

 bright blue

Centre Write

Autumn 2018

Staying faithful?

Sir Roger Scruton | Nicky Morgan MP | Lord Ahmad | Tim Farron MP

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Chair: Matthew d'Ancona
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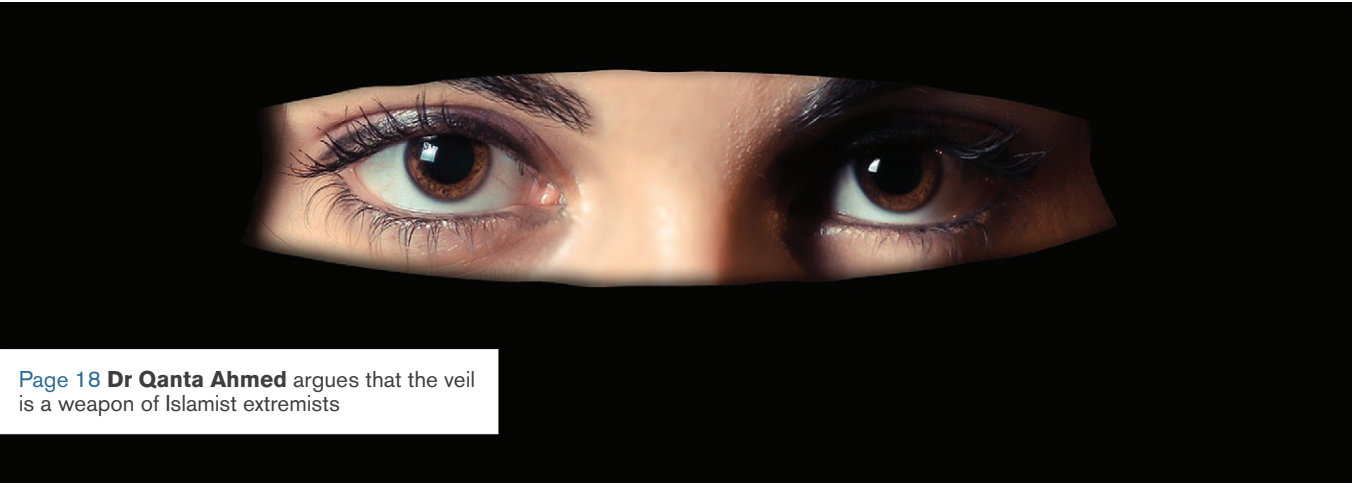
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Editor-in-chief's note



Ryan Shorthouse is the Director of Bright Blue and editor-in-chief of *Centre Write*

The Archbishop of Canterbury recently spoke at the Trade Union Congress annual conference, claiming that the gig economy and zero-hours contracts are a “reincarnation of an ancient evil” and that multinational companies such as Amazon “leached off the taxpayer” through alleged tax avoidance. This followed his involvement in and endorsement of a major economic report by centre-left think tank IPPR, which called for significant increases in both taxation and spending.

Despite historically low Church attendance, the Church of England, and Justin Welby in particular, still have considerable popularity and authority in this country. They should, in my view, use that power to influence public debate and policy towards the ‘common good’.

“In liberal democracies, secular law should be supreme. Indeed, only then can religious plurality survive.”

But just as the Archbishop should speak out on political matters, he should also expect – and engage with – critics of his views. On the gig economy, for instance, the evidence shows us that the experience of those working in it is much more mixed than the hellishness he describes. Undoubtedly there are those who are being exploited, but Bright Blue research, published in our report *Standing alone?*, illustrates that the majority of self-employed individuals living in low-income households

have high job satisfaction, certainly more than employees. Religion, I think, is at its most useful when it encourages reflectiveness, of ourselves and the world around us, rather than absolutist and judgemental thinking, which Welby has, unfortunately, been guilty of here.

The controversy over these comments ultimately proved that when the Archbishop speaks, we still very much listen – even agnostics like me. This is because the Church has had a long and unique place in this country’s fabric since the Elizabethan period: present, yes – in educational, community, cultural and public life – but never omnipresent. As the esteemed conservative philosopher, **Sir Roger Scruton**, tell us in his interview (p.24), the English continue to have a strong affinity with Christian values, but struggle with the metaphysics of it all and certainly don’t want its teachings thrust down throats. He argues, astutely, that the English “are guilty of all kinds of eccentric qualities that come to them from the Christian faith, even though they are not in the business of affirming that faith”.

There is, it seems, a liberalness to Anglicanism: most people do not live and breathe it, but instead forever dip in and out of Anglican institutions and ideas. It is discursive about and welcoming of different faiths in its schools and churches. Indeed, Christianity heavily shaped the canon of liberal thinking that so influenced European and American politics from the Enlightenment, despite the fashionable assumption that Christianity and liberalism have been from the start in conflict. **Nick**

Spencer from the think tank Theos (p.10) reminds us of the connection between these two philosophies: “Religious thought – specifically Christian thought – has proved a powerful justification for human rights, dignity and equality, the rule of law, and various forms of political accountability.” As **Tim Farron MP** (p.9), the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, says: “It has been largely forgotten that many of the values held by today’s liberal secular society are built upon Christian foundations”.

Religious thinking should and does have a place in liberal society, then. And we need not follow in the footsteps of the French, consigning faith to the private realm alone. Secularism, specifically secular law, as Scruton has previously and extensively written about and which Chief Executive of Humanists UK **Andrew Copson** describes (p.16), is essential to transcending especially religious and ethnic differences to build functioning, stable nation-states. But we need not be doctrinaire about secularism, prohibiting religious thinking, symbols and representation in the public realm.

“Present, yes – in educational, community, cultural and public life – but never omnipresent.”

Which brings us to the wearing of the veil. Across many European countries, despite so few women wearing it, the veil has become a point of major political debate, raising questions about gender, religion and public safety in modern


>> society. **Dr Qanta Ahmed**, a Muslim woman (p.18), argues that liberal westerners should not be so naïve: niqabs and burqas are deeply misogynistic, promulgated by extreme Islamists, with cultural rather than religious origins. “Islam never intended women to be unseen, unheard, or denied personal agency”, she argues, powerfully.

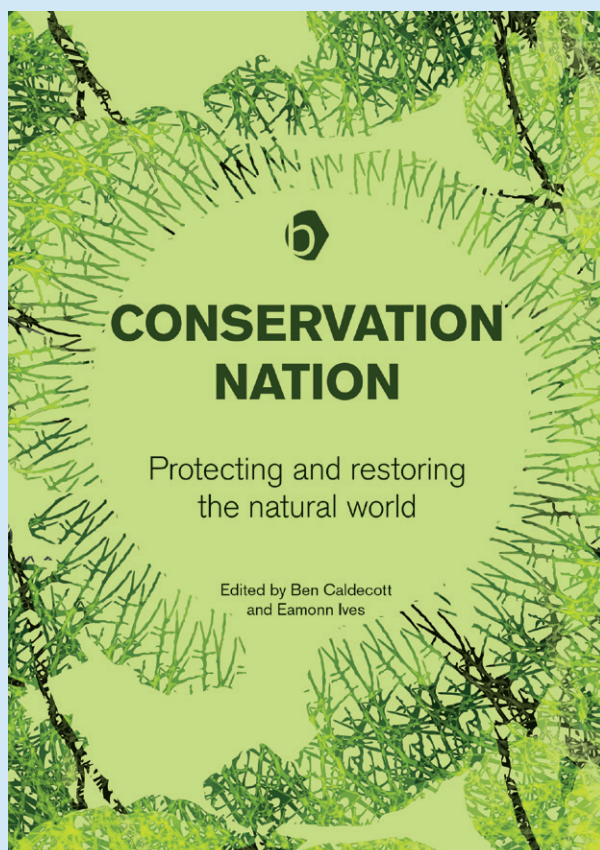
I sympathise strongly with these sentiments. But, still, I do not think we should follow the French, who in 2010 banned the concealment of the face with items such as masks, helmets, balaclavas and, yes, veils. The truth is, we cannot be

certain just how much of any religiously-motivated action or thought, in fact any type of action or thought, derives from free will or external pressure, or different degrees of both. As long as it is not harmful to others, then, it strikes me that wearing the veil should be permitted, apart from in specific, exceptional circumstances. But of course, it should be a part of robust but civil debate, as should other non-harmful but contentious religious practices.

Faith has played and does play, generally, a positive role in society, the motivation for good words and works by many, as **Revd Mike Long** – the

Superintendent minister of the Notting Hill Methodist Circuit – recalls it did in the wake of the terrible destruction of Grenfell Tower last year (p.15). But, as history warns, it can also be deeply destructive, particularly if people use it as an ideology to impose their will or worse on others. Religion can and should inspire, both in public and in private, but it must not govern. In liberal democracies, secular law should be supreme. Indeed, only then can religious plurality survive.

The Church of England should therefore continue to campaign for the ‘common good’ in this country, but carefully. 



Latest report

Conservation Nation

Dr Ben Caldecott and Eamonn Ives

Nature is facing unparalleled threats. Under Conservative Governments this decade, there has been progress on nature conservation, at home and abroad. But there is still much more to do, including in policy design and public funding.

This book brings together leading experts, policymakers, opinion formers, and politicians both from conservative and independent backgrounds to explore proposals, and mobilise support across the political spectrum for future conservation efforts.

Letters to the editor

Send your letters to ryan@brightblue.org.uk

As Alex Smith's piece ('Really Connecting', Summer 2018) points out, technology has created a serious decrease in meaningful interactions for many people. The data on mental health and general wellbeing is concerning. However, there has also been a noticeable increase in technology that targets these issues. Mindfulness and meditation apps have become increasingly popular as well as start-ups to strengthen local communities by redistributing unused food or household items. There has also been a significant increase in social media movements and campaigns targeted at mental health. Hopefully this trend will continue, and people will increasingly develop and use technologies which promote more meaningful interactions and personal wellbeing.

Anne le Roux *Bright Blue member*

It was refreshing and timely to see an edition of *Centre Write* ('Matters of the mind', Summer 2018) devoted to mental health issues.

The Conservatives made a significant contribution to this field with the introduction of the Accredited Registers (AR) programme in 2012. But we could go much further. We now have tens of thousands of psychological practitioners just waiting for the Government to take the initiative and work with the AR programme directly.

The Conservatives should be proud of the AR scheme. It provides light-touch regulation and is incredibly popular with the profession. It should be further strengthened by making it compulsory through primary legislation and then integrated properly into existing approaches to our national mental health crisis.

Dr Christopher Forester *Chair, National Counselling Society and Bright Blue member*



Professor Julie Barnett ('The lonely mother', Summer 2018) correctly suggests new mothers should stop comparing themselves with "often unattainable ideals". However, Barnett does not mention the new conception of motherhood as secondary to a career, and how this adds to feelings of isolation.

Today, young women are encouraged to pursue their dream career and let nothing hold them back. But whilst career opportunities are emphasised, less and less value seems to be placed on the gift of motherhood. In a country where we can now freeze our eggs so that we may focus on climbing the career ladder, children and motherhood become a mere inconvenience. It is no surprise that Barnett suggests new mothers find it difficult to make meaningful connections with friends, as such friends likely believe that motherhood impedes one's career prospects, puts an end to exotic holidays and other bucket-list superfluities, and ultimately ties one down.

It is seldom the case that full time mothers need liberating from the shackles of institutionalised misogyny; staying at home tends to be an option reserved for the affluent minority. Of course, it is important that women are taught from a young age that a career is rewarding and attainable. But we should also ensure that motherhood is portrayed as an equally worthwhile option, and support those who choose such a path.

Imelda Stephenson *Bright Blue member*

The Corbynites and antisemitism



Stephen Pollard is the editor of *The Jewish Chronicle*

Stephen Pollard explores the relationship between the political hard-left and antisemitism

Denis Healey coined the classic 'First Law of Politics': "When you're in a hole, stop digging." As a guide to dealing with a crisis, it's almost always the best advice. Almost.

Because sometimes it's simply irrelevant. Sometimes it's not you doing the digging. Sometimes the hole is so great that there can be no end to the digging.

Which brings us to Jeremy Corbyn and antisemitism. Barely a day goes by without new evidence emerging of the Labour leader's support for or appearance with an antisemite.

I'm writing this in early September. So far, the most damning single video has been his reference to British Zionists not understanding English irony – a classic of that oh-so-refined English antisemitism that holds that the Jew is, for all his or her qualities, somehow 'the other' and alien.

But the hole is so vast – so full of unexcavated evidence just waiting to be brought up – that this will clearly not be the last to emerge.

It can't be, because this is the milieu in which the Labour leader spent decades of his political life until his elevation in 2015. He spent that time actively courting and being courted by the likes of Hamas, Hezbollah and assorted other antisemites. There is decades-worth of this stuff to bring to light.

