

## **William Hague: how faith can tackle social exclusion**

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### **Social exclusion and disadvantage can be tackled by faith-based welfare programmes, by taking more account of faith, and by strengthening family and community.**

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When I met George W. Bush in Austin last year, I heard first-hand about the success which faith-based organisations have had in helping some of the most disadvantaged communities in Texas. Today, I will be meeting two of the people who have been most closely involved in the ideas and work of such organisations - Marvin Olasky, a Professor at Texas University, and Don Willett, from Governor Bush's policy team - to see what lessons we can learn from what they have achieved.

#### **What families worry about today**

For there are problems we both share. Twenty years ago, in Britain and the US, most parents' concerns for their children focused on economic questions such as whether work would be available for their children when they left school.

Today their concerns are more mixed. Broadcasting standards, the menace from drugs, fragile relationships and standards in schools tend to feature prominently.

In Britain, people look to political leaders to respond to these concerns but they often look in vain. The divide between politicians and people is most marked when it comes to questions of values. The messages from government and its agencies often appear to ride roughshod over the commonsense values of families throughout Britain. In response the defenders of the "new morality" argue that any talk of common values is fruitless and old-fashioned.

In his book *The Politics of Hope* Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, argued that most people accept the rightness of honesty, keeping out of crime, parental responsibility and fidelity. A still, small voice within them still speaks quietly but consistently against those sometimes powerful contrary instincts to make choices that would harm neighbours, partners or children. The Chief Rabbi delivers a warning that so much public policy "disconfirms" these instincts. The Government's recent abolition of the married couple's allowance, for example, sends the wrong message about the importance of family life.

The consequences of government policy's subversion of the public's values are most serious for those people who can afford it least. Middle-class families are often able to limit the fallout from wrong turns in a relation's life.

Strong families help a member to get through the consequences of an addiction, a debt problem or a failed relationship. But in Britain's poorest communities the support structures are often very weak and the problems may not arrive one at a time, but in droves.

#### **Parts the state cannot reach**

It is foolish to believe that extra social security or better macroeconomic policy alone will be enough to cure deep-seated problems of crime, family breakdown, poor environment and unemployment. When a life has been characterised by repeated setbacks a loss of confidence, hope and purpose results.

In some of Britain's poorest areas churches and other faith communities are pioneering innovative projects to help people to overcome multiple disadvantages. These projects appreciate the economic challenges facing individuals and their communities, but balance this

with consistent relational support and a spiritual message of hope.

In Manchester, for example, a number of Christian youthworkers have committed themselves to live on a council estate on a long-term basis. They are building friendships with the young people and hope to help them to make choices about relationships, crime and work that will rescue them from a dangerous cycle of deprivation.

In a disadvantaged part of Liverpool a number of church workers visit 350 children at least once every week. The weekly visit happens regardless of the weather and is vital for children who have little constancy in their lives. Once a week those children know that whatever problems they may be facing at home, at school or on the streets, there will be a visit from a genuine friend who is concerned for them and their welfare.

Last December I visited a Christian-run drug rehabilitation centre, with a good record of success compared to secular alternatives. Some of the success was undoubtedly due to the testimony of some of the people working there, who had themselves had addiction problems in their past. They had found forgiveness and the chance of a fresh start in Christian teaching. The approach deserves close study in an age when so many government initiatives have failed to deliver.

If future public policy is going seriously to address disadvantage, we need to have an honest debate about the range of challenges that are involved. We need to encourage a diverse range of responses.

That will include a more generous acknowledgement of the role of faith communities. Successful faith-based programmes are often denied government funds because of their spiritual foundations and the European Union's proposed Employment Directive may seriously imperil their independence. I will fight to protect the independence of faith-based projects as well as the right of potential users of such programmes to choose a secular alternative.

Policy must also recognise that the most compassionate characteristic of a policy to tackle social exclusion is honesty. We must be honest about the consequences of family breakdown and the absence of fathers in children's lives. We must do more to prevent children missing out on a basic education. And we cannot assume that the availability of job opportunities will be enough for some people who lack the support and encouragement required to sustain employment.

The confused messages currently given out by public policy, the disregard for the faith dimension in national life and the failure to promote the family all need to be addressed. Britain's social problems will not be solved quickly but we need to start soon if the patterns of disadvantage that characterise some of our poorest communities are to be contained.