

“Man is by nature a political animal.”

Aristotle



The Jubilee Centre

Apolitical **Animal?**

Political disaffection is commonplace in modern Britain. Election turnouts are consistently disappointing, politicians are widely regarded as corrupt and mendacious and party membership is at an all-time low.

Many people are sincerely engaged with single issues but support for diverse and often competing causes fails to build the shared social vision needed to address today's complex problems. There is still a real need for the public to connect with, but also reshape, mainstream politics.

Apolitical Animal? offers a Biblical perspective on this important issue. The political structure of Ancient Israel was necessarily very different to that of 21st century Britain but still has much to teach us. A multi-polar political composition, constitutionally guaranteed safeguards, powerful extra-political critiques, and a very particular attitude to the exercise of power: each of these elements can be used to guide our thinking and help re-engage the British people with politics today.

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Apolitical **Animal?**

**A Biblical Perspective on Engaging
with Politics in Britain Today**

Nick Spencer

“Live in harmony with one another.”

1 Peter 3v8



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You will find contact details and a fuller list of Jubilee Centre publications on pages 50 and 51 of this booklet.

Jason Fletcher
Jubilee Centre Manager
February 2003

Apolitical **Animal?**

A Biblical Perspective on Engaging with Politics in Britain Today

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Summary

“*The blunt truth is that people increasingly see politics and Parliament as remote from their lives.*” So spoke William Hague to a packed House of Commons shortly after the 2001 General Election. He was not exaggerating.

Tony Blair was re-elected Prime Minister with the lowest share of the eligible electorate for more than a century. Labour received fewer votes than any winning party since universal suffrage was introduced in 1928 and fewer than Neil Kinnock had received in the process of losing the 1992 general election. Despite winning a 167 seat majority, New Labour did not receive a very convincing mandate to govern.

Nor was the 2001 General Election an aberration. 35% of the eligible electorate voted in the 2002 local elections. The UK has, on average, the lowest turnout rate for elections to the European Parliament. Political activism is highly unfashionable and party membership is at an all-time low. Politicians are widely thought of as corrupt and mendacious and political television as dull and irrelevant.

This is a matter of considerable concern. Politicians and political and social commentators have spent much time deliberating what this says about 21st century Britain and what can be done about it. In December 2002 the Conservative think tank Commission for Democracy recruited Peter Bazalgette, the man behind Big Brother, to help make politics more appealing to younger voters, just one of the more recent proposals to re-engage the electorate.

The reasons for this profound disenchantment are complex. A vast Labour majority and weak opposition are the obvious immediate explanations but the malaise has far deeper roots. The triumph of the free market, Labour’s shift to the right and Tony Blair’s inclination towards inclusive ‘Big Tent’ politics have blurred the political landscape and bred a politics of ‘new managerialism’ in which debate focuses on management strategies rather than ideological visions. Voters are left confused and bored.

Sleaze and spin have badly stained the entire political process. The media’s love of scandal, combined with the public’s seemingly unquenchable thirst for entertainment, help trivialise debates. The all-pervasive consumer mindset encourages us to view ourselves as consumers of the state, rather than participants within it.

And yet, disengaged as we may be with mainstream politics, many of us are still clearly concerned with individual political issues. Single issues, from globalisation and sustainable development to fox-hunting and university top-up fees, can still excite considerable public attention and even, as witnessed by the fuel crisis in September 2000, change government policy.

The exact nature of our political disengagement is examined in chapter one of this booklet. Chapter two then goes on to assess some of the more cogent reasons why political engagement is important. Whilst the vigour and commitment of single issue politics is commendable and should be built on, there is still a need to engage with the mainstream, partly so that topics which are not emotive or newsworthy enough to attract effective single issue campaigns do not fall through the net, and partly because single issue campaigns themselves can atomise society along lines of self-interest rather than help us “live in harmony with one another.” As Vaclav Havel, the Czech president, discovered when he invited anti-globalisation protestors to debate with IMF officials during the Prague summit in 2000, “thousands of single issue campaigns produce thousands of mutually contradictory ‘solutions’ – none of them remotely as powerful as the forces they confront.”

Perhaps more persuasively, individuals’ own ideological commitments transcend both single campaigns and the modern tendency towards political pragmatism. A political ideology founded on social compassion or global justice can elevate our daily lives from pure self-orientation and protect us from our own worst tendencies. As one newspaper editorial put it, “to gain power and use it in the public interest is at the heart of democracy... We are more than pleasure seekers.”

We should not be constrained by mainstream politics, however. Just as there is a real call to engage with the official political process, there is also a need to modify it and expand our understanding of what politics is. Political consumerism, combined with the systematic dismantling of local government over the last twenty years, has fostered the belief that politics is confined to Westminster and Brussels, and is a matter of what ‘they’ can do for ‘us’. This is a corrosive attitude, breeding a sense of political alienation and local apathy, and blinding us to the fact that politics can and should incorporate all manner of immediate, on-going, inclusive, community-focused affairs. Aristotle called man a political animal not because we are argumentative or power-hungry but because we live together in organised communities.

Having examined the reasons for political engagement, chapter three turns to assess the Biblical perspective. Although Israel found itself in a number of vastly differing circumstances during her long scriptural history, each of which profoundly affected its political situation, there is good reason to see the Torah as normative. This details a multi-layered but non-hierarchical political structure, in which particular authorities dealt with the issues most appropriate to them but where the emphasis was always on the responsibilities of the individual, family and locality rather than on distant kings and councillors.

In addition to this, there were a number of constitutionally guaranteed safeguards in place, such as the ‘rule of the law’ and the limitation of kingship,

which were intended to preserve political integrity and maintain the individual's political autonomy. Moreover, the role of the prophets provided an additional extra-establishment critique of the exercise of power, contradicting and confronting errant monarchs.

Finally, both structure and safeguards were underpinned by certain fundamental values, such as the recognition that ultimate authority belonged to Yahweh, that the Israelites had a covenant relationship with their God, and that they were called to exercise power in a very particular way. Such values were intended to maintain a just and secure society and one in which the effectiveness of every individual's political engagement was guaranteed.

It is, of course, important to recognise that these teachings need to be de- and re-contextualised if they are going to be relevant to 21st century Britain. For this reason chapter four does not offer an exhaustive agenda for how the problem of political disengagement can be solved by means of applying Biblical principles. Instead, it offers a number of suggestions for structural and personal development and asks some hard questions of our own attitudes and behaviour.

Britain will not become a hungrily political nation by means of any simple policy measure. Biblical teaching does not dictate an absolute template for the state towards which all peoples must aspire, still less a panacea for political disengagement in our particular, post-industrial, post-modern country. It does, however, offer guidelines and 'boundary conditions' which can help us reanimate politics in Britain today. ■

1. Disaffected or Disengaged?: Politics in Britain Today

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Political disaffection is a fact of modern life. Election turnouts are low, political activism unfashionable and politicians viewed as corrupt and mendacious. Reasons for this are complex, ranging from the specific problems of having a dominant government and weak opposition, to the more general blurring of the political landscape, the rise of 'new managerialism' and the view which sees politics as the exclusive domain of politicians. At the same time, single interest groups are growing louder and more powerful, suggesting that whilst we are disaffected with the political process, we are still engaged with many of the issues behind it.

Political Disaffection Today

Tony Blair experienced "something of a Damascene conversion" in 2002. After years of refusing to give evidence before a parliamentary committee, he took the plunge and appeared before the heads of all 34 Commons Select Committees on July 16th.

A month earlier Mr Blair had faced a hundred or so journalists in the inaugural monthly Prime Minister's news conference. The conference was shorter and less exhausting than the Select Committee grilling but at least as important for both government and public being, in the words of one correspondent, "the latest battle in the war against spin."

These two innovations were amongst the most recent to address the growing British disaffection with politics. The most famous of these was the Committee on Standards in Public Life which was set up in October 1994 "to examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office."¹ Other measures included the use of proportional representation in elections to devolved assemblies, experimenting with postal, e-, and Internet voting in the 2002 local elections and proposals to counter the 'yah-boo' culture of Prime Minister's Question Time by bringing it forward to the morning.²

There remains, however, a strong sense of political disaffection across the country. BBC research in February 2002 reported that nearly 40% of people said they thought politicians were "crooks", "liars", "out for themselves", and "didn't care about ordinary people." Disaffection was particularly acute amongst the under 45s. Many people saw politics as essentially white, middle-class, middle-aged men arguing with other white, middle-class, middle-aged men in a "secret shared language" which people found "difficult to relate to their everyday lives."³

A recent report by the Independent Television Commission showed that 70% of the public said they had little or no interest in the television coverage during the 2001 General Election, compared with 56% at the 1997 election. Viewing figures show news audiences have been declining since 1993, with the number of viewers under the age of 44 dropping by a quarter.⁴

This disaffection is most convincingly seen in recent election turnouts. The 2002 local elections returned a 4% increase on the previous elections but the figure was still only 35%. In the 2001 General Election Tony Blair secured his return to Downing Street with the lowest share of the eligible electorate of any prime minister for more than a century, with 17 million people out of a total of more than 42 million not voting.⁵ The UK has the lowest turnout rates for elections to the European Parliament, falling from 37% in 1994 to 24% in 1999. Worldwide, Britain came 65th in a list of 163 countries ranked according to national election turnout between 1990 and 1997.⁶

The evidence for our disaffection with politics is undeniable and widely recognised by politicians of all parties. When William Hague stood up in the House of Commons on 20th June 2001 following his election defeat he commented:

“All of us in the House, in all parties, should be chastened by levels of voter apathy that resulted in the lowest turnout at a general election since 1918... Elections to this place should be the cornerstone of democratic accountability in our country, yet millions of people are not sufficiently motivated to take part in them. The blunt truth is that people increasingly see politics and Parliament as remote from their lives. They do not think that they matter. They no longer see Parliament as a place in which they can get things done.”⁷

Tony Blair expressed similar sentiments when questioned by the Select Committee chairmen thirteen months later:

“If people have a clear idea of what parliament was doing they would see a far greater connection between their concerns and what MPs were debating. I think it has to do with this disconnection between political discourse and the public... we have got to think of the ways we can bring the real political debate before the eyes of the public. If what people see is a political discourse which takes place solely in terms of process and personality and not policy I think they do become disconnected over time.”

There does, therefore, appear to be some unanimity over the diagnosis: the public is disaffected with the political process because they see it as irrelevant to their daily lives. This, however, whilst accurate is far from complete.

