

Building a New Culture of Social Responsibility

6 April 2011

Catholic Social Action Conference

Institution of Mechanical Engineers, Westminster

Mt Rev Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster

President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

I am very grateful for your presence this morning at what is best described as a public conversation. It brings together in one room an unusual mix of people - politicians, civil servants, those working in social action in the Catholic community, representatives from other churches and organisations. I hope in this conversation, as in all good conversations, we can explore something worthwhile together. There are three areas in particular we might focus on:

- some of the challenges and opportunities for Catholic social action in the light of the changing economic and social context;
- possible developments in the Church's engagement in social action in that context; and
- more effective ways of working in partnership with others: statutory authorities, churches other faiths and other bodies.

The genesis of our meeting is complex. On one hand, there are the pressing needs of the times. On the other the imperative of faith, highlighted, I believe for many, by the Visit last September of Pope Benedict to the UK. And, at the end of that Visit, there were the significant remarks made by the Prime Minister when he stated that a priority of this Government is the creation of a culture of greater social responsibility, adding that 'people of faith are great architects of that new culture.'

In response, the Bishops of England and Wales, meeting last November, reflected on our priorities. We embarked on a programme whose aim would be to enable the Catholic community to contribute as fully as possible to this project.

The first step undertaken by our agency, Caritas social action network – "CSAN"- was a very quick snapshot audit of the size and scope of Catholic social action in England and Wales as a preliminary step before more detailed research is undertaken. On 1st February we held a workshop in Liverpool attended by over 180 people involved in Catholic social action across the country to explore together current challenges and opportunities. You have in your packs some of the results of that event which indicated what we do and some of the practical question arising from that involvement. The next step

was to seek to engage, at the level of Catholic social teaching, with some of the philosophical ideas behind the “Big Society”. A seminar was held in Archbishop’s House on 9th February and you all received in advance of our meeting today the discussion paper which emerged. This outlines some of the tools brought by Catholic Social Teaching to this architectural task.

This meeting, then, brings the fruits of the work done so far to a wider and much more diverse forum in an open and honest engagement as we seek to play our part in contributing to social renewal. We have structured the morning to allow for such an exploration.

As soon as I have finished these remarks, there will be time for some initial contributions from you all: first thoughts and expectations. We will then hear from Baroness Warsi on behalf of the Government. She has spoken thoughtfully about the positive role faith communities play and we look forward to hearing what she has to say. We then have Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies. I am very grateful to Paul for stepping in at short notice in place of Sir Gus O’Donnell who is unable to be with us. It is extremely helpful for our discussion to be informed in a clear and objective way by an understanding not only of the immediate but also the longer term constraints on public expenditure. There will then be time for a discussion with them before the Minister needs to leave at coffee time.

Helen O’Brien, the Chief Executive of Caritas social action network and Christoph Petrik-Schweifer, Caritas Austria will then explore how our work might develop and some initiatives that have taken place in Austria. The international Caritas network of Catholic charities offers a whole range of fascinating models of possible development for the social action work of the Catholic community in England and Wales. At our next Bishops Conference meeting in May we will be discussing this further and reflecting together on possible ways forward. Today’s discussion is important for that.

Returning to the programme, after coffee we will have a panel discussion in which I hope as many of you as possible will be able to take part.

We are all very aware that our meeting today is taking place when severe cuts in public expenditure are coming into effect, centrally and locally. Parts of

London are in some ways insulated from the profound impact which these cuts are having particularly in other cities. An integral part of the Christian witness is to stand in solidarity with those in need, to ask insistent questions of local and national government about the priorities by which decisions are made, about who is bearing the brunt of the cuts and to sustain particular concern for groups most at risk. As unemployment, debt and financial hardship increase, so too can severe social issues including homelessness, family breakdowns, crime and alcoholism. These increase the burden on social action organisations at a time when funding to these organisations, not only from central government and local authorities but also from donors, will be reducing. No doubt some of these issues will be raised this morning, and rightly so.

But equally I hope we do not dwell only on the immediate problems but also take up the longer term agenda. In his excellent recent lecture “Big society – small world” the Archbishop of Canterbury recognised the widespread - and understandable- scepticism that the phrase the “Big society” is simply a smokescreen for cuts. But he also rightly says that “Cynicism is too easy a response and the opportunity is too important to let pass”. All of us – not just the politicians of any party – need to think hard about how to build a richer community life, characterised by stronger social bonds and a greater acceptance of our mutual responsibilities. And as our Bishops noted in November, “if this project is to succeed, it must be taken beyond party politics to become a common endeavour owned by society as a whole.”

It is indicative of a “*common bond of unity*” we are gathered this morning from such different backgrounds to work with one another towards a shared goal. I believe that everyone in this room has an unrelenting commitment to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged people in our society. Common ground is sometimes difficult to find – but it is clearly visible here today.

One clear challenge is to make this particular Catholic contribution better understood, not because we are looking for recognition but because there is something of value at hand: the value of the practical contribution being made (and a financial figure has been put on that in some quarters) and the valuable insights and motivations which can be shared too.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, for example, Pope Benedict XVI discusses the theme of the logic of gift, that insight that at the heart of most of our transactions an element of 'gift' is present, in many different forms, although it often goes unrecognised because of the perspectives of 'contract' and 'consumer' that so dominate our thinking. Not only must we ensure that the gratuitousness shown by millions of people, not least in Catholic Social Action Organisations, is not overlooked but I also believe that this idea of gift holds a key for unlocking a new sense of moral purpose more widely in civil society, including in the business community. We should not think too narrowly of the scope of social action. I hope in coming months that the Bishops programme of deepening social engagement will explore the relevance of the idea of gratuity in various areas of life, including the world of business.

But perhaps one of the biggest challenges is not to be disheartened. I was very struck by the generous and positive approach of those who came to our Liverpool conference. No-one was minimising the challenges, but there was also a palpable sense of energy and engagement, an awareness that new approaches are arising with scope for creativity and innovation to serve those in need more effectively and thereby help transform society. So today we may quietly celebrate the efforts of all involved in Catholic Social Action while positively opening up the discussion to difficult challenges and hard questions.

I look forward to our discussion.

Thank you very much