

**Some thoughts on my first year at the Despatch Box.**

Thank you for your invitation to contribute to the proceedings of this important gathering. I look forward very much to the studies of a historical nature which will follow this session but I'd want everyone to note that my offering, while it contains a few matters of which history may one day be made, is more about a role, a presence, at the heart of contemporary British politics. You have given me my very first opportunity to reflect on a year at the despatch box. I suspect that I'm the first Methodist Minister to serve on the front bench of any political party – a position which I'm enjoying greatly. Before I dive in, however, let me clear one or two things out of the way.

I've been a member of the House of Lords since the summer of 2004. I entered parliament at the invitation of Tony Blair aided and abetted, I've since understood, by an impressive group of supporters including, among others, Hilary Armstrong, Neil Kinnock and Len Murray. It's important to note that this all came about as a complete surprise to me, like a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky. I had certainly done nothing to make it happen. In other words, I owed nothing to anyone, I came into parliament without being in anyone's debt. I've discovered how rare such freedom is in the world of politics. The Prime Minister offered me the Labour Whip though he said he'd quite understand it if I opted instead to sit on the cross benches. I didn't hesitate. I've been a member of the Labour Party longer than I've been a Christian. So I sat on my party's benches with a keen desire to address the political agenda "from the inside." Politics, I told myself, is too important to leave to politicians.

Roughly half my time in parliament (2004 – 2010) has been spent on the government benches; since 2010, I've sat with the opposition. Despite taking the party whip, I felt in those early years that it would be conflictual to fulfil a more up-front party political role. I was 62 when I entered parliament and imagined I'd be retiring from my ministry at 65 with plenty of time to devote to a more political role in due course. In the end, I didn't sit down until ten years later! So I remained resolutely on the back benches for well over a decade, limiting my speeches mainly to non-legislative debates (on international relations, euthanasia, education or the question of adoption by same-sex couples for example). I found myself networking widely across all sections of the House; I brought diverse groups into parliament for visits; I took part in the House of Lords outreach programme to schools across the land; I hosted

various charitable bodies who wanted to hold events in parliament; and I set up meetings between busy people who could usually be counted on to agree to come together in such august surroundings. All this whilst still the superintendent minister of Wesley's Chapel.

Then, a year ago, came my retirement. I felt free now to offer my party leader (in the Lords) a little more time. I couldn't have expected her reaction nor that of the party. There was nothing but delight, hands were thrown in the air, and I was invited there and then to join the whips' team and to sit on the front bench. I remembered ruefully that Abraham had been 75 when he'd been asked to "up sticks" and get on with the next phase of his life. So who was I to complain?

In the Lords, unlike the Commons, the activity of the whips is not limited to discipline, arm-twisting, being the eyes and ears of the party leaders. Our whips are given departmental responsibilities. I was informed of mine on the first day of the new session of parliament in October. I was to be assistant to the Shadow Minister at DCMS, Lord Stevenson of Balmacara, an old and trusty hand, best pal to Gordon Brown, a skilled operator. I was pleased enough to have responsibilities for Culture, Media and Sport but not quite so sure about Digital! "Oh," said the Leader as I expressed my feelings on that matter, "I forgot to tell you, a Data Processing Bill begins its passage through parliament tomorrow. And it starts here with us in the Lords. You'd better get up to scratch!" I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice. I was given virtually no orientation or induction. I attended endless lobbying sessions with interested bodies and sat through strategy meetings with teams from each House. I read the General Data Processing Regulations – now known familiarly as GDPR (produced in Brussels and to be operative in Europe from May 25<sup>th</sup> and then, with some modifications, in the United Kingdom from the moment we leave the European Union). I was baptised by total immersion in the deep and swirling waters of this most complicated piece of legislation between October 2017 and January of this year. All the while, I was winding up debates on related matters – the Future of the Internet, the Internet and Children, the state of Museums, government provision for the Arts, the Future of Channel Four, Doping in Sport, - just for example.

When we said goodbye to the Bill and sent it off to the Commons, I learned that I was now considered to be fully fledged as the official opposition spokesperson for DCMS! This "promotion" came with a range of responsibilities. I need to be available to lead for the opposition on questions

raised by peers at our daily question time. And I interrogate Ministers when we discuss pieces of secondary legislation. I meet leading figures in the media, the arts and the sporting world. And I get to attend various events, such as a YouTube presentation and a preview of the BBC's King Lear. And then there are site visits – I'll shortly be off to ITV's new studios at Salford and Cardiff. It's hectic.

As if all that weren't enough, I was informed that I was, with immediate effect, the Shadow Minister for Wales. I puffed up my chest with pride at that news. Not much Welsh business comes to Westminster since devolution, so I enjoyed the prospect of having a nice title with very little to do. The perfect combination and a good antidote to the DCMS role. Or so I thought. Then came the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill which has dominated our proceedings from January until just two days ago. And the slings and arrows of that outrageous Brexit brought severe challenges to the devolved governments of Northern Ireland (without an administration at this time), Scotland (with a fiercely Nationalist government still flexing its muscles) and Wales. The original provisions of this Bill, as far as Wales was concerned, saw all the powers repatriated from Brussels firmly placed in the hands of UK ministers who, in their own time, would pass them back to Cardiff. The Welsh believed, rightly, that this exercise of "Henry VIII powers" would undermine the very nature of devolution.

So began a period of frenetic activity. There were heated debates across the floor and high level talks with officials and ministers behind the scenes. I welcomed the advice of such august bodies as the Bar Council, the Law Society, the Hansard Society, Law Lords and the Constitution Select Committee. All of them supported our view that the Bill was hopelessly flawed. We fought tooth and nail till the very last moments and, wonderfully, gained a radical redrafting of the relevant clauses. Along the way, I'd been called in to see government ministers in the Cabinet Office on more than one occasion as we tried to find an accommodation that would work. There was a desire on all sides to re-work the original proposals and, in the end, the Welsh government was pleased to accept a completely re-configured arrangement. Scotland is still adamant in its refusal to do so. And from Northern Ireland there is simply a very sad silence.

With two such enormous Bills, each running for unparalleled periods of time and with record numbers of amendments tabled (between 600 and 700 in each case), I'd had a baptism of fire. But I was now much more aware of parliamentary process and the resources at my disposal. And, as I look back, always asking the question "what is an ordained Methodist minister doing

here?”, I’ve begun to enjoy this unique opportunity to explore an interface of such great moment.

Let me tease out the “ordained Methodist minister” a little before I go on. I have made great efforts to learn the features of parliamentary discourse. There must be no (overt) reliance on religious creeds – that will be resented by those who hold no such creeds who will consider such interventions to be mere “special pleading.” Of course, every member of the House shapes his or her views according to some “value system” or other. There can be no doubting that. But they, we, must all put our arguments across in a secular, rational, accessible way. Our debates must take place on a “level playing field.” It’s taken me a long time to begin to learn how to do that.

I never dress as a clergyman. I don’t generally attend religious events. I try to do my work as a secular member of a secular institution. But I’ve discovered how that in no way sets a limit on my role. Members – agnostic, church-goers, people of other faiths, corner me with their (often haunting) questions of a personal or spiritual kind. It’s humbling. I’ve conducted funerals, marriages, baptisms. I sit on the Ecclesiastical Committee. Without my saying a word, I believe that no one is unaware of my identity as a Methodist Minister. Indeed, I suspect that it’s the fact that I don’t wear that identity on my sleeve (or round my neck) that gives people confidence to approach me in the ways I’ve described. Less can be more.

All through my ministry I’ve been a campaigner. I’ve been one of a merry band of people who’ve tried to speak the truth to power. My great exemplar in this respect has always been David Haslam (though he’d be displeased with me for mentioning him in this way). Nor can I easily forget Donald English or his wonderful (and mercifully short) document entitled “Sharing in God’s Mission.” Having defined mission as any activity that seeks to embrace people beyond the boundaries of the church, he went on to identify three strands to that understanding. These were Evangelism, Social Action, and the Struggle for Justice. That document has always been my manifesto for ministry. It’s never been bettered in my judgement.

But now, here I am, a Methodist minister who’s a politician. No longer banging on the door of power holders but sharing their space. I’ve always understood politics to be “the art of the possible” where compromise and accommodation are very much at the heart of the exercise. And in this “binary age,” almost Manichaeian in its dualistic manifestations, an age in which identity politics

makes it an age of victimhood, I've come to see just how invaluable compromise and accommodation can be. I've been lucky enough to learn my trade as a politician in the House of Lords where nothing can be achieved by any party without seeking and finding support on other benches. Let people abolish the House of Lords if they wish but don't let them sacrifice the informed, exploratory, interrogative, consensual decision-making processes which underpin its work. The magisterial speeches I've heard in recent days from Douglas Hogg (Viscount Hailsham) and Chris Patten (Lord Patten of Barnes) speaking with the brilliance of latter day Delphic Oracles or Welsh Revivalists from the government benches and against their own party's Brexit proposals has greatly cheered me in this respect. Compromise and accommodation, finding ways of living together with our disagreements, are surely key elements in the search for holistic, inclusive societies built on respect and toleration.

Let me now turn to some of the subjects I've found myself debating – subjects which seem to me to require methodologies and systems of evaluation for which theologians are (or ought to be) trained. I've discovered that the legislative programme of parliament deals with one ethical subject after another. Here are just three examples.

One key debate during the passage of the Data Processing Bill pitted the advocates of a free press in passionate opposition to those speaking for the victims of press intrusion. We had Baroness Hollins, Lord Prescott and Lord Paddick, all of whom had had their phones hacked and their privacy invaded, speaking very movingly about the need for a more tightly-regulated press. Lord Black, Lord Grade and various media-barons were adamant that investigative journalism and the freedom to publish were essential ingredients to our democracy and should not be subject to regulation by the State. The arguments were well marshalled and, in the end, the weight of opinion came down on the side of the press but not before there was ample recognition of the plight of those who'd been violated by unprincipled journalists and an appeal for more rigorous self-regulation.

Then there was the question of how to protect the rights of children when they use the internet. Once again, we were worried about the regime of self-regulation which often puts commercial interests first. The GDPR gives children more rights, including the right of erasure, the right to be forgotten. We sought to ensure that this right would continue to be enshrined as a minimum standard in UK law once we've left the European Union. A number of

amendments were made to the original Bill to ensure that the needs of children should be built early into the process of design and considered preventatively rather than reactively. These very real protective measures were the product of a great deal of discussion led by some hugely qualified peers from the world of high technology.

And finally, members of parliament are worried just now about racism in all its forms. The treatment of the Windrush families and their descendants, Sir Alan Sugar's tweet about the African football team, the fear of overt racism in Russia during the World Cup tournament and the egregious and unfeeling racist comments of the President of the United States on a regular basis, the question of race in the current global debates about immigration, the alleged prevalence of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, evidence of Islamophobia throughout society, - all of these in the context of the rise of ultra-right populist parties across the world – and it's not difficult to sense that we're living in critical times. My colleagues have asked me to write a proposal for a debate on the subject at some forthcoming time. This is what I submitted.

*Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are pernicious manifestations of racism. Our media regularly carry stories that report their pervasive presence in all its ugliness. Jewish and Muslim communities report their experiences and the fear and ill feeling they produce. Many will readily confess such fear at the present juncture in our society. Old horror stories and half-forgotten attitudes are only too obviously present in the conversation and actions of so many people. Whilst it is easy to identify such prejudice with "far right" or "populist" groups, there can be no doubt that it exists in the everyday attitudes of "normal" people too. Any and all incidents of anti-Semitic, Islamophobic or racist behaviour should always be condemned and those holding them should be held to account – by peer pressure, by the media, by our institutions and (where appropriate) by the criminal justice system. There is simply no place for these in our public life.*

*All this, however, treats such evils reactively. From time to time, we need to dig more deeply into the historic forces and cultural conditionings that give rise to the attitudes, drives and prejudices that come to the surface at particular moments in our history. It would be good, and it must be important, for us to take a long, hard look at ourselves and the way we view those from different cultural (racial, religious or social) backgrounds. We must somehow recognize how the way such people have been, and*

*are, treated has often led them to interiorise and suppress their fears and feelings thus making community cohesion even more difficult to achieve.*

*A parliamentary debate might be an appropriate vehicle for an examination or analysis of this kind. At some stage, we must surely go beyond the symptoms or effects of antisemitism, Islamophobia and racism. We must dig more deeply than even the worst incidents reported in or press, to recognise the roots, the causes, of racial hatred and prejudice. This alone will help us feel our way out of deep-seated ways of thinking that seem sometimes as old as time and with which every one of us is to some extent infected. A debate of this kind might well be an exercise in "Truth and Reconciliation."*

And so, I draw these remarks to a close. I was delighted to receive a note from my old friend John Hall, the Dean of Westminster Abbey, who ended his letter with these words: "I hope life is enjoyable and stimulating for you in this new sphere of your ministry. You must be the first Methodist minister to be a front-bencher in the House of Lords, continuing your pioneer ministry."

I rest my case.