



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

ENGLAND AND WALES

Caritas Parliamentary Reception

HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT, WESTMINSTER, 23 NOVEMBER 2011

Address by Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster

Thank you for inviting me to address you today. It is a pleasure to be here with so many committed individuals from the charity sector, the Catholic Church and the political arena. This is a valuable opportunity for those working in social action to raise their thoughts and concerns with our politicians. It is also a chance for the Ministers, MPs and Peers present to learn more about the excellent work being done by the organisations here today, and to hear from the experts working daily with the most vulnerable people in our society.

None of us can be in any doubt about the severity of the challenges facing us in the coming months and years as the effects of long-term and widespread debt are tackled:

- The effects of economic austerity and cutbacks are already being felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable. The increase in youth unemployment, the pressure on housing provision and support, and the impact of personal debt are bringing hardship and distress to those least able to sustain them. At the same time some aspects of the distribution of wealth cause scandal and dismay.
- The summer's disturbances in some parts of the country demonstrated a callous disregard for the common good of our communities, increasing the burden for those whose homes and businesses were affected.
- And, ever present throughout these developments, are enormous pressures on families and particularly on our young people, most of whom struggle hard to maintain their dignity and self-respect. They need our support.

It is important that we address these challenges in the correct way, so that the decisions taking place here in Parliament on the future of the social security system, the health system and the criminal justice system are shaped by a practical recognition of the needs of and really influenced by the experience of those on the front line of this work.

It is in this context that the work of Caritas Social Action Network, and events such as today's, are so important – and I urge the MPs and Peers to utilise the wealth of knowledge and creativity available in this room. It is only by strengthening relationships between those organisations which work across the social action spectrum, and those parliamentarians who are shaping the legislative response to society's challenges, that we can together achieve a better future.

Importantly, today is also something of a celebration. It is always exciting to hear about the work being undertaken by the member organisations of this Catholic network in so many different fields and in so many different ways. The current challenges shine a light on the best that you offer:

- innovative ways to help people who have fallen on hard times
- tireless efforts by thousands of staff and volunteers to improve the lives of others

- and above all an inspirational ethos of compassion and care; you are both professional and heartfelt
- the positive and vital role that faith – here the Christian faith – has in inspiring initiatives in our society. Faith is not a problem to be solved, but an important part of the solution.

I take this opportunity to congratulate you, thank you and encourage you in your continued work.

Just over a year ago, many of us were here in this building for the Holy Father's historic address, where he talked of the commonalities between the United Kingdom's tradition of pluralist democracy and Catholic Social Teaching. It is truly an honour to be back here once more, with those at the forefront of that democracy, and with those organisations which so visibly bear witness to that teaching.

Thank you.

+Vincent Nichols

Archbishop of Westminster

President, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales