

## Session 5

### PARLIAMENT

**This session will focus particularly on politics in Parliament, looking at how things work, Christians and Parliament, and how you can take part in trying to influence political decisions.**

#### Key messages:

- a. there is no perfect political system
- b. in order to influence it we need to understand how our own system works
- c. there are tensions and dilemmas for everyone involved

#### Preparation

You will need:

- background information about your MP for the introductory exercise (the websites <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons/> or [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) are useful, or the House of Commons Enquiry Service on 020-7219-4272
- Paper and pens to write answers to the Parliamentary Quiz (and a small prize for the winner)
- Bibles or a sheet with the following readings on it: Judges 8:23, Psalm 72, and 1 Samuel 8
- Copies of the Session 5 handout on devolution

#### WELCOME AND PRAYER (5 mins)

Loving Father and Mother, we pray for all those who play a role in governing us. For Members of Parliament, of the Scottish Parliament, of the Welsh Assembly, the Greater London Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the European Parliament. We pray for officials and civil servants, for researchers and administrative staff. We pray for those seeking election to office, and for those who have faced the pain of being defeated. We pray that we will seek to be aware of their role and the challenges they face, and to remember them before you as often as we criticise what they do. In the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

#### INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

Most people's contact with Parliament is through their local MP. Before the meetings ask someone to find out who your MP is and something about them. What party are they a member of? What is their majority? What are their political interests? How far does the constituency spread? At the meeting share this information with the group and find out whether anyone has written to their MP? What was the letter about? Did they get a reply? What did they feel about it? [If your group is spread over more than one constituency, you could perhaps look at a map of the different constituencies, and the different MPs who represent them]

If you live in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or London some of the powers of the Westminster Parliament are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly, Northern Ireland Assembly or Greater London Authority. People in your group may have had contact with their MSP, AM, Northern Ireland Assembly member or London Assembly member. There is a handout on different powers given to the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, Greater London Authority and Westminster Parliament for information which could be used to answer questions or shared with the group at the end of the session.

#### ACTIVITY (15 mins)

##### **Challenge the group to the *How well do you know Parliament Quiz?***

The aim of this quiz is to help people to talk about what they do – and don't – know about the operation of Parliament. Although scores aren't important, you could have a small prize (eg fairtrade chocolate) for the winner.

At the end of the quiz ask the group to think what questions they are still left with? Does anyone else in the group know the answers or can you think of ways you might find out?

#### THE BIBLE AND KINGSHIP (20 mins)

There is no perfect political system. In the Old Testament we can see the way in which the people of God struggled over the question of what form government should take. In those days the option before them was whether or not to have a king, and there was clearly plenty of disagreement!

#### **ACTIVITY**

**Hand out sheets with the Bible readings on them or ask people to look them up. Compare the condemnation of kingship in Judges 8:23 and the hopes for kingship expressed in Psalm 72.**

**Read 1 Samuel 8.**

**Discuss what arguments you think might have been used both against and in favour of kingship? Did kingship prove to be a good option for Israel? What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages? Was it perhaps simply inevitable that the nation would choose the path of having a king?**

There is a very deep conviction in the Old Testament that God alone is king and that this kingship embraces all aspects of life, including the social, economic and cultural life of the people. Only God can claim such authority, and the kind of rule God offers is just and compassionate. So there were those who saw the desire for a human king as undermining the rule of God and they were highly critical of the monarchy. Yet the pressures on the people – the different tribes of Israel – to organise themselves in the face of outside threats meant that those who wanted a king won the day. However there were repeated efforts to ensure that the king was also subject to God's rule, and the prophets made it clear that only the king's obedience to God could bring the people peace and prosperity. Kingship came to be seen as necessary but also open to abuse and failure.

**Ask the group to reflect on our own parliamentary system. Is this the ideal? What is good and bad about our way of organising government? Is democracy the best there is? What perspectives does our faith bring to such questions?**

#### **RELATING TO YOUR MP (15 mins)**

Do you know your MP? Does your MP know you and your church? You are far more likely to be able to influence an MP over a particular issue if you already have a relationship with your MP.

