



CHRISTIAN INFLUENCE IN A SECULAR WORLD

Questions for Candidates: Northern Ireland Assembly Election 2011

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INTRODUCTION

An election to the Northern Ireland Assembly has been called for 5 May 2011. As Christian citizens we should think carefully about how to vote.

The Christian Institute is a registered charity and cannot endorse any political party or candidate in the Election. We cannot tell you who to vote for.

To help Christians find out the views of the people standing for election in their constituencies we have prepared a list of *Questions for Candidates*.

Additional copies of *Questions for Candidates* are available on our website christian.org.uk/nielection and from our office on request – telephone **0191 281 5664**.

Our nation has to have laws to restrain evil and policies to commend what is good (Romans 13:1-7), but governments are not responsible for everything. Indeed if there is to be democracy, they must not be. Many Christians are gravely concerned about legislative proposals which intrude into ordinary family life, evangelism and the running of the local church.

It is important to say that society is more than the state. Society is made up of families and many institutions and organisations between the state and the citizen. Government by itself cannot solve all our problems or even come remotely close.

The issues we have highlighted in the enclosed list of questions are those where we believe the Bible is clear. They tend to be issues where biblical principles, and in particular the Ten Commandments, directly apply. We cannot break God's law without there being consequences – to a degree in this life, and fully

in the life to come. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows (Galatians 6:7). A nation will never be blessed by breaking God's laws.

Christian citizenship

The state is a means of God's 'common grace'. The Bible is very clear that the governing authorities act on God's behalf to restrain evil (see Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2). This is for the good of all people in this world – not just Christians.

The Christian has dual citizenship of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and of an earthly nation (usually that in which he was born). The Christian's duty is to obey the governing authorities, except where they forbid what God requires, or require what God forbids (Acts 5:29). It is the Christian's heavenly citizenship which commands the ultimate loyalty.

As well as duties, being a citizen gives us certain liberties. The Apostle Paul was prepared both to use and not to use his liberties as a Roman Citizen depending on whichever option most benefited the gospel cause (Acts 16:37-39; 21:39; 22:25-29; 25:10-12).

For us in the United Kingdom in the 21st Century, we live in what is historically a relatively unusual situation – we live in a democracy. Unique responsibilities and privileges flow from living in a democracy. One is that we have the right to vote. Surely Christians should use this privilege.

Christians can exercise their vote and help influence the policies of the next Assembly. Christians also want to go much further. We want to say that discussions about our economy or the provision of public services must not ignore the massive spiritual and moral problems in our nation.

Christians in the UK today live in a collapsing culture in which God's moral law is openly flouted. Things will not get better unless this is

addressed. The only lasting and real solution to the problem of man's sin is uniquely provided in the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel denies that there can ever be political salvation in this life. Nevertheless, we are to pray that our authorities would provide freedom for the Gospel and freedom for Christians to live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1 Timothy 2:1-2). We are to pray that the governing authorities will fulfil their God-given mandate and govern according to God's moral law (Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-14). The Assembly Election provides an opportunity for Christians to speak out and play their part.

Biblical priorities

The Bible gives a clear basis for knowing right from wrong. God's moral law is laid down for everyone – not just for Christians.

The Lord Jesus criticised the Pharisees and told them that they had "omitted the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23), namely justice, mercy and faithfulness. This included setting aside the commands of God by neglecting their parents (when they needed financial support) in order to observe a man-made tradition (Mark 7:9-12). For Jesus Christ, and for us, it is God's commands that tell us what constitutes justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Whilst we are obligated to obey God in everything, certain parts of the moral law are absolutely fundamental. That is why God has been pleased to give us the Ten Commandments.

When it comes to votes in the Assembly, there are cases where MLAs vote for or against what is taught in the Commandments. For example, a vote for abortion is a vote to break the 6th Commandment (Exodus 20:13). Similarly it is a breach of the 7th Commandment (Exodus 20:14) to promote homosexuality to young people in schools or to equate homosexual unions to marriage.

