



Scottish Election 2007

These questions, prepared by the ACTS Church & Society Network and the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, identify some key issues to raise at hustings meetings, offering some brief background material and a question on each topic.

1. Criminal Justice

In Scotland, we send more people to prison than most other European countries - not because we have more crime, nor because our conviction rate is increasing. What we are doing is sending more of those convicted to prison and we're giving them longer sentences in response to the perception that offending behaviour is more serious than in the past. Yet studies refute this.

The media debate about crime and punishment is increasingly more punitive, building an expectation that prison is the answer, when the facts show that it is not. The three main factors preventing re-offending are a home, a job and a family and loss of one or more of these through a prison sentence, makes 'going straight' less likely.

Preventing young people entering the criminal justice system in the first place is vital and certain Scottish police forces are doing this effectively, using restorative warnings. Like all restorative justice approaches, these concentrate on putting right the harm done, impressing on the offender the impact of their behaviour on the victim or on the community.

Questions: What do you see as the main problems of the criminal justice system? What measures would you propose to make our communities safer?

2. Education

The First Minister has pledged to "give Scotland the best education system in the world by 2020". He promised to achieve this by revolutionising Scotland's schools by: completing the school building programme; training more teachers; creating more vocational courses; establishing more schools of ambition - with poorly-performing schools earmarked for extra investment; providing more support to universities and colleges; and reducing the number of Scots not in education, employment and training. Mr McConnell said high-quality education was the best way to ensure the country could compete globally for decades to come. "Scotland has one of the best education systems in the world," he said. "But we need it to be the best in the world; a truly world-class education system that will serve people throughout their lives. Our ambition is to have the best education system in the world by 2020."

Question: What are the priorities that need to be undertaken in the next parliament to tackle current weaknesses on the road to fulfilling the ambition of giving Scotland the best education system in the world by 2020?

3. Food, Trade and the Environment

A major consequence of trade injustice in relation to food and agricultural products, in both the third world and in Scotland, is environmental damage and social disruption. Cost pressures on farmers force short-cuts and move environmental questions out of the picture. The same pressures mean that the impact of production methods on the stability of rural communities is regarded as someone else's issue. Inequalities in the food trading chain are at the root of many of these problems. There is much that government could do to help redress the balance both in terms of the regulation of competition but also in aiding the development of alternative markets.

Question: Scottish agriculture is responsible for the management of much of our land. What would your party do to help farming to be more competitive in the food trading chain so that farming becomes empowered to be more sensitive guardians of the Scottish landscape and its rural communities?

4. Family Issues

The Scottish Parliament has made considerable changes to the law in regard to family life. With the aim of catering for those it has viewed as vulnerable, it has changed the legal concept of family life considerably. Much of this has been aimed at 'reflecting' social changes and thus it has made divorce easier, raised the status of cohabiting relationships and granted (with the help of Westminster) homosexual relationships rights and status on a par with those of married couples.

Amongst the most vulnerable children are those who can no longer live with their birth parents. The Adoption Act was passed to make adoption services better able to meet the needs of such children and initiatives to encourage stable married families to adopt are now necessary.

Question: Do you think that it is rightly the job of the Scottish Parliament to highlight the value of marriage and encourage it in society?

5. Health - Inequalities and Rural Issues

In Scotland 20% of the population live in rural areas, with 6% in remote rural areas. The health care needs of people in rural areas are the same as those living in urban areas, but access to specialist care involves travel, both costly and inconvenient for the rural patient. The socio-economic factors leading to ill health and health inequities are well recognised, and particularly affect the young and the elderly.

Demographic changes in our population, with an increasing number of the elderly, present a health care challenge. The medical needs of this group include short-term medical care; rehabilitation following discharge from a specialist hospital; surveillance of chronic and degenerative diseases; and care in the terminal phase of life. These needs were well met in the past by the availability of Cottage Hospital or Community Hospital facilities - providing care close to family and friends, and at the same time providing a valuable 'protection' from the inappropriate use of specialist hospital beds. Many of these needs can also be met by appropriately trained care workers offering increased support in the patient's own home.

Question: What steps should the Scottish Parliament take to tackle rural health deprivation and the inequalities of health care services, and how would you ensure that the debts held by many Health Boards do not result in loss of services, especially in rural areas?

6. Housing and Homelessness

The Scottish Executive set a target on homelessness: by 2012, all people approaching local councils because they are homeless will be given an offer of settled accommodation. One criticism of the target has been that it will be impossible to achieve in a climate of continuing shortage of affordable housing. Campaigning groups have consistently pointed out the need for more affordable housing to achieve it.

Each of the 32 local authorities now has a homelessness strategy. These span the range of relevant council activities, not just housing departments, and include the work of housing associations and voluntary organisations, including church-based projects for homeless people. Activities include: improved advice and information; temporary accommodation; support for those who need it; special projects for groups such as alcohol and drug users or people with mental illness; getting household goods and furniture to people resettling after a period of homelessness.

Affordable housing is an issue that goes far beyond homelessness – it is also needed for incoming workers vital to the economy; young people seeking their first home; rural residents seeking housing within a reasonable distance of work or family; partners whose relationships break down. Run-down housing stock also needs to be improved or replaced.

Wider housing issues include the Scottish Executive's commitment to extend the right to buy their home to most housing association tenants, which will also take effect in 2012; and the 'community ownership' programme, through which council housing stock is transferred to housing associations.

