

Church & State – Church versus State?



*The Rev'd Dr. Nicholas Henderson
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The British Prime Minister, apparently stung by the whole bench of Anglican Bishops in the House of Lords, has denied that it is his wish to expel them from the British second chamber.ⁱ

Rumblings amongst Boris Johnson's ministers have followed the publication of a letter from 25 Bishops stating that the policy of sending some migrants who arrived from across the English Channel to Rwanda is 'immoral'.ⁱⁱ The letter says: "Whether or not the first deportation flight leaves Britain today [12th June 2022] for Rwanda, this policy should shame us as a nation." This letter had in turn closely followed the Prince of Wales who is alleged to have said privately that the policy of effective deportation to Africa is "appalling".

The fact that the only other country in the world (apart from the Vatican) with religious leaders in the legislature is Iran, does not detract from the close involvement of the English Bishops with the leadership of the country from Saxon times. Whenever the government of the day appears to move away from what might be described as a consensus of reasonable action, the Church of England, usually in the form of its Bishops, steps up critically on behalf of the nation. That is its role. A memorable example of this was during the archiepiscopate of Robert Runcie and premiership of Margaret Thatcher when the Church produced the formative 'Faith in the City' report about the plight of the poor in the inner cities. Published in the autumn of 1985 it called on the government to adopt a number of social reforms. It was immediately accused (before its publication) by an unnamed Conservative minister of being "pure Marxist theology".

There appears to be a distinct propensity towards a centralisation of power under the present Conservative Johnson regime with a tendency to undermine parliamentary accountability and centralise power in the hands of the executive.ⁱⁱⁱ This with an apparent disregard for normal ethical considerations is exemplified by the recent resignation of Lord Geidt the prime minister's advisor on ministerial interests. Geidt is the second person to resign as Johnson's ethics adviser during his fewer than three years as Prime Minister.

All this has as an interesting backdrop the very recent vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister, which he survived but with 41% of his members of parliament voting against him and later in June two crucial by-elections are to be held. Scarcely has there been a more critical time for the British government and the moderating influence of the Bishops of the Church of England ought to be welcome.

In the meantime, what is fast becoming a proxy war is still raging in Ukraine where innocent civilians are subject to a daily barrage of bombing and artillery

fire with the destruction of their homes, livelihoods and their lives. Many war crimes committed against the Ukrainians are alleged, with much credibility.

Meanwhile in Russia Church and State have taken on a traditional thoroughgoing Erastian relationship with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Rus firmly in support of Vladimir Putin's imperialistic invasion. Famously, Winston Churchill in 1939 defined Russia as "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." He meant an inscrutable land that plays by its own dangerous rules, regardless of any other probity. Unsurprisingly, a growing chorus is becoming louder to expel the Russian Orthodox Church from The World Council of Churches.

Ukrainian refugees are also now a significant and growing reality. Unlike other European countries the British response to these has at best thus far been half-hearted. The need for a Christian conscience in our governing bodies has rarely been more needed.

It is good to remember then that the British House of Lords always starts its sessions with prayers led by one of the Lords Spiritual.

ⁱ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10919587/No10-says-no-plans-kick-bishops-House-Lords-criticised-Rwanda-migrant-plan.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/immoral-rwanda-policy-shames-britain-say-archbishops-bq55d7gm0>

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https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00323217211063730?_cf_chl_tk=5WheDHOKK3SsIKdCmTTqHLJCap4wJQzgHQ40U9UGHbM-1655325110-0-gaNycGzNB5E