Comment: *Politics and Religion*

The religious vote plays a much less significant part in British elections than it seems to do in the United States of America.

Before the recent General Election, it is true, some Christian groups, as well as Muslims associated with certain mosques, sought to raise interest among their co-religionists, in social and ethical issues affecting them. On the whole, however, the majority of us felt inclined to congratulate ourselves on being able to keep religion and politics apart. The Americans, on the other hand, whose Constitution requires the separation of church and state, seem only too keen to mix religion and politics. It is inconceivable that an atheist, or even an agnostic humanist, could be elected President – though, for all their born-again conversion stories, White House prayer breakfasts, and suchlike, neither President Bush nor President Clinton gets to church every Sunday, if reports are to be believed. Mr Blair goes far more, they say – though this may simply be due to his preference for the formality of Catholic liturgy, rather than for occasional experiences of revivalist enthusiasm.

According to MORI surveys, a majority of Anglicans voted Conservative, perhaps somewhat surprisingly. As for the Catholic electorate, 53% voted Labour, 23% Conservative and 22% for the Liberal Democrats (see *The Tablet* 21 May 2005: 4–5). As a group, that is to say, Catholics remain among Labour's strongest supporters. Moreover, contrary to what was the case some decades ago, when Catholics were mostly industrial workers, and linked by interest to trade unions and the Labour Party, there is now little difference between Catholic and Anglican congregations in respect of their social class composition. Indeed, according to MORI, 55 per cent of Catholics, but only 51 per cent of Anglicans, are 'middle class' in market research terms.

Early in the 2005 campaign Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor gave his approval to a pledge by the Conservative leader Michael Howard (who is Jewish, with a son in the Anglican ministry) to make parliamentary time for a bill to reduce abortion time limits.

This seems to have had little effect on Catholic voting intentions. On the other hand, Labour lost the votes of a significant number of Catholics who believed that the Prime Minister's support for the American invasion of Iraq was mistaken, either because this war had no justification in international law or because it was started on false pretences or, more generally, because the true aim was to take control of Middle Eastern oil.

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All abortions were illegal in Britain, before 1990, where the child concerned was "capable of being born alive" [Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929]. This was abrogated by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990, passed by Parliament on a free vote and thus not treated as a party-political issue. The bill was introduced and strongly promoted by members of Margaret Thatcher's government. After many debates the majority in the House of Commons voted in favour of allowing abortions up to 24 weeks.

While there is some talk now of revisiting the subject, in the light of recent medical advances, it seems very unlikely that Parliament, with or without a Labour majority, would reduce the limit, let alone criminalise abortion again.

Since 1990, Britain has had the most liberal legislation in the world on stem cell research. This attracts scientists from elsewhere. Most other states in the European Union, however, oppose such research, on the grounds that it routinely involves the destruction of human embryos. Although an outright ban by the EU on member states is unlikely, EU directives and funding decisions could affect research so much that it might no longer be practicable. This is one of the ways in which, residually, the influence of Catholic doctrine remains a factor in EU politics.

The recently re-elected Labour government seems eager to continue the policies of the previous Conservative administration, not only allowing stem cell research and human cloning but actively encouraging them – well beyond the limits of Catholic ethics. For all that, it seems unlikely, in the near future at least, that a majority of Catholics in the United Kingdom would make this contradiction of Catholic teaching a test at elections – however puzzling or deplorable this may seem. Perhaps most voters in Britain shy away from one-issue politics, in principle, and Catholics, in this respect, are as British as they come. Perhaps British Catholics are not as 'European' as we like to think.

F.K.

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