

PAUL DONOVAN

# New Labour, old prejudice

Catholic MPs and ordinary members of the party believe that powerful elements within Labour are becoming hostile to the Church. Such a bias could have serious consequences for the party's electoral fortunes – and for Gordon Brown's desire to do business with the Churches

A number of Catholics are becoming increasingly uncomfortable about the recent actions of the Labour Party. First, there was the faith schools debate, when Education Secretary Alan Johnson inserted an amendment in the Education Bill that would force all new faith schools to take 25 per cent of non-believers. Then came the gay adoption row, in which the Government is seeking to force Catholic adoption agencies to be prepared to place children with gay couples. The increasingly tense atmosphere between Government and Church has caused some to question whether Catholics still have a place in the Labour Party.

At Westminster there is some evidence of an aggressive secularist faction within the party. For example, a new Labour Humanist Group was launched last week in the House of Lords, with the avowed intention of "opposing faith schools". The result is that some Catholics say that they are feeling under pressure in the party in a way that has not been seen for many years. The result may be a turning away by Catholics that would have serious electoral consequences for the party. Alternatively, the attacks could have a galvanising effect on Catholic members, leading to a new assertion of rights. Certainly, from the viewpoint of the leadership, a Catholic boycott could have serious electoral implications.

To see what can happen when political parties turn their backs on Catholics, the Labour leadership need look no further than the last American presidential election. There in 2004, some 52 per cent of Catholics voted for George Bush compared to 47 per cent for his Democrat Catholic opponent, John Kerry. Had the Catholics supported Mr Kerry, Mr Bush would not now be in the White House. Notably, the US Catholic hierarchy made clear in advance its displeasure over Mr Kerry's ambivalent position on abortion.

If the church leadership indicated that Catholics should not support the Labour Party in the next election in the United Kingdom, because of its position on, say, faith schools or medical ethics, there could be serious electoral consequences, especially given that Catholics traditionally vote Labour in high numbers.

Some 53 per cent of Catholics voted Labour in the last election, according to MORI, compared to just 36 per cent in the overall population. Catholics are also relatively pro-

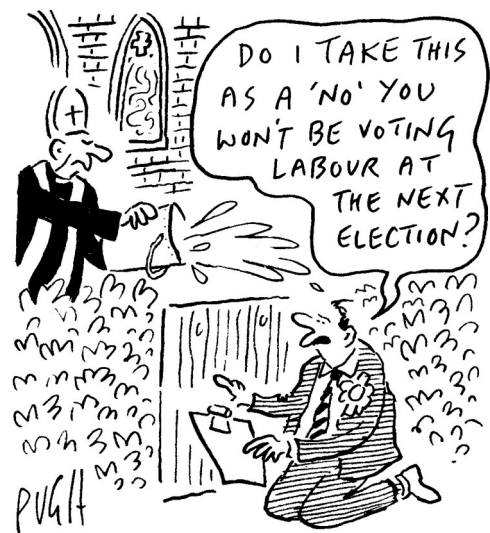
Labour compared to other Christian groups, among whom just 31 per cent supported Labour in that election.

The MORI poll also found considerable regional variations, with Catholics most widespread in London, Scotland and particularly the North-West (where one person in five is Catholic). They are most thinly spread in Wales and the South-West.

At grassroots level there is certainly a feeling among some Labour Party activists of being under attack. Greg Eglin, a Catholic former councillor and Constituency Labour Party (CLP) member in east London's Leyton and Wanstead ward, declares there is an anti-faith and anti-Catholic attitude gaining momentum in the party. Mr Eglin recalls the issue arising at the last constituency meeting. "There were two questions that came up. They were, 'why is the left of the party doing this?' and 'why are we seeking to alienate a group [Catholics] that votes by so much in favour of the Labour Party?'" said Mr Eglin, adding that Catholics stayed with the party in greater numbers in the last election than any other religious group. But Mr Eglin does not believe the Labour Party is unique in terms of being anti-Catholic. "Remember the Conservative Lord Baker is trying to reintroduce his 25 per cent non-believer quota for faith schools in the House of Lords," said Mr Eglin.

