



EKKLESIA GENERAL ELECTION FOCUS 2015

'VOTE FOR WHAT YOU BELIEVE IN'

SUMMARY:

With the rise of people-based parties, civic movements for social change, and opposition to debt-deflationary austerity policies, aspects of politics in Europe are shifting in a progressive direction. But there is also a dark side, signaled by social dislocation, the scapegoating of minorities, toxic ideologies, and aggressive xenophobia. As a 'democratic moment' in this changing context, the UK General Election is being seen as potentially the most open in years. The major parties are being challenged on all sides. Political pluralism is growing. Will hope or trepidation prevail? This Ekklesia paper suggests that elections should be seen precisely as 'moments of opportunity' in a broader and wider political process that needs to be rooted in civic action and participation, rather than dominated by unaccountable elites. Our challenge to Christians and to all people of good faith (religious or otherwise) is to be courageous; to seek to 'Vote for What You Believe In', and to act for what you believe in, rather than succumbing to a reductionist narrative that says you can only get something slightly less worse than you fear. Here we offer a rationale for that positive approach, an overview of the changing political scene, Ten Core Values that provide a basis for interrogating parties and candidates, an encouragement to pledge ourselves to a politics of principle, consideration of fostering honest belief in politics and 'voting as witness', and extensive references and resources.

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1. Introducing ‘Vote for What You Believe In’

As the 2015 UK General Election approaches, a variety of candidates, many representing political parties large and small, are out to win votes. How will people who care deeply about social and economic justice, peacemaking, global solidarity, hospitality towards migrants, the priority of tackling poverty, the need for inclusion and the case for equality approach this poll? Will they vote **and act** in fear, in hope, or with a combination of the two and a sense of uncertainty about what the future may bring? These are the key questions we wish to address, because they are important to the values and principles we as a thinktank stand for. [1]

‘Vote for What You Believe In’ is about the need to transform the way people approach politics, and as part of that the way voters approach elections. The two, it should be noted, are not identical. Politics is, or should be, about how power is brought as close to people as possible (subsidiarity), and how it is used for good – most specifically to promote participation and communal wellbeing, and to benefit those who are currently at the bottom of the heap or pushed to the margins. [2]

It is important to recognize that an election is not the sum of politics. It is a moment in a much larger and wider political process – an “event in democracy” (Vaughan Jones). That realization ought to free us up to be able to make bolder choices at election times, and to realize that beyond those electoral moments, we can and should be working to make the representative system more responsive to participative change from the grassroots – from among the jobless, the low paid, those with disabilities, minority communities, LGBTQI people, migrants and many others who often feel (and in practice are) disenfranchised by the dominant order.

So politics is much more than voting. Nevertheless, elections are clearly vital opportunities for change in political processes more widely conceived, because they help determine who has their hands on the larger levers of power (the system of governance); and because the tone and outcome of elections continues to shape what those who are elected to public office will feel mandated to do with it, and how they will respond once they are 'in power'.

In recent years, there has been much disenchantment with conventional, electoral politics. People have come to distrust politicians in ever-larger numbers. They see little to choose between them. They believe they are out for themselves, not for the wider good. Many vote tribally because that is how they have been acclimatised. They vote for parties they do not really care for in order to make a protest they do not really think will make much difference. They vote cynically to keep a 'worse lot' out. Or they do not vote at all because they consider it to be a waste of time.

This is understandable. In Britain, more and more decisions are taken by 'the market' rather than by elected representatives. 'The market', in turn, has been corrupted by the dominance of huge corporate interests, not by the activities of small and medium participants. A thoroughgoing change in our political and financial systems is needed – including constitutional and electoral reform, democratic controls over finance, and a move towards environmentally and communally sustainable economics. Along with others, Ekklesia has analyzed, commented upon and advocated many of these changes over the past dozen or more years. [3]

Deep change of the kind that is required in our public institutions is about far more than swapping parties at elections. It is about social transformation. But elections can play a significant role in shifting allegiances, changing agendas, and setting new directions. And as we map out below, things *are* changing. Across Europe, people are rising up and realigning to claim power back from unaccountable institutions and machine politicians.

So while fear still conditions many of our largest institutions and the mental landscape of those who have clung on to power for many years, we suggest that *this UK election is actually a moment of hope*. The system can be challenged, both from without and within. It is possible to demand better of those who seek to represent us than we and they have previously believed possible. Against the tide of despair, it is necessary for people of conviction to say, quoting Welsh actor and activist Michael Sheen: "You must stand up for what you believe - but first of all, by God, believe in something." (*Huffington Post*, 3 March 2015). Not anything, note, but a 'something' that is about enhancing life, liberty, equality, sharing, peaceableness and social hope.

2. What Ekklesia is promoting, proposing, providing, piloting and pledging

'Vote for What You Believe In' endorses *an approach to deciding how to vote and participate in politics based on principles and values* rather than tribal allegiances, febrile calculations of advantage, and lowest-common-denominator assessments of who will win in the short run. Over the coming weeks we will be:

- Promoting papers and reports on key issues – like migration, welfare and economy – based on the direct experience of those living at the cutting edge, and the wisdom of those working for change in a hands-on way.
- Proposing our **Ten core values for General Election participants**, which came out of an Ekklesia consultation at the end of 2014. These are Christian in formulation, but open to ownership by people of other beliefs, religious and otherwise.
- Providing up-to-the minute news and topic briefing on key issues in and beyond the election, together with Christian (and other) perspectives and comment.
- Piloting some innovative ideas about voter and citizen engagement ('Platform Politics') that will have a shelf life beyond the 2015 General Election.
- Pledging to match our votes as far as possible to what we believe in through a process aimed at increasing the number of people visible in public life who want to stand up for principles that put people and planet first.

3. If you never vote for what you want, you never get it

The German philologist, philosopher and cultural critic Friedrich Nietzsche once declared that "Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies", [4] while W. B. Yeats observed in a dark moment of history that "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." [5] It is therefore important to stress that the kind of 'believing' Ekklesia wishes to put back into the political and electoral process is not the fanaticism of those who can only ever see one side to an argument, one winner, and one protagonist (them and theirs) who is righteous – but rather the kind of believing that wishes to move beyond self-interest to genuine concern for the other, and most especially the disadvantaged other.

The shadow side of 'believing' can be seen in the passionate intensity of those mobilizing for parties and causes based on racism, cultural superiority, xenophobia and deformed claims about preserving 'a Christian country'. [6] These are dangerous narratives deliberately designed to attract people who feel

excluded by the system. They are about encouraging people to find someone who is different to them to blame for what is wrong. This is a 'divide and rule' populist strategy perpetrated by those with ideological intent. The answer is not to buttress a failing system in the face of malign assault, but to develop a language, politics and communal practice of hope: to demonstrate and argue for a better way that brings the excluded together rather than dividing them. This is part of the 'alternative way' (political, social, personal, cultural, environmental, and spiritual) that Ekklesia seeks to further through its research, advocacy and commentary.

Equally, while we do not think that voting should be compulsory, and while we have always recognised the place for refusing to vote as a matter of conscience in particular circumstances, Ekklesia has always argued that the enemy of social transformation is the apathy that its opponents recognize as perhaps the most potent way of thwarting change, small or large. In his latest documentary, 'Bitter Lake', [7] filmmaker Adam Curtis probes the helpless, "oh dear..." culture that has been bred by the chaos and confusion of much contemporary politics – as people drown in information, but lack the framework or understanding to make sense of it, or to retain the belief that "another world is possible". [8]

In this context, the philosophy behind 'Vote for What You Believe In' is a return to core values and principles on the one hand, and reassessment of dominant political messages on the other. As commentator George Monbiot puts it: *"Here is the first rule of politics: if you never vote for what you want, you never get it."* [9] Continually to choose something you do not want for fear of something worse is to allow change to be continually blocked. A wider range of choices and a better set of calculations are needed for the body politic as a whole. In electoral terms, that has to start with the choices people make in the ballot box. At present the non-proportional First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system remains a significant barrier both to people voting for their convictions and getting a share of representation from their vote. We continue to believe that political reform and the reinvention of 'town hall politics' (rather than sterile hustings) are essential to the revivification of democratic participation.

It is of course possible that a 'Vote for What You Believe In' approach will not affect the outcome of the election, or result in a particular government of choice. However, it can be the starting point in a longer, larger process of change. It helps demonstrate to politicians that voters care about a wider good, and it can have long-term impact on policymaking, whichever party is elected. It can help larger parties reassess their values and change direction. It can strengthen the voice of smaller parties or independent candidates. Voting is one aspect of being a citizen. It is also, in a certain sense, "an act of witness": a signal of what it is you want to stand up for (not just stand against) at a particular moment. [10]

4. The changing political landscape and how to negotiate it

The backdrop to the 2015 General Election in the UK is that the political landscape is now changing across Europe. The growth of civic-based movements

and the fragmenting of hegemonic political blocs is opening up new possibilities. The victory of the Syriza coalition in Greece has placed a major question mark against debt-deflationary and public sector cuts policies dubbed 'austerity'. [11] The startling growth of Podemos ('We Can') in Spain is posing similar questions in that country. In Portugal and elsewhere, dissent against stale orthodoxies is flowering.

The real choice, these civic change movements suggest, is not between competing versions of free market fundamentalism or old-style centralised security states. It is between an old political order which sees itself as having 'no alternative' but to bail out reckless financiers and makes ordinary people pay when economic systems based on speculation fails, and a new order where the economy, the environment and the political apparatus are democratised and re-directed towards the needs of the many rather than the self-interest of the few. Equally, it is about renewing or forming political parties on the broad basis of popular alliances, rather than on the narrow machinations of a technocratic elites.

The landscape is also changing in Britain. The huge civic movement mobilised north of the border by the 2014 independence referendum campaign has generated fresh debates about social justice, Trident, devolution and democratic accountability within the UK state. It has also changed the electoral landscape for several forthcoming elections, including the 2015 one. The Greens and Plaid Cymru in England and Wales, together with the resurgent SNP in Scotland, are talking of a 'progressive alliance'. [12] Meanwhile, UKIP has been tapping disillusionment with mainstream politics in regressive ways, particularly in England. The Conservative and Labour parties are struggling to hold on to the support that has given them overwhelming dominance of the Westminster system since the middle of the last century. And the Liberal Democrats are losing ground in the aftermath of participation in a five-year, austerity-based governing coalition with the Conservatives.

Equally, as we indicated earlier, there are darker forces at work. Far-right and xenophobic politics has also been on the rise in Europe. Anti-migrant and anti-foreigner rhetoric has been growing. In parts of Britain, UKIP has been able to exploit dissatisfaction and disgust with the existing political status quo in order to make populist capital out of blaming immigrants and the European Union for our discontents. These will not be countered by a return to "politics as usual", but by something boldly different – something which addresses why it is that people feel no investment in the society to which they nominally belong, how the threat to a publicly funded social security and health system is likely to produce more fragmentation and political toxicity, and why blaming people (most notably migrants and minorities) is not only morally wrong but a chronic failure to understand what is entailed by the interdependence of belonging to a community that is at once local and global.

There is truly a *kairos*, a moment of profound moral choice, bound up in this election.

5. So is a renewal of politics possible?

Right now it is clear what the 'new wave' in politics is not. It is not market fundamentalism and it is not a centralised state. In that sense, at least, it is not the old right or the old left. 'Third way' approaches have also come under serious scrutiny. What a renewed politics will look like has yet to be fully determined. Sustainability and environment obviously have to be centre-stage. There is renewed concern about the economic and social (as well as moral and spiritual) impact of inequality. Innovative ideas such as the Robin Hood Tax (a Financial Transaction Tax) [13] were considered eccentric and unthinkable when Ekklesia was being established in 2002. Now, though they still have a way to go, and will certainly have to adapt and change in an ever-evolving global system, they have become mainstream – as economists John Grahl and Photis Lysandrou suggest in their recent work on a Financial Activities Tax [14].

Despite recent controversies around transition cost, the same acceptance and transitioning is likely to be the case with the Basic Citizens' Income [15] as an alternative way of looking at the roots of distribution and welfare. In addition, voices from different (even antagonistic) places on the traditional political spectrum have found a common discourse around the complementary idea of a so-called 'negative income tax' (NIT) – a progressive tax where people earning below a certain amount receive supplemental income from the government instead of paying taxes. Land Value Tax as a partial or complete alternative to a local income tax has also been receiving policy attention in different quarters.

Similarly, post-austerity economic theory is being reinvented in an environmental direction for an era in which there is a need for huge transformational programmes designed substantially to reduce dependence on the use of fossil fuels while in the process sustainably boosting employment and confronting the decline in demand caused by the financial crisis and austerity. [16] Not all of these ideas will get on the agenda easily in a General Election where the best-funded ideas are embattled orthodoxies. But they may nevertheless be worth investing in vote-wise, and they are ideas and possibilities which are now being advocated in a number of different places across the political spectrum. To vote (and work) for such innovative possibilities is to vote for the future. A counsel of despair will not deliver them.

In short, the political game that has been played with surety in the past appears to be breaking down, though no one can easily calculate how. Again, from the 'Vote for What You Believe In' perspective, it makes sense to look primarily for what is hoped for, rather than what is feared. This will not always work with immediacy, of course. In 2010, many voted in hope of political reform in the shape of a more proportional voting system. The resulting half-baked proposal born of coalition compromise did not deliver.

But in the aftermath of the 2015 election, the pressure for a change in the ballot and on allied reform issues could be even stronger. The result in terms of parliamentary seats is unlikely to do justice to the way many have cast their

votes, and there will be a further reaction to that. Concomitantly, looking back on the Power 2010 initiative for political reform (see Appendix 1), it is evident that the route from pressure and/or voting to actual change is rarely straightforward, linear or fast. Momentum has to be maintained, and people's concerns linked at variety of political and demographic levels.

As part of preparing this paper, and the materials and reports that will accompany it, Ekklesia – a diverse company of thinkers and advocates with shared values but different experiences and outlooks – enjoyed a lively discussion about 'tactical voting'. To what extent can a vote rooted in conviction seek tactical advantage? Is voting with tactical intent for something any different to voting with tactical intent against something? To what extent should local and immediate factors be weighed against wider long-term ones? We did not reach a consensus about this. But we did want to reject the constant attempts being made across the political spectrum to persuade people to abandon what they believe on the basis that a vote for 'a' is really a vote for 'b' and so on. The welter of competing and contradictory 'advice' along these lines is growing more absurd by the day. Claims about the calculability of voting patterns rapidly become untenable. Polling data cross-comparisons are fitful. *Far better, we suggest, to look at what outcomes and policies you want to support or encourage, and then to look at the candidates and/or parties who can help to get these ideas picked up and acted on.* That is still a matter of judgement, but one based on practical principle rather than machine politics.

Within this framework, there are some difficult choices to be made as to *how* one seeks to implement what one believes. It is possible, for example, as we have just noted, to attempt to take a 'long view' of politics through our vote. This will inform the choice of politician now – not someone with immediate prospects of 'success', maybe, but someone who represents the bigger change we want to see. It can be argued that this runs the risk, in the short-run, of allowing in a government that may continue with policies that damage the poorest, many of whom may not be able to vote for themselves.

Might this mean that the best becomes the enemy of the better? Does our long-term choice cause more immediate harm to people who are more vulnerable than we are? Or will putting short-term considerations first continue to thwart the wider bigger change that addresses these very issues and concerns? In other words, will a shorter-term based on using our vote in a bid to alleviate more immediate suffering run the risk of perpetuating 'politics as usual' such that nothing changes substantially, which in the long run hits the poorest more deeply? These are simultaneously ethical and political decisions. They are complex. We are not coming down definitively on one side or another, but asking people to bear these factors in mind – while seeking to be as positive as possible in elevating humanizing principle over narrow party advantage.

Equally, there will be some who simply do not find the extent of what they would want to vote for available in the electoral choices before them. As Michael Sheen again said recently: *"What people everywhere are saying, regardless of their politics, is 'You can't choose if what you want isn't on the menu'."* So working for

meaningful political change that benefits people and planet, and especially the most vulnerable, is about using the resources at one's disposal, including the ballot, to challenge and change what is on offer – often incrementally, but sometimes, when the opportunity arises, through patterns of voting or civic mobilizing which make a more substantial breakthrough possible.

For that reason, beyond the UK General Election in 2015, Ekklesia wishes to work with others on the further elaboration of change-agency and radical democracy. This is where a 'democratic moment' in electoral politics has to pay more attention to the wider political arena, the power of social/civic movements, and the way the institutional infrastructure we inherit needs to be re-shaped by the broader architecture provided by some testable 'change theory'. [17]

Overall, therefore, Ekklesia is recommending an approach to electoral politics, whatever its flaws and limitations, which is about seeking to match voting intentions and civic action with core values and principles as far as possible. That requires participation. In the 2010 General Election, 15.9 million people did not vote – substantially more than any single political party achieved through the ballot. At the end of February 2015, some 7.5 million people who could vote were not registered to do so. We oppose compulsory voting, and recognize that some will choose on grounds of principle to withhold their vote. But again, the choice can and should be about hope not despair. Ekklesia's reasons for choosing and aligning with hope are set out in the next section.

6. Ekklesia's ten core values for General Election participants

In November 2014 a group of Ekklesia associates, board members and consultants came together to look at what our focus should be for the 2015 General Election. What emerged from that meeting, among other things, were ten core values, or principles, that spell out some major priorities for Christians (especially, given our constituency, but not exclusively) at a time of decision like this.

“What we seek together in political and civic engagement, not just at elections,” we said, “is a renewed society where self-interest increasingly gives way to common interest, and where sharing and forgiveness are the basis of common life.”

