
THE TABLET

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In his first major speech on foreign affairs, Democratic candidate Barack Obama has ticked so many global boxes that he is in danger of becoming all things to all men. It would be a mistake to forget that if elected as President he might sometimes have to use America's hard power as well as the softer sort, to make enemies as well as friends. Making enemies is, of course, what the neoconservatives in charge of American policy under President George W. Bush did excessively, as if to prove America's virility. As a result, whoever wins the November presidential election will become leader of an America that is more unpopular in the world than at any time since the Second World War. The American public has woken up to the fact that the neocon policies have proved immensely damaging to America's interests. So a massive undertaking to repair its reputation will be necessary, and Mr Obama is already uniquely placed to accomplish that. He is black, charming, young and emotionally sensitive. He is not ideologically driven. He was born in Hawaii, raised on that island and in Indonesia by his white American mother and his grandparents, but his father was Kenyan. Indeed, his recent remarks about children needing fathers take on a certain poignancy in view of his own childhood.

Most attention has been given to his commitment to withdraw American troops from Iraq within 18 months, a commitment that is already shaping events on the ground. But that does not mean all the troops will be coming home. He declares his priority to be the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It has always struck the rest of the world as odd that the Tal-

iban, who housed and helped the al-Qaida group responsible for the 11 September attacks, has been left for a coalition of Nato forces to deal with, while Washington picked a quarrel with Iraq, which was no immediate threat to America. Iraq has been a great distraction from the fundamental task, which is to defeat al-Qaida militarily and ideologically, and defeat the Taliban likewise as a means to that end.

For that, Mr Obama needs to find where local interests overlap with America's. He has said he would talk to Iran, and hence presumably to other Middle Eastern states that the Bush administration has treated as pariahs, such as Syria. It is too soon to say how tough he would be with Israel, but he will not be lacking in advice that he will need to be very firm indeed. But he will need to be firm with Iran too, and indeed with its puppets Hamas and Hezbollah.

The world is changing, and in the next American presidency old problems will be supplemented by new ones, such as the rise of India and China as economic superpowers. China in particular may eventually feel strong enough to challenge American hegemony in the Pacific. It is already making a real nuisance of itself in Africa, letting its pursuit of oil and minerals dictate its appeasement of tyrants and human-rights abusers. The containment of China, for the good of the rest of the world, may soon become an American priority. But that and all his other foreign policy objectives would only succeed if America has allies who trust it. The repair of those alliances has to be one of Mr Obama's first policy priorities, and he could not do better than to start with Europe.

GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Bishops of the Anglican Communion have gathered for the Lambeth Conference, which has begun with a retreat. But the calm atmosphere of prayer and contemplation evoked by the word seems to be in strong contrast with the rancorous character of the preliminaries so far. There does not seem to be much grace about the place, and with grace comes respect. Perhaps the retreat will go some way towards repairing that, although the refusal of a significant number of conservative bishops to take part at all rather limits the scope for a mood change. And if the Holy Spirit is after all there to guide them, where is his kindly light likely to lead?

A return to fundamentals might help. The Anglican Communion prefers not to have a precise definition of itself: "being in Communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury" raises the question of what being in communion really means. The nearest the Anglican Communion has by way of a self-description can be found in the various theological reports that have been commissioned over the years to address certain internal problems of church order, chiefly over female ordination. And what characterises them is reliance on a theology of "church", an ecclesiology, that was hammered out in the course of various projects undertaken by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (Arcic), especially those on authority. International Anglicanism has come to use this "Arcic theology" as a way of describing itself to itself. And thus it has come to bear a considerable resemblance to post-Second Vatican Council Catholic ecclesiology.

But in the Catholic Church there is an emotional bond ac-

companying this ecclesiology, concerning the importance of the Petrine office of the Bishop of Rome and the sense of loyalty and respect the office engenders. Arcic theology notwithstanding, there does not seem to be an adequate parallel in the Anglican Communion. Traditionally, Anglicans would say that they do not need it, and that the Roman example, where papal devotion sometimes seems to them excessive and lacking in decorum, is not a good advertisement.

That absence may be why it would not seem natural to speak of "submission to Canterbury", "conversion to Canterbury", in the way those are spoken of with reference to Rome. But "conversion to Canterbury" does rather describe what the Anglican Communion most needs at the present time: a metanoia, or change of heart, a willingness to submit particular interests to the needs of the common good in a humble spirit of repentance and charity; and above all, a respect for the leader who in a particular way stands in the place of Christ as his representative (or "vicar"), and embodies the unity of the Church in his own person.

This year may be the year it becomes apparent that without such regard, the role of the Archbishop of Canterbury is truly impossible and the unity of the Anglican Communion is not achievable. Or to put it another way, it is now for those who do not want a papal model of leadership in the Anglican Communion to show that they can find the mutual respect and goodwill – in short, the grace of God – to work together for the good of the Church without one. If they cannot, the Anglican Communion seems destined to fall apart.