on devolution

The issues in this briefing may be more or less relevant to you, depending on where you live. Devolution of power from Westminster to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland means that some of the Westminster politics will affect different parts of the United Kingdom in different ways. Look out for the codes on each page to see if the section is relevant to where you live. Further information about devolution and the General Election is available at the Churches' election website – www.churcheselection.org.uk.

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Children and Young People



Background

- Young people make a real contribution to our society, though often they are portrayed in the media as being antisocial, out of control and threatening.
- A 2007 report by UNICEF showed that the United Kingdom's children were the unhappiest in a survey of 21 developed countries. They drink, smoke and have sex more often than their contemporaries. Children in the UK also eat less often with their families and are less satisfied with life.
- In 1991 the UK signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now each have a children's commissioner, who speak up on behalf of children and promote the values of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- During the lifetime of someone turning 21 last year, there will have been over 400 different major announcements (acts of parliament, government strategies and funding changes) for children and youth services. That equates to around 20 every year, with each initiative lasting, on average, a little over 2 years. While many developments are welcome, so many changes are not necessarily a healthy way of supporting the most vulnerable children and families.

Issues

- **Youth crime** – Young people are particularly vulnerable to street crime and are disproportionately more likely to be victims. But children and young people are also seen as the problem. Policy makers and sections of the media need to portray positively what it means to be young today. Young offenders need opportunities to turn their lives around and develop the practical and emotional skills to make a positive contribution to society. Alternatives to custody must be sought.
- **Access to opportunities** – Young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) often need additional support. Programmes should develop a young person's ability to learn, rather than just focusing on 'achievement' – meaning the award of a qualification.
- **Families** – Families are important because they are where almost all children are brought up and where children learn to care for others. Today, family life is pressurised and families often need support.
- **Children with disabilities** – Over the past 10 years, the population of disabled children has changed. More children with complex and severe impairments are surviving due to medical advances, and there is a significant increase in the number of children diagnosed with disorders on the autistic spectrum. This has led to an increased demand for intensive support

services, but in many cases local authorities cannot meet this demand.

- **Children in care** – Wherever possible, children should live with their birth families. Where this is not possible, they should have access to the highest quality services so that care is a positive experience. Positive outcomes, such as educational achievement, should be broadened to include the ability to live independently, a reduction in challenging behaviour and improvement in emotional wellbeing. Giving children and young people security and stability is the key.
- **Child neglect** – Neglect has a devastating impact on a growing number of children across the UK each year. It is the most pervasive form of child maltreatment in the UK, with the risk for recurrence higher with neglect than for any other type of abuse. Effective and timely interventions can make all the difference.

Questions:

- What can be done to help promote a positive vision for children and young people as full and active citizens in society?
- What kinds of support do families need most to help them during difficult times?
- Often vulnerable families are wary of the 'formal' services that are available to them. How would you support the voluntary sector within the community to provide services that are responsive to local needs?

Further information

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Criminal Justice



Background

- Since the last General Election the prison population has continued to rise from 75,145 in 2004 to 84,154 in August 2009: a record high. Numbers are projected to reach 96,000 in 2014. In 2008 the number of people in prison exceeded the prison services' own measure of operational capacity, and by mid-2009 82 of the 140 prisons in England and Wales were overcrowded. An increased use of remand, short prison sentences and indeterminate sentences have all contributed to this situation.
- It costs on average £40,992 a year to keep a person in prison in England and Wales and £459 to keep a person in a police cell overnight.
- Between 160,000-180,000 children are estimated to have had a parent sent to prison in 2009: more than will experience the divorce of their parents.
- Reoffending rates also continue to rise with nearly half the adults released from prison reconvicted within a year (47%). Reoffending rates for community sentences after a year are lower at 37%.
- Whilst the new National Offender Management Service has focused on reducing reoffending, the reality for the majority of released prisoners is that they leave with a £46 discharge grant and little or no state support for resettlement or rehabilitation.
- Recent independent reports on the situation of particularly vulnerable people within the criminal justice system contain recommendations on dealing more humanely and effectively with, for example, women in prison (Corston Report, 2008), and mentally ill offenders and those with learning disabilities (Bradley Report, 2009).
- Media coverage tends to focus on a punitive approach to offenders and what it sees as failures in the criminal justice system to be sufficiently rigorous. Opinion surveys, however, tend to suggest that the public is less punitive and more understanding than often appears, agreeing that offenders with a drug habit and mental illness need, most of all, to be helped.

Issues

To be truly effective, criminal justice policy should not be isolated from other social policies such as education, training, health, housing and employment. However, within this breadth of debate, central themes to consider include:

- **Prisons and community punishments** – To manage prison overcrowding and the growing prison population, up to 20,000 new prison places may be built in the next five years. Political parties are proposing reform of community sentencing, looking in particular at how to make punishments more visible. There are suggestions to toughen up sentencing, such as removing the possibility of parole before a minimum term has been served in jail. There are also plans to improve the

effectiveness of rehabilitation schemes and drug, alcohol and mental health treatment.

- **Effective rehabilitation** – Without effective rehabilitation offenders remain at higher risk of reoffending, particularly if they need drug, alcohol and mental health treatment. Most political parties accept that effective rehabilitation, improved education and training for offenders in prison are key to reducing reoffending.
- **Restorative justice** – Restorative justice is an approach that emphasises restoring the well-being of the victim and the community, whilst helping offenders take responsibility for what they have done and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. Restorative justice has divided political opinion, with some parties supporting the concept, perhaps through various community justice initiatives and greater involvement of volunteers in criminal justice services. Other parties do not support the idea.

Through the Churches' Criminal Justice Forum, Churches have lobbied the government on such issues as the importance of family ties and the value of restorative approaches to justice. Current emphases are on meeting the needs of particularly vulnerable people in the criminal justice system, such as children and youngsters in custody and people with mental illness and learning disabilities, the reduced use of imprisonment, and more effective rehabilitation.

Questions:

- How would you address the needs of those with mental illness, learning disabilities, and alcohol or other drug dependencies within the criminal justice system?
- What do you see as the key elements of effective rehabilitation to restore offenders to the community and reduce the likelihood of reoffending?
- Do you support further development of restorative justice within the criminal justice system? Why, or why not?
- What are the greatest needs of victims of crime?
- What role does the wider community (including faith communities) have to play in criminal justice matters and how would you seek to promote community engagement?

Further information

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Democracy and Accountability

Background

- The system of MPs' pay and allowances has been one of the leading domestic political issues of the past year. The reputation of – and public confidence in – all our politicians and political institutions has collapsed. This crisis for democracy needs as much urgent and careful attention as fixing the expenses rules that gave rise to it.
- New technology is providing many people with new ways in which they can express their opinions and participate in public debates. At the same time traditional forms of political engagement are in decline. Membership has fallen across all political parties, whilst voter turnout at general, local and European elections has also dropped. The fall in turnout and disenchantment with mainstream parties were major contributory factors to the election of two British National Party (BNP) members to the European Parliament in 2009.
- Devolution and reform at Westminster has substantially changed the UK constitution since 1997. Directly elected mayors and cabinet style government at a local level have sought to invigorate and empower communities – with mixed results. The adoption of the Human Rights Act and freedom of information laws have equipped citizens with greater powers to challenge authority. Reforms to the House of Lords have largely removed the influence of the hereditary element, ended single party dominance and overhauled the role of the lord chancellor. The creation of a new Supreme Court and abolition of the law lords have given effect to a separation of the legislature and the judiciary, bringing to an end parliament's historic role as the highest court in the land.

Issues

- **Standards in public life** – Restoring public trust in democracy is essential if participation in this and future elections is not to decline further. Political parties have prevented some MPs from seeking re-election because of the expenses issue and there will be understandable public anger directed towards those individuals standing again who have been implicated by the media. Ensuring that a sense of proportion is maintained and that concerns about proper accountability and trust are balanced against equipping politicians with the necessary resources to do their job will be important.
- **Electoral reform** – All parties have spoken positively about improving the ability of voters to petition parliament, and to 'recall' their MPs between elections if they are found guilty of impropriety. Suggestions for reform include reducing the number of MPs by 10%, holding a national referendum on changing the voting system from first-past-the-post to one of proportional representation and reducing the voting age to 16.

- **Constitutional questions** – All major political parties favour continued major restructuring of our constitutional framework. Key issues revolve around whether a written constitution or a Bill of Rights is necessary or desirable, and how to resolve the 'West Lothian question' (where Scottish MPs in Westminster vote on matters which only affect England). The future of the Church of England as an established Church is occasionally called into question.
- **House of Lords reform** – There is widespread political support for continuing with reform of the House of Lords, with general agreement for a majority or wholly elected second chamber. As well as legislating to remove the remaining 92 hereditary peers, recent reforms have sought to modernise the House of Lords by introducing a new 'lord speaker', giving the house powers to suspend or expel peers guilty of misdemeanour, and by allowing those who wish to, to 'retire' from the peerage.
- **Devolution** – There is ongoing discussion in different parts of the UK about the extent of devolution. This may be about when to transfer policing and justice power to the Northern Ireland Assembly, or greater powers in the Welsh Assembly. Scotland's future within the UK is in question, with the Scottish National Party (SNP) government pushing for independence. There are also issues around the distribution of funds for public services in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Questions

- How can we encourage more citizens to get involved in politics and to use their right to vote?
- What should MPs be doing to restore trust in parliament and between themselves and their constituents?
- How great a role ought religious communities take in influencing the political process?

Further information

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The Economy



Background

- Since the last election, when the British economy was described as a “success story”, the recession which kicked in during 2007 has bitten hard. The credit crunch dampened economic activity and bailing out the banks by the government to prevent a catastrophic collapse has cost billions. Unemployment has risen fast and no rapid end to the recession is in view.
- Levels of debt, both personal and national, are very high by historic standards. The economic downturn is a global phenomenon, but the UK’s place in the financial markets means that much responsibility lies with this country and our economy is particularly vulnerable.
- Income inequality, which had been narrowing before 1979 has, since then, widened. Research shows that the damaging impact of wide inequality on happiness, wellbeing and human relationships is very significant.
- The near-collapse of the banking system, and the damage this has caused to the economy suggests a major flaw in the model of deregulated markets. But no serious alternative has yet made its mark.
- Getting out of the present difficulties, without causing massive inflation or provoking a deeper depression, is the major dilemma facing governments.

Issues

- **Banking regulation** –The Keynesian approach, using public spending to stimulate jobs and economic activity, helped pull the UK out of the depression of the 1930s but appears to have stoked up problems like inflation, for which markets and monetarism were seen as the answer. Should we seek solutions in a return to Keynes, a continuation of the deregulated market model, or something different?
- **Fiscal responsibility** – What is the place of public spending in a recession? The government has spent billions bailing out the banks, but has called for no significant changes in return. Rising unemployment and poverty make increased demands on public spending whilst reducing revenue from taxes. Should the priority for public finances be to balance the books and trust in low taxation to stimulate economic activity, or create jobs and activity through public spending at the expense of higher taxation?
- **Global poverty** – By global standards, the UK remains prosperous. How can efforts to eliminate global poverty and mitigate the impact of climate change – both of which are costly but urgent – be maintained whilst rebuilding the domestic economy?

- **Income inequality** – In the UK, the gaps between the mega-rich, the ‘middling majority’ and the very poor are extremely wide and continues to widen. Gross inequality affects the social fabric, weakening social bonds and damaging the common good. Yet redistributive taxation seems to be electorally unpopular.
- **Sustainability** – Some are asking whether continual economic growth is a valid goal for society. Unlimited growth raises questions about environmental and economic sustainability. There is, however, no political consensus on how to measure prosperity and well-being.
- **What is the economy for?** – Regulating the market to curb its tendency to boom and bust requires moral agreement about the principles of regulation. But British society may have become so individualised that such agreement is impossible. The Churches may be a forum where the purposes of economic life may be debated and shared values forged.

Questions

- What conditions should the government impose on the banks in return for bailing them out of a crisis largely of their own making?
- How can the different parties’ policies prevent the most vulnerable in society from bearing the brunt of the recession and the austerity measures which may follow?
- What makes a prosperous society and promotes human wellbeing? Do you accept that treating growth as the only economic goal has made people in general less happy and has damaged social bonds? How can the government and the economy serve human interests better?
- How can the government work to redress the widening inequality of wealth?

Further information

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Education

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Background

- Education continues to have a high profile in politics. The accent is on raising standards in all sectors and ensuring that the considerable recent investment in education pays dividends.
- There is now an expectation that there will be legislative programmes introduced in every session of parliament, with a proportionate increase in regulatory burden for schools and institutions.
- The 2008/2009 report from OFSTED highlights how education is now seen as a broad spectrum ranging through childcare, schools, learning and skills, to children's social care and local authority children's services. The report speaks encouragingly of sustained improvement throughout the sector but highlights the high proportion of provision which is mediocre or worse.
- There has also been a trend of improvement in colleges of further education; again, more colleges are now outstanding and fewer are inadequate than was the case four years ago.
- Building Schools for the Future (BSF) and the academies programme suggest that improvement is being driven by an increasing diversity of providers and changes to systems and structure
- Student tuition fees in higher education were introduced in 2006 at £3,000 pa and have increased in line with inflation each year since. The feared drop in applicants from lower socio-economic groups did not happen, nor did the intended 'market' in fees develop, with almost all universities charging the full amount.

Issues

- **Impact of reduced spending** – After an unprecedented investment in school and college buildings, in the current economic climate the present levels of expenditure are unsustainable. Reduced revenue will inevitably compromise the quest for increased standards and scope for efficiency savings are limited.
- **The purposes of education** – The current drive for increased standards may be regarded as overwhelmingly a quest for skills for the economy. The holistic purposes of education need to be re-examined and restated.
- **Diversity of provision** – The academies programme and recent proposals to create 'accredited school providers' suggest an increasing trend towards diversifying provision away from local authorities.
- **Pressures on the workforce** – Increased levels of scrutiny, reporting and monitoring are putting considerable pressure on teachers and school leaders. This can detract from the

core purpose of teaching and learning. This applies equally to schools, childcare provision and colleges.

- **Succession planning and leadership** – It is getting increasingly hard to recruit high calibre heads and senior school leaders. This is particularly marked in primary schools in rural areas. There needs to be a focus on how to secure high quality school leadership into the future.
- **Curriculum** – Important issues for the future include: the nature and shape of the primary curriculum; the role, structure and delivery of personal, social, health, citizenship and religious education; and the balance between vocational and academic education.
- **Student Fees** – If the current maximum does increase significantly, then a 'market' may ensue, with the 'elite' universities charging more and poorer students being deterred from applying.

Questions

- How can an effective education system be achieved if spending is reduced?
- How much diversity should be accepted in the overall system? What is the outlook for schools with a religious foundation?
- How can teachers and others be relieved of both bureaucracy and over-regulation?
- What should be the focus of moral, spiritual and social education?
- What would increase the effectiveness of primary education, particularly in achieving basic literacy and numeracy?
- What should the balance be between academic and vocational education?
- How can we ensure that that fees and support costs in higher education do not disadvantage the poor?

