

Comment

Party line : an exchange with Peter Hebblethwaite

PETER HEBBLETHWAITE WRITES ...

Any journal of opinion and ideas—such as *New Blackfriars*—operates on a tacit convention between its editors and its readers. If the convention breaks down, the readers use the ultimate deterrent: they cancel their subscriptions.

Two pieces in the otherwise excellent October 1984 number caused me disquiet because they seemed to imply that part of this tacit convention is that *New Blackfriars* automatically supports the Labour Party. First, Michael Knowles expresses his baffled incomprehension that any consequent Catholic could support Mrs Thatcher, and wonders where he might find a 'Catholic social ethic'. Then Mary Pepper castigates Gerald Priestland apparently because he is Charterhouse and Oxford educated. Though she agrees he has a good mind and is a compassionate human being, she implies that his book contains nothing of interest or value.

'The only justification for publishing this book', she announces, 'is the popularity of its author' (p. 443). That is, as the schoolmen used to say, an apodictic statement. I would like to ask the question: d'ou parle-t-elle? More prosaically, I would wish to be told how the hell she knows it was 'the only reason' Priestland's book got published. The first condition for publishing any book is that it should be readable. But she only reveals her true hand in her envoi, her final sentence: 'I would describe this (Priestland's work) as a quaintly old-fashioned book with its pre-sociological understanding of human nature, but the popularity of the SDP, particularly among middle-class Christians, shows there is plenty of life left in the old liberal individualist dog yet' (p. 444). This is worthy of inclusion in any twentieth century *sottisier*. It is a nudge-nudge, wink-wink piece of complicity with an imagined *New Blackfriars* readership who are expected to share in its presumptuous, condescending, arrogant, unfounded and patronising implications.

Well, some of us don't. I don't, for one. The Editor is not, of course, responsible for the views of individual contributors etc.. Yet, unless someone speaks out, the impression might gain ground that *New Blackfriars* has become an organ of the left-wing of the Labour Party. The two articles I mention both make this assumption. They suggest that it is all part of the deal, the tacit convention.

No doubt, perhaps provoked by my impertinence, the Editor will come clean and explain exactly where he stands. As a regular reader and occasional contributor I would like to believe that *New Blackfriars* has not sold out to the left-wing of the Labour Party, but that it is concerned with something much more serious, critical, creative and self-questioning. The Dominican charisma is for truth, wherever it is to be found. *Veritas, a quocumque dicta, a Spiritu Sancto dicta est*, is an old Thomist saw. Hence, *New Blackfriars* should (and for the most part does) prefer argument to ideology, close reasoning to predictable opinion-uttering, Christian values to modish shibboleths. Unless it is that, it has nothing to contribute to the rich symphony of Catholicism in this country. But we have not reached that pass yet.

Michael Knowles raises the problem that ought to occupy us: Is there a Catholic social ethic? Unfortunately, he starts out from the same assumption as Mary Pepper. Defeated by 4–1 in a borough election in Congleton, Cheshire, last May, he is amazed that his fellow Mass-goers supported the Tories so massively. He appeals for the sympathy and help of *New Blackfriars* readers. One gets the feeling that, placed in a position of authority, he would excommunicate all the Tory voters forthwith: ‘I find myself quite honestly and frankly unable to understand how any Christian can vote Tory, let alone sponsor Tories’. Cardinal Ratzinger could give him a job at the Holy Office—oops!—Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I have no wish to encourage Tory voters, but am not so puzzled by their behaviour: Catholics in this country are more influenced by the newspapers they read than by the Gospel. They—and I and Knowles and Pepper and *New Blackfriars* readers—all stand in need of perpetual conversion. But I don’t see how the obnoxious Tory voters can be excommunicated. They are acting according to their rather dim lights (something that most ‘progressive’ Catholics applaud when it is a matter of *Humanae Vitae*). The sensible course is to enlighten them on every possible occasion.

But Mr Knowles has clearly not been very successful with such an approach. So he calls, in typical Labour Party fashion, for directions from on high, orders from the central office, from, in short, the bishops. The most astonishing thing about his article, so theoretically ‘progressive’ in content, is its highly ‘conservative’ ecclesiology. He complains that the clergy don’t give a lead, the bishops don’t offer guidance, the Pope is too far away. But he is crying for the moon. See *Lumen Gentium*: ‘Let not the layman imagine that his pastors are always such experts, that to every problem that arises, however complicated, they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission’ (43). That was promulgated in 1965.

But this not mean that the Church (defined in Knowles’

antiquated sense as pope, bishops, priests) has no guidance to offer. The inability to offer solutions is not a cop-out. It is unreasonable to expect bishops to dictate to us our political choices. Yet the 'guidance' he seeks is actually on offer: and that is that we have to get our hands dirty in the mud of everyday politics. Knowles is exemplary in this respect, and should persevere with the electors of Congleton. If his case is as good as he thinks it is, they will eventually vote for him. If he doesn't accept that, he is not committed to that democracy which the mainstream of the Labour Party, at least, is dedicated to upholding.

There is another possibility. Mary Pepper heaps scorn upon the Social Democratic Party as middle-class, 'liberal individualist', trapped in a 'pre-sociological' understanding of human nature. Let me declare an interest: a founder member of the SDP, I find it the only British political party which is approximate to 'Catholic social doctrine' as it has been most recently expounded in *Laborem Exercens*. Crosby is not all that far from Congleton, and Mr Knowles should have noticed Shirley Williams' success there in a constituency that had a large number of Catholics. Sometimes deemed by the media to be a 'critic of the pope', I believe nevertheless that papal social teaching has something to say to us.