But obvious as it has been since Mr Corbyn took office that this crisis could never go away – it can't because it centres on Mr Corbyn's core beliefs – this summer has been spectacularly bad.

Labour has, consciously and deliberately, gone out of its way to troll the

Jewish community – for example, telling 68 rabbis from across the religious spectrum that their view that the party should adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism counted for nothing and only Labour was qualified to define it.

Then, almost beyond parody, the Corbynites were sent out to attack Lord Sacks – Lord Sacks! – as a "far right extremist."

My newspaper, *The Jewish Chronicle*, posed seven questions for Mr Corbyn to answer concerning his relationship with and support for a variety of antisemites. He gave no serious answer then, and he hasn't done so since. At no point has the Labour leader said or done anything other than mouth the words that he is against antisemitism – and, as he usually adds, all other forms of racism.

But as the evidence that contradicts that drips out picture by picture, word by word, video by video, not once has he offered a moment's self-reflection to address why it is that, as Dave Rich has put it, he seems to be the world's unluckiest anti-racist, constantly offering support to antisemites.

The truth is that he cannot, because this is his political DNA. In the hard-left mindset, antisemitism is not real racism. Real racism is discrimination against black people and 'oppressed' minorities.

Far from being 'oppressed', Jews are part of the powerful elite. That's the view of Ken Livingstone, for example, who said in 2012 that Jews wouldn't vote for him because they are too rich.

There are some 'Good Jews' – the Jews who oppose imperialism (in other words,


Israel) but the rest are, by definition, 'Bad Jews'.

Opinions like these are why antisemitism is a unique form of racism. Most racists regard the object of their hatred with contempt as lesser human beings – such as the Ku Klux Klan in the US or the National Party in apartheid South Africa.

But antisemites see Jews as clever, sly and wily. They think Jews secretly run the world. Hence the constant references to the supposed Rothschild control of the world's banks, Jewish control of the media and wars fought to further Jewish interests. The hard-left regards the world as being run by a Western elite and powerful interest groups, which need to be broken up by revolution.

It also explains part of the visceral hatred of Israel – and why, for example, enemies of Israel are the people Jeremy Corbyn turns to as friends. As a Westernised capitalist democracy they regard Israel as another arm of oppression to be smashed. This is the milieu in which Jeremy Corbyn has existed for decades.

This is a crisis that cannot end, because Mr Corbyn is in some ways simply a stooge. He has his personal issues with Jews, but the real issue is the hard-left cadre he represents which now controls the Labour Party.

Mr Corbyn may stay, he may go. He may say something, he may not. It's all irrelevant. The real point is that Labour is now run by politicians who divide Jews into 'Good' and 'Bad', who see them as the class enemy and who choose to ally with organisations which exist to wipe Jews from the face of the earth. 

An end to Islamophobia



Mohammed Amin
is Chairman of the
Conservative Muslim Forum

The Conservative Party needs to tackle Islamophobia, for moral and political reasons, argues **Mohammed Amin**

I want to explain briefly why tackling 'Islamophobia' is vital, both for our country, and for the Conservative Party in particular.

The word 'Islamophobia' is itself contested. I normally avoid using it. Here, I use it purely as an abbreviation for anti-Muslim hatred and prejudice. Neither of those is committed simply by criticising the religion of Islam. But criticising Islam is sometimes disguised Islamophobia, just as criticising Israel can be disguised anti-Semitism.

"Britons growing up today will have to function in a diverse world, where most people are very different from the inhabitants of 1950's Britain that so many haters of Muslims hark back to."

Muslims matter for three main reasons. One and a half billion Muslims are the world's second largest religious group with over 50 Muslim majority countries, and very large Muslim minorities in countries such as India and Nigeria. In the UK, at 5%, Muslims are also the second largest religious group, and with the decline of Christian religious practice, Muslims represent a much higher proportion of active religious practitioners. Finally, Muslims are currently the group facing the most widespread hostility, measured by critical media coverage, of any minority group and are therefore a litmus test for our society's treatment of all minorities.

Suffering Islamophobia directly harms the victim. When discrimination stops you getting jobs that you are qualified for, your current and future earnings and quality of life suffer. Experiencing discrimination and hatred can result in mental and physical illness, with associated costs to the Exchequer, and can lead to alienation, petty criminal activity and even to radicalisation. Our country also suffers from the waste of talent, when we need every highly skilled person to succeed.


Rabbi Lord Sacks has written: "The hate that begins with Jews never ends with Jews." The same is true of Muslims. A society that fails to tackle hatred directed at them will soon find itself with hatred being directed at other groups; once one group is marginalised, other candidates for hatred are soon found. Furthermore, Britons growing up today will have to function in a diverse world, where most people are very different from the inhabitants of 1950's Britain that so many haters of Muslims hark back to. They will be unable to do business with such foreigners if they have grown up hating people who are different.

Since Islamophobia harms Britain, that is enough reason for the Conservative Party to make it a priority. However, self-interest is the other reason. The 2011 census showed 80 constituencies where Muslims were more than 10% of the population. By now, the figures will be higher. Historically, Muslims have been concentrated in inner cities, but with growing numbers and wealth many are moving out into the suburbs. Muslims will not vote for a party

they see as tolerating Islamophobia; nor will many young non-Muslim, metropolitan liberals who value the diverse multi-ethnic, multi-religious society that Britain is today.

Recent general elections have shown both the benefits of getting it right, and what can go wrong. In the 2010 general election, only about 15% of British Muslims voted Conservative. In the 2015 general election, thanks to David Cameron's detoxification of the Conservative Party plus hard work by many including the Conservative Muslim Forum, this had risen to 25%. That increase will have accounted for some of the seats that we won that year to get our absolute majority in Parliament. In 2017, while our national vote share rose, our Muslim and other minorities vote share fell, contributing to our losses.

To illustrate the effects of demographic change as Muslims and other ethnic minorities move out from inner cities, look at Ilford North, a constituency which is experiencing significant inflows of minorities from East London. From 1945 to 2015, the Conservative Party held the seat for 53 of those years, losing it only in very strong years for Labour such as 1945, 1997, and also in October 1974. However, in 2015, despite the Conservative Party performing strongly around the country, we lost the seat, and Labour increased its majority in 2017.

Ilford North could be our Party's future. If we fail to convincingly address Islamophobia within our own ranks, let alone Islamophobia in wider society, we will find ourselves fighting future elections while hobbled and handicapped. 

Faithful to politics?

Faith should not be a private matter, argues **Tim Farron MP**



Tim Farron is MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale and the former Leader of the Liberal Democrats

What role should faith have in a liberal public square? A quick trawl on Twitter of the phrase 'religion' and 'politics' predictably brings up a largely negative view: "Keep religion out of politics", and "Religion and politics are a toxic mix."

Much of this suspicion is from liberals who believe that the absence of faith is somehow a neutral position in politics; if you hold a faith you are at best eccentric and, at worst, intolerant and intolerable. This view holds that faith is acceptable if it is practised as a kind of private hobby, and if it has no bearing on your public actions or pronouncements.

"It has been largely forgotten that many of the values held by today's liberal secular society are built upon Christian foundations."

As a liberal politician, and a Christian, I have been encouraged many times to leave my faith at the door when I engage in public debate. But, even if that were possible, why would it be desirable? I don't want policymakers to be empty-headed and value-free. I want people to feel comfortable with expressing their views – and defending those views – in robust but respectful debate.

For a start there is no such thing as a neutral public square. We all approach life with a particular world view and set of values. These are developed, often subconsciously, from our parents, peer

groups, teachers, the media and our culture. Society is formed of people with a myriad of beliefs and outlooks.

Second, the reality of faith is that it is not a private world view, but one that inspires action. Look at the response to the horrific Grenfell Tower fire last year. The local faith groups – churches, mosques, synagogues and gurdwaras – stepped in and provided food, accommodation, counselling and support over the following days and months. They were able to do this because they were already embedded in the local landscape, trusted and visible, and committed to serving and supporting the community.

This demonstrates faith that goes beyond the cultural and surface niceties of religion. This kind of faith is what drives many people, and it comes with a holistic world view, which in the Christian faith often includes an emphasis on the teachings of the Bible.

This is what liberals often find hard to stomach. But it has been largely forgotten that many of the values held by today's liberal secular society are built upon Christian foundations.


The Biblical narrative centres on the idea that we are all created in the image of God, and that Christ died for each one of us. This powerful belief confers on every individual an innate worth. It carries with it the fundamental requirement to treat others with respect and dignity, no matter who they are. This is a truly 'lofty equality' on which the secular liberal concept of human rights is based.

Yet today's debate is so often defined by the concept of 'us and them'. If we view

someone as fundamentally different to us, for example because of their race, religion, sexuality or language, it is then only a small step to justifying treatment of them that we would never tolerate if it was being meted out to our own family or friends.

"I don't want policymakers to be empty-headed and value-free. I want people to feel comfortable with expressing their views – and defending those views – in robust but respectful debate."

There is an argument that the resurgence of nationalism in the UK, USA and across Europe has been in part due to the intolerance of 'liberal elites' shouting down any views that diverge from their own. And liberals should be ashamed of this sort of behaviour. John Stuart Mill believed that the greatest threat to freedom is the tyranny of opinion, using social pressure to freeze out certain views. Instead, liberalism should seek to promote conscience above conformity, and oppose the idea of society being beholden to any particular worldview.

A truly liberal society involves fighting for the rights and freedoms of people you don't agree with. It means holding in balance the views of a pluralistic population by upholding freedom of speech, religion and conscience. It requires more religious literacy from our institutions and political classes. It also needs us to put aside personal attacks and learn how to listen respectfully and disagree well with one other. 

British Prime Ministers 'do God' – sort of



Nick Spencer is Senior Fellow at Theos

British Prime Ministers may have been increasingly notable for their Christian faith. **Nick Spencer** explores what that means for our nation

It is a strange fact that as Britain has become more secular its Prime Ministers have become more religious. In the decade or so after the Second World War we had: Clement Attlee, who claimed he was “incapable of religious experience” and thought theology “mumbo-jumbo”; Churchill, who described himself as a buttress of the church (that he supported it from the outside); and Anthony Eden, who was closer to his father’s atheism than his mother’s Anglicanism.

Thereafter, things warmed up a little. Macmillan was a devout Anglo-Catholic, Douglas-Home a private Scottish Episcopalian, Wilson was influenced by his nonconformist background, Heath by his Anglican one, and James Callaghan once served as a Sunday school teacher, but thereafter lost his faith. Certainly, a more religious bunch than the first three, then, but hardly (except for Macmillan) fervent.

Since then, however, we’ve enjoyed/ endured (delete according to political and theological tastes) a more robustly faithful lot.

Margaret Thatcher was devout believer, whose fierce late-Victorian Methodism was foundational to her politics and delivered, twice while leader of opposition and once in power, some of the most significant theological lectures ever offered by a leading parliamentarian. John Major was all but agnostic, but his successor Tony Blair was an adult convert, his communitarian thinking of the 1990s grounded in the personalism of Christian philosopher John Macmurray, filtered through the Revd Peter Thompson at Oxford.

In his wake, Gordon Brown was a son of the manse, a believer but one who was apparently more comfortable talking about his father’s faith than his own. David Cameron’s Anglicanism was cultural and undogmatic, famously coming and going like Magic FM in the Chilterns. And now Theresa May, as everyone knows, is a clergyman’s daughter, a practising Anglican and someone who claims Christianity as foundational to her political worldview.

All in all, the arc of post-war British Prime Ministers may be long but it tends towards faith. What are we to make of this?

The first point is that it is not anomalous. A recent book I edited, *The Mighty and the Almighty: how political leaders do God*, charts the theo-political lives and tactics of 24 Prime Ministers, Presidents and Chancellors from around the world since about 1980. Some of these come from countries where ‘doing God’ is obligatory (the US, obviously) but many (Australia, France, Germany, South Korea) do not. Few now imagine the world is going secular, as sociologists once confidently predicted. Nor, it seems, are its leaders.

Second, this is dangerous. I work for a religion and society think tank, which has for 12 years argued for faith in public life. Rightly understood and embodied, it is part of the solution not part of the problem. Religious belief and practice is positively associated with mental and physical health, wherever you go in the world. Religious groups offer vast and irreplaceable resources of practical, social, and pastoral support in the most secular West, to which may be added economic, medical

and educational support everywhere else. And religious thought – specifically Christian thought – has proved a powerful justification for human rights, dignity and equality, the rule of law, and various forms of political accountability. Moreover, those societies that have tried to eradicate the religious beliefs and practices of its people, in the conviction that they were mere giving history a bit of a helping hand, have invariably ended up a nightmares of misgovernment and persecution. All in all, societies and polities, need faith.

