

Focus

MAGAZINE

What's
the big
picture?



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What's the big picture?

Of all the literature that gets handed out over the next couple of weeks, beyond any measure of doubt, this item is different. Between the covers there's not the slightest endorsement of a political party, nor a political philosophy, and certainly not a verdict on the merits of Brexit or Remain.

Instead, take a step back from the noise and heat of the campaign. Unlike a certain political spin doctor who once said, 'We don't do God', *Focus* writers unapologetically do.

We begin and end and do much of the in-between reflecting on that moment in the ballot box. Where do we put that cross? Can a God perspective help us decide? From this insight we share our musings. We even try to imagine how Jesus Christ would vote. . . . What is the big picture?

Whatever the issues concerning our own UK election, it's fair to say that the world is a little unsettled at present. What used to be the established order appears to be gone? Sure, and there's nothing wrong with the world changing. Thirty years ago the Berlin wall fell, bringing with it hope that the 'swords into ploughshares' dream could actually come true. But, after 9/11, hope once again turned to fear.

Take, for example, the current outbreak of civil unrest on several different continents. People are angry, with Bolivia, Catalonia, Chile, Hong Kong and Iraq reaching boiling point. Civil disorder is nothing new, but what is new is that the people who are angry are university-educated youth who have little hope of finding a job. Even those with jobs and successful careers in our times seem to have more fear than hope. Looming over us is the question of whether Planet Earth will be fit for our children to inhabit.

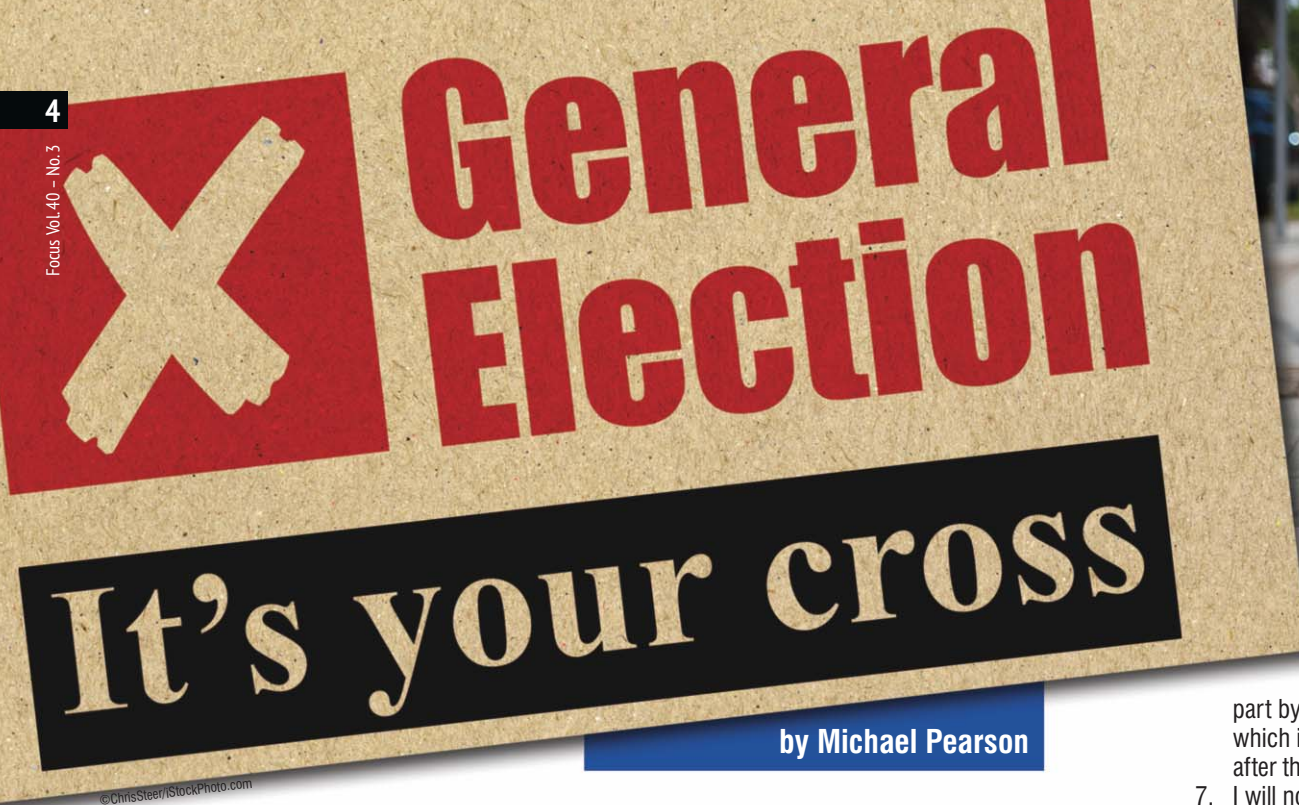
More likely than not, you're reading *Focus* because of a friend who is a Seventh-day Adventist. You might have noticed by now that Adventists, in the main, are pretty cheerful and hope-filled people. They seem to have a buoyancy and optimism about the future that seems as far removed from fear as you can get. And, sure enough, they do God.

It's not usual in this column for the editor to thank the contributors for their incisive reflections. But, in this case, I need to do just that, as well as thanking my friend and colleague who said, 'Go for it!' It's been a fast turn-around from idea to what you have in your hands.

Boil the kettle, pour the brew into your cup, sit down – and for a few moments enjoy what I think you'll find to be a most interesting read.

Focus – turning everyday conversation into Good News.

David Neal, Editor



by Michael Pearson

We are in the midst of a fiercely fought election campaign. It is more controversial and complex than most in living memory, and it will probably be more significant than most for the future of our country. That means you and me and our children. As we are bombarded with messages from all directions, I have set myself some rules for getting through the next weeks as an ordinary voter:

1. I will use my right to vote. It has been hard-won over very many years by courageous people. I cannot blame other people for the outcome of the election when I have backed out of my responsibility.
2. I cannot remain outside of politics even if I wish to. I am part of the 'polis', my society. If I am silent or oblivious to all that is going on, I am still politically active. 'All that is necessary for evil to triumph is that good men keep quiet' – a sentence repeated by many over the last couple of centuries, and

still true. So I will not be, cannot be, passive.

3. I will resist the temptation to say: 'My vote will not make a difference.' My silence would make a difference. It would help one of the candidates. This is one of the most unpredictable elections in memory, and every vote will indeed count. Some majorities will be very small.
4. I will resist the temptation to say: 'All politicians are as bad as one another.' That is just lazy thinking. It is true that a few of them may be driven purely by self-interest: but many of them are truly dedicated to public service. They work hard and run the risk of personal abuse, either digital or physical.
5. I will not fall into the trap of saying that all the political difficulties in which we find ourselves are the fault of the people in Westminster. Of course, they have played their significant part: but the media create an appetite for political drama and oversimplified messages – they boost viewing



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figures, website hits, Twitter and Instagram traffic.

6. And I will not forget that I have played my very small part by handing the politicians a problem which is almost impossible to resolve, even after three years and more.
7. I will not be sucked into conspiracy theories which will multiply on the internet during the election. Nor will I satisfy myself with short sound-bites or brief and sensational headlines. They are not enough for me to form a clear opinion.
8. I will retain a healthy scepticism about all the promises being made to make life better. I will do my best to check things out by reading material which comes from other sites or other parties, not least those whose viewpoint may differ from my own. I cannot afford to say: 'I can't be bothered.'
9. I will beware of so-called strong men who tell me that if I follow them all will be well.
10. In any conversations during the election I will not allow myself to become angry with those I disagree with. And I will not simply blame others for all the difficulties. I am involved in this, like it or not.
11. I will have in the forefront of my mind the interests of the poorer people in our country – those living on very low wages, the unemployed, those dependent on NHS and community support, those

disadvantaged in so many ways. I will not vote simply in line with what will most benefit me.

12. I will not vote simply on economic issues or matters of power. There are other things at stake here. There are important freedoms of expression to be defended. There are the forces of violence to be resisted. There are serious matters of environmental protection. There are real questions about what kind of country we want to be, and about whom we will welcome to our country from outside.
13. I will try to be sympathetic and generous in my attitudes and opinions. I will try not to be naïve, but neither will I allow cynicism to take over.
14. I will not forget in all this that I am a follower of Jesus, who said that He was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life'. I will listen carefully for the authentic voice, for the honest candidate amid all the noise. I will remember that Jesus did say that the way to life is narrow.

I do not know where such considerations will lead you to put your cross. I can see that I am working with fine margins. I am still waiting, watching, thinking. I live in a constituency where the options are less than perfect. I will go to hear the local candidates speak. I will vote. It is the least I can do.

I am tired of fighting and division

by Ian Sweeney

As one who loves watching nature programmes, I am ever fascinated by the mating rituals among certain kinds of animals. Peacocks, for example, engage in elaborate and flashy displays of their brilliant tail feathers.¹ Male lions, on the other hand, are cast out of the pride upon reaching sexual maturity, and must live on their own until they are strong enough and brave enough to fight and defeat another pride leader lion.

With another election looming for the UK, all of the political parties are engaged in seeking to win the support of the electorate. As in the animal kingdom, political parties will engage the tactics of both a peacock and a lion.

In being a peacock, parties will display their prominent 'feathers', or policies.

They will seek to attract our votes with attractive policies regarding taxation,

Brexit, immigration, social care funding, NHS funding, law and order, transport, etc. This is all done in the hope that the electorate will be won over by their display and promises, and give them the required vote.

And, as with lions, politics can be brutal, as each party is prepared to fight for leadership. Each party will sink its teeth into the promises and plans of the opposition. Disparaging remarks, comments and ridicule are some of the ways the political parties will go on the attack. This is now the ingrained nature of political parties to such an extent that, when Parliament sits following the election, the prime minister's question time will be a bear pit of shouts, jeers and mocking cries.

If anybody thought that politics was just to be observed on the television from the comfort of our sofa, the recent Brexit referendum put paid to that. In the aftermath of the June 2016 European referendum, it is now seen that politics has the power to divide families. The counselling service, Relate, said that a fifth of its clients admitted that couples were experiencing rifts and fights as they debated the EU referendum result.²

I am tired of fighting and division.

In the approach to Christmas, many take comfort in the words of the angels who sang to herald the birth of Jesus, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' (Luke 2:14, KJV.)

With a general election in the Christmas season, peace and good will are likely to be sadly lacking in the arena of UK politics.

Yet, while I am tired of fighting and division, it is something that, as a follower of Jesus, I should not be surprised over.

Jesus is recorded as making the following statement: 'Do you suppose that I came to bring peace to the world? No, not peace, but division. From now on a family of five will be divided, three against two and two against three.' (Luke 12:51, 52, GNB.)

Oh dear – this sounds like the EU referendum!

Why all the hate and division?

The record of Jesus' life is that He healed people (for example, Luke 5:12, 13), cared for

the interests of the most vulnerable in society (Luke 7:11-17), gave equal opportunities in employment (Luke 8:1-3), had a feeding programme for the hungry (Luke 9:10-17), promoted racial equality (Luke 10:25-37) and was respectful and dignified to both the rich (Luke 19:1-10) and the poor (Luke 21:1-4), but, for all of this, Jesus was hated.

The actions of Jesus were a rebuke to those who lived self-serving lives.

It was not that Jesus sought to be divisive, but He knew that people who were only interested in maintaining their power and influence would feel undermined by His actions, which were denunciations of injustice and wrongdoing.

Jesus knew that peace will always be disturbed or lacking by those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

However, not only were Jesus' actions a rebuke, but He spoke about it too. He was hated because He spoke truth to power. Jesus was not too frightened or intimidated to confront the hypocrisy of leaders who would say one thing, but do another (Luke 11:37-54).

And yet, despite all of this hatred towards Him, Jesus cared for His opponents and was supremely interested in winning over those who hated Him passionately. In fact, He gave up His life for those who just wanted to kill Him. And, while His enemies rejoiced, in the closing moments of Jesus' life, that they had been successful in finally eliminating their opponent, Jesus still had time and affection for them, and so prayed on their behalf, 'Forgive them, Father! They don't know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34, GNB.)

Jesus was not a peacock trying to show how beautiful it is; nor was He a lion trying to fight its way to supremacy. He was a Lamb, prepared to give up His life for the greater benefit of all humankind.

While I am undecided as to which political party will get my vote, I know that Jesus is deserving of my vote, every single day.

¹<https://sciencing.com/peacocks-mate-4565678.html>

²<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-anxieties-issue-troubled-couples-relationship-counsellors-experts-a7500876.html>

Brexit strategy:



head in the sand

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I thought I was struggling with Brexit apathy. You don't need me to tell you the whole thing has been going on for far too long, brings seemingly unsolvable conundrums to the table and has been a political nightmare that has resulted in the demise of two prime ministers' careers . . . so far. But I have become aware that what I am feeling is not apathy. Apathy is about not caring, lacking interest and not being emotionally invested. But that is not how I feel as I watch our country undergo a process that comes across as more challenging than trying to take Earth out of the Solar System (would we call that 'plexit'?) No – with a bit of self-awareness kicking in, I realise I have sort of

by Adrian Peck

been putting my head in the sand. The consequences for the country, for my personal finances, even for the simple things like the supply of basic pharmaceuticals, are reported as being so disastrous by some that it is all too stressful to contemplate at times; so back into the sand the head goes.

You can probably tell that I occasionally remove my head from its haven of unknowingness and, through squinting eyes, try and keep up without being overwhelmed by esoteric parliamentary procedures. But then

down it goes before it all becomes too much again. You see, I *am* emotionally invested in what happens; I do care; and, of course, I am interested. My approach is partly driven, perhaps, by fear of the unknown. The rest of the world are looking on; their heads, not deposited in sand, are generally shaking in disbelief. Part of my own head-in-sand approach has been to switch my focus and follow US politics, because I can be pretty much detached from events on the other side of the Atlantic and I can enjoy shaking my head in disbelief at what is going on there. But then I came across a headline on CNN, a US website, that reads, 'What's happening with Brexit? Seriously . . . no one really knows',¹ and there, flooding back, come those concerns.

But, with a little bit more reflection, I am conscious that this is not the whole story. You

see, I am a Christian, so that brings with it a different perspective on things. The metaphor I am using, head in sand, is actually not quite accurate. It is not sand that surrounds me, but life. I am getting on with the things that I can affect and trying not to worry about things over which I have no influence . . . except maybe in a small way at the ballot box on 12 December. There are still day-to-day tasks to complete, people to help, folks to talk to, the bin still needs putting out on Tuesday mornings; life still goes on. And the big stuff?

In Isaiah 46 the prophet by the same name is talking on behalf of God to His people at a time when they are experiencing very arguably more upheaval than we have now. Where the headlines scream that no one knows what is going to occur, God says, 'Only I can tell you the future before it even happens' (Isaiah

46:10a, NLT). Reassurance is to be had by remembering 'things I [God] have done in the past' (Isaiah 46:9). Hope for future prospects comes with the assurance that 'everything I [God] plan will come to pass' (Isaiah 46:10b).

The thing is, I can get on with living, with influencing where I can influence, knowing that God is taking care of that big stuff. At times, does this seem far-fetched? I prefer to think of it as being far-sighted. The Bible tells a huge story whose ending is that God's plan will come to pass, and that all this trouble, turmoil and tragedy we are experiencing will come to an end. It may not seem that way now, but I can trust God to make it happen.

So I need a new metaphor. Not head in the sand, then. Not even head in the sky. Perhaps eyes on the prize?

¹<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/16/uk/whats-going-on-on-with-brexit-intl-gbr/index.html>



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Politics, people and kindness

by David Wright

The word 'politics' seems to be one of those multifaceted, 'quicksilver' terms that produce different reactions from different people. When most people talk about politics, though, they are usually thinking about the everyday things that matter to them – about the kind of society they want to live in. They expect their politicians to be working to change things for the better, not adding to the current divisions, intolerance and violence that we see growing in our communities.

Perhaps, then, you agreed with Archbishop Justin Welby when he recently spoke out against the dangers of the increasing parliamentary use of 'careless comments' and 'inflammatory language' by our politicians. He said that action was needed to heal divisions **'at almost every level of society, including the political level'**, and then added, **'I don't**

only blame [the] Government; I think we are all quite broken.'¹

This year I sat in a field in the middle of Oxfordshire for three days – but not on my own. There were 20,000 other people there listening to the live music too. What struck me at this year's festival, however, compared to previous ones, was the number of artists putting forward a possible solution for society's brokenness – they were suggesting it was time for everyone to show greater kindness towards each other. One headline band drew a standing ovation with a song called **'Be more kind'** – its opening lyric proposing, **'In a world that has decided it's going to lose its mind, be more kind, my friends, try to be more kind.'**² The lead singer explained he'd written the song after reading a poem by the Australian writer Clive James, just

before he died, who admitted, **'I should have been more kind. It is my fate to find this out, but find it out too late.'**³

Someone once said, **'Kindness is love's readiness to enhance the life of another person.'** It seems that Clive James regretted discovering this too late in his life.

