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Reflections on issues in the General Election 2010 by the Most Reverend Patrick Kelly, Archbishop of Liverpool.

The fruit of three Briefings.

Preface:

I recommend careful attention to 'Choosing the Common Good', the pre-election document prepared by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Among the many gifts I have received I give thanks that my Father was politically engaged. I remember him going to the large public meetings that were part of the lead up to General Elections in my school days. I also give thanks that the RE curriculum at Preston Catholic College included social awareness, nourished also by membership of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and political responsibility. And I add one other gift: that I was a non-governmental observer at the first non-apartheid election in South Africa. Through no deserving of my own I have come to take voting with great seriousness.

At the approach of this General Election, and how this came to me I just do not know, I felt it would be wise to be briefed by others and only then to offer reflections. I have taken part in three such briefings:

By those in Nugent Care who are at the sharpest end of our service to those in need, financially, emotionally, spiritually, culturally.

By the Deacons, together with their wives, since Deacons are called by Our Lord to keep the Church faithful to the commission to be salt and leaven in society for the benefit of all and in particular to reach out to those in greatest need.

By the 800 Group: that is by the Chief Executives and Chairs of the Trustees of those Voluntary Bodies, based mostly in Liverpool, that between them have offered 800 years of service to those in need. The following agencies and Associations were represented at the meeting Age Concern, Bradbury Fields, Henshaws, Imagine, Merseyside Society for Deaf People, Nugent Care and PSS.

Local Solutions was also represented and, since already, and increasingly for the future, co-operation across the Statutory and Voluntary Sector is essential, the presence of an official from the Ministry of Work and Pensions was significant.

I explained at all three briefings that my goal was to be able, in the light of these briefings, to address the General Election, less foolishly and to make what I have learned more widely known. I made it clear that I would not claim to speak in the name of anyone but myself as Archbishop of Liverpool. But I must also put on record this fact: all those present gave the assurance that they were more than willing for me to put on record their participation in the briefings.

I have done my best to be attentive to all that was shared, to recognise what common elements emerged, and so judge what issues it is fitting for me to share more widely. So I may make some contribution to responsible voting and at the same time prepare for what the frame of mind and attitudes the future will need since one constant thread is deep uncertainty of what the situation will be like in coming months and years, an uncertainty curiously symbolised in the Icelandic Volcanic ash.

So, from that background I offer these notes, these observations, setting a scene rather than topics with which to grill a candidate. I suppose my decision as to how to vote will be for those who wrestle with underlying issues, aware of poverty in all its depth, and who do not insult my political mind by offering me glib sound-bites and quick fixes.

Public Finances:

The situation is very serious. A wish list of what services must be provided is foolish. It will take some time for us all to be adequately informed about the situation and it will be no surprise if there is another budget soon after the General Election.

For some time, with grants kept at existing levels and with no account taken of inflation, the Voluntary Sector has faced cut-backs in the funding available for its work and this already is having serious consequences for those in deep need.

Private Finances:

Many are experiencing increasing restraints on their financial resources. Less second hand goods are being made available, because less refurbishment is taking place, so there is less for distribution to others. Shops and stalls purchasing gold and related TV adverts offering this same service may be highly significant.

Front-line services:

I have become much more aware in the briefings that all assurance not to cut back front-line services must be scrutinised in the light of this fact: besides statutory front line services, and in these any cut-backs would be obvious for all to see, there are also those that are not statutory; these are truly front-line and often the field where the Voluntary Sector is specifically engaged and effective, even financially. The non-statutory front line services respond both to acute, unexpected need, the last straws, and by the preventative nature of their expertise, they often prevent greater problems in the future. Typically they offer not only financial assistance but also accompaniment in managing, coping and all on a long-term

basis. Often they meet with limited success. But that does not undermine their value, and they should not be hastily dismissed as a failure; their determination to help those in chaos, confusion, complexity of need means they run the risk of failure and that is in truth their great value.

These non-statutory services contribute to the benefits accomplished by the Health Service, the Judiciary, Police and Prisons, Education, and Welfare.

At a time of cut-backs I find myself bound to warn against decisions based on notions of the deserving poor; those called undeserving poor do not lose their humanity and that has to be respected, embraced and nourished.

The voice of the poor:

Inter-generational poverty is a fact; I do not do all that is expected of me if I only try to alleviate poverty of body, mind, spirit; I must also be a voice, an advocate asking about root causes, and that applies whenever I find myself confronted by need whether it is close to home or much far away. In a part of the country that has seen massive demographic decline the needs of an ageing community and complex hopelessness for many who are young, faces me every time I am on a bus, train or walking in the city. And among the poor are those well beyond the margins of a coherent, organised way of life, with no aspiration, and no dreams; instead they seem to have no moral framework, and being without morals is more dangerous, for themselves and for others, than being immoral; that is why, for the well being of all, they need a voice.

And it is not new: listen to Charles Dickens in 'A Christmas Carol':

The Spirit of Christmas Present opens his robe to reveal two children:

'They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any degree, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread... This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased. "Deny it!" cried the Spirit stretching out its hands towards the city. "Slander those who tell it ye! Admit it for your factious purposes and make it worse and bide the end!"'

Migration:

There is far too much confusion and ignorance about what it means to be an asylum seeker and about the facts about migration, both across the European Community and across the world. And as a son of an economic migrant I find myself forced to stop and think whenever that phrase, economic migrants, is used in a pejorative sense.

The Future:

It will have to be different. It will need co-operation within each voluntary agency and between all in that sector, and then between that sector and statutory bodies. The status quo is not an option. Optimism seen as the certainty of getting back to where we once were, to the good old days is pointless today. Instead hope comes into its own for hope means the confidence to create something new. Hope depends on cooperation to achieve attention to all the facts, however unpalatable; that will lead to better understanding that is not hasty and slick; and that will form the basis for sound judgments, healed of bias and prejudice; and that will ground responsible action that takes full account of long-term consequences. The Young Christian Workers' phrase, 'See, Judge, Act' has come into its own.

Ends

21 April 2010