

Elections, Christians and the Gospel

Out into the open as never before



The 2010 general election, with its television debates and hung Parliament leading to a Lib-Con coalition engaged a public, normally bored with politics, like no other in living memory.

Perhaps predictably, the economy and immigration were the issues that most captivated media attention. Several weeks of preparing the public have now culminated in the 22 June 'tough but fair' budget with its cocktail of spending cuts and tax increases, and we will wait to see in coming months if the plan results in the deficit reduction and 'enterprise-led recovery' promised or founders on the rocks of union unrest, stalled growth and increased unemployment.

The effects on the health service of the expected spending cuts and restructuring are yet to be seen and it may take much longer before they materialise.

What has been particularly striking about this election, however, has been the level of involvement of Christians and Christian groups. British Christians wanting to vote in an informed way have never been better resourced to do so. The election brought Christians out into the open as never before.

Faithworks¹ issued a declaration calling on candidates to 'recognise the important contribution that local churches and Christian charities have made historically in providing services within local communities, acknowledge the indispensable role that faith in Christ plays in the motivation and effectiveness of Christian welfare programs and encourage and promote further initiatives and deeper partnership underpinned by legislation'.

Christians and Candidates,² sponsored by CCFON and fronted by former Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, ran a roadshow and published MPs' past voting records on key ethical issues.

A massive online database of MPs' votes produced by the Christian Institute,³ the result of over ten years' detailed analysis, was supplemented by a 50-page resource on each political party's stance on a whole host of issues from embryo research to reform of the House of Lords.

CARE's campaign 'Make the Cross Count'⁴ featured policy papers, hustings events and 'My manifesto', outlining the dreams of Christian leaders about policies they would like to see enacted. On a similar theme 'Election Crossroads'⁵ published a questionnaire voters could use as a basis for quizzing their local candidates at surgeries or hustings meetings.

The Evangelical Alliance launched its 'top ten reasons for Christians to vote'⁶ along with regular news updates, resources on the major parties' positions on key policies, and electoral maps.⁷ Christians in Politics⁸ encouraged Christians to longer term involvement in the three main parties.

CMF played a key role in launching the Westminster 2010 Declaration of Christian Conscience,⁹ styled on the US Manhattan Declaration.¹⁰ This was eventually signed by over 66,000 UK Christians calling on candidates to pledge 'to uphold the right of Christians to hold and express Christian beliefs and to act according to Christian conscience'. It began with the affirmation 'We believe that protecting human life, protecting marriage, and protecting freedom of conscience are foundational for creating and maintaining strong families, caring communities and a just society' and focused specifically on areas where Christians have recently faced discrimination. Over 1,000 candidates were assessed on the basis of public statements, answers to written correspondence and past voting records.

As I write this US professor of theology Wayne Grudem is embarking on a UK tour under the title 'Public Hope: Politics and the Great Commission', which looks at 'how civil freedoms thrive in the slipstream of the spreading gospel, how good works (including in public life) flow from grace-saved sinners, and the limitations of government'.

In my last *Triple Helix* editorial¹¹ I raised ten issues, apart from health, education, crime and the economy, which will concern Christian doctors (euthanasia, abortion, embryo-destructive research, sexual health, poverty and health, freedom of worship, marriage and family, addiction, obesity and inactivity, marginalised groups). How will we fare with these during the next Parliament and how can we help shape our society's response?

Jesus' 'Nazareth call' to preaching, healing, deliverance and justice remains.¹² Regardless of what challenges we face and what opposition we encounter, he still calls us to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which he has carried [us] into exile' and has plans to give us 'hope and a future'¹³ as we seek to walk in his footsteps in gospel witness and in living out the practical love of Christ to our generation.

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references

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