

Second Bi-Annual Burke Address – Murdo Fraser MSP, Deputy Leader of the Scottish Conservatives

Thursday 9th November, 2006

Introduction

Good evening and thank you for coming. I am delighted to be with you in order to give this, the second Conservative Christian Fellowship Scotland Burke address. I want to express my thanks to both Elizabeth Berridge and Sarah Haldane at CCFHQ for their hard work in organising tonight, as well as Michael Veitch, Julie Gilstrap, Joshua Horden and the other volunteers here in Scotland who have been working tirelessly over these past few weeks to make this event possible. As most of you will know, the CCF has no staff north of the border and we rely exclusively on the time and effort of our members to arrange events like this. I am therefore delighted that in the past two or three years we have seen a real increase in CCF activity in Scotland, which I hope is a trend that will continue, with your support. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am glad to have the opportunity to address some matters of real and pressing interest to all of us here. I want to speak this evening about 'a conservative hope'. A hope which learns from the past and looks confidently to the future. It was Edmund Burke who rightly said "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors." Burke was speaking about the inheritance which we all have received in this country. An inheritance of political liberties and laws which have been passed on from generation to generation. An inheritance which we too have a responsibility to guard and to pass on. Burke speaks about government, home and church as the key parts of a constitution grounded in the Christian faith. He warns us that those who forget their ancestors will not be wise in the way they look towards the future. Tonight I would like us to take Burke's advice to heart and give some thought to our past, our present and our future.

Our past

As we look to the past I'd like to reflect both on people of faith and their principles. Here in Scotland, we have some wonderful examples of people who have understood that a Christian faith must express itself in social and political life. These are the ancestors Burke was talking about, those who have gone before us in faith and in practical action. Thomas Chalmers was such a person. He was a man of conservative conviction and radical action. Chalmers was shaken to the core by the witness and example of the Christian Member of Parliament William Wilberforce. Wilberforce's faith in Christ and tireless works in service of the most needy made a profound impression on Chalmers, and inspired his work in his own community. As a minister in the East End of Glasgow in the early nineteenth century, Chalmers saw the enormous need for basic education amongst his parishioners.

And he did something about it. He organised schools which would meet the needs of the people. These schools were not free but were affordable. It was a simple act of kindness. But an act which invited others to take responsibility, as far as they could, for their own social improvement. He was sensitive to the needs of his neighbours. And he was also sensitive to the right approach to meeting those needs. Chalmers was a person of hope. And he understood that hope for a society is rooted in faith. Although we can't guess whether

Chalmers would claim to be a 'modern compassionate conservative' in today's sense, we could do worse than to remember his example. Conservative philosophy has always believed in encouraging small and local voluntary networks, like that initiated by Thomas Chalmers, because they strengthen civil society. Edmund Burke famously described these groups as the 'little platoons.' Many such platoons of faith and action are represented here tonight. Thomas Chalmers is just one example of conservative hope. We could equally think of many other great figures from our Scottish past, some more controversial than others. The role of faith in social and political responsibility has a long and inspiring history in Scotland. But what are the

principles which have guided our ancestors, these people of faith? I think there are three which stand out: participation, patience and practicality.

First, participation - or involvement. To have understanding which can lead to action requires that men and women are involved. Involved in the most needy parts of society, in prisons, in tough neighbourhoods, in special education, in care for the elderly. Involved in the pressing global issues of the day: preserving God's earth; promoting just corporate practices; pursuing the production of affordable medicines for the developing world. Involvement means being where people need help. People of Christian faith understand what it is to be helped by God. People of faith are close to those in need. People of faith are involved. Second, patience. It's no good being close to the tough situations our society faces if we don't stay there patiently. We need patience because the challenges we face today will not just disappear overnight. We also need patience to listen and learn about what challenges people are actually facing today. And we need patience to carry on working for the common good even when progress is very hard going. Patience means staying the course when things get difficult. People of Christian faith believe that God stays with His world even when the going gets tough. People of faith have been given that same staying power. People of faith are patient. Third, practicality. Involvement and patience should lead to practical plans for action. Practicality is about seeing the way to make the right thing happen. If you're in the thick of things and listening patiently you're probably seeing practical ways forward. Whether it's about community policing; legislation which is hampering small businesses or opportunities for adult education, there will be practical ways forward. People of Christian faith will be involved and patient. People of faith here tonight are patiently involved. The Conservative Party is committed to learning the practical ways forward which you are already implementing and then to help make things happen together. Faith inspires involvement, sustains patience and guides practicality. The Conservative party is committed to people of faith as we all work together for the common good. So with all this in mind, let's turn to the present.

Our present

Faith today still has a highly significant role to play in the social and political fabric of this nation. In my role as an MSP, I have the privilege of meeting with a number of faith based organisations who are making a real difference in the lives of their communities. In my own area of Perthshire, I have seen the sterling work been done by the YMCA in Perth city, and also CATH - Churches Action for the Homeless in Perth. I have also visited Bethany Christian Trust, who operate here in Edinburgh and in Fife, and who have built up a reputation for their work with the disadvantaged that is second to none.

Unfortunately, the important role that groups like these play in strengthening the fabric of our society has been overlooked too often in recent years. Groups like Bethany Trust or the excellent Unity Enterprises in Glasgow, are at the sharp end of dealing with social ills. And they do it far more effectively than central government can. But as well as giving local groups the patience and wisdom to serve their communities, faith also equips women and men for public service in elected office. Now I would like to say that this point that I believe strongly that no one political party should or could claim to have a monopoly when it comes to the Christian faith. As the Conservative peer Lord Griffiths said when giving the CCF Wilberforce Address some years ago: "The Christian religion is an account of eternal truth. It is an explanation of our origin and our destiny. It is about the purposes of God and the salvation of mankind... By contrast politics deals with something of a totally different character, namely the activity of governing world. It is an activity which is specific and limited... As a result no political doctrine, creed, ideology or even disposition should ever claim an exclusive status because it is in some way based uniquely on the Christian religion" I am therefore delighted that here in Scotland, there are Christian politicians active in all the mainstream political parties. I also very much hope we can continue to avoid the unhealthy polarisation of the Christian vote which we have seen in the United States, where the Republican Party has become so intimately entwined with the evangelical church. I want tonight to make the case that the best way for Christians to play their role in government today is through the established political parties. There is no one Christian party; no single practical Christian policy

on the NHS; no single practical Christian policy on the right level of taxation; no single practical Christian policy on methods of recruitment for the armed forces. However, well-intentioned Christians today are establishing their own political parties. I would warn my fellow Christians that this is not a helpful step. As I've already shown, there will be a diversity of views among Christians on a whole range of issues. But if you have a so-called Christian party then most people, like it or not, will think of that party's policies as the Christian policies.

But what if like me, you're a Christian, a member of the Conservative Party and happen to disagree with the so-called Christian party's policies on, let's say, education reform. To the rest of the country, it looks like a house divided. Worse still the name of Christ might be damaged. And as I understand it, there are already at least two Christian parties intent on fielding candidates in Scotland next year, which only serves to reinforce the impossibility of attracting a consensus behind one particular 'Christian' platform. I also worry that exclusively Christian parties may serve to undermine the efforts of believers in other parties. And even if candidates from Christian parties were successful in attaining elected office, they would be unlikely to form anything other than an extremely small rump with minimal influence over policy decisions. There would therefore be a real danger of the Christian voice being marginalised and Christian votes being effectively wasted. In this present time, I would respectfully suggest to my fellow Christians that what we need are Christians who are patiently involved in the mainstream political parties and who are coming up with practical ways forward in the rough and tumble of our nation's political life. Christian parties are not a practical way forward.

What then of the Conservative party at the moment? Well at a UK level, I believe David Cameron has done an excellent job in pushing issues of concern to many Christians, such as social justice and environmental degradation, up the political agenda. And here in Scotland, under the leadership of Annabel Goldie, we are at work developing ideas to renew the broken communities which continue to blight far too much of Scotland. To this end, we want to expand and develop the role of faith based organisations and the voluntary sector as a whole, by reducing the complex bureaucracy surrounding public procurement and supporting long term, secure funding for successful projects.

Our future

I said earlier that I was going to speak about a conservative hope and take to heart the advice of Edmund Burke. We've now looked to our ancestors and learnt from the principles of faith which they lived by. We've seen some of the good things we want to conserve in our heritage. And we've made an assessment of where we are in the present. But now, let's turn our minds to the future. What do conservatives hope for?

Conservatives, here in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, believe that rather than invest ever more powers in the state and it's associated agencies to solve the problems with our country, we instead need to build a stronger society and reinvigorate the tried and tested institutions on which this country is built. We need, for example, to stand up for the most important institution of them all – the family – and to actively support marriage, which the evidence tells us time and time again, is the best setting for the raising of children. We also need to renew respect for authority, the loss of which is responsible for so much of the crime and disorder that blights our streets, homes and classrooms. The Scottish Conservative party is currently in the process of a detailed policy review, and these are the sorts of issues which we hope will feed into our manifesto when it is published closer to the election.

I'm minded of William Wilberforce's great statement that 'The best hope for Britain is not in her fleet and armies, not so much in the wisdom of her rulers, but in the spirit of her people and in the persuasion that she still contains many who, in a degenerate age, love and obey the Gospel of Christ.' Of course, fleets, armies and governments are of great practical importance. But the point being made is something slightly different. The point is that

Christian faith instinctively looks to the past to gain hope for the future which can bring change in the present.

This is the hope which our nation needs. A hope which won't accept a mood of defeatism. Defeatists will say that drug addicts never change, that strong families are dead and gone, that political parties are for the power-hungry not the servant-hearted. A hope born out of faith will not accept such defeatism. Such a hope will carry on serving and working with every breath it takes.

Conclusion

Some people say that faith and politics don't mix. I think this kind of comment rather misses the point. More seriously it actually undermines hope by trying to separate God from His world. I've got two quick reasons for saying this and then I'll close. First, I think that there's more to life than politics. Politics is important but it's less important than the people it serves, the rest of society. Faith and society obviously mix. You see faith in churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship. You see faith in the words and deeds of the people of faith in all areas of life. Politicians who serve society will obviously want to understand people of faith and take the lead in supporting the great good work which is done in God's name across many parts of the land.

Second, I believe that there's more to life than society. Any nation which fails to recognise the reality of God in the world is in danger. But a nation which does recognise the importance of faith in God will be able to understand its own role in history and in the world. This is the way, as the apostle Paul writes, to 'quiet, peace, honour and godliness.'

Thank you for coming this evening and God bless you.

ENDS

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Notes to Editors

The Burke Address will take place on Thursday 9th November at

the Charlotte Chapel (in the Lower Hall), 204 Rose Street,

Edinburgh, EH2 4AZ, at 7.30pm.