

**3rd March 2023**

**Bishops' Conference of Scotland**

**Explanatory Note on the Relationship between Politics and Conscience**

In the course of Scotland's civic and political history, the values of freedom of thought, conscience and religion have been hard won and are now recognised as fundamental human rights. At the same time, our recent equalities' legislation accords religion and belief the status of protected characteristics because they are considered especially vulnerable to discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

In his address to parliamentarians and civic leaders in Westminster Hall in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI praised our parliamentary system for its particular vision of the respective rights and duties of the state and the individual, which he said remains an inspiration to peoples across the globe. It has raised up politicians admired by believers and non-believers alike for the integrity with which they followed their conscience even at the cost of displeasing the powers that be. In the process, it has emerged as a pluralist democracy which places great value on freedom of speech and political affiliation with a strong sense of the individual's rights and duties, and of the equality of all citizens before the law.

Turning to the relationship of faith and politics, he proposed that the role of religion in political debate is not to impose its own view of right and wrong but to play a vital part in shared and reasonable inquiry about the sort of principles that protect human dignity and allow the common good of society to flourish. At its best, sound religious sense even protects the civic search for the good from the manipulation of ideologies or too narrow perspectives that do not give a proper account of the fullest integrity of every person in society. This is why the world of secular rationality and the world of religious belief should not be afraid of ongoing dialogue with each other for the good of our civilisation. From this perspective, religion is not a problem for legislators to solve but instead makes its own vital contribution to the national conversation. In that regard he pointed to the successful collaboration of our parliaments and the Church in fostering peace, spreading democracy, caring for the poor, promoting international development and redressing climate change. For such cooperation to continue to bear good fruit, religions need to be free to act in accordance with their own faith principles and convictions. He concluded by inviting us to remember the positive contribution that religious belief has often made to the life of our nation.

Recent events, however, have caused serious concern among many Scottish citizens over the negative characterisation of religion in civic life. This disquiet has made itself known in the light of two interconnected issues. The first is to do with who is qualified for political leadership. The second is the silencing of conscience in general. We share these concerns.

With regard to leadership, it has been suggested that Kate Forbes MSP is unsuited to leading her party and to becoming First Minister because of her religious convictions. We feel obliged to state that, as a well-established civic principle, holding or expressing religious beliefs and values does not debar any individual from leadership in public office.

With regard to the silencing of conscience in general, we would point out that, in the same address in which Pope Benedict praised our political tradition for evolving a pluralist democracy, he also lamented a new contemporary trend aimed at the marginalisation of religion even in the name of tolerance, and expressed concern at how some Christians in public roles have been expected at times to keep their convictions private or Christian parliamentarians required by their parties to act against their conscience on votes involving contentious moral issues, in order to eliminate discrimination! These developments were worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.

In that context we advise that such trends inhibit freedom and introduce a blind conformity that goes as far as undermining the foundations of liberal democracy. They close off open and honest debate and risk marginalising much of Scottish public opinion. In the pursuit of diversity, they risk imposing an unnatural uniformity on our people's views and their political discourse, while reducing the wider pool of people who might stand for office, potentially denying our nation access to talent and ability. In these times, we urge political leaders to do all they can to create the conditions that allow for open, honest and respectful debate, particularly in relation to contentious moral issues. We ask them to avoid marginalising, or even silencing, the voice of minority groups and inhibiting vital democratic debate. Only such openness and tolerance can preserve the dignity of every citizen, uphold the human rights of every person, foster the common good that is the inheritance of all Scots and advance our parliament's founding values of wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity.