

saving our bacon?

Zoe Greaves considers whether we should be law-breakers or law-makers?

A journalist named Walter Winchell once said that 'too many people expect wonders from democracy, when the most wonderful thing of all is just having it'.¹ What do you expect from democracy? Moreover, what do you feel democracy owes you? Now I stand guilty on this front, along I am sure with many of you.

Living in the UK, for the most part we find ourselves in an extremely fortunate situation, and yet, having paid our taxes and every now and again crawled out of bed to cast our vote by marking a small X in a box, we consider that we have the right to expect a multitude of different services; our streets cleaned, our children educated, our health needs met, crime controlled, our rights and freedoms upheld. We expect a lot from one small X. And when these expectations do not come to pass we feel robbed or cheated. It seems increasingly possible that there may come times when our democracy no longer serves us as we consider it should. If that time comes, what as Christian medics should we do and who should we be; are we to be Law Breakers or Law Makers? In the words of JF Kennedy I would

challenge you now to 'ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country?'² If I have convinced you that this challenge might be worth taking, then please, read on.

a little perspective

The recent national election spawned a number of lobbies and petitions, people from every belief and background seeking to ensure that for the next five years they would have fair representation in our government. Amongst these, the Westminster Declaration stood out as one of the larger, an appeal to MPs to respect the views of Christians in legislations to be proposed and passed. From this petition, one sentence caught the attention of many: 'As UK citizens we affirm our Christian commitment to exercise social responsibility in working for the common good and also to be subject to all governing authorities and obey them *except* when they require us to act unjustly.'³ It was in the light of this exception that many parliamentary candidates (PCs) found themselves unable to pledge their support and it raises some interesting questions with

regard to personal faith and medical ethics.

From the faith view, Christians have a moral as well as biblical obligation to obey their governing authorities, with the provision that the governing authority does not command disobedience to the higher authority, God himself. Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 amongst other scriptures make this eminently clear.

In the field of medical ethics, abortion is a topic that invites a broad range of views throughout the medical profession from people of both secular and religious opinions. Here we find the mother's autonomy coming into conflict with beneficence for the unborn child; depending on where we lay the greatest importance we make the decision of whether or not to abort (or to facilitate the provision of an abortion). At present, the 1967 Abortion Act states that 'no person shall be under any duty, whether by contract or by any statutory or other legal requirement, to participate in any treatment authorised by this Act to which he has a conscientious

How to make a law in 10 easy steps!⁷

1. First know your MP: If you're particularly fortunate, your MP will be a member of the governing party or even a Cabinet member. Having recently voted, I'm sure you know who your current MP is, but prior to the election comes the careful decision of who to vote for. Who will most represent what you believe? There are a number of resources which enable us to look at previous voting records of an MP and surveys answered by PCs expressing their views, so there is no need for us to vote randomly or on gut instinct. Vote wisely.^{8,9,10}

2. Raise your issue: Many more Bills are proposed than will ever see the light of day. There are many ways to assess how much interest there is and to raise awareness. This can be done through Early Day Motions (effectively petitions signed by MPs), asking questions in the House, or the publication of Draft Bills (Green and White papers, which consult the public about an idea or make a definite proposal for legislative change respectively).

3. First Reading: Unfortunately not a book club! A Bill can start in either the House of Commons or Lords. There are public Bills - introduced by the Government and therefore likely to be passed - and Private Members' Bills. In order to have a Private Members' Bill read the MPs must enter a ballot giving them

a slot at which the Bill can be read; or make use of the Ten Minute Rule which is unfortunately far more complex than the colloquial three second rule and very rarely results in a Bill being passed! Hence, it is worth hoping your MP will be a member of the Government. At the point of first reading the title of the Bill is simply read and an order is made for the Bill to be published in full.

4. Second Reading: At this point the Bill is first debated and amendments proposed and voted upon. If you ever accidentally landed on the Parliament channel while flicking between Sky Sports and E4 then you may have seen one of these often lively debates which have made our parliamentary system the butt of many jokes on the international stage yet allow all MPs the chance to have their say and to influence legislation, even when not a part of the governing party.

