

The Election Results, May 2015

Some personal musings....blowing my cover!

I've kept my counsel since the shock election result of Thursday, as friends galore, mostly Labour supporters and mostly Christians like me, have posted their disappointment and even disgust about the outcome on Facebook.

Many comments are so derogatory of anyone who didn't vote Labour or Green that you feel that you'll be seen as an elitist, uncaring ignoramus if you let on! It's just not as simple as that and I finally had to express something.

Personally, I had hoped for continued Coalition government (which represented more than 55% of the electorate in 2010) in which consensus politics brought two radically different parties together and tempered the extremes of political ideology for the sake of the nation. Shock, horror and disgust from the left! How could I think that a Tory-led government was acceptable to me, a Christian Pastor?! I'm not a Tory, but, if you can be bothered to read on, here's why I wanted more coalition for the time being.

First, my deepest sympathies are with the Lib Dems who paid a terrible price for their courage in putting the national interest first. Tragically, when in the future will any third party ever again be willing to stop just playing politics and join a coalition if it means electoral suicide like this? We have probably lost the consensus politics of coalition for several generations now. Did we really want to move back to extremist politics?

What would have been the point of the Lib Dems if they had not joined the Tories in government in 2010? It's easy to be in opposition and point the finger and criticise if you're never actually going to hold the reins of power and actually make decisions that matter. If you want to treat politics as that kind of game please go back to university to play it! (I remember those days from sit-ins at Lancaster University in the 1970s!)

All credit to the Lib Dems for making the step up and giving us five years of stable government, for acting as a social conscience to the Tories, for helping Britain to a more secure economic footing and much more. They didn't deserve this annihilation!

Perhaps the greatest mistake they made was the way they prioritised and placarded their opposition to tuition fees to win favour before they faced the reality of power, back in those pre-2010 election days when they were still merely a third party pressure group. Perhaps Nick Clegg, once in coalition, could have fought the Tories harder for such a key election promise?

But they did not deserve all the blame for tuition fees. That actually lies with Labour who introduced them and the Tories whose policy it was to increase them – which Labour would almost certainly have done too. Yet Lib Dems have taken the hit and we have lost some courageous and good men from politics as a result. I'm so sad to see the end of the careers of Vince Cable, Simon Hughes, Danny Alexander and others.

Who will be the social conscience of the Tories now? Is this really what the electorate wanted?

We have reinforced two party, even one party politics. The system is truly broken. What hope is there for third and fourth parties at the next election?

The Bible may not spell it out in 21st C. terms, and I do recognise the radical and counter-cultural nature of the Kingdom of God, but there is also surely a side to the Gospel about working unitedly, co-operatively, which fosters working together with others for the good of all, and especially the poor? And minorities can be like salt that savours...

Luke 4 provides us with Jesus' manifesto that inspires many of us to see captives set free, the blind seeing and prisoners released - and Christians respond to that in a multitude of ways, both spiritually and practically.

Whatever our own expression of the anointing of God on our lives for the benefit of others, generosity and love do have to take into account some basic economics.

So, on economics - do we really think, as the Scots Nats do, that the last five years have truly been "austerity" and we need to put an end to it? Of course, I wish we could. But please, Nicola (and Natalie and the Greens and Leanne and Plaid Cymru too), where do you think this money is going to come from, with a continued annual deficit of about £100billion and a national debt of £1.56 trillion and growing, with interest payments of £43billion every year?

Every year, each household in Britain pays an average of around £2,000 per year in taxes just to finance these interest payments! Seriously, do we think that "ending austerity" with large increases in public expenditure are an "Investment" that will grow the economy and solve all our problems, and that this is the way to wipe out the deficit and then reduce the debt? Really? Where's the evidence for that?

Just think about the figures above in terms of your own household. If you're an average family and you had control of where your taxes went, would you be happy with £2,000 of them each year "spent" on interest payments, just to service your debt, on top of your mortgage and any credit card/loan interest payments that you may have? Would your solution be to borrow even more money so that you will have to pay even more in interest, but without even reducing your debt burden at all? Just like interest-only endowments that result in a debt-laden poverty-stricken retirement!

Of course, CAP is there to help people out of the resulting mess.... and oh of course, nothing to worry about, we have the house as capital to fall back on.... but as many have found, in crisis they lose the house! When the next crisis hits the UK (and the economic cycle that Gordon Brown thought he'd ended suggests that the next recession is due some time in this parliament) we could still be in a far worse place to face it than we were in 2008! The consequences really don't bear thinking about.

Well, we could tax the rich more to pay for the extra spending? Unfortunately, I suggest that the economics don't support this as a viable strategy. There's a taxation tipping point at which increased taxation results in reduced government income and depresses the economy, which is bad for everyone. And the stats show that most tax is paid by the richest few percent already. A mansion tax really isn't going to make a lot of difference. A council tax rebanding might be a better solution but that could hit a lot more of us harder than we would like!

I genuinely fear that, if we are not going to head for a frightening crash of Greek+ proportions in years to come, once interest rates start to rise from rock-bottom once again – as they must eventually - that we will need even tougher cuts in expenditure, and there will be no Lib Dems, or any other credible party, around to help look after the weakest in our society. Even Labour eventually accepted the need for some cuts, but according to Natty Nicola that's why they paid the

electoral price! Not progressive enough, she said, not “progressive” enough to commit to spending even more money that we don’t have. Crazy!

