

**Speech Notes for the 31st January to the London
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By Lord Christopher F. Patten of Barnes

Several of the political leaders who have most impressed me have had a remarkable ability to use a personal anecdote to make a more general point. They conceptualise from it. They weave it into a narrative. They show how it illuminates their approach to political issues. The two men, who in my experience, did this best were Bill Clinton and Helmut Kohl.

But personal recollections and stories can affect the broader attitudes of all of us, in and out of politics. The memory that most shaped my own approach is still all too vivid. I was the Minister for Overseas Development, visiting a refugee camp on the Ethiopian border with Sudan in the late 1980s. It provided a refuge for children, mostly boys, who had fled the war in Sudan. About half the boys who tried to escape the war had died on the trek – starved to death, dehydrated, murdered by gangs of Janja weed Arab paramilitaries. I spoke to thousands of them in the tented school they had created in the camp. The head of this makeshift school asked if they could sing their thanks to me in their native Nilotic dialect Dinka. First, they sang the Lord's Prayer. Then they sang a verse from Isaiah. I did not of course know what it was. But that night, back in the Embassy in Addis Ababa, I looked it up in the Gideon Bible in my bedroom. It was Chapter 9, Verse 2 of Isaiah "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, they

that dwell in the land of the shadow of death upon them hath he light shined”.

Well, those boys had certainly walked in darkness and left many of their colleagues and friends in the land of the shadow of death.

As chance would have it, one of my first engagements when I came back to Britain was to speak at a prize-giving at a school for mostly middle-class children in a prosperous London suburb. I could not help but think about the comparison. With what conclusion? It’s fairly obvious really: the responsibilities which those of us who live in prosperous, peaceful societies, blessed with the advantages of the best of nature and nurture, owe to those who struggle with awesome challenges simply to survive. So I commend all of you who understand the imperative of finding ways in which the fundamental messages of the New Testament can give some impetus to our political response to intimidating contemporary challenges. Some of these threaten ending sustainability of any sort of successful economy. Your work and commitment reminds us that there is an umbilical link between the Galilee of Christ’s days and London, Rome, Canterbury and – shall we add – the Calais Jungle in 2019. I have, not surprisingly always regarded denunciation of religious leaders for raising political leaders as ignorant and absurd.

No one of course suggests that Christianity, or the teachings of the Catholic Church, provide a manifesto, or collection of policy prescriptions, with which to overcome the biggest problems that roil our societies today. But just let me mention three challenges which have damaged the social

fabric of our societies, especially in Europe and North America.

First, social inequity. There is a remarkable American play being performed at the Donmar Theatre in London at the moment called “Sweat”. It is a gritty play about an industrial community in America whose solidarity and prosperity are shattered when the local steel business is largely shipped off to Mexico, the standard of living of the same town plummets, and the different racial and ethnic groups turn on one another. White against black. Black and White against Brown. The play is, I would guess, a pretty good description of the social causes of populism and extreme identity politics. Trump. Salvini. Le Pen. Even, some would say, Brexit.

Now I am not arguing against globalisation. You might as well try to stop the weather. Nor am I saying that market forces destroy communities. But there is no doubt that growing social inequity in rich, developed countries in the last quarter century has contributed to growing social and political unrest. And there has to be a Christian response, which is not left-wing or right-wing, but which asserts the public priority of dealing with issues like education, training, homelessness and poverty in the midst of plenty. Moreover you do not have to try to squeeze some of the astonishingly highly paid corporate leaders in our society through the eye of a needle to accept, surely, that there is often a gap between pay at the corporate top and pay at the median level or the bottom which is so large as to both cause offence and scandal.

Pope Francis has said that the church should act as a field hospital to help those dealing with the predicaments of life rather than as a sort of moral traffic policeman – scolding

more than helping. That seems to me to be a message that should resonate with all of us.

My second point about contemporary challenges is this.

Every developed country, every rich country, is a magnet for those around the world who live in poverty or in violent societies where order and the Institutions of a functioning state have broken down. This pressure has already caused political turbulence in Europe. It is not going to get any better. The population of Africa is about 1¼ billion today. It is predicted to rise to about 2½ billion by the middle of the century. You could find similar examples of fast rising populations in West Asia, ravaged as it is by conflict or potential conflict. Plainly, Europe needs policies which deal with the pressures that will face us in ways that are effective and humane. And don't forget that Europe will be facing the demographic consequences of the combination of enhanced longevity and plunging fertility rates.

It is not racist to have an immigration policy. It is, however, racist to use the question of immigration to whip up the sentiments of "soil and blood" populism. We need to have policies that combine foreign and security policy, development assistance, support for communities where rapid and substantial migration flows have caused real local difficulties and reasonable ways of controlling or preventing illegal flows of migrants.

Shrugging our shoulders and letting migrants drown is plainly a wholly unacceptable policy. These are very tough issues. But it is important for the Church to be heard loud and

clear. Exactly the same is true in the United States, where many already understand that walls have more to contribute to rabble-rousing polemics than to sensible policy making.

I believe that the church has been helpful in leading the debate on climate change and sustainable development on our fragile planet. I hope it will take an equally public position on immigration and its effects.

Third, communities are under economic pressure and social and cultural change which pose an additional problem in sustaining a sense of community in the digital age. The internet in its many forms can often enhance a sense of beleaguered personal identity which fights against the notions of civic humanism and Christian solidarity.

We have seen in the last few years divisions between and within countries based on ideology largely replaced by the divisive bitterness of what the great novelist Amin Maalouf calls “the panthers” of identity politics. At one extreme that has seemed in danger of opening the door to the sort of nationalism which caused such appalling damage in the first half of the last century The church is better placed than most to point out, as it has done over climate change, that there is hardly any major national problem that can be successfully overcome without international co-operation. I was very pleased to read reports of Pope Francis’s recent remarks on nationalism and populism.

I am delighted this evening to be able to congratulate you on helping to give voice and vision to the leadership which the Catholic church and our Christian sisters and brothers must contribute ever more self-confidently, in the

debate about the great questions facing us all in the 21st century. Those questions are formidable – formidable but not insoluble. We could do worse than recall the words of Ulysses speaking to his crew in Tennyson’s great poem about the end of his journey. “Come my friends,/ ‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world”. There is, after all, much to be said for Christians, for Catholics, being associated with the embrace of optimism. And in addition, all of us in the Catholic Church should believe that we can, if we are serious about it, move the world.