

## Six ways to repair the Church-Government relationship in the UK



Mark Hoban Catholics have more reason than most to reflect on the tensions between Church and State. It was of a Catholic prelate that Henry II said “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?” How many Catholics assumed - until they saw last Thursday’s exit poll - that the electorate would rid them of this turbulent government?

Despite the success of the papal visit, the strong relationship between Cafod and DfID and the work on human trafficking led by the Home Secretary, Theresa May and Cardinal Vincent Nichols, the relationship between the Church and the last Government was not easy. The greatest tension between Church and Government was a result of fiscal consolidation and welfare reform.

So here are six ways for the Church to rebuild its relationship with the Conservative Government.

1. Invest in relationships with a wider range of parliamentarians. The Church’s efforts to achieve a rapport with Baroness Warsi when she was Minister for Faith and Communities was lost when she left the Government. Time spent with Catholic Conservative MPs and others who shared similar values and goals would also have been valuable, and would have led to a broader and deeper relationship with the Government.
2. Accept that the electorate did not repudiate austerity. Each major party was committed to spending cuts and it was the party with the most ambitious plans for tackling the deficit that won the most votes. The new Government has a mandate for further spending cuts and welfare reforms.
3. Decide how to engage with the Government. Pragmatic, evidence-based interventions will have more impact but generate fewer headlines than outright opposition.
4. Avoid the temptation to over-simplify political issues. Having been on the inside, I know that governing is a more nuanced and complex process than it might appear from the outside. Often ministers have to strike difficult balances between treating the symptoms of a problem and dealing with their causes. Working out the right short and long-term response to the trafficking of people across the Mediterranean is a prime and poignant example of this.
5. Recognise that poverty is both dynamic and static and any government’s anti-poverty strategy needs to reflect this. There should be generous support for those who cannot work for reasons of old age or ill health, but how do you design a system for those who can work but are unemployed that demonstrates solidarity but doesn’t create a dependence on benefits that undermines human dignity? This should provoke a debate, but no one has a monopoly of truth.

6. Engage with MPs. Don't leave this to just the bishops' conference or an MP's parish priest. The most effective way to influence MPs is to talk and listen – not to preach or, even worse, ignore them altogether and express surprise when they do something you don't like.

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