Tolle, lege Laborem Exercens. It says some unconventional things. It explains, for example, that trades unions should have a social and not a political role, and that their links with political parties should be severed. That is bad news for the Labour Party, which only exists on the laughable fiction that all trades unionists support it. Take the papal principle seriously, and that would mean an end to the political levy. There is no earthly reason why trades unionists like myself (NUJ) should be forced to contribute to a party which I consider moribund. Can Knowles or Pepper tell me why I should or what is democratic about this political tax? (If they advise me to go along to my local branch meetings, there democratically to influence my union from within, I regretfully have to point out that the treasurer annually addresses me, as he demands his poll-tax, as 'Dear Comrade').

But that is a detail. The main relevant feature of *Laborem Exercens* (believe me, I am a Vaticanologist) is that it cries a plague on all ideological houses. It declares that the unrestrained play of market forces without social considerations is iniquitous and sinful: something we daily witness under Mrs Thatcher and—broadening the sweep—President Ronald Reagan. It also says that the collectivist solutions adopted by socialism (meaning the socialism found in Eastern Europe, so much favoured by Mr Arthur Scargill, whose remarks about Solidarity are contemptuous and revealing) also leads to injustice: something else we can daily witness in General Wojciech Jarozelski's Poland. The trouble with Catholic social doctrine is that,

for the most part, it is platitudinous. But, alas, some platitudes strike truth.

In describing what *Laborem Exercens* is saying, I have just described the position of the SDP. I would like the readers of *New Blackfriars* to envisage this way of realising their Christian commitment. But, unlike Mr Knowles and Ms Pepper, I do not regard my own political position as some self-evident truth. I do not claim that it should be supported by the full weight of the magisterium. Nor do I claim that the entire Catholic community in this country, advised by its bishops, should be dragooned into voting SDP (or Alliance) at the next election. That is not their job. Are English Catholics grown up or not? If they are, let them vote the way they will. I would maintain that their most consequent Christian option would be to vote SDP. Perhaps one day I will explain this at greater length.

One thing at a time. All I want to say here is that readers of *New Blackfriars* need to be jolted out of two-party complacency and smugness, that it is not self-evidently foolish or 'pre-sociological' to argue in favour of the SDP, and that, finally, *New Blackfriars* has enough intellectual integrity and independence to make room for the case I am arguing.

It would be deeply regrettable if *New Blackfriars* became the organ of the SDP. It would be equally regrettable if it did not allow for this option as both sane and Catholic. We are not in the business of finding the official party-line and enforcing it: our task is to think hard and straight.

I think it will be admitted that the new Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, is a sufficiently 'radical' figure for the readers of *New Blackfriars*. This is part of what he said at his enthronement on September 21, 1984:

This offer of freedom for newness and hope under the Almightyness of God and through the down-to-earth presence of God is, however, not by any means confined to the Christian Churches and religious affairs. There is a power and a possibility here about hope in our present social discontents. Here, again, triumphalism, absolutism and illusions have to be got rid of if we are to find hopeful and human ways forward.

The cost of hope in our society and our politics is a responsible readiness for compromise. Once we are clear that nobody has God's view of things or does God's will in God's way, then it also becomes clear that to insist on one's own view and nothing but one's own view is outrageously self-righteous, deeply inhuman and damnably dangerous.

It is to set our inevitable conflicts on course for

destructive fights which no one can win, through which we will all lose and which could end by destroying us all. Until we reach the Kingdom of God, responsible, mutually worked out compromise will again and again be of the essence of true godliness and true humanity.

Anyone who rejects compromise as a matter of policy, programme or conviction, is putting himself or herself in the place of God, and Christians and atheists can surely agree that, whether there is a God or not, no person or set of persons from our human race is suitable for divine appointment. Consider the bearing of this on our most pressing social tragedy, the Miners' Strike.

We'll leave Bishop Jenkins there. His next remarks were widely reported. I don't know where he went to school, and it doesn't much matter, and I don't know how he votes, because we have a secret ballot in this country. But I'd bet a year's subscription to *New Blackfriars* that he votes SDP.

PETER HEBBLETHWAITE

THE EDITOR RESPONDS...

In the early 1920s we were already being reproved for printing 'rank bolshevism'. What Peter Hebblethwaite says to us is at least more subtle. His main criticism is that *New Blackfriars* may be drifting into becoming an organ of a particular political party, or, more exactly, one sector of a political party, with a clearly recognizable ideological position. He thinks he can already sniff, very very slightly, the smell of the smugness of those who claim to know all the truth—he sniffs out ideological smugness with almost as much ardour as the inquisitor in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* sniffs out heresy. So he quotes the Pontiff with relish, pointing out that *Laborem Exercens* attacks the ideologies of both the left and the right. And the conclusion which he draws from that document is that our readers must adopt the urbane and genial open-mindedness of the political centre, with its ability and preparedness to compromise. 'Readers of *New Blackfriars* need to be jolted out of two-party complacency', he says. (This could bewilder some of our readers, seeing that half of them live outside the U.K.) By implication, he is telling us to take more notice of the centre parties in British politics than—in his opinion—we have so far.

If one uses the word 'theology' in its classical sense, we are a 'theological journal'. If one uses the word in its narrower, 19th-century sense, we are at least a journal that publishes a lot of theology. However one defines the word, I think it would be generally agreed