But – and here’s where we find the ointment housing not so much a fly as a Giant Weta (look it up) – religious commitment is also risky, threatening to animate, divide and subvert the proper processes of public debate if not handled with appropriate care. To be clear: I’m not simply rehearsing the exhausted and unpersuasive claim that religions are simply incompatible with liberal democracies or that they – yawn – “inevitably cause war.” It’s rather that religious belief and practice taps into the deepest human desires and concerns and operate near the reactor core. They needn’t destabilise and divide but they self-evidently can and do. They need to be handled with care.


Which brings me to my third point and back to British Prime Ministers. ‘Handled with care’ does not mean handled with silence or hidden away in the ‘personal but not public’ box. Post-war British Prime Ministers may have been increasingly notable for their Christian faith, but few have felt free to speak about it openly. Thatcher was one exception, and even

>> she was rather more silent in power than in opposition. Cameron, perhaps oddly, was the other, speaking saying more about Christianity than both his predecessors and his successor put together – although that was probably because no one ever imagined he took it very seriously.

By contrast, Blair stopped doing God after a *Sunday Telegraph* interview at Easter

1995 that unfairly implied he was claiming God for Labour. Gordon Brown's recent memoir explains how he felt unable to talk about his motivating faith while he was in Number 10, and Theresa May (hardly the most confessional of public figures in any case) would not dream of talking God.

Good, the secularists say. God doesn't belong in politics. They are wrong. And

not just for the reasons outlined earlier. It is because religion is so powerful and so central to human identity and hopes that it needs a political voice. Suppression leads to resentment, not some kind of alleged rational consensus. Ultimately, the best antidote to bad theo-politics is good theo-politics, not some kind of secular wall of silence. 

Are Christianity and capitalism compatible?

Paul Goodman and Tom Kibasi debate



Paul Goodman is the executive editor of *ConservativeHome* and a former Conservative MP



Tom Kibasi is director of the Institute for Public Policy Research and chair of the IPPR Commission on Economic Justice

Dear Paul,

I imagine that we both agree that Christianity and capitalism are not inherently in opposition to one another. As Max Weber observed, it was Protestantism that ignited the spirit of capitalism. But there are many different varieties of capitalism, and the real question is the moral character of the economy of the moment, rather than the fact of it.

Over the past two years, the Archbishop of Canterbury has been a member of the IPPR Commission on Economic Justice, which *The Economist* described as “exemplifying the new consensus, borrowing ideas from left and right.” Welby appears to be re-orientating the church to be more concerned about the morality of the boardroom than the bedroom. After all, most people spend the majority of their waking hours at work. It is a conception far from ‘the Conservative Party at prayer’. This shift in the thinking of the church is surely a good thing, wouldn't you agree?

The essential Christian message is centred on the idea that every human is precious and worthy of dignity. What Nietzsche slammed as “slave morality” is a basic commitment to equality: that all are equal in the eyes of God. We accept that human beings are flawed, and therefore do not expect perfect equality on earth. But surely the logic of Judeo-Christian morality is that we should be working towards an economy that is more equal, not less?

Agnostically yours, Tom

Dear Tom,

Our starting points are so different that we're in danger of talking past each other. Yours, as an intelligent agnostic, is to think about Christianity and capitalism from first principles, drawing on the Archbishop of Canterbury's view as you do so (thus also giving the IPPR Commission a plug). Mine, as a sceptical believer, is to ponder the matter from the lived, historical, given experience of Christians for over two thousand years.

“Yes, there are non-negotiable absolutes, as true now as two thousand years ago. Christians must worship God alone. Not race. Not class. Not the state. And not the market – which, properly understood, is a social artefact: made for man, like the Sabbath.”

They've lived under pagan caesars, Byzantine priest-emperors, tsar autocrats, elected presidents, liberal democracies. Some have made the case for revolutionary socialism. Others, heaven help us, for slavery. Others still decorate American free-market think tanks. Very many have rejected the claims of politics altogether.

A conclusion leaps out from this bewildering story. As one historian put it: “Jesus of Nazareth managed to be all things to

>> *all men while none the less being true to himself." What should follow in any reflective person is a certain humility. I am not saying that 'anything goes'. But the boundaries of Christian social and political thought evidently stretch wide.*

So wide, in fact, that your formula of "working towards an economy that is more equal" would not gain consensus – then, now, or perhaps in the future. Which equality? Before the law? Of opportunity? Of outcome? Of respect? These necessarily clash – at least some of the time.

Perhaps the reason Christian answers can legitimately differ is bound up with the nature of Christianity itself. It isn't "centred on the idea that every human is precious and worthy of dignity" – no more or less than the other Abrahamic religions, anyway. It is centred on the claim that Christ was the Son of God. The claim transcends economics.

Best, Paul

Dear Paul,

I must say that I was a little surprised to read such a stirring defence of relativism, an idea so unpopular with the right for many years. It is undeniable that the boundaries of Christian thought are broad; but surely if there is to be meaning in the world, they are not limitless. It is certainly true that my perspective chimes more strongly with Catholic social teaching—with its regard for good works and the common good—than with the individualism of the protestant tradition.

Even then, the idea of justice and equality sits proudly in the heart of Anglicanism. I spent many years singing Evensong and each night sang the words: "He hath put down the mighty from their seat: and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich he hath sent empty away." Perhaps I should have written with more precision: a conception of justice—and equality—is essential to the Christian tradition in this country. It is one of many reasons that I have such affection for the Church of England and would not wish to see it privatised through disestablishment.

The claim that Jesus Christ was the Son of God is surely the starting point for the Christian faith, not its conclusion. To reduce the Christian faith to the baby in a manger and the man on the cross is to miss the point. John (4:18) teaches us that "God is love", and continues, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." It is *through* Him: His acts and His teachings, not merely the fact of His existence.

As the political theorist Carl Schmitt observed, "all modern conceptions of the state are secularised theological concepts." That is why I've always been puzzled by those on the left that show

such disdain for religion: what is socialism if not the secularised Sermon on the Mount? But an interpretation of Christianity that locks it in a box called 'faith' and keeps it separate from the sphere of human experience that we call the economy is surely no better.

With all good wishes, Tom

Dear Tom,

I said that we were in danger of talking past each other. So it has proved.

The difference in starting points may account for some misunderstandings. For example, I didn't suggest that faith shuns economics – rather, that it transcends it. As for relativism, if offering a snapshot of Christian viewpoints through the ages is to incur the charge, then every church historian risks being burdened with it.

I did claim, however, that your formula of "working towards an economy that is more equal" would not gain consensus among Christians – in the past, the present and perhaps the future. This is the heart of the matter we're battling to-and-fro. It may be significant that while other points I made were explicitly challenged (and sometimes misread), that one was not.

This could be because it was implicitly conceded: as you write, "it is undeniable that the boundaries of Christian thought are broad" – broad enough, I think, not to make equality the King Charles' head of Christian social thought. But if you want to contest my take, the questions remain: which equality? Before the law? Of opportunity? Of outcome? Of respect? Again, these necessarily clash – at least some of the time.

If we're to speak the language of equality, I'm broadly at the equality of opportunity bit of the spectrum. You may be elsewhere. But from what I like to call the lived, given experience of Christians, my view surely has no more validity than yours (and vice-versa). Might there not be other language to speak here, too? Why the identification of justice solely with equality? What about cohesion; and freedom; and solidarity; and choice?

And hope, which springs eternal. That we may settle on common ground in our last exchange isn't beyond it.

Best, Paul

Dear Paul,

I don't think this is a case of talking past each other. You have critiqued my positions, but I have not heard from you about how your Christian faith informs your understanding of capitalism or the contemporary economy. Perhaps you could use your last letter to state your case, rather than to refute mine? I wait in hope.

I'm afraid the whole discussion on equality of opportunity

>> versus equality of outcome is a debate of the 1990s, not today. The evidence is clear: equality of outcome creates equality of opportunity—but the reverse is not true. Social mobility is greater in more equal countries: there is more opportunity to move when the rungs of the ladder are closer together. And when so many life chances are determined in the first 1,000 days of a child's life, it is absurd to argue that opportunity alone is a meaningful goal for equality.

The theological case is as compelling as the empirical one. The Old Testament begins by saying: "So God created man in his own image." And John teaches us that: "No servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." The power of the Gospel is its message that each of us is worthy of God's love: not that each of us has an opportunity to be worthwhile but by the fact of our human existence, we are loved. Are 4.5 million children living in poverty an expression of love? Why do so many followers of Christ believe that morality belongs in the bedroom but not the boardroom?

"That is why I've always been puzzled by those on the left that show such disdain for religion: what is socialism if not the secularised Sermon on the Mount?"

Moreover, the Gospel teaches us that for Christ, it was not merely a set of truths about the world, but expressed through concrete action. Through the acts of His ministry, Jesus was the living embodiment of the idea equality. He washed the feet of his disciples. He laid his hands upon lepers. And if that were not enough, He was hoisted up upon the cross where he died with common thieves. There could not be a more arresting equality of outcome.

Jesus commands us to "love thy neighbor" and Ephesians tells us that we should "be subject to one another out of reverence to Christ." As any reader of the Bible will know, the poor feature prominently: "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." It could not be clearer. But man is imperfect: it is unrealistic to expect perfect equality. But the case for redistribution is plain for all to read. It seems unlikely that the hedge fund managers will inherit the earth.

I fear that you fall into the naturalistic fallacy: that because there is a wide range of behaviour from those who profess the Christian faith, it is not possible to reach any concrete conclusions from the teachings of Christ. If Christianity only speaks to the next world and not to this, it contains no obligation nor duty to one another today: so the greedy and exploitative alike can draw comfort from Augustine's wish to "make me pure but not yet." Restoring moral

purpose to the economy is not simply a choice: it is a Christian duty—for I am my brother's keeper.

With best wishes, Tom

Dear Tom,

The core of the matter we've been asked to discuss is the claim that, in your words, "the logic of Judeo-Christian morality is that we should be working towards an economy that is more equal, not less".

My response is that this view would not gain consensus among Christians – in the past, present and perhaps the future. Furthermore, I ask: which equality? Because equality before the law, of opportunity, of outcome and of respect aren't always the same, and sometimes clash. Additionally, I want to know why you give equality primacy, almost to the exclusion of other contributors to justice – such as cohesion, freedom, solidarity, choice and so on.

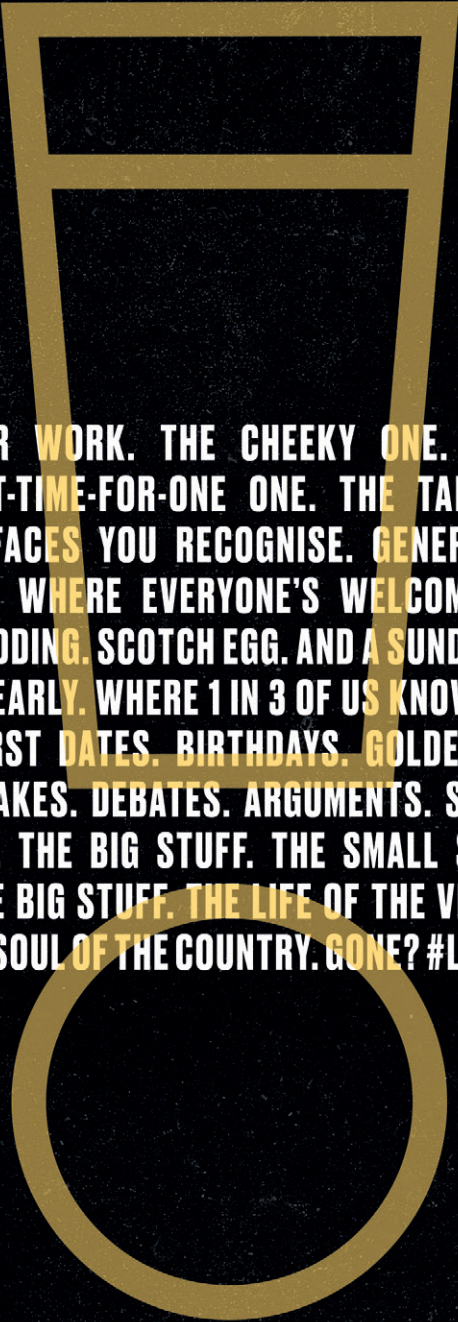
You finally attempt my first question by asserting that equality of outcome creates equality of opportunity. With respect, this is like saying that, in an essay competition, you and I must share the prize, even if your essay is better. Your basis for this view is highly contestable – namely, that a country's equality determines its social mobility, without reference to its history, culture, family structure, make-up, diversity and so on. This is a one-dimensional take.

The absence of other dimensions elsewhere, too, flows from this fixation with equality of outcome. You still have nothing to say about such other contributors to justice as choice, solidarity and freedom. You do find space, however, to ask me to give my own view while simultaneously suggesting that you know what is – namely, that Christianity and politics don't mix. For the third time, I say: that's not my take, though it's certainly that of many Christians. The best answer I can give emerges from your question: "Are 4.5 million children living in poverty an expression of love?" To which my reply is: of course not – but that's not the point here.

It is, rather, whether they're more or less likely to escape poverty if governments aim for equal outcomes rather than, say, more opportunities. On that, Christians may legitimately differ. Yes, there are non-negotiable absolutes, as true now as two thousand years ago. Christians must worship God alone. Not race. Not class. Not the state. And not the market – which, properly understood, is a social artefact: made for man, like the Sabbath, not the other way round. That seems to me near the heart of the Catholic social teaching you admire.

But I should be careful with scriptural allusions. Maybe should you too. You cite the two thieves in the context of equality. That made me think of St Augustine: "One of the thieves was saved." But not, he said, the other. Not much equality of outcome there.

Best, Paul



THAT PINT AFTER WORK. THE CHEEKY ONE. THE QUICK ONE.
THE-HAVE-YOU-GOT-TIME-FOR-ONE ONE. THE TABLE WHERE YOUR
MATES SIT. THE FACES YOU RECOGNISE. GENERATIONS IN EVERY
CORNER. A PLACE WHERE EVERYONE'S WELCOME. THAT PERFECT
STICKY TOFFEE PUDDING. SCOTCH EGG. AND A SUNDAY ROAST AS GOOD
AS YOUR MUM'S. NEARLY. WHERE 1 IN 3 OF US KNOW OUR LANDLORD'S
NAME. GO FOR FIRST DATES. BIRTHDAYS. GOLDEN ANNIVERSARIES.
WEDDINGS AND WAKES. DEBATES. ARGUMENTS. STORIES. POLITICS.
FOOTBALL. MUSIC. THE BIG STUFF. THE SMALL STUFF. THE SMALL
STUFF THAT IS THE BIG STUFF. THE LIFE OF THE VILLAGE. THE HEART
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There, when we need it the most...

Different religious groups provide vital social capital, especially in response to emergencies such as Grenfell, writes **Revd Mike Long**



Revd Mike Long is
Superintendent minister
of the Notting Hill
Methodist Circuit

It is a given that British society is changing fast: we are far more diverse than previous decades. We are becoming a more fractured society, more discontented with politics in general, and more prone to factional interests and divisive politics. Truth is becoming a contested commodity.

Religions embrace sets of beliefs and coalescing practices, and so have long track records of thought and experience as to how people and groups should act, and what justice, peace and society should look like. Such traditions, without being necessarily determinative, can be a rich repository to offer insight into public debate on contemporary issues. When the Archbishop of Canterbury criticises Wonga, he does so reaching back into a long, evolving tradition of ethics on the charging of interest that goes back not only to the pivotal Second Lateran Council of 1139 (for those interested in the scholastic tradition on usury), but to origins many centuries earlier.

The role of religion in promoting social cohesion is a critical one. That's not based upon some bland tolerance, a pact not to disagree over areas of difference, rather a vehicle that helps people and communities navigate the vital and tricky issues of identity and belonging in community. Religious organisations can help us attain a cohesion based on attending to difference whilst simultaneously holding to other commitments such as the value of life and creation: we've been wrestling with these matters for many centuries, though admittedly sometimes more successfully than at others.

Religion is a powerful force for binding people together. For many, religious organisations are far more inclusive (and free) than other social opportunities easily available to them through work, family, neighbourhood, or shared interests. If you want to find a striking example of diversity in Britain, try visiting your local mosque or church. Congregations often embrace a greater range of ages, social classes, and ethnicities. That includes, in my own experience, not infrequently those that are often marginalised and excluded, and (safely) includes the ex-offender, the autistic, those with impairments, and the mentally frail, to name but a few.

“One of the key roles of faith leaders is to act as the interface between the local and the wider world, sharing such insights. All of which militates against insularity.”

The response to the destruction of Grenfell Tower illustrates the positive ways in which religious organisations not only contribute to – but underpin – cohesion in society. My experience as part of the faith community's response to the Grenfell Tower fire bears this out. Many community organisations acted as focal points for local volunteers to act, faith-based ones playing a significant role. Their role, both in terms of offering support from its own volunteer base, or as a catalyst for the wider community, was pivotal. The Muslim Aid report into the response to the Grenfell

Tower fire stated: “A variety of Muslim and Christian organisations have played critical leadership roles in the Grenfell response, offering trusted, expert assistance to local communities. The extensive physical presence of faith organisations at the heart of the UK's diverse communities needs to be properly recognised and harnessed as a vital element of contemporary emergency capacity.”

The faith-based organisations near Grenfell are not threatened by each other: it is perfectly possible to have profound convictions without becoming exclusivist or denying the validity of others' truths. Indeed, our local Jewish, Muslim and Christian groups are about to engage in a process of 'scriptural reasoning' in which we share different insights on texts that have parallels in each other's Scriptures. In other words although religion can, like any cultural phenomenon, be manipulated for sectional interests, it need not be a contributor to conflict any more than does sport, music or fashion, but positively promote a deeper and richer dimension to society.

The mention of trust in the Muslim Aid report is vital here. In a community with little confidence in established authorities (for a variety of reasons), the faith-based organisations possessed a credibility that helped people donate and distribute money, care responsibly for distressed people, and not be suspected of seeking to make capital from the tragedy.

Many faith centres were assisted by a wide diversity of people of all faiths and none. On the very first day of the fire I was greeted at the church by several local

>> Muslim representatives, offering not only prayer mats and clothes (which we gladly accepted), but graciously inviting me to speak at the Iftar, the ceremony to mark the end of the day's fast during Ramadan, at the mosque on the Friday.


“Faith-based organisations possessed a credibility that helped people donate and distribute money, care responsibly for distressed people, and not be suspected of seeking to make capital from the tragedy.”

It wasn't simply a matter of a fantastic community spirit being stirred by an appalling tragedy on our doorstep, it was also due to the social and organisational channels that the faith community helped to provide. Religious organisations provide not only social glue but a significant resource for communities, especially those economically 'deprived' (yet rich in other ways, of course) and where there is a relative paucity of other institutions and networks compared to other, more 'affluent' areas.

The Methodist Church near Grenfell, for its part, played a significant role in the community during the 1960s following the Notting Hill riots, pioneering multi-racial church work, campaigning on housing issues (pioneering creative housing solutions including the Notting Hill Housing Trust and the charity Shelter), and establishing many other projects.

That disasters such as the Grenfell Tower fire stir up a greater sense of togetherness and community is hardly surprising. Yet neither do they have to be confined to the short-term. Some years ago, when I was a minister in north London, a Bravanese Somali education centre was burned down in a racist attack. A few days later, a peaceful march of Muslims, Christians and Jews took place, and some lasting relationships were forged between faith communities who hitherto had simply lacked the impetus to form a local partnership. Lay and ordained, orthodox and reformed, from those three faiths continued to meet, offer hospitality and study together. I was not surprised to find that local rabbi coming to the church after the Grenfell Tower fire, accompanied by local Jewish leaders.

One factor contributing to religion's role in enhancing both social cohesion and social capital is that of their reach: many are global movements with followers inhabiting diverse countries, careers and languages. As such, local faith-based organisations such as churches and mosques are connected to a global network that shares information, learning, concerns and practical assistance. Horizons extend far beyond the local community, and one of the key roles of faith leaders is to act as the interface between the local and the wider world, sharing such insights. All of which militates against insularity. Indeed, the networking that is essential to any faith-based organisation means that minority voices that otherwise would not attract the attention of the world's media can be heard: religious congregations can be remarkably well-informed about the experiences of those whose lives are at considerable variance from their own.

Religious faith may for many be regarded as a private matter; yet for its practitioners (a word I prefer to 'believers') it has wide social implications. In the current political and social climate, we may find such actions and organisations indispensable. 

A secular state for a secular people?

Andrew Copson believes it is time to separate the state from religion once and for all



Andrew Copson is
Chief Executive of
Humanists UK

Secularism, globally, is under threat. Attacked from all sides: from the left, from the right, by liberal multiculturalists and illiberal totalitarians, abused by racists and xenophobes as a stick with which to beat minorities in the West, subverted elsewhere by religious fundamentalists planning its destruction.

But perhaps the biggest enemy of secularism today is ignorance. Although secularism has been of fundamental importance in shaping the modern world, it is not as well-known a concept as capitalism or social welfare or democracy. You won't find it commonly studied in schools or even at universities. These

days, when all the implicit assumptions of modernity and the open society are under strain, this is a dangerous situation. Reasonable debates about secularism on the basis of a shared understanding of it, what it means, and where it came from, are in short supply.

Secularism is the idea that state

>> institutions should be separate from religious ones, that freedom of belief and thought and practice should be an automatic right for all (unless it interferes with the rights of others), and that the state should not discriminate against people on grounds of their religious or nonreligious worldview.

In a hypothetical homogenous society, perhaps there could be a non-secular form of state or government that would be fair, but there is no such thing as a completely homogenous society. All societies are made up of distinctive individuals. In the context of this reality, secularism holds out the best possibility of securing both liberty and fairness in any democracy that respects the rule of law.

Today, secularism is a feature on paper of states from India to the US to France. All the states that have adopted a secular system have done it in their own way, according to the nature of their own particular society and their religious, cultural, and political history. Even so, the arguments made for secularism in almost all times and places have been similar. It is argued that this system is best able to secure freedom, justice and fairness. It is promoted as the best system to avoid sectarian conflict and strengthen peace. It is cast as a pathway to modernity.

Even in societies which are not secular on paper, these assumptions often prevail in practice, with government in liberal democracies relying on a *de facto* secularism in the conduct of government, which makes no laws on religious arguments alone and expects fair treatment of citizens regardless of their creed.

In terms of its settlement between religion and the state the UK is an unusual case in comparison with other nations. Or, more properly for the purposes of this discussion, England; in both Wales and Northern Ireland the Church has been disestablished, and Scotland always had a different arrangement. On paper, we have one of the most religious states outside

of the Islamic world. At the same time, we have one of the least religious societies in the world: less than half our population identify with a religion and less than a third believe in one.

A combination of this second fact as well as the beneficent impact of the liberal political tradition, which slowly secured throughout the nineteenth century liberty in practice for non-Anglican protestants, Jews, Roman Catholics, and humanists and other non-religious people, has rendered establishment softer in practice than the law might suggest. Still, it is not as soft as all that.

We are not a secular state. We remain legally a Christian one. If our head of state, Her Majesty The Queen, were tomorrow to experience a revelation of the truth of the Mormon faith, let us say, abdication would be her only option. Similarly, if her son were to become a Sikh, or any of her descendants a conscientious non-Anglican, unwilling to pretend as previous monarchs may or not have done, that would be the end for them too. This is not a serious problem, perhaps – there is always another potential head of state ready and waiting – but it illustrates the slightly farcical nature in principle of our religious settlement.


So what might the practical focus of any future UK 'Secular State and Disestablishment Bill' be? Certainly, it would not mean a banishment of religious people from public life. Secularism is compatible (indeed, enables) religious charities and citizens to live their lives and be active in politics in line with their beliefs. Nor does it need to entail – as it sometimes has in the US or France – the total silence within public institutions on questions of religion and belief. There is a strong case for pluralistic inclusion when it comes to education about religions and non-religious worldviews in state schools, marriage laws and pastoral support in public institutions like prisons and hospitals, and much more, wherever



inclusion can be achieved not at the cost of the rights and inclusion of others.

But there are clear things this future bill would target. National occasions and memorials would no longer be presided over by the priests of a denomination most of us aren't members of, but constructed in a way that represented our whole nation. Clerics would no longer sit and have votes in our parliament by right. We are, in any case, the only state other than Iran that allows this.

Our state schools would no longer be legally required to have daily Christian worship – the only state schools in the developed world that are so required. State-funded schools would no longer be controlled by religious authorities, selecting pupils on religious grounds, causing religious and racial segregation, and impeding social mobility. Again, egregiously, we are almost alone in the OECD in allowing this.

If the law in the UK was changed along these lines, then the result would be a fairer society, that maximises the freedom of religion or belief for all. 

To veil or not to veil?

Dr Qanta Ahmed explains why she, a Muslim woman, believes veiling in Britain should be outlawed



Dr Qanta Ahmed is author of *In the land of invisible women: A female doctor's journey in Saudi Arabia*

I am a Muslim woman who is observant of Islam. I also believe 'veiling of the face' is an un-Islamic practice. I reject the niqab as part of my personal battle against Islamism – Islam's totalitarian imposter – and because Islam has raised me to be a feminist and humanist. Wearing the niqab is to affiliate with Islamism, and reject secular values. Defending it as an Islamic rite is an act of idiocy – and worse, it can lead to ground being yielded in the battle of political ideas to a totalitarian ideology.

As a Muslim, I am not alone in rejecting the false idea that the niqab represents Islam. Morocco, which has a Muslim majority, has banned the sale and production of the burqa. Turkey – whose population is also majority Muslim – has banned all head coverings. Pluralist Ahmadi Muslims – renowned for their profound commitment to interfaith tolerance, and rejection of violence – have affirmed that Muslim women must reveal their faces. They consider concealment of the face to be a threat to national security.

“They believe the niqab to be a religious rite, and not a cultural practice which has been recently appropriated by Islamism – a doctrine so misogynistic that women barely exist in Islamist literature.”

Of course, the veil – including the niqab – carries different meanings depending on context. And that context is critical for meaningful contemporary debate in Britain.



As a doctor, I treated Pathan grandmothers of jihadist families in Pakistan's Swat Valley in Khyber Pakhtoun province. Wearing the burqa allowed them to leave their mud-walled homes in the mountainous hamlets where they lived their limited lives. They could enter public space, travel to the market, and come (escorted by their eight year old grandsons) to the government clinic for treatment. Even though there is no mandate for the burqa in the Quran, cultural pressures had hermetically sealed it in these communities over time. By wearing the niqab and burqa, these women could have some sort of personal agency. Without cultural change

beforehand, denying these women their niqabs or burqas would be an anti-feminist act of oppression.

In Britain, circumstances are completely different. Muslim women in Britain are among the most empowered and liberated Muslim women today. Legislation protects them from forced marriage, honour violence and female genital mutilation – all grotesque human rights violations, wrongly imposed on women in the name of Islam. Muslim women in Britain hold political and public office. In Britain, therefore, the veil should be banned.

Islam never intended women to be unseen, unheard, or denied personal

>> agency. Consider Hazrat Khadija – the Prophet Mohammed’s first wife with whom he had his longest marriage. She was a wealthy merchant, who owned property and traveled internationally to trade. She was neither immobilised nor concealed. She was sufficiently independent to approach the young prophet with a marriage proposal. The first Muslim woman was therefore a self-made, socially mobile entrepreneur, financially self-reliant and fully autonomous in her decision to marry. A thousand years ago, our female predecessors fought in battle, and personally challenged the Prophet Mohammed for their fair share of the spoils of war.

But the niqab mocks this proud tradition of Islamic feminism. We see the veil enforced by coercion and violence. In Afghanistan, acid attacks forced Muslim women to adopt the burqa. In Pakistan, Muslim women concealed their maimed and mutilated noses behind the veil. The windows of their homes were blacked

out on the Taliban’s orders. In Saudi Arabia, women are compelled to wear black abbayahs and hijabs. Women in Iran continue to be silenced by the regime. Advocating a dehumanising garment like the niqab empowers extreme Islamism at the expense of Muslim womanhood.


“Islam never intended women to be unseen, unheard, or denied personal agency.”

The Quran mandates veiling the gaze – for both women and men – and the covering of secondary sexual characteristics. But I denounce the suggestion that erasing women from view is mandated by Islam. Naïve intellectuals – profoundly ignorant of the history of veiling – may criticise me for such strident refutation of the niqab. They do not realise they have been deceived. They believe the niqab to be a religious rite, and not a cultural practice which has been recently appropriated by Islamism – a

doctrine so misogynistic that women barely exist in Islamist literature.

In short, British secularists have been cowed into yielding to extremism. Protected by the British fear of appearing ‘Islamophobic’, Islamists exploit British tolerance in order to destroy it. This is the cunning game of the Islamist: the exploitation of pluralism to thrust extreme, misogynistic practices into the mainstream, while denying their critics the right of reply.

It is imperative that those who defend the niqab understand that they are not advocating feminism. They are advocating totalitarianism based on invented Sharia. Extreme Islamism claims legitimacy from Islam, while it is locked in mortal combat with secular democracy.

Within the secular liberal democracies of Western Europe, the niqab is a cultural symbol. It must be stripped of the false religious legitimacy it has been afforded by Islamists and well-intentioned, but naïve, non-Muslims. 

Having faith in Faith

Dr Andrew Davies explains why politicians and policymakers must bring religious groups into the fold



Dr Andrew Davies is a Reader in the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham

Faith communities are among the UK’s most underappreciated providers.

Week in week out, they educate our children, feed the hungry, tend the sick and dying, and generally provide an anchor for their communities. And yet their contribution is still viewed in many quarters with scepticism and unease. They have never quite been brought into the fold when it comes to policy decisions.

Politicians and policymakers consistently struggle to engage with all

but the most progressive faith groups – fearing, perhaps, that collaboration with more conservative religious organisations may be misconstrued as establishment endorsement of orthodox religion. Conservative faith groups, for their part, can come across as unwilling to engage. They often like to ‘plough their own furrow’ and can be fearful of partnership with those who they believe may wish to restrict their religious expression.

But failing to acknowledge the

contribution conservative faith groups make to public life risks pushing them to isolation and exclusion, and deprives the needy of valuable support.

Part of the challenge of engaging with the more conservative faith groups is that many of us struggle to understand communities who take their faith so seriously. The English attitude to Christianity has, on the whole, been that it is a pleasant excuse for some lovely choral music and scones on the vicarage

>> lawn. But that isn't the kind of Christianity that is most prominently on display in the UK today.

“The English attitude to Christianity has, on the whole, been that it is a pleasant excuse for some lovely choral music and scones on the vicarage lawn.”

Evangelicals now account for over a million Christians, and they take their faith incredibly seriously. They really believe in what they preach and sing, and are absolutely convinced that their religion should make a difference to everyday life. Christian Evangelicals aren't alone in this, either: for Orthodox Jews, conservative Muslims, traditionalist Sikhs, religion is central to their lives and guides every detail of their existence.

Interestingly, all of these religious

traditions imbue in their followers beliefs which align very neatly with a centre-right worldview. Christian Evangelicals, Orthodox Jews, conservative Muslims and traditionalist Sikhs all believe in personal responsibility, opportunity, aspiration, social mobility and care about their communities and their world.


Given that religious believers are their natural allies, perhaps it's time to ask centre-right policymakers, networks and organisations to recognise the needs and interests of faith communities when developing policy.

I'm certainly not advocating an empty instrumentalisation of faith, or calling for a half-hearted series of mosque, gurdwara or cathedral drop-ins from the Cabinet. We shouldn't prioritise religious ideologies or agendas – but we must acknowledge their existence and ask for their interests to be taken seriously.

Faith communities should never dominate any policy debate or determine

its outcome, but we have to encourage the presence of religious voices at the table and ask faith leaders to work with us to deliver change for their communities. The policy community needs to think about the impact of their decisions and choices upon people of faith and, where possible, work with diverse faith communities to broaden mutual understanding.

“Interestingly, all of these religious traditions imbue in their followers beliefs which align very neatly with a centre-right worldview.”

If more people acknowledged the motivating power of religion and realised the positive role that faith can play in the transformation of society – including by enabling social mobility and deepening and broadening a sense of community – it would, surely, be good for society at large. 

Something borrowed or something new?

Dr Andrew Skilton explores the growing appetite for Buddhism in the West



Dr Andrew Skilton is a Senior Research Fellow in Buddhist Studies at King's College, London

I was half listening to a piece of vox pop radio a while ago and heard what seemed like a priceless comment from a teenage girl: “I’m not materialistic” she exclaimed in a tone of wounded self-exculpation, “I just like expensive things!” I no longer recall the context, but the passage had been edited to make the listener chuckle at the seeming self-deception. I laughed along at the time, but on reflection, I see a sort of logic in her

outburst.

There is, after all, a sense in which she speaks for us all. Who wants to be seen as materialistic nowadays? Yet, more of us enjoy unprecedented levels of comfort and access to goods and services than ever before in human history. Taking the pulse of popular culture, the web is awash with sage advice to nurture the ‘spirit’ and reject materialism, only some of it religiously motivated.

Commentators on consumerism suggest that we are beset by envy and possessiveness, and a lack of empathy – traits that fuel the acquisitiveness of which materialism is the expression. Their research appears to track an increase of materialism both in the West and in Asia, although it is unclear to me whether this is more a matter of extent than degree – the ‘democratisation of consumption’ as it were, compared to previous centuries

>> in which access to maximal goods and services was restricted to a narrow elite.

And we are wrong to assume that the 'West' is somehow more materialistic than the 'East'. The myth of 'eastern spirituality' was a witting strategy employed in colonised communities, including a number of Buddhist countries, to assert at least one type of superiority over the technology of their western colonisers. Buddhist teachers in Burma, for example, held that Buddhism was heir to a superior mental culture of which the tools were the mental technology of meditation. A number of these teachers also developed simplified forms of meditation practice to increase its popularity, and there is a certain irony that one of these – Burmese Vipassana – was to morph in the late twentieth century into what we now know as the mindfulness revolution. Finally it seems the tables have been turned and the colonisers have colonised!

But, in a way, all of this is spin. Historically, we can see that Asian societies have been just as committed to conspicuous consumption and acquisition-based status as our own, even if the opportunities for this were, until recently, more restricted than in the West. Materialism, and its twenty-first century manifestation consumerism, is nothing more than the belief that possessions are the key to happiness, and this belief is not new and not western.

This was reflected by the Buddha some 2,500 years ago, quite some time before the advent of Amazon and the 24-hour shopping mall. From him we can get a perspective on consumerism, because his view is that, regardless of the degree of access to goods that it enjoys, the whole of humanity is plagued by the incorrect belief that objects can make us happy. For him this is one aspect of an existential problem that afflicts all individuals and binds them into unsatisfying lives. So from the Buddhist perspective, the problem of consumerism is an aspect of being human.

We can understand Buddhism as a system for helping individuals and communities to control and potentially transcend the demands and effects of this kind of materialism. How does that work? The fundamental insight of the Buddha was that everything is impermanent, but that we as ignorant creatures cling to objects, people, relationships, deities, ideologies and so on, in the hope that they will provide ultimate and permanent satisfaction to us. Since they are all impermanent, sadly, we are doomed to dissatisfaction, unless we can gain control of this habit, even free ourselves from it. In practice, this is accomplished as an internal transformation of the individual. The cutting edge of this transformation is formed from progressive degrees of restraint coupled with the willingness and courage to look at oneself when gratification is denied.

I hanker after a new bread maker or that red sports car – I am after all middle-aged – but what happens when I do not grasp after either? If I can sit with myself, refraining from further compensating gratifications and distractions, then in the magical space of my attention there can emerge into awareness a whole gamut of drives and needs that fuel my own materialist tendencies, giving me the chance to understand myself, to allay the whirlwind of unreciprocated need that seeks validation from objects that cannot validate me.

This sounds like psychodrama and one needs to take care that it does not descend into that. The primary means of ensuring that it doesn't is to balance this internal process of attention with an outward movement of attention towards others through personal generosity, delight at others' good fortune, and compassion for those in need. Here the individual is taught to reach out to sustain and cherish those around them with unstinting gifts of time, energy, materials goods and money, simultaneously countering their own personal and very human proclivity to




identify with their own possessions. While Buddhist monks tend to live simpler lives, they are not forbidden possessions and Buddhist lay people are encouraged to increase their wealth, in the knowledge that this will allow them greater opportunities for acts of generosity.

Meditation can often help with the process of internal attention, but I fear that the contemporary craze for mindfulness as a cure-all for every affliction may not be the hero of the day. Its more popular applications seem little more than the harnessing of a secularised mind technique to the narcissism of the 'me' generation.

Some perceptive commentators rue the removal of mindfulness from its ethical and ultimately spiritual context in Buddhism, since it is those that both give it meaning and make it a more powerful tool for transformation.

But it seems clear to me that the human spirit seeks meaning and that despite predictions to the contrary, I do not think humanity's higher aspirations will be any more crushed by contemporary consumer goods than they were by their pre-industrial counterparts.

Perhaps also, with the seeming failure of some big political narratives, it may be time for a new narrative of personal restraint and responsibility, and I think Buddhism has a role to play in that. 

A foundational freedom

The Prime Minister's newly appointed Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, **Lord Ahmad**, explains the importance of his role



Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon

is the Minister of State for the Commonwealth and the UN and the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Freedom of religion or belief, including the freedom to change religion, or have no faith, is a fundamental human right and one that I believe passionately should be enjoyed by everyone, everywhere.

The reason I believe it matters – is not just for its own sake, or even because we know that more than three-quarters of the world are guided by their faith. It matters because where such freedoms are absent, curbed or suppressed, intolerance and mistrust flourishes, splitting communities down religious fault lines. Once communities are divided, it does not take much to spark tensions and spill over into violence.

The United Kingdom is an incredible country where people of all faiths and none are free to practice, profess and propagate their faith without fear of discrimination, persecution or violence. Over the centuries, the UK has welcomed people from all over the world – I'm one of them, or my parents were: the partition of India forced them to move to Pakistan, and then in the early 1950s my father migrated to the UK.

From the landscape that greeted my father in the 1950s, Britain has changed. Spires and steeples have been joined by minarets and menorah, domes and temples. As you look over the rich and diverse tapestry that is modern Britain today, we have more than 1,700 mosques, 400 synagogues and 300 gurdwaras, often standing side by side with churches and cathedrals.

I am proud, as we should all be, of our religious diversity, but it would be wrong to

suggest that it is always easy to integrate religious minorities into a society where there is already a dominant religion. When we stand up against religious persecution abroad and promote religious tolerance and respect internationally, we know from our own experience how challenging it can be and continues to be. When a temple is built on your street or a halal butcher opens in the market it's a demonstration that your religion is one of many, and not the only one. At times this can be difficult, and the battle of ideas is by no means won, even in the UK.

Therefore, it is important for governments and faith leaders to keep making the argument that we have nothing to fear from accepting other faiths into our society; that mutual respect is a sign of strength, not weakness; and that when faiths take the difficult step of defending each other's rights, they are spreading the universal message of tolerance, respect, understanding and peace – the universal message of all religions.

In my role as a Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and more recently with the additional responsibility as the Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief, I've seen some positive examples of respect and tolerance amongst faith communities across the world. In the Middle East, Lebanon is seeking to establish itself as a model of peaceful coexistence of faiths in a region of great instability. In Abu Dhabi, a third Christian cathedral – for the Greek Orthodox faith – has just opened. And a mosque beside the Catholic cathedral – which had carried the name of the Crown

Prince – has just been re-named at the Crown Prince's request as the Mary, Mother of Jesus Mosque.

Outside the Middle East, I have also seen religious diversity flourishing in Ghana, with Christian and Muslims communities working together. And most recently, during a visit to Sudan – a country which is desperately challenged economically, and is still recovering from deep-rooted conflict, I saw the hope that was provided by the respect between faith leaders.

Yet tragically, as we look around the world, millions of people face the most appalling persecution every day because of their beliefs.

Even in Europe, where we have some of the strongest rights protections in the world, tragically anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are on the rise, and attacks on those who look or dress differently are increasing. It is essential that they are dealt with robustly and in a united fashion.

Further afield, we have all been horrified by the barbarity of Daesh, including towards Christians, Yazidis and Mandeans in Iraq and Syria, and the despicable crimes of Boko Haram's against Nigerian Christians. These acts by terrorist organisations are appalling. But it is not just non-state actors who are to blame.

For too long, far too many states have failed to prevent religious discrimination, or even to ensure the rights of citizens of all faiths – and none – are protected by the law. In Egypt, Coptic Christians still do not enjoy equal citizenship rights. They continue to face social pressure that restricts their freedom to worship, build

>> churches, and play a full role in national life. When legal protections are lacking, popular prejudices go unchecked, people suffer harassment, and that harassment can turn to persecution, exclusion, and – tragically for many – violence.

In some cases states are going further than that and are actively trampling on their citizens' rights. As we look around the world today, this is the reality for: Rohingya Muslims in Burma's Rakhine state; Baha'is in Iran; Christians and Uighurs in China; and Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. In Saudi Arabia, non-Muslim religions are banned and the death penalty is imposed for apostasy. While in Pakistan, blasphemy laws are used to intimidate atheists, Christians and other minorities, and we have seen the state turning a blind eye to attacks on Christian minorities and the Ahmadi Muslims. All are being failed by their respective governments, the very people whose responsibility it is to protect them.

It is therefore right that tackling discrimination and promoting tolerance around the world is a priority for the UK Government. Our Prime Minister has spoken of the need to "stand up for the rights of people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety."

We lobby governments directly about specific cases. We urge them to protect the rights of their citizens and, where appropriate, we press them to change legislation that discriminates against minority groups, or to introduce safeguards to protect the misuse of certain laws.

We also work with international partners through the UN and other bodies to promote religious freedom; to build consensus on the importance of the issue; and, just as importantly, to ensure that religious persecution in itself does not go unpunished.

We have been at the forefront of a campaign to bring Daesh to accountability and justice, committing £1 million to help establish a UN-led investigative team to support the collection of evidence.

And we spend millions of pounds every year on grassroots projects around the world to counter hate speech, to promote tolerance and understanding of minorities, and ultimately build mutual respect between communities.

I am therefore proud of the role our Government is playing in standing up for persecuted minorities – be they the Christians of Algeria or the Rohingya Muslims of Burma, to name but two communities. Yet, so much more needs to be done.

"When legal protections are lacking, popular prejudices go unchecked, people suffer harassment, and that harassment can turn to persecution."

Building mutual respect is essential. As His Holiness Pope Francis rightly says, people of different faiths – and none – need to "fully understand our respective convictions" if we are to succeed in breaking down the barriers between us.

The UK Government is strengthening links with faith leaders in this country. For example, I have introduced regular faith roundtables to discuss the pressing foreign policy issues of our time and deepen our understanding of religious perspectives on them.


Education is also vital if we are to eliminate intolerance and break down the barriers between communities for good. As Nelson Mandela said, no child is born hating his neighbour; intolerance is something that is learned. We must educate our children to understand other religions, in the hope that the next generation will be wiser than those that have come before it. And schools have a vital role, including faith schools. I myself am a product of a Church of England School; my mother insisted on it. She believed it was essential to learn about and respect other beliefs. My wife and I

have made the same choice as parents, our daughter and one of our sons attend Catholic schools, whilst our youngest is at a Church of England nursery. It doesn't dilute our faith, but rather strengthens it, through respecting those of other faiths and none. The crucial thing is that schools teach inclusivity and mutual respect.

While all these Government-led efforts are important, tackling intolerance is not just about government action: there are things that individuals can do in their communities too.

Religion itself can be part of the solution. As his Holiness Pope Francis said during his visit to Burma last year: "Religious differences need not be a source of division and distrust, but rather a force for unity, forgiveness, and tolerance and wise nation-building."

This positive force can help to ensure that people of all faiths and none truly feel part of the wider community, their country, and their nation. On Christmas Day last year, non-Christian restaurant owners across the UK opened their doors to feed the homeless. Young people from the Muslim community spent New Year's Day picking up litter. In North London, the local Jewish community raised thousands of pounds for the family of a murdered Asian shopkeeper. Small acts of compassion like these demonstrate that we are all part of the same community. They dispel misconceptions and prejudice, and build lasting bonds and friendships.

Every act of intolerance, every attack by neighbour on neighbour, community on community, and country on country is an attack on society as a whole. Humanity cannot afford for this to continue. We need to be intolerant of intolerance; to speak out against discrimination in all its forms; to fight impunity; and to hold states true to their international commitments. Rest assured the UK will play our part in defending and strengthening the essential and fundamental human right of freedom of religion or belief. 



The *Centre Write* interview: Sir Roger Scruton

Olivia Utley sits down with renowned conservative philosopher, Sir Roger Scruton, to talk about the Church, conservatism and the next Prime Minister

“The metaphysics is hard. It’s hard to believe in God, it’s even harder to believe in the incarnation and the virgin birth and the other things. So there is a kind of agnosticism, but it’s often combined with a real respect for Christian culture.”

As a conservative, how do you feel about the Archbishop Justin Welby?

Let’s say he’s keeping an even keel, and that’s about as far as you can go. I mean, he’s obviously giving in to quite a lot of fashions. I suspect, gradually, he’s moving towards an equal number of women and men bishops and things like that. And sometimes it seems as though various secular causes are taking over, in a certain way. But I can’t complain about him. He’s a distant figure, nothing to do with me. The Anglican church is two quite different institutions; there are the discussions in Lambeth and all that, which gets a lot of attention, but then there’s just the ordinary church, which is not about that at all. It’s about local matters and local charities and comforting people in their troubles. And that hasn’t changed.

Should politicians “do God”, against the advice of Alastair Campbell?

Well, any advice given by Alastair Campbell should obviously be ignored. But, on a serious note, somebody who has a faith is under an obligation to bear witness to it. I think that the more Christians bear witness to their faith the better, because the fact is, Christian faith still matters to a lot of people in Britain. And if they don’t see people in high office standing up for it, they feel that they should retreat and hide. Tony Blair was, of course, a drama queen and self-obsessed, but what he did in going public with his faith was a good thing.

The renowned and controversial Canadian academic Professor Jordan B. Peterson says he acts “as if God exists”. Is this a mindset which should be adopted?

There are huge difficulties for educated people in that many of them recognise the deep dependence of their culture and their interest and everything on the Christian inheritance, but they can’t believe the metaphysics. The metaphysics is hard. It’s hard to believe in God, it’s even harder to believe in the incarnation and the virgin birth and the other things. So there is a kind of agnosticism, but it’s often combined with a real respect for Christian culture.

How integral do you think the Church of England is to English culture?

Well, it is absolutely integral to it. I mean obviously English culture existed before the Church of England, in the sense that Chaucer was part of English culture, and the Church of England as we know it today is essentially a creation of the Elizabethan period. But it became absolutely integral to our sense of national identity during the aftermath of the seventeenth century turmoil, and from then on was part of the legitimising of things in England. Schools and other institutions which depend on a charter – civil societies, royal societies and so on – they were all wrapped up in the Anglican church. Even Parliament – which, after all, has prayers which are uttered in the language of the Anglican church. Of course with religious observance on the decline these things are changing, but the culture we’ve inherited is an Anglican one. George Orwell said that the English people are distinguished by the fact they have no religious belief and haven’t had any religious belief for years, but they retain a kind of Christ-like attitude to each other – that they are guilty of all kinds of eccentric qualities that come to them from the Christian faith, even though they are not in the business of affirming

>> that faith. They are embarrassed, and this goes right back to the eighteenth century, about talking about religion. At a dinner table, you can cover all kinds of topics, but not sex or religion.

Religious observance in Britain has nosedived in the last ten years. Do you think the decline bad for the country?

Yes, it has been bad for everywhere. Most people, when deprived of that prop, find themselves unable really to keep a straight line in anything. And there's printed evidence of that. You see it in the extent of mental illness, and also in the ease relationships break up.

What do you think are the biggest challenge facing the Church of England now?

Well, obviously, decline in congregations, that's a huge challenge. But nobody can work out what's the cause and what's the effect. Do people stop going to church because all the services have all gone happy clappy, or is it that when people stop going to church, the church responds by trying to make its services more 'fun' – to entice them back? Another problem is the gradual exclusion of the Anglican church from its role in public life. There are still a few services broadcast on Radio Three, and in royal events there will usually still be a religious aspect, but increasingly the Anglican church is having that role taken away from it.

What sort of role should religious education play in schools?

I was lucky in that I was brought up with old-fashioned religious education. It was Anglican, and it was about getting to know the Bible and singing the hymns. There was a smattering of theology, but the most important thing was that you didn't have to believe any of it. Whether or not you chose to believe it was a private problem of your own. But the education taught one belongs to the surrounding order of things, and cast a certain aura of holiness over everything. When I was growing up there was only the one possibility, which was the Anglican Church conferring its blessing on everything. The Catholics had their own schools. We had a few Jews in our classrooms, and they were allowed to separate themselves from religious education. But now of course, with the huge rise in the Muslim population, things are very different. Muslim education, unlike a Christian education, is an education in belief and doctrine, and it doesn't let you just get out of it. It's a way of life. So religious education in a Muslim school really is religious education – and it's very different to the gentle Anglicanism I'm talking about.


Do you think faith schools have a positive role to play or does it just depend on the faith?

I think it does depend on the faith. A faith school can be used to fill in what is missing from the national curriculum by a way of spiritual content, which is what a Church of England school is supposed to do. And I think the old Catholic schools fitted in beautifully. There was never an attempt to say that you didn't belong to this materialist, horrible society all around you. Same with the Jewish schools – they were never part of some kind of undermining of the surrounding order. But you can't deny what is happening in the Muslim schools. Many pupils are radicalised, and set against the values and the conventions of the surrounding society. And they're producing terrible results, because the teachers are not really interested in teaching Maths and English and History. They are interested in making sure that every student can correctly recite the Quran, even if none of them know what it means.

