

Paul Donovan - Journalist

Why Catholics must be participants not spectators at the general election

The starting gun for the next general election already seems to have been fired despite the lack of the announcement of a date.

The parties know it will be sometime between now and the start of June, so all are trying to get their retaliation in first.

The election will be set against a background clouded by the MPs expenses scandal. There can be few times in history when the reputation of the political class has reached such a low ebb. This disillusionment could well have beneficial consequences for the smaller parties like the Greens, British National Party and UK Independence Party. There may also be a new wave of independents standing seeking a genuine reconnection between Westminster and the people beyond.

The concern must be that lack of belief in the political class does not profit extremists by encouraging fewer and fewer people to get involved in the process. It would also be foolhardy to forget that the bankers have wreaked far more havoc on the fabric of our society by their reckless actions than any politician.

The economy will no doubt be one of the major issues debated during the election campaign. The Labour Party has undertaken massive spending to try and kick start the economy out of recession. It hopes that as the economy takes off and tax revenues rise that the deficit built up will be reduced accordingly. The Conservatives on the other hand favour cutting public services and spending generally in order to reduce the deficit. Labour claim this approach will lead to greater unemployment and deepening recession. The concern for the electorate must be that the cost of the crisis is not dumped on the lowest paid and most vulnerable people in our society.

Another subject that Catholics will hope is high on the election campaign agenda will be addressing climate change. All of the parties have made positive noises about this subject but the question will be who can deliver? The sight of Tory leader David Cameron cycling into Parliament while a car with his various belongings drives behind does not inspire confidence. It beggars the question as to whether his policies on the environment are all a lot of greenwash. The Labour Government has certainly talked the talk on climate change but failed to take enough positive action. The failure to tackle airline emissions and specifically agreeing to expand Heathrow airport raises serious questions over their commitment. The environment will be an area where Catholics need to test candidates real commitment to address the crisis.

It must be hoped that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will figure in election debate. Sadly there is no party committed to pulling out of both conflicts. Withdrawal is already underway in Iraq but mainly so that troop numbers can be escalated in Afghanistan. The commitment to these futile conflicts seem to have taken on a life of their own. The question of withdrawal occasionally arises but then its back to business as usual.

The budget for war as compared to public services like health, education and transport seems to limitless. Belt tightening may be required in every other area due to the economic crisis but not the war budget. The party that agreed to stand up to the Americans and withdraw from these two conflicts would no doubt get many votes. The closest to such a commitment is probably the Liberal Democrats.

Sadly, immigration will no doubt figure as an important issue. Immigration has become a political football used to veil racism. It is an issue that should not feature but is taken amongst some in the chattering classes as almost code for what is wrong with the country. The failure to control borders and the number of undocumented workers is seen as proof of a government unable to cope in many other areas. The fact that this country operates some of the most inhumane practices when it comes to migrants both documented and undocumented seems to count for little. Locking away asylum seeker children in detention centres, stopping asylum seekers working and stirring a general anti-migrant attitude have all served this country badly.

The desire to blame the perceived outsiders for the problems of the country has also helped foster the growth of racism and the extreme right BNP. They have been able to step in and help build the myths fostered in the tabloid press about migrants jumping social housing queues and getting preferential treatment.

The Catholic Church has often been a lone voice in making the case for migrants. It has called for the regulation of undocumented workers and a more human approach to asylum including letting those who come here work for the duration of their stay. The Church has also condemned the policies of the BNP. It will be important that Catholics continue this work at election time, making the positive case for migration and helping ensure that the BNP go back under the stones from which they came.

It would also be good to see civil liberties on the agenda with issues like the restoration of the right not be detained without trial. Crime and punishment may also feature, though it will be up to the public to push for a deeper debate that takes on the questions like does prison work, rather than who can build most prisons?

These are just a few of the issues which are likely to figure in the general election campaign. They are areas where the Catholic Church has spoken out in the past and must have a continuing voice in the future. It is important that in this of all elections that Catholics get involved in the political process. It is no good just standing by as spectators on our own destinies, we must be participants in the political process, working to ensure that the kingdom values as articulated in the social teachings of the Church become a reality under the next government. It is in all our interests to become active and seek change.

* See also www.paulfdonovan.blogspot.com