



## State Expectations

Paul Bickley

*UCCF and bethinking.org offer this paper to encourage consideration of these important political topics, but do not endorse any particular view on these issues. An alternative view is given in Philip Vander Elst's article *Power Against People*.*

### STATE EXPECTATIONS

Politics has taken some serious hits recently – the expenses scandal has succeeded in plunging politicians to a new low in terms of public perceptions. The 2010 General Election campaign has done little to restore trust. For all the parties' talk about a new, reformed and more transparent politics, it has in the main been fought using the old dark arts of spin, counter spin and the refusal to give a straight answer to a straight question.

Scandal has exacerbated the ill-effects of artificially inflated expectations. In 1997 the Labour Party's general election campaign went under the slogan, *'things can only get better'*. After Blair's landslide, it seemed indeed as if Britain had turned a corner and had become a different kind of country – a *'cool Britannia'*. As with Blair, so with Obama: governing is far trickier than being elected.

And if, as Mario Cuomo said, campaigns are delivered in poetry and government in prose, we know the quality of the prose is mixed. Governments can be more or less effective within their sphere of influence. Why? Is this simply a matter of getting sufficiently skilled officials in place, developing sophisticated enough systems to deal with particular problems or focusing

enough financial resources on a given service? Or is there a more foundational set of issues at play? Is a government's seeming lack of proficiency actually indicative of a lack of legitimate function? Do governments fail in particular areas because they are seeking to do what, innately, they have no business doing?

In other words, what is the role of Government? This is the most basic question of political theory. It is one which, while making the occasional appearance (cf. Margaret Thatcher's *'rolling back the frontiers of the state'*) has not been really been a mainstay of a British politics, dominated as it has been by a remarkably enduring compact between state and people. We have consented to be governed and pay relatively high taxes in return for the state's provision of moderately comprehensive public services. There has of course been significant disagreements about the place of the market model in those services, but there would be very few British politicians now prepared to argue that the state should not, for instance, provide healthcare which is *'free at the point of delivery'*.<sup>[1]</sup> The comparison with the heated debates in the United States over Obama's modest healthcare insurance proposals is striking.

### GETTING MORE FOR LESS?

After the expensive bank bailout and the recession which followed, all political parties have acknowledged the need to make cut backs in state spending. The Conservative Party have aligned this with a more philosophical argument about the 'Big Society'. Taking place of the 'Big State', the Big Society will ask 'ordinary' people to control, and occasionally deliver public services. Probably reflecting the fact that the Labour has wedded itself to market capitalism, the Big Society will not see the 'rolling back' of the state for the sake of the freedom of the market. Instead, it will be for the sake of civil society.

This combines notions of community empowerment and the engagement of the 'Third Sector' with an older liberal / conservative suspicion of the state as not only inefficient and ineffective, but also as an agency whose activity actively damages human flourishing through the curtailment of essential human goods like freedom and choice. The state has no positive function, since it *'is essentially a coercive*

*institution owing to its monopolistic control of the police and the armed forces'. According to this line of argument the state's proper role, in a theologically freighted phrase, should be limited to the restraint of evil. Christians – evangelicals in particular – have often pleaded texts like 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7 in support of this view.*

*Power Against People: A Christian Critique of the State*, an Institute of Economic Affairs paper by Philip Vander Elst, is an example of just such an argument against big government made from a Christian perspective. The paper – which is well worth reading for the full critique – concludes:

*The tragedy of history is that so many millions of small but valuable lives have been trampled upon and crushed by the predatory State, a process that continues to this day. In the face of this fact, it must be the job of Christians, above all others, to remind people, once again, that whereas this world and its institutions are passing away, God created every human being in His image to share His life and love in His eternal kingdom. That means that the individual, with his immortal soul, is infinitely precious and may not be sacrificed to the transient idol of State Power.[2]*

If Philip Vander Elst is right, then there are a number of implications for how Christians should behave in the public square, including possible changes to the causes on which they seek to promote government action. Bluntly, it also has implications for how they should vote.