Question:

Are all candidates committed to the target of providing settled accommodation for all non-intentionally homeless people applying to local authorities by 2012; and what accommodation and support provision should be put in place during the coming Parliamentary term to make it a reality?

7. Human Trafficking

Not so long ago it was generally assumed that trafficking must be something to do with vehicle congestion in our cities. Now it's a growing concern, highlighted in the media and the subject of campaigns mounted by Amnesty, Anti-Slavery International, the UN and various Christian groups. It is in fact international organised crime, lucrative because it exploits demand for a product - human beings - that can be sold, used and resold many times. It's notoriously difficult to combat because it crosses borders, requiring international co-operation of law enforcement agencies and because its victims, who would be the best witnesses for the prosecution, are unavailable because of physical imprisonment, language difficulties and fear of reprisals for themselves and their families in the countries of origin.

Human trafficking is the recruitment (either by force or deception), transfer and reception of people in exchange for money for the purpose of controlling and exploiting them for forced labour, provision of sexual services or other forms of servitude. It is, in short, today's slavery, two hundred years after Britain passed the Act to Abolish the Slave Trade.

The Palermo Protocol condemning trafficking and calling for intergovernmental action was signed by the UK government in 2000, but its legislative obligations have not yet been ratified. In 2006 a Joint Consultation Document from the Home Office and the Scottish Executive, "Tackling Human Trafficking" began an important process towards a strategy. Pressure is required to ensure that it is taken forward.

Questions: What measures would you propose to tackle the *demand* which keeps traffickers in business, particularly the demand for prostitutes? What provision are you committed to making in terms of places of refuge and support services for victims of trafficking discovered in Scotland?

8. Local Government

Local Council elections are taking place on the same day as the Scottish Parliamentary elections. The voting system is changing with a proportional representation system being used. Rather than electing just one member per Ward voters will list their candidates in order of preference and three or four members will be returned per Ward. Although the Council elections are often ignored local Councils often implement many of the policies decided at Holyrood, especially in areas of education and social care.

Funding of local Councils has always been controversial. Most of their funding comes from Central Government with the difference coming from a local tax. At present each household pays Council Tax which is set by each Council. Some of the parties are arguing that this system is unfair, as it does not take into account individuals' disposable income and a local Income Tax should replace the present system.

Question: What do you think would be the fairest way to funding local Councils in Scotland?

9. Poverty, Debt and Social Justice

Despite social justice targets and milestones, and more recent efforts to "close the opportunity gap", the poor remain very much with us (even if increasingly out of sight and out of the media spotlight). Heath inequalities of eight years in life expectancy between local authorities dramatically indicate the impact of poverty; the number of Scots being made bankrupt is rising alarmingly; yet political interest has been sporadic. Social Justice has been described as a thread running through all Executive policies, but the question is what impact these policies are having.

The Scottish Executive have recently acknowledged the impact of churches' and faith communities' work in regeneration, or even transformation, of communities. And churches are working with others (like the Poverty Alliance) to carry out a Poverty Audit of the first eight years of devolution, by listening to the experiences of folk with first-hand knowledge of what it means to be poor in Scotland today, or to be excluded from the advertised "good life". We hope that Report (due out in March) will focus some media and political interest on poverty as an election issue.

Question: How do you think the Scottish Parliament can make an impact in tackling poverty.

10. Racial Justice

Despite efforts made by the Executive in the past few years to tackle racism and raise awareness, racism is still part of day-to-day experience of some people in our society. Incidents of reported racially motivated crimes are on the rise in Scotland. Moreover a number of recent reports and research papers suggest that attitudes of people in Scotland are become less tolerant towards migrants and people of other racial and cultural backgrounds. As a result minority ethnic people (Black, Asian, English, Eastern European) are reported to feel less secure and some live in fear.

As people of faith we profess that all people are created in the image of God and therefore should be treated equally no matter what their cultural or ethnic background. We strongly assert that there is no room for racism in Scotland. Through the Scottish Churches Racial Justice Group and the Racial Justice Officer, churches in Scotland seek to address the issues of racism within society and to encourage more integration both within the churches and society.

Question: How do you see the future of 'multicultural' Scotland and what steps would you take to tackle racism in Scotland?

11. Refugees and Asylum

Christians believe that all people are created equal in dignity, made in the image of God. Therefore, we affirm respect for the worth of every human being. We recognise that governments have a primary responsibility for their own citizens but basic human rights should not be denied to any persons coming to this country on the grounds that they are not, or are not yet, fully accepted as citizens.

Much of the national debate about asylum in the media has been relentlessly critical of asylum seekers. Issues around the right to asylum have too often been dealt with by misrepresentations and half-truths. The numbers of people claiming asylum in the UK are small. A reasoned political debate based on facts, which recognises the human dignity of everyone involved is required and is vital. We recognize that asylum is a reserved issue which is dealt with by the UK government, however the Scottish Parliament has powers which are relevant to the treatment of asylum seekers, for example over the treatment of children.

Questions: What steps will you take to ensure that there is a reasoned and well informed political debate around the issue of asylum? What action will you take to ensure that the Scottish Executive ensures that measures designed to protect children and vulnerable people in Scotland apply equally in the case of asylum seekers in Scotland?