Christians believe that God is a God of kindness – and that it was God's kindness that led Him to send His Son, Jesus. **'When the kindness and love of God our Saviour was revealed, he saved us. It was not because of any good deeds that we ourselves had done, but because of his own mercy. . . . God poured out the Holy Spirit abundantly on us through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that by his grace we might be put right with God and come into possession of the eternal life we hope for. . . . I want you to give special**

emphasis to these matters, so that those who believe in God may be concerned with giving their time to doing good deeds, which are good and useful for everyone.'⁴

This instruction to show kindness to others asks **'that we spend our time looking not at ourselves and our needs, our rights, our wrongs-that-need-righting, but at everyone else and their needs, pressures, pains, and joys'**.⁵

If God has shown kindness to us, then, as recipients of this undeserved grace, we are expected to reflect that grace to others – so they too can be bowled over – be taken aback – and be stunned – by having unexpected kindness shown to them.

At the end of the Good Samaritan story, Jesus asks the lawyer this question: **'In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a**



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neighbour towards the man attacked by the robbers?' When the lawyer replies, 'The one who was kind to him,' Jesus tells him, 'Go, then, and do the same.'¹⁶

Back in the sixth century BC, a Bulgarian slave living on the Greek island of Samos wrote a story about a mouse helping a lion. His name was Aesop and his simple message was: 'No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.'

The Body Shop founder, Anita Ruddick,⁷ once wondered what the world would look like if politicians were all required to be kind.⁷ Perhaps the better question is this – what would our society look like if we **all** acted with more kindness towards others?

¹The Telegraph, 27/10/19

²Frank Turner and the Sleeping Souls

³Clive James, *Leçons De Ténèbres*, 2013

⁴Titus 3:4-8, Good News Bible

⁵Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 2007

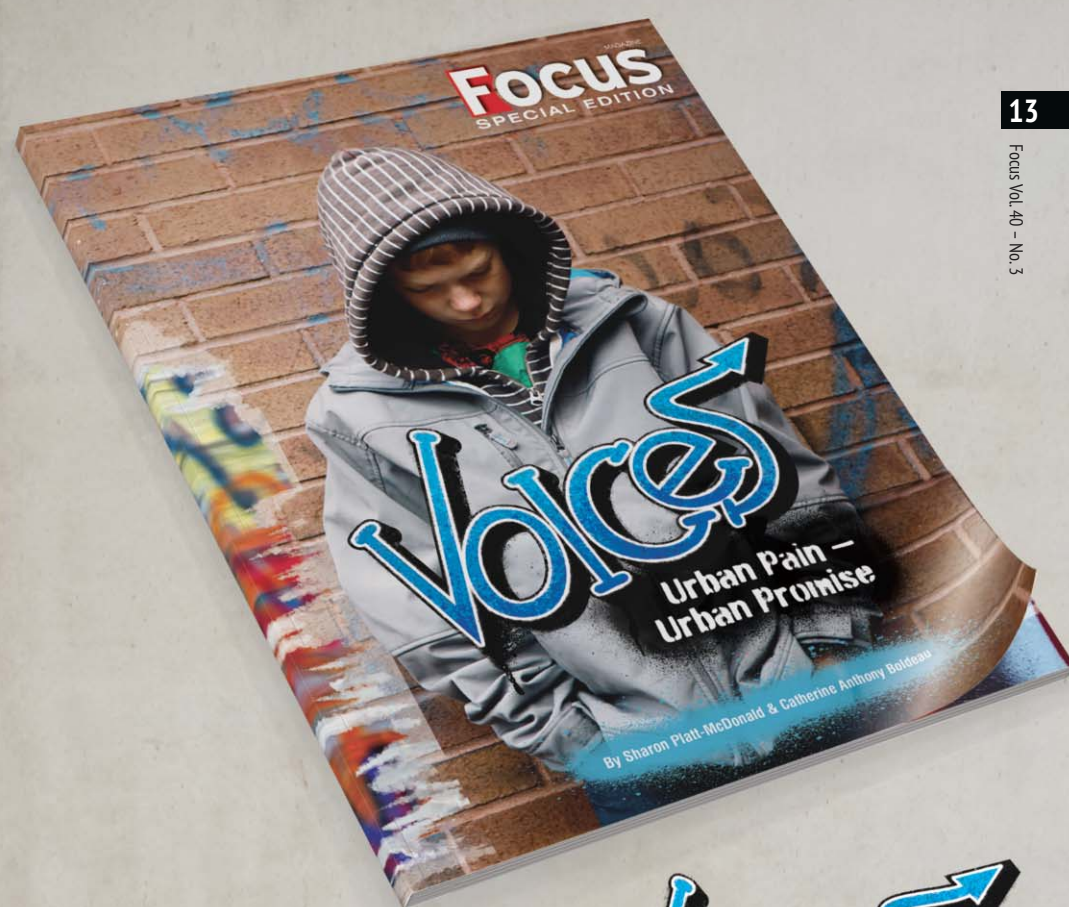
⁶Luke 10:36, 37, Good News Bible

⁷Anita Ruddick, *A Revolution of Kindness*, 2003

'No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.'



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PARLIAMENT: WHAT NEXT?

CITY OF LONDON

Putting thought behind the vote



by Victor Hulbert

'I don't know who to vote for! They are all as bad as each other! I don't think I'll bother.' Have you heard those words recently? Maybe you've said something similar yourself.

Britain is probably at its most divided for a generation. Issues on our relationship to Europe, to each other, and to the environment appear to dominate the conversation. Since Parliament cannot make up its mind, the choice is now up to you! Your vote counts!

Ian Sweeney believes that, as a Christian,

your vote can make a difference. I would never advise someone which party they should vote for, but I would suggest that they look at policies in the light of the practical social advice given by the Old Testament prophet Micah: 'He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?' (Micah 6:8, NKJV.)

In effect, this means that mine should not be a selfish vote. It is not 'what is best for me', but more, 'what is best for those around me'. It also means I need to look positively towards that which, in today's high-pressure environment, is often seen negatively.

Matt Haig wrote *Reasons to Stay Alive* following a major fight with depression. At age 24 his world caved in. He is a novelist, and so he used his often witty and engaging writing as a way to help him towards seeing light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

We now desperately need light at the end of the political tunnel. To do that, we perhaps need to take note of Haig's advice to look at the world in a very different way.

'The world is increasingly designed to depress us,' he writes. 'Happiness isn't very good for the economy. If we were happy with what we had, why would we need more? How do you sell an anti-ageing moisturiser? You make someone worry about ageing. How do you get people to vote for a political party? You make them worry about immigration. How do you get them to buy insurance? By making them worry about everything. . . .'

He argues that our best choice is to resist those pressures – to be calm almost as a revolutionary act; to be happy even if things are not perfect.

I've seen that in practice in my local town's Facebook group. There are those who complain about rubbish in the street, bad drivers, rude teenagers and bad service. They depress me. I've even suggested that rather than complaining about litter, why don't we just

make an effort and pick some up?

Then there are those who write to talk about the kind lady who paid for an old man's shopping when he forgot his wallet, the teens who helped search for a lost dog, the man who spontaneously stopped his car to help a lady struggling to change a car tyre. Those stories keep me attached to the group.

What does that mean for me at election time? I'm not looking for the perfect party or perfect candidate – but I am optimistically looking for the best.

I am actively checking out who is standing as a candidate where I live. What do they stand for? What are their values? Will they make a difference?

While there undoubtedly are bad eggs in the political basket, I choose to believe that most people go into politics for the right reasons. They want to make the world a better place. If my one, single, simple vote can help someone do that, then it is a vote worth casting.

I've chosen to engage with my local MP over the past four years. I've written him letters challenging or complimenting his views on major issues. I've commended him when he voted against his party whip on something that I felt was important. I didn't really like him when he was first elected, but he has grown on me – grown due to engagement and understanding. I will have a different MP in a few weeks' time. I plan to engage with them as well. They are MY representative, so I will want them to know my views.

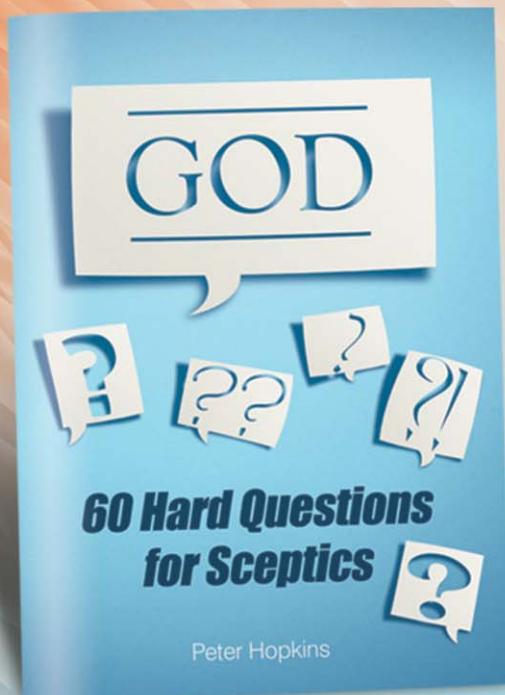
If a candidate knocks on my door, I will engage. If they win the vote, I'll engage further. My simple vote at the ballot box may indeed be the catalyst for positive change.

Finally, as I consider what choice I will make on 12 December, I remember the words of Paul to Timothy: 'I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.' (1 Timothy 2:1, 2, NIV.)

Perhaps more time in prayer and less in protest and complaint might also help me decide my vote.

How does a Christian respond when their faith is challenged?

By asking a question!



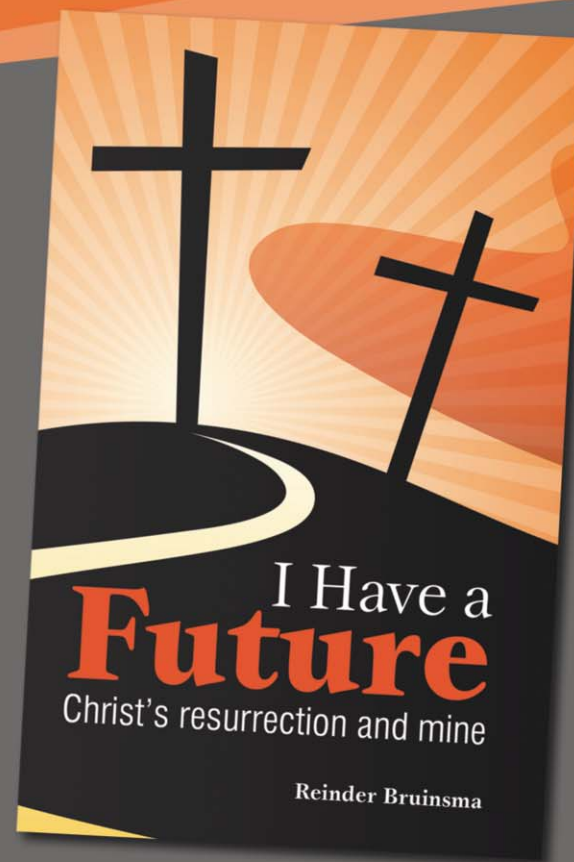
Challenging the challenger helps to open up the issue and keep conversation going. It's a method Jesus used in His ministry.

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I used to be a 'prophet'; now I'm happy just being a follower of Jesus.

My career as a 'prophet' started in September 2006 when I began reading for a degree in Political Science at the University of Nottingham. In addition to learning about world history, law, philosophy, and geopolitics, I quickly discovered that a large part of the 'science' of politics involved analysing data, developing opinions, and making predictions. While data analysis and the ability to formulate factual opinions are essential, the primary value of political science lies in its capacity to predict and mitigate future outcomes. For example, by studying phenomena such as ethnic conflicts, political scientists have been able to develop predictive models that inform political actors on how to prevent such events from happening in the future. In theory, prediction in politics is a good thing; in practice, however, the Cambridge Analytica scandal has shown that the capacity to predict is also open to misinformation, misuse, and sometimes manipulation.

Ever since the announcement on 24 June 2016 that the UK had voted to leave the European Union, Christians, not unlike political scientists, have found themselves analysing the data, forming opinions and offering predictions as to what 'Brexit means Brexit' actually means. The difference, however, lies in the claim made by some Christians that the primary source from which their Brexit views come is not opinion polls, think-tanks, or 'discussions down the pub', but the Word of God: more specifically, Daniel 2:43, which reads, '... but they shall not

cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay' (KJV).

The relevance of Daniel 2:43 to Brexit comes primarily from the fact that, within several Protestant traditions, Daniel 2:43 is interpreted as a reference to the geographical region which today constitutes modern Europe. This has led some to take the view that Daniel's prophecy, '... they shall not cleave', places a burden on Christians to vote 'Leave' rather than 'Remain'.

So, does the reference 'not cleave' mean we ought to vote to leave? In short, no. While Daniel 2:43 does reference ongoing tensions, nowhere do we actually find the words 'Brexit', 'Vote Leave', or 'Vote Remain'. In fact, if we read on, we find that Daniel's prophecy culminates with a prediction as to the coming of God's eternal kingdom, a kingdom that is made 'without hands' (Daniel 2:44, 45, KJV): that is to say, without human effort. If God's coming kingdom will be established 'without hands', how can it then be claimed that the prophecy of Daniel 2:43 is asking Christians to vote one way or another? The establishment of God's kingdom does not depend on the vote of anyone, even the faithful! To suggest otherwise risks accusations of misinformation.

As you decide which party to choose in the upcoming general election, consider the implications your vote might have concerning Brexit. Think about the values that the Bible teaches, take a look at each political party, and honestly evaluate who you think will provide the healing and leadership our country needs at this time. Don't merely predict: pray about it and vote according to your conscience. The Brexit process has defied and frustrated the predictions of even the most seasoned political analysts, and the likelihood is that it will continue to do so. Trust, instead, that – regardless of the outcome – Jesus is in the process of setting up His kingdom, a kingdom that 'shall never be destroyed' (Daniel 2:44, KJV). Put your hope in Jesus, not in politics.

I used to be a 'prophet'; now I'm happy just being a follower of Jesus.



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Cups of tea with 'the other'

by Helen Pearson

Last year, I heard five words in a BBC documentary on the Foreign Office which made me sit up and take notice. The words were spoken by a leading civil servant in his briefing to a new ambassador. He was talking about diplomatic engagement with governments who may have poor records on human rights or the environment or some other issue that the British hold dear. Here are the chief diplomat's five words: 'Engagement does not imply approval.'

In the middle of a general election campaign, his words have come back to me as

I decide how to vote. It's at a crucial time for our country. I want to think through issues. I believe it's my duty to hear all points of view, especially those likely to be different from mine.

But how can I engage with talking to people who I already know are unlikely to share my outlook on life and my values? How can I talk to them without coming into destructive conflict? How might I navigate the unknown choppy waters of their views? I don't want to develop toxic relationships. Can I find a way to engage neutrally with those who differ from me

– without approving or disapproving?

I have learned that the most important thing to understand when engaging with people who think differently is that my difficulties are often based on anxiety. Perhaps I will be unable to hold on to my own ideas and values in the presence of someone who doesn't share them. Maybe I will get angry and betray my best self. Perhaps I fear some loss of identity when faced with the strong convictions of people who disagree with me. Perhaps engaging with them will draw me into being too easily persuaded and forsaking my own

values. Then who might I become?

But I'm not going to give up too easily. I still believe that, if we want to heal the divisions in our families, our communities and our country, and to develop the spirit of diplomacy of which our world is sorely in need, regular conversations with someone on a different 'side' are vital. I want to develop the art of talking to 'the other'.

Earlier this year, I met Jo Berry, who, with huge courage, has developed the skill of talking to someone who is 'other' in an extreme sense – the man who killed her politician father for ideological reasons. One of her recommendations was that we learn to have conversations over 'cups of tea with the other'.

Here are some strategies that might come in useful in such conversations. I wish I were better at following them!

1. Be curious. Expect to learn something.
2. Read – do some homework about the particular point of view that you disagree with. Find out what 'the other side' really believes and why.
3. Ask open questions, not closed ones. Give yourself and the other person room to explore ideas rather than come to conclusions.
4. Know who you are. Check out your own beliefs and assumptions, especially those that you hold with the most fervent certainty!
5. Watch your tone of voice. Recognise that holding definite views can make you sound superior. Dogmatism is one of the surest ways to destroy useful conversation (she said dogmatically!).
6. Be self-aware. Recognise that, even in your own holding of views, you are often inconsistent, even uncertain. Allow others to be the same.
7. See if you can write the view of the other person as if it were your own.
8. Step out from under the responsibility to 'persuade' the other person.
9. Share a joke – and learn to laugh at yourself.
10. Listen, listen and keep listening!

How would Jesus vote?

by Andrew Puckering

The WhatsApp message came from Mother at 8.43pm: 'General election December 12! X x'

Immediately, thoughts of staying up eagerly all night, 'swingometers', David Dimbleby of the BBC and Professor John Curtice of Strathclyde University raced through my mind.

I am very *positive* about political events. When Aristotle said that 'man is by nature a political animal', he was probably referring to me. Remembering that 'Brenda from Bristol' famously expressed disappointment at the news that there would be a 2017 general election, I suppose you could call me the 'Anti Brenda'.

However, much as I love political events, I am also a Christian. This means that, when agonising over where to put the 'X' on my ballot paper, I must also take into account whether my vote reflects my faith. It raises the intriguing question, *How would Jesus vote?*

'Not of this world'

Some Christians argue that Jesus wouldn't have voted at all. He famously told Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor before whom He had been put on trial: 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36, NKJV). When His opponents tried to pin Him down on the issue of taxation, He masterfully sidestepped their trap (Matthew 22:15-22). It is argued that to vote for a given political party is to be complicit in all the bad things they might do while in office, even to take personal responsibility for everything included in their manifesto – some of which might not fully reflect the values of Christ. We would not wish to sully ourselves, so the logic goes, with a political agenda that will inevitably be flawed.

