

**“Making All Things New (or a Blast from the Past)?
– Faith and Politics in Scotland 2004”**

**The First Annual SCPO Lecture,
delivered by Rt Hon Jim Wallace, MSP, Deputy First Minister**

23 March 2004

I feel particularly honoured to have been asked to deliver this first annual Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office lecture, on the subject “Making All Things New (or a Blast from the Past)? – Faith and Politics in Scotland 2004”. A subject which was given to me rather than chosen by me, although the liberal interpretation of it will be mine.

It scarcely seems more than five years since I attended Graham Blount’s commissioning service one damp Edinburgh evening in St Andrew’s and St George’s. My frustration level had been rising as I failed to find a parking space anywhere near the Church, and had to abandon the car some distance away. I had reconciled myself to slipping into a pew at the back, and was pleasantly surprised on approaching to realise that by about a minute and a half, I wasn’t going to be late. Slipping into a seat at the back was more difficult than I’d anticipated as I had to weave my way through robed clergy about to process. The challenge became impossible when I was told that as the senior Liberal Democrat attending, I was expected to join the party and denominational representatives at the front to shake hands with Graham at the appropriate point in the service. And so the evening is etched in my mind with that anxious thought of moving at the wrong time or failing to move at the right time.

That time, of course, was post-referendum and before the election. Aspirations and expectations were high. And the role of the Churches in the renewed Scottish democracy was seen as a natural follow on to the leading contribution made in the long battle to secure our own Parliament.

As part of the title of this address refers to a “blast from the past”, it is opportune to remind ourselves for a moment of that past.

These were days when engagement with the Parliamentary process depended on emissaries despatched to London to lobby on specific issues. These had been days when the ruling ethos was that there was no such thing as society and that the main moral of the parable of the Good Samaritan was that he had money. If such philosophy jarred in Scotland, it wasn’t solely politicians who voiced it – the churches, COSLA, trades unions and other civic organisations who spoke out together to articulate a different ethos – and found unity through the Constitutional Convention in pursuing a new Parliament and a new politics.

The theological perspective and history of the Church of Scotland was influential in reviving and promoting the idea of the Claim of Right – the concepts of a limited sovereignty and a popular sovereignty. Politicians exercising power as a gift of the people, very different from the theory of sovereignty of Parliament or sovereignty of Westminster which had acquired such dominating orthodoxy.

This concept of popular sovereignty is one of which we do well to constantly remind ourselves. Although I opposed the idea of a referendum when proposed by Labour 1996 – the scars of that ploy in 1979 still hurt – in retrospect I was wrong and the referendum confirmed the popular legitimacy on the scheme we now have. And when I say we do well to remind ourselves of that, I don’t simply mean Ministers. Of course we should constantly be aware that the powers we exercise are given to us as trustees; but it surely also applies to those who criticise Ministers for not intervening beyond the limits of the popularly approved devolution settlement.

Whatever one’s personal and human response to alleged injustices in the operation of asylum and immigration rules, for example, or whatever support, as a party leader, I may give to party colleagues at Westminster on these issues, as Ministers we have clearly defined responsibilities,

and I don't believe we serve the public interest by muddying these waters or implying that our writ runs wider than it actually does. As parties in working together to achieve this settlement, I hope the Churches and faith groups will respect that reality. By all means, speak out, but remember where the exhortation and encouragement is properly directed.

In addition to buttressing the political philosophy underlying the establishment of our new Parliament, the Churches were also partners in trying to move the new away from the practices, procedures and mindsets of the old. The work done by the Consultative Steering Group in 1998 tried to capture the spirit of the Convention and the new style of politics we wanted to see.

- Accountability to the electorate
- Transparency of policy making through accessibility and openness
- A commitment to more consensual and cooperative working
- Power distributed, not least through a strengthened committee system.

I am in little doubt that this new approach was relevant to the Churches decision to establish a Parliamentary Office, to take advantage of the opportunity of greater inclusiveness and decision making. As someone who is both active in politics and a practising Church member, I strongly endorsed this step – the more so because of its evident ecumenical approach.

In addition, the vitality of the Inter Faith Council has added enormously to the political dialogue in Scotland. During my first time as acting First Minister, I had the stimulating pleasure of engaging with the Inter Faith Council; and subsequently, in this very building, I recall a very useful dialogue on the Executive's policies to tackle sectarianism.

Graham Blount and I were discussing earlier, whether today, five years on, the decision would have been to establish an Inter Faith Parliamentary Office. That is the measure of how far we've travelled. But if, in this address, to mark the 5th anniversary of the Scottish Churches Parliamentary Office, I look at issues from a Church perspective, it is no sign of disrespect to the many valued acquaintances I've made in the different faith groups.

I believed, and still do, that the Churches and faith groups are among a core group, who have a particularly relevant role to play. It is stating the obvious to say that the approach taken will be one that reflects religious teaching and core Christian or other faith values, but they are values which can pervade a whole range of issues. The perspective of the Churches, and the faith groups, surely is a broad one, unlike that of single issue campaigns, whose contribution to civic society and political debate is initially important, but by its very nature limited. Single issue campaigns undoubtedly have their place in our renewed Scottish democracy. They can add a freshness and vitality to the debate.

But pursuing single issue campaigns can often blind the campaigner to the fact that pursuing one goal is rarely without consequence elsewhere. Achievement of the goal may have resource consequences or knock-on effects for other legitimate interests. The best resourced, most articulate or loudest advocate of a specific interest does not necessarily have the best overall interests of the majority at heart. But, in government, we seek to represent and balance the interest of all citizens, and to protect the weak and regulate the strong.

The Church perspective may well be able to reflect that need for balance, and that is why I believe the input of the Churches, particularly channelled through the SCPO is particularly important.

Moreover, the Churches have a resource, which if we're honest about it, is more extensive and more valuable than that of any political party – and that is a mass membership. Whatever media attention my party's Scottish conference will attract this coming weekend, I know there will be a good number of congregations which will have a bigger attendance on Sunday morning. And the same goes for the other parties.

A membership rooted and active in rural Scotland, urban Scotland, island Scotland, comfortable Scotland, deprived Scotland – can, if well harnessed, bring a huge range of experience and expertise to the work of the Churches in making their contribution to the political debate. Yes, there is the obvious difficulty that they don't all speak with one voice, but nevertheless, the skills and experience of members can surely be used to inform submissions, and so benefit the political dialogue.

But the title of the address invites me to consider, as a Minister, whether we have made all things new, and in particular do our practices and processes reflect the new style of politics for which we campaigned.

Let me admit, that I won't claim we've made all things new. There are still Westminster features which prevail. First Minister's Question Time has something of the gladiatorial nature of Prime Minister's Questions, although still more civilised. The current pilot of departmental themed questions suggests that there may be things we want to learn from Westminster. Some argue that the relative party discipline – of opposition as well as government parties – is too much of a Westminster throwback. I doubt it. I've seen the Westminster machines in action. But nor do I apologise for some measure of disciplined behaviour in delivering a programme agreed between two parties in the aftermath of an election, and published so that it is transparent for all to see and judge.

The politics of minority government may have a superficial appeal, not least to pundits, commentators and maybe even the Opposition; but instead of a published Agreement, deals would be cobbled together on a daily basis without any real knowledge of what the trade-off was. And in a world, where politicians can usually find it easier to say 'Yes', who'd want to be in government, trying to balance resources and expenditure, only to be blown off course by every new popular spending commitment.

But if we haven't made all things new, I believe we've made enough things new to make a real difference.

One of the earliest resolutions of the Scottish Parliament was to have a multi-faith 'Time for Reflection'. As my colleague, Donald Gorrie, described it at the time – proportional representation prayers. Having been a Westminster MP for 18 years, where, until the last eighteen months, prayers, starting with the 67 psalm, remained unchanged with one exception, the immediate relevance and diversity of Time for Reflection is refreshing indeed. [The one exception, to which I referred, was following the divorce of the Prince and Princess of Wales when the Princess was dropped from the list of individual members of the Royal Family for whom Parliament prayed.]

But other key features of the Parliament mark a radical departure from the established Westminster model.

The Petitions Committee have ensured that concerns of individuals or groups who have petitioned the Parliament can have these concerns placed on the agenda of the relevant subject Committee or the Parliament itself.

The commitment to consult has been real and genuine – indeed to the extent that I sometimes hear complaints of consultation fatigue. The Hansard Society, during the last Parliamentary term, picked out the Executive for running more on-line consultations than any one else in government.

