

# Thinking about the Election

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## **They want your vote. Should they get it?**

It is in the interests of political parties and candidates to know what the public wants. So it comes back to us: we are the public. What do we want? More importantly, what are our wants based on?

The focus of this reflection is our *own* values and attitudes, because what we expect of our candidates comes back to what really matters to us.

It is tempting to say: everybody's wants are different; what difference will my vote make among so many? Probably not much if all we do is cast a vote. And probably less still if our vote is determined by uncritical affiliation to a party, or some single issue, or a personality cult. We need some way of evaluating *all* party manifestos, *all* issues, and *all* personalities.

Can Christ's gospel be any help? Obviously, the gospel does not give us a blueprint for social and economic policies. But social and economic policies are supposed to be in the service of human dignity and a humane society, one in which every person matters. In its turn, the gospel is about what it means to be authentically human fully human and fully alive. So for Christians, the general election is a time of special opportunity; we know something about what it means to be authentically human.

And we are not the only ones who would say with Pope Paul VI:

*It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustices, if at the same time one does not realise how each shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first.*

And so our involvement in this year's election means

- examining our own values;
- putting party manifestos under the spotlight of gospel values, or other religious values;
- doing this evaluation with others, or at least sharing with others what we have seen;
- then casting our vote.

In our form of democracy, the party system presents us with manifestos that are a package deal. Not every part of the package might be to our liking, or even to the liking of some candidates. And so strategic voting and coalition considerations can be called for.

Even so, perhaps the most strategic voting of all one that requires a collaborative effort and an informed public is to put into the parliament as many people whose personal integrity and values may well make the difference when it matters. Which brings us back to values, starting with our own. Let us test our own values on just a few of the issues relevant to what kind of society we are creating:

### **1. Refugees and asylum seekers I was a stranger and you welcomed me**

A quota is about how many refugees our country can receive, and that is a matter of good government. But our attitudes towards them is about *us* what kind of persons we become.

Ultimately the planet belongs by right to all people not to some more than others. How we share the planet comes back to decisions that are made by people. Some of those people represent us.

How do we feel when sometimes innocent individuals or even whole ethnic groups are branded for export?

### **2. Does love have boundaries? am I my brother's/sister's keeper?**

Famine, starvation, disease, homelessness, pollution of the world's air, earth and water, and human rights violations:

Can I really say these are not my problems? Can I resort to the cliché about keeping out of politics? What do I expect of those who represent me in parliament?

### **3. Violence and abuse when you did it to the least of these, you did it to me**

The public is right to insist on protecting people against thugs and against sexual deviants. But there is more: W L Marshall, who has worked professionally with both victims and offenders, says

*The public needs to set aside its understandable, but distasteful, feelings of vengeance and attempt to come to grips with what is likely to minimize the chances that further innocent children will suffer at the hands of identified child molesters. We must be willing to take the steps necessary to protect children and ignore our dysfunctional desire to simply punish. However much it might grate on our feelings, the evidence tells us that assisting child molesters to put their lives together in ways that allow them to function effectively, is the most effective way to reduce their risk to re-offend. Strategies (including treatment) aimed at achieving this goal do not exclude holding the offender responsible.*

On that basis, would my attitudes make me part of the solution or part of the problem?

### **4. Having more where your treasure is, there your heart will be too**

Have I ever asked a political candidate what he/she means by a higher standard of living? Chances are that they have never seriously reflected on the difference between *having* more and *being* more, or on the link between having more and being less.

Have I ever traced the links between having more, wanting more, spending more, borrowing more, earning more, and putting more stress on families and marriages, and what we are doing to the environment?

Is having more a *higher* form of living?

### **5. Being more man does not live by bread alone**

Economic planning geared to having more puts us on a treadmill; it has been getting faster, and people have been falling off.

To be themselves, people need times of stillness to see more deeply into life; times of quiet to hear from the heart; time for wonder, beauty and thanksgiving and other things the Treasury cannot count. These are the dimensions of life, and of being truly human, that get squeezed out when market forces which are supposed to be in our service somehow become our master.

In addition, people are being mesmerised by the propaganda of consumerism, the pull towards constant and immediate gratification, and the trivialisation of life and of all that is sacred especially by the entertainment industry.

Do the candidates in my electorate know that I would like something better than that?

### **6. Economic systems can anyone pick figs from thistles?**

Even increased expenditure on health, housing and education has not met growing needs. Another treadmill! Can we be satisfied with policies that only fine-tune an economic system which allows capital resources to be concentrated in fewer hands, and allows the very concept of public service to be discarded in favour of the corporate mentality? How has that given us a higher standard of living?

Is there a connection between the economic system we have created and the constant need for more expenditure on health, welfare, unemployment and crime.

### **7. Does marriage matter? there was a wedding at Cana Jesus and his disciples were invited**

When two people take marriage vows, they commit themselves to each other for life and promise to be faithful. Not to make that commitment is not to marry.

Nor is any other relationship a marriage if it does not fit the description: Male and female he made them saying 'be fruitful and multiply'. The so-called right to choose cannot change that.

So how much faith can we have in the judgement of politicians who say marriages and non-married relationships should all be put on the same footing? What does that say about marriage?

#### **8. The rights of children their angels always behold the face of my Father**

Psychologists point out that a father's love and a mother's love are *different* and that each contributes *differently* to a child's development. A same-sex couple cannot provide both kinds of love not even by redefining parenthood to mean just child-caring.

Is it ethically acceptable to override the needs and rights of a child for adult agendas? Can we entrust legislating responsibilities to candidates who think the answer to that is yes.

#### **9. New birth technologies it was You who put me together in my mother's womb**

When it comes to difficult decisions, do I still believe that *every* human being is sacred or only some? What is my position on bringing embryos into existence to be used as raw material for other people's medication, and then discarded?

What do I say to parents facing the birth of a child with serious defects? People are quietly accepting the practice of killing such children before or at birth on the grounds that their lives would require great sacrifices on the part of others.

Are there special categories of human beings whom it is acceptable to kill? And who decides? Or is it never right to use any person as a means to other ends?

That brings us back to the purpose of social and economic planning. They exist for the well-being of persons; persons do not exist for the well-being of social and economic planning. You might want to make that your yardstick when checking the beliefs and values of those who are competing for your vote.