Reasons for Disaffection

Superficial Reasons

After the 2001 General Election MORI conducted a survey into why the turnout had been so low. Many of the reasons given for non-voting cited the inconvenience of traditional means of voting. 21% said they “couldn’t get to the polling station because it was too inconvenient.” 16% said they “were away on election day”, 15% said they were “not registered to vote” and 11% said they “did not receive a polling card/postal vote.” Only 10% said they are “not interested in politics.”⁸

Whilst for many people these explanations will be authentic there is no reason to see why inconvenience or logistical difficulties should have reduced the electoral turnout by 12% in five years. Such a rapid decline suggests that ‘inconvenience’ is used by some people as a smokescreen for more profound reasons.

‘New managerialism’, the ‘Big Tent’ and the Blurring of the Political Landscape

In 2001 the existing Labour majority of 179 seats acted as a specific disincentive to voting. Many of those who had voted Labour in 1997 thought voting in 2001 unnecessary and many opposition voters thought it pointless.

The general tenor of Labour’s first term in power, exemplified in the courting of big business and the reduction in the base rate of income tax, blurred traditional political boundaries. For many voters it became hard to distinguish precisely the differences between the ‘left’ and ‘right’. As one of the respondents in the MORI research said, “to be honest, all the parties are the same and this discourages me from voting.”

New Labour’s inclusive ‘Big Tent’ politics served to smother distinctive positions still further. Ostensibly intended to end the inanity of party-political mud-slinging, the approach also suppressed conflicts and suffocated debate, confusing voters still more about the precise features of the political landscape. How is the public to understand a government that is willing to raise taxes but unwilling to admit to it?

This blurring was the result of a big shift in British politics in which the traditional ideological divides which dominated post-war Britain were left behind. The free market triumphed over all ideas of a state-controlled economy: government’s role now was to listen to rather than dictate to business. Liberalism became dominant in the moral arena: no government, particularly after the ‘Back to Basics’ scandals of the 1990s, would dare to tell or even advise people how they should live their lives.

Today, the only remaining difference between the traditional ‘left’ and ‘right’ positions is in the *degree* of involvement the private sector should have in the provision of public services. Labour favour a combination of private money and public service provision and the Conservatives remain convinced of the private sector’s ability to run as well as fund public services. Whatever the tension between these relative positions, they are a long way from the deeply-entrenched battle lines of the 1980s.

The result of this ideological blurring is the increasing importance of ‘new managerialism’. Political debates today no longer centre around clear cut principles such low tax market economy vs. high tax socialism but instead are about who can best manage the NHS or education services.

Theoretically this is a more hard-nosed means of political evaluation, encouraging judgement according to results rather than ideologies. But in practice such debates are so complex and vulnerable to extenuating circumstances, slippery statistics, political evasion, and spin, that politics becomes not only difficult to judge but also rather tedious and insipid. At the end of the day, it is hard to judge between parties on the basis of whose overall management will achieve the greatest reduction in cancer deaths over the next five years.

The Corruption of Politics

Beyond the blurring of the political landscape, the 1990s saw the very business of politics become mired in accusations of corruption. Where the Conservative government was dogged by charges of sleaze, the subsequent Labour one has been marked by the stain of spin. Self-interest and corruption has been replaced by media manipulation and ‘control-freakery’.

Inevitably, there has been more smoke than fire here. Tony Blair is no Silvio Berlusconi. The reputations of Aitkin, Archer and Hamilton overshadow those of hundreds of reputable politicians. The media are determined to hound Labour for its spinning, furious that their own role should be usurped by government. Nevertheless, given the readiness with which the general public is willing to dismiss politicians as “crooks” and “liars”, it is clear that the smoke is clinging to the robes of state and reeking badly.

Politics as Entertainment

Almost a by-product of this combination of ideological blurring, political corruption and media hostility is the way in which politics has become a soap opera. Adversarial politics demands that politicians find and exploit points of difference between themselves and their opponents even when there is none or where they are minor, and this, combined with aggressive political interviewing, often makes mountains out of molehills.

The public’s desire for entertainment serves to exacerbate this trend. Anecdotes involving people are more popular than analysis of ideas. Human interest stories attract considerably more viewers than policy documents. The result is a Whitehall which becomes a slightly grander version of Walford:

“There is a soap opera attitude surrounding what is happening in Government... who said what, who will resign today instead of how is the Government dealing with the problems of the country.”⁹

This is seen time and again in the political arena. The Jo Moore scandal was simply the juiciest of many stories about political intrigue behind closed doors, packaged by the media in a thin wrapping of ‘what does this tell us about government’.

Prime Minister’s question time, theoretically a key forum for ensuring political accountability, has become something of a modern Coliseum, with gladiatorial debaters scoring points off one another to the roar of the adoring and loathing crowd. As Tony Blair said to the Select Committee, “if we are all absolutely honest about it, it is 80% theatre.”

General elections campaigns, theoretically the very cornerstones of democracy, readily deteriorate into baby-kissing media circuses, where tabloid editors have a greater influence on voting behaviour than party manifestos. As Rupert Murdoch’s flagship tabloid proudly proclaimed after the 1992 General election, “It Was the Sun Wot Won it.”

To a degree, this is all perfectly understandable. If politics wishes to appeal to a population fed on and motivated by the principle of entertainment, which believes itself to be too busy to absorb anything longer than a soundbite, it will invariably need to turn itself into a quickfire soap opera to survive. To this extent, politics is merely following where it is being led.

Unrealistic Expectations

In Britain over recent years our opinion of politics and politicians has demonstrated a curiously contradictory trait. On the one hand, we confidently espouse the truism that politics doesn’t achieve much and “if voting changed anything they’d abolish it”. Yet on the other, we are determined to hold politicians to account for failing to deliver. This is the tension between our desire to appear as hard-bitten realists with no naïve expectations of the world and our culture which is obsessed with accountability, delivery and transparency.

It has also made it effectively impossible for any politician to admit a mistake. Derek Draper, Peter Mandelson’s former spin doctor, who lost his job in the 1998 ‘Cash for Access’ affair, summarised this hypocrisy when talking about his time in power:

“It meant giving up the sense of being who I was; the right to be that sometimes confused, occasionally contradictory, fallible person that most of us are, but we expect our politicians not to be.”¹⁰

In a similar way, the BBC research quoted above details how respondents described the media’s coverage of politics as being “too elitist” and suggested that humour or drama should be used to explore the world of politicians and politics *whilst at the same time* saying that they feel that the media focused too much on scandal and trivia around politicians rather than issues. Expectations as demanding and contradictory as this, combined with the sceptical realism which most of us like to proclaim, leaves politicians with an unenviable task.

Economic Insulation

A further reason for political disengagement derives from the enormous socio-economic changes in Britain over the last hundred years. Whilst only the naïve or ideologically blinded would agree that Britain is without its troubles, the fact remains that compared with pre-war generations most Britons today are well-fed, comfortable, free, secure, healthy, long-lived, and enjoy job security, leisure time, a houseful of labour saving gadgets, and significant discretionary income. We may not actually be any *happier* today but we are better able to insulate ourselves from the causes of unhappiness and distract ourselves from its effects.

This has bred a sense of political isolationism. To some degree wealth allows us to create our own lives, to cushion them from the troubles which afflicted our forbears and to satisfy our needs and wants. Compared to earlier generations, we are relatively autonomous, self-governing individuals, for whom many political issues seem contingent because they *are* contingent.

Whilst everyone wants better public transport, most have cars to fall back on. We all want better pay but the alternative is often one holiday rather than two. Everyone desires job security but the consequence of losing this, whilst unpleasant, even traumatic, is rarely as frightful as it might have been before the age of social security.

Of course, there will always remain areas for which there can be no effective fall-back option, such as the maintenance of law and order (although the growth of gated-developments is a step in that direction). Moreover, the lack of any direct correlation between income and political activism shows that a number of other factors complicates this sense of economically-bred insulation. Those who own and earn less and who therefore might be expected to be politically active, are not, and are often disenfranchised for other reasons. Conversely, the better off have more to protect and this often catalyses political involvement.

Nevertheless, the principle remains that *as a nation* the more money we have, the better able we are to insulate ourselves from the slings and arrows of life and the less we *need* government to help us.

Legislative Insulation

Another way in which we are insulated can be seen in the assumption of the benignity of power which underlies so much of our behaviour.

Whether we recognise it or not, we rest on the achievements of others. Our attitudes and behaviour are based on an assumed foundation of the rights and privileges which are the product of many years of struggle. We know that we are presumed innocent until proven guilty; that we cannot be imprisoned without trial; that, by and large, we cannot be sacked or exploited or evicted by an employer or landlord without good cause. Unconscious of it as we may be most of the time, history has strung many safety nets beneath us. We live with the assumption that we are, for all intents and purposes, safe and that exercise of political power will always be benign.

It hardly needs pointing out that this is something of an historical anomaly, with most societies over the millennia and many today experiencing the capricious, malign and aggressive exercise of power in some way. More pointedly, individuals in Britain today regularly discover that the state isn’t necessarily ‘on their side’. Plans to build an airport runway, to alter road and rail routes, or to reduce police presence or hospital services in an area can all awaken people to the realisation that the exercise of political power is still very important and not necessarily conducive to their aspirations.

A Sense of Distance and Powerlessness

Of course, being aware of the reality of political decisions is no guarantee that one can do anything about them, and it is this attendant sense of powerlessness which is perhaps most powerful disincentive to political participation. Because of the scale of so many issues today, there is a real feeling that even if one were to be fully engaged and motivated, it wouldn’t make any difference whatsoever.

In the BBC research, 37% of respondents said they felt “powerless”, “unsupported” and “unrepresented”. It is easy to see why. The enervation of local government by the removal of its tax-raising powers, the centralisation of national government and the perpetual emphasis on globalisation are good cause for people to feel they are distant from the seats of real power. When the average UK constituency has over 50,000 potential voters and the average EU one ten times as many, my vote invariably seems insignificant.

Disaffected but not Disengaged?

Whilst our disaffection with the political process is undeniable, it is far from true to say that we are altogether disengaged with political issues. September 2002 was marked by the largest single demonstration in British history, when 400,000 people marched through London to protest about the government's treatment of rural communities. A fortnight later a smaller but equally determined number protested about the prospect of war with Iraq. A month after that it was university top-up fees. Membership of political parties may have been in decline for decades but single issue politics is flourishing.

There are many reasons for this. A post-modern society is wary of meta-narratives. People today are reluctant to sign up to any organisation or institution which offers a comprehensive agenda based on a 'big picture' approach. Instead we prefer to choose causes and campaigns which fit with our own personal agenda. Our allegiances are modelled in our own image and we create for ourselves a political smorgasbord of interests which fits our lives and lifestyles.

This is consumer politics, about which political parties, founded over a century ago and based on modernist approaches which offer a complete explanation for and solution to the nation's ills, can do little. If people can choose any one of 6,800 coffee combinations when they visit Starbucks every day, they are unlikely to be satisfied with 'A or B or C' in General Elections twice a decade.

It also enhances one's sense of power. General political apathy does not change the fact that there remain passionate arguments aplenty and a real sense of cause over issues such as fox hunting, sustainable development or rural affairs. Individuals who feel that government is too distant, unwieldy, complex, or bureaucratic choose instead to move outside the mainstream of politics and take action into their own hands. Single issue politics affords greater opportunity for direct action and encourages the sense that an individual's contribution really does make a difference. As the women who supported Genetix Snowball in "the fight against GM crops" in 1999 said:

*"If the government isn't going to get involved, then it's up to us...
An awful lot of people think they are powerless. When you do
something you realise the power you have."¹¹*

The truth is, however, that such political activism is still relatively rare. Moreover, only very occasionally do such protests go mainstream and have a tangible influence on central government policy, as with the fuel protests in September 2000.

The passion exhibited in these debates suggests that many of the issues which underlie the political process are still deemed critically important. It is more the method with which they are handled which is judged irrelevant and moribund. The British people are more disaffected with Politics than they are with politics. ■

Notes

- 1 *Hansard* (HC) 25 October 1994, col 758
- 2 The all-postal vote in Stevenage Borough saw 52.9% of the electorate taking up their democratic right to vote, compared with 29% in 2000 and 35% overall in 2002. Prime Minister's question time was moved to the morning on 8th January 2003.
- 3 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1845276.stm
- 4 http://www.itc.org.uk/uploads/Election_2001_Viewers_Response_to_the_Television_Coverage.pdf
- 5 Labour achieved 10,740,168 votes in 2001 as against 11,560,000 in 1992
- 6 http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk./publications_pdfs/chaptertwo.pdf
- 7 *Hansard*, Vol. 370, Part 5, Column 47, 20 June 2001
- 8 <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk./moripoll.htm>
- 9 Faz Hakim, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/archive/2063263.stm>
- 10 *Draper's life after politics*, BBC Tuesday, 30 April, 2002
- 11 *Do I look like an anarchist weirdo hippie?*, The Observer, 6 June 99

2. Reasons for Engagement

Chapter Summary

Whilst our engagement with single issues politics is to be welcomed and fostered, it should not displace mainstream political engagement. Many issues do not lend themselves to specific campaigns and demand a broader, more orthodox approach which itself can serve as an antidote to political corruption and as a safety net for political liberties. Ideological motivations and social compassion offer further compelling reasons for mainstream political engagement. At the same time, there is a real need to recognise that politics is not the sole domain of politicians but can include many forms of local community action.

Reasons for engagement

Whilst it is perfectly possible to explain our disaffection with the political process today, this does not amount to an argument for engaging with it. It is very easy to *assume* that everyone should take an interest in the exercise of political power and simply to admonish them when they don't. If the public naturally gravitates towards single issue politics, why shouldn't that be allowed to replace mainstream politics altogether? Treating political engagement as axiomatic within civilised life not only fails to address apathy but can in fact perpetuate it. We need reasons for engagement.

Single Issue Politics: Strengths and Weaknesses

The first and most obvious of these reasons can be seen in the growth of single interest groups over recent years. The passion with which people campaign over particular causes, from abortion and fox hunting to the Euro and anti-capitalism, shows that, however politically disaffected we are as a nation, many individuals are still highly motivated by specific political causes.

Issues and causes draw individuals together for a variety of reasons, from the purely pragmatic to the wholly ideological. At the extreme, grass roots activism can alter government policy, as happened during the fuel crisis in September 2000. More realistically, the media attention that campaigns and protests attract helps to increase public awareness and understanding, and forces governments to address or at least acknowledge issues.

This seems to be politics as it should be, powered and steered by public feeling, organic, relevant and important. In an age where few advocate political systems with any vigour, it seems only natural that passion should devolve to more specific causes. Such a shift in public interest promises to redesign, if only

slowly, the overall political landscape, as mainstream parties recognise that the loyalty which had once been theirs has shifted to an array of increasingly influential single interest groups.

Single issue politics has its limitations, however. Causes may unite individuals but by their very nature single issue campaigns are limited and specific. Even when they combine to focus on a whole way of life, as the disparate groups that comprised the Countryside Alliance march did, they fail to encompass the breadth of any one individual's life.

Moreover, single issue groups they can disunite just as easily as unite a cause. When the Czech president, Vaclav Havel, invited anti-globalisation protestors to debate with IMF officials during the Prague summit in 2000, he realised that thousands of single issue campaigns can produce thousands of mutually contradictory 'solutions' none of which is remotely as powerful as the forces they confront.

Big issues such as law and order, or economic security affect individuals profoundly, yet rarely lend themselves to single issue campaigns, encompassing, as they do, a multitude of factors. Alternatively other issues are too incidental for effective single issue campaigns, yet can have a very immediate and personal impact on an individual. A decision to curtail local bus services or withdraw County Council funding is rarely exciting enough to attract media attention, yet can affect those dependent on local services enormously.

In either case, whether the issue is vast and complex, or small and local, it will be shaped by the exercise of some form of official political power. To be able to contribute to or influence such matters one needs to understand and engage with more orthodox political structures. Single issue politics can often inject an invigorating commitment and resolve into a stale political debate but it cannot offer a panacea for society's ills.

Westminster and Beyond: Engaging with Mainstream Politics

General Elections and Westminster politics are, of course, the main focus of media and public attention. Recent devolution, establishment of Regional Development Agencies and talk of regional assemblies has shifted the focus slightly from Westminster, but only slightly. MPs have a greater mandate than any other public officials in the country. What goes on in the Houses of Parliament is what really matters.

This should be reason enough for engagement but regrettably it is not. The political disaffection of recent years has been primarily fuelled by and targeted at the sleaze, spin, hype, hypocrisy, and sheer distance of Westminster. Whereas lunatic local councillors were the political pariahs of the 1980s, corrupt MPs and manipulative spin doctors replaced them in the 1990s.

And yet it is exactly those affairs which have so badly corroded trust in and respect for Westminster politics that constitute a fundamental reason for greater public interest. Public engagement in national politics is the most effective safety net there can be, promoting the need for honesty and propriety in the public sphere.

The growth of professional lobbying and the rise of MP's consultancy services under the Major government resulted in a number of public interest scandals, and these in turn precipitated the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life in 1994.¹² At the time the public (or, at least, the media) were more interested in politicians' integrity than some politicians were. The longer term fallout, however, appears not to have been a renewed confidence in a cleaner, more honest political process but rather a lingering cynicism over political integrity.

Political engagement is not just important as a safety net against political corruption. It is also a bulwark protecting our political liberties. A number of the Home Secretary's recent proposals, such as detention without charge, abolition of trial by jury for some offences and the abolition of the double jeopardy rule, have been criticised for attacking the heart of democratic freedom. To cite these is not to suggest that they are necessarily wrong but merely to give an indication of how much our day-to-day lives rest on preconceptions concerning the exercise of power. Whilst disengagement from the political process will not precipitate a tumble towards political anarchy, the best means of ensuring the just and right exercise of power is through the scrutiny that comes with widespread public interest.

It is impossible to talk of Westminster politics without recognising that national governments operate in an increasingly intricate international network. There is currently an uneasy balance between the autonomous nation states of the 'modern' world and the networked, globalised states of the 'post-modern' one. On the one hand, individuals think in independent, sovereign national terms: "the concepts, values and vocabulary of the modern world still dominate our thinking in international relations."¹³ On the other, the treaties and institutions which form the post-modern world are all founded on principles of mutual transparency, openness and intervention.¹⁴

This tension is not easily resolved. The growing recognition that economy, law-making and defence are primarily international affairs and need to be embedded in an international structure sits uncomfortably alongside the apparent absurdity of global or even continental democracy, with hundreds of thousands of voters per constituency. Together, they comprise a powerful disincentive to involvement.

Yet, ignoring the international context easily allows the will of the majority to become the tyranny of the minority. This can be seen in the current debate

about sustainable development. Whilst most recognise the need to protect the earth's natural resources and alleviate the crippling poverty of billions in the developing world, the governments which have greatest capacity to do so feel the need to appeal to national majorities who would need to make real sacrifices to achieve these ends. In this way, the dominant national majority becomes the dominant international minority. Engagement in national politics almost predicates an interest and involvement in the international scene.

Ideological Motivation

Perhaps the most convincing reason for political engagement is simply ideological. Ideologies are unpopular today. Post-modern society dislikes all-encompassing stories and all-inclusive agendas. Pragmatism is popular now, with a 'whatever works' approach being widely favoured.

There are real problems with this, however. 'Whatever works' is difficult to discern in any complex system but especially hard in the political world where what works within a nation state may not work in the global arena. The Common Agricultural Policy may maintain thousands of farmers' livelihoods across Europe but only at the cost of excluding and penalising millions in Africa.

Moreover, even within one nation there may be several distinct ideas of what 'works' or how to evaluate it. What may work for a society – such as higher taxation, actively encouraging immigration or pronouncing on matters of personal morality – may not work for a political party, whose ultimate measure of success is popularity.

New Labour's inclination towards political pragmatism is a good example of this. It has led them towards a form of government known as 'continuous democracy' whereby priorities and policies are tested and modified on an on-going basis by focus groups. The result is a particularly direct, if rather 'rights-based' form of democracy which pays significant attention to 'the people's' opinion.

Unfortunately, the process also led the government into "a bewildering maze of contradictory whims and desires." The 'continuous democracy' of Labour's first term of government stated that the railways were not a high priority in the public's mind but in the wake of the rail disasters and delays of recent years the same focus groups have blamed Labour for not investing in the railways sooner. As Derek Draper commented:

"People are contradictory and irrational and so you have a problem in terms of deciding what you are going to do if all you do is actually listen to a mass of individual opinions which don't really have any coherence, and crucially are not set in context...you end up in [a] quagmire..."¹⁵

The inevitable conclusion is that ideologically-driven political engagement is necessary for the satisfactory running of society.

“the truth is a politician has to say, ‘Look, this is what I believe... do you want that...yes or no?’...[People] are looking for someone to do something they can’t do themselves...come up with coherent political opinion that they might have faith in.”¹⁶

Ideologically driven politics can also save us from the other danger of the pragmatic approach, which is the tyranny of self-interest. ‘What works’, when translated to an individual’s level, tends to mean ‘what makes life best for me.’ The result, if these individual attitudes are aggregated back up to the national level, is ‘pleasure politics’, where the ultimate aim of the political process is the satisfaction of voters’ personal desires.

Ideological motivation can cut through this self-orientation and demand that, at some point, the needs of others are elevated over our own, or that a long-term perspective is prioritised over immediate demands. At its most sublime, it is epitomised in Jesus’ teaching the disciples the principles of God’s authority:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”¹⁷

More recently, it was summarised in a Guardian editorial after the European elections in 1999:

“Politics represents the best of what it can mean to be a citizen. To gain power and use it in the public interest are at the heart of democracy. The right to vote was hard won, and the wide agreement that politics and public affairs are increasingly dull, even purposeless, is to devalue our society. We are more than pleasure seekers.”¹⁸

Such sentiments can be seen in the social concern which motivates many people today. Echoing John Donne’s famous sentiments, there remains an acute awareness that “any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.”¹⁹ Human beings are unquestionably relational and the ideology of social concern which grows out of that characteristic provides one of the most powerful defining forces within mainstream politics.

Ideologically driven engagement in the political process can not only protect the minority against the tyranny of the majority (and vice versa), *and* protect society against the shallowest forms of vote-chasing, but it can also protect us from our own worst tendencies and elicit from us our best.

Broadening our Idea of Politics

Whether we engage in the political process for personal, pragmatic or ideological reasons there is also a real need to broaden our idea of what politics actually is.

The longstanding constitutionally subordinate role of local government, the more recent removal of many of its taxation-levying powers, and the subtle consumerist mindset which encourages us to divide the world into providers and consumers can blind us to the fact that politics goes on every day in very ordinary, often mundane local circumstances. We may be far more mobile than ever before but each of us is still profoundly impacted by our immediate community.²⁰ Politics is what goes on around us.

Following the effective dismantling of local government in the 1980s and ‘90s, this is often overlooked. With nominal financial autonomy, local councils are viewed by the public as largely impotent, an attitude which is reflected in the fact that Great Britain consistently has the lowest turnout in sub-national elections of all EU countries.²¹ However, local politics extends beyond local government and includes where we shop, how we travel, what kind of care we take of our local environment, and to what extent we are involved in local affairs. Many of our day-to-day decisions and routines shape our local environment in ways which, when built up over years, can either build or destroy a community.

After decades of centralisation there appears to be increasing realisation of this point in Whitehall. Gordon Brown said in 2001:

“Our aim must always be the maximum devolution of power possible; government not stifling local action, local people making local decisions about local needs.”²²

In a speech the following year, the Prime Minister echoed this commitment to localism:

“After five years in government I know only too well that passing legislation, or making a speech will not solve vandalism on estates, raise standards in secondary schools, look after the elderly at risk. The job of government is to provide investment, support and infrastructure for those trying to solve problems at the local level.”²³

And such sentiments are increasingly common currency in political think tanks:

“To deal with the issues that people care about – a dynamic local economy creating jobs, safe and clean streets and public spaces, quality education – requires leadership not only from government but also from a variety of people in the community.”²⁴

Of course, this devolution of power does not extend to giving individuals moral guidelines. Back to Basics marks the tombstone of any meaningful political-moral discourse in our society. Nevertheless, the current emphasis on local solutions to local problems should help broaden our popular idea of what politics is and direct our focus away from Whitehall to some degree. Engaging with politics goes beyond campaigning or voting and can encompass joining a PCC, PTA, workplace committee on employer-employee relations, or even the local neighbourhood watch scheme.

Conclusion

The reasons for engaging in the political process can be framed in negative or positive terms. Engagement can act as an antidote to political corruption and a safety net for political liberties. At the same time, it can be a means of securing one’s particular interests, shaping one’s own community, and elevating oneself from the status of self-interested “pleasure seeker”.

Such reasons do not, however, necessitate the individual’s wholesale compliance with existing political structures. True political engagement should be reactive *and* proactive. The more people engage with the political process the better able they will be, not simply to mould their own lives and communities, but also to influence the way politics is conducted. Lives can shape politics just as much politics shapes lives.

For Christians who see political engagement as part of their faith, this double-edged reason for involvement will serve to encourage them both to use and shape the political process in accordance with Christ’s kingdom. To that end, it is important to examine Biblical teaching to understand the perspective it offers on our engagement with politics today. ■

Notes

12 ed. Bill Jones et al, *Politics UK*, (Pearson, 2001), pp. 221–223

13 Robert Cooper, *The Post-modern State and the World Order* (Demos, 1996), pp. 10–21

14 e.g. the Treaty of Rome, the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the International Criminal Court, etc.

15 from *Century of The Self*, Episode 4 (BBC, 2001)

16 *ibid.*

17 Matthew 20:24–27

18 The Guardian, 17 June 1999

19 John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, XVII* in *The Oxford Authors: John Donne*, ed. John Carey (Oxford, 1990)

20 cf. Nick Spencer, *Where do we go from here? A Biblical Perspective on Roots and Mobility in Britain Today* (The Jubilee Centre, 2002)

21 Railings, Temple and Thrasher (ed.), *Community Identity and Participation in Local Democracy* (Commission for Local Democracy, Research Report No.1, 1994), cited in *Politics UK* p. 486

22 quoted in *New Localism: Refashioning the Centre-Local Relationship*, Dan Corry and Gerry Stoker (NLGN, 2002), p. 20

23 *ibid.* p. 20

24 *ibid.* p. 20

3. The Politics of Ancient Israel

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Biblical teaching offers guidelines for fostering political engagement in three areas. Structurally, the Israel of the Torah had a multi-layered but non-hierarchical arrangement, in which particular authorities dealt with the issues most appropriate to them but where the emphasis was always on the responsibilities of the individual, family and locality rather than on kings and councillors. Beyond this, there existed a number of checks and balances which were intended to act as safeguards against political corruption and maintain the individual's political autonomy. Finally, both structure and safeguards were underpinned by certain fundamental values which were meant to guarantee a just and secure society and hence the effectiveness of individuals' political engagement.

Introduction

When assessing the Biblical idea of politics and political engagement, there is grave danger of whitewashing over intricacies and complexities. The single-volume, modern translation means by which most of us encounter scripture can easily lead us to forget that its 66 books were written over a millennium, cover the events of two, and use a wide variety of genres to detail the rich and varied encounter of God with his people. We need to be sensitive to radically differing social and cultural conditions. As Christopher Wright has written:

“it is important that we see the breadth of canonical material on this subject and not focus on a single, narrow band of texts which can lead to a distorted idea of ‘the’ Old Testament view of the state.”²⁵

The story of the Israelite involvement in politics varies according to the changing nature of Israel and the circumstances in which the nation found itself. Nevertheless, there is good reason to view the period of the Exodus as normative, with the Torah acting as the blueprint for social and political structures and as the yardstick against which other periods were judged.

Political Structure

The Book of Exodus presents the liberation of Israel from systematic, ethnic exploitation in Egypt to the varied city-state culture of Canaan. Israel fled from

one, centralised tyrannous state, to a land of smaller nations, less comprehensively brutal than Pharaoh's Egypt but equally pyramidal in the balance of their economic and political power. In each, individual deified kings and tiny ruling elites dictated policy to a wide base of peasant labour, usually for self-aggrandising and expansionist purposes. In both situations, Israel was called to holiness, to be separate and distinct from the surrounding culture, and this was to manifest itself in her political structure just as much as her ethical or religious outlook.

The power structure outlined in the Torah was multipolar, encompassing six independent sources of authority, each with its own geographic jurisdiction. These were the individual, the family, the community, the Levites, the tribe or region, and the nation, and between them they formed a network of concurrent authorities each instituted by God and protected, limited and empowered by the national constitution. Moreover, they each fostered a particular means for individuals to engage in the politics of the state.²⁶

The Individual

The individual was the bedrock of the state and of the political process. The constitutional provisions of Sinai were geared first and foremost to the moral and legal obligations of individual Israelites rather than the procedural organisation of the Israelite state. Effectively, they placed people before structures.

Much of the Torah is aimed at preserving the moral and relational integrity of the citizenry, partly through the 'Bill of Obligations' embodied in the "Thou shalt..." commands and partly through legislation with an "if x, then y" format.

In this way, the Ten Commandments acted as a foundational constitutional safeguard, its pithiness helping each individual Hebrew know the obligations they owed their fellow citizens and, in turn, were owed by them, and to know also the covenant relationship with Yahweh which underpinned all these duties.

The Family

Alongside the responsibilities of the individual was the government of the family. The biblical family was emphatically not the nuclear family that we recognise today but rather an extended kin group which would often, as in many pre-industrial societies, act as an economic unit too. Accordingly, the family had economic obligations, such as leaving the corners of their fields unharvested for the poor and the weak, paying hired labourers fairly and promptly and being under obligation to allow hungry travellers the right to eat the produce of a field.²⁷

At the same time, the family's economic rights and stability were safeguarded. Assets such as millstones were not to be mortgaged "because that would be taking a man's livelihood."²⁸ The laws concerning the release of debt, the restoration of

the debtor and the ban on interest were intended to preserve the financial self-sufficiency and integrity of the family unit, so that “each one... [can] return to his family property and each to his own clan.”²⁹

The family unit was, therefore, to a large degree a self-governing unit, owning and freeing servants,³⁰ observing celebrations together,³¹ regulating and legitimising marriage and divorce,³² redeeming poor relatives,³³ superseding military duties at times,³⁴ and taking the responsibilities towards widowed in-laws extremely seriously.³⁵

The Community

Disagreement between Israelites such as those as described in Deuteronomy 25 were to be decided before a “court [of] judges” or in “the presence of the elders.” This local government function was central to Israel as the court of first instance. In local disputes which transcended the family unit, it was frequently the “elders of the town” who were called to resolve the situation. They were responsible for fetching premeditated murderers from the cities of refuge,³⁶ for atoning for unsolved murders,³⁷ and for enforcing obligations on the family when disputes had exceeded family boundaries.³⁸

The Levites

A fourth source of authority in Israel was in the role of the Levites. The Levites had their own unique constitutional arrangements, whereby they were denied a place in the distribution of land but instead were to rely on the constitutionally mandated tithes of the people. They provided a nationwide religious and welfare bureaucracy, charged with the maintenance and protection of those who fell outside the family group.