Our understanding of 'values' in this context is values-in-use, not merely espoused values. That is, principles which need to be judged in action, and which can create the conditions for rethinking the issues they address or the policies they point to in relation to examples of creative engagement, rather than detached theory.

Our ten core values, expressed in explicitly Christian terms but open to others, are set out below.

We have provided the briefest summary of the challenge from the Christian *message*, a *meaning* that looks for a dynamic equivalent of that challenge in the present, and a *memo* to General Election 2015 participants about some of the issues and questions we face in the United Kingdom right now:

(1) A commitment to favouring the poorest and most vulnerable

Message: In the biblical traditions of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, more is said about poverty and wealth than any other single topic. The concern is to lift up the downtrodden and challenge the misuse of power. In the company of Christ, outsiders become insiders.

Meaning: In the word of the late Anglican bishop, David Sheppard, there is within the Gospels a clear “bias to the poor”. This is something we want to see practised in the life of faith communities. However, the “poorest and most vulnerable” are not to be thought of as objects, but subjects and protagonists.

Memo: The Poverty Truth Commission [18] has adopted the maxim, “Nothing about us without us is for us.” Its aim is that those living at the rough edge of policies to do with housing, welfare, social security, education and more should be actively engaged in creating their own solutions, rather than being ‘done to’ by politicians, policymakers and parliaments from on high. How can we press political institutions to change the way they ‘do policy’ along these lines?

(2) Actively redressing social and economic injustices and inequalities

Message: Overwhelmingly, along with responsible stewardship of resources, there is a biblical concern to redress injustice, support the weak, and in the words of the Magnificat, “bring down the mighty from their thrones.” The community around Jesus is an *ekklesia* of equals, a band of levellers. In this sense, though it has often been abandoned to power in history, Christianity is a revolutionary creed.

Meaning: As St Augustine once put it, “charity is no substitute for justice withheld”. By charity, he meant voluntary action rather than communal binding. But as public philosopher Martha Nussbaum says, “love matters for justice” because it is what binds us most deeply together. [19] And as several political theologians have suggested, justice can be seen as an outworking of love in the political realm – that is, beyond the immediate reach of neighbourliness.

Memo: The richest one per cent has seen their share of global wealth increase from 44 per cent in 2009 to 48 per cent in 2014 and at this rate will be more than 50 per cent in 2016. Members of this elite had an average wealth of \$2.7 million per adult in 2014. [20] Will candidates at this election buttress or question this massive gap, nationally and globally?

(3) Welcoming the stranger and valuing displaced and marginalised people

Message: In the Gospels Jesus welcomes those regarded as 'unclean', outsiders and strangers into his company, and faces criticism from the religious establishment for dining with them and including them. By so doing, he challenges exclusionary religious and political systems.

Meaning: Refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, people living with HIV/AIDS, abused women, homeless people, and 'foreigners' should not be seen as 'them', but as part of a changing and emerging 'us'.

Memo: Migration is forced on many people by poverty, war, human rights abuses, climate change and other impacts caused or aggravated by policies pursued by the rich world, historically and under the conditions of globalization. Will candidates and parties continue to scapegoat and exclude migrants, or seek instead to address the causes of unsustainable people movements, support those seeking refuge, and resource communities in transition? [21]

(4) Seeing people, their dignity and rights as the solution not the problem

Message: In some ancient cultures only a king was regarded as being 'in the image of God'. In the biblical tradition, all people, irrespective of tribe or caste, were designated the subjects of God's creativity, love and care. Jesus broke taboos and codes that discriminated against women and others.

Meaning: Discrimination on the basis of gender, class, caste, ability, sexuality and ethnicity persists, leading to the exclusion or marginalization of large groups of people locally and globally.

Memo: Moves to enshrine human rights [22] and equality can face opposition, curtailment and withdrawal of consent when governments are inconvenienced by them. Will candidates and parties stand by them, and back equal access to law and legal support for all?

(5) Moving from punitive 'welfare' to a society where all can genuinely fare well

Message: The biblical vision of *shalom/salaam* is one of restored relationships. The Jubilee tradition frees slaves and restores land. Early Christian communities saw the sharing of goods and the welfare of all as a basic component of their identity and commitment to the way of Christ. [23]

Meaning: There is a 'common good' to which we can and should aspire which challenges the segregation and inequality that breeds poor health, poverty and anomie.

Memo: Those on low incomes, the jobless, disabled people and the sick are among those being made to pay the price of austerity, while the wealthy are bailed out. What will politicians standing for election do to reverse this process in seeking the welfare of all?