#### **ACTIVITY**

**Get the group to identify what makes an effective relationship with an MP, perhaps drawing on things they have done/experienced in the past. Ideas might include:**

- **Get to know your MP** – visit your MP in Parliament or at their constituency office (details in the local phone book or on their website). Even better invite them along to an event at your church, perhaps a special service or community event, or to visit a social project like a playgroup or a nightshelter that you organise. And if they can't come, invite them again.
- **Affirm the work done by your MP** – even if you are writing to oppose something they are doing, try to find some area of common ground upon which you can build. For example they might have voted against an increase in the development budget, but you know they are very committed to work with children in need in the constituency. Point out the disproportionate impact of poverty on children in developing countries.
- **Pray for your MP** - let your MP know that church members will be praying for them regularly. This is not just praying that they will change their mind on particular issues, but that they will be given the wisdom necessary to make difficult judgements and for strength in coping with a life that can place strains on their family relationships.
- **Write effective letters** - address them to the right place and person; don't write in green ink, put words or phrases in capitals or rely on bible quotes – you will be taken less seriously; write in your own words, MPs get dismissive of organised letter-writing campaigns.
- **Talk local** - even if you are contacting your MP about a "national" subject try to get a "constituency angle" in your letter – eg the number of homeless people in your local authority area; the impact of alcohol misuse on your town centre; or your church's commitment to combating climate change
- **Show that yours is not an isolated voice** - get lots of people to write personal letters. MPs judge the importance of an issue by the amount of correspondence they receive. So instead of passing a motion at church council, persuade each member to write a short letter. Twenty letters is more effective than a single motion.

- **Ask your MP to take action as a result of their contact with you** - this may be to raise the subject with the relevant Minister; the Minister concerned will have to respond to the MP, so raising their awareness of the issue. And your MP will probably write back to you too. Or it might be to sign a Parliamentary Early Day Motion (like a parliamentary petition), vote a particular way, or table a parliamentary question.

NB Depending on what subjects get your group fired up it might be more appropriate to get your group to talk about ways in which they might relate to their MSP if in Scotland, their AM in Wales, their Assembly Member in Northern Ireland or their GLA member in London – the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, and Greater London Authority have different responsibilities and the issues of concern locally might be the responsibility of the devolved government.

### **COMPROMISE AND CONSCIENCE**

One way to lose support for your cause is to question the integrity or conscience of your MP. Few of us get through a day without facing dilemmas or compromises. From the everyday – supporting fair trade or buying British – to life-changing ones – working in the arms industry or taking a personal decision about abortion. Life's choices are rarely clearly between right and wrong, and part of the human condition is wrestling with complex moral choices. Sometimes this leads us to compromise, negotiate or settle for the best option at the time. This doesn't always sit easily with the language of our faith – we worship an unchanging God, a God of truth not compromises. How do we live with these challenges in our lives?

These dilemmas are also apparent in politics. In voting for one particular party, we do not expect to agree with every promise made in a manifesto, rather that a party shows the nearest "fit" to our own political beliefs. Politicians' experience of this dilemma is heightened by the fact that they owe some loyalty to the party which helped get them elected. How should individual politicians act within a parliamentary democracy whilst staying true to their consciences?

#### **ACTIVITY (20 mins)**

Choose a current highly controversial issue. This will depend on what is in the news and the make up of the group, but should be an issue which many Christians would see as an ethical one, eg armed conflict, gambling, nuclear weapons or abortion. In groups ask people to imagine that they are Christian government ministers who totally disagree with government policy on the subject.

- How would they respond?
- Would they resign as a minister?
- Would they stay in post and try to influence the party?
- What loyalty should they have to the party?
- If they didn't resign over this issue where would the line be?
- How would they reply to letters from Christians questioning whether they were being truly Christian?
- Can members of the group identify times when they have experienced such tensions in their own lives?
- Reflect again on the title of this course – "The Art of the Possible"

#### **PRAYER AND CLOSING (5 mins)**

Loving God, we want to pray for our MP, [name]. We pray that at times when we agree with them as much as at times when we profoundly disagree you will remind us that they too are seeking the best for all people. We pray that they will be given wisdom and judgement in making decisions, and the courage to work for their convictions, resisting the temptations and pressures they may face. We pray for the friends and family of [name] that they may also feel your love and closeness, especially at times when [name] feels far away or distracted. May marriages, friendships and family relationships be given time to deepen and grow away from the pressures of Westminster. We ask these prayers in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, Amen.

### **HOMEWORK**

**Find out about the three Christian party groupings at Westminster – the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum, the Christian Socialist Movement and the Conservative Christian Fellowship, as**

well as the all-party Christians in Politics ([www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk)) – and if you are inspired by any of them, join one! Find an opportunity to pray for your MP.