

# MAKING CHRISTIAN CHOICES IN THE POLITICAL WORLD

By CHARLES WOOKEY

A CERTAIN EMINENT British member of parliament is said to have concluded a rousing speech to his constituents with the words, 'So those are my principles. And if you don't like them, I'll change them'. This is often just what politics seems to entail. But is it true? Can there be such a thing as a politician with integrity, and if I am engaged in political activities how do I reconcile them with my Christian commitment? How do I decide what political options to take, if any?

I think that discernment can be of great value in thinking about these questions. How? By helping us to see their true context, and in providing a framework through which to sift the various movements and motives which drive our choices. To my mind the fundamental question facing a reflective Christian engaged in any political activity is 'who is in control?' If I am reflecting on my motives for doing something, or not, whatever the subject matter, this question is always relevant. Is the Lord in charge here, or am I at root serving another master in this area of my life—my party, my reputation, my special interest, my ambition or my desire for quiet and peaceful life.

In this paper I try to illustrate this by looking at a variety of situations. In considering these I have found it helpful (as well as in time-honoured fashion) to present the way we can be decoyed from the truth in the form of temptations. Throughout I have not been particularly concerned with what, if any, political options a Christian should take, but rather in the way our decisions are reached: how we 'operate'.

## *Clean hands*

The first 'temptation' I want to consider is the desire for clean hands. I believe it is often thought, at least in Britain, that it is just impossible to be involved in any political activities and retain any integrity; and that all Christians (not just priests!) should steer well clear of political involvement. We can use the question of control to see what can lie behind this. It is a fear that there is a

sphere of operation in which the Lord is not ultimately in charge, and therefore in which we tread without his protection. The result is that we can avoid experiences that confront and change us, which is so often what making even small political gestures, like going on a demonstration or writing to our MP, can actually do. This is the temptation to have 'clean hands'. It is a specific instance of Ignatius's fourth rule in the Second Week rules. It starts from the true observation that evil and corruption exist at all levels of political life, and misleads us to the conclusion that therefore I, as a conscientious Christian, should always steer well clear of any political involvement at all.

But, for many, this is a straw dog. The tensions for them arise not from wanting to avoid political involvement altogether but from being swamped by a sense of powerlessness and of the sheer scale and complexity of political problems. Our awareness of the global nature of political problems can easily overwhelm us and at the same time make us feel there is nothing we can do.

*'There is nothing I can do'*

First of all it is worth noting that, although having more information makes us feel more impotent, it actually makes us less so. For knowledge is itself a form of power: if we are well informed, we can act. We can persuade others, protest or campaign. No one would bother to seek publicity for a cause if it were not so.

But we can still feel powerless, helpless perhaps, however much information we have been fed. The feeling, like all feelings, has to be accepted without judgement. The feeling is what it is, and it is part of our experience and so is saying something. It might in a given situation be saying a number of things. Perhaps we are being gifted with a greater insight into our own place in the order of creation, one that gives us a truer understanding of ourselves. It permits us to share the life of the truly poor and powerless in the world. We are not meant to lie down until the feeling has gone away but to stay with it.

However, the feeling of helplessness can also be used as an escape. If we find ourselves saying 'something should be done about that' or 'why doesn't someone go and help them?', a good test is to turn the question to ourselves: 'why don't I do something to help?' Maybe I cannot do anything much, but I can pray. Maybe there is something else I could do, like send money or join a local group, or write letters, or just find out more. Maybe there are good reasons why I cannot in this case. But it does no harm to reflect on them. The temptation here is that of being too busy, too tied up or committed already to take on another cause or to

do this extra thing. Sometimes we genuinely are. But we are prone to take control of ourselves, deciding what shall and shall not 'get through to us' and influence our choices and actions. The Lord wants to stretch us, to fracture our tight, busy shells and let new concerns, new light, in. And even as we accept these and they become our concerns too, we are tempted to close the gap once more by accommodating them, but no more.

### *Participation*

Why do people get involved in politics? One reason might be that something in our experience or situation calls forth a response in us. It is a gift. It might be out of anger, or a sense of injustice, or a desire to participate: 'to do something' or a mixture of these and many other motives. And what characterizes a response as political (as opposed to prophetic) is that it involves joining with others with the aim of more or less directly influencing decisions taken by those in power. Here discernment is extremely important, because the kind of choices we make can easily be manipulated by others who seek our support, and as we immerse ourselves in a political grouping the snares along the way are manifold.

Anyone who gets involved with political activity is involved in conflict and confrontation. And not only is this true in the obvious sense that there will be the opponents of the group. There will be the differences of opinion within any group of more than one person. Within a national party there is a multitude of levels on which conflict can arise, but one of the most important is over particular policy issues the party can adopt. At every general election in Britain there are letters to the newspapers from individuals complaining about the party political system, that no one party has pronounced exactly his views on all the issues: there are only two or three set menus to choose from and none has just the combination of dishes he wants.

### *Single issue groups*

One interesting response to this in the UK has been the growth of single-issue political groupings, such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and Friends of the Earth. Individuals who are reluctant to be activists in a political party, not all of whose policies they support, can with wholehearted abandon commit themselves to a single issue party with which they are in total agreement. No compromises are needed, and there is an easy conviction of the rightness of the cause. There are other reasons for the growth of these groupings in the UK, and the proliferation of special interest groups. The

UK in this as in so many things, is following the USA in developing a sophisticated political lobbying system, where well-placed and informed pressure groups exert an ever-increasing influence on the political process.

But another possible reason for the growth of these groups lies in a fragmentation of society, and a shrivelling up of the common ground between individuals. There is less of a shared vision of how the world might be made a better place. But this makes it difficult for there to be communication between rival issue groups and makes it hard for individuals looking at the panoply of worthy causes to support to compare them.

Moreover, as a result, joining a political party, as opposed to a single issue group, can seem to be more compromising, more to do with ambition and the desire for power than with a disinterested concern for making the world a better place. And as mainstream political parties form alliances with this or that pressure group, this view is encouraged. Party politics becomes a free market in policy, where party policy is to a large extent a function of public opinion channelled in these ways. The professional politicians are assumed to be driven not by a desire to change the world but only to gain and stay in power.

There is also a lack of real communication between single issue pressure groups and the mainstream parties. Precisely because many of those who really care about an issue join the single issue groups and not the main parties, their vision and perspective are not, they feel, understood and shared. The carers are outside the system. Hence the modern phenomenon of the protest, which is a symbol of lack of dialogue.

Of course it is undeniable that the electoral system in the UK is in part to blame for this situation, and much could be achieved by, for instance, introducing proportional representation. But even so in my view the proliferation of single issue groups in the UK is disturbing. It is a way of channelling individuals' creative and dynamic energies into rival camps which feign an overarching vision which they cannot have. It is a case of divide and rule. It follows from the fact that God is one that, at root, our experience is also one. Not only do we need to draw together with others in a group if our vision is to be more complete, but also we need to gain awareness of other issues if we are to see our own 'pet' hobbyhorse in perspective. The real concerns which lead someone to join CND are fundamentally the same as those in Anti-Apartheid: a concern for human values. I would not want to argue that such groups should not operate, but rather to say that there can be a temptation here, which argues from the true observation that

no political party seems to have all the 'right' views, to the false conclusion that I am always better off channelling my energy into a single issue group, where at least I agree with all they are doing.

*Integrity in party politics*

It is easy to be on the side of the angels if you can fight all your battles one at a time, but political life, like the rest of creation is somewhat messier. But can anyone be a party politician and retain his or her integrity? One fear here is that these essential elements of the political game involve manipulating others for our own ends: using people. The Christian, we might think, respecting the value of the other, should never do this. However, this is simplistic. There are many social roles we play in which we treat others more as means than as ends. In a sense we use the woman in the ticket office to buy a ticket, although by saying 'thank you' we acknowledge she is not just a machine. So we need to go deeper to see the sense in which using people becomes really pernicious. One thing we might say is that an honest politician will deal straight and talk straight. How far does this get us? Suppose for instance, you use a member of a party committee to decide national party policy on housing. Imagine yourself to have strongly held views which you know are not shared by some other committee members. The meeting starts, and the chairman calls for views. Now consider two scenarios, A and B.

A. You believe in straight dealing and straight talking; in 'laying your cards on the table'. So at the first opportunity you explain your views and your recommendation for the policy. You are listened to thanked for your contribution, but you notice that the effect of what you have said is to immediately polarize the committee, and a contrary view to yours is then stated with equal force and vigour. The discussion progresses and a compromise is worked out which is some way from your own recommendation.

