



THE 2019 ELECTION AND BEYOND

1. Taking a stand

Ekklesia is not affiliated to any political party. Our voluntary staff and associates, along with our contributors and supporters, belong to a number of parties and none.

However, as a think-tank and agency for change we do not and cannot pretend to stand above or outside the arena of political struggle – because this is one of the crucial spaces where the struggle for the transformational values and practices takes place.

In Ekklesia's General Election focus paper from 2015, 'Vote for What You Believe In' (<http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk/node/21487>), we outlined ten core value-based principles which we feel remain important for voters to consider when making their choice on 12th December 2019 – and also in the months and years to come.

Our ten 'benchmarks' for working for a better society and voting for the common good were consciously designed to be shared by people of goodwill from different faiths and non-religious convictions. They are:

- *A commitment to favouring the poorest and most vulnerable*
- *Actively redressing social and economic injustices and inequalities*
- *Welcoming the stranger and valuing displaced and marginalised people*
- *Seeing people, their dignity and rights as the solution not the problem*
- *Moving from punitive 'welfare' to a society where all can genuinely fare well*
- *Promoting community and neighbourhood empowerment*
- *Food, education, health, housing, work and sustainable income for all*
- *Care for planet and people as the basis for human development*
- *Investing in nonviolent alternatives to war and force as the basis for security*
- *Transparency, honesty and accountability in public and economic life*

2. Deciding how to vote

In the past Ekklesia has stressed the importance of voting as a voluntary act of witness, as well as a tangible instrument of democratic choice. We have recognised that there are circumstances in which refusing to endorse any of the available candidates may be a necessary stand. We have also put an emphasis on ‘voting for what you believe in’, rather than simply opting for the least worst option.

However, there are also circumstances in which it may be irresponsible not to participate, and where difficult or less than palatable choices may be essential to thwart a major threat to the common good, and to the interests of those who are most marginalised and threatened in society.

Many would judge that the 2019 UK General Election is such a moment, just as the 2020 US Presidential election will be. For those who stand by the active principles set out above, the election of Boris Johnson’s hard-right Conservative Party and/or the re-election of Donald Trump would, by any measure, represent a huge set-back for truth-telling and integrity in politics, for health and welfare for all, for greater redistribution of wealth, for the prospects of radical action on climate change, and for efforts to rid the world of weapons of mass destruction.

Both people and planet are already paying a high (potentially fatal) cost for the recent surges in reactionary populism, the alt right, racism and xenophobia. The dark money, digital manipulation falsification of facts behind the campaigns for Johnson, Trump, Brexit, Orban and Bolsanaro (among others) are a threat to democracy, as well as to the active values of equality, justice, inclusion, peacebuilding and environmental responsibility.

In this UK election it seems clear that voting for a better future requires setting aside tribal party loyalties and looking towards a coalition of people and parties which can thwart the advance of the hard right, put the Brexit conundrum back to the people, and set the stage for a significant overhaul of the voting system. Our friends at Compass and Make Votes Matter are among those urging people to make pragmatic choices for a much larger good.

Above all, we would urge you to vote with primary concern for those whose lives are seriously put the line by the health and social care crises we face, by the catastrophe of Universal Credit, by vicious cutbacks impacting disabled and sick people, by poverty and homelessness, by the impact of global warming here and elsewhere in the world, by the rising tide of xenophobia towards EU citizens and other migrants, by the growth of racism and intolerance, and by the misuse of economic resources which puts more and more wealth and power into the hands of just a few.