But there is no official understanding of the role of Government amongst Christians through the ages.[3] Rather, there has been and continues to be a plurality of understandings, all of which highlight some important themes, usually depending on the social conditions from which they emerge. They tend to have some common themes, being drawn from the same biblical narrative and from the experience of the Church, but few of them could be used to sponsor modern statist or *laissez faire* ideological positions. Rather a biblical account will offer vision of Government as both limited and legitimate.

## LIMITED AND LEGITIMATE

The theological case against the state is

frequently built on a particular biblical anthropology. This anthropology emphasises the fall – because of it, so the argument goes, human beings cannot live together in harmony without the protection of government. Equally, the flawed character of the human beings that run government means that it poses a threat of either tyranny or negligence. *Ipsa facto*, the appropriate sphere of operation for government is to prevent human beings doing harm to each other by maintaining the threat of greater force.

Most political theologians would agree that the Bible is profoundly ambivalent about the state – not least because of the experience of persecution by early Christians. The book of Revelation's metaphor of the Roman imperial government as a predatory 'beast' is one chilling biblical warning of the capacity of the state to acquire idolatrous characteristics. Even Israel's monarchy is compromised from its beginning.[4] To focus on this alone, however, is to ignore a substantial proportion of the biblical tradition and important biblical themes.

Rather, Christian reflection on the role of government should be through the wide-angle lens of creation, fall and redemption.[5]

In creation, Adam and Eve were called to fill the earth and '*subdue it*'. Alongside other independent and diffuse centres of responsibility, including the family, tribe, and individual, political authority is a proper and intended part of creation. It is not, therefore, simply a convenient way of managing post-lapsarian human brutishness, but a part of the so-called 'cultural mandate'. On the other hand, political authority is as thoroughly spoilt by sin and evil as anything else in creation, and thus needs to be continually reminded that it is limited, conditional and delegated. But things are expected of it: when the prophets emerge later in the biblical narrative to declare God's judgement against abuses of economic and political power, what is declaimed is often sins of omission, '*you have not...*'[6] In the same way, it is open to the redemptive influence of the Gospel, and can be drawn towards acts of justice and mercy.

One key aspect of this would be the recognition of a fundamental human equality.[7] This is implicit in the creation narrative, in which all are descendants of one couple.[8] We see it in the

universality of sin and the universal need of redemption.[9]

It is an explicit condition of the communities constituted by both the new and the old covenant. For the people of Israel, the land was divided up according to tribes and families to ensure roughly proportionate access to the means of production.[10] The Jubilee system periodically reversed the accumulated debt and inequality in favour of the original distribution.[11] The law codes were distinguished from other contemporaneous codes of the Ancient Near East by the absence of class-based punishments depending on the status of the parties.

Jesus' ministry seemed to intensify these commitments. It was radically inclusive, extending to rich and poor, men and women, foreigners and fellow-citizens, the socially excluded and the respectable. In the early church, Paul was concerned to wean the Thessalonians off their dependence on abusive client-patron relationships, encouraging each to work for themselves, so that they could in turn be generous to those in need.[12] He asked the Corinthians to be more intentional about their financial support for the poverty-stricken church in Jerusalem, contending that there should be 'equality' between the two communities.[13]

None of this necessarily entails a particular view of government. Neither Israel nor the Church, in so far as they achieved equality in their social and economic life (and we know that the value of equality was often recognised in the breach), had done so through the agency of anything that we would call 'the state'. The point here is not to suggest that the state should be shaped along any allegedly biblical model (which would be a travesty of the distinctive eschatological function of the church), but to allow that both Israel and the church are pointers to the kind of life toward which God wills the whole of creation through redemption. The key political question becomes not 'how big should the state be', but 'how can governments be drawn towards actions that recognise a rounded vision of human dignity and equality?'

Only in the light of this more rounded theological anthropology can we begin to assess what are thought to be the key New Testament passages

on government, such as 1 Peter 2:13-17 and Romans 13:1-7. Both suggest that the authority of government is legitimate, established by God, so one should submit to it. Government *does* exist to restrain evil by punishing the wrongdoer, but *also* to promote good by commending those who do right. Governing is a work of God, and those who do the work of God are entitled to the support of his people.