But seriously, do we really think this country has experienced severe austerity in the last five years? I know full well about about foodbanks and debt; after all I lead a church that works to help the poor through CAP, foodbank and Job Club, and a vision to do much more. I do know that many people are struggling to manage from day to day. But I also know that it could have been a whole lot worse, and potentially it will be, if we don’t keep a grip on our national finances.

I’ve worked on an aid programme in Eritrea, I’ve been to Uganda twice, India three times, Romania, Ukraine and China, all in the cause of providing help for the truly poor, especially children - those for whom our recent “austerity” still offers a life beyond their wildest dreams! We have little appreciation in modern Britain that we are in the top 5% or less of wealthiest peoples of the world, even under “austerity”! Employment is at record highs, though I agree that pay is certainly too low for the lowest paid many of whom are genuinely struggling to make ends meet, and the difficulties for first time house buyers are extreme and desperately need addressing with large increases in house building.

Yes, the problems for many in Britain are acute, and I don’t wish to appear unsympathetic, but perhaps a lot more of us need to visit Africa, India and many other places across our world, away from the tourist centres, to see what poverty and austerity means. Sit in their primitive homes, look at their few precious possessions and lack of clothing, watch them sitting on the floor cooking sparse rations, see them face disease with no NHS or even any medical help within 50 miles, and be challenged, rebuked and inspired by the joy and faith of believers who are putting their trust in God.

I digress.... but whether home or abroad, we know that the long-term answers to poverty are not just more and more handouts.

So what about Labour? Do I have sympathy for them too? A little, but I didn’t think they were ready for government and the election result bears that view out resoundingly.

Fighting a campaign on the basis of class warfare, inequality (which actually got worse under 13 years of Labour!), and a mansion tax was electoral suicide. It was a return to all those years when I faithfully voted Labour in every election that Thatcher and the Conservatives won from 1979 to John Major in 1992 and they kept on shooting themselves in the (Michael!) Foot! Finally Tony Blair found a winnable way and we had the new dawn of 1997, an unforgettable day, a day that Milliband was part of but has since completely rejected.

Thirteen disappointing years later, we’d had Brown’s destruction of pensions which never properly recovered after the dotcom crash, selling off the gold at rock bottom prices, crazy PFIs, foolhardy bank deregulation, the insistence that he had ended “Boom and bust” and personally saved the world... not to mention disastrous military ventures. Their ship had sailed... into ignominy and disillusion all round.

In those years when Labour could have put the economy on a sound footing, we overspent and so were terribly badly positioned for the global crisis when it hit in 2007/8. Yet Milliband, last week, in the best of the election debates when members of the public really did take the three main party leaders to task, actually refused to apologise for that excessive spending! He didn’t believe Labour had overspent and had nothing to apologise for. I couldn’t believe my ears! Perhaps that was the key moment that turned his election campaign?

I hope that, when we do eventually get a Labour government, they do better than they did with the benign economic climate they inherited in 1997. But they'll never get back in power if they just pursue the same politics of class warfare and supporting the "working people" that led to constant failure and disappointment during the 80s and 90s. They need more intelligence than they displayed in those ideological years! They need a new vision for our country that inspires people.

So who will lead them to that new vision? I like Andy Burnham but can't see that he's the man and certainly not Yvette Cooper or "bring back brother David"! They're all tainted with Labour's too recent past anyway. It's sad to think that Labour has wasted five years and are even further from being fit to govern now than in 2010. We desperately need a strong opposition that will keep the Tories in check and potentially govern in five or ten years time so we don't experience the moribund sterility and unfairness of one party in power for decades. That could happen.

What about the Lib Dems? Tim Farron has to be the man. I believe that he's a genuine Christian too, not just a pretend one to get votes! So I hope he has some Kingdom of God principles that will translate to good politics and government. If the electorate will finally forgive the Lib Dems he has a slim chance of leading them to some sort of recovery but I fear not to the potential they had in 2010, not within my lifetime anyway. I hope I am wrong.

At least we've seen the back of Nigel Farage and his pint, well until September at any rate when he probably will stand for the leadership of UKIP once again! I'm also relieved to see the back of George Galloway and his hat. (Nothing wrong with either the pint or the hat, it's just in combination...)

As for the Scots Nats and the Tories - we have returned to the politics of extremes and it bodes well for those who want independence for Scotland! After being desperate for Scotland to stay in the UK I'm now almost tempted to say, "let them go!" Why did they vote in droves for a one party state and then send them all down to the hated Westminster to "fight for a better deal for Scotland"? This is truly selfish politics and terribly sad, but of course that is what the Nats stand for after all. They exist for the Scots and not the rest of us. In my best moments I think and hope that Cameron will do his utmost to unite the UK again, but I don't say that with great hope of success.

I think that when the Scots eventually get Nicola's "better deal for Scotland" they'll actually discover that it's far worse on their own than with kindly, patient, forbearing friends like the English ☺! alongside them! Will they still be able to afford free university tuition and prescriptions for their own then? I somehow doubt it.

I'm having to fight the temptation of English nationalism (or even northern nationalism!) which Cameron dangerously succumbed to on the day after last year's referendum! But with a Northern Irish wife, an Indian son-in-law and a Chinese daughter, there are some checks and balances on me....!

The Tories... how many of their promises will it be expedient to forget? I don't want to be a cynic! The European question is big, I hope we move beyond it soon. We face some difficult and potentially momentous years. I don't envy David Cameron!

9th May 2015