3. Actions for change

In past elections, including 2015 and 2017, Ekklesia has put considerable effort into examining the parties' General Election manifestos, analysing them in terms of our core values and principles, and offering comment on the extent to which they do or do not fulfil and genuinely humanitarian and transformatory vision. In 2019 we have not had the time or resources to do this. However, we asked Ekklesia's main contributors for some of the commitments they would like to see in the realm of government action. The following is a by no means comprehensive list of the major challenges we face. That is, the need for:

- A 'Green New Deal', including radical measures to decarbonise the economy, with major investments in renewable energy, just transition of the economy, public transport, and building public housing on the 'passive house' model.
- Abandoning GDP as the main and only way of measuring economic success: opting instead for a 'wellbeing economy' and ground-level environmental sustainability.
- Decisive action on tax avoidance and evasion, environmental taxes, and a move towards land value tax and a Universal Citizen's Income.
- Examining how AI, automation and robotification can be developed in safe and accountable ways that enables wealth to be shared and drudgery and waste to be replaced by new avenues for human creativity.
- A commission on 'public enterprise' and creative/participatory forms of public ownership of major utilities.
- A major reform of the banking system, including national, regional, local and small business investment banks; re-regulation of the City of London.
- A living wage for carers and others who contribute to the quality of life and health for us all outside the traditional economy.
- Scrapping and replacing Universal Credit. An overhaul of social security along the rights-based approach taken by the Scottish Government. Reform of welfare policy and administration.
- Scrapping Trident nuclear weapons, ending the arms trade, and working the staged conversion and re-investment of military industry towards civilian production and employment.
- A new foreign policy based on investment in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, the extension of human rights (including economic, social and cultural rights), the strengthening of multilateral institutions, nonviolent intervention forces, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination.
- A major public housebuilding programme housing; making all new builds 'lifetime' homes which will be accessible and meet people's needs if they become disabled at any stage.
- An end to privatization within the NHS, together with user- and practitioner-led reform and refunding.
- An end to selection and employment on the basis of religion or belief in publicly funded schools; the end of tax relief for private schooling.

- The strengthening of fire safety/building regulations and steps to ensure that disasters like Grenfell are not allowed to happen again.
- A positive and devolved immigration policy; full rights for EU citizens in the UK; policies for welcoming and settling asylum seekers and refugees.
- Political reform: scrapping FPTP and replacing it with a proportional voting system at UK level; regular citizens assemblies; an independent television debates commission for election periods; full transparency for election spending and a cap on large donations; action to halt the abuse of digital media by wealthy lobby groups and parties; scrapping the House of Lords and replacing it with a regionally elected/nominated revising chamber; a public enquiry into the 2016 EU referendum illegalities and dark money.
- Truth Charter: a commitment from parliamentarians and public officials not to knowingly mislead, make excuses or refuse to answer questions. An undertaking that ministers who can be shown to have intentionally misled Parliament or the public would be made to resign and face civil sanction.
- Employment: an end to generalised zero hours contracts. A national minimum wage of at least £10 per hour. Investment in continuous training, reskilling and lifelong learning.
- A final-say referendum on Brexit; powers for the people of Scotland and Wales to decide their own governance and constitutional future; a commission on alternative confederal arrangements to the current United Kingdom settlement; a four nations constitutional convention.
- Reform of the media, including Leveson 2, restrictions on corporate ownership, investment in cooperatives, a new fairness and fact-checking charter for the BBC, and a establishing a major public/private/charitable trust to invest in public service reporting and publishing.
- Giving regulatory bodies like the Electoral Commission and the Advertising Standards Authority extended and preemptive statutory powers, so that the rules have more of a deterrent effect on would-be wrongdoers.
- On Council Tax, Business Rates and the funding of local authorities, reform to move to regimes which are less regressive for individuals, and more redistributive between rich and poor areas across the UK.
- An end to driven grouse shooting and subsidies for grouse moors which are environmentally damaging.
- Extensive tree planting programmes, especially in areas where it could help prevent flooding.

Many of these aspirations are reflected in the various commitments, policies and manifestos of the Labour Party, the Greens, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Women's Equality Party; and to a lesser extent by the Liberal Democrats. In Northern Ireland the Alliance Party and the SDLP are among those seeking to offer cross-communal hope. Standing against many of these hopes and proposals are the Johnson-led Conservative Party, the Brexit Party (which is actually a corporation rather than a party), UKIP and the DUP. People can form their own judgement on such matters, but the evidence is that there are sharp divides on these questions, not just on Brexit, the Irish border question

(which is crucial to the Good Friday peace process) and on the question of the constitutional settlements in Scotland and Wales.