And the importance of consultation is not the exercise itself, but a readiness on the part of government to listen and to develop or change its thinking, in the light of responses.

The Health Department's public drugs campaigns were carefully evaluated through general consultation and focus groups. Indeed I recall that this is an issue on which the SCPO had a particular interest – informed, no doubt, by the valuable work done by the churches in providing practical help and support for drug misusers and their families.

In the event, the Executive received a very clear signal that authoritarian, paternalistic or simplistic negative messages failed to reach the target. As a result, the communications strategy underpinning ‘Know the Score’ contains a message that all drugs can be harmful, but also produces a stream of factual and non-judgemental material.

As providers of care homes, the views of the Churches were relevant in establishing the Care Standards for Care Homes for Older People. These changed significantly following a wide and detailed consultative process, which involved extensive consultation with care home providers.

From personal experience, I can testify to significant changes in the light of the consultation process on the Prison Estates Review. The response from many, and not least the trades unions, allowed us to encourage the development of an option, which will allow the public sector an opportunity to match the costs of the private sector. And, of course, we reversed our decision on the future of Peterhead Prison. Crucially to me in that regard were the representations from the families of the prisoners. We had argued in our original review, that relocating the prisoners in central Scotland would mean they were closer to their families for visiting purposes. Many families, however, said that given the nature of the offences, they found it easier to visit well away from their own home area. There were, of course, other factors, but I was particularly mindful that the sentence of the courts was not intended to penalise families, who, almost certainly, had already experienced sufficient grief.

In that case, there was also important input from the Parliamentary Committee. On responding, I said this:

“The way in which the consultation procedure progressed is a tribute to the Parliament and what many of us who fought to establish the Parliament said it should do. There is no monopoly of wisdom in the government.”

But it must surely follow that if consultation is to be genuine, and if governments are to change policies, then we don’t need the blast from the past of accusations of “u-turns” and “humiliating climbdowns”. That means all – and that includes the opposition and the media - must show the maturity which the new politics requires. Nothing will persuade governments more to adopt the negative default mode of the old politics than the language and posturing of the old politics.

I mentioned the Parliamentary Committee, as undoubtedly their role in the Parliament marks an important way in which we do things differently. The work of the Committees address the need for more transparency and a better distribution of power.

People who claim that the Committees bend too much to the discipline of the party whips have never been in the shoes of a Minister appearing before such a Committee. The difficult questions are just as likely to come from your own side, as from the Opposition.

But the key point is that unlike so many Committee Reports which gather dust at Westminster, reports and recommendations of our Parliamentary Committees more often than not have a real influence on policy or legislation.

It was as a result of a Committee Report that legislation was brought in to include questions on religion in the 2001 Census. The work and scrutiny of the Equal Opportunities Committee has undoubtedly had a material influence on the equality proofing of legislative proposals; whilst the unanimous report of the Health Committee in the last Parliament helped pave the way for the introduction of free personal care for the elderly.

In addition, the Committee have the power to initiate legislation. The first Committee Bill to pass into law made important provision for protection from domestic abuse. More recently, Parliament voted to appoint the Children’s Commissioner the result of another piece of Committee legislation.

Now, I would not hesitate to say that there is still scope for measurable improvement. The Procedures Committee Report on the CSG Principles made a number of detailed recommendations

of relevance to both Parliament and Executive. Let there be no doubt of Ministers' commitment to reflect the CSG Principles in all aspects of our work, and to engage with the Parliament and key stakeholders in civic Scotland to fulfil the vision of inclusive governance and accountable government.

And obviously I include the Scottish Churches and other faith groups as important partners in the continuing quest for improved governance.

As I've already said, the views of the Churches cover a broad range of policy, and in identifying a few issues coming up, I'm not suggesting that they are by any means exclusive.

One issue which resonated through the last Parliament was the issues of debt, and not least the question of the future pouding and warrant sales. Incidentally, anyone who thinks things haven't changed much, should reflect on whether a solitary party representative at Westminster could ever have made as much progress with private members legislation, as Tommy Sheridan did in the last Parliament.

Tackling the issue of debt is strongly rooted in Biblical teaching. Graham Blount, in his foreword to "Debt on our Doorstep" said this:

"While not offering a package of solutions, which can be readily translated for British debt now, the Bible treats debt within a horizon of justice, a creative justice based on spiritual and humanitarian principles, which goes further than the simple truth that debts must be paid."