## WHAT DOES THAT MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Christian political categories, it seems, cannot easily be mapped onto the polar opposite big or small state categories that have often dominated late modern political discourse. We cannot avoid the hard work of imagining and examining, in our own time and place, what the specific roles and 'size' of the state ought to be. That is a core task for 'public theology', which responds to biblical motifs by developing themes which aspire to give them substance in contemporary political contexts. Catholic Social Teaching, for example, has offered up solidarity, subsidiarity and the common good.

None of this will allow us to set the role of Government in stone – different thinkers within the Catholic tradition would, for example, preference subsidiarity over solidarity or *vice versa*, leading to a very different perception of the purposes of the state. But to ask that the state orientates itself to the common good, even if that does not lead straightway to a blueprint for political institutions, calls for a substantial change in perspective – as Jonathan Chaplin points out, Christians may hold different points of view on the appropriate architecture of an education system, but they could agree that it is not enough for education to be described and delivered for the purposes of economic achievement, rather than moral and social maturity.[14]

The 'Christian perspective' on the role and purpose of government will combine reflection on prevailing social, political and economic conditions at a given time, as well as attentive listening to the witness of Scripture and the wider Christian tradition. Added to this should be the recognition that social change is never achieved by the state alone – rather, as R.H. Tawney pointed out, the state responds to the sentiment and values of its wider culture:

*All that statute can do is reduce a philosophy into sections which are sufficiently clear to be understood even by lawyers. Hence the great days of Parliament are when there is outside Parliament and in society a general body of ideas which Parliament can apply... Nor is the modern futility of Parliament due to mechanical difficulties, which can be removed by mechanical remedies, such as revolution. It is due to the absence of a generally accepted philosophy of life. Our task is to create one.*[15]

Unlike his contemporaries, the famous Fabians Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Tawney was appropriately suspicious of those who thought that human life, or human economies, could be closely managed by the state. Without a proper view of human dignity and relationships, the power of both could and does result in oppression.

Historically, social change has most often been effected by movements within civil society – from the anti-slavery movement to trade unionism – harnessing the state to just causes.

In so doing, civil society achieves what it cannot achieve alone.

## References:

[1] Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan did so in a Fox News TV interview in the United States. This prompted a popular Twitter rebuttal campaign, #welovetheNHS. Conservative Party Leader, David Cameron, distanced himself from Daniel Hannan, saying he had a rather ‘eccentric’ point of view and that he had done ‘the NHS a disservice’. The idea that the view is somehow weird is instructive of the strength of the social / liberal democratic view of the state.

[2] Philip Vander Elst, ‘Power Against People: A Christian Critique of the State’, *Institute of Economic Affairs Discussion Paper*, No. 21, p.37.

[3] Theos and the Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics, have recently published a collection of essays on different Christian perspectives on the role of Government under the title, *God and Government*. This provides the basis for many of the arguments in this short paper, though it cannot do justice to the wide variety of perspectives in the book, including

some which lend themselves very much to a ‘small’ view of the state.

[4] 1 Samuel 8:6-18.

[5] See Nigel Wright, ‘Government as an ambiguous power’ in Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds., *God and Government*, SPCK, 2009, pp.16-38.

[6] See Jeremiah 22:3, 13-17; cf. 21:11-12, Micah 3:9-10.

[7] See Julian Rivers, ‘The nature and role of government in the Bible’, and Andrew Bradstock, ‘Government and equality’, both in *God and Government*, pp.40-60, 180-204, respectively.

Neither of these authors treats equality as a purely material or economic dynamic. Rather, equality is set within a view of reformed human relations. R.H. Tawney, for instance, understood that pure redistribution would be pointless, if not accompanied by a resolved set of human relations. Men would be left ‘gawping for more’.

[8] Genesis 3:20; Acts 17:26.

[9] Romans 3:23-24.

[10] Deuteronomy 3:12-20; Joshua 13-22.

[11] Leviticus 25.

[12] 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10.

[13] 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

[14] Chaplin, *God and Government*, pp.230-231.

[15] Quoted by Wright, *RH Tawney*, Manchester University Press, 1987, p.18.

## © 2010 Paul Bickley

Theos, the public theology think tank, provide many resources on social and political issues. Go to [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk) for more information.

Find out more about *God and Government*.

The views expressed here are those of the author and not those of UCCF or **bethinking.org**.