



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – July 2009

Sic transit gloria mundi

IT HAS been fascinating to watch how people have turned against politics and politicians this last month or two. The immediate trigger seemed to be the *Daily Telegraph's* exposure of politicians fiddling their expenses over the years – information newly available under the Freedom of Information Act. The real trigger, it seems to me, has been the recession. As jobs, mortgages, savings and shares have wobbled frighteningly, someone had to take the blame. First it was the bankers and now, our revenge unsated, it is the politicians. A generation ago, the whole question of politicians' pay was put on the back burner: it was simply impossible, politically, to turn MPs' pay into the kind of remuneration that would attract accountants, business men, doctors, lawyers and other professionals into politics as a full time job. Politicians were working people – for whom managing another house in London was too expensive – or rich men and grandees working part time, who could well afford to camp out in the constituency and pretend to live there. Instead of getting the remuneration right, the whole business of expenses became for some a lifeline – a way of funding that flat within easy distance of Parliament – but, for many, simply a slush fund. This kind of arrangement was bound to come to light one day and to cast doubts on MPs' claim to represent the public in all things honest, lawful, moral and true.

We may not be right to expect MPs to succeed in being any more honest, lawful, moral and true than the rest of us but we can and should expect them to try to be. The collapse of religion in public life is linked to the collapse of virtue: many have no moral compass at all, beyond some vague sense of right and wrong, learnt from bible stories when they were little. There was a time – well over a century ago - when the House of Commons was effectively the House of Laity of the Church of England. Here (supposedly) were the leading men (and, alas, they were all men at that time) of the country, supposedly deciding matters in a godly and virtuous way. We have lost all that, and are probably none the worse for it, except that, when we are represented by those who have no religion and no religious and ethical values, we have a right to expect that they are nonetheless men and women of the highest probity, whose agnosticism or atheism is informed by an intense concern for morality and human flourishing. (Whether such a non-religious system can be built is still very much open to question: all attempts so far have been terrifyingly violent and amoral: look at Stalinism; look at Nazism; look at Maoism.)

We pray then for the restoration of public confidence, for a fresh look at political processes and for the election of men and women of the highest calibre. They will need to be properly remunerated. Their principal home, as honour dictates, will be their home within the constituency they represent and, as well as travelling and subsistence expenses, they will need a billet in London and some help in paying the rent. But a fresh look at how we are represented may be a very welcome by-product of all this. Whatever is constructed – an English House of Commons and a British House of Lords, both elected, or an elected House of Commons and an appointed House of Lords – the important thing is that it is built on Faith, Hope and Charity, the three theological virtues, without which we live the life of animals and manage no better than the survival of the fittest.

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