Debt is not novel to our generation – but our materialist generation has probably increased the pressures on so many people to seek credit and accrue debt. My difficulty with Tommy Sheridan's Bill was not the wish – widely shared – about changing an outdated system of debt collection which lacked a human face, but how to do so in a way that didn't make Scotland unique in making much debt repayment a voluntary activity.

The outcome not only distinguishes between commercial and personal debt, but puts in place a series of safeguards to protect those in the "can't pay" category; but possibly most significantly has developed debt arrangement schemes and a network of money advice services across Scotland. More often than not, the debt which is the trigger for recovery procedure is only one of many. Multiple debt, and the anxiety that goes with it, is usually the reality. A system which now encourages and assists the debtor to address his or her general indebtedness is one which I would like to think is an example of "creative justice" which has genuinely sprung from the work of the Parliament.

In this Parliament we are due to tackle other archaic diligence procedures, including new ways of dealing with bank arrestments, as well as trying to modernise personal bankruptcy procedures to try and remove the stigma which so often attaches to it. Once the draft Bill is out for consultation, I very much look forward to receiving views through SCPO on our proposals.

Another topical and controversial issue is the growing of GM crops. I fear the debate to date has not done justice to such a complex issue. It has been all too easy to present it as a simple 'Yes or No' response to so-called Frankenstein foods, whereas the scientific assessment of trials is only one part of a rather more intricate debate with an ethical as well as a scientific dimension.

It is an issue where I believe the Scottish Churches can helpfully contribute to the debate. The Society, Religion and Technology Project of the Church of Scotland reported to the 1999 General Assembly, which took the view that there is no simple 'Yes or No' answer; that the issue should be examined on case by case basis and that GM crops should focus on applications with obvious benefit to people and the environment. And the Church can raise issues which go beyond the narrower legal responsibility of Ministers to approve a particular genetically modified seed or not. The role of multinationals in commercially driving forward the use of GM foods, particularly in developing nations; a counterbalance to the view that GM holds the answer to world hunger, conveniently ignoring vital issues of power and distribution; but not forgetting either the potential

for GM crops in medical applications, improving nutritional content or increasing yields. Writing in last September's 'Life and Work', Donald Bruce, Director of the SRT wrote this:

".....a black farmer in South Africa told me that sowing GM cotton has over five years increased his yields on his small farm so that he can now afford to send his children to school."

These are not simplistic issues, but in the arena of public debate, is there not more scope for the Churches to inject some balance, and challenge not only politicians but the wider public on what are some quite fundamental issues.

The third policy area I'd like to raise is reform of family law. The Parliamentary sensitivities surrounding this are perhaps best illustrated by the fact that some of the proposals which I brought forward in a White Paper in 2001 reflected Scottish Law Commission proposals, now well over ten years old.

The family and family concerns are properly the concern of Church as well as State. I readily recall Cardinal Keith O'Brien's address on the occasion of the national Thanksgiving Mass last November, when he identified support and promotion of the family as one of his key issues of concern. I should certainly endorse the idea of the family being one of the important building blocks of a stable society.

But I'm conscious too that it is much easier to support the idea of the family, if one's own experience of family life has been secure and fulfilling. The challenge today is how we reconcile different experiences of family life in a way that offers protection to the vulnerable, nurtures feelings of love and respect (including self respect), and promotes the innate dignity of each man and woman and child. Launching the Children's Charter, yesterday, the figure was quoted of up to 60,000 children living in a home where at least one parent abused drugs. In many such cases, a pattern is emerging of increased dependence on grandparents. Whatever our Churches teachings, a simple fact of life in 2004 is that many couples do not choose marriage, and so legally many children are born out of wedlock.

These are the realities which we, as politicians face, when we try to frame laws that don't discriminate, that seek to be humane, and that try to protect any made vulnerable by domestic relationships. Let's not pretend it is easy, but perhaps it is important to keep concern for the interests of children to the fore as we reform and modernise our laws. Whilst a litmus test of children's interests won't cover every scenario, it will act as a good guide as we approach a sensitive issue.

And there is a challenge here, too, for our Churches. No one, least of all the Executive, is asking the Churches in Scotland to shrink from their theological position or dilute their ethical teaching; but rather to consider what kind of contribution they can make in trying to secure better justice for all in society regardless of their lifestyle, circumstances, religious persuasion or lack of it.