The Catholic CLP member and former Labour leader of Hull Council, Patrick Doyle, agrees that the Labour Party is not the only anti-Catholic body in Westminster. On the other hand, he believes that Catholics have had quite an easy ride until recently. "There are more MPs in Parliament now who call themselves Catholic. And over the last 10 years there has been less pressure on issues like abortion," said Mr Doyle, who believes many Catholic interests have been well served by the party, particularly in terms of increases in overseas aid and the attitude – until recently – towards faith schools.

Mr Doyle believes the danger of Labour losing votes is greater in Scotland, because of the particular voting choices there, than south of the border. "In Scotland there are other alternatives, but in England the other parties are as anti-Catholic as the Labour Party, if not



more so," said Mr Doyle, who believes the recent difficulties should prompt the Catholic Church to upgrade its own lobbying structures. "How well organised are parish and pastoral councils? If we aren't organised and ready to raise issues then Catholics will lose out," said Mr Doyle, who wrote to his local Hull MP, Alan Johnson, on both the faith schools and gay adoption issues. "We must be ready to raise issues and lobby. Writing a letter is fine, but there must be direct visits made to the MPs."

Stephen Mathews, vice-chairman of the Christian Socialist Movement and a Catholic member of the Labour Party, believes that the pressure on the Church from the Labour Party is simply a reflection of attitudes in the wider society. Mr Mathews thinks the gay adoptions row should act as a wake-up call to the Church, showing that it cannot expect exemptions that allow it to discriminate. "It is a step too far," said Mr Mathews, who believes that the Church is happier talking publicly about sex-related issues than, say, about poverty. He qualifies this point by admitting that the media have little interest in the Church's views on many social issues, but are keen to report stories with a "sex" angle.

A Catholic member of the Hammersmith and Fulham CLP, Moya St Leger, is less willing to exonerate Labour, and believes that Catholics in the party do now feel under attack. "It is the first time for a hundred years that we have had to fight our corner in such a way as the present," said Ms St Leger.

The Southampton Itchen CLP member Francis Davis goes further, insisting that hostility to Catholics is not simply linked to faith schools or gay adoption. "Student pro-lifers of the late Eighties often relate how ferocious elements of what became New Labour can be," said Mr Davis. "Local parties are now collapsing as the Blair effect wanes and with it disappears any semblance of an attempt to treat a life of faith seriously. This must be difficult for Gordon Brown, because all the better-known candidates for deputy leader are pandering to this, on the one hand, and on the other are allergic to any mention of the very faith communities that the Chancellor sees as key to his 'new progressive coalition.'"

**J**im Dobbin, the Labour MP for Rochdale and a Catholic, sees a real electoral danger in alienating Catholics. "A high percentage of Catholics vote Labour and there is also a good representation among the membership and in the trade unions," said Mr Dobbin.

The MP for Dagenham, Jon Cruddas, a candidate for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party and also a Catholic, is in no doubt about the damage that could be done to Labour's electoral chances if anti-Catholic attacks continue. "Those behind the attacks fail to understand the strength of the Catholic constituency – not just as voters backing Labour but also as activists throughout the party in every constituency and among the unions and many MPs," said Mr Cruddas. While relations between Church and party might have reached a long-time low point, the MP believes the Church has a vital role to play in terms of confronting injustice through the Labour Party. "Real concerns are now being registered by mainstream Catholic MPs in the party with a renewed desire to articulate policies informed by Catholic social teachings," said Mr Cruddas. "The fightback is being developed around the living wage, migration, the fight against Trident ... There is something of a return to class politics around a renewed onslaught against poverty."