Further Information

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Environment



Background

- At the time of the last General Election in 2005, environmental issues and climate change were still regarded as a fairly low priority by both voters and the major political parties. Since then the topic has become much more urgent and important. In 2008 parliament passed a Climate Change Act, which commits future governments to reduce the UK's greenhouse gas emissions by 80% from 1990 levels by 2050.
- A major summit to discuss global efforts to tackle climate change was held in December 2009 in Copenhagen.
- Several mainstream Churches have published reports into climate change in the past few years. Operation Noah has said, "God's creation faces the most urgent peril, which, to be averted, requires a rapid and radical transformation of our economy and culture – towards liveable, supportable lifestyles."

Issues

- **Greenhouse gases** – There is general consensus amongst climate scientists and politicians that significant climate change is occurring due to human activity. Projections indicate that if emissions are allowed to rise at their current pace, the world would likely face a 2° - 4.5°C average temperature rise by 2100, with a 3°C increase most likely. If this happens the results could be catastrophic: many species would be at greater risk of extinction, sea levels would rise and severe weather (droughts and floods) may happen more frequently.
- **Poverty and the developing world** – Climate change cannot be dissociated from poverty. It is clear that the developing world is already suffering from the effects of climate change, such as droughts and floods, while not being responsible for greenhouse gas emissions. More than 20 million people were displaced by sudden climate-related disasters in 2008 alone. Christian Aid has called for justice and fairness to be at the heart of international climate agreements and policymaking; acknowledging and reflecting developed countries' historic responsibility for climate change and demanding they put in place significant cuts and finance for adaptation.
- **Transport** – 25% of carbon emissions in the UK are from transport. Road transport accounts for 92% of this, with 58% coming from passenger cars alone. Consecutive governments have prioritised road infrastructure over more equitable and sustainable methods of transport. Alongside this has been massive growth in aviation; based on the Department for Transport's projections, it is estimated that by 2050 aircrafts will account for 91% of all the greenhouse gases the country should be producing, according to the limits set by the 2008 Climate Change Act.

- **Energy** – Producing energy and consuming energy account for a high proportion of the UK's carbon emissions. There are two challenges here: decarbonising our energy supply and a step change in energy efficiency. Some parties support a new generation of nuclear power stations; some still want coal but with carbon capture and storage. Others argue that we can meet energy needs through renewables, both large scale and localised if investment and political will is there. The UK has signed up to the EU Renewable Energy Directive, which includes a UK target of 15% of energy from renewables (wind, wave, solar and biomass) by 2020. This target is equivalent to a seven-fold increase in UK renewable energy consumption from 2008 levels – the most challenging of any EU member state.
- **Community involvement and lifestyle change** – The challenges presented by climate change and our devouring of the world's natural resources requires a response from everyone. Churches have a presence in every community across the UK and through the eco-congregation movement have shown themselves to be agents of change and transformation. How can Churches and the government work together to combat climate change and shift our society and economy onto a more sustainable footing?

Questions

- How can government help individuals to reduce their use of energy and fossil fuels and increase their energy efficiency?
- Taxing big greenhouse gas emitters (such as 'gas-guzzling' cars) is one way to deter people from polluting, but what more can be done to change hearts and minds?
- What can people in the UK do to ensure action is taken by other polluting countries?

Further Information

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Equality and Diversity



Background

- Recent laws, such as the Equality Act 2006 and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, have resulted in significant changes to provide protection against discrimination and to promote equality and diversity.
- Equality laws protect against discrimination and promote equality on several different grounds (including age, gender, race, sexual orientation, disability and religion). It is unlawful to discriminate either directly or indirectly against a person because of their race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin and this applies to employment, housing, education and the provision of goods and services.
- In the final parliamentary session before the election, the government hopes to enact a new Equality Bill which brings together all existing equality legislation in one place, and also places a duty on public bodies to try to reduce socio-economic inequality when making decisions.

Issues

- **Churches and equality** – The Churches have over the years affirmed the principles of equality and diversity for all people. They have declared that racism and homophobia are contrary to the gospel. To this end we are called to work for racial justice and equity of opportunities for all within our society. However, some churches and Christian groups have expressed concern that equality laws could have an impact on freedom of religion or expression, and that a balance between different rights needs to be achieved.
- **Racial justice** – Estimates suggest that black and minority ethnic (BME) men are about four times more likely than white men to have their profiles stored on the police national DNA database. A disproportionate number of people from certain ethnic groups are stopped and searched. In 2007/2008, 28% of people from ethnic minority communities felt that they would be treated worse by the police or another criminal justice agency because of their race. While this percentage has declined from 33% in 2001, it is still troubling. The most recent figures show that BME groups account for 26% of the prison population, even though they constitute only 9% of the overall population in England and Wales. For BME groups caught up in the criminal justice system, this reality exacerbates their economic vulnerability and further contributes to their social marginalisation. Minority ethnic groups experience higher rates of poverty than the average for the population with the highest for Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Black Africans, reaching nearly two thirds for Bangladeshis, according to a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report from 2007.

- **Gender justice** – There has been a revolution in some aspects of women's lives over the past 30 years, yet for many women social and economic justice remains a distant dream. Women working full time are paid on average 17.1% less an hour than men for doing work of equivalent value. This figure rises to 20% for ethnic minority women, and to 36% for women working part time. With women making up 19.8% of our MPs, the UK is ranked a lowly 13th within the European Union (EU). Many European countries use positive action measures designed to address the under-representation of women in their legislature and this is an area of party difference within the UK with some parties having used all women shortlists to greatly increase female representation and others ideologically against measures like this.
- **Sexuality and equality** – Despite the huge legislative changes in the last decade to acknowledge the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, homophobia and transphobia remains a big problem in the UK. This can and does spill over into violence, and in 2008 a survey found that one in five lesbian and gay people had been the subject of aggressive homophobia over the preceding three years. There are also problems of bullying in schools and harassment and discrimination in the workplace. A survey in 2007 found that two-thirds of young gay people at secondary school – 150,000 pupils – have experienced homophobic bullying. In faith schools, that figure rose to three in four.

Questions

- What do you think about 'multi-culturalism' and 'integration'?
- How can the government better seek to promote equality in the UK?
- What government policies need to change so that BME people, particularly the younger generation, do not feel alienated?
- What particular initiatives have politicians been able to take or encouraged in your constituency that can develop social cohesion and help build a better society?

Further information

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Europe



Background

- The European Union (EU) expanded in 2007 to include Bulgaria and Romania. There are now 27 member countries, and there is a high likelihood that Croatia and Iceland will join in the next few years.
- In the autumn of 2009 the Lisbon Treaty was finally ratified by all member states, which completed a long process of constitutional and organisational reform of the EU.
- It is often said that around two-thirds of all laws that affect the UK now originate from the European Commission or Parliament. The Lisbon Treaty increases the range of policy areas that the EU has some responsibility for.
- In 2009 two BNP candidates were elected to the European Parliament, raising questions about xenophobia and nationalism.

Issues

- **The UK in Europe** – Despite the increasing size and authority of the EU, British people in general tend to have a very low interest in European affairs and politics. Most debate tends to be about whether you are ‘pro-Europe’ or a ‘Euro-sceptic’. There is very little understanding about how the EU works, what it does or how it affects the lives of European citizens. Despite this, the UK is a big player in the European Union as the country has a large population and a strong economy, and English is widely taught as a secondary language in many countries in the rest of Europe.
- **The Lisbon Treaty** – The Lisbon Treaty, which came into force last year, was a major reform of the EU and how it works. The Lisbon Treaty was drawn up following the failure of an earlier proposed European constitution. A new permanent post of president of the European Council was created, and the first holder of this office is former Belgian Prime Minister Herman van Rompuy. A second new position, that of high representative for foreign affairs, was filled by a Briton: Catherine Ashton, a member of the House of Lords and previously the UK’s European commissioner.
- **Dialogue with the Churches** – One of the articles of the Lisbon Treaty specifically recognised the role that European Churches play in society and commits the European Union institutions to “open, transparent and regular dialogue”.
- **The Euro** – The issue of whether the UK should adopt the Euro is not high on the political agenda, as most economists agree that the conditions are not right and the move would not benefit the UK at the present time. Many politicians remain

committed to the principal of joining the Euro zone, and many are implacably opposed. Although it is not expected to feature as a main issue during this General Election campaign, it is worth considering in the long term, and finding out what your candidates’ views might be, if this is an important issue for you.

Questions

- What can be done to help people understand European issues better?
- What role should the UK have in Europe, and what role does Europe have to play in the world?
- Where do you think the European Union is heading? Should Turkey be allowed to become a member?

Further Information

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Faith in Public Life



Background

- British society has, over the last few decades, become increasingly diverse. There are now significant minorities of Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Sikhs as well as smaller communities of other faiths.
- The Churches have been engaged with promoting good relations between the different faiths throughout this period.
- Local faith forums are important for different faiths to come together around particular agendas.
- The terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 and London in 2005 have raised concerns about religious extremism, religiously motivated violence and the fragmentation of communities where different faiths might live in isolation from one another.
- In the past few years there has been a rise in anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, attacks on minority communities and the election of candidates from the far right to local councils, the London Assembly and the European Parliament.
- There has been some criticism that government funding and other policies place too much emphasis on Islam and that its policies in this area view Muslims through a 'security lens'.

Issues

- **Countering religious-inspired terrorism** – In the UK, the police and security services remain vigilant against terrorism by using intelligence-gathering methods. The government has implemented a strategy of community cohesion with the aim of stopping extremist ideas from putting down roots in local communities – this is known as PREVENT. They have also supported the work of inter faith organisations to help break down barriers.
- **Secularisation** – Some people believe that UK is an increasingly secular society, and that this has led to the marginalisation of the perspectives of faith and in particular the Christian Churches. On the other hand the government has consistently defended 'faith' schools and has greatly increased its consultation with faith communities.
- **The Salt of the Earth** – Churches play a huge role in increasing social capital and community cohesion. A range of studies have shown that the Churches are very active in community involvement, social action and social care. Many Churches and Christian organisations are directly involved in the provision of services to the most vulnerable in our society and receive funding from different levels of government for this. During a recession and tightening financial circumstances there are fears the most vulnerable will lose out and smaller

voluntary organisations will be pushed out in favour of larger private sector providers with the resources to respond to tenders and offer economies of scale. What role can and should MPs and the government take in supporting and encouraging faith groups' involvement in the provision of services for our most vulnerable?

- **The Light of the World** – Churches have a role in speaking up for the most vulnerable in the public sphere, for example, condemning the detention of children of asylum seekers and denouncing the BNP for claiming to represent British Christians. However, some politicians have argued for faith to remain a private conviction and against religious values and motivation being expressed in politics.

Questions

- What role do you think faith communities should play in politics and public life?
- How can politicians and faith groups have a meaningful conversation about important social issues?
- How can religious freedoms be protected and religious differences respected, whilst still addressing concerns about extremism and terrorism?

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Global Peace and Security



Background

- British and allied military presence in Afghanistan dates back to 2001 – the conflict has lasted longer than the Second World War. By November 2009, more than 230 UK armed forces personnel had lost their lives in the conflict.
- War zones and areas of political instability remain a cause for concern. These include:
 - Pakistan – government troops fighting al-Qaeda-inspired forces and suffering suicide bomb attacks.
 - Iran – persecution of Baha'i religious minority and western fears about nuclear weapons proliferation.
 - North Korea – nuclear weapons and long range missile testing from an unstable country.
 - Zimbabwe – political power sharing between Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF and the Movement for Democratic Change.
 - Democratic Republic of Congo – violence and instability continue as the country struggles to emerge from civil war.
 - Sri Lanka - the civil war between government forces and the Tamil Tigers ended in 2009, but reconstruction and reconciliation work will be long and difficult.
 - Fiji – the military government have clamped down on the activities of the Methodist Church (the largest religious group in Fiji) and arrested their leaders.
 - Many other situations around the world, including the Middle East, Burma and Sudan.
- International discussions continue around nuclear proliferation, cluster munitions and climate change.

Issues

- **Global threats and challenges** – The UK's National Security Strategy indicates that the security threats are no longer posed by other countries, instead they are more likely to come from challenges such as climate change, economic recession on a global scale, bad governance, competition for global resources, global militarisation and terrorism. There is strong cross-party recognition of this.
- **Afghanistan** – The purpose of British troops in Afghanistan has been increasingly questioned over the past year, as casualty numbers rise, with no obvious notion of what 'success' in Afghanistan would look like. Widespread criticism and allegations of vote rigging in the 2009 presidential election have led some to ask why the west is supporting such a corrupt regime. The threat of al-Qaeda-inspired terrorist action emanating from Afghanistan may have diminished, whereas the risk from Pakistan or even from within the UK is still high. As an anti-terrorism operation,

is it still the most effective thing that the government can do? Rebuilding Afghanistan and protecting the population is another reason for British forces to be there, but many are now asking whether the price – in terms of money and in lives – is too great to pay.

- **Nuclear arms** – Nuclear weapons proliferation is on the international agenda, as in May 2010 the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference takes place. This once-every-five-years meeting provides a framework for international disarmament negotiations. The potential for this meeting to make real progress is high, as recently the USA and Russia have agreed significant cuts in their nuclear weapons stocks. North Korea and Iran are widely believed to have acquired or wish to acquire their own nuclear capability. At the same time, the UK is in the process of renewing its own nuclear weapons system, known as Trident.
- **Terrorism and civil liberties** – The threat of terrorism in the UK and around the world remains high. In recent months there have been suicide bombings in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is strong political support for the work of the intelligence and security services, though there is an ongoing debate around security and civil liberties. Detention without charge for up to 42 days for terrorist suspects and the introduction of identity cards have proved to be controversial measures and remain the subject of debate.

Questions

- What are the options for the future of Afghanistan? Which is best?
- With Russia and the USA committing to reduce nuclear arsenals, what further measures should the UK be taking to secure a world free of nuclear weapons?
- Is there a trade off between security and civil liberties and, if so, where should the line be drawn?
- How can the government work to longer-term goals, such as state-building, peace-building, non-proliferation and climate change, and relate these to defence expenditure?

Further Information

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Health



Background

Health is always a key issue in General Election campaigns. Throughout the last year key topics have been swine flu, dementia care, the crossover between social and health care, and the move to all nurses being graduates.

Issues

- **Compassion** - In January 2009 the National Health Service (NHS) published its constitution, and it contains the concept of 'compassion':

"We respond with humanity and kindness to each person's pain, distress, anxiety or need. We search for the things we can do, however small, to give comfort and relieve suffering. We find time for those we serve and work alongside. We do not wait to be asked, because we care."

These are values that the Churches would want to endorse, but would also want to see the rights and responsibilities contained in the NHS constitution articulated in a way that enhances care.

- **Access to services** – These include seeing a GP at a time that suits the patient, access to services locally for accident and emergency care, cancer care, neonatal care, and how these are managed at a time of limited resources. Should school dental checks for every child be prioritised over eliminating mixed-sex accommodation in hospitals? Should people have a direct say in how their local health care provision and hospital services are provided? Are targets in healthcare a helpful aspiration or do they just contribute to more bureaucracy and form-filling? At the end of the day, the public want Scandinavian levels of service funded by US levels of taxation. It is the difficult job of politicians to promote their policies to the public. The Churches would want to stress the importance of serving those in greatest need first of all.
- **Waiting times** – There are ongoing questions about the use of 'alternative providers' for surgery, including care abroad.
- **Infections** – Swine flu and the provision for care and the maintenance of services if the number of cases rise to epidemic proportions and also hospital acquired infections remain political issues. How can these be reduced and eliminated from health care settings?
- **Mental health** – With an increase in reporting of mental health problems linked to the current financial crisis, problems in the area of mental wellbeing are likely to affect more individuals, families and communities.

- **Dementia** – The UK's ageing population means there will be an increase in people suffering from dementia and the effect on their families, carers and the NHS will be costly.
- **Nursing** – Nurses are at the forefront of care and new guidelines indicate that, in the future, they must be graduates. Will this move lead to better standards of care?

Questions

- How can there be improved access to local specialist services eg cancer care, neonatal care?
- With an increasing elderly population, what support is needed to ensure excellent local care for those with dementia?
- What measures do you think should be taken to promote general health and fitness?
- What are your priorities in healthcare? How would you work out the allocation of resources to those people who are in greatest need?

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International Development



Background

- The financial crisis has caused economic growth in developing countries to plummet in 2009, trapping a further 46,000,000 people below the poverty line. High food costs have disproportionately hit the poor.
- The major international donors are failing to deliver the level of increased aid and debt relief that was promised at the G8 Gleneagles summit in 2005.
- Many developing countries continue to see a movement of people to cities. In 2010, globally, those living in rural areas will, for the first time, be outnumbered by those living in cities. Slightly more than one third of all people living in urban areas live in slum conditions.

Issues

- **The global economy** – Recession exposes the fragile nature of growth in weak economies and when the investment bubble bursts, thousands find themselves unemployed. The G20 agreed a global stimulus package of \$1.1 trillion. Much of this will go to support middle income countries. Policy responses need to focus on wider issues of economic justice, such as better regulation for international business, countering tax avoidance and corruption and just trade rules to overcome protectionism.
- **Trade** – The collapse of the Doha Development Round of trade talks came about after developed nations failed to agree on measures to allow developing nations special leeway on tariffs to protect fragile economic sectors from cheap imports. Currently the EU is negotiating regional economic partnership agreements (EPAs) that the Trade Justice Movement claim will force through a liberalisation agenda that undermines healthcare provision and education for poor people.
- **Debt** – The Jubilee Debt Campaign has warned of a new debt crisis as developing country export revenues are hit by the global financial crisis. Of 43 economies that the World Bank identifies as most at risk from the crisis, 38 had been previously been identified by the Jubilee Debt Campaign as having unpayable levels of debt.
- **Aid** – All three major political parties are committed to honouring the UK pledge to ensure that we provide 0.7% of gross domestic product (GDP) towards international development by 2013. Some smaller parties have pledged to go further than this. There is greater divergence in policy concerning how the money is spent and through what channels. The Department for International Development has had a mandate to use aid to help alleviate poverty. Some are concerned that this may not remain the key priority above that of UK foreign policy and economic interests.

- **Climate change** – Many developing countries are already beginning to suffer the effects of climate change. There is widespread acceptance that developed nations who have contributed most to the increase in greenhouse gas emissions have a responsibility to help developing nations create sustainable low carbon economies and adapt to the impacts of climate change. Many are calling for a fund to be managed through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change or similar bodies, as this gives developing countries the greatest scope to determine how it should be used in accordance with their priorities.
- **Conflict** – Many of the world's poorest economies are suffering or emerging from conflict. The involvement of the major economic powers in internal conflict has a chequered history. In recent times agreement at the UN on the responsibility to protect and the establishment of the International Criminal Court offers hope that key human rights principles may have a greater bearing on the way in which states respond to conflict.
- **Agriculture** – Over the past 20 years funding for sustainable agriculture has fallen from 17% to 3% of official development assistance. In the context of climate change it is even more crucial that there is investment to improve the richness and productivity of the land including forests, watercourses and soils. However this must be combined with strong measures in each nation state to ensure that small farmers have security of land tenure and access to markets, information and improved infrastructure. The agricultural sector needs careful and sensitive development if the twin objectives of increasing food production and supporting small independent farmers are to be met.

Questions

- How best can we ensure that the alleviation of poverty, rather than foreign policy interests, is at the heart of UK aid and development policy?
- What reforms would you like to see of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF?
- How can we ensure that UK development efforts support green growth and jobs?
- How can we best develop the livelihoods of small farmers and develop opportunities in rural areas?

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Migration and Sanctuary



Background

- The right to asylum is a sign of our common humanity. Both practically and theologically we are responsible for one another. Our mutual responsibility cannot stop at national boundaries.
- Claims for asylum form a small part of the total annual migration to the UK. Both planned immigration (via work permits, study visits etc) and migration in response to persecution have contributed hugely to the richness of culture and diversity in the UK. Immigration is, however, a sensitive political issue. There is a current debate about an appropriate and sustainable level of population growth. Some people fear that changes to culture and society will mean that their traditional way of life is threatened. These fears have been exploited by extremist political parties.
- There were 25,000 asylum applications in 2008, down from 84,000 in 2002.
- Research by the Independent Asylum Commission shows that the word 'asylum' has very negative connotations. It recommends that the word 'sanctuary' be used instead in public discourse. Citizens for Sanctuary is a campaign which is asking all prospective parliamentary candidates to agree not to make asylum a political football at this election, and are inviting all candidates to sign the 'Sanctuary Pledge' – www.sanctuarypledge.org.uk.

Issues

- **Detention of children** – Tens of thousands of men, women and children (both immigrants and those seeking sanctuary) are detained under the UK's immigration rules each year. Detention is costly, both in financial and in human terms. The enforced uncertainty and anxiety detainees experience can have a serious impact on their mental and physical well-being. One current campaign is 'OutCry!' which is calling for an end to the detention of children and families for immigration purposes.
- **Destitution** – Many people seeking sanctuary are left destitute by the asylum process in the UK. No one knows exactly how many people have been left destitute at the end of the asylum process, without any status, permission to work, or access to benefits. Many are not removable from the UK (either because there is no safe route back to their country of origin, or because their governments will not issue them with a new passport). Many more are not removed by the UK government in a timely fashion and are left to wait with nothing. They wait for many years in this situation – completely reliant on charity, kindness or being terribly exploited in the sex industry or in illegal employment. 'Still Human Still Here' is the name of a campaign seeking to help destitute people who have not been successful in their asylum claim.

- **Vouchers** – Several thousand individuals seeking sanctuary are supported under what is known as "Section 4 support". These individuals are at the end of their cases and have either agreed that they are willing to return to their countries of origin or have managed to get sufficient new evidence to reopen their claims for sanctuary in the UK. Around 14,000 individuals are supported under these measures. They receive accommodation and voucher support (mainly gift tokens for a named supermarket). There is no cash element at all to the support and they receive £35 a week in vouchers. Many projects exchange these vouchers for face value by selling them on to supporters to enable those living on supermarket vouchers to exercise more choice and have more dignity. The government has recently introduced a new form of voucher support (an Azure card) which cannot be exchanged for cash. The card operates like a prepaid debit card which is topped up weekly but does not have a chip and pin facility so that money cannot be obtained from ATMs. Campaigners have been disappointed by this move because it will stop asylum seekers from having any cash, which can make life very difficult, especially as some individuals have been on section 4 support for up to five years.
- **Right to work** – Except for certain limited circumstances, those seeking sanctuary are not allowed to work while waiting for a decision on their claim for protection in the UK. If they were allowed to work it would help those who go on to receive permission to stay in the UK to quickly move on into more permanent work, further reducing the cost to the tax payer. Because of lack of work experience it can take months and sometimes years for a refugee to get work after being awarded sanctuary.

Questions

- What are the alternatives to the detention of children and families of people seeking sanctuary?
- Will the candidates support the Citizens for Sanctuary proposals around the election campaign?
- How can the system of asylum processing be improved to be swifter and fairer? How can churches and community groups be enabled to help people in the system who have nothing?

Further information

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Poverty and Social Exclusion



Background

- The gap between rich and poor in the UK is greater now than at any time in the past 40 years.
- Inequality in the UK has reached a shocking level. The poorest and most vulnerable people in our society are left behind, while a minority benefit hugely from our prosperity. This is not only unjust – research shows that the growing gap between rich and poor also has a corrosive effect on society as a whole. Inequality is linked to crime, health problems and a host of other social ills.

Issues

- **Child Poverty** – 30% of children live in poverty, according to the End Child Poverty Campaign. There is widespread political consensus in support of the target of eradicating child poverty by 2020. If this is to be achieved, urgent action is needed to prioritise targeted interventions that make the difference in breaking the cycles of deprivation. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the government needs to develop a joint strategy to tackle child poverty with the devolved governments/assemblies.
- **The poverty premium** – Fuel poverty is a growing problem. Upwards of 20,000 people die of cold-related factors each winter in the UK, often because they cannot afford to heat their homes properly. Many people on low incomes have to use prepayment meters for their gas and electricity. Yet, whilst customers who pay by direct debit receive discounts, those who use prepayment meters are charged a premium for their energy. Essentially, the richer customers are being subsidised by the poorer ones. According to the National Housing Federation, energy companies make £50,000,000 a year from the excess cost of prepayment meters – even though these customers have an average household income of just £13,500.
- **Legal loan sharks** – People on low incomes frequently cannot borrow money from mainstream banks. Instead, they are forced to borrow from doorstep lenders or companies offering ‘payday’ loans. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, there is no limit in the UK to the interest rates that companies can charge. Rates range from 180% to over 1,000% APR. People therefore become trapped in a cycle of debt, borrowing more and more. In 2006, the Competition Commission found that the doorstep lending industry was making excess profits of £75,000,000 a year – but no action has been taken as yet to restrict the cost of doorstep loans.

- **A minimum income standard** – Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, based on views of members of the public, suggests a single person in the UK needs to earn at least £13,900 a year before tax in 2009, in order to afford a basic but acceptable standard of living. Working-age people on benefits remain well below the minimum income standard. In spite of the national minimum wage, almost half of children in poverty are in a family where someone is in full time work.
- **A fair society and a fair tax system** – Over the past 30 years the UK has got richer – but 40% of the total extra income since 1979 has gone to the richest 10% of the population. Because they are hit harder by everyday taxes like VAT, people on low incomes actually pay a higher proportion of their incomes in tax than the highest earners. Many of the wealthiest people are also able to evade much of the tax they should be paying.

Questions

- What can be done to reduce socio-economic inequality?
- What practical support do people living in poverty need most?
- How does the current tax and benefits system contribute to wealth redistribution or greater inequality? What changes should be made?

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