

Protest and prophecy

One of the areas where cuts will hit hardest is Liverpool, writes **Phil Jump**. Where should the churches stand, and what should they preach?

I'M GOING to miss those invitations with the gold-embossed crest of the city of Liverpool at the top. But these cuts are going to affect us all, and I guess it's just the price I'm going to have to pay.

Perhaps I should explain. I am referring to a letter which I received from Liverpool Town Hall a few days ago asking if, as part of its cost-saving programme, I would mind awfully if my invitations to civic events came in future by email.

I agreed, of course, even if it does mean that from now on participation in civic life will resemble travelling with a no-frills airline – just turn up with your confirmation email and a recognised form of identification.

A sign of the times perhaps, but at least one cost-cutting measure that will be relatively painless – unless, of course, you happen to be the printer who relies on the Town Hall contract to keep your business going.

And so it is that Liverpool and Manchester seem to be bearing the brunt of a raft of public spending cuts that have been described, even by moderates, as unprecedented in the history of local government. We should have seen it coming. *The Economist*, in an article as early as July last year, pointed out that despite its recent renaissance through its Capital of Culture status and a huge programme of inward investment, virtually all of Liverpool's economic recovery was down to an increase in jobs in the public sector.

There are those who argue that age-old Tory prejudices have fuelled a deliberate and premeditated attack on their traditional enemies in the northern industrial heartlands. Others simply point to the mathematics and argue that if this is where the largest proportion of public money is spent then this will inevitably be where cuts impact most.

In announcing the city council's resignation from the Big Society vanguard programme, leader Jo Anderson said that in real terms Liverpool is facing a bigger budget reduction than any other local authority in the country.

SO HOW, as a recognised church leader in the area, should I respond? And more importantly, what is the responsibility of God's people in all this?

Some, of course, would argue that we need to make our stand and add our own to the growing voice of protest which is beginning to emerge. Indeed one local Baptist minister, Ian Spence, has already made the headlines in becoming the public face of a campaign to save a local swimming pool in Manchester.

On a larger scale is the poignant fact that a 'non-

political march of protest' organised by Merseyside Public Sector Alliance converged on the city's iconic Anglican Cathedral. It is unprecedented for a cathedral to be the venue for a Trade Union rally, but Dean Justin Welby was quick to defend the gesture. 'Although we are not party political the cathedral has a deep biblical interest in social justice and the welfare of the community we serve,' he said.

Veteran politician Tony Benn used the event to call upon the city to lead the way in uniting the country in opposition to the present economic measures. From Capital of Culture to Capital of Protest? It certainly appeals to my scouse mentality, but I can't help feeling I'll end up hearing Boris Johnson saying 'told you so'.

The cathedral march had a resonance with the bi-annual Pentecost walk of witness in which Christians and at times public figures have participated for some years. The route passes the celebrated statue of Derek Worlock and David Sheppard, always remembered for their crucial role as the architects of church unity in the once sectarian Merseyside. But few will forget that this commitment to work together was forged against a backdrop and partly in response to devastating economic decline. Theirs was not only a commitment to church unity but to social justice, in a city that was being ravaged by the disintegration of Britain's industrial base.

Many in the city feel that theirs is not the only shadow from those dark and militant days that is beginning to loom once again. There is no doubt that old wounds are beginning to re-open, and perhaps it is no coincidence that the first voice that urged me to become more involved came from across the Pennines – that of a Baptist, working in the area of the infamous South Yorkshire coalfields.

Yet the breadth of the present agenda is realised when a few days later I received a text from a former professional musician urging me to initiate some action to save the threatened Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Is this the moment for the modern day Sheppard and Worlocks to emerge, or in this day of Facebook democracy which can, it seems, even manage to topple Middle East dictators, will it be more down to the Ian Spences of this world whose local efforts to save swimming pools, libraries and children's centres will meld together to form the church's response?

PROFESSOR Hilary Russell, who heads up the social policy unity at Liverpool John Moores University and recently retired as chair of Churches Together in Merseyside, argues that one of the strengths of the church is its ability to do both.

She recalls one of those bitter disputes from the dark days of the 80s when a massive manufacturing plant in one of Liverpool's suburbs was being closed down by its American owner. 'The Bishops were putting their case in the board room while local clergy stood on the picket line.'

This approach resonates with that advocated by Sefton Central Labour MP Bill Esterton when he addressed a recent gathering of Christians and local residents hosted by Maghull Baptist Church.

His own assault on the spending cuts is very much centred on his desire to protect children's services and in particular the children's centres in his constituency. Yet he acknowledges that should his efforts prove unsuccessful, the Big Society may yet offer a glimmer of hope if churches and other community groups can muster the resources to take them over.

Protest and pragmatism might well need to go hand in hand. There – I've gone and done it! Committed the cardinal sin of imagining that the Big Society and spending cuts might somehow be related.

Council leader Jo Anderson was of course smartly rapped over the knuckles by an entire deputation of

Government ministers for making a similar connection. But can we seriously dissociate the two? Surely if we succeed in creating a deeper sense of social responsibility and community cohesion, should we not expect to end up spending less on law and order, crime reduction schemes, rehabilitation of offenders etc?

