

Christians and Disagreement, Thursday 25 July 2019

Part One, introduction and overview

Here are extracts from speeches or statements made in Britain in July 2019. The sources are given overleaf. But please don't turn the page yet! Read each extract, and try to guess who, or what sort of person, might have said or written it.

1) Coarsening our public debate

"Today an inability to combine principles with pragmatism and make a compromise when required seems to have driven our whole political discourse down the wrong path.

"It has led to what is in effect a form of 'absolutism' – one which believes that if you simply assert your view loud enough and long enough you will get your way in the end. Or that mobilising your own faction is more important than bringing others with you ... This is coarsening our public debate. Some are losing the ability to disagree without demeaning the views of others.

"This descent of our debate into rancour and tribal bitterness – and in some cases even vile abuse at a criminal level – is corrosive for the democratic values which we should all be seeking to uphold. It risks closing down the space for reasoned debate and subverting the principle of freedom of speech ... This absolutism is not confined to British politics. It festers in politics all across the world."

2) A climate of fear

"Reports of far-right extremism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate are on the rise ... Angry words whip up a climate of fear and incite hate, violence, public disorder, oppression and segregation ... Women beaten on a bus because they are gay, sledge hammer attacks on mosques, children being forced into marriage.

"Christians, Muslims and Jews being slaughtered in Sri Lanka, Christchurch and Pittsburgh ... Around the world populism, prejudice – and even open racism – have catapulted extremists into power."

3) My heart breaks

"We value openness, but Britain is in retreat, pulling up the drawbridge. We cherish equality, so that every individual can thrive: whoever they are, whatever their background, however they worship. But this is threatened too – just think of that shocking picture of those gay women, bloodied, attacked on a bus. Or the rise in Islamophobia and antisemitism, in the heart of British politics.

"President Trump's attack last week on four members of Congress, all women of colour, started with him deploying the textbook racist 'go home' message. By the end of the week, we saw thousands of people whipped into fervour at a rally, chanting 'Send her back'.

"So my heart breaks: for every immigrant who feels less safe, for every little girl of colour who feels afraid, for every person who feels less welcome in their own country."

Sources

- 1) **Coarsening our public debate:** Theresa May, Chatham House 17 July 2019
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-the-state-of-politics>
- 2) **A climate of fear:** Sajid Javid, Coin Street Community Centre, London, 19 July 2019.
<http://www.ukpol.co.uk/sajid-javid-2019-speech-at-coin-street-community-centre/>
- 3) **My heart breaks:** Jo Swinson, *The Times*, 23 July 2019
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/when-farage-and-johnson-offer-only-hate-we-should-give-people-hope-rqzc7rwfz>

Part Two, meetings, gatherings and conversations

"... An essential and central activity would be the narrating and sharing of stories, since a stranger, it has been said, is someone whose story you do not know. Ignorance of other people's stories has been a big part of the broader Brexit story.

"The stories shared by both leavers and remainers would no doubt include tales of loss, grief, bereavement and banishment. Amongst leavers there is nostalgia for the time when Britain was 'great,' and a consequent longing to make Britain 'great again' by 'taking back control'.

"Amongst remainers there is guilt and sorrow as they realise that the multicultural harmony they have hitherto enjoyed has contained some wishful thinking, laced perhaps with a measure of complacency. Danny Boyle's depiction of British tolerance and quirkiness at the 2012 London Olympics was perhaps more a celebration of a mirage than of reality.

"What would these gatherings talk about in concrete terms? The questions for discussion proposed by the Church of England could certainly be on the agenda, and in addition some of these:

- Do you remember where you were and what your feelings were when you heard the result of the referendum in 2016? In what ways have your feelings changed since then? How do you feel about people whose views are different from your own?
- This land you live in, England, part of the United Kingdom, part of the British Isles, part of Europe, part of western civilisation, part of Planet Earth. What do you like about this place, and what are you grateful for? What's not to like, what are you ashamed of, and which things do you wish were different? How do you see the past of this country?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel not only English or British but also European? Which other European countries, if any, have you lived in or visited? How do you feel about people in certain other European countries?
- Is the world getting more friendly, would you say, and less dangerous, less threatening? Has it improved for you? Is it still improving? Is the best still to come? Or is everything going downhill, getting nastier, falling apart?"

— from an article by Robin Richardson published earlier this year on the Open Democracy website