

# Prime Minister's dissembling, hypocritical and disingenuous speech to religious leaders

Posted: Tue, 03 Apr 2012 by [Terry Sanderson](#)

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave an Easter reception for Christian leaders at Downing Street this week at which he delivered an unctuous speech of such disingenuousness and hypocrisy that it almost takes the breath away.

He starts by saying he welcomes the Easter message as being one of hope, but at the same time admits that he has problems believing a word of it - particularly the resurrection! Even so, he welcomes what he calls the "Christian fightback" in Britain.

It is not clear what this "fightback" is against but he measures it in "the enormous reception of the Pope's visit."

However, the Pope's visit – as the Catholic Church's own research showed – was a [comprehensive flop](#).

Cameron says "we've won the argument over Bideford Council and the fact that if councils want to say prayers before council meetings they should."

They have "won" by declaring that a [High Court judgment](#) is, in their opinion, wrong and have unilaterally over-ruled it. Isn't that the sort of thing that dictators do – particularly theocratic dictators? The interpretation that Mr Pickles has put on the Localism Act is highly suspect and untested in court, yet he blithely announces that it means whatever he says it means.

Then Mr Cameron says: "I think we see the fight-back in this very strong stance that I've taken and others have taken in terms of the right to wear a crucifix. I think this is important. People should be able to express their faith."

But when did people not have the right to wear a crucifix or express their faith? This is a fantasy propagated by Christian extremists in this country and one that the Prime Minister has embraced either through cynicism or gullibility.

He also failed to mention that his own Government's [legal arguments](#) in the European Court say that employers have the right to restrict the wearing of jewellery (not crosses –but *any* jewellery) in the workplace if it is necessary. I think he is hoping nobody notices that.

The Prime Minister's promotion of what appears to be some kind of Christian theocracy for Britain sits uneasily with his advocacy of secularism for the Arab world where, he says, there is an "enormous danger in terms of the persecution of minorities and particularly the persecution of Christians".

Perhaps the most telling part of the speech is about his conflict with religion over gay marriage. He hopes that the religious leaders he is addressing will not be too harsh. And just in case they won't let up in their relentless and unpleasant campaigning against gay rights, he throws out a hope to them that he might give in to their bullying. "If this doesn't go ahead, to those of us who'd like it to go ahead, there will still be civil partnerships, so gay people will be able to form a partnership that

gives them many of the advantages of marriage," he says.

It is at this point that gay couples who had hoped to tie the knot can start to take down the bunting and cancel the wedding cake order.

It is the first inkling that the promises he made to the gay community are very likely to be betrayed.

He doesn't want to lock horns with the churches on this because he needs them on board for his "Big Society" project.

Ah yes, the Big Society, the idea that "faith-based" organisations are somehow going to run our public services without any extra money from the Government.

Britain is one of the most secularised countries in the world. Even on a conservative estimate a third of population has no religion (with about 20% being outright atheists). What is the place of this gigantic minority? Are we supposed to just fall in line behind our "faith leaders"? Are we supposed to stand by as they take over the education system for their own propaganda purposes; usurp secular social services and religionise them; and bring their small-minded illiberal teachings into our bedrooms and even our health care?

Mr Cameron's craven speech in which he promises religion the key to the country is a gross insult to those of us who don't have religion and don't want religion. It is a warning to gay people that the tables are turning and that "religious rights" will soon pull ahead of everybody else's rights – particularly theirs.

This courting of religion by politicians has sinister echoes of the American approach. But the Prime Minister should recognise that Britain is not America – and even in America he should heed the fate of Rick Santorum, who has taken this idea of theocratising a secular nation to its logical conclusion. The people have roundly rejected him.

### **A transcription of the Prime Minister's speech at Downing Street:**

As you know, we have receptions here for Diwali, for Eid, for Jewish New Year, and I think it is right and it is proper in a Christian country to celebrate this – the most important of the Christian festivals, Easter – right here in Downing Street. So I'm very proud to have brought together such a prominent group of Christians in so many different walks of life, so many different charities, so many different churches. I think it's a great event that we have it and I'm proud to hold it again. And it is, as I said, we obviously spend a lot of time celebrating Christmas and thinking about Christmas, but actually, really, Easter in many ways is the one that counts. Even those of us who sometimes struggle with some parts of the message – the idea of resurrection, of a living God, of someone who's still with us – is fantastically important even if you sometimes, as I do, struggle over some of the details. It's a very important message. It's a message of hope.

What I wanted to say to you today, really, I think I've got three points, one plea and two challenges, if that's all right. The three points are these: the first thing is: I think there is something of a Christian fight-back going on in Britain and I think that's a thoroughly good thing. I think you could see it in the enormous reception of the Pope's visit; I think you could see it with the successful return visit that Sayeeda Warsi led. I think you can see it, actually, in the reception to Sayeeda's superb speeches about standing up for

faith and celebrating faith and, as she so famously put it, actually doing God in Britain. So I think you can see it in those things. I think you could also see it in the very happy celebration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. I think that was another event that helped in this Christian fight-back, and I think there have been one or two good examples of the Christian fight-back as a thoroughly good thing: the fact that we've had that argument and won that argument over Biddeford Council and the fact that if councils want to say prayers before council meetings they should. We do in the House of Commons, why on earth shouldn't local councils do that as well? I think we see the fight-back in this very strong stance that I've taken and others have taken in terms of the right to wear a crucifix. I think this is important. People should be able to express their faith, and so I think there's something of a fight-back going on and I think we should welcome that.

