

# Conflict and Cooperation

**M**edia reporting of politics often emphasises division, difference and confrontation. Stephen Timms explains that the day-to-day work of an MP is very different and that divisions are not always along party lines.

The working life of a government minister may not appeal to many Christians. It involves handling conflict, day in and day out, and being on the job 18 hours a day and six and a half days per week. And yet, Christians recognise that they should play their part in shaping the future of our society.

## *Handling conflict*

THE CHALLENGE OF handling conflict should not keep Christians out of politics. Many Christians I meet are very interested in politics – in the life of their community and their country – but avoid political activism because they believe it involves constant moral dilemmas. Should I obey God or go along with the party? They believe that the position of a government minister must be completely impossible, unless he or she sells out altogether and just maintains a purely nominal faith commitment.

I try and persuade them that the reality is very different. Those dilemmas are actually extremely rare – and handling them is only a tiny proportion of our work. Being a politician involves making constant choices, though, about a wide variety of subjects, and the way we make those choices – as well as the decisions themselves – have a profound impact on other people. If our approach is to co-operate with others – listening to their viewpoints and working hard to understand them – the decisions we make will be better decisions. It's vital that Christians don't just vacate the public arena, leaving other people to make all the choices, and then complaining when they don't agree with the outcome.

The choices we make as politicians are no harder than the choices other Christians have to make in the workplace. What is different is that our choices are very public. When people disagree, they may express their disagreement in pretty strong terms – and rightly so. And the

fact that they might be right doesn't make it any easier. Let me give you an example.

## *Challenging government thinking*

ARRIVING AT THE Treasury one day, I found it surrounded by a human chain of Jubilee 2000 campaigners – many of them Christians. They were calling on the government to cancel the debts owed to it by the world's poorest countries. I wished that they would at least acknowledge that we were trying to do our best to tackle poverty in the developing world.

But the campaigners were right. The government has since taken the steps they were calling for. This year Britain has the Presidency of the G7, comprising the world's wealthiest countries. We are heeding the call of the Make Poverty History campaign to underline the case for rich countries to provide more help to the poor. The Prime Minister and Chancellor have paid tribute to the work of the churches on this subject. It has been a remarkable example of Christians changing the public mood through campaigning – and bringing about radical change as a result. The campaign has proved justified and effective.

## *Community involvement*

WE HAVE SEEN very effective faith community involvement in a range of other aspects of government work. The government's New Deal programme is one of the reasons for unemployment having been dramatically cut. And some of the best and most imaginative contributions to

## **Stephen Timms**



Stephen Timms grew up in a Labour-supporting family in a Conservative area, and became a Christian as a teenager through a Crusaders Bible class near his school in Farnborough, Hampshire.

As a maths student at Cambridge University, much of his free time was spent with the Christian Union. One summer he helped on a two-week tent

mission in Newham, East London, sleeping in a dusty church hall adjoining a railway viaduct. He loved it and was inspired by Christians who lived out their faith showing practical biblical concern for disadvantaged people.

After graduation Stephen started work in a software company in London and went to live in Newham where he joined the church planted by the mission team. He also joined the Labour Party. He became a Councillor and – from 1990 to 1994 – was Leader of Newham Council. In 1994 the local MP died suddenly, and Stephen Timms won the by-election as the Labour candidate. 60% of his constituents are from an ethnic minority – the highest proportion of any constituency. He has worked as a Minister in Social Security, Treasury, Education and Trade and Industry departments and is currently Financial Secretary to the Treasury.

the New Deal have been from the churches. I want to see Christians actively getting involved in such projects and using that experience to take on wider political responsibility.

## *Sustaining commitment*

A SECOND OBJECTION to political involvement, though – and in my view a better justified one – is the impact on family life. Being a minister is an all-consuming job – Monday to Thursday in the department from early until late, followed by Friday and Saturday in the constituency and Sunday afternoon doing the red boxes. It demands a very high level of commitment and there is a tension with the demands of family.

And yet, the Christian faith understands commitment. Christians have a good grounding for commitment – and the

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