4. Fixing democracy; reinvesting an ethics of civic engagement

The 2019 General Election campaign has not been good for democracy at any level: representative, deliberative or participatory. It is clear that the Westminster voting system is broken beyond repair and does not permit fair, diverse and proportionate representation. In addition to electoral reform, written constitutions, and reform of the fabric of our political institutions, a major re-energising of, and reinvestment in, civic life and education – including the development of in-person civic assemblies and their social media equivalent – is required. The issue of tackling truth decay and moving beyond post-truth and populist politics is a much larger one which Ekklesia hopes to tackle in the future. In the meantime, these *Short Thoughts Before a Long Night* (Jill Segger) set out an ethos framework within which to consider these and other fundamental issues in the aftermath of 12th December 2019:

“It has been a terrible three years. Our politics is broken. The moral compass which until fairly recently, still pointed reasonably well to a cardinal point of rectitude, trimmed and ordered by the knowledge of shame and the ill-defined but generally understood code of conduct by which legislators and electorate guided themselves, is now so dysfunctional that even to try the words ‘honour’, ‘trust’ or ‘restraint’ seems quaint and naive.

“We hold our politicians in contempt. We fear that no one – individually or corporately – is telling us the truth. Social media digs us deep and deeper into redoubts of abuse and hatred. We are readier to yell insult than to reflect and attempt the painful silence of discernment.

“The division which has, to a significant extent, been created by the unscrupulous playing upon ignorance and fear, should give us pause. It is never too late to learn, though the delay in doing so may be about to bring us hard years. The system, and our understanding of the relationship between executive, legislature, judiciary and voters is in urgent need of overhaul.

“Referendums – of which there will inevitably be more – must be better regulated, as must the ‘wild west’ of digital campaigning. If we are willing to let unexamined opinions master us and permit differences to grow into tyrants, rather than perceiving them as adjudicators and teachers, we can only become more angry and divided. That suits the interests of the self-seeking and callous elements of power. There is a great deal of work to be done in remaking our unwritten constitution – its ‘good chaps’ guidelines have been comprehensively destroyed, while a crazy voting system renders the votes of so many meaningless, and permits the incumbents of ‘safe’ seats to cock a snook at scrutiny and accountability.

“There are personal responsibilities too, because we are not yet so far gone in the slide towards unchecked power that we cannot push back against its scouts and enablers. We must be agents of solidarity, looking after the weakest and being ever alert to each other’s needs. A Friend recently reminded me of these words from Galatians: “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

“Indeed, there is not. Nor is there any power that can permanently keep us from these life-giving and transformative virtues.”

5. #SmallActsOfHope

Last but not least, we commend our ongoing #SmallActsOfHope project as a way of renewing ourselves, our neighbours and our commitments in times which can feel dark and troubling. See here for details and links: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/29031>

Simon Barrow
Director

ABOUT EKKLESIA

Ekklesia is an independent change network promoting transformative ideas for a better world. Our aim is to connect positive beliefs and ethics with politics. We seek to be a ‘theatre for ideas’, combining reflection, action and culture. Our roots are in Christian social thought, but people of other convictions (both non-religious and religious) are vital partners. Our vision is of justice, peace and sustainability for people and planet.

Established as a citizen-based think tank in 2002, Ekklesia has evolved into a reflection, briefing, policy, publishing and advocacy organisation. We seek to be small, mobile, flexible and intelligent. Over the past 17 years over 200 people have contributed to our work, including (at different stages) some 20 associates, two directors, three associate directors, a COO, a publishing manager and seven board members.

We now feel that the designation ‘change network’ captures what we seek to do better than the corporatised and much-abused term ‘think tank’, and in any case we remain committed to a style of practical and theoretical investigation which could reasonably be described as “thinking without tanks”.

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