The second point I want to make is: I hope that the fight-back will be based around values more than anything else. I think that we have lots of things going for us as a country, all sorts of difficulties and challenges, but the greatest need we have in our country is to have strong values and to teach our children and to bring people up with strong values. The values of the Bible, the values of Christianity are the values that we need – values of compassion, of respect, of responsibility, of tolerance. Now, I've made this argument many times that you don't have to be a Christian or you don't have to adhere to another religion to have strong values, to believe in strong values or to pass those values on to your children, but the point I always make is that it helps. We're always trying to tell our children not to be selfish, but is there a better way of putting it than 'love thy neighbour'? We're always telling our children to be tolerant – I know I am, and often a fat lot of good it does me – but is there a better way of explaining tolerance than saying, 'do to others as you would be done by'? It's the simplest encapsulation of an absolutely vital value and the Christian church and the teaching of the Bible has put it so clearly. We're always telling our children that they must make the most of what they have; they must not waste what they have been given, and is there a better way of putting that than 'don't hide your light under a bushel, make the most of your talents'? So I think that Christian teaching can help us to have the strong values that we need as a country and we should be celebrating that and shouting about that.

The third point I want to make, and I think this is part of the Christian fight-back, is we should be very proud of the institutions that the churches in Britain support. I think, particularly in an age where we're really making some progress on improving levels of attainment in school, we should celebrate the link there is between churches and schools, and indeed between mosques and schools and synagogues and schools. Faith has a huge amount to bring not just to our national life in terms of values; it has a huge amount to bring in terms of strengthening our institutions and I think it's a good time to celebrate that.

Now my plea: my plea is that I hope that in spite of the disagreements and the arguments we will undoubtedly have, the plea is that I hope we don't all fall out too much over the issue of gay marriage. Let me just make this point. What the government is consulting over is a change to civil marriage, to what happens at the registry office. It's not consulting over what happens in the church. I'll just make this point, which is that inevitably there's a consultation, inevitably there will at some stage be a vote and inevitably there'll be some quite strong arguments between now and then, and there'll be some strong words used. But I hope we can keep the strength of

the language at a reasonable level and that goes for both the proponents of gay marriage and indeed the opponents of gay marriage.

The point I'd make is this: if this does go ahead it will change what happens in a registry office; it will not change what happens in a church. If this doesn't go ahead, to those of us who'd like it to go ahead, there will still be civil partnerships, so gay people will be able to form a partnership that gives them many of the advantages of marriage. So I hope we can just keep the debate at a rational and sensible level, but on the basis that we're not always going to agree. That was my plea.

Now let me go to my two challenges. The two challenges are these. The first one is overseas and the second one is at home. The one overseas is this: I think there's huge potential for what I call and what others call the Arab Spring and the growth of democracy in the Middle East, but there's also an enormous danger in terms of the persecution of minorities and particularly the persecution of Christians. Now, Britain is fully engaged in the world; we have the second largest aid budget of any country in the world. We're one of the few countries keeping our promise to spend 0.7% of GDP on aid, and we do have real influence, real heft in these countries. I think there's a really important moment, and this is the challenge, is for the churches and Christians to work together with government on agendas to persuade these newly democratising countries not to persecute minorities and to respect Christians the world over and the right to practise your religion.

The domestic challenge is, and you'd be surprised if I didn't bring it up, the issue of the Big Society. I think there is enormous potential in churches and faith-based organisations to tackle some of the deepest problems we have in our society, whether it is educational and under-attainment, whether it is homelessness, whether it is mental health. Just wandering around the room chatting to some of you, I was talking to a lady who runs very important residential clinics for young people who have been self-harming or indeed have eating disorders – a classic example of someone of faith who has a great belief in wanting to do good, in wanting to change the world and we should be encourage those faith-based organisations into the solving of social problems.

Tomorrow I am going to be going to the City of London, not to make a speech about the importance of the City raising finance for business, but on the importance of the City raising finance for society. Big Society capital in effect with the Big Society Bank is going to make money available so that organisations, that social entrepreneurs in this room can take that money and expand their social enterprise to cover different parts of the country or to make it bigger to solve bigger problems, to take on bigger challenges. This is an agenda that I think is vital for the future of our country; it's one that I'm passionate about, but I think it gives the biggest possible opportunity for churches up and down the country to have a real social mission as well as having a moral, religious and a spiritual mission. I think it's a great opportunity for faith to show its power to move mankind, to move mountains, to get things done.

## **Terry Sanderson**

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