

# Faith in Politics: The 2017 General Election

Does the prospect of the upcoming election fill you with excitement, or apathy? Or something in-between?

Every General Election presents an opportunity for citizens to participate critically and constructively in the democratic process. It may be a cliché to suggest that there has “never been so much at stake”, but there is an element of truth to this saying. We are living in an unprecedented political moment. There are many things that are uncertain about the future of our country, and this is an important opportunity for you to challenge and scrutinise the policies and rhetoric of politicians.



This resource has been produced by the Joint Public Issues Team (the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church). For more information and resources, including bible reflections, visit [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2017/](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/general-election-2017/)

## Times are changing

As a Christian people we believe that not only has our world and those who live in it been made by God, but the systems and structures that hold us together are part of God’s purpose too. We are called to draw attention to the needs of the oppressed, to speak out with the marginalised, and perhaps to highlight issues that are overlooked by mainstream coverage. We need to ask “who is our neighbour?” when we vote.

While some may welcome the opportunity that a General Election presents, many may feel worn out by politics. Perhaps that means it’s even more essential that Christians recognise their responsibility to think about what this election means for our communities and the situations where we want most to see change.

The political landscape is changing fast. Whilst the vote to leave the EU certainly alters many things for the UK, there are other aspects of political life that are also undergoing considerable change.

The onward momentum towards devolution presents a new set of political opportunities and challenges. As regions and nations continue to take back more power from traditional power bases, the nature of our political debate is changing. The emergence of Metro Mayors and city region deals, in addition to the increasingly active devolved parliament in Scotland and assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland, means that it’s been a long time since all power resided in Whitehall and Westminster.

In a digital age, the way in which individuals engage with politics has transformed, and continues to change, almost unrecognisably. We have seen the growth of a worryingly reductive and divisive approach to politics, and many voters feel unsure about where they can source balanced information. Social media is responsible both for opening new channels of communication and for the creation of closed communities — in which we only hear the perspectives and opinions of those who sound or look familiar to us.

“Post-truth” was the Oxford Dictionary’s word of 2016. Defined as circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief, the fear of living in a post-truth society serves to undermine a belief that anyone is speaking truth. Is this a new phenomenon or has the growing predominance of the internet compounded an existing one?

Other commentators have noted that traditional party political lines of left and right are being undermined by fault-lines between protectionism and liberalism, which appear to transcend these historic ways of determining how we vote.

Whichever way you look at it, the sands of politics have shifted dramatically in a very short space of time, making it feel even tougher to know what’s going on in politics and to make that important decision about how to use your vote

## What issues matter in 2017?

This election has been largely framed in the context of Brexit. Politicians are imploring voters to consider their ability to deliver a good deal for the United Kingdom during negotiations with the EU, should their party receive a mandate to do so from the electorate. But General Elections are never about mandates alone. This briefing highlights four issues which are poised to have a real impact on the future of the UK after 2017:

- **The UK’s relationship with the European Union**
- **Migration, forced displacement and the UK asylum system**
- **Poverty and economic inequality in the UK**
- **The UK’s role in the world.**

Whilst these are certainly not the only important issues in this General Election, they highlight some key domestic issues - welfare, poverty, and our asylum system. They also explore global concerns, including how to ensure that our responsibilities to support those in the global south are not overshadowed by more immediate concerns about the future of our own country.

## Using this briefing

This briefing explores these issues as straightforwardly as possible, laying out the key facts rather than telling you to vote for a particular party. At the end of each section you will also find some questions, to help you reflect on the issue.

Christians will always hold contradictory viewpoints about politics, and that's ok. It is essential is that we do not let these differences affect the way we treat each other. We should be willing to listen respectfully to views that may not be our own. But it is also important not to try to avoid conflict and stop talking about these important issues for fear others will disagree or be offended. This General Election, can we model disagreeing well?

So why not sit down with friends over a pot of tea and use our questions to guide a conversation about one issue in particular? Bible study groups could use this briefing in conjunction with our bible reflection materials at [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk) to think about how Christians could respond to the 2017 General Election.

# The UK's relationship with the European Union

## Background

The upcoming election is not a vote about whether the UK should remain in the EU, yet Brexit is undoubtedly the backdrop against which this election has been called.

