

Conscience or Compromise?

How can you remain faithful to your Christian beliefs when you're committed to a political party? Do Christian MPs leave their conscience at the Commons front door and follow the party line on everything? Alistair Burt gives his view.

Many Christians worry that politicians are in constant turmoil as we make tough political decisions, which daily tear at our consciences, and that we largely give up any perspective other than our own party's interest. They believe we 'compromise' as if it were the most evil of political tricks. Relax. This is not the case. Compromise has a role in life, and I will come to compromise in politics in a moment, but let me deal with 'conscience issues' first.

Conscience issues

MOST MATTERS WHICH come to Parliament on which Christian conscience is exercised are not subject to any 'party' view, or to pressure from 'whips', those MPs whose job it is to ensure that MPs vote for their party's proposals. Issues such as abortion, embryo experimentation, divorce law reform, capital punishment and euthanasia are not subject to party discipline and MPs in all parties have different views. When such issues are discussed there are 'free' votes, so you need not worry that Christian MPs are compromised. Many of these issues are of great importance to our national life, and Christians should feel free to raise them with candidates during election campaigns.

And, of course, not all the decisions we are asked to take involve major ethical considerations. A decision on what form of local government we have, say whether or not to have regional assemblies, is not a moral, but a purely practical question. Colleagues may hold different views, but none would see it as a matter of conscience if the party asked them to vote in a particular way.

Compromise is not a dirty word

DO WE AGREE with absolutely everything our parties say? No, this is highly unlikely. If we did, there would be nothing to work on to change in our party's stance. But on balance, we agree to support party policy

because we agree with those aspects of policy which we strongly support, and we will have accepted that another point of view is in the majority on another issue.

In time we may find out that we are either right or wrong! It is rather like a PCC, or any committee you may be a member of. Are you right all the time? If a decision goes against you, do you walk out, unable to accept it? Or do you put your concerns to one side and work for the common goal? And if you do, do you feel your conscience is scarred forever?!

I suspect that you, like us, stick the course. If a particular issue is so against our point of view that we have to declare it, then there is room in our parties for this to be done. Parties are not fixed and monolithic. They represent a balance of views, and they evolve and change as the world we serve moves and changes. If we cannot accept the 'party line', the agreed collective decision, then the whips have to be told. They will try and persuade, but sometimes you have to stick to your guns and vote the way you believe you must. But this really does not happen all the time. You cannot be an expert on everything, and sometimes you take colleagues' advice, and support a measure even if you are a little unsure.

Ebb and flow

I BELIEVE GOVERNMENT could not function without this ebb and flow. Sometimes the process yields change. Reaching a consensus decision involves people being prepared to take rather less than 100%

Alistair Burt



Alistair Burt is the MP for North-East Bedfordshire. He entered Parliament in 1983 at the age of 28 as MP for Bury North, his home town. He was a Minister of State in John Major's government, but lost his seat in 1997. Returning in 2001, he was Shadow Minister for Higher and Further Education, before becoming Parliamentary Private

Secretary to both Iain Duncan Smith and now Michael Howard.

'I was much influenced by my father's life of service in Bury as a family doctor and was inspired by a local church where a number of members were involved from all major parties.

I have a passion to support Christians at work, believing this is a much neglected field of affirmation and mission. My work gives me the opportunity to be involved in God's world in a hard place, where decisions have consequences, and where we must interpret the needs of a fallen world with truth and grace.

My concerns are for our divided community where modern life is making it increasingly difficult for some to be engaged, for the sad consequences of relationship failure and for the developing world - an area where increasing public interest has been a positive story during my twenty years in Parliament.'

of their point of view. Our everyday life would be impossible if we did not work this way, so why be judgemental of politicians for doing the same? Many MPs, working together, have produced changes in government policy by refusing to accept the detail and arguing for amendment, then accepting something better than was first on the table.

Conscience and principle are important to the vast majority of MPs when they decide to come into public life. Perhaps the concentration on all those things that are difficult, and the national obsession with finding blame when things go wrong has blinded Christians to how much is achieved at all levels of local and national government. Conscience and compromise both have their place in life, and can play their part in successful politics.