These are not matters of political opinion, but straightforward issues of right or wrong.

Debates about water charges, free medical prescriptions, or renewable energy can all involve a moral component. But from a biblical perspective these issues can never be as important as a debate on whether euthanasia should be legalised. After the election there is time enough to debate all these matters, but during an election we have to decide how to vote. This necessarily involves weighing up what is most important.

Speaking to candidates

Candidates or their representatives may come to your door or call by telephone or stop you in the street to ask how you intend to vote. This presents an ideal opportunity to raise Christian concerns and to find out where the candidates stand on key issues. The candidate's opinions on certain moral issues can be quite different from the position of the party.

More than at any other time the candidates and the sitting MLAs will be open to listen to your views. Should they be elected they will be representing you in the Assembly.

Think through two or three issues and have questions ready in case canvassers call or stop you whilst out shopping. Limit yourself to two or three issues with which you are most concerned. Be prepared to give a reason for your view. The *Questions for Candidates* will help you get to grips with the issues you are interested in.

If you speak to the candidates themselves, ask if they are willing to raise your concerns in Assembly if elected. If they say that they will, you can hold them to their promise should they be elected.

If you speak to a representative canvassing on behalf of the candidate, ask for your concerns to be forwarded. The very act of asking questions is a Christian witness.

Writing to your candidates

If you don't want to wait for candidates to knock at your door, then you could write to the candidates either by letter or by email in order to raise your concerns. This way you can be sure that all the candidates are aware of your concerns.

Election literature which is put through your letterbox will give the local addresses for your

candidates. If you write to a candidate, keep your letter short but do raise specific points. Make sure you tell them you are a constituent. You could swap notes with other Christian friends who have had contact with a candidate.

There are many ways of being a Christian citizen, but an election provides a good opportunity to be salt and light in our society. Christians must pray for wisdom, weigh the evidence and exercise their Christian conscience.

Questions

1. SUNDAY TRADING

Sunday trading was legalised in 1997 when the Shops (Sunday Trading &c) (Northern Ireland) Order allowed large stores to open for five hours of unregulated trading every Sunday. Since then some large retail firms have argued that the remaining restrictions on Sunday trading should be removed. They want to be able to open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Earlier this year the Department for Social Development issued a public consultation which called the current law in Northern Ireland into question and presented a number of options for change, including the total deregulation of Sunday trading in Northern Ireland.¹

Additional deregulation would further undermine Sunday as a day of rest. There are concerns over the disturbance for local residents and local religious services that would be caused by noise and traffic. It would also put further pressure on workers to work on Sundays. Employee protections in the legislation have proved to be weak. The day of rest was instituted by God at creation (Genesis 2:2) and affirmed in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11). It is of value to all men.

QUESTION: Are you in favour of liberalising the law on Sunday trading?

2. DIVORCE

In 2002 the Northern Ireland Executive at that time brought forward plans to make divorce easier and quicker. The Family Law (Divorce etc.) Bill proposed to slash the period needed to obtain a divorce from 5 years to 3 years.² This would have reduced the time available for reconciliation. The Bill would also have watered down the requirement for both parties to appear in court before a judge.³ In England and Wales divorces can be conducted by post, like applying for a passport. It is far easier to make false claims by this method and it would undoubtedly encourage more divorces.

The Bill proposed to abolish adultery and desertion as specific grounds for divorce, thereby leaving 'unreasonable behaviour' as the only fault ground.⁴ Under the proposals someone could no longer request a divorce on the specific ground of adultery, but would be forced to use a catch-all ground which would equate adultery with more trivial behaviour.

Thankfully the Family Law (Divorce

etc.) Bill was shelved when the Assembly was suspended in 2002, and has not been reconsidered to date.

QUESTION: Do you believe the law on divorce is too lax, too restrictive, or about right?

3. PARENTAL SMACKING

The Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 changed the law on smacking to parallel a new law in England and Wales passed in 2004. Under this legislation any smack that causes reddening of the skin that is 'more than transitory' could potentially result in a prison sentence.

In 2009 the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner took an unsuccessful case to the Court of Appeal in an attempt to impose a total ban on smacking in the Province. This campaign cost the taxpayer over £200,000 in total.⁵ The Children's Commissioner also stated in the media that parents who smack their children are like child abusers.⁶

The children's rights groups NSPCC and Barnardo's are also calling for a total ban on smacking in Northern Ireland.⁷ A ban on smacking would criminalise loving parents.

QUESTION: Do you believe parents should be banned from smacking their children?

4. ADOPTION

Under the Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 only single persons or married couples can adopt children. The law on adoption in Northern Ireland is currently under review.⁸

In 2006 the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety launched a public consultation advocating that homosexual couples and unmarried heterosexual couples

should be granted rights to jointly adopt children. 95% of respondents to the public consultation opposed this proposal, but the Department continued to recommend this measure.⁹ The children's rights groups NSPCC and Barnardo's both support the rights of homosexual couples to jointly adopt children.¹⁰

QUESTION: Do you think homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children?

5. CHARITABLE STATUS FOR CHRISTIAN GROUPS

The Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 established a Charity Commission to regulate the work of charities, including churches and missionary societies. Draft guidance published by the Commission in 2009 included some alarming proposals. It argued that if the membership policy of a church was not 'sufficiently open' according to officials at the Commission, then that church could have its charitable status removed.¹¹ The draft guidance also stated that organisations whose activities cause 'friction' with other groups in society could be deregistered.¹² Although that may sound sensible, the term friction was left undefined and there was a danger that, for example, a missionary organisation evangelising Muslims could be alleged to be causing 'friction' with the Islamic community.

In February the Northern Ireland Executive agreed that the Charities Act should be amended to remove the problematic wording that had enabled the Commission to put forward some of these proposals. Executive members also agreed that additional measures should be incorporated to protect the status of churches and religious charities.¹³ The amendments to the Charities Act are due to be considered by MLAs after the election.

QUESTION: Do you back a change in the law to protect the charitable status of churches and faith-based organisations?

6. HOMOSEXUAL MARRIAGE

Tony Blair's Labour Government introduced civil partnerships throughout the UK in 2005, but stopped short of introducing full same-sex marriage. Civil partnerships give homosexuals all the legal rights and privileges of marriage, but it is a separate scheme and those registering do not get a marriage certificate.

Campaigners say that civil partnerships are not enough. The coalition Government at Westminster has already bowed to pressure and is 'formally looking' at redefining marriage so that same-sex couples can get married. Homosexual activists in Scotland have detailed plans to push the Scottish Parliament to act. Like Holyrood, the Northern Ireland Assembly has the power to legalise homosexual marriage.

Redefining marriage would be a profound legal change with reverberations throughout society, including implications for what children are taught in schools.

QUESTION: Are you in favour of changing the definition of marriage so homosexual couples can get married?

7. ABORTION

Abortion is illegal in Northern Ireland, although under case law it may be performed where a mother's life is in danger. In England, Scotland and Wales abortion was legalised in 1967 and since that year over 7 million abortions have been carried out on the UK mainland.¹⁴ Over 200,000 abortions are now carried out annually in Great Britain.¹⁵ During the passage of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act in

2008, a small group of English and Scottish MPs attempted to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland, but this proved unsuccessful.¹⁶ Since the devolution of policing and justice, responsibility for abortion law has become the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is currently preparing guidelines on abortion law in Northern Ireland.

QUESTION: Do you believe the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is too lax, too restrictive, or about right?

8. EUTHANASIA

Many people are concerned that the Mental Capacity Act 2005 for England and Wales allows euthanasia by omission (e.g. by withdrawing food and water). The Act does not formally legalise euthanasia but creates 'advance decisions' – known as 'living wills' – which could open the door to euthanasia.

An inquest held in 2009 found that a self-harm patient carrying an 'advance decision' died after doctors refused to treat her, leading to calls for a review of the law.¹⁷ The then Health Secretary at Westminster, Andy Burnham, said the case took the law into "new territory" that he did not believe had been intended by Parliament and suggested Parliament may want to revisit the issue.¹⁸

Euthanasia by acts of commission (e.g. by administering a lethal injection) is illegal in the UK, as is assisting someone to commit suicide. However, pro-euthanasia campaigners have made repeated attempts to change the law in these areas. In 2006, Lord Joffe's Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill, which would have legalised some forms of euthanasia, was rejected by the House of Lords. Margo MacDonald's End of Life Assistance (Scotland)

Bill 2010 would have legalised euthanasia in Scotland but it was resoundingly rejected by the Scottish Parliament.

Following the devolution of policing and justice, responsibility for this area of law now falls within the remit of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

QUESTION: Do you believe assisted suicide or euthanasia should be legalised?

9. GAMBLING

An Executive survey carried out in Northern Ireland in 2009 found that one in 50 adults in the Province has a gambling problem. This is four times higher than on the UK mainland,¹⁹ even though gambling legislation in Northern Ireland is more carefully regulated than in the rest of the UK (see the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985).

The Minister for Social Development has recently launched a public consultation in which he has unveiled a number of proposals to liberalise the gambling laws, including allowing an increase in the stakes and prizes permitted.²⁰ The consultation document also proposes to allow bookmakers and bingo clubs to open on Sundays.²¹

QUESTION: Do you believe the laws on gambling should be liberalised?

10. FREEDOM OF SPEECH

In recent years some Christians in England and Scotland have found themselves opposed by local councils or investigated by police following complaints about their open-air outreach. Public policy can either allow or restrict freedom to share the gospel. Hate

speech legislation has great capacity to interfere with our evangelism. People today have little concept of sin. Consequently they feel no need for a saviour. Gospel preaching involves declaring prevalent sins to be sins and calling people to repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness. This is what the Apostle Paul does in 1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5 and Ephesians 5. If it were to become unlawful to say homosexual practice is sinful, this would affect our freedom to talk about the one who can forgive that sin.

In April 2010 Dale Mcalpine, an open-air evangelist from Workington in Cumbria, was arrested after a conversation with a Police Community Support Officer in which he explained that the Bible calls homosexual practice a sin. Charges against Mr Mcalpine were later dropped and Cumbria Police eventually acknowledged that they had wrongfully arrested and unlawfully imprisoned Mr Mcalpine.

In December 2010 Birmingham County Court ruled that West Midlands Police had acted unlawfully when they arrested and detained street preacher Anthony Rollins. Mr Rollins had been preaching in Birmingham city centre and in the course of his sermon stated that homosexual practice is sinful. A passer-by dialled 999 and called the police. Two officers arrived and arrested Mr Rollins without further inquiry. Handcuffs were placed on Mr Rollins even though he was calm and compliant.

QUESTION: Should it be a crime to say homosexual practice is sinful?

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Questions

1. **Are you in favour of liberalising the law on Sunday trading?**
 2. **Do you believe the law on divorce is too lax, too restrictive, or about right?**
 3. **Do you believe parents should be banned from smacking their children?**
 4. **Do you think homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children?**
 5. **Do you back a change in the law to protect the charitable status of churches and faith-based organisations?**
 6. **Are you in favour of changing the definition of marriage so homosexual couples can get married?**
 7. **Do you believe the law on abortion in Northern Ireland is too lax, too restrictive, or about right?**
 8. **Do you believe assisted suicide or euthanasia should be legalised?**
 9. **Do you believe the laws on gambling should be liberalised?**
 10. **Should it be a crime to say homosexual practice is sinful?**
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