

Politics and Christianity

- unholy alliance, or a marriage made in heaven?

The resignation of Jo Moore - the advisor who famously suggested that September 11 was a 'good day to bury bad news' - comes as a long-awaited relief to many in the Labour hierarchy. For others, it is a victory - there was something of a campaign to oust her. Jo Moore's crime, in a sense, was the same as that of Elizabeth Filkin, the erstwhile Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards. Moore was naive. She thought that ruthless efficiency was the primary requirement of her post, when actually it was discretion. She was right to assume that unfavourable statistics would go unnoticed on a day of world tragedy, but her cynical opportunism proved far more embarrassing than the figures ever could have been.

Filkin, too, pursued her calling with single-minded vigour. Her indiscretion was to presume that she could actually investigate cabinet ministers, merely because her remit said she could. Like Moore, she made powerful enemies who would eventually prevail - but there the similarity ends. The two women had very different attitudes to public service: Filkin was principled, and Moore was wholly pragmatic.

A migratory species

Most politicians inhabit the murky waters somewhere between those extremes, though it is fair to say that 'principle' is the shallows, and few big fish are to be found there. It is often where the parliamentary small fry are spawned - but it is not conducive to rapid growth, and many soon leave for the richer feeding ground of pragmatism.

Compromising situations

Pragmatism presupposes a willingness to compromise, just as a Commission for Parliamentary Standards presupposes the likelihood of moral deficiency. The 'Achilles heel' of pragmatism is that a person who will say or do anything for the sake of the party (and their own advancement therein) may be equally amenable to compromise on any matter pertaining to personal advantage. This was most clearly demonstrated during the last Conservative administration: Cash for questions and Quango appointments vied with every kind of sexual misconduct for lead coverage in the tabloids. In an era when the discovery of a politician engaged in 'normal' adultery was almost a breath of fresh air, the stock of Westminster plummeted. It has never really recovered - a fact which may well be reflected in recent polling figures.

An electorate voting with its feet

A cynic of Jo Moore's calibre might say that Westminster is largely populated by amoral or immoral people of indistinct or non-existent ideology, whose only motivation is self-aggrandizement. A more accomplished cynic might add that these characteristics are the politicians' best claim to being truly representative of their electorate. Such sweeping generalisations, of course, would be grossly unfair - yet even some of charitable disposition have been alienated by the style of recent governments, with the ascendancy of spin and sound-bites over substance. Perhaps the greatest disincentive to vote, though, is the niggling suspicion that it is a completely inconsequential exercise...but that position is defective, since it depends on enough other people not believing it.

The truth about power

Overall, the temptation to disengage from the electoral process is a strong one, and it is not mitigated by the common belief that "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This maxim, however, suffers from the small but significant drawback of being entirely untrue. Power does not corrupt at all - it merely facilitates the expression of pre-existent corruption. Moreover, the only one who can legitimately claim absolute power has forever been wholly incorruptible.

A few silken threads for the pig's ear

Ours is an imperfect system, operated by flawed individuals in a fallen world. In short, it could have been conceived for the express purpose of attracting Christian participation. Yet few Christians take the opportunity to be 'salt and light' in politics, and some don't even vote. Not many of us are equipped for life on the hustings, of course, but most of us are enfranchised, and we can all write an 'X'.... even if we sometimes have to write it next to the name of the candidate who is least unsuitable for office.

Beyond the green leather benches...

Politics, however, is about the issues of daily life - not just elections - and if society is increasingly disenchanted with the political process, it remains deeply concerned about issues - for example, education, health and crime. These issues are important to us, too, though not just because they affect us directly. They challenge us to make a choice: We can give serious thought to them; we can develop positions on the major issues that reflect our faith. We can offer people a Christian perspective that takes into account the realities of modern living. By doing this, we may even win the right to be heard on the Most Important Issue. Or...we can ignore, and be ignored.

What Would Jesus Do?

The small band of committed Christians at Westminster are men and women of integrity, who apply their faith to (sometimes) very complex issues. They are worthy of support, but they are also worthy of emulation. We may not be in a position to affect society as a whole, but we can use the same process to make a difference at an individual level. Ultimately, though, our role-model must be Christ himself. If we can find any issues of daily life in the first century that he didn't apply kingdom principles to, then we should feel entirely free to ignore similar ones in the twenty-first...

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