



When governing goes wrong

Here are two examples of when governing or leadership goes wrong.

Fifty years ago this summer, Pope Paul VI published a document called 'Humanae Vitae'. It was the end of the Sixties and followed a Council earlier in the decade that had hinted at liberalisation in the Church's position. Priests and even people around the world were consulted with a view to reconsidering the Church's position on the family and sex.

This, though, was a new Pope and he wasn't for turning. 'Humanae vitae' ('Human lives') was published. To widespread surprise, while the rest of the world was heading for free love, the Pope articulated an entirely opposite position. Sex should not be divorced from "creativity". Not only should sex be limited to marriage; married couples were precluded from using anything that unnaturally got in the way of new births, like condoms, the Pill or plain old coitus interruptus, which had presumably been the key method of contraception for centuries before, because this type of sex would be anti-creative. (For a reason that I still can't really understand, couples were allowed to use the 'rhythm' method' in which couples had sex at times in the month when they knew the woman was infertile).

As an act of teaching, it was and is widely ignored. Surveys show that 80% of married Catholics not only use contraception but do not think it is a sin to do so. For many Catholic priests on the ground, the only

solution has been to keep quiet about 'Humanae Vitae' and hope it largely goes unnoticed. When the magisterium and the people are so disunited, it just leads to a stale mate. You just can't progress in either direction.

So too with the Brexit referendum. The British people, by a very small majority, voted to leave the EU in a referendum. However, a clear majority of MPs in Parliament think that this is a stupid idea and so they are loathe to do so. Indeed, they would probably vote against a 'hard'/'clean' (depending on your viewpoint) Brexit.

As it is MPs who are delegated the powers with which to actually carry things out, the country is in a kind of stale mate. The views of the people, and the views of the legislature, are just so out of whack that there isn't really a way to progress.

It has led me to think about leadership and how people go about it. You can think that making a firm stand would be enough. That's probably what Pope Paul VI thought in 1968, but fifty years on, that document has achieved almost none of its aims, because it just didn't link to how people lived their lives. The Brexit vote of the people (I know, a small majority only) didn't link to how most MPs went about what they did or how they thought. Actually to change something needs coherence between the leaders and the led.

July 2018 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.