

## BEYOND JOHN KNOX?

### Graham K Blount

*“As I was walking up the stair,  
I met a man who wasn't there;  
He wasn't there again today –  
I really wish he'd go away”*

(Anon)

The man in question usually sits begging on the "News" steps in Edinburgh which I climb each day on my way to my office close to Parliament's temporary home. I sometimes stop and pass the time of day with him, for no more virtuous reason than that he provides an excuse to stop and catch my breath without admitting to the rigours of advanced middle age! On May 7", the day after our election, he wasn't there. I stopped anyway, and thought to myself "well, there you are ... we only elected the Parliament yesterday and they've abolished poverty already!". Then reality took hold, and I wondered more cynically whether he had been moved on in case MSPs might be offended by the presence of homeless beggars on their way to Parliament. Either way, perhaps he could be seen as an ikon; if Parliament can't make a significant difference to him, what have we been fighting for?

However, let me suggest another ikon, not far away from the first. To take up their seats, our new MSPs will have to get past the intimidating statue of John Knox in the courtyard outside the Assembly Hall. A great symbolic moment, I thought - until the Scottish Office built a huge wooden box around the statue replacing the image of the bold John with the tips of his fingers just visible, like the last sign of a drowning man. In or out of his box, the image of John Knox is indeed something we must get beyond in the new Scotland.

The body language of the statute speaks of confrontation and a power game between competing power blocs - the church confronting the "monstrous regiment" of the woman who ruled Knox's Scotland. If the churches chose to play that same power game today, one thing is certain - we would lose. If we chose to claim a status based on history, or the claims of "national church" in a "Christian country", we will start to suffer King Canute's fate.

But there's more to what we inherit from John Knox than that. For a start, there is something about putting politicians in their place - not under the church's

thumb (as Knox might have wanted) but locating them alongside the rest of us, under God. There is something profoundly important here, which would be symbolised by prayers built into the Parliament's proceedings; something about sovereignty as derived from God, held by its "community of the realm" and trusted by them to Parliament and/or other institutions.

From Knox we also inherit a tradition of "speaking truth to power", rooted in the prophetic challenge to injustice, confronting those in power with the truth they do not want to hear. Remember Nathan, telling King David a story about a ewe lamb, which inspired the king's righteous indignation until the prophet said "you are the man".

For Knox, opposition to government came from a passionate, theologically grounded commitment to the wellbeing of not just a church but of a nation. That commitment led Knox's church to take the first steps toward free education for all; it led churches to start to establish free health care for all, to pioneer the variety of forms of caring we call social work. And the Kirk Session records of Scottish parish churches last century show how much time and energy was dominated by "doling" out poor relief or parish relief - the precursor of the welfare benefits system. Three of these - education, health and social work - will be major items on the agenda of the Scottish Parliament (welfare benefits being a retained Westminster responsibility). If the state has - rightly - taken over the main responsibility for administering these services, the churches have not given up either their involvement or concern for the welfare of our nation and its people in these and other areas.

With the same passionate commitment as Knox, the churches will engage in a new relationship with the new political process - learning to sing the Lord's song in a new Scotland. For me, this is the positive side of the commitment of the national church - but, in contrast to Knox's day, not something to be jealously guarded against other denominations but gladly shared with anyone willing to share the commitment to the wellbeing of the whole nation. And we will engage, together, as part of wider civil society (as we

have through our participation in the Constitutional Convention).

We are promised a Parliament that will be open, accessible and participative. In making provisions for prelegislative scrutiny, for cross-party committees with power to initiate legislation and an obligation to consult, the Consultative Steering Group is giving that promise shape. And a Civic Forum is being formed as one way in which churches and community groups can contribute to the political debate. But we need to claim that space - not let newly elected politicians take possession of it and leave us imagining our part in the democratic process ended with three Xs on May 6<sup>th</sup>.

The task of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office is to build that new relationship, to enable the churches to make as effective a contribution to the political process as possible. Someone described the task as "evangelising the power structures". One sign of that is that I sent to the newly elected 129 MSPs a copy of "Good News for a Change" - which tells the stories of several church community projects in different parts of Scotland; that kind of experience will be the basis of our contribution to political debate.

Keith Clements in his book "Learning to Speak" warns the churches against too ready a commentary on political issues. We should, he argues, speak what we know. What churches know (like what you and I know) comes from what we do. Uniquely, churches have people working (paid and volunteers) in every community in Scotland; our experience comes from simple personal caring, from small projects like a church opening its premises for an after school club or support for people caring for a victim of Alzheimer's Disease, from bigger projects which several churches share ecumenically or get together with other community groups to make a significant difference to the quality of people's lives, from the national activities of such as the Kirk's Board of Social Responsibility - the largest voluntary social work agency in Scotland.

That adds up to a range and depth of experience as we listen and learn, and think critically about that too. To

contribute that experience to the decision-making process - including letting the voice of those at the sharp, hurting end of political policies be heard - is vital. But we will do more. We will also offer our faith reflections on our experience - not to "trump" other contributions by claiming God for our side of the argument but to offer our best, which comes from our faith, ready to listen to the best contributions of others wherever they are coming from.

My role is that of the creative midfield player in the team, making the game flow by good communication - bringing people together, preparing briefing papers for the churches and for Parliamentarians, ensuring that the churches spokespersons get the information they need, at the right time, and with opportunities to talk to the right people. As people in touch with how the health service is (or isn't) working in Scotland, you are a vital resource for me in contributing to debates on healthcare; I would hope to be a useful resource for you when you have concerns that need to be addressed by Parliament.

People ask me what "clout" I (or the churches) will have. In one sense that belongs to the power game model, and the churches are not seeking special influence or privileges. But if we make our contribution effectively, then I believe we can make a difference, as we have over the issue of whether a time of prayer or reflection should be built into the proceedings of Parliament, which has now been agreed in principle. As has been the case in that discussion, part of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office's role is to let a range of voices be heard, and especially the voices of the weakest and most vulnerable.

This is part of being salt for the earth - not retaining our purity in the salt cellar but shaken out into the (political) world. That is an existing challenge for us all. It is why the churches have appointed me to be not so much a mover as a shaker in the new Scotland.

*Graham K Blount - Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, St Columba's by the Castle, 14 Johnston Terrace, Edinburgh, EH1 2PW*