

ICF President reflects on coalition Government

9th June 2011

One of the first lessons I learned as a Trade Union representative was never to react to what people say was said, but make sure you are clear about what was actually said. I must confess to feeling that this can particularly be applied to the latest “criticism of the coalition” on the part of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Dr Williams’ critique published in this week’s *New Statesman* is described by some as “the most significant by a church figure since *Faith in the City*”; yet having read the actual text of his argument, one is left wondering whether the growing raft of copy it seems to be spawning, is actually talking about the same thing.

In what seems to be a typically balanced reflection, the thrust of the Archbishop’s argument is that the present Government needs to clarify its aims in a number of key policy areas, and the opposition needs to present the electorate with a clear and credible alternative. If this is a criticism of anyone, it is of the political system in general in which trading insults and slogans too often seems to usurp clear policy and reasoned critique.

I would argue though that this often has as much to do with those who report politics, than the politicians themselves. Sadly, in the rush for sound-bites and circulation, the popular media seems to have overlooked some profound and even prophetic reflections, not least that politics in Europe and beyond have reached a place which the Archbishop describes as the “tectonic plates . . . shifting”.

On the *Big Society*, Dr Williams reflects what many within the church and wider society have been saying for some time; firstly that as a sloganized idea, this has well passed its sell by date, and the time has come for some practical policy and tangible local implementation. As the resident and Church Leader in what was supposed to be a pilot city, I would have to describe myself as particularly impatient in this respect. He also calls for dialogue so that any reductions in “big state” provision can be implemented in a way which takes account of the capacities and capabilities of the local community, faith and voluntary sector.

The Church’s calling is to be a prophetic voice in society, neither climbing mindlessly onto every policy bandwagon, nor joining in criticism for its own sake or in some vain attempt to appear relevant. Both Government spokespeople and the Archbishop have described this as an attempt to “spark a livelier debate”, and it seems in political terms to be little more than that – accompanied by some insightful and intelligent reflections which might usefully fuel it.

The Archbishop is longstanding president of ICF, and we welcome his comments as another reminder that Christian faith affects and informs every aspect of our everyday lives.

Phil Jump

ICF Vice-Chair June 2011