Mr Cruddas is keen to push the doors of the Labour Party wide open again, and to reclaim its identity as a broad church. "You might say I am a Catholic who is determined to mobilise and help build this new coalition. This is what the deputy leadership [contest] is about – contesting the terms of current debate and returning the party to what it has been before, a vehicle for radical economic and social change," said Mr Cruddas, who believes some aspects of the new Immigration Bill – to be given its second reading over the next fortnight – may provide issues around which MPs could mobilise.

There are certainly pressures being put on Catholic supporters of the Labour Party from many sides. The leadership needs to realise that what the Catholic constituency brings to the party far outweighs any perceived drawbacks. A Labour Party without Catholics would be a shallow vessel indeed, and one less likely to win any future election.

■ Paul Donovan is a freelance journalist.

**MONA SIDDIQUI**

## 'Eradication must be total. There can be no room for just a little bit of discrimination'



Hardly a month goes by without the spectre of yet another clash between religion and state, or at least that's how the papers sell it to us. The latest row, over legislation that will force all adoption agencies including faith-based agencies to accept applications from gay couples, led to accusations of homophobia and a debate about the role of conscience.

It is not surprising that the row over the Catholic Church's position on same-sex adoption in particular garnered so much coverage in the press. The media love a good religion row, especially when it concerns sexual ethics. And if you have religious piety on the one hand and secularism on the other you have all the makings of a great divide. The debate has been presented as if it is cleanly split between people of faith and those who profess to not having any faith, with each side at the opposite ends of any moral spectrum.

In matters of sex and sexuality, Muslims are perceived to have identical morals to Catholics, so it came as no surprise that certain Muslim organisations were supportive of the Church, also calling on the Government to desist from insisting on a measure that would be contrary to people's consciences. This was frustrating, partly because sex and sexuality are far more complex areas in Islam than most Muslims would like to believe and also because simplistic condemnation or defence of sexual issues can no longer be the way in which faith responds to the complexities of human existence.

While we should have the right to follow our conscience, let us not delude ourselves into thinking that conscience is a private and personal matter. Rather, a person's conscience speaks in the very nature of their relationships with one another. Conscience can awaken the sublime in us all but it can equally be used to justify prejudice and discrimination. It is true that our scriptural traditions have largely been read as essentially inimical to homosexuality, not only that homosexual acts are wrong but that they are sinful in the eyes of God.

Thus the burden of arguing against these positions weighs heavily upon the shoulders of anyone who wants to contest such beliefs. I am also aware that formulating and selling an argument intellectually is not the same as accepting it emotionally. Yet, if homosexuality is accepted as part of the diversity of the human condition, if our Government has deemed fit to make illegal any sort of discrimination, whether it be on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation, it is inevitable that this eradication must be total; there can be no room for just a little bit of discrimination.

Many people will regard this recent decision as symptomatic of the slow erosion of religious influence upon state decisions. Yet, if we are all to be treated as equal citizens, then the ills committed in the name of our faith and culture, should be equally condemned. This is why it is so frustrating that the Government remains reluctant to take on the issue of forced marriages still practised by certain British Asians. Why is the Government so afraid of talking about this issue? I suspect ministers fear it will upset religious sensitivities in our already fragmented society. Ignoring this abusive practice will do nothing to help sustain community cohesion, for minority groups are not exempt from the challenges of human rights issues; they too must tackle those practices which depend on silencing and coercing people into unhappy and undesirable relationships. Such a practice needs not only to be condemned but should be outlawed.

The Qur'an, all too often regarded as the repository of Muslim morality, does not allow for such coercive and unjust practices, but many Muslim cultures have to varying degrees allowed them to continue for the sake of honour and lineage. So who will speak for the repressed, the marginal and the frightened? The state cannot talk about equality for its citizens but exclude minorities for its own convenience; rather it has a moral duty to view all its citizens as equals and so engage those in minorities in constructive debates. If this means criticising certain entrenched thinking then so be it – even if interference causes destabilisation. Such a change may be politically inconvenient but it is morally necessary.

■ Mona Siddiqui is Professor of Islamic Studies and Public Understanding in the Department for Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow.