

12 Questions

You might want to ask yourself during an Election Campaign



A core commitment of our Christian faith is “Truth and Justice”. We do not claim a monopoly on these realities, and they are elements that people of many different religious persuasions consider important. Put simply, we want things to be fair and honest. When we approach elections, we might do so with an almost “gut reaction” of supporting or opposing one particular party, though recent elections have shown how people can change their traditional voting habits. So as you wade through the various claims and counter-claims of the latest election campaign, we offer 12 basic questions that might help you to work out what is fair and what is genuine.

Is that actually true?

Politicians particularly like straplines and sound-bites. Often a memorable phrase can become almost permanently attached to a policy, party or idea and have significant impact – either to repeatedly commend it, or to discredit and condemn. When such phrases stick in our minds they can feel true, even if there is very little evidence to support them as reality. So if a phrase or description grabs you, ask yourself whether there is any substance behind it. If you hear a negative attached to any particular party, policy or individual - ask yourself “is that really true, or is it just a description that someone else has come up with?” Policies can often be justified by stigmatising particular groups and people, not just political opponents. Whether it’s big business, benefit claimants or someone else being talked about – don’t just listen to the policy, but the reasons offered to justify it and ask yourself “Is that really true?”

What does that really mean?

You may remember Donald Trump’s famous slogan “make America great again!” It certainly captured the imagination, but setting aside the self-interest that lies behind it, the more informed commentators were quick to point out that in such circumstances the word “great” can mean a lot of different things. One person’s definition of “great” might also be someone else’s idea of “awful”. So when a politician or media commentator uses a word that resonates or grates with you – stop and consider the degree to which they are using a generalisation that can mean ten different things to ten different people. Sure, everyone will be happy enough on polling day, but you may find out afterwards that their definition of “disaster” “great” “effective” “proper” and the like, might be quite different to yours.

How will that happen?

At the end of the day this is an election. This means that candidates have one simple aim. On polling day they want you to sufficiently like them or the party they represent, to choose them above their opponents; or at least to sufficiently dislike the alternatives to see them as the best option. And if there is one way to get people to like you, it’s to say the things they want to hear and promise what they want. Campaigners will make commitments that may well be genuine aspirations, but how are they going to actually achieve them? Do they have a workable strategy to make it happen? Can they back up their headline claims with effective plans? Do their plans stack up? How likely are they to succeed?

Does it need fixing?

Some promises and commitments will be preceded with an inference or explanation of how their opponents have caused or will cause a particular problem. They may commit to a credible solution, but what difference will it actually make? They may be proposing to do things that would happen anyway, with or without any political intervention. Other pledges will be vital and significant, and it can help distinguish which are which with questions like – “What is the problem that this addresses?” – “How significant is that problem and how effective will their solution be?” – “Are they seeking to do something intentionally different, or simply promising what is likely to happen anyway?” - “How do we know it’s really a problem and will their solution fix it?”

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What did they really say?

The media coverage of politics tends to place great focus on a particular phrase or comment that a politician comes out with – especially if they say something that shocks, startles or in some other way grabs attention. Commentators may also lock onto a particular statement because it appears to reinforce a narrative that their media outlet has already decided to pursue. But such comments can often be edited or presented completely out of context. They may be nothing more than a slip of the tongue or convey an unintended double meaning. Of course there are moments when such “gaffs” do reveal an individual’s true colours when they are seeking to present a less than honest front. It’s for you to decide, but be slow to judge anyone by a one-off phrase or statement. And of course there’s a flip side to this too – just as a media outlet can make someone out to be saying what was never intended, politicians can be quite good at wrapping up something unpopular in a phrase or sentence that is designed to appear quite innocuous. Either way, keep asking “What did they actually mean by that?”

Who is telling me this?

