

We're not in Kansas now: why targeting the "faith vote" is a hopeless cause in Britain

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The latest polls in Corby, Northamptonshire, where a parliamentary by-election is due to take place on November 15, seem to indicate that the Tories are facing a heavy defeat.

Despite this, according to the Conservative Home website, the Tories will take the opportunity to "road test" an appeal to the "faith vote" in Corby.

They want to know — as do we — whether there is really an organised and significant religious voting bloc in the town — or anywhere in Britain come to that. If it were to be significant, no doubt the party would roll it out at the general election, and we'd be subjected to a sudden surfeit of American-style piety in our politicians.

The Conservative candidate in Corby is Christine Emmett, who is a practising Christian. [She has used a local newspaper](#) (pdf) to target local churches to tell of her personal faith. She writes:

"My faith guides me in everything I do. It has also supported me through difficult times and it is important in a job serving the public to have the full support of my family and the greater church. I feel blessed to have both. I've been an active member of the Conservative Christian Fellowship for many years."

A local councillor, David Sims, gives his backing to Christine, also mentioning her faith:

"It is a great encouragement to me to see an increasing number of Christians recognise their call to serve their communities in public life, not out of a love of power, but persuaded by the power of love. This ranges from those who are prepared to serve the democratic process in relatively mundane and unseen ways, but also includes our Parliamentary Candidate, Christine Emmett, who needs our support."

Interestingly, Christine Emmett lets her co-faithful know that she supports same-sex marriage.

"I fully support people who are both gay or straight in their desire to have monogamous, committed relationships. I recognise fidelity, commitment and love as really important and commend the ambition behind the idea of same-sex marriage. However, unlike Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives will not be holding a three-line whip on the issue. I would fight any move by any party, if I thought that churches and vicar's (sic) would be punished if their conscience prevented them from conducting same-sex ceremonies."

This is fascinating from a tactical viewpoint. It is in churches where resistance to same-sex marriage is likely to be most keenly organised. So, on the one hand Ms Emmett lets her Christian credentials be known, but then, on the other, she takes a liberal stance on same-sex marriage.

Already the constituency she is appealing to is likely to be split on this issue, so she is likely to alienate as many as she impresses.

So, how is this likely to play out at the ballot box?

First of all, opinion polls seem to suggest that there isn't any significant religious vote to be targeted. Most people don't go to a church, synagogue or temple, and although they are not in the main anti-religious, and might even define themselves as Christians, they can't be reached through any organised religious structure.

And even the ones who do go to church, and can be reached through their place of worship, are unlikely to make their voting decisions based on their religion.

Other polls show that church-goers are just as likely as the population at large to make their voting decisions based on a range of issues rather than on religious considerations alone. Catholics in particular seem to be at odds with their church on social issues. Demands by priests that their communicants vote in accordance with Catholic doctrine generally fall on deaf ears.

So, even if she could reach a large number of religiously-active voters, it is unlikely that they would cast their vote based on the teachings of their church. Like everyone else, they tend to take into account wider considerations, such as the economy, whether the local hospital will close, how the current government is performing on jobs and welfare etc.

Another finding from polls is that more than 80 per cent of the population do not want religion to be involved in public policy-making. Nor do they don't want religious leaders to have influence on parliamentary decisions.

So, in emphasising her faith she risks alienating another section of potential supporters – those who are suspicious of and even maybe hostile to religiously-motivated politicians.

It will be very interesting to see whether Ms Emmett's tactic has any influence at all on the final result. Although I think, in the end, it will be next to impossible to measure.

Having said all this, there is the question of the "Muslim vote" in constituencies where Muslim communities are concentrated. Again, is this a voting bloc that can be corralled and targeted by politicians?

Less is known about the voting habits of Muslims except that they have traditionally supported Labour. Since Tony Blair started the war on terror that can no longer be guaranteed.

George Galloway appeared to gain his victory by appealing directly to the disaffected Muslim vote in Bradford West and other politicians in constituencies with large Muslim populations have taken note of that. There is now a suspicion that MPs in such areas are playing to the gallery (in the mosque) more and more. The appointment of Baroness Sayeeda Warsi as Minister for Faith is probably designed to appeal to Muslim voters, who politicians seem to think have only one mind between them.

Of course, these constituencies with large concentrations of Muslims are relatively few, but they can be important in tightly-fought elections. It seems the "Christian vote" is too diffuse and split for it to be reachable by candidates in elections. We have yet to see if reaching for the "Muslim vote" is any more realistic.

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Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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