

**Voting with our Feet
and
The Challenge of the Politics of the Far Right and the Churches.
CTBI Racial Justice Network Conference 5 October 2009**

The meeting was chaired by Bishop Tom Butler (Southwark) and the two main speakers were Jon Cruddas, MP for Dagenham and the Revd. Arlington Trotman, Moderator, Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe.

Jon's excellent speech put the present situation both in its historical context and its European context. He reminded us of Oswald Moseley in 20's – 30's Britain, and how in a time of recession and dissatisfaction with the politicians of the time, people were led to join the Fascists. The scapegoats accused then were among others – the Jews, now it has become immigrants, Asylum seekers and sometimes Muslims. There is also now a general move across Europe to the far right. Centre policies are emptying out and some people are moving to the right or left. Having said that, the major factor that caused 2 BNP MEP's to be elected was the lack of support for Labour which increased the proportional percentages for the BNP.

Dagenham constituency has the lowest cost housing in the Country. This, coupled with rapid changeover in population and high unemployment, has led to many strong feelings of alienation. So Dagenham Council has 27 Labour, 12 BNP, and 2 Conservative councillors.

For the many who are alienated they see 'hope' lacking in politics, despair and fear instead. Obviously the credit crunch has led to distrust of authority figures and capitalism in general and the issue of MP's expenses have destroyed confidence in the whole political process.

Jon then explained how modern marketing skills are used by all political parties. In marginal seats where most elections are decided, there are, he said, about 20,000 floating voters whose decision is crucial. New Labour has believed that by targeting this group (Often referred to as Middle England) with an emphasis on 'earn' and 'own' they can win elections. This has worked in the past for Labour. Sadly, Jon concluded, Labour has lost by these methods the sense of being the party which stands for human needs, cares for the poor and disadvantaged, ethics in general, and was the party of hope for ordinary people. What wins votes has replaced the party of justice for ordinary people.

So the BNP is claiming this ground, claiming to be the party of the ordinary white British people. Despite its violent and racist policies of hate, it tries to use the language of Old Labour. Perhaps many who vote B.N.P in Dagenham, Tower Hamlets, Broxbourne, etc are turning a blind eye to the violent policies and statements of hate, but rather voting in protest against a Labour party that has seemed not to do anything for them and lost credibility as a party for ordinary people. So yes, we should be against the B.N.P, but also if we could rebuild the Labour Party as a party of hope and the party of the poor that might be the most effective way to reduce BNP influence.

In the context of the historical over-view he believed 15th September 2008 when Lehman Brothers collapsed would be seen, in retrospect, to mark a significant switch to the far right in the United Kingdom and in other parts of Europe. The activities of

the English Defence League, Muslim Defence League and UKIP should also be monitored.

However, he ended on a note of hope. He described the activities of 'Search-Light' which sought to bring hope not hate into politics. He spoke of Barak Obama encouraging 'stories of hope.' He said we must use modern methods of communication, especially in trying to reach the young, e.g. the use of the internet. 80,000 people had signed up to the 'Not in my Name' campaign as the 2 BNP MP's entered the European Parliament. He also drew attention to the Good Citizen movement and concluded that now is a crucial time and we need to work together to build a Politics of Hope.

Building on this excellent political analysis, Arlington Trotman then said that the voice of the churches was essential. He commended the Methodists, United Reformed Church and Church of Scotland that issued statements saying that membership of the BNP was incompatible with membership of the church. We must stand up against hate.

However, he asked, were church people sufficiently politicised and aware of justice and social issues? After all, many 'Christians' in Germany had supported the fascists and many 'Christians' had supported apartheid in South Africa. (I wonder how many of those who voted BNP in Dagenham go to church?)

Arlington suggested Christians and churches must do the following: -

1. We need to articulate and draw attention to social evils.
2. Our theology must centre on justice and poverty.
3. We must work to overcome the 'Hate of Difference' and rejoice in the 'Joy of Diversity'.
4. " 'They' have taken our homes, jobs, hospital places etc.' Such myths must be spoken against, truth put forward and understanding found.
5. We must engage in our local communities with real social needs.
6. We must take action where there are local fascist groups. (In the afternoon a greater emphasis was placed on talking to the B.N.P but avoided giving them a platform).
7. We must influence MP's to put the issue high on their agenda.
8. We must tackle Islamophobia.
9. Ministers must preach on these issues.
10. We must work always to help the disenfranchised and alienated in our area.

It was sad to hear about the experiences of the Romanies in Ireland and that racially motivated murders had increased across Europe, so the church must speak and act now.

In the afternoon we went into 5 groups and our group spoke of the need for material that could be used when the General Election came, particularly in relation to the BNP. We also spoke about what we should do if we discovered members with BNP sympathies. Such people should be challenged with both love and firmness by Minister, Elders and even the whole church.

The conference was very well attended by U.R.C people and people from all over the United Kingdom. A very useful day.

Francis Ackroyd