5. Committee: Not tea and scones with the WI (!), this is the point at which each clause and amendment made is examined in detail by a carefully selected committee who are obliged to consult relevant experts and interest groups in order to take account of their views.

6. Report: The committee makes its report and the amended Bill is again debated and further amended.

law breakers or law makers?

How to make a law in 10 easy steps!': continued

7. Third and final Reading. Following immediately from the report stage; it is the issues raised by the Bill that are debated. The final vote for the first House is then made.

8. Repeat in the Lords/Commons: The Bill then passes to the other House and goes through stages 3-7 again. There are Bills that don't need to go through the Lords but these usually involve finance and taxes rather than medical ethics.

9. Consideration of amendments: Having been seen by the other House the Bill returns to the House it started in where there is a vote to

approve the changes made by the second House. It is at this stage that a game of ping-pong can start, with the Houses disapproving of each other's amendments and the Bill bouncing back and forth, but this tends to drag things out, unlike the rapid-fire sport.

10. Royal assent: We're off to see the Queen! A relatively easy bit. The last time a monarch withheld assent was in 1708 so you'd have to catch her on a very bad day for this to be withheld.¹¹ From this point on the Bill becomes an Act of Parliament. That is Law. Nothing to it!

objection....'⁴ The 1990 Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act contains a similar clause.⁵ This allows freedom of the healthcare provider to decide where he or she draws this line. But, consider what the situation would be if this clause were removed? In light of this conundrum what would we do?

Thankfully, this has not yet been the case. We have the profound privilege of living in a democracy and one that, for all its flaws, seems to work. Oscar Wilde perhaps cruelly described the democratic process as 'the bludgeoning of the people, for

the people, by the people'.⁶ In reality it is this clause to the Abortion Act which shows a democracy working to protect its citizens, equipping and encouraging the coexistence of immeasurably different groups. Returning to our question; faced with a situation in which the conscience clause did not exist, I would suggest that we are not only faced with a difficult choice, either to sacrifice our principles or disobey the law. Rather, can we change the law and if so how?

Now, I hope I've given some indication of why politics and in

particular legislation has the potential to be of such vital importance in our lives, so, see the 'how to' guide starting on the previous page.

Faced with this, it would be easy to stand back and admit defeat; there is nothing I can do. However, you could not be more wrong! Although I must admit that to suggest our ten step approach would be easy was perhaps a touch ambitious, as medics we can play an important role in the above process and in the absence of a snappy mnemonic we have instead the four Ps as an *aide memoir*:

The Four Ps

Petitioner: We often think of parliamentary petitions as having thousands of signatures. However, the minimum number of signatures for a petition is one - that's you! There are just a few simple rules on how a petition should be composed but these are easily accessible on the Parliament website and even better, the new Government plans to further simplify the process.^{12,13} You can then aim to have your petition presented to the House of Commons. This will help towards raising awareness of an issue prior to the introduction of a bill.

Politician: Your MP works for you; aside from their party line and personal views an MP's role is to represent the views of you, their constituent. Write to them with issues that concern you; they can't be representative if they don't know your views. They can then be representative in debates, in which petitions they sign and the Bills they propose. MPs also vote during the second and third Readings and can sit on Committees.

Professional: As future doctors it is possible that we will have expertise on issues of medical ethics that come under discussion in Committee. As

Christians we should not shy away from controversial and ethically challenging fields such as obstetrics and gynaecology as we will no longer carry the expertise in such fields necessary to influence decision making processes.

Prayer: Most importantly, let us remember our leaders in prayer, as we are commanded in 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

law makers or law breakers

So, what will you be? Law maker or law breaker? Well perhaps it's not just one or the other. I hope this article has challenged you to consider the role that you can play in both! In the former, to be aware of the world of politics and the part you can play! And in the latter, well, to be prepared to be like the apostles, who could not be silenced,¹⁴ and be a 'law breaker' when the law of this land

contradicts our *highest* authority.

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