I doubt if there is any theological way of reconciling these different understandings of and by mankind. What we can do is try to understand better – not advocate, not agree but understand and commit to concern for the common welfare, for respect for each individual and not least those who need the state's protection more than most.

Perhaps the issue of family law reform is a good illustration of the tension which necessarily exists between the obligations of our faith and issues of law and legality in a just society.

This address was also sub-titled 'Faith and Politics in Scotland, 2004' and the tension to which I have referred leads me to the first of my conclusions, and that is let us recognise the limitations of politics and the law. I recall the introductory chapter of a legal textbook when I was a student. The author described a man walking along a street and seeing a total stranger drowning in a puddle of water. Like the priest and levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, he walks on by, and the question is asked whether in law, he can be sued? The learned author reflected that however

answerable he may be in a High Court on the Great Day of Judgement, he was not answerable in one of our courts of law.

It is important for us to remember that where civil law and legislation stop, the law to love God and love one another takes us further, and so our duty as followers of Christ is not to be constrained by the limitations of politics.

But secondly, we should recognise that there is a positive side to law and politics. Law, in a negative way, prohibits us from harming our neighbours. And it can be instrumental in defining what is acceptable and unacceptable. In the words of Martin Luther King, “Nor can morality be legislated, but behaviour can be regulated. Judicial redress may not change the heart, but they can restrain the heartless.”

So in Scotland in 2004 there is undoubtedly a role for people with faith to engage. Whilst Parliamentary made laws may not create heaven on earth, they should at least take us in the right direction. If our laws are to reflect God’s love for his world, there has to be the involvement of men and women of faith, in shaping them. As Cardinal O’Brien said in his address, this evening, the Churches can provide a framework of values. And that points very much towards engagement. Not all will be called to political activity, but equally I don’t believe that apathy or indifference is an option for the followers of Jesus. The believer cannot abdicate basic political responsibilities – to be aware and informed; to express concerns from a principled standpoint, and to vote in accordance with those principles.

As the prayer says:

“From the silent apathy of good men, O Lord, deliver us.”

In December 2002, I was honoured to be asked to deliver the Baillie Lecture at the University of Edinburgh. In my researches, I found the following words by John Baillie in his book “What is Christian Civilisation,”

“Christians today who defend the Church’s slowness to concern itself with social reform by standing fast on the distinction between ‘religion and politics’, or between ‘religion and economics’, too often find themselves in the same camp as those men of the world whose opposition to projected reforms proceeds only from the defence of their own vested interests in the existing order.”

But if Christian silence is not an option, there is a challenge to our Churches Parliamentary Office. Not only is it a ready channel to convey a Christian message or viewpoint to Parliament and Executive; it is well placed to be a channel of information back to the parishes, so that the individual can be informed on what the issues of the day are; so that ignorance doesn’t become an excuse for apathy.

Some final thought. In his contribution to “God in Society”, published last year, Professor Will Storrar plays on the name “Holyrood” and sees a flash of divine humour:

“.....the new Parliament,” he says, “was to be built on a comic site par excellence, the former site a brewery bearing the name of a gallows.”

He goes on: “The place of Christ’s Rood, his Cross, is the place where we see shockingly juxtaposed God’s suffering love for humanity with the terminal violence of the powerful against the innocent. It is a holy place precisely because it is a place of healing for a suffering world. Through the resurrection and the sending of the Spirit, the holy rood remains a source of hope for humanity.” Professor Storrar then suggests “that the theological significance of the new structures and processes of the Scottish Parliament lies in their capacity to bring something of that cruciform holiness to our politics, to our people, and to our small bit of the planet”.

Put like that, it is an awesome challenge. But the call to each of us surely resonates. For all our human and political imperfections, it is to make it a holy place 'because it is a place of healing for a suffering world.' 'A source of hope.'

Let us remember, that just before The One who sit on the throne said:

“And now I make all things new (Rev 21 v5), a loud voice proclaimed:

“He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain.” (Rev 21 v4)

The new Parliament building is not the new Jerusalem – but when we enter it, and when we debate on it, we will do well to challenge ourselves whether what we do will wipe tears from suffering eyes and be a 'source of hope' for our 'people and our small bit of the planet'.