In addition to this, the Levites had specific jurisdictions reserved for them. They were responsible for the care of the Tabernacle,³⁹ had an ecclesiastical court which gave them exclusive jurisdiction over crimes against the Sanctuary and the priesthood,⁴⁰ constituted a court of appeal for cases too difficult for normal courts,⁴¹ and also helped with crimes which took place in areas between population centres.⁴²

The Tribe or Region

In Genesis chapter 49 Israel is described in detail as operating on a tribal basis. When, in the opening chapter of Numbers, Yahweh commands a census of Israel’s clans and families, it is this tribal structure which is used, with “one man from each tribe” appointed to aid Moses and Aaron in the task. Israel’s tribal identity was very important.

Tribal elders made the offerings at the dedication of the Tabernacle, the

national symbol of the federal commonwealth and constitutional seat of central government and worship.⁴³ Tribal representatives ratified actions of national constitutional importance.⁴⁴ And tribal officers were appointed on an *ad hoc* basis to represent the tribe on specific issues.⁴⁵

Perhaps the most important aspect of Israel’s tribal constitution was in its military organisation. The army was constituted on a tribal basis and this basis of military organisation continued to some degree under the monarchy.⁴⁶

The Nation

The role of central government in the period before the monarchy was relatively small. Its primary purpose was national defence and even that was organised along tribal lines and subject to other obligations such as responsibility to the family or to business.⁴⁷

This minimal role for central government is reflected in the brief and heavily restrictive legislation concerning the king’s military and economic power in Deuteronomy 17. The king is to be one of the people, subject to the law, limited in wealth, responsible in personal affairs, and humble in self-designation.⁴⁸ The contrast with other kings of ancient Near Eastern cultures could not be more pronounced.

Central government’s other distinctive roles were in settling inter-tribal disputes and fostering a sense of national identity through religious festivals. The risk of civil war, logically very high given Israel’s diffuse military structure, caused surprisingly little problem, possibly due to the ability for tribes to unite and punish one of their number which refused to perform its constitutional duties.⁴⁹

A sense of covenantal unity fostered by the highly important festivals was the most centralising feature in Israel’s early history. Religious worship concentrated all of Israel on their shared history and faith. It was based outside the tribal units and as such transcended local and regional loyalties, helping engender a national consciousness which did much for national unity.

Multipolarity: Uniting the Different Strands of Government

The Israel of the Torah had a complex multipolar structure of political power in which different authorities were responsible for different areas. The system was akin to our modern separation of powers except that the divisions were along geographical lines rather than according to legislative, executive or judicial function.

The division was also non-hierarchical. Individual or family authority was not automatically compliant to the edicts of larger state units. Marriage took precedence over military service for a year.⁵⁰ The king was subject to the law, as preserved and taught by the Levites.⁵¹ The family’s criminal justice right to exact

blood vengeance was mitigated by a national system of ‘vengeance free zones’ known as Cities of Refuge, and also by the sphere of Levitical authority, which would grant sanctuary to the criminal who grasped the horns of the altar.⁵²

In order to preserve this diffuse power system, each authority had a constitutionally protected geographic jurisdiction. The family had its allotment of land protected by the Jubilee legislation. The locality had authority over its geographically defined town or city, the tribe over its territory, and the national responsibility was for overall defence, with primary jurisdiction over the capital city. The Levites, whilst not allocated rural land, were guaranteed housing and provision in the constitution. Overall, everything rested on the autonomy of the individual and his or her responsibility for their own behaviour and occupation, according to the law.

In such a way, the Israel of the Torah had a multi-layered but non-hierarchical structure. The various authority units reflected the need to operate on a variety of levels. Government, in as far as possible, was not a distant, abstract entity but an immediate and concrete fact of life, usually based on the natural ties of locality, community and family, and intended to give a positive incentive to maintaining productivity, social integration and individual worth. The reality, as Israel showed during the period of the monarchy, was somewhat different.

Political Reality: The Period of the Monarchy

Israel became a monarchy for understandable if not compelling reasons:

“We want a king over us. Then we shall be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”⁵³

Although Samuel and Yahweh interpret the demands as a rejection of theocracy, their objection is practical rather than theological. When Yahweh tells Samuel to engage in dialogue with the elders who present the demand, his instructions sound ominous:

“Listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.”⁵⁴

This Samuel does in no uncertain terms:

“This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and

others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves.”⁵⁵

Samuel’s dispiriting catalogue of potential woes – confiscation, taxation, conscription, and exploitation – was ignored. Israel became a monarchy and with it a fully-fledged state, with central leadership, boundaries and organised military defences.

The monarchy was not a success, however. Even under the first king, Saul, there emerged a tendency to disrupt the family and hence local and tribal military and political jurisdiction by directly conscripting men outside the constitutional model of “one man per family.”⁵⁶ In the tension between the desire for external strength and the need for internal justice, the latter was often sacrificed. The glories of David and Solomon represented an Israelite golden age, at least in material terms, but the kingship was corrupted even at that time with Solomon centralising authority and laying the foundations of trouble which were energetically built on by many of his successors.

The centralised authority afforded by the monarchy allowed kings to abuse family land rights.⁵⁷ Over the years Yahweh became merely a figurehead for the state. The rule of the king challenged that of the law to which the king should have been subject.

In reaction to this, a number of prophets fought to prevent the authority of God and his prophetic word from being hijacked to legitimise human and political ambitions. Early on in the history of the monarchy the idea of a “faithful remnant” emerged and with it the concept that “it was not the *state* of Israel itself that constituted the true people of God, but a minority of ‘true believers’ within it.”⁵⁸

Ultimately, the glory days of David and Solomon were overshadowed by a rather longer period of compromise and tension, in which the complex, overlapping spheres of government described in the Torah were all too easily subsumed within the over-powerful and often corrupt centralised power of the monarchy. Too often the state worked instead of and sometimes even against the people, and the series of checks and balances which were intended to make government dependable, meaningful and involving for the average Israelite was ignored.

Political Reconstruction: The Exile and After

With the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC Israel lost its statehood and nearly its nationhood. The Israelite's sin returned them to captivity, this time in Babylon, less tyrannous than Egypt but equally foreign and hostile.

The context for political involvement thus changed radically, with the Israelites' primary task now being to maintain their distinct identity whilst not standing out as so intractably different as to elicit persecution. Israelites didn't altogether refuse political engagement, as the examples of Daniel and Nehemiah show, but the structures in which they maintained their involvement had altered completely.

Even after they returned from exile, politics for the Israelite people was a very different affair, comprising as they now did a tiny, politically insignificant sub-province within the vast Persian empire. Under the Persians the people experienced a comparatively benevolent policy of religious freedom and local autonomy and this enabled them to reform a community marked by four key features⁵⁹:

- **Worship:** the community consciously returned to the original conception of the Israelite "*edah*", the assembly gathered for worship;
- **Waiting:** the community maintained its faith in God's historic promises and looked forward to a new future from God;
- **Obeying:** the community recognised that it was neglect of the law that had led it into exile and determined to avoid the same fate again;
- **Questioning:** the community deliberately wrestled with the doubts and questions which resulted from the tension between God's promises and its own difficult and painful history.

These elements and the relatively benign Persian government encouraged a return to pre-monarchic principles. However, with the imposition of Hellenic culture on the eastern Mediterranean in the wake of Alexander the Great's conquests, fissures began to appear within the renewed Jewish community.

The issue of how far the people of Israel should accommodate themselves to the dominant Greek culture became increasingly important and by the time Jesus was born the fissures had become major fault lines. The issue was intensified by the Roman occupation, to the extent that, as some historians have observed, it makes little sense to talk about first century Judaism in the singular. The question was no longer 'What is the proper form and means of political engagement and government?' but 'What is the appropriate level of resistance?' Different groups, among them the Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, each answered the question in a different way.

Due to this critical political situation, not to mention the unique role of Jesus, the New Testament is far less concerned with describing the appropriate structure for political engagement. Jesus' famous answer to the Pharisees on the Temple mount – "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" – despite having become the proof text of critics wishing to curtail the Church's involvement in politics, was never intended to be a comprehensive evaluation of church-state affairs. Paul's advice in Romans 13 concerning the proper relation between individual and state is less elliptical and more detailed. But it too has often been used in isolation to justify an anti-democratic approach which sits ill-at-ease with the intricate, multipolar, corporate form of government outlined in the Torah.

As ever the New Testament and more precisely the person and work of Jesus Christ must be the lens through which we read the Law and the Prophets. Yet the particular political pressures of 1st century Palestine counsel us against taking New Testament political teachings out of context. The New Testament church was a small and politically uninfluential minority, living under the shadow of an autocratic 'global' empire, and concerned with politics only in as far as it impinged on the spread of the new Kingdom. As far as political structures are concerned, the Torah offers a more comprehensive and pragmatic model for dealing with the realities of national political life.

Political Safeguards

Beyond the multipolar political structure which was built into the Torah, Ancient Israel enjoyed a series of safeguards which underpinned the exercise of political power. Although many of these are invariably specific to the particular political arrangements of the time, the principles behind each can help foster a sense of engagement with the broad political life of the nation.

The Rule of Law

In Deuteronomy 17 the Israelites are told that any king they might elect over them must be answerable to the Law just as they are:

"When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left."⁶⁰

In an age in which the divine right of kings has been thoroughly disregarded, we are liable to overlook the revolutionary nature of this command. Considering that it was written against a background of cultures in which kings not only had divine right but were often themselves considered to be divine, the fact that it tells the king that he should “not consider himself better than his brothers” is almost incredible.

To speak of “the rule of law” in ancient Israel is, however, slightly anachronistic, as the phrase is today used almost exclusively to refer to the belief that adjudication should be governed by laws and not by people. The Torah was never intended to provide exhaustive case histories of all possible occasions which might demand some form of legal arbitration and so was never intended to be used as a definitive statute book which facilitated ‘the rule of law’ in the modern sense.