(6) Promoting community and neighbourhood empowerment

Message: The Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament describes the strengthening of communities of hope and resistance living in the shadow of Empire, from which the energy of the Christian message flowed.

Meaning: The empowerment of people – economically, socially, culturally, politically and spiritually – is a source of social and personal transformation which turns them into agents rather than mere recipients.

Memo: There is much talk of devolution and local control in the political arena at present, but the *de facto* centralization of power remains strong, or there is a disequilibrium between responsibility and resources. How can this be changed through land reform, local economic initiatives and other means?

(7) Food, education, health, housing, work and sustainable income for all

Message: the Apostle Paul promoted a message of sharing among early Christian communities, so that there was neither want nor excess among them. Archbishop William Temple and others saw in this the grounds for creating a participatory, welfare-based society for all, not dependence on religious or secular charity. [24]

Meaning: In this vision – Christian and humanist – there is a desire to ensure that we each have the freedom to develop to our full potential. This requires communities with the necessary securities and opportunities to enable that development.

Memo: Food poverty and hunger, lack of affordable housing, educational and health inequalities, low wages and job insecurities persist (and in some cases grow) in a country considered to be the fourth wealthiest on the planet. What will parties and candidates do to put human flourishing at the heart of political economy?

(8) Care for planet and people as the basis for human development

Message: The “eco” in ecology comes from the New Testament Greek word *oikos* for “house” and is part of the etymological roots of the word “economy” (*oikonomia*) meaning household purse. The interrelation between the earth, its people and the right use of resources is firmly established in the biblical vision of creation restored, renewed and rebuilt.

Meaning: In modern terms, eco-justice “challenges both humanity’s destruction of the earth and the abuse of economic and political power which result in poor people having to suffer the effects of environmental damage,” points out the World Council of Churches. [25]

Memo: Further action to end carbon dependency and move towards a sustainable, eco-economy is vital to the future of people and planet today. How will these imperative shape the policies and outlook of those seeking election this year?

(9) Investing in nonviolent alternatives to war and force as the basis for security

Message: It is peacemakers not war-prosecutors who are blessed in the Beatitudes. The last injunction Jesus left to his companions before his execution, according to St John’s Gospel, was “put away your sword”. In his crucifixion by the powers that be, Jesus absorbs violence having refused to inflict it.

Meaning: War and violence are not “solutions”, but tragedies. The world is being torn apart by cycles of violence, a clash of barbarisms, drone diplomacy, an arms dependent economy and what theologian Walter Wink called ‘the myth of redemptive violence’. [26]

Memo: From Trident replacement, to billions spent on illegal and catastrophic conflicts, and the multiple failures of the ‘war on terror’ and one-eyed intelligence, our political system seems entranced by militarism. How do the parties and candidates propose to re-invest in peace forces and non-lethal ways of handling conflict in the twenty-first century?

(10) Transparency, honesty and accountability in public and economic life

Message: “The truth shall set you free” was the promise of Christ according to St John’s Gospel. But those who preferred a lie that put them in power, rather than a truth that might have divested them of it, continued to collude against him, to the point of state execution.

Meaning: Economic and political corruption on a massive scale is widespread not just in parts of the so-called developing world, but among the wealthiest nations, and among the beneficiaries of the credit and austerity crisis. It isn’t just wrong, it kills. [27]

Memo: Tax evasion and avoidance on an industrial scale, MPs’ expenses scandals, lack of transparency in the City, the banking scandals, systemic inequality and data hacking are among the signs of an unhealthy body politic and economic. What priority will candidates and parties give towards real accountability in the public sphere?

7. A 'Vote for What You Believe In' Pledge

We are inviting those who would like to make a positive choice during this General Election to make a public pledge to "Vote for What You Believe In" based on the ten values and principles set out above. Taking part in the pledge means publicly stating their convictions are informing their choice and that they will continue to hold politicians to account for these principles after the election. We will be encouraging people to pledge via our dedicated GE2015 website (<http://voteforwhatyoubelievein.org/>) and social media, giving an account of their reasons for participating.

8. Voting as witness: is 'believing' in politics good faith?

Is it possible to consider a vote in an election as an 'act of witness'? What could that mean? And what kind of 'believing' is possible for Christians and others of conviction in the context of a democratic process? There is both an opportunity and a limitation raised by these two questions.

The opportunity is the challenge of aligning electoral participation with beliefs, values, principles and advocacy as far as can be achieved within the constraints of an electoral process and the availability of candidates and parties.