Across the political spectrum, politicians and parties will have three primary concerns:

- The strategy the UK Government will use during the negotiations to reach a deal
- The nature of the deal itself
- The impact that the withdrawal deal may have, positively or negatively, on areas of policy and public interest

**“What does it mean to think of our neighbour – and their interests – when pushing for UK interests on exiting the EU?”**

Prime Minister Theresa May called for an early election on the basis that she wanted to provide “stability and certainty” throughout the years in which the UK will be negotiating its withdrawal from the EU, believing that the UK's bargaining hand will be improved if there is a strong mandate given to the UK Government responsible for negotiating the terms of our withdrawal. The Conservatives will argue that electing a different government at this stage could add to the uncertainty that already surrounds the process.

Whilst Labour is committed to the UK withdrawing from the EU, it has been critical about the Government's refusal to commit to providing assurances for EU nationals. They have said that this will be a “day one” priority, should they be elected. The Liberal Democrats have also called for EU nationals to be given the right to stay in the UK.

Nicola Sturgeon, the leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), called for an independence referendum to be held on Scottish membership of the Union, once the terms of Brexit are clear. Now there is a General Election, Scottish voters will be considering what impact the result will have on Scotland's future.

## Issues

### Negotiating the UK's future

The negotiations that the UK is now engaged in will be some of the widest-ranging and most complex ever undertaken by the United Kingdom. Over the course of the negotiations, the following issues<sup>i</sup> and others will need to be addressed, and if possible, resolved.

- *The rights of EU and UK citizens in each other's countries* – Will the rights of EU citizens currently residing in the UK be limited or upheld?
- *The UK's spending commitments within the EU budget* – The EU's plans for the future will have been made on the assumption that the UK would contribute to its budget. The remaining members of the EU have already begun to make the case that the UK must make a final "divorce settlement" contribution to compensate for the gap in the budget that will result from its departure.
- *The transfer of EU regulatory responsibilities from EU to UK law* – how long will European legislation continue to apply in the UK, and how will the UK participate in regulation currently held Europe-wide?
- *The rights of UK and EU fishing fleets to fish in each other's waters*
- *Renegotiating cross-border security arrangements* – What will the UK's security responsibilities look like once it has left the European Union? Will the UK continue to share intelligence with European neighbours? What form will border security checks take once the UK has left the EU?

In addition to negotiating these European issues, the future Government will also hope to pursue trade agreements with EU members as well as countries from around the world. The sooner that these EU specific issues are resolved, the greater certainty there is for the UK as it seeks to widen its number of trading partners.

### Free movement of people and goods

Key questions remain concerning two of the four "key pillars" of the European Union - the free movement of people and the free movement of goods.

The European Union was founded upon the notion that the benefits of agreeing to these four principles outweigh the disadvantages, and that they are mutually reinforcing. Many European countries are reluctant to grant the UK the benefits of easy trading relations if the country does not agree to the other principles, like the free movement of people. EU residents presently living in the UK have been vocal in their concern at the current Government's failure to guarantee the rights of EU citizens already residing in the UK, many of

whom have guarantee the rights of EU citizens already residing in the UK, many of whom have guarantee the rights of EU citizens already residing in the UK, many of whom have expressed anxieties over their future.

What does it mean to think of our neighbour – and their interests – when pushing for UK interests on exiting the EU?

## Questions to reflect on...

- How would you want a future Government to represent you during the UK's negotiations over its future relationship with the European Union? What issues are you concerned about?
- What do you think are the most important decisions that will be taken during the process? Who will they affect?
- Is a "common good" possible when discussing the UK's exit from the European Union? What would this look like for people in your community, your nation, and people in other countries?
- How can people's fears and anxieties be heard and addressed during this process?

## Migration, forced displacement and the UK asylum system

### Background

In September 2015, the world was rocked by the shocking images of a young child, Alan Kurdi, found dead on the shores of Turkey. Almost three years on, what has changed and what has stayed the same, and why?

People leave their homes for many reasons. It is tempting to draw a distinction between people who are forced to leave their homes as refugees, fleeing from particular acts of violence or persecution, and those who choose to migrate for economic reasons. In reality, such clear-cut distinctions are difficult to make. In Syria, many refugees forced to flee had good jobs, but relative affluence did not enable them to remain safe in the face of civil war.

**"The ongoing humanitarian refugee crisis continues to affect an estimated 65.3 million people globally"**

It is important to remember that the current refugee crisis is not isolated to one country or region, but is a humanitarian crisis on a global scale. Wars or disasters may act as triggers that compound the effects of poverty, inequality and discrimination, forcing people to flee their homes and country of origin.

The UK Government has provided significant financial support for humanitarian assistance in the region around Syria, thanks to its commitment to allocating 0.7% of gross national income to international aid and development. This money has been spent on emergency aid: food, shelters, medical aid, emergency relief packages and sanitation and hygiene solutions. It has also funded education and employment support to refugees in Lebanon and Jordan<sup>ii</sup>.

Today, much of the world's attention has moved on from the refugee crisis. Other issues, like Brexit, the American election and growing concerns about North Korea, have meant that there is less media coverage of the ongoing humanitarian crisis, which continues to affect an estimated 65.3 million people globally. This has also meant that calls from civil society – charities, faith groups and community leaders – to do more for refugees, have often been drowned out.

## Issues

### Concerns about immigration

Immigration was a powerful and often divisive political issue that dominated much of the coverage of the recent European Union referendum. Although personal experience or friendship with migrants is strongly correlated with more positive views towards migration, polling consistently shows that the British public largely wants immigration levels to be reduced.

Concerns about the levels of migration to the country mean that many are resistant to measures that might prove to be a “draw”, increasing levels of migration into the country. Yet grants of asylum represent a tiny proportion of net immigration to the UK, and the UK takes only a small fraction of those seeking asylum in Europe. In 2016, over 1.2 million people sought safety in Europe. Of this number, Britain received 38, 517 asylum applications including dependents – around 3% of all asylum claims made in the EU last year<sup>iii</sup>.

Will this coming election be an opportunity for parties to promise to limit further the numbers of immigrants or asylum seekers entering our country, or is it time for us to reconsider the way we approach migration?

### Taking responsibility: relocating refugees

In September 2015, the UK Government announced a limited programme of refugee resettlement from Syrian families in refugee camps. The original pledge was for 20,000 people to be resettled ‘over the lifetime of the UK Parliament’, which was expected to run until spring 2020. However, with the calling of this early election, the future of this programme will be a matter for the next Government to determine. The same is true for other resettlement programmes, including those for vulnerable children and their families from the Middle East and North Africa, for programmes of resettlement from other areas of emergency, and for any potential future help for unaccompanied child asylum seekers in Europe.

Whilst the UK has committed to relocating 20,000 Syrian refugees, this is tiny in comparison to the number of refugees other countries have accepted. Lebanon, Pakistan and Turkey are all hosting at least

1 million refugees each, whilst Europe has accepted just 6% of the overall number of displaced persons.

As we look to a future in which the UK is no longer a member of the European Union, there are some important decisions to be made about how the UK will deal with migration and choose to respond to its legal and moral obligation to support refugees in the future.

## Asylum support

Many charities and human rights groups have voiced their concern about the treatment of asylum seekers under the current asylum system. They argue that the asylum system is failing to meet the basic standards of care and support that asylum seekers are legally entitled to, often leaving charities, including faith groups, to bridge the gap.

A recent report stated that evidence shows that “a two-tier system has developed for refugees. Those refugees who arrive through a resettlement route are provided with accommodation and receive support to access services and find employment. For refugees who have gone through the asylum system, there is no such support.”<sup>iv</sup> This two-tier system would appear to mirror a narrative that is used within the media, which depicts refugees on official resettlement programmes in a more positive light, and asylum seekers arriving independently as “irregular” or illegal migrants.

Refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom endured traumatic experiences in their country of origin, face immense challenges in attempting to rebuild their lives in a new country. The Christian principles of welcome and love for the stranger remind us to treat others as we would wish to be treated. What does this mean when reflecting on asylum and immigration in this election?