Where do you think the Church of England will be in 50 years time?

I think it'll be, obviously, a minority state. If a Labour Government of a Corbyn type got in, then it would, very easily could be, pushed to the margins. I think as far as I understand about what's happening among young people, they're not drawn to the old, stayed, somber Anglican right, but they are often drawn to the evangelical Christian church. I suspect that might grow; it certainly would grow if we got into real trouble and conflict with Islam. What is interesting in America is that Catholics were, for a long time, as they were here, marginalised. They didn't enjoy full privileges. They weren't encouraged to advance in society. This all changed when the Kennedys started taking over. And now, in the highest offices, the Catholics are the ones who dominate, such as in the Supreme Court. They get the best education, because they go to the Catholic schools. So you have emerging, in America and especially in intellectual circles, a Catholic educated elite. To some extent that's true here. You know, there's quite a lot of Catholic MPs: Jacob Rees-Mogg, Damian Hinds.

Speaking of him, what do you make of Jacob Rees-Mogg?

I very much approve of him – seems great to me. I wish he were Leader of the Conservative Party. And I think he might be. He has a lot of young people on his side. What people like in him is his correctness and old-fashioned, polite, gentlemanly qualities and the clear and articulate way in which he expresses ideas. 

Why I'm a Bright Blue MP



The Rt Hon Nicky Morgan

MP is the Chair of the Treasury Select Committee and former Secretary of State for Education

One nation conservatism is about dealing with the world as it is, not how we would like it to be, writes **the Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP**

I joined the Conservative Party in 1989.

In 1999, after a decade of campaigning on behalf of other candidates, I decided to put in my application to the Party's approved list of candidates. I was the PPC in Islington South in 2001, was selected for Loughborough in 2005, and finally won the seat in 2010.

It took a long time to get to the House of Commons. But I'm glad, for all sorts of reasons, that it did. First, it allowed me time to get qualified as a solicitor and work in a completely non-political environment, as well as getting married and becoming a parent. But it also allowed me time to get to know Loughborough very well and to understand what people are looking for in their Member of Parliament.


I decided to stand for Parliament partly because I couldn't bear the image that the Conservatives were presenting to the country in the late 1990s. But also because I believed I could be a good advocate for

those who needed help in dealing with big government and the unfairness of being caught in 'the system'. And the latter is basically the bread and butter of being an MP. After eight years as Loughborough's MP, addressing unfairness is what gives me the greatest satisfaction.

My time as an MP has taught me that most issues and problems aren't black and white, meaning they don't need black and white, or ideological, answers. As a liberal conservative, or a one nation conservative as I'd more often describe myself, I don't think ideological or radical solutions reflect how people live their lives or what they want from their politicians.

I believe the liberal wing of the Conservative Party deals with the world as it is – a fundamental strength of the Conservatives and a key reason for our success over decades. We aren't interested in using our fellow citizens as experiments in grand schemes.

We want this country and its people to flourish and that means running the government, and particularly the economy, well – in addition to keeping people safe. It isn't all about the economy, but at the heart of most people's wellbeing is a secure financial base – a job that pays fairly, pensions that aren't eaten away by inflation, savings earning a decent return.

I believe one nation conservatism is also about the politics of inclusion not exclusion. We don't want or need to set up groups of people to hate or oppose one another to make ourselves feel bigger and more powerful. We want the best for everyone, realising that as Conservatives we strive to create the conditions for everyone to make the most of the opportunities this country offers, while providing a safety net for those who at points in their lives may need support. What we don't do is follow a false, socialist, view of equality which holds people down and sets a cap on ambitions. 

Annual appraisal



Eamonn Ives is a

Researcher at Bright Blue

Eamonn Ives reviews Bright Blue's past twelve months

So, 2018. A year which has bucked the United Kingdom's four-year trend of playing host to either a referendum or general election – so far, that is. But whether or not the political

volume has quietened down, however, is another question entirely.

Britain's withdrawal from the European Union nudges ever closer. With that, temps in and around the Palace of

Westminster have been tested – at times to their limits – but there has still been fertile ground in which new ideas can be sown.

Indeed, Bright Blue has contributed

>> much to the policymaking machine. Since the last party conference season, a considerable part our research – both published and currently ongoing – has had some relation to where powers will likely be repatriated from Brussels to Whitehall, after the fated date of the 29th March, 2019.

Energy and environment policy, an area whereby the UK has largely followed the EU's lead for decades, for instance, has been a distinctly fruitful domain for Bright Blue over the past twelve months.

Our report released last year on post-Brexit agricultural policy, *A greener, more pleasant land*, has seen various recommendations adopted by the Government, including that farmers, land-owners and land-managers be rewarded specifically for the public ecosystem services which they provide, rather than simply the amount of land they manage, as is currently the case.

We have also seen the Government heed our calls, through our report *Hotting up*, for greater R&D spending on innovation in low-carbon aviation development, which will be vital if the UK is to meet its climate obligations. Talking of which, the Government will soon task the Committee on Climate Change with investigating the feasibility of adopting a new, legal net-zero emissions target, which we have been pushing for after the release of *Hotting up*, which demonstrated the scientific, technological, legal and political case for doing so.

Staying with the environment, Bright Blue was particularly proud of the commissioning and analysis of polling on the public policy priorities of younger voters – well, at least those aged 28 and under – which revealed taking action on climate change as top. This work has been credited far and wide as a key motivator behind the Government's recent prioritisation of environmental issues.

From our multi-year conservation project, we published both a collection

of essays and another policy report, *Saving global nature*, which called on the Government to intensify the work it does conserving precious ecosystems in less economically developed countries around the world. Specifically, we proposed that, from 2020, at least £1 billion of funding per annum for nature conservation is made available through the UK's existing international development spending.

In recognition of all our work, we were shortlisted in the 2018 *Prospect* Think Tank of the Year Awards for energy and environment policy. But, we were shortlisted for social policy, too. Indeed, we have also had a productive year in this policy space over the past twelve months. We successfully campaigned for the increase in the salary threshold for the repayment of student loans, the cutting of Stamp Duty for nearly all first-time buyers, and the cutting of the initial seven-day wait before people become eligible to claim Universal Credit, all of which were adopted by the Chancellor at the end of 2017.

Our ongoing work on human rights and discrimination has been extensive, even leading to some policy wins, such as the appointment of a Special Envoy for freedom of religion or belief. Our conference, *Fighting for freedom?*, even made front page news, with the then Minister for Human Rights, Dr Phillip Lee MP, resigning at the end of his keynote speech from Government over Brexit.

We published a detailed polling report which examined what Conservatives really think about the importance of human rights and the extent of different forms of discrimination. Then, this Spring, we published a collection of essays, authored by prominent backbench MPs from all the main UK political parties represented in Parliament, which diagnosed and proposed solutions for the 'burning injustices' that still blight Britain.

We have also produced an essay collection and extended essay with The Fabian Society on the future of workplace

pensions. This project has sought to find political consensus on key aspects of further pension reform, such as supporting the self-employed, tax relief, auto-enrolment, the state pension, and the new pension freedoms.

In the coming weeks and months, Bright Blue will be releasing a diverse range of further publications to influence public discourse and policy. We have a paper which examines – and proposes measures to boost – levels of neighbourhood trust across England. A new report explores the pros and cons of the Government's flagship welfare reform policy, Universal Credit, before proposing practical changes. And we will publish research considering the future of the UK's gas network, as well as reports on air pollution both in the West Midlands and across the whole of the UK.

We've been very busy but we're delighted to have moved to a new Bright Blue HQ, in the City of London. And we were pleased to see our former Head of Research, Sam Hall, appointed as policy adviser to the Secretary of State for the Environment, and our former Communications Manager, Laura Round, appointed as special adviser to the Secretary of State for International Development.

Undoubtedly, these are politically fraught times. So much of the policy agenda in Westminster is, understandably, dominated by the UK's leaving of the EU. Political parties also seem fractured in more ways than many can remember. The Government, lest we forget, operates as a majority only with the support of the Democratic Unionist Party. Whilst Brexit rightfully commands much of the Parliament's bandwidth, domestic issues cannot be allowed to fall off the agenda entirely. Our research – past, present, and future – seeks to ensure that this is not the case, and that important issues of social, economic, and environmental justice receive their due regard. 



Save the Children

ANNUAL RECEPTION

CO-HOSTED WITH CONSERVATIVEHOME

Tuesday 2 October 2018
9.30pm – 11.00pm
Castle Fine Art Gallery,
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Refreshments will be provided
Wheelchair accessible

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

Penny Mordaunt MP,
Secretary of State for
International Development

Tom Tugendhat MP,
Chair of the Foreign
Affairs Committee

Paul Goodman,
Editor of ConservativeHome

Kevin Watkins,
CEO of Save the Children

Tamworth Prize winner 2018

The Tamworth Prize is our annual essay competition for young people aged 21 or under. It is a chance for young people to explain what sort of centre-right Britain needs today.

How do we solve Britain's housing crisis?

James Smith

We haven't been building enough houses, and this has pushed prices up. In London, the mean house price-to-earnings ratio has shot up from 4:1 to 10:1 in just two decades, causing home ownership to slip beyond the grasp of young, upstart first-time buyers. Housing must be cheaper.

“It is hard to ignore the extent to which the housing affordability crisis is centred around London, where rent prices cost – on average – a third of household income.”

But rapidly devaluing houses would be disastrous. Ramping up housing supply too quickly could cause a breathtaking drop in house prices, jeopardising retirement plans for millions of Britons, and potentially crashing the financial system.

Everyone agrees. Housing is broken. The experts think so. The media think so. Even the Government thinks so. Introducing the housing white paper at last year's Conservative Party Conference, Theresa May blasted the “broken” housing system, and pledged to invest £2 billion in

>> affordable housing.

But let us correctly diagnose the issue. We do not have a housing crisis. We have an 'affordable' housing crisis. The Government is in an unenviable position, forced to balance the needs of disaffected first-time buyers for whom home ownership is a distant dream, and reassuring homeowners that their investments are secure.

“No single policy can fix the housing crisis. Fiddling with stamp duty, re-introducing rent controls – this is mere tinkering.”

The aim of our housing policy should be to decrease house prices – but not too rapidly, which could be calamitous.

Conservatives must build more houses – on the green belt if necessary, or making productive use of existing brownfield sites – and relax planning controls. Only by adopting such radical measures can we fulfil the noble goal of creating a 'property-owning democracy'. Government figures demonstrate that 184,000 homes were completed in 2016-17, below the pre-crash peak of 200,000.

It is not clear how many houses we need. Dr Alan Holmans suggests that an extra quarter of a million houses must be built each year – just to maintain housing stock. To have any serious effect on affordability, more will be needed. The Chancellor Philip Hammond has claimed that 300,000 new homes a year are needed, repeating the findings of a House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee report. This figure is likely to be nearer the mark.

Such a titanic house-building programme requires land. Yet, post-war planners – wary of unchecked urban sprawl consuming the countryside surrounding British cities – introduced the green belt in 1947, which limited building on city outskirts. The name 'green belt' is a masterstroke of marketing, conjuring

up bucolic images of the unspoilt, rolling countryside we love to associate with this green and pleasant land. This is a myth. A third of the green belt is used for intensive farming. The green belt needs to be slackened to allow for house-building.

According to a 2015 report by the Adam Smith Institute, a million new homes could be built on just 3.7% of London's green belt within walking distance of a Tube station.

A compelling slippery-slope counter-argument could be levelled against this proposition: if we start chipping away at the green belt now, will we ever stop? To assuage these fears, green belt development must be coupled with a more productive use of brownfield land. This can be achieved through densification.

In his 2017 housing strategy, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan endorsed new design standards, which brought high-density (not high-rise) housing to outer London boroughs. Such densification may allow a greater number of homes to be built without unnecessarily impinging on the green belt. It would be particularly advantageous for our capital city.

“The name ‘green belt’ is a masterstroke of marketing, conjuring up bucolic images of the unspoilt, rolling countryside.”


A further valuable idea is the relaxation of planning controls. At present, house-building is essentially rationed by the state, so development rights are handed out stringently under this quasi-socialist regime. Decisively shifting towards a free market system of planning control would be welcome. Whilst the Government made some limited provision for decentralising planning control in the Localism Act 2011, more is needed. Giving local authorities and ordinary citizens a say on where new homes are built will lead to a more productive use of available land.

It is hard to ignore the extent to which the housing affordability crisis is centred around London, where rent prices cost – on average – a third of household income. Making areas like Bristol, Manchester and Birmingham more attractive to prospective homeowners – both financially and culturally – presents opportunities for productive and exciting policymaking.