OFF THE record, there are very few politicians of any shade who don't quietly admit that the Big Society is in principle a pretty decent idea, or indeed that we need to make some efforts to curb public spending. It is the scale and speed of the cuts that seems to have united everyone in public outcry.

Previously some of the more intelligent voices were advocating a serious conversation with community and faith groups so that the cuts could be targeted at those services that others were best equipped to take over. But there's simply no time for that, particularly when any attempt to connect the two is so quickly dismissed.

Yet the irony in all of this is that the Big Society is forming and organising itself before our very eyes. Previously unimaginable partnerships and alliances are emerging in common purpose of what the participants perceive as the public good.

The problem for our Government is that rather than coming together to take over the running of public services, their common endeavours are focused on organising public rallies, marches of protest and on-line

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This in turn highlights another potential response for the church. Even as threats become headline figures, they still mean little to most of us. But speaking



off the record, a couple of Christians in senior local government roles leave me in no doubt about their severity.

What I notice is not so much what they have to say, but their whole demeanour. They are almost punch drunk, and I'm left feeling that if these cuts were on a smaller scale, and it were just a matter of losing the odd senior colleague or two, they might be up for a fight. It's a thought they've turned up for a battle with a rifle, only to discover that they're about to be run over by a fleet of tanks.

The chair of a Primary Care Trust in another part of the region is somewhat more outspoken. He sees the present measures as a deliberate and premeditated attack on the poor, targeting and even punishing the most disadvantaged in our society.

Yet ultimately it is not really that important whether or not a million has been removed from the elderly services budget, but how those who depend on it are cared for in our communities. If it means that few three-figure salaried posts are being shed, which weren't really that necessary anyway, then so be it; if it leaves fragile and frail people neglected and distressed then we should be expressing some serious concerns.

IT IS in response to this that some of us are coining the phrase 'social intelligence'. Local churches are often well embedded in their immediate neighbourhoods and able to speak with real authority about what people are actually experiencing. This may be the time to sharpen our listening skills as well as finding ways of collecting our stories and combining them to offer an authoritative picture of how the present measures are truly affecting our society.

Perhaps I am being too much of a cynic, but one thing that really worries me is that it actually serves the interests of the political opponents of the present Government to ensure that the axe falls in a way that shows them up in a bad light. I realise that this is an entirely speculative and potentially scandalous remark, but I can also see some very tempting political capital for both sides.

Already some Tory-run authorities are parading the claim that they have achieved significant cost reductions with no real impact on essential services, while others are predicting an entire meltdown in local provision. I suspect that there is a measure of exaggeration on both sides, which is why we need an independent, unbiased and potentially scandalous remark, but I can also see some very tempting political capital for both sides.

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All too often the church can be tempted to simply leap onto the most available bandwagon. However, the true prophet is not simply the spokesperson for popular opinion, but stands at a critical distance from society and seeks to look at things through God's eyes.

It is the prophet who asks the awkward and quirky questions about what we really value, and in this respect we might also ponder former Archbishop George Carey's recent observation that while one group of reds in the city have been seeking to re-ignite the voice of militancy,

another has engaged in more than £100 million's worth of transfer deals.

Some will argue that the two aren't connected, but can I really ignore the fact that I am likely to be living in a city which can't afford to care for its children and elderly but spends nearly £50 million on centre forwards?

And it's important that we retain this prophetic edge no matter how the fortunes of our nation eventually fare. The one thing that everyone seems agreed about is that eventual economic growth and recovery is the answer. But at what cost might this be achieved?

Already we are hearing of unprecedented levels of youth unemployment even in areas where growth is happening. As those of us now in middle age are forced to remain in the labour market for a few more years before retiring, how many of the next generation are being denied opportunity in the process?

There are other far-reaching concerns that also need to be addressed, like the environmental implications of economic growth along with issues like social justice, fair trade and world poverty.

AND as I wrestle with all of this, I also have to ask questions of the institution in which I have been called to serve. Already the invitations to join the various protests are starting to flood in, particularly now I've agreed to receive them by email.

But is this the role of a regional minister as the Union and Associations envisaged it when our posts were set up just over 10 years ago? Should our primary concern be the spiritual and socio-economic wellbeing of the communities in which we have been called to serve, or doing our best to ensure that Home Mission giving manages to ride the economic storm unscathed?

For all that our communities are facing, I still sense that the bulk of my time is expected to be spent pursuing agendas that seem to have little impact or significance beyond the walls of Baptist House.

Yet this is a time when Baptists seem to be re-discovering their true identity. With MPs being interviewed at evening services, Baptist ministers organising community protests and Council leaders inviting us to their marches and rallies, this may be a world which bears little resemblance to the church environment in which I grew up – yet it's one which would have been very familiar to people like John Clifford at the turn of the last century.

What should the church be doing? This is a question to which there is no easy answer, but of one thing I am certain. This is not a time for you to sit in your small corner while I sit in mine.

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