## Questions to reflect on...

- What role do you think that the UK should play in responding to the global refugee crisis?
- What factors should the UK consider when making decisions about the future of our migration system?
- What does our faith, and stories contained within the bible, have to say about the way we should treat those who come to the UK in need of help?

## Poverty in the UK

### Background

As Christians, we believe that all are made in God’s image and should have the opportunity to realise the potential God has placed within them. Yet poverty in the UK affects the lives of around 4 million children, two-thirds of whom are in working families. Despite

**“Despite continued increases in employment for parents, child poverty is predicted to top 5 million by 2020.”**

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The face of UK poverty has changed over the past two decades. Poverty in the past was tightly linked to unemployment and old-age. Today pensioners are the age-group least likely to experience poverty and the majority of poor families are in work. The past four years have seen rising levels of employment go hand-in-hand with rising poverty and particularly child poverty.

Changes to the minimum wage and the tax system have had a positive effect for people in poverty, but these are vastly overwhelmed by much larger negative effects resulting from cuts to the benefit system. Cuts to benefits are expected to continue to drive increases in child poverty as the new Universal Credit will provide substantially less support than the benefits it is replacing.

## Issues

**More employment does not mean less poverty**

The UK’s unemployment rate is low by historical standards and overall the numbers in employment are very high – but poverty is rising. This is not a consequence of how poverty is measured; multiple methods of looking at incomes and deprivation tell a similar story.

Rather, work is not providing a sufficient income to keep families out of poverty. Low pay and insecure work are part of the explanation. Another key factor is that many of the new jobs are going to people who have to work limited numbers of hours due to health problems, disability or caring responsibilities. For many families, working flat out, even at the so-called National Living Wage, will not prevent poverty. In-work benefits have been key to this group avoiding poverty.

**Brexit and poverty**

Brexit will have a huge effect on the UK economy. For those in poverty the most important questions are around how wealth within the country will be distributed. An incoming government could choose to emphasise policies that target money on economically poorer areas and the least wealthy. If not, and if the economy suffers from Brexit, so too will those already living in poverty.

The Human Rights Act, which is derived from the European Convention on Human Rights, has acted as a check on benefit reforms. Importantly all reforms are designed to comply with the Act. Even then some difficult cases or unintended consequences of policies are challenged under the Act. For example, it was found to be



unfair and illegal that the Spare Room Subsidy, or Bedroom Tax, was being applied to panic rooms for domestic violence survivors, or to rooms disabled people used to store medical equipment. Will the Human Rights Act be retained?

It will be important to assess the impact on the benefits system of any post-Brexit arrangements and to ensure that the poorest do not suffer disproportionately as a result.

## Questions to reflect on...

- What priority do you think an incoming Government should give to reducing poverty as it works towards leaving the European Union? What would this look like?
- Many parents and guardians are unable to work full-time or at all due to illness or caring responsibilities. How should a new Government ensure they and their children can avoid poverty?
- Pope Francis said “How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor.” What might this mean for your church?

## The UK's role in the world

### Background

After leaving the European Union, the UK will want to develop further positive relationships with nations remaining within the EU and other countries. A key national interest will be the UK's trade relations. But at what cost should these trade relations be pursued? How can the UK ensure that its achievements in the areas of human rights, climate change and international development will not be eroded by agreements with large, powerful economies? What will the UK's place in the world be in the future?

In Deuteronomy, we are provided with the image of a nation with a “wise and discerning people”. At the time the descendants of Abraham were at a watershed moment of their nation's life, transitioning from one reality to another while faced with the challenge of expressing nationhood in a new, emerging context. However we relate to the EU or any other political entity, we are part of an international community. This image described in Deuteronomy reminds us that respect for a nation comes not through one-off actions or political grandstanding, but by an ongoing commitment to justice and peace. What does that mean for the UK's role?

### Issues

#### Security & International Affairs

After participating in the war in Iraq, the UK has understandably been reluctant to intervene militarily in other conflicts, such as the Syrian War. But as the UK prepares to launch the first of two new aircraft

carriers, its policy on supporting peace in the Middle East is confused. Despite a Foreign Affairs Committee report into the Government's handling of Libya stating that the "Government has yet to appreciate the lessons from our experience in Libya, including our lack of country knowledge amongst those drafting and deciding policy", the UK still struggles to contribute leadership towards a comprehensive strategy for building peace in the region. What should the UK's role be in relation to conflicts around the world?

## Human Rights

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is hugely important in protecting the rights of all British citizens. It includes key protections for citizens vis a vis the state, including the right not to be unlawfully detained, the right to a fair trial, the right to free expression and fair and equal treatment, and freedom of conscience. It is a separate entity to the EU, and the UK's departure from the European Union will not require the Government to repeal our commitment to the ECHR. However, the rhetoric around 'taking back control' has led to calls for a new UK Bill of Rights and for the UK to break links with the ECHR.

Should the UK leave the European Convention, many of these rights may become a matter for political debate and no longer be taken for granted. Prime Minister May has argued that the Convention 'binds the hands' of the UK Government when dealing with security cases, as it has been invoked by terrorist suspects to prevent them from being deported from the UK. However, human rights groups argue that preserving and strengthening the European Convention on Human Rights is in the best interest of British citizens.

## The Environment

**"Climate change is arguably one of the greatest threats faced by humanity, but it is a threat that will largely affect the poorest people in the world"**

Climate change is arguably one of the greatest threats faced by humanity, but it is a threat that will largely affect the poorest people in the world, plants and animals facing extinction, and ecosystems that have been exploited for their natural resources by the west. The UK's willingness to take climate change as a serious threat has been recognised internationally, but as other issues, including trade, take centre stage, will the UK's record on climate change begin to slip?

The UK has ratified the 2015 Paris climate agreement but the pledges of all nations will require a review in 2020. This is crucial as governments have promised to take further action to keep catastrophic warming down to 1.5 degrees.

Will the UK not only maintain its efforts to reach its current climate change targets, but also plan to increase its actions in order to achieve the ambition of the Paris Summit?

## Denial of religious freedom

In many places in our world the freedom to exercise their religion and belief is under threat. People of many faiths and none can find themselves vulnerable to physical violence, jail and torture and the denial of rights, employment and other opportunities. Faith-based groups can find it difficult to get permission to open new places of worship, and those who speak out against restrictions may find themselves targeted. Too often Governments find this area of human rights difficult to address in their bilateral relations with other states, and may even resist measures to systematically monitor restrictions on freedom of information and belief. A future Government could play a key role in promoting freedom of religion and belief as a foundational human right.

### Questions to reflect on....

- To what extent should tackling climate change be a priority for an incoming Government? What might this involve?
- Might the UK's focus on establishing bilateral trading links with other countries prevent us from challenging the abuse of human rights? How should new trade agreements take account of human rights?
- Are you aware of places where there are restrictions on religious freedom? How should a future government draw attention to the importance of religious freedom internationally?

## For more information

For further information and resources produced by The Joint Public Issues Team, please visit our General Election webpages at:

<http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/politics-and-elections/general-election-june-2017/>

There you will find “**This is a time**” a biblical reflection on the upcoming election, and guidance designed to help those planning to host a hustings meeting in their local community.

### Other helpful websites:

[Quaker Vote](https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/news/count-down-to-general-election) : <https://www.quaker.org.uk/news-and-events/news/count-down-to-general-election>

[Christians in Politics](http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/): <http://www.christiansinpolitics.org.uk/>

[CTBI](http://www.churcheselection.org.uk/) website covering the General Election: <http://www.churcheselection.org.uk/>

[CYTYN](http://www.cytun.org.uk/election2017/index.html) – Election 2017 resources: <http://www.cytun.org.uk/election2017/index.html>

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<sup>i</sup>Further information is contained in this Chatham House briefing

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/preparing-uks-brexit-negotiation>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/65a3e064-2120-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4853\\_top\\_20\\_facts\\_about\\_refugees\\_and\\_asylum\\_seekers](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/4853_top_20_facts_about_refugees_and_asylum_seekers)

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0316/APPG\\_on\\_Refugees\\_-\\_Refugees\\_Welcome\\_report.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0004/0316/APPG_on_Refugees_-_Refugees_Welcome_report.pdf)



The Church of Scotland

