
THE TABLET

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AIDS AND THE LESSER EVIL

The Vatican could no longer ignore the evidence of a serious division of opinion in the Catholic Church about the use of condoms in the fight against HIV-Aids. It was therefore judicious of Pope Benedict XVI to call for a review of the medical and theological issues soon after his election, a review now being undertaken by the Pontifical Council for Health Care. News of the review coincided with the publication of an interview with Cardinal Martini, widely regarded as the principal alternative candidate for the papacy in the conclave that elected Pope Benedict XVI a year ago, where he added his voice to those of other senior church figures who have expressed similar views in favour of a limited use of condoms. As he put it in an interview with an Italian magazine, there may be occasions where the use of a condom by a married person to protect their spouse from infection could be the lesser evil.

There are more than 39 million people with HIV, and Aids kills some three million a year. Every measure should be taken to reduce these totals, especially in Africa. The Catholic Church, through aid agencies such as Cafod and missionary organisations, is heavily involved in medical treatment, care for the victims, and care and education of orphaned children of victims. So the charge of callousness on this issue, so readily levelled by Western commentators, does not stand up. Many church leaders also oppose the use of condoms, sincerely convinced that widespread use can be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, on the grounds that

it encourages promiscuity. Even those who advocate condom use agree that abstinence and fidelity remain vital in fighting the advance of Aids.

But the real problem for the Catholic Church lies elsewhere. Under the doctrine spelled out in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, any use of condoms, for whatever reason, is immoral. There is no leeway for arguments about a lesser evil; it is irrelevant how effective condoms are against Aids. But it is also well known that in the panoply of Catholic moral teaching, that on contraception is most often disregarded by the faithful. Can the Vatican approve the use of contraceptives in connection with Aids, even in the textbook case of a married couple, without reopening the wider debate? Would that not be interpreted as a retreat from *Humanae Vitae*? Indeed, has the time come for such a move anyway, with Aids as the catalyst for an overdue development of doctrine? The Pope will be well aware of all these questions.

In 1968 the most persuasive reason advanced in favour of retaining the ban on artificial birth control was that to lift it would signal that the Church could change its mind, and hence undermine its teaching authority. That is ironic, given the damage done to that authority by the furore that followed. Today, however, far from weakening its position, the Church would gain much public credit by admitting that condoms should not be ruled out as a protection against HIV-Aids, even if the practical questions concerning their advisability remain to be addressed. And if that opens the door to wider issues, then so be it.

DAMAGE TO LOCAL DEMOCRACY

It should be no surprise if the forthcoming local government elections in England show a significant swing against the Labour Party. The popularity of whatever party is in national government is always the key factor in such elections, except where a particularly ferocious local controversy has temporarily submerged it. And now, as ever, that popularity is mortgaged to external and often arbitrary events over which politicians have less control than they, or their opponents, like to claim. So the result on 4 May will be interpreted as a verdict on the current performance of Tony Blair's increasingly accident-prone national administration, not on how well Labour's local representatives have run services in their patch. This, though rarely referred to, is the greatest single defect in local democracy in Britain. It means that an incompetent party can gain control of a council, and a competent one can lose it, because of factors that are out of reach of the local town hall. As a result there is no real democratic mandate in local government.

Thus the mess inside the Home Office, which led to its failure to ensure that foreign criminals are deported after they have served their sentences, will matter far more in how people cast their votes than efficiency in, say, refuse collection. The claim by some white, working-class voters in certain inner-city areas that Tony Blair's Government does not care about them but panders to the needs of asylum seekers and immigrants, will undoubtedly mean the casting of votes, and the probable winning

of council seats, for the British National Party. Yet, once elected, there will be nothing those councillors can do about the issues on which they stood, one way or the other. Even the recent row over NHS deficits, which has set Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt against the health service unions, will count for more than, say, a particular local authority's record on residential care for the elderly. Surveys show that most people know little about local government, despite the cost to them in council tax.

On the other hand, knowing that the size of their party's stake in local government is vulnerable to national swings based on national headlines, ministers ought to be exceptionally careful how they conduct themselves. Tony Blair's Government may not be facing the national electorate for another three or four years, and in any event it will probably be Gordon Brown's administration by the time it does. But the voters' next chance to make their views known is less than a week away. To be told that the Home Office has allowed foreign murderers, child abusers and rapists to be turned loose on the streets will make this particular encounter a cold and hostile one. Even if none of those turfed out of their town hall because of it, nor indeed those replacing them, had the slightest knowledge of or influence over the facts of the matter.

It would take a pact of self-denial of rare public spirit- edness to persuade the parties, together with the mass media, not to subvert local politics for national purposes in this way. But that just makes it all the more desirable.