On the other hand, other Christians point out that, like John the Baptist, Jesus was not afraid to address the real social grievances of His day, fearlessly denouncing injustice wherever He saw it. He recognised that, even though not of this world, His followers would, nevertheless, still need to live *in it* (John 17:14-16). We may also note that God's people in the Old Testament – specifically Daniel and his friends, as well as Mordecai and Esther – were sometimes very directly involved in politics, even with pagan administrations that oppressed their own people: and yet God was able to work in those situations through them. Finally, although Christ *disavowed His obligation* to pay taxes, He nevertheless tacitly *accepted the responsibility* to do so (Matthew 17:24-27); and, indeed, we His followers are encouraged to give our political

overlords all due deference (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). From this we may infer that fulfilling our societal obligations at the ballot box is not inherently antithetical to the Gospel.

His values

Having said all that, assuming that Jesus would vote at all, which political party might He support? Well, a lot of that would depend on the policies they promote. Take the environment, for example. One might suppose, given that He's 'not of this world' and that He's going to remake it one day (Revelation 21:1-5), that the environment would not be high on His agenda. However, the fact that He tasked Adam with looking after his environment (Genesis 2:15) and the fact that He will punish those who destroy it (Revelation 11:18) suggest that He cares for Planet Earth very deeply.

His concern that the poor should be cared for is well known (Matthew 25:31-46), so we might confidently expect that He would happily support a strong social welfare programme. However, He doesn't seem to have a problem with people being wealthy (1 Kings 3:13; Job 1:1-8), so long as they remember who gave them that wealth in the first place (Deuteronomy 8:18; Daniel 4:30-32) and don't hoard it for themselves, but give it to the poor (Matthew 19:16-26; Luke 12:13-21). It's therefore an open question whether or not He would support a punitive tax hike for the rich, but He'd probably approve of policies to encourage charitable donations.

It's highly likely that He'd be a staunch defender of marriage and the family (Matthew 19:3-15). He would strongly oppose any form of xenophobia or nationalistic prejudice towards immigrants (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19), even going so far as to commit to a policy that immigrants who have settled and become permanent residents should have access to all the rights of a full citizen by birth (Leviticus 19:34).

Population control

Given His command to love others as much as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39), it's hard to think that He might have a problem with

overpopulation or immigration – unlike Pharaoh, who tried brutal methods to get the numbers down (Exodus 1:8-16). In fact, the Bible presents an influx of people, even to the point of overcrowding, as a *positive* thing (Isaiah 49:12, 18-22). According to the exceedingly wise ruler Solomon, a large working population is a huge advantage to a country (Proverbs 14:28). Jesus might well, therefore, be relaxed about net immigration figures, particularly given His encouragement to spread out and fill the earth (Genesis 1:28).

... and Brexit?

While we could certainly imagine Jesus pointing to Brexit and saying, 'See? I told you that was going to happen' (Daniel 2:41-43), it's hard to say whether He would have actively supported it or not. He probably would have deplored the suspicion towards immigrants that was one of its driving factors (Exodus 23:9), and the idea that any negative economic impact might disproportionately affect the poor would surely trouble Him. As of the time of writing, we still don't know how the Brexit process will ultimately play out, but there are no surprises to Him – He's known the end from the beginning (Isaiah 45:21).

Where to put your 'X'

Ultimately, it's not the purpose of this article to tell you which party to vote for. However, look at which party will support the poorest off in society – the elderly, the sick, the disabled, those struggling to find work or on low incomes – as well as caring for the environment and reaching out to the marginalised and oppressed. Ultimately, Jesus will have a say in it, for the Bible tells us that He is working behind the scenes in history (Daniel 2:20-22), and He can be trusted to work things out in the end.

As for me, I still haven't decided which of the parties will get my vote. I'm going to read the manifestos, pray about it, visit the polling station, and settle down to watch the coverage as the results come in – and leave it in God's hands. There's no safer place than that for us to be.

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Can we find TRUTH in a world of FAKE NEWS?



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In the Trumpian era, fraught with political divisiveness, unsocial media and alternative facts, the truth has become a very fluid, interchangeable concept to suit the one wielding it. The myriad of media platforms has grown, affording everyone a soapbox from which to spout their rhetoric. The solitary voice is no longer confined to the mind, as everyone is encouraged to 'speak their truth'. At a side glance, 'speak your truth' may seem very innocent and even empowering; however, a closer gaze reveals the danger of a truth according to the one spouting it: a generation of opinionated beings who would defend the fake by vilifying truth. Everything is now viewed as fake news if you do not agree with what is being portrayed.

In describing the idea of truth being

objective, Gunnar Myrdal (1969) wrote: 'The ethos of social science is the search for objective truth. The faith of the student is his conviction that truth is wholesome and that illusions are damaging, especially opportunistic ones. He seeks "realism", a term which in one of its meanings denotes an "objective" view of reality, [which brings the question] . . . How can bias be avoided?'¹

For the Christian – the follower of Jesus – the Bible is the premier written guide in terms of the pursuit of truth. John 8:32 (NLT) says, 'And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' Is the news being disseminated able to inform and educate? Does it portray a view of the issue that illuminates and suggests an equitable resolution? In John's account he is talking about the truth in the Person of God,

by Lungani Sibanda

which cuts to the core of the individual and is life-changing: the truth that stands on its own merit without the need for embellishment or ornamental flair.

