

GIVE REASONS TO HOPE!

A Pastoral Reflection by the Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland

On the forthcoming Westminster Elections (4th July 2024).

The forthcoming Westminster elections provide every voter with an opportunity to influence the values and policies that will shape the future of this part of our island for some time. While some hold the principled view that the British parliament should play no part in the affairs of this part of the island, and choose to remain absent from it, the fact remains that, until a majority of citizens choose otherwise, the decisions of the Westminster parliament impact the lives of every person here in a fundamental way. From social welfare to policies for economic growth, from the core funding formula to the respect for the right to life itself, the politicians elected to the next Westminster Parliament will make key decisions profoundly affecting the lives of every one of us on this part of our island.

As people prepare to vote on the 4th of July we, as Pastors, offer the following reflection based on values which, we believe, come from the example of Jesus and have been developed in Catholic Social Teaching. We also offer some key questions they might pose to particular candidates in their area.

We begin, however, by appealing to every one who has the ability to do so, to participate in the democratic process by exercising their hard-won right to vote. Even where there is no candidate who reflects the full range of a voter's values or aspirations, it is still a fundamental Christian duty to maximise the good we can do by taking part in the democratic process.

TO OUR POLITICIANS - GIVE REASONS TO HOPE!

As pastors, close to the daily dreams and struggles of people in all kinds of situations, our deepest concern today is not just the important social and economic issues that have dominated the pre-election discourse. We are concerned about a much more fundamental and underlying risk to our society's well-being – a growing breakdown in social cohesion, and hope!

People are constantly saying to us things like 'society is fractured', 'politics is broken', 'life has never been so stressful' and, 'every day is a struggle, like never before'. It is no coincidence that in this environment, our society is also reporting an unprecedented crisis in mental health, not least among younger people and children. Nor is it unrelated that in homes throughout Derry and Belfast, to the most rural areas of the north, the social 'normalisation' of illegal and legal mind-altering drugs is reaching epidemic levels. People also express concern to us about a growing culture of aggression and lack of civility in all aspects of life, fuelled in particular by the lack of regulation of social media.

It is no exaggeration to speak of a crisis of hope in our society!

And so, we encourage all citizens to pose this basic question to candidates in the forthcoming election. What are you going to do to restore hope and civility to our society? What are you going to do to improve the quality and tone of public debate, and to improve social cohesion by modelling shared concern for the common good? What are you going to do to improve the quality of the lives of all, especially the most vulnerable, beyond your own personal or party interest?

The well-being of society, especially of the young and most vulnerable, is the fundamental vocation of politics. Few citizens, we believe, would say that our society here is functioning well. We encourage our politicians, in their noble vocation, to strive for a vision of society that brings genuine hope and flourishing to the lives of all. In this election, give us reasons to hope!

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN LIFE IS RESPECTED!

We believe at the heart of the vision of a vibrant, cohesive and flourishing society is an absolute commitment to the dignity, value and right to life of every person, at every stage, and in every condition of life. If politics is not about respecting, defending and promoting the dignity and value life itself, then what is its core value?

We have watched over recent decades, through the Westminster parliament in particular, how respect for the fundamental right to life has been subjected to a reductionist political culture, where people are valued more and more for their utility, or their positive cost to benefit analysis, rather than for their inherent dignity.

This erodes hope!

Pope Francis reminds us of a fundamental principle of Catholic Social teaching. That everything is connected! Drawing on Pope St. John Paul's vision of a 'consistent ethic of life', he points out that we cannot speak of an ecological crisis, or an economic crisis, without also speaking of a social crisis, one in which the core value holding all of society together is a profound and inherent respect for life, in all its forms and in all its stages.

And so, we encourage those voting in the forthcoming elections, to ask their candidates: What will you do to uphold the right to life of every person, from conception to natural death? What will you do to ensure the most vulnerable, at the beginning or end of their life, will not be at risk from pressure or harm from others to have their lives ended or to end it for themselves? What position will you take in forthcoming Westminster debates about introducing euthanasia and even more radical laws extending the limits on abortion, and discriminating against those in the womb with disabilities?

We can only truly have hope when life is respected, at all its stages, especially when we know society will protect our life when we are vulnerable and unable to protect it for ourselves!

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN I CAN LIVE FREE FROM ADDICTION!

There is another rapidly growing threat to life and hope in our society, one that we see on the streets of our cities every day, but also lurks, with increasing social acceptance, in the homes and social venues of communities across the north. This is the near epidemic levels of substance abuse, and the violent criminal industry in legal and illegal drugs that sustains it. It is no exaggeration to say that access to drugs in our society is out of control, becoming more socially acceptable and causing untold damage to individuals, families and whole communities. It is also placing huge additional pressures on our health and policing services.

There is an urgent need to address the drugs crisis in our society in a well-resourced, multi-disciplinary way, primarily as a social and medical issue, rather than as a criminal issue to be dealt with as a revolving door phenomenon by the police and prisons. The Irish Bishops' Drugs Initiative has previously proposed the removal or reduction in criminal penalties for the possession and use of small quantities of drugs, in favour of treating such situations as a public health issue, and prioritising treatment, care, education programmes and longer-term personal development. We take the opportunity of the forthcoming election to re-state this appeal to our politicians. De-criminalise the taking of drugs by those who have become their victim. Give them reasons to hope by providing adequate residential, expert multi-disciplinary support to set them free to live their lives again with confidence and purpose.

The north of Ireland does not have, but urgently needs expert, multi-disciplinary residential care for those who have become addicted to drugs specifically.

And so, we encourage voters to ask their candidates: Will you work to secure funding for the first residential facility here to help those addicted to drugs, that they can get the expert, multi-disciplinary help they need to become free of their addiction? Will you work for the removal or reduction in criminal penalties for the possession and use of small quantities of drugs, in favour of treating such situations as a public health issue, and prioritising treatment, care, education programmes and longer-term personal development?

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN ALL CAN LIVE WITH DIGNITY!

Elections enable citizens to participate in the shaping of public policy. In this regard there is so much to be done. Too many families are suffering real financial hardships and lack of access to health and social services, which are at breaking point. Recent data shows that the equivalent of 26.3% of the population is on a hospital waiting list here. Across our schools, the spending per pupil on education is consistently lower than in England and adequate resources for Special Education Needs services continues to fall far short, despite rapid growth in the number of children requiring SEN assistance over the past ten years.

The introduction by the outgoing Westminster government of a two-child cap on child benefit was, quite simply, socially and morally abhorrent. This tax on having children has compounded the levels of child poverty in the north, which continue to be among the highest on these islands, despite the promises of devolution. We continue our appeal to all politicians

across these islands, to make the eradication of the totally unacceptable levels of child poverty here an urgent priority in public policy.

This serious underfunding of Northern Ireland by the UK government undermines local democracy and further erodes confidence in politics. There is a strong case for a needs-based analysis to be undertaken in the application of funding to Northern Ireland due to the particular economic and social deficits here.

We therefore encourage voters to ask their candidates in the forthcoming Westminster election: Will you work to maximise the grant funding, on a true and just needs basis, that Northern Ireland receives for public services? What will you do to improve the dire levels of childhood poverty and levels of working poor in Northern Ireland? Will you work to remove the socially and morally abhorrent two-child benefit cap, and work to urgently reduce child poverty in Northern Ireland?

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN I HAVE SOMEWHERE DECENT TO LIVE!

According to the most recent figures from the Department for Communities, the number of households considered to be ‘statutorily homeless’ is 10,349, with 45,105 applicants on the social housing waiting list. Of these applicants, 32,633 are in ‘housing distress’. This is a scandalous and intolerable situation, especially given that safe, affordable and appropriate housing is a human right.

We therefore encourage voters in the forthcoming election to ask their candidates: What will you do to urgently address the current housing crisis, causing so much distress to individuals and families throughout our society?

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN I FEEL WELCOME AND SECURE!

The demographic of the island of Ireland- north and south - has changed dramatically, in large part on account of the arrival of so many people here from other parts of the world. Many of these people have migrated here to work and already play a critical role in the delivery of our public services, particularly in healthcare. Without them, our public services and businesses would not be able to function. Others have come here because of war, displacement, persecution, or economic oppression. As Christians, it is our duty not only to welcome them as we would welcome any stranger, but also to enable these newcomers to belong in our communities, including in our parishes and congregations. We call upon our successful election candidates to ensure proper planning, adequate funding and delivery of services for all of the community, including our newcomers. It is clear that global challenges from wars, food insecurity, displacement and climate change have an impact everywhere. In this respect, we echo the words of Pope Francis: ‘that everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.’

And so, we encourage voters to ask those candidates standing for election: What will you do to ensure that migrants, refugees and newcomers feel welcome and secure in our society, and

that adequate services, including health, education and housing are provided for them, and all in our society?

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN THE FAITH, COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTORS ARE VALUED AND SUPPORTED!

Politicians cannot build social cohesion, and hope, on their own. The contribution of the community and voluntary sector, as well as Churches and faith communities, is vital.

The faith, community and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland continue to provide a wealth of services in many areas of health, social services, family supports, the arts, social enterprise and local community services, in our communities. Large numbers of volunteers are supplementing these services, contributing their gifts, time and expertise in support of a myriad of organisations on the ground. But these services are endangered through lack of funding and failure by politicians to fully appreciate their essential contribution. It is often only when the services have to be radically reduced or shut down completely, that people realise the invaluable contribution they make to areas such as disability awareness, marriage and relationships counselling, health and wellbeing services to the elderly, vulnerable children, the lonely, and to those disproportionately facing poverty and socio-economic disadvantage.

The UK's exit from the European Social Fund has made this situation worse, coupled with the slowness in the delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which is resulting in lack of certainty in terms of community-based services from April of 2025. We need our elected politicians to appreciate and advocate for our community and voluntary sector and to work urgently to restore, if not improve their levels of funding for their vital work in building up social cohesion, well-being and hope.

And so we encourage those who will vote in the forthcoming election to ask their candidates: What will you do to support the vital contribution of the faith, community and voluntary sectors to the well-being and cohesion of our community? What will you do to urgently replace the vital funding our community formerly received from the European Social Fund?

THERE IS HOPE – WHEN THERE IS JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION FOR ALL!

A consistent ethic of life prizes justice as fundamental for peaceful coexistence in society. The passing of the recent NI Troubles (Legacy & Reconciliation) legislation at Westminster has added further pain to the already gaping wounds that many people across all our communities are being forced to carry. This legislation does nothing for the restoration of relationships and reconciliation. We urge those who will be elected in this election to continue to raise this question with the incoming government and to ensure that promises to repeal the legislation will be acted upon as soon as possible by any new government.

And so, we encourage all those who will vote in the forthcoming election, to ask their candidates: What will you do to repeal the legislation on legacy introduced by the outgoing government, and ensure equal justice, and genuine paths to reconciliation for all?

CONCLUSION – THERE ARE REASONS HOPE!

‘Without a vision, the people perish!’. This is the famous and ancient insight of the Wisdom tradition of the Old Testament. It holds true to this day. If our political leaders do not give people concrete reasons to hope, if they do not hold out a vision for our society that embraces the basic needs, dignity and inherent worth of all, it should be no surprise that society fractures, and confidence in politics is eroded.

As Christian leaders, we continue to be inspired, and driven in our steadfast hope for society, by the vision of Jesus, that we might have life, and have it to the full (Jn. 10:10)! All that truly gives people life, brings society hope! In this short reflection, with deep gratitude and respect for all those who put themselves forward, with courage, and commitment to public service, for elected office, we express our sincere hope that, if elected, they can shape a better future for us all. We also express our conviction, rooted in the promise of Jesus to be with us to the end of time, that even yet, there are many reasons to hope!

ENDS.