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TRUTH AND POLITICS by John Battle

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Faithful to the watchword of their tradition “VERITAS”: ‘Truth’ the Dominican LAS CASAS INSTITUTE based at Blackfriars Oxford has this year been running a series of public lectures on “Truth Telling” in the media, truth telling in economics and last weekend truth telling in politics. Lord Chris Patten, European MP, Anneliese Dodds and Jenny Sinclair of the national ecumenical movement Together for the Common Good led a well-attended debate on the pressures facing truth in this era of new politics, examining how to advance a culture where truth enables mature participation in the political process.

Following both the British European Referendum and the recent American Presidential election, it could not have been more timely and the conference drew attendees from as far a field as Glasgow. The generally entrenched view that all politicians are liars, daily reinforced by the media, only got a boost from these two major events.

Chris Patten’s personal insights from his own political experience led him to challenge the introduction of ‘spin doctors’ into politics exemplified by both Bernard Ingham under Mrs Thatcher and Alastair Campbell under Tony Blair, but he challenged the latest moves to ‘tabloidize the news’ and questioned the latest idea of ‘truthiness’ (the view that ‘it must be true because I said it’) as more recent worrying developments.

Anneliese Dodds MEP spoke about the “breakdown of empathy” to others and drew attention to the rise of ‘charismatic individuals’ being seen as the answer to complex political challenges some deliberately promoting ‘untruths’ to get hold of power. She urged a more authentic local community approach.

Jenny Sinclair introduced a Christian theological underpinning emphasizing with Pope Francis the need to listen to the perspectives of the poor in all this, challengingly warning that ‘listening to another perspective could affect your orthodoxies’! She stressed the need to “encounter each other with deep respect” drawing on the inspiration of the writer Jean Vanier.

The recently appointed Lord Shinkwin who has focussed in his political work on disability equality issues then presented as a practical political case study his attempt to change the 1967 Abortion Act with a very specific and focussed amendment which will remove what has now become the default position of quietly accepting the removal of infants with diagnosed and potential disabilities. He outlined the hard political task in Parliament of changing a life destructive piece of law in the current climate.

Then the Dominican Brother Samuel Burke OP brought us back to scan the ‘muddy fields of politics and law’ from the Gospel view of Truth as the ‘person of Jesus’ drawing on St Thomas Aquinas’s careful distinctions and St Augustine’s view of humanity as ‘the community of truth’ which relies on linking “trust” to truth in practice.

As one participant highlighted there is a real difference between ‘facts’ and ‘narrative’, Others stressed that ‘truth’ cannot be confined to so called ‘objective facts’ as those proclaiming a ‘post truth society’ claim. The search for truth must not be called off now and as Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP in closing suggested, we could start by refusing to dismissively name call those with different views to our own.