There is much 'fake news' in today's society, but a lot of news still has truth. There are still those who seek to uphold a standard of an unbiased promulgation of news: the writers who subscribe to the journalistic creed articulated by Walter Williams, the founder of the first journalism school in the US. In his journalism creed he writes: '*I believe that the journalism which succeeds best – and best*

deserves success – fears God and honours man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power, constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers but always unafraid, . . . quickly indignant at injustice, [and] not swayed by the appeal of privilege or the clamour of the mob; seeks to give every man a chance, and, as far as law and honest wage and recognition of human brotherhood can make it so, an equal chance; is profoundly patriotic while sincerely promoting international goodwill and cementing world comradeship; [and] is a journalism of humanity, of and for today's world.'²

Yes, it is possible to find truth in this world of fake news, but it requires diligence on the part of the news consumer. Consider the source of your story and read beyond the headlines. Check the author of the story and their credibility. Look at your own biases, as they shape your reaction to a story. Is it relevant and current? Is it a serious story? Please remember that the mere fact that it does not fit your narrative or contravenes your personal views does not make it fake.

As crass as this current news culture is, it is a great time to be alive. The interactivity of the media makes it possible to converse with the writers of news and hold them accountable. The consumer has a duty of care to the news that is shared. The fifth estate may speak truth to power and hold the powerful to account. Above all, as Philippians 4:8 (KJV) says, '*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*'

¹Quoted in D. C. Phillips, 'Subjectivity and Objectivity: An objective inquiry' in Martyn Hammersley (ed.), *Educational Research: Current Issues* (Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd: 1993), p. 57

²Quoted in Ceciliano-Jose B. Cruz, *Advanced Campus Journalism for Fourth Year* (Rex Book Store, Manila: 1997), pp. 203, 204



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by Lynette Allcock

I have a thing for imaginary house-hunting. When I was growing up, my family often moved around thanks to my father's job, and so I have been left with a powerful urge to look into estate agents' windows. As a millennial living in London, it sometimes feels like imaginary house-hunting is the best I can hope for! My peers and I often wonder whether we'll be able to afford our own properties; some of my friends are deeply frustrated by the ridiculous housing costs, whether to rent or buy. Other friends are scared about what could happen to our planet if we keep mistreating and polluting it. Still others are anxious about what might happen to the economy and our jobs with Brexit. In fact, during my birthday dinner, the conversation somehow turned into a passionate discussion about the pros and cons of Brexit, and I realised that no matter which side of the debate you're on (or even if you are

heartily sick of it), it is still nerve-wracking to be uncertain about the future. We don't know what will happen or how that will affect us, which is true of life in general, I suppose – but, for many of my peers, the political situation heightens feelings of anxiety.

When I, too, am uneasy in the face of such uncertainty, I find hope in my faith – knowing what God is like and looking back over my story at all the other hardships my family and I have gotten through with God. I could share many stories of times when bills were paid, a place to live was found, some opportunity opened up, or a person arrived to help in the nick of time. We could never see a way forward, and yet God answered our prayers and came through for things we didn't even realise we needed.

Recently, I find myself coming back to one of my favourite teachings of Jesus: 'If God

gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers – most of which are never even seen – don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you? What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes.' (Matthew 6:30-34, MSG.)

I also love what the apostle Paul writes: 'If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?' (Romans 8:32, MSG.)

I have found that God's promises come true. He *does* take care of what I need, often in ways that reach beyond what I could imagine. Knowing this gives me hope for the future – even if I don't know if I'll ever afford a house, or what will happen to the economy with Brexit, or what will happen to our planet with climate change. Moreover, the hope that I find for the future gives me a sense of stability and courage to keep working for a better world today.

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That stubby little pencil and prayer

by Michael Baker



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You hold that stubby little pencil in your hand, poised over that voting paper, and you begin to think, 'Where should I put my cross?'

As a person of faith, trying to be consistent with the values found in Scripture, let me be honest. It's *not* straightforward: at least, not for me. It is abundantly clear that there are local, national and international challenges, moral and economic conundrums, political and ecological problems out there that need addressing.

After many hours of thinking and wrestling, listening to and watching the various political party leaders, the pundits and pollsters, and the opinions of family and friends, you and I are left alone in that polling booth, with just our intelligence, our values and our consciences.

What do we do?

Here are some things that perhaps we might want to consider before turning up at the polling station. . . .

1. Not one person is perfect and right all the time on everything. The same is true of political parties or political systems, for that matter. There is no leader on earth that is going to perfectly represent my views all the time. That is as true of the leaders in my local council or church as it is of the country.
2. Remember that most of the individuals who put themselves up for public office do so with a genuine sense of wanting to improve the lives of their constituents. They are not all 'in it for themselves'. Make sure you research as much as you can, particularly on the issues that matter to you.
3. Voting is a privilege that many people don't have. The opportunity to influence the governance of one's country is really a blessing. Despite what some may say, your votes do count! While it may be appropriate at times to consult, and agree to vote in concert with others to advocate a particular course of action that may be influenced by your beliefs and values, ultimately it's your choice!
4. Be positive. Choose to vote *for* the values you hold dear, rather than just *against*



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something. It is so easy to become jaded and cynical about the process of engagement, but, as it is said, 'It's better to light a candle than simply to curse the darkness.'

5. See the act of voting as the beginning and not the end of your engagement in community and civil society. Even after the election, maybe you should be willing to find a variety of ways of engaging in expressing Christian values, positively.
6. As a Christian, remember that God works through imperfect individuals and systems, even calling flawed human beings to hold high political office. Read about people like Daniel and Moses, Joseph and Paul. Recall how they all had opportunities to speak 'truth to power', often on behalf of others.
7. **Pray** as you think, *before* you cast your vote.
Pray as you cast your vote, gripping that stubby black pencil.
Pray *after* you have voted, and seek to become the 'salt' and 'light' Jesus wants His followers to exemplify.

The words you use may be varied, but the theme should always reflect that of the model prayer in Matthew 6:9-14, verse 10 of which reads (NKJV): 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

Casting your vote may be one of the means by which God answers your own prayer.



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