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UKIP and the Common Good

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This paper addresses the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its call for Britain to withdraw from the European Union (EU). The paper does not argue for or against withdrawal but aims to help Christians reflect theologically on the question. The first section briefly considers two of UKIP's 2010 General Election policy statements. Whilst UKIP demonstrate some openness to the theological tradition of 'common good' thinking, Christians will still find their basic policy commitments problematic. The second section explores the kind of 'common good' argument for withdrawal that Christians might find persuasive. It suggests that British trade policy might provide a basis for such an argument, but insists that more research is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

Introduction

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was established after Britain ratified the Maastricht Treaty in 1993.[1] UKIP's founding members were united in opposing Maastricht and have been arguing for British withdrawal from the European Union (EU) ever since. At their first General Election in 1997, UKIP were overshadowed by the Referendum Party of Sir James Goldsmith. The Referendum Party had the sole aim of securing a referendum on British membership of the Euro. However, it folded after the 1997 General Election and UKIP has since established itself as the strongest euro-sceptic voice in British politics. UKIP currently has three members of the House of Lords and eleven Members of the European Parliament.

UKIP's 2010 Manifesto: Theological Comments on *Restoring Britishness* and *Produce and Prosper*

At the 2010 General Election UKIP published eighteen policy papers alongside a (very short) Manifesto. This section will consider only two of these policy papers: *Restoring Britishness* and *Produce and Prosper*. These papers are interesting because they provide evidence that UKIP thinks in terms of the nation as a whole. This bears some resemblance to the Christian tradition of 'common good' thinking. However, these papers also reveal a problematic tension in UKIP's thought between a commitment to 'uniculturalism' (*Restoring Britishness*) and to 'innovation' (*Produce and Prosper*).

Restoring Britishness is described as a 'cultural policy' and gives an insight into the deeper thinking of UKIP policy makers. The paper makes a number of highly problematic claims which there is not space to consider here. In brief, it argues that the identity of the British people is under grave threat from without and from within. The threat from without stems from British membership of the EU and from 'corporatist Americanised pressures' whilst the threats from within are being fostered by 'an anti-British British establishment born of a 1960s self-loathing.'[2] In the context of these '[t]hreats to Britishness', UKIP proposes a policy of 'uniculturalism' or 'civic nationalism.'[3] According to UKIP, the opposite of uniculturalism is a multiculturalism which undermines British identity. This policy is interesting to the extent that it articulates a desire for cultural continuity. This desire will be discussed further below.

The second policy paper, *Produce and Prosper*, offers an analysis of the prospects for the wealth and income of the British people.[4] It is based on the claim that the British balance of trade (goods and services sold overseas minus those purchased overseas) has declined in recent years and is likely to go on declining.

This in turn suggests that the current standard of living in Britain is not sustainable and that action must be taken to correct the situation. The paper proposes a number of remedies which are summarised as follows:

> 'The overarching goal of our policies on jobs, the economy and enterprise is to promote a new vibrant culture of producing goods and the services related to them. Our policies will bring more skilled jobs, more innovation and the elimination of our present massive trade deficit.'[5]

It is much easier to be positive about this policy paper than *Restoring Britishness*. For example, it is welcome to see UKIP talk in terms of an 'overarching goal' for British economic activity. This is reminiscent of the Christian common good tradition, which has been exerting less influence on public life in recent years.

It is also welcome to notice UKIP using the short phrase 'goods *and the services related to them*' (my italics). The usual shorthand for economists and statisticians is 'goods and services'. By changing this, UKIP are suggesting that the British services sector should be ordered to the production of goods. This is an extension of the decision by UKIP to focus their analysis on the problem of the 'trade deficit' rather than the 'current account'. The main difference between these two technical accounting terms is that the trade deficit excludes income earned overseas and is better focused on the actual movement of goods and performance of services between Britain and the world. UKIP's more concrete focus is shared by the common good tradition which is not just concerned about whether British GDP is increasing, but whether Britain is actually contributing to its own welfare and that of its neighbours.