Whilst researching this essay, I noticed that every article entitled “The Government should do X to solve the housing crisis” was rebutted by an opinion piece entitled “Doing X will not solve the housing crisis on its own.” Whilst this trend – where an article would be answered, in true Newtonian fashion, with an equal and opposite article – was frustrating, it demonstrated something of immense value. No single policy can fix the housing crisis. Fiddling with stamp duty, re-introducing rent controls – this is mere tinkering.

An ambitious national programme of house-building in re-densified urban areas – and on the green belt – is needed. Local communities should have all reasonable power to direct where houses are built. Both main parties have a stake in this issue, but especially the Conservative Party: a Conservative MP – Noel Skelton – coined the term 'property-owning democracy'.

Harold Macmillan, when he was Prime Minister, established his political reputation by building half a million new houses a year. In Anthony Eden's political vision, power and property were to be widely distributed across all citizens – and that meant home ownership. In John Redwood MP's words, property ownership is the “economic expression of democracy.”

The radical reforms I have outlined in this piece are necessary – to win the next general election, to fulfil the Conservative vision, and to unite Disraeli's divided, disparate Britons into One Nation. 

James Smith is the winner of the 2018 Tamworth Prize and studies at Warwick University.

ARTS & BOOKS

Film: **First Reformed** *Directed by Paul Schrader*



Oscar Rocklin is a
Research Assistant
at Bright Blue

First Reformed is Paul Schrader's most recent directorial project.

Much like *Taxi Driver*, for which he wrote the screenplay, this is a tale of a tortured soul. In this case, the story centres on a pastor at a Dutch Reformed Church in upstate New York whose faith is crippled by his experiences.

“He charts the course of a once retiring man go from delivering readings to a near-empty church to obsessively pouring over evidence of environmental destruction to strapping on Michael’s suicide vest.”

A defining aspect of *First Reformed* made immediately obvious is its austere and paired-back visual tone, which is as Presbyterian as the church itself. The feel of the film is very much rooted in Schrader's own religious upbringing and a 'transcendental style' of filmmaking.

Pastor Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke) is a deeply damaged protagonist. Once a military chaplain, it is revealed early on that Toller lost his son in Iraq having encouraged him to join up in the first place. His marriage has failed and his health is fast deteriorating. Even his new vocation is threatened by the nearby “megachurch”, which props Toller's parish up as a quaint curiosity cum glorified souvenir shop.

After leading a service in front of his small flock, Toller is approached by a

member of his congregation named Mary (Amanda Seyfried) who implores him to speak to her radical environmentalist husband Michael (Philip Ettinger). Michael is distraught at his wife's pregnancy, unable to countenance the idea of bringing a child into a world he is convinced is poisoned and on the verge of total ecological collapse.


From discussing with Michael his predictions of global cataclysm, Toller begins to absorb the despair which has gripped the father-to-be. Although he tries his best to provide comfort, Toller cannot prevent Michael from taking his own life in the woods outside of town.

Toller becomes preoccupied with the actions of a polluting corporation which is sponsoring the 250th anniversary celebrations of the First Reformed Church. His health continues to collapse and his behaviour becomes increasingly erratic. Here we see Ethan Hawke produce one of the most intense and compelling performances of his career to date. He charts the course of a once retiring man go from delivering readings to a near-empty church to obsessively pouring over evidence of environmental destruction to strapping on Michael's suicide vest.

The portrait of Toller's radicalisation becomes the central element of the final act of *First Reformed*. It is this part of the film which is arguably the most enduring. Author Jamie Bartlett, writing in *Foreign Policy* magazine last year, argued that “the next wave of extremists will be green.” *First Reformed* paints a vivid and

grounded image of someone living this potential future.

Within all its bleakness, *First Reformed* contain some moments of quiet hilarity, Michael's funeral proving a particularly farcical occasion. In its own way, the relationship which develops between Toller and Mary is a coming together which is as awkward and comic as it is touching.

Although some criticism could be levelled at the film's finale, it is a fascinating and haunting exploration of belief in the twenty-first century. *First Reformed* can be a genuinely difficult and troubling film to sit through, but it is this which makes it such valuable viewing. 



Film: **The Children Act**

Directed by Sir Richard Eyre



Freddie Jordan is a journalist at *Reaction*

Persevering to the end of *The Children's Act* is the cinematic equivalent of subscribing to the *Financial Times*. You do it because you feel you ought to, but it brings you no joy.

This adaptation of Ian McEwan's 2014 novel, though directed by Richard Eyre, is penned by the author himself, which gives some indication as to why it plays out as a more refined and delicately constructed slog than just taking out the bins.

Embattled high-court judge Fiona Maye (Emma Thompson) lives with her academic husband Jack (Stanley Tucci) in an elegantly soulless London apartment, and has presided over several high-profile and controversial cases – the latest of which ruled to separate a pair of conjoined twins knowing that one would die as a result of the operation.

As his wife undertakes grave Solomonic decisions that would ensure a lifetime of therapy on a daily basis, Jack announces he's bored and will have an affair. So Fiona plunges headfirst into her next emotional odyssey – the case of a 17 year old Jehovah's Witness who is refusing the blood transfusion that could cure his leukemia. Sound like fun yet?

To be fair, the early scenes in court are handled with a respectably chiselled legal accuracy that invites attention for its realism. The conflict between the boy's parents, who can choose only one of their son or their faith, and the medical and legal teams before them, feels suitably pressured and authentic.

Until Fiona announces that she is taking the unorthodox decision to speak



to the boy, Adam, in hospital herself, picks up his guitar and starts performing a duet with him.

To make things more preposterous, Adam, played by a wide-eyed Fionn Whitehead, is less of a normal teenager than a kind of earnest, late nineteenth century stable boy who wanders nomadically around in an oversized coat quoting Yates. The more we are expected to empathise with the injustices of his situation, the more he begins to behave like a creep, stalking Fiona night and day and writing reams of increasingly alarming letters.

Having lost any semblance of verisimilitude, the film ceases to have a purpose other than to simply explore

the desiccated emotional wastes of the wealthy and middle-aged. Emma Thompson's magnificent performance is undoubtedly the film's great strength, but there is no real sense of satisfaction or progression to stimulate it, and Stanley Tucci's talents feel wasted as another dead canvas on which to illustrate marital misanthropy.

Ultimately, the film is painted in the self-satisfied, orchestrated wallows of a moody classics student, and seems to have little to say about marriage, faith or legal procedure. Instead, beneath its superficial, Fortnum and Mason's biscuit tin genteelism, it doesn't really seem to mean anything at all. **B**

Divided: why we're living in an age of walls

By Tim Marshall



Ryan Shorthouse is the Director of Bright Blue and editor-in-chief of *Centre Write*

Bestselling author and foreign reporter Tim Marshall's latest offering, *Divided*, feels a bit like reading *The Economist*: informative about areas of the world you know little about, but without sufficient depth and detail on countries you do.

Marshall takes us on a world tour of walls – both physical and cultural. It delves into divisions both between and within countries – India and its neighbours, as well as India's monstrous caste system, for example.

The focus is on the history of the most obvious divisions: the Great Wall of China, colonially-carved Africa, the Berlin Wall, Hadrian's Wall, the Israel-Gaza security border and – yes – that bloody wall Trump promised. So, if you follow current affairs, the bulk of the chapters are likely to be providing extra colour to stories you are well acquainted with.

But he does touch upon little-known conflicts: the decades of fighting around the 7 feet-high sand wall between Morocco and the Western Sahara, the territory that still belongs to Spain and is home to the separatist Sahrawi people; the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the oil-rich Bakassi peninsula, which is still not settled despite an International Court of Justice ruling in 2002; or the insurgent and

independence-seeking Naga tribespeople, who live either side of the jungle border between India and Myanmar, frustrating both nations. Unearthing these under-told clashes would have made a more illuminating and innovative book.

His attention is on battles that have been much talked and written about before, yes, but he provides a bounty of fascinating facts. That the iron curtain was first lifted with the opening of the border crossing between Austria and Hungary in the summer of 1985. That the presidency of Nigeria, according to an unwritten rule, alternates between a Christian and a Muslim. And that India has no effective national refugee or illegal immigrant laws, having not signed the 1951 UN refugee convention.


The text is turgid when he is writing about the actual characteristics of walls, not least because most modern borders in contested areas are high-security with the same high-tech features, whether it's the one bordering Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and India, or Jordan and Syria.

But Marshall does have a knack for conveying the experiential and emotion enormity associated with these walls. The story of 15-year-old Felani Khatun, shot dead by border guards while trying to cross the longest border fence in the world between India and Bangladesh, is harrowing: "She remained dangling on the fence, bleeding but still alive. As the sun rose and the mist lifted, she could be seen and heard crying out for water before finally succumbing to her wounds."

And his recollection of how East Germans reacted to the wall coming down

captures just how deeply magnificent freedom of movement was and still is for many on the Continent: "I was living in Paris at the time and about thirty-six hours later saw a battered old East Berlin Trabant car, with four young East Berliners inside, sputtering up the Champs-Élysées. With the border open, they had decided the first thing they wanted to do was see the City of Light, and had driven almost non-stop to get there."

But Marshall is no open borders utopian. The sentimental stories are there to illuminate, as with the odd humorous aside, but not dominate. Facts come first. He admits that some of these walls serve a useful purpose. It is "an uncomfortable truth", he says, that strict security around the Gaza strip has reduced fatalities on the Israeli side of the conflict, and that the Saudi wall with Iraq has helped prevent infiltration by Islamic State. And he is damning of European elites for ignoring concerns over immigration. On Brexit, he argues: "In June 2016 the political, business and media classes got the shock of their lives... The less arrogant woke up and realised how out of touch they were with huge swathes of the electorate."

Marshall's book is a useful resource if you want to learn more about conflicts around the world, but don't put it on your must-reads to enjoy cover to cover. 

Divided: why we're living in an age of walls, Tim Marshall; Elliott & Thompson; 266 pages (Hardback). Published 2018.

Festival:

Big Tent Ideas Festival



Wilf Lytton is a Senior Researcher at Bright Blue

It hadn't been an easy find: after wandering through a car park nestled among futuristic-looking buildings and down a path that snaked through tall hedgerows, the sight of large pale brown tents pitched in a field of grass provided my first glimpse of what I'd come to see.

It was a warm Saturday morning in early September and, having caught a train from London to rural Cambridge, I'd reached the entrance to what was billed as a 'festival of ideas'. Set in the shadow of Babraham Hall in Cambridgeshire, an imposing jacobean facade that now stands in the centre of a state-of-the-art biological research facility, the cluster of tents appeared somewhat diminutive. Yet this was by no means a trivial gathering.

The brainchild of MP George Freeman, the Big Ideas Tent Festival has set itself the challenge of reinvigorating the centre ground of politics with new ideas and innovative thinking. Now in its second year, the event played host to 1,500 festival-goers, among them, politicians of all colours, heavyweight commentators, business people and civil society leaders – testament to the broad appeal of policy debate outside the Westminster bubble.

Discussion of topics ranged from social justice to sport and the UK's role in tackling wider issues such as climate change and global prosperity. Throughout the day, tents brimmed as audiences eagerly joined panellists to question and debate the status quo. So busy were the discussions that, being neither a seasonaire of festivals nor political gatherings, I was perhaps at a disadvantage, never quite managing to




secure a seat.

At some point, I knew to expect the familiar refrains, whether on Brexit or social issues or climate change. I would tune out when those moments came. But they never did. Instead, the quality of debate proved to be a markedly different offering from the adversarial backbiting that has become a staple of parliamentary discourse and newsroom debates. For once, it was the moderates who had the floor. Enter considered opinions and pragmatic ideas in an environment where disagreement could be informative and where doubt and uncertainty were allowed to take precedence over simplistic answers to difficult topics.

I should point out that the fusion of political debate in a festival atmosphere is not a new concept. The Bristol Festival of Ideas and Barbican's Battle of Ideas, as well as a host of similar regional events, have been taking place for over a decade.

What is new is their prevalence and the public interest in having such debates, which marks something of a return to the political grassroots and the creation of much-needed fora for frank and open discussion between politicians and those they represent. The signs that a once disengaged segment of the electorate are becoming more politically active through local events is something to be celebrated. For one, it compels Members of Parliament to be accountable to their constituents and represent their interests faithfully, meaning ideas shared in a tent can form part of Westminster debates.

While a centrist renaissance still appears only a distant possibility, the popularity of spaces like Big Ideas Tent should encourage others to follow suit. 

Big Ideas Tent Festival took place on 8 September 2018 at Babraham Research Campus in Cambridge.