Instead its language was ‘imagistic’ rather than literal and it operated by requiring individuals to assess how *similar* the crime under evaluation was to the examples or ‘pictures’ of crimes given in the Torah.⁶¹ This flexibility and need for “intuitive judgements of justice” demanded a “great deal of private and creative reflection” as is evidenced by the commands for Israel to absorb and meditate on the law:

*“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.
Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and
when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.
Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”⁶²*

The law was for everyone, not just the lawyers. And everyone included the king. Israelite law did not preclude judgment by people, as the modern phrase “rule of law” does. Indeed it demanded it. Israel was called to be a nation under the law, a nation whose life was guided by the Torah. And this was a principle which extended from the lowliest rural labourers right up to the king in Jerusalem.

Immediate Government and the Danger of Centralised Power

Israelite thought tended to the concrete rather than the abstract. Government was not a question of a small coterie of individuals implementing political theory upon the mass of the people. Nor was it something conducted by a minority for the majority. Whilst there was an openness to national and regional systems of government, this tended to be on a ‘needs must’ basis. Ideologically, power was decentralised, devolved into the hands of groups which were immediate and meaningful to the individual.

The natural concomitant of making government immediate was an acute recognition of the dangers of centralising power. The issue of kingship epitomised this danger. The Torah makes allowances for kingship but sets severe limitations on it, recognising the potential for self-aggrandisement and domination of local and regional government.

“The king...must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them...He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.”⁶³

For this reason the nation existed and operated on a number of different levels, with the census and the division of land in Numbers and later chapters of Joshua enshrining this principle. In Numbers 33, God tells Moses that after the conquest of Canaan he is to “distribute the land by lot, according to your clans. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one...distribute it according to your ancestral tribes.”⁶⁴

This distribution acted not only as an antidote to economic inequality and as a foundation for the equality of opportunity but also as a fundamental decentralisation of power. In an agricultural culture land was power. Equal distribution facilitated the balance of authority and helped individual tribes and clans to act as a positive restraint against a king who might otherwise “take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves...[and] accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.” In the book of Joshua, the extensive detailing of lines drawn through and around towns, hills, rivers, and valleys gives every tribe, community and town their allotment in the economic and political reality of Israel.

The same principle is evident in the more explicit appointment of leaders. In Exodus 18 Moses’ father-in-law warns him against overburdening himself with power and responsibility and advises him to

“select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times...that will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.”⁶⁵

This Moses does with positive results. A little later Israel is commanded to “appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town.” These are to “judge the people fairly” and told “not [to] pervert justice or show partiality...[or] accept a bribe.” They are to “follow justice and justice alone”.⁶⁶ Once again we have power spread across the land, devolved to regional and local

authorities, all of whom are commanded to administer justice according to the principles of the Torah.

Extra-political Structures

In the early chapters of Judges, God warns Israel that because they failed to drive out the peoples of Canaan, “they will be thorns in your side.”⁶⁷ Exactly the same could be said of the prophets by the kings of Israel.

Familiarity with scripture can easily blind us to the fact that a significant proportion of the Old Testament is taken up by critiques of and challenges to Israel’s failings which came from Israel’s prophets. The role of the prophet was as old as that of the monarchy and, contrary to the modern understanding of the word, had little to do with foretelling the future.

The prophets’ primary concern was the present. The Hebrew word for prophet, ‘nabi’, was related to the verb ‘to call’ and reflected their dual role within society. Prophets acted both as messengers, individuals *called by* God, and as proclaimers, *calling for* God and summoning Israel to respond to his call.

Time and again they found themselves criticising the monarchy and the state, proclaiming God’s judgement on a nation which had wandered from the One who rescued it and ignored his calls to return to his ways, and even anointing alternative leaders. Time and again they found themselves ignored, ostracized, persecuted, and exiled.

Although by no means all prophets were sufficiently radical and uncompromising to earn themselves persecution, and some offered very comforting messages of nationalistic invincibility and security, the majority acted outside and spoke against the establishment. Prophets represented the true character of God and in the early monarchy this involved standing “in opposition both to religious apostasy and syncretism and to the authority of kings when these failed to uphold the cause of Yahweh or flouted his moral demands.”⁶⁸

Later the critique shifted from kings and particular groups to include proclamations against the entire nation when it had turned away from God. Later still, the prophets of the exile and the post-exilic period were concerned with the hope of restoration of the nation. Time and again, the prophets specialised in ‘thinking the unthinkable’.

Irrespective of whether the messages of individual prophets were reassuring or unpalatable, the role of the prophet was fundamentally outside the official power structures of monarchical Israel. The Israelite concept of the state was already legally restricted but during the time of monarchy, when it was most centralised and hence most vulnerable to systematic corruption, government was carefully and persistently scrutinised by watchdogs who claimed their authority from a distinctly supra-establishment source.

Political Values

Underpinning both the structure and safeguards of Old Testament politics were a number of fundamental values which dictated *how* power should be exercised. These were not so much practical points of organisation but principles which guided the politics outlined above.

Power and Authority Belong Ultimately to God

Affirmations of God’s ultimate power are plentiful in the Bible. The Israelites are reminded concerning their liberation and prospects that

*You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.*⁶⁹

Job is reassured towards the end of his trials that

*The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power; in his justice and great righteousness, he does not oppress. Therefore, men revere him, for does he not have regard for all the wise in heart?*⁷⁰

The final and perhaps most comprehensive affirmation of this is in Revelation where John is awed by the vision of “a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it”.⁷¹ The vision is, of course, of the sacrificed Lamb which, as the book unfolds, is used to overturn images of Roman imperial power.

This focus of God as supreme sovereign and authority over creation, as epitomised in the vision of Revelation, has been used to sanction absolutist authoritarian structures over many centuries, and has been criticised accordingly. However, this interpretation and use of the vision of Revelation is, ironically, exactly what the vision was trying to deny.

*“So far from legitimising human autocracy, divine rule radically de-legitimises it. Absolute power, by definition, belongs only to God, and it is precisely the recognition of God’s absolute power that relativises all human power.”*⁷²

It was the absolute, unaccountable, anthropocentric idea and exercise of power within the Roman Empire which Revelation so powerfully denounced. Ultimately, if power belongs to God, all human authority is answerable to him and must remain accountable, humble and cautious.

Collective Responsibility

The decentralisation of power in Israelite society is reflected in the modern idea of subsidiarity: the principle that a central authority should perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more local level. In Israel, however, this principle of subsidiarity came with its own responsibilities.

Israel is frequently personified within the scriptures. Hosea describes the nation as a small child. In Exodus it is Yahweh's "firstborn son". In Jeremiah it is like an unfaithful woman.⁷³ In each case the metaphor serves a particular purpose. Yet underlying each is the idea that Israel was a unified body and as such had collective responsibility.

With the devolution of power came devolution of accountability. When government is spread across society as a whole, society as a whole is held to account. Accordingly, in the Old Testament there emerged the very clear idea that the whole nation was responsible for its actions, even when the actions were those of its rulers. Responsibility was collective. It was, after all, Israel and not simply the errant Israelite kings which were sent into exile in 587 BC.

The Covenant Relationship

A central element within the decentralisation of power in Israel was the idea of covenant. The ruler and the ruled had a mutual obligation to one another. Responsibility was not simply one way.

Covenants within the Old Testament varied considerably in form and content. They could be secular, such as between two leaders, two heads of state, a king and his people, or a king and his conquered vassal.⁷⁴ Alternatively, they could be between a god and his people, binding the two together in a relationship grounded on commitment to mutual promises and obligations. These covenants might be unconditional, resting on divine grace alone, as with the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, or conditional, such as the Mosaic one, with an endurance which depended on the people's continued obedience and secured by the sanctions of blessings and curses.

The Mosaic covenant underpins the political structure laid out in the Torah and informs the Israelite understanding of government and authority. The Hebrews are commanded "to walk in [God's] ways and to keep his commands and decrees and laws," so that they might "live and increase" and be blessed. The promise is not unconditional, however, and failure to follow the law will result in them not living long in the land. They may be commanded to "choose life" but ultimately the choice remains theirs.⁷⁵

In such a way, the exercise of political authority is part of the greater whole of a conditional, covenantal relationship between Yahweh and his people, and bound up with the concept of mutual obligation.

Flexible Government

As observed, Israel operated and recognised a variety of different state models during the Biblical period. As one theologian has written

*"Nowhere in the Bible does God put forward an ideal of monarchy or republicanism or some other political system as the unchanging truth for our aspiration."*⁷⁶

This does not, of course, mean that no political system is out-of-bounds. The political principles discussed above point away from a highly centralised autocracy in which human beings are deprived of their moral autonomy and become pawns in the hands of over-powerful kings or presidents. At the same time, they also point away from highly-individualised anarchies, in which moral responsibility becomes existential autonomy and breeds an isolationism which dispenses with duties to one's fellow citizens.

Nevertheless, the absence of a detailed, unconditional political blueprint is an important point. Whilst the Torah was normative for Israel, it placed people before structures and afforded a degree of flexibility for government. Resistance towards having a king is clearly stated at several points and yet the Torah legislates for one and God is prepared to acquiesce to Israel's demands, with what sounds like the tone of tired and resigned parent: "Listen to them and give them a king."⁷⁷

This flexibility should act as an antidote to our tendency to canonise political systems. Capitalism, Socialism, Marxism, and whole host of other ideologies may have aspects which recommend them but they can easily become goals in themselves, demanding loyal support, rather than being tools used to construct a just, peaceful and politically engaged society.

The Exercise of Power

If Old Testament writers were not particularly concerned with outlining a precise theology of the state, New Testament ones were even less so. Audiences and circumstances dictated a radically different agenda for the 27 books of the New Testament.

Yet, whilst not being directly concerned with politics or statecraft, the New Testament does offer the definitive example of the keystone for all political engagement: the exercise of power.

This is made explicit on numerous occasions in the Gospels. Jesus is recognised as one who taught as if he had authority.⁷⁸ He gives his disciples authority to drive out evil spirits.⁷⁹ But he then calls them together and says "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."⁸⁰ Under his self-designated title, Son of Man, he declares that he has authority to forgive sins.⁸¹ And then, under the same title,

he tells his disciples “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”⁸²

The lesson is as simple as it is profound. “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them,” Jesus tells his disciples. “Not so with you.”⁸³

It is this difference – between the power of this world and the power of God – which is realised in the tense and puzzled exchange between Pilate and Jesus as recorded in John 19. Pilate, frustrated by Jesus’ silence, asks, with what sounds like astonishment, “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” It is enough to provoke an answer from Jesus: “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above.”⁸⁴

Like the Psalmist, Jesus recognises and acknowledges the tension between all power and authority coming from God and God allowing man to use that power and authority for his own ends of torture and death. It a tension which crucifies him.

And yet, through crucifixion and the vindication of the resurrection, it is a tension which Jesus himself resolves. “All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me”, he tells his disciples in the great commission. It is this authority which they are to take to all nations.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The two or so millennia of Biblical history find Israel in a variety of different cultural and political situations. The Israelites go from being enslaved and oppressed by one superpower to having pretensions to being a superpower themselves. They oscillate between landlessness and established nationhood. They experience a range of political structures without ever feeling truly at ease or making a real success of any of them. Yet through this complex and fluctuating history, a number of principles emerge which guided – at least in theory – Israel’s statehood.

Israel owed everything to God. As Hosea movingly records:

*“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son...
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;
but they did not realize
it was I who healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with ties of love;
I lifted the yoke from their neck
and bent down to feed them.”⁸⁶*

As a nation, Israel had nothing which had not been given (or lent) to it, and this included its capacity for government.

The exercise of power was accountable before God. It was to be guided by the Law. It was to be adaptable to circumstances rather than petrified and made an idol. It was to be used, not as an end in itself, but as a means of instituting God’s rule and God’s values in his people. It was not to be confused with the power of other nations. It was observed and critiqued by an extra-political source. Supremely, it was to be devolved throughout the nation rather than concentrated in the hands of any one individual, so that all may enjoy and be responsible for the nation’s covenant relationship with God. ■

Notes

25 Christopher Wright, *The people of God and the state in the Old Testament*, Themelios (Vol. 16 No. 1, Oct/ Nov 1990)

26 For this whole section cf. B. G. B Logsdon, *Multipolarity and Covenant: Towards a Biblical Framework for Constitutional Safeguards* (Jubilee Centre, 1989)

27 Deuteronomy 24:17, 19-22; 26:11-12; 23:24-25

28 Deuteronomy 24:6

29 Leviticus 25:10

30 Deuteronomy 15:12-18

31 Deuteronomy 15:19-22

32 Christopher Wright, *Living as the People of God* (IVP, 1983), p. 177

33 Leviticus 25:25

34 Deuteronomy 24:5

35 Deuteronomy 25:5-10

36 Deuteronomy 19:11-12

37 Deuteronomy 20:1-3

38 Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 22:13-19

39 Numbers 1:53

40 Numbers 18

41 Deuteronomy 17:8-10

42 Deuteronomy 21:5

43 Numbers 7:2-11

44 Exodus 34:31

45 Numbers 1:16; 13:3-15

46 1 Chronicles 27:16-21

47 Deuteronomy 24:5; 20:6

48 Deuteronomy 17:14-20

49 for example Judges 20-21

50 Deuteronomy 24:5

51 Deuteronomy 17:14-20

52 Deuteronomy 19:4-7; Exodus 21:13

53 1 Samuel 8:19-20

54 1 Samuel 8:9

- 55 1 Samuel 8:11-18
 56 1 Samuel 14:52
 57 1 Kings 21
 58 Wright, *op. cit.*, p.7
 59 Wright, *op. cit.*, p.9
 60 Deuteronomy 17:18-20
 61 Jonathan Burnside, Licence to Kill? (Cambridge Papers, Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2002), p. 2;
 see also Bernard Jackson, *Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000)
 62 Deuteronomy 6:6-9
 63 Deuteronomy 17:16-17
 64 Numbers 33:54
 65 Exodus 18:21-22
 66 Deuteronomy 16:18-20
 67 Judges 1-2
 68 'Prophets', R. N. Whybray in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Metzger and Coogan (Oxford, 1993), p. 621
 69 Deuteronomy 8:17-18
 70 Job 37:23-24
 71 Revelation 4:2
 72 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 44
 73 Hosea 11:1; Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 3:20
 74 Genesis 21:25-32; 1 Kings 20:34; 1 Chronicles 11:3; Ezekiel 17:13-19
 75 Deuteronomy 30:15-20
 76 J. W. Skillen in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 479, quoted in
 Torleiv Austad, Attitudes towards the state in Western theological thinking, *Themelios*
 (Vol. 16 No. 1, Oct/ Nov 1990) p. 19
 77 1 Samuel 8:22
 78 Matthew 7:29
 79 Matthew 10:1
 80 Matthew 20:26-27
 81 Matthew 9:6
 82 Matthew 20:28
 83 Matthew 20:25
 84 John 19:10-11
 85 Matthew 28:18-19
 86 Hosea 11:1-4

4. An Agenda for Engagement

CHAPTER SUMMARY

*B*iblical teaching on politics demands careful de- and re-contextualisation and does not provide a cheap or easy panacea for today's political disenchantment. Nevertheless, it does suggest that in order to foster engagement political processes need to be increasingly localised and political safeguards maintained without being wholly derestricted. At the same time, at an individual level, we need to re-evaluate our relationship with politicians, re-assess our own motivations, and broaden our understanding of what politics actually is.

Using Biblical Teaching Today

Believing Biblical teaching is relevant and useful for understanding and shaping modern society does not entail believing that scripture should be read like a social or constitutional textbook. This point is eloquently expressed by the theologian Oliver O'Donovan:

*"If political theologians are to treat Israel's political tradition as normative, they must observe the discipline of treating it as history. They must not plunder the Old Testament as though it were raw material to be consumed, in any order or in any variety of proportions, in the manufacture of their own theological artefact. They are dealing with a disclosure that took form in a succession of political developments, each one of which has to be weighed and interpreted in the light of what preceded and followed it."*⁸⁷

A translation process is required in order to understand how the underlying ideology within the teaching – the concern with securing right relationships across society – should be de-contextualised from its ancient Near Eastern setting and re-contextualised for 21st century Britain.⁸⁸

Britain today is a densely populated, hypermobile, post-industrial, consumerist nation, supporting an ever growing communication network and an ever-splintering sense of national identity. The Torah, on the other hand, was given to a static, pre-modern, agricultural society, with no effective communication links but an intensely strong sense of identity. More specifically, the complexity of modern politics marks our political processes as qualitatively different from those of any pre-modern society.

Such differences demand the very proper recognition that institutions and processes and our engagement with them need to develop and evolve and not simply fossilise around anachronistic models. Biblical writers, whilst conscious of

the power and potential of political government, tended to view it as a tool rather than a goal, a means by which God's values might be engrafted into human society rather than a particular template towards which all peoples must aspire. To that end, there are principles which run through both Testaments which should act as 'boundary conditions', guiding our concept of political engagement but falling short of prescribing an exact political template.

With this in mind, and given the breadth of the issue under discussion, this final chapter does not intend to provide a definitive programme, still less a panacea, for tackling the issue of political disaffection. Instead, it examines briefly a number of areas which are relevant both to this sense of detachment and to Biblical teaching, and looks to ask pertinent questions, suggest approaches and encourage further interest in the issues.

Overall, it recognises that the problem of political disengagement will not be solved by any single, simple solution such as switching to proportional representation or e-voting but requires instead deliberation and action on a number of fronts.

Engaging with Politics Today: Structure

A number of Torah principles may be seen within the British political system today. Exercise of political power is governed by the rule of law. It is accountable to a wide range of parties including the general public, the markets and international bodies such as the European Union and the IMF. Power is not easily concentrated in the hands of one individual and is, in rhetoric at least, exercised for those unable to exercise it themselves.

However, the disaffection discussed above suggests that this isn't enough and that there are areas for radical change. Disengagement is bred by distance and the dismantling of local government over the last two decades has helped alienate people from the political process. Whilst authority needs to operate on a number of different levels, not least at a supra-national one in this age of globalisation, there is a real need for genuine local autonomy in Britain today.

The principle of subsidiarity has much to recommend it and is wholly consonant with Old Testament teaching. The problem today is that whilst subsidiarity is easy to talk about, without any strong definition of the role and powers of local government, issues invariably drift towards the centre. Moreover, central governments are reluctant to return genuine economic and political power to local government for fear of losing control, being held accountable for the failures of others, and giving a green light to 'Postcode Lottery' inequality.

These issues are far from insurmountable, however, and would be addressed by fostering the sense amongst the general public that participation in local

government actually matters. This could be achieved by considering the merits of different electoral processes, such as e-, Internet and postal voting, and by reining in the political power of some unelected organisations, such as multinational corporations or lobby groups, whose influence often completely bypasses the democratic system.

Structural suggestions such as these may all appear, somewhat ironically, centrist themselves and so it is essential to emphasise that the behaviour of individuals is equally important. We need to examine our own attitudes to political participation and this invariably begins with our approach to voting. Why do we or do we not vote? Do we take local, regional, national, and international elections with equal seriousness? What do we want or expect to achieve by voting? For whose benefit do we vote? What balance of self-, community, national, and international interest lies at the heart of our voting decisions?

Our self-examination should not end with our voting behaviour. Exercising our democratic right (or duty) to vote is not the be all and end all of political participation. Engagement should extend beyond the ballot box and the uncomfortable question for many of us is, how far? How far do we take responsibility for local affairs? Do we participate in local debates? If so, which ones and what are our criteria for involvement? Are we willing to take up formal roles and opportunities in the local community, such as school government, PCC, or even neighbourhood watch?

Behind these hard questions about our local involvement, there lie questions concerning our general conception of political power. Where do we see the appropriate extent and locus of political power. Who should wield 'the sword' and over what issues? How far should matters like hunting, smacking, sexual behaviour, or school curriculum design be left in the hands of individuals and how far should they be the concern of the state?

Those currently with political power are inevitably best placed to modify power structures in such a way as to foster political engagement. But to devolve genuine autonomy to a local level when we as individuals show little inclination to care about or participate in local affairs would be futile. A politically engaged nation requires structures which facilitate meaningful engagement and a population which is prepared to employ them.

Engaging with Politics Today: Safeguards

Britain can pride itself in having an effective set of checks and balances against political corruption, in spite of the cynicism which many people still feel towards Westminster. The ever-present issue of political donations has, for example,

plagued both Conservative and Labour administrations over the last decade and recent events have shown that all major donations to an incumbent party are now scrutinised by the press with extraordinary diligence.⁸⁹

Indeed, it had now reached a stage where any major commercial donor to the government is almost guaranteed to *suffer* as a consequence of their generosity, as any contract won in the wake of a donation, irrespective of the details, is likely to provoke a media outcry. The idea that wealthy individuals might want to donate money to a cause because they believe in it, rather than because they cynically think they will benefit from it, is sadly laughable.

And this itself points to a serious problem. The validity of the ‘watchdog principle’ is, in once sense, wholly ratified by the role of the prophets in the Old Testament, standing outside and often antagonising the official political structure. Yet the prophets had a specific and limited role and were themselves answerable to the Torah and, through that, to Yahweh himself.

In the manner of Israel’s prophets, the modern media constitute something of an extra-establishment critique, guarding their independence fiercely, and judging political interference as completely unacceptable. As with the prophets, the media see themselves as speaking for (what they deem to be) the ultimate authority and good within society, whether that is freedom of speech, personal liberty, economic freedom, or social justice. They hold the authorities to account with great vigour and claim an absolute commitment to the truth, irrespective of the consequences.

However, whilst the principle of this is commendable, the practice is somewhat different. As Onora O’Neill said in her 2002 Reith Lectures, the media are one of the only British institutions to have “managed to avoid not only the excessive but the sensible aspects of the revolutions in accountability and transparency.”⁹⁰ The need to critique power easily becomes blanket cynicism of all politics and politicians, a universal acid corroding through all political initiatives irrespective of their content.

This achieves nothing. Democracy still requires leadership. Politicians should be not disparaged simply because they are politicians. The watchdog principle, although sound in theory, as exercised by the media needs itself be scrutinised and should not be allowed to erode the very concept of authority. Political engagement suffers if we are all led to believe that all politics is corrupt.

As with issues of political structure, this is not simple ‘a matter for the authorities’. Whilst few of us will have the information and influence of a political correspondent, this should not deter us from exercising a ‘watchdog principle’ within our own lives, both locally and in the broader political arena. As individuals, we can try to evaluate policy decisions from a Biblical perspective, in a kind of prophetic role writ small, rather than simply advocating pragmatism or

acquiescing to the particular intellectual trend of the moment. We should be able to understand and critique prevailing values but do so in such a way that transcends mere criticism and offers a way forward. Any one individual’s capacity for this will, of course, be limited but commitment to a particular issue, such as fair trade, transport policy or sexual ethics, allows considerable scope for well-informed engagement. Single issue politics lends itself to the watchdog principle.

We can also ask questions of our local political circumstances. Are we aware of the policy decisions which affect our immediate environment? Are there local issues over which we would campaign? Are we aware of local proposals which might affect us and our environment adversely, and how would we address them if we were? How do we identify opportunities to express these opinions and evaluations in appropriate circumstances?

Political engagement is fostered, not simply by greater involvement in the existing process but also in broadening our concept of what political engagement is. This can be done by acting as our own safeguards in relevant situations but also, as we shall see below, by re-examining the values which underpin the political process today.

Engaging with Politics Today: Values

Whilst appropriate structures and safeguards are important for fostering political engagement, the values which underlie our attitudes and behaviour will always be the most critical element in addressing our modern sense of detachment.

We need to be aware of our political preconceptions. Political trends over the last two decades, combined with the prevalent consumerist mindset which tends to divide the world into consumers and providers, encourage us to see politics as a matter for ‘them’ and the political process as what ‘they’ can do for ‘us’. Reanimating local government will address this in part but there is an equally pressing need for us to broaden our concept of what politics is.

We should be aware that PTAs, PCCs, residents’ associations, and even neighbourhood watch schemes have a political aspect to them in as far as they influence local affairs. We need to be aware that where we shop and what we buy have political implications. Our power as consumers is very great and the manner in which we spend our money has numerous repercussions in the sphere which we would more readily recognise as political. The same goes for how we travel. The poison-chalice position of Transport Secretary is, ultimately, linked directly to when and where we choose to walk, drive, or take the train or bus.

Perhaps the most natural location for extended political engagement is the workplace. Given the average length the British working week (40 hours for full-time workers according to the Office for National Statistics), the capacity and

necessity for people to become ‘politically’ engaged at work is great. As with consumerism or mobility, the workplace doesn’t at first appear to be a political arena at all, and yet historically the Trades Union movement has been one of the most influential elements on the British political landscape. That has changed considerably over the last two decades but opportunities for workplace engagement via committees on employer–employee relations, policy formation, and even company strategy still exist and retain a strong political dimension.

We also need to examine our relationship with politicians. Do we implicitly see them as the official providers of a harmonious society or is our relationship with them more covenantal? What do we expect from them? Are we prepared for them to act in such a way as is not in our personal interest? Do we demand higher standards of probity from our politicians than we exhibit ourselves?

Examining our relationship with our politicians entails assessing our own identity. Do we see ourselves as consumers of the state or participants within it? Do we advocate pure altruism, enlightened self-interest or moral and civic responsibility? How far do we deem ourselves responsible for the consequences of the actions of our governments?

The same applies to our corporate identity. National festivals, the frequent retelling of the nation’s story, the personal assimilation of the Torah and the supreme command to know and love Yahweh did much to unify Israel as a nation and to counter any fragmentation fostered by decentralised power.

It is, of course, very important to scrutinise all nationalistic claims and expressions as they can often become vehicles for exclusion and prejudice, rather than identity and community. Nevertheless, the fact remains that a point of unification within a nation fosters a sense of belonging and participation in national life. The alternative of autonomous individualism or pluralism makes the political task of negotiating consensus solutions very difficult.

In Britain there is already considerable debate over which national symbols and stories are correct, which are important, and whether a sense of national unity is desirable in the first place. There is continual argument about the role of the monarch in British society, the much altered position of the established church, the death and re-evaluation of the British Empire, and the absence of any single codified constitution, each of which influences the national self-image.

To call for a national point of unification is not to demand intolerant uniformity or to impose absolute homogeneity where there is currently diversity and multiplicity. It is, instead, to recognise that interest in and commitment to the exercise of political power is naturally cultivated if individuals feel that their community – whether that is local, regional or national – is meaningful and relevant to them.

Overall, perhaps the single most important question to be asked of the values which underpin our political engagement is ‘what is our motivation?’ It is here that Jesus’ words to his disciples – “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” – are most pertinent. How far do we see the concept of servant leadership as applying to the political sphere, both in terms of others’ political leadership and our own engagement? Are we prepared to allow the needs of others take precedence over our own wants? Do we see power as affording us the opportunity to serve or be served?

Conclusion

Modern British disaffection with politics and politicians does nobody any good. The reasons behind it – electoral distance, post-ideological politics, the stain of political corruption, the consumer mentality – are deep rooted and do not lend themselves to an easy solution.

The growth of single interest groups and campaigns offers an antidote to mainstream disengagement and this should be welcomed but also treated with some caution. Single issue politics can easily become political consumerism, breeding short-termism and exclusivity, fostering the tyranny of the majority by ignoring issues too small to grab headlines, and fragmenting rather than unifying the population. We need mainstream political engagement which channels single interest passion to work for minorities, minor causes and the everyday problems which do not lend themselves to single issue campaigns. At the same time, we need to broaden our understanding of what politics is, shifting our gaze from Westminster or Brussels and recognising the local town, local church and local High Street as arenas for political engagement.

The Biblical understanding of political engagement advocates a multipolar approach, where power is grounded in the individual’s behaviour and government takes place at the most immediate level possible. It limits the power of any one individual, not least by placing all under the same law. It recognises power as belonging ultimately to God and holds not simply authorities but whole nations to account for the exercise of that power. But it also suggests the importance of an in-built flexibility whereby political structures or ideologies do not become idols themselves.

Supremely, it advocates a kenotic notion of power, humble, self-limiting and focused on the good of others rather than its own maintenance. This is a demanding command but it is coupled in the New Testament with the recognition that we cannot expect to achieve such self-sacrifice on our own strength alone.

Biblical teaching does not offer an easy or definitive solution to the problem of political disengagement. Indeed, this booklet will have done little more than highlight some of the important issues, formulate a Biblical perspective on them and suggest ways in which this perspective may be incorporated into the existing political process and individuals' lives. However, in combination with the Further Reading section below in which interested readers may pursue their concerns in greater detail, it is hoped that it will make some contribution to the process of reanimating politics in Britain today. ■

Notes

87 Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theory* (CUP, 1996), p. 27

88 A later booklet will deal with this issue in greater detail.

89 cf. Lakshmi Mittal, Paul Hamlyn, Bernie Ecclestone

90 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/>

Further Reading

Books

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10 Downing Street: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1.asp>

BBC: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/default.stm

Christians in Politics: <http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/>

Christian Socialist Movement: <http://www.christiansocialist.org.uk/>

Committee on Standards in Public Life: <http://www.public-standards.gov.uk/>

Conservative Christian Fellowship: <http://ccfwebsite.com/>

Electoral Commission: <http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/>

Liberal Democrat Christian Fellowship: <http://www.christianforum.libdems.org/>

Trades Union Congress: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/>

UK Parliament: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/>

About the Jubilee Centre

The Jubilee Centre was founded by Dr Michael Schluter in 1983 from a conviction that the Biblical social vision was relevant to the contemporary world.

This vision initially led the Jubilee Centre into a number of campaigning roles, in partnership with others, on such issues as Sunday trading, family life and credit & debt. It also led to the launch of The Relationships Foundation in 1994 to engage in practical initiatives to reform society on issues such as criminal justice, health, unemployment, business practice, and peace building.

Over recent years The Jubilee Centre's focus has shifted away from campaigning towards promoting a coherent social vision based on careful research that applies the biblical pattern to social, political and economic issues. It aims to share its work widely in order to equip Christians in the UK and overseas to engage more effectively in the transformation of society.

For further information about The Jubilee Centre's current projects, please contact:

Jubilee House, 3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ

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www.jubilee-centre.org

The Jubilee Centre also publishes the Cambridge Papers, a non-profit making quarterly which aims to contribute to debate on contemporary issues from a Christian perspective. Recent issues include discussion of cloning, taxation policy and multiculturalism. There is no subscription charge and if you wish to be added to the mailing list please contact Anne Gower at the above address or via email annegower@jubilee.centre.clara.net

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(Jubilee Centre, 2002) Nick Spencer

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(Jubilee Centre, 2001) Jonathan Burnside

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(Zondervan, 2000) Michael Schluter and the Cambridge Papers Group

£6.99 (+ £1.50 p&p)**

The R Factor

(Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) Michael Schluter and David Lee

£7.99 (+ £1.50 p&p)**

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