For example, someone might choose to vote on the basis of a strong conviction about the moral wrongness of nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction. The issue of the replacement or otherwise of the Trident nuclear fleet has already been raised as a 2015 election issue in a number of quarters, both within and between parties and among disarmament and peace NGOs. Some parties have made a strong commitment to seek to get rid of Trident and any successor system. Others have committed to its partial or complete replacement. Some candidates of the latter parties are committing to oppose Trident, even though their party does not. It may also be the case that local or independent candidates stand on this particular issue (something raised in Ekklesia's 2009 paper, 'The State of Independents: alternative politics'). [28]

In any event, it is possible for a voter to make a strong personal stand by declaring a voting intention based on the question of WMDs, and in so doing to challenge both candidates and parties on their future practice and intention.

Similarly, there will be people, standing, supporting candidates and voting specifically on the issue of the future of the National Health Service and publicly funded healthcare in England and Wales. Such persons are hoping to have an electoral impact and representation in parliament. However, even if they are not successful in that way, they are also taking their stand and aligning their vote in order to send out a public message and a message to the larger parties and political system. It is also important to say to those who believe that the current system and present parties do not offer a real choice that there are alternatives. But if people do not vote for them "because they'll never get in", that becomes a

self-fulfilling negative prophecy. All small causes which have become major causes have had to overcome that barrier at some point, whether electorally or through other forms of political action.

In other words, the notion 'voting as a witness' (a declaration of fundamental principle) is not based on pure electoral calculation. Indeed, many candidates in a first-past-the-post system choose to stand in spite of the fact that they cannot win, not just to offer a choice to the electorate and increase the vote of their particular party or cause, but as a matter of principle – and because they see an election (as we have noted earlier) as a moment in a broader political process, rather than simply as an end in itself. It can and will be argued that such an approach is 'naïve', but equally – and perhaps with increasing importance as we face the erosion of the perceived credibility of politics as a vocation and of political institutions – it can be considered an investment in political credibility. Likewise, a Christian, or a person of other belief, may choose to vote against a party they normally support or belong to on particular moral grounds – or to vote for one party in one jurisdiction and support another one (financially, in terms of campaigning and so on) elsewhere, for similar but distinguishable reasons. The fact that voting options are different in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland opens up this possibility. Such creative (one might even say subversive) behaviour is also a way of resisting the absolute claim of political parties to loyalty.

In Christian tradition, the New Testament word 'witness' comes from the Greek *martyria*, from which we also get the notions of sacrifice and martyrdom. The latter idea has been widely discredited in late modernity because of its association with violence and the taking of life. But its origins were quite different: the idea of giving your life for and with others, in commitment to the beautiful, just and truthful realm of God. For Christians, 'witness' means a very specific commitment to way of Christ, through identification with the poor, rejection of violence, and trust in the power of love rather than the love of power.

Evidently, the stakes in an election, where different interest groups are competing for a share in temporal power, look quite different to the kind of faith in the efficacy of divine love demonstrated in the willingness of Christ to embrace even death rather than to succumb to a victimizing, brutal system – what theologian Walter Wink calls the polity of the Lie. [26] For Christians and for others, faith (trust based on Gift) in political systems, processes and outcomes will necessarily be limited, conditional and 'penultimate' (Bonhoeffer). Nevertheless, it is possible to consider electoral participation, like any human activity, not simply as an end in itself but as a public statement of conviction about what is needed for a good society, for the defence of victims, for the overcoming of injustice, and for steps towards realizing other important practical principles.

Similarly, Ekklesia has put the case quite strongly and repeatedly, on the basis of nonconformist Christian conscience, that the aim of Christian and church involvement in politics should not be self-interest or the defence of religious privilege. Trying to grab power for ourselves, in other words. That flies in the

face of the self-sacrificial, life-giving nature of the Christian Gospel. Rather, Christians are called to exercise what the Catholic tradition calls an “option for the poor”, the outsider, the outcast, and the marginalised. This is the litmus test for political policies and practices: how do they treat “the least of these, my sisters and brothers”?

So how much can we ‘believe in politics’, and more particularly elections? Well, they are an arena in which – unlikely as it may sometimes seem – truth can be told, power held to account, beliefs made clear, choices established, and representatives chosen who can pursue both a common good and the particular good of people whose voices and needs may otherwise be overlooked. That is certainly worth doing. At the same time, a wider vision of the political endeavour will see the action of ‘moral communities’ (from advocacy groups and neighbourhood associations through to religious congregations) as the foundational places where values are made usable and applicable by what we do, and where the contours of the discourse that shapes voting and other forms of civic engagement are determined. Here again, witness becomes crucial, because such actions only have wider effect when they publicised and mobilised.

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Appendix: Ekklesia and the General Election, past and present

Over the past ten years, going back to the 2005 election where we published a non-party change manifesto challenging 'politics as usual' from a specifically moral and theological viewpoint, Ekklesia has published reports, essays and analysis on a whole gamut of concerns that arise in broad political and ethical discourse. Our approach is based not on party thinking but on social and personal transformation as the key to community and political-economic change.

The history is as follows. Ekklesia was established in 2002. We first produced material during an electoral period for the European Elections in 2004. This was a pamphlet by Richard Franklin, published jointly with Sarum College, entitled 'Toward the abolition of the nation state?'

For the 2005 UK General Election we produced a paper aimed specifically at examining the role of the churches and Christian faith in political processes. It was entitled 'Subverting the Manifestos', and drew upon collaboration and discussion with colleagues in the US working on plural Christian engagement with political issues in a progressive social context – notably Sojourners and the NCCUSA.

In the 2010 General Election Ekklesia was an active partner in the 'Power 2010' initiative for political and voting reform. This brought together some one hundred civic and (to a more limited extent) faith groups to advocate for a more representative political system. It was conducted in collaboration with Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, openDemocracy, Unlock Democracy and others. We argued the moral case for such reform in Christian circles, and called the 2010 poll 'the ethics election' (<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/11712>). We produced some 240 news briefs, commentaries and blogs, including and election-night one.

After the election, we followed through by focusing on second chamber reform, helping to organize a write-in campaign to Church of England bishops with automatic seats in the House of Lords, asking them to engage with moves towards a democratic and accountable revising chamber in which they and others would be there by election or nomination rather than privilege. This was the first time that bishops had been lobbied by the public in such a systematic way. Over 1,500 letters were sent.

Ekklesia's 2015 election initiative to stimulate, inform and engage people of belief (religious and otherwise) is 'Vote for What You Believe In'. Unlike the 2005 focus, 'Subverting the Manifestos', this is not overtly theological in the way it is framed, though those same concerns underline what we are saying, and as a Christian political thinktank that works across the spectrum of belief for social and economic justice, peace, participation and sustainability, we will be offering occasional specific commentary from an Anabaptist-informed ecumenical Christian perspective.

Following the coming into law of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 coming into law, Ekklesia has not registered with the Electoral Commission as a lobbyist, since our activities during the election period will be a continuation of the research, policy work, commentary and advocacy that we have been engaged in for many years on some of the key issues that are bound to feature in GE2015 debate. We do not and never will endorse or seek endorsement from any political parties or specific candidates and we will be spending well under the specified limits on anything that could be construed as falling within the remit of the Act, with which we intend to comply, though we believe with other NGOs that it is a threat to democracy and should be repealed. (<http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/20851>)

As we said in our statement issued on 18 September 2014, the day before the provisions of the new Lobbying Act come into force, "Our chief concerns will continue to include economics for the benefit of people and planet, social security and welfare for all, environmental sustainability, peacemaking and disarmament, a hospitable and welcoming approach to migration, promoting participatory democracy and political reform, hearing the voices of disabled people and others marginalised by the way society is run, global action for development, and through all this, working with Christians and churches to recover the core emphasis of the gospel on judging action and behaviour according to how it impacts the least and the last in the domains of politics and religion."

As we say in Ekklesia's Values statement, it remains our core conviction that, "Life in all its fullness cannot be achieved by the social and natural sciences, technological advance, economic development, democratic accommodation, autonomous reason, ethical theorizing and political operation alone – it requires a major change of heart and mind; a turnaround (*metanoia*) in the basic way we relate to each other, to the world and to God."

AUTHORSHIP & RESPONSE

This paper was written by Ekklesia co-director Simon Barrow, following two consultations with associate staff and associates: Virginia Moffatt, Henrietta Cullinan, Jonathan Bartley, Jill Segger, Bernadette Meaden, Kate Guthrie, Simon Woodman, Harry Hagopian, Vaughan Jones, Dawn Savidge, Symon Hill and Keith Hebden. Thanks also to Michael Marten, Jake Cunliffe and Savitri Hensman, plus others who commented and assisted.

The 'Vote for What You Believe In' dedicated website can be found at: <http://voteforwhatyoubelievein.org/> On Twitter use the hashtags #votebelief and #GE2015 to join the ongoing conversation. Follow General Election debates and analysis on Ekklesia at: <http://ekklesia.co.uk/generalelection2015>

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Ekklesia is a public policy think-tank that explores the changing nature of politics and beliefs in a plural world. We have associates and contributors in England, Scotland, Wales and globally.

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