Unfortunately, whilst there are these elements of commonality between the argument of *Produce and Prosper* and the common good tradition, there is also a significant problem. It was noted earlier that *Restoring Britishness* commits UKIP to a policy of 'uniculturalism'. However, the summary sentence from *Produce and Prosper* quoted above includes a commitment to 'a new vibrant culture' in British economic life which will involve 'more innovation'. These two policy papers are therefore in tension. With 'uniculturalism,' UKIP state their desire to maintain British culture on a familiar and established pattern. With economic 'innovation', UKIP state their desire for a new economic culture which is more focused on manufacturing. More than that, this new economic culture is to embody habits of continual change. The resulting tension between continuity (uniculturalism) and change (economic innovation) can be focused with a question: what would UKIP do if a change to an economic practice was opposed as not being the British way?

This tension has not been identified to score a cheap point. If it were simply the case that UKIP had used the same word 'culture' to talk about something fixed in one paper and something dynamic in another, then this might not be very serious. After all, words can change their meaning with their context. However, this particular tension looks familiar. Christians consider God's revelation in Jesus Christ to be a fixed point which cannot be exceeded. To 'move on' from Jesus Christ is to stop being a Christian. On the other hand, Christians also have a doctrine of God the Holy Spirit who 'will guide you into all truth' (John 16:13). Thus, the problem of the knowledge of God, which Christians allude to with phrases like 'the mystery of God', has the same structure as UKIP's tension: in each case there is something known (Jesus Christ/British culture) and in each case there is the expectation of change (Holy Spirit/economic innovation).

This analogy between the deep commitments of UKIP policymakers and the deep commitments of Christians has two main implications. Firstly, and most obviously, UKIP's 2010 policy papers do not offer a Christian account of British political life: UKIP have displaced talk about Jesus Christ with talk about British culture and talk about God the Holy Spirit with talk about economic innovation. This is unacceptable to Christians, but does not, of course, preclude pragmatic co-operation in the interests of the common good. Indeed, at one level, UKIP can be applauded for making their deep commitments available for public discussion.

Secondly, it is possible to pose a question for UKIP to consider. In their understanding of God, Christians are conscious of the tension between their knowledge of Jesus Christ and of God the Holy Spirit. This means that they are often led to ask: what does it mean to be faithful to Jesus Christ in

this new historical situation? The activity of answering this kind of question is sometimes called 'discernment'. However, UKIP do not seem to be aware of a similar tension between their commitment to British cultural continuity and their commitment to economic innovation. This means that they do not offer an equivalent to Christian discernment. It also raises a serious question about how well they would govern should they win an election. Would UKIP politicians switch unstably between legislating for cultural continuity and legislating for economic change? And would they be able to reflect, consciously, on the interaction between these kinds of policy?

EU Membership, Trade Policy and the Common Good

If Christians wish to engage with UKIP then they need to be aware both of the obviously problematic displacement of God by British culture and economic change, but also of the inflexibility which results from the denial of the tension between these terms. The fact that UKIP has not noticed the tension in its policies between continuity and change is relevant to its call for Britain to withdraw from the EU. Specifically, UKIP have the habit of reducing withdrawal to a question of continuity: Britain cannot remain as Britain if it stays in the EU. This, however, fails to address the fact that Britain will change whether or not it is in the EU (and whether or not the government formally commits itself to supporting innovation). The question is, whether the change is for the better or the worse? This observation motivates another question for UKIP: would British withdrawal serve the common good?

This obviously requires far too much detailed knowledge to be answered conclusively in this paper. Instead, this section will briefly explore one area in which a common good argument for withdrawal might be possible. This exploration is guided by a return to the early stages of the European debate and a famous speech by Hugh Gaitskell to the October 1962 Labour Party Conference. In this speech Gaitskell argued that the terms for British entry into the Common Market (EEC) were inadequate. The speech is interesting for its concern with the effect of British entry on Commonwealth countries. In particular, it was a condition of entry in 1962 (and subsequently) that Britain would adopt the Common European External Tariff. This meant that goods imported from Commonwealth countries, which had previously been given preferential treatment by Britain, were to be taxed at a standard European rate. Gaitskell was concerned that these changes would have a big impact on the ability of British colonies, and former colonies in the Commonwealth, to sell their produce at a fair price.

According to the former Labour MP Peter Shore, Gaitskell's concerns were warranted. Shore claims that when Britain eventually joined the EEC (now the EU) in 1973 '…Britain basically abandoned its long-developed low-cost food supplies from Canada, Australia and New Zealand….'[6] British entry may also have prevented the development of closer trade links with Commonwealth countries over the last forty years and will have had an impact on the distribution of wealth across the world. This paper cannot assess the detailed impact of British membership of the EU on world trade patterns. However, it can highlight the kind of argument which Gaitskell was making. Gaitskell deployed a kind of common good argument which did not address the question of British membership in principle, but asked whether its effects would be better or worse. Moreover, even though Gaitskell was speaking before 'globalisation', the speech paid more attention to the impact of Britain on other countries than is typical of the equivalent arguments by politicians today.

As Gaitskell recognised, there is no reason in principle why the EU should insist on higher external tariffs for goods from low-income countries than Britain was offering in the 1960s. Indeed, Gaitskell suggested that Britain might negotiate exceptions to the Common European External Tariff as a condition of entry. Similarly, if it is the case that Britain's membership of the EU is continuing to prevent low-income countries from selling their goods at a fair price, it is quite possible that British politicians could respond by lobbying the European Commission for change in this area. However, such a change is complicated today, as it was in the 1960s, by the European positions in World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations and by the significance of the Common Agricultural Policy for other member states.

Given the effects of Britain's entry into the EEC on its trading relationships, it is interesting to note the subsequent patterns of public reflection on trade

policy. On the one hand, since the early 1970s, British politicians and the media have largely ceased to talk about it. This presumably reflects the fact that the policy is now set by the European Commission in consultation with numerous national governments. On the other hand, popular discussion of British trade policy and its implications has increased significantly. This manifests itself most obviously in the development of consumer initiatives such as the Fairtrade mark. However, there have also been related initiatives to support low-income countries (of which the Commonwealth contains a large number). For example, there has recently been a successful campaign to increase the amount of money which Britain spends in international aid, as well as the campaigning that has been done around the Jubilee Debt Campaign.

Conclusion

The increase in popular concern with the effects of trade on non-European countries suggests that there is a problem with British trade policy. For whatever reason, it is also evident that this problem is not being tackled in Westminster or Brussels. It is, however, manifesting itself in a forum in which a wider range of countries are able to speak. As Paul Mills has recently noted, the World Trade Organisation decided in 2003 to focus its energies on reducing agricultural tariffs and subsidies in rich countries.[7] If it is the case that British membership of the EU has contributed to, and is continuing to perpetuate, unfair trade relations, then this represents an important issue for consideration by British Christians. It might also provide a more persuasive basis by which UKIP can argue for British withdrawal from the EU. However, such a 'common good' argument would need to be supported by more detailed research into the effects of Britain's EU membership on international trade, let alone the impact of withdrawal on other areas of public policy.

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1. Following UKIP's own practice, this paper will refer to Britain when it means the United Kingdom. This convention is adopted solely for stylistic reasons. Whether the same can be said for UKIP policy-makers would be an interesting question for future research.
2. UKIP, 'Restoring Britishness: A cultural policy for an independent Britain', *General Election Policy Paper* (January 2010), 2.
3. UKIP, 'Restoring Britishness', 6 and 25. See also, *UKIP Manifesto* (April 2010), 13-14.
4. UKIP, 'Produce and Prosper: A jobs, enterprise and skills policy for an independent Britain', *General Election Policy Paper* (2010). This analysis assumes that the four categories marked A-D in Section 6.1 (p14) refer to chapters 7-10 of the policy paper.
5. UKIP, 'Produce and Prosper', 2.
6. Peter Shore, *Separate Ways,* (2000), 73.
7. Paul Mills, 'Globalisation and the world economy - for richer for poorer, for better or worse?', *Cambridge Papers* 14.1 (March 2005). Available at: www.jubilee-centre.org/document.php?id=46. Last accessed, 12.09.11.

For further reading:

- Nicholas Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God: A Reading of the Apostles' Creed*, SCM, 1992.
- Clifford Longley, 'Government and the Common Good', in Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds, *God and Government*, SPCK, 2009, 159-179.
- Oliver O'Donovan, 'Prayer and Morality in the Sermon on the Mount', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22.1 (2009), 21-33.
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- UKIP, 'Produce and Prosper: A jobs, enterprise and skills policy for an independent Britain', *General Election Policy Paper* (2010).
- UKIP, 'Restoring Britishness: A cultural policy for an independent Britain', *General Election Policy Paper* (January 2010).
- Nicholas Adams, 'Eschatology Sacred and Profane: The Effects of Philosophy on Theology in Pannenberg, Rahner and Moltmann', *International Journal for Systematic Theology* 2.3 (2000), 283-306. [Advanced text]

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