B. You start by saying nothing, and listening to the other members air their views and give their recommendations. As the meeting progresses you are able to see how to present your own views as a compromise of the others being given, and you do this, subtly bringing out the points you all along recognized as the key ones. The result is that the agreement is much nearer your own solution.

Is B a more manipulative mode of behaving in a committee than A? Not necessarily. There is a temptation for Christians particularly in any committee to 'come straight out with it', as if by doing so they cannot be accused of being devious or cunning. But in fact 'coming straight out with it' can itself be highly

manipulative. This is especially true if you are a religious, since it is often harder for people then to disagree with you.

But in an example such as this a great deal hangs on the nature of the committee. For instance, is it a procedural 'hurdle' to be got over, or is it intended as a genuine policy-making instrument? If it is the former, then it will have an element of the 'bargaining game' about it. The participants of the committee are in effect under no duty to treat the views of the others seriously and each is allowed to use the others in an effort to get the best result for himself or herself or the particular interests he or she represents. Each has a personal agenda and all know this.

But what if the committee is a genuine policy making instrument? Then it is not a bargain so much as a compromise which is sought. It is more like a communal decision. Each member is obliged to give some weight to the views of the others and, in effect, allow it as important that they all agree. It is here that the question of being manipulative arises, because here there is a situation of implied trust, which can be betrayed. I can have a hidden agenda and use such a committee as best I can to further my own views regardless of those of other members; or I can be genuinely open and ready to take others' views seriously.

A great deal hangs on the role I see myself as playing in a given situation and on the extent to which there is a shared understanding of this by other participants. There is a spectrum of human relationships, from the business bargain at one end to the married couple at the other, where the extent of openness, trust and 'treating the other as making legitimate demands on me' varies. Being straight does not mean being married to everyone. It does mean being clear about the role one is playing at a particular instance and sticking to its boundaries, and, on occasion maybe, refusing to play certain roles at all. Manipulation arises through pretence.

I think one of the reasons why politicians are looked at askance is that they are seen as doing something other than they are. When I first went to work at the House of Commons I was shocked by the extent of charade, of the difference between the face presented to the media and the character off the air. But after a while I came to see things differently. This might be the cynicism of experience, but I began to feel I had perhaps applied the wrong criteria to the work politicians do, and had judged them too harshly as an outsider. If you went to court without knowing anything about the adversarial legal system, and saw a barrister in court eloquently defending some scurrilous rogue, you might think the barrister a bit partisan, perhaps not really believing all he says,

and this might shock you. But knowing the system makes all the difference. This is his job: to be as convincing as he can. He does not have to believe all the rhetoric and we do not expect him to. Now in many circumstances politicians see themselves as advocates: they are simply reading out a departmental brief, and may actually believe or even understand little of it. It does not bother them, because they are not pretending to themselves or others in the know that it is otherwise. It bothers us, however, because we expect them, and they encourage us always to believe every word they say in public pronouncements.

We might think this very shocking, but it is not a fact of all parties or institutions? Officials of the Church, acting as such, are constrained in what they say in public pronouncements. In private, to friends, or maybe just to themselves, they may admit to different views. So it is with ministers defending government policy: all of them, so long as they are in position, have to agree with all of it in public, but behind the scenes they do not. Up to a point this seems to me is an unavoidable consequence of forming any group or institution which has views on a range of topics. The single issue group gets round this precisely by sticking to the single issue, selecting its membership so that it never happens. But it cannot change.

Still, there are limits: a party politician might present a particular policy he does not agree with out of a well-founded sense of loyalty, because maybe he judges the broad thrust of the other policies are right. But what if some goal he holds very dear is threatened by some policy change?

The freedom within a democracy which allows me to join a political party and to hold political office also allows me to resign. If I am put in a situation in which to go on is to lose my self-respect, to undermine the very reason I went into politics, I can stop. When politicians say in defending some policy, 'I have no alternative', they are always lying. I was present in the House of Commons when Ian Gow MP, then a junior minister, resigned. What struck me most was not the issue (the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement), but the curious mixture of evident incredulity, jealousy and admiration it seemed to produce in others: here was a man actually prepared to sacrifice a promising career because of what he believed. There are probably many politicians who would be hard pressed to find an issue as important to them as their own ambition. One test, then, is 'Is there an issue you would resign over?' It is not a bad question to put, if only to oneself.

To my mind it is much more important that the answer to this is genuinely 'yes' than what the issue might be. But it is the

ultimate sanction the individual politician has, and discerning when to take a stand and when to hold on to fight another day is one of the really difficult and crucially important questions. There are two aspects to this. One is seeing clearly the underlying forces at work in a given conflict. The other is knowing when to act and when not to.

### *Reading the signs*

A mind-set which a politician, particularly a pragmatic centrist one, can easily fall into is the belief that there is always room for compromise. But this is not so. In his wonderfully lucid pamphlet 'Taking sides' Albert Nolan points out the difference between conflicts where compromise is desirable and those where it is not:

In some conflicts one side is right and the other wrong, one side is being unjust and oppressive and the other is suffering injustice and oppressions. In such cases a policy of seeking consensus and not taking sides would be quite wrong. Christians are not supposed to try to reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice; we are supposed to do away with evil, injustice and sin.

This is very important. But in some ways it seems much easier to believe it appropriate in conflicts such as those in South Africa (out of which Nolan is writing) or those involving totalitarian regimes in Latin America and elsewhere than of the more apparently balanced and dignified tussles between political parties in the established democracies. Real evil seems to stop at their shores.

This is a belief sustained in the UK by the fact that apparently sincere Christians are to be found at pretty well all points on the political spectrum. So it seems that guiding values such as 'the good' only take us as far as the platitudinous—real policy differences are over how best these goals, which we all agree on and yearn for, are to be achieved. Political arguments are more like disputes about practicalities between reasonable men and women than a battle between good and evil.

But votes are to be gained by professing good Christian intentions. Anyone can read a prepared text saying all the right things. We must look at what they do, not what they say. In this the opposition always have one advantage, of course, which is that they only have to talk. The government in power have another, however, which is that 'if you were in our position, having to weigh up all these factors together, you would do the same. You can't condemn us from there.'

### *When to act*

Supposing we clearly see in a given situation that we are involved in a conflict between good and evil, we still have to decide what



to do and when. There is 'a time to be silent, a time to speak' (Qoh 3, 7). And there are no obvious, no simplistic absolutes. Let me give two examples to illustrate this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was sitting outside a cafe in Germany in the late 1930s when a parade of Nazi stormtroopers marched past. Everyone stood up and gave the Nazi salute as was expected of them, under the watchful eye of the troop commander. Not to have conformed would have resulted in arrest and, possibly, death. So Bonhoeffer, after some reluctance, saluted with the others, muttering that it was not worth losing one's life over a salute. Of course, he did lose it later, after several more years of opposing Nazism.

The second example is from the gospels. On several occasions (e.g. Jn 10, 39) Jesus is on the point of being arrested or stoned, and he avoids the event, sometimes saying 'My hour has not yet come'. He has a sense of his own destiny, and of when not to take a stand. It was not a compromise with himself.

So we must be chary of judging others and ourselves in complex situations, where deep conflicts abound. There are some helpful guides and some identifiable pitfalls which we can use to ask if we are following the Lord or some other master in a given situation, but we cannot absolutize in advance when to take action. We live in the provisional all the way to the bottom. But how do we decide in a complex situation where, having carefully weighed the various arguments, we are still torn between the options, and where no kindly light is apparently leading us on? Here we have to trust, and just do the best we can. The difficulty with Ignatius's admonition 'never to make any change in time of desolation' in this context is that often practical decisions cannot wait.

But in a way to focus on 'choices' is to put the emphasis in the wrong place. A real commitment to follow our Lord is well below the surface of our minds, and operates within us when we are not aware of it, being a wellspring of desires, priorities and aims which we cannot just ditch next Tuesday. Concentrating too much on choices can lead us to cultivate a rather unhealthy preoccupation with our own salvation. Being too scrupulous can turn into a self-absorption in which others are seen as merely objects in a battle which has only three real characters: me, God and the devil. Fortunately, my own salvation is God's problem, not mine. Following the Lord is not first of all about the choices we happen to make, just as sin is not first of all about 'wrong actions'. Both are much deeper and more pervasive. They are about who is in control, what direction we are taking in every part of our lives.

### *The salami principle*

One particularly insidious danger is that of being gradually turned away from the Lord. A powerful illustration of this is given

in the play 'Good' by Edward Bond. It depicts a liberal university lecturer in Germany in the early 1930s who, after having a difficult time with a senile mother, writes a book to get over it, extolling euthanasia. He regrets this, but Goebbels reads the book and the lecturer is 'asked' to do some work for him. The Nazis have just come to power and you hear him agreeing with a Jewish friend of his that, whilst the Nazis have some weird ideas, on the other hand motorways are being built, employment is up, and no doubt they will drop the antisemitic froth in time. But gradually through the play, the character of the lecturer is transformed by his involvement with them into an evil, convinced Nazi.

The point however is that there is no juncture in the plot at which you can confidently say, 'Ah, *that's* where he went wrong'. All the compromises are so small that he just gradually changes from a good to an evil person. This is the salami principle, and it is very frightening: you cut away a little bit at a time and by the end it is all gone.

The mistake lies in thinking that good can be divided against good. However complex the situation, however torn the loyalties, however painful the consequences, it is possible to stay facing the Lord, although it may not feel like staying whole. As George Herbert puts it in his poem 'A Wreath':

Who knowest all my ways,  
my crooked winding ways, wherein I live,  
wherein I die, not live: for life is straight,  
straight as a line, and ever tends to thee . . .

The Lord's purposes may be obscure, but they are not in contradiction with each other. He is not interested in achieving some political goal which I can bring off only by losing my own integrity. And if we find ourselves arguing this, we should stop and listen to where the voice is coming from, as Jesus did when offered the whole world for his soul (Mt 4, 8-11).

#### *Political involvement in context*

One important guide is the way we act outside of our political involvement. If we bring every part of our lives to the Lord, and genuinely try to follow him, then our lives will show this. If he is the way we are facing, then in all sorts of small ways this guides us, keeps us whole and our lives straight. Now suppose that some other goal, say that of political office, begins to assume a predominant role as a life goal. This will have repercussions. We will slowly and subtly change in our relationships, and our priorities. This is more likely to be evident to family and close friends

than to oneself, and the Lord can work through them to warn us of what is happening.

This has a bearing on an issue which surfaces in the media from time to time when a political financial scandal breaks, namely whether the private lives of politicians are of any relevance to their ability or suitability for political office. Whilst there is something loathsomely hypocritical about the high moral tone adopted by the press on these occasions, it is interesting also to hear the view often expressed that politics and private morals have nothing whatever to do with each other. This is widely believed, and language such as 'skilled operator', 'politically astute' lend credence to the notion that being a good man or woman has as little to do with being a good politician as it does with being a good tennis player.

But then what is politics about? Is it arguing our corner, getting the best deal from our sectional interest, as against others whose interests we discount or ignore altogether? If we define the game just in terms of winning something such as an election, or getting a policy adopted, then maybe we can identify the skills which success requires. Politics becomes just a game like tennis. But it is not just a game; the decisions made by those in power are for real and are crucially affected by their own personal values. That is why we cannot split off political flair as a separate skill. Political involvement, rightly understood, is not an end in itself but one kind of response to a vision of a better world. Without the vision, it is dead.

So how is it possible to reconcile the elements of skill and 'political considerations' with a vision of what it is all for? When politicians and their advisers or commentators talk about 'political considerations' or the 'political fall out' from an issue, or say that it is 'highly political', what they mean is that it has an impact on popularity and so on votes. 'If we do this, we might lose the next election as a result, or a vote in the Commons, or the support of a particular lobby which has been helpful to us in the past.' But what weight should a politician in power give to such factors? None? I do not believe so.

Suppose, for instance, that you are in power, and there is a whole raft of measures you want to enact, but you cannot do them all in one go. Then you want to stay in power long enough to get them through. If you are genuinely concerned with realizing a vision of a better world through putting these measures through, then staying in power to do so is a desirable means to this end. Hence such considerations will matter. But it is a big 'if'. It is possible, I am sure, to have such a vision and be in power—you

only have to look at someone like Dubceck before the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia to see that. Some individuals are gifted with the necessary qualities, for the world desperately needs good leaders.

Still, the trap is there. Power as the means so easily turns into power as the end. Young members of parliament are the easiest to tame: their ideals may be strong but to get anywhere they have to play the system. Once they come out at the top, they are free to promote their ideals, but they have forgotten them along the way and playing the system then becomes an end in itself. But it does not have to be so. Whilst it may profit a man nothing if he gains the whole world but loses his soul, it is for the greater glory of God if people of integrity get involved in running it.