Much of the information we absorb in an election campaign will be filtered through media outlets such as TV, Radio, Newspapers and websites. Some will be from the parties themselves, and expected to be somewhat biased in their own favour. But don’t assume that everything else is therefore neutral. Every outlet will have its own agendas and approaches, some are quite openly slanted in a particular political direction, but all have their own priorities and concerns. There is simply too much happening in any given day, for us to be presented with anything other than a few highlights that an editor somewhere has decided upon. If a politician gives a speech, it will have lasted for several minutes, perhaps longer – you are likely to be shown 2-3 sentences from it. Every presenter will also have their own views of right or wrong – even their tone of voice can convey an implicit message of disbelief, disapproval or commendation. So why has a particular media outlet told you about this? What else has been happening and why have they chosen not to report that? Is the information they are sharing intended to prove a point they are making, or communicating what the speaker intended? Are they communicating what happened or their take on what happened? What is reality and what is opinion?

Was that question fair?

A constant criticism of politicians is that they don’t answer questions – we’ve all seen interviews where an individual does everything but give a straight answer. But do we always stop to consider whether it was a reasonable question in the first place? Many of the issues that Parliament deals with are complex and require weighing up conflicting needs and interests. Interviewers can often present things in an oversimplistic light and ask questions that no reasonable person would answer with a straight “yes” or “no”. We must also recognise that a lot can happen in a 5-year parliamentary term and there will be inevitable unknowns that will have to be encountered and addressed. So any sensible politician is unlikely to unequivocally rule things in or out, without leaving some room to manoeuvre in the light of unforeseeable circumstances. Let’s remember that we are electing real people to govern us in real time, not simply electing an organisation to deliver a pre-set agenda.

Am I comparing like with like?

General Elections are all about generating popularity and a positive image. This means that rather than simply being right or wrong, a politician will want to appear better than their opponents. So we may hear lots of comparatives “they will . . . we will . . .” Statements of this nature can be helpful when we are deciding between two or more options, but are we always comparing like with like? “They play football but we care about the vulnerable” may have a ring to it, but playing football is not an indicator of whether or not someone cares about others. Human instinct will tend remember the second element and assume that it qualifies the first. So when you hear a comparative statement, take both elements on board and ask whether they truly relate to each other.

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Is this backed up with facts?

We've noted that elections can be dominated by big slogans and broad claims. These can help give a sense of the overall purpose and priorities of any given individual or party, but they can also be remarkably vague and deliberately misleading. So when any party makes a claim about themselves or their opponents, ask yourself (or them if you have the chance) "on what information do you base that claim?" – "what will you actually be doing to make that a reality". Think about this particularly when parties make pledges to spend or save money – the more important questions are "What are you going to spend that money on?" – "How much will it actually save?" Also try to keep a sense of "scale" – "We will spend (or save) 10 million pounds on . . ." sounds significant compared to the average household budget, but what will that money buy when we are talking about a national programme? In short, as the big messages and slogans emerge, try to dig down and find out what facts, figures, intentions and practical outcomes actually lie behind them.

If others are wrong are they right?

"Under a Labour government, dental treatment will be painful and the British weather will be unreliable." This might make you less inclined to vote Labour, but the simple truth is that under a Conservative or any other shade of government those things will be no different. We have chosen an obvious example, but statements like this can often be conveyed over more subtle issues. And even in those areas that a government can impact and affect – none are perfect and all have to make difficult and painful choices. So when representatives of one party accuse their opponents of a particularly unpopular policy direction or intent – stop and ask the question "will you actually be any different?" – "What do you intend to do about that particular issue?" - "Is that a problem of their making or would it be a problem anyway?"

If they are right, are others wrong?

This is the flip side of the question above. Parties will also seek to impress us with their good intent and positive aspirations. We may find these attractive, but before we become completely sold out on them, we also need to ask "What are your opponents planning – are you actually offering anything better than them?"

What are the things that matter to me?

Finally, remember that this is your vote and it doesn't belong to anyone else. Campaigners will not only try to make their case on particular issues, but also significantly influence the things that get talked about and portrayed as important. While we might see the role of the media as challenging and re-balancing this, remember that news outlets have their own agendas too. So perhaps before you get too engulfed by election coverage, take some time to think through the issues that matter to you. Whether or not they make it to the front pages and evening news bulletins, try to find out what the main parties are saying about those things; read up on what your local candidates say about them, and don't be afraid to ask doorstep canvassers and other campaigners about the things that matter to you.