



Four reasons for not giving up on politics

David Hines © 16 July 2017

Intro:

About once a year I find myself writing a sermon on why you shouldn't give up on politics. Every time it's because of some current news item. Last year it was many Americans who were despairing of politics because Donald Trump had been voted president of the United States by a very small margin. Earlier the same year, many people in Britain were despairing of politics because of the decision to get out of the European community, again by a very small margin. And to cap it off, this year there's just been an early election in Britain, called by Teresa May hoping to get a bigger margin of support, only to find her margin is almost down to zero. We get similar reactions to politics here. And as a result, the number of people who turn out to vote is often very low.

It seems many people despair of politics ever producing a satisfactory result.

Is anyone here planning not to vote in the next election? (No) Anyone not sure who they will vote for? (half a dozen)

I'd like to break this problem into four pieces, and say

1. Let's not give up on public opinion
2. Let's not give up on our justice system
3. Let's not give up on ourselves
4. Let's not give in to bitterness if we don't get the election result we wanted

Point 1 – don't give up on public opinion.

One of my favourite quotations about democracy was made two and a half thousand years ago, by the Athenian politician, Pericles. He said not everybody can create public policy, but everyone can judge it. He regarded democracy as the best system because it brought together the biggest number of people. A number of other countries had advisory councils, but Athens had the largest numbers of people having their say. Women didn't vote, nor did people without property. But working men could serve on juries, so for a few brief periods Athenians had huge participation in politics.

And it all happened because Pericles and other leaders trusted public opinion. They believed that ordinary people had wisdom the city needed.

So that's still a good reason to vote in elections today, because if we don't vote, our ideas will not get counted; politicians will do dumb things and we will only have ourselves to blame.

The same idea was stated by American president Abraham Lincoln. He said “You may fool all the people some of the time, and you may fool some of the people all the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all the time.” So again, if we give up on politics the country will miss out on our wisdom. Even small groups of people will be aware of aspects of their own lives where the government is going wrong. So if they don’t vote, those issues will be ignored.

To give an example of that a couple of weeks ago. My wife, Marion is chair of the Methodist social welfare organisation Lifewise, and you will probably have heard that the government has just agreed to pay the minimum wage for people in caring jobs, like home care workers. We have aged-care workers coming into our own home six days a week, so we know how valuable they are. But I heard a week ago, that the full flow-on of this minimum wage rise is not being passed on to the workers, because the government has used a bad bit of maths, and is only paying the increase for the number of workers who were below the minimum wage, and so if Lifewise wants to promote some of these workers for their extra skills, they will have to pay the increase from somewhere else. Or cut down their service, or these workers will not get skill margins, and will go somewhere else.

I said to Marion, is Lifewise going to protest about this, and she said this would be very difficult, because the government might switch to other providers. But if that criticism is valid, and it doesn’t get passed back to the government, they will be able to fool all the people all the time.

So the country needs input from all people from all sides of life.

When I’m down to take a sermon, I always check the Christian lectionary of Bible readings, and they often add a valuable outside perspective on today’s issues. Well today’s lectionary has Jesus’ parable of the sower. Which is about public opinion, and why he spent the last three years of his life doing public speaking

- In this parable, Jesus said a farmer went out and scattered seed over his field. And some of the seeds fell on the path and birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground where they didn’t have much soil and they sprang up quickly. But when the sun rose they were scorched, and withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked them.

This is a story any public speaker could tell ... how they meet criticism, apathy, conflicting loyalties. You would think they would give it up.

But this story has a twist at the end

- Jesus said other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundred-fold, some sixty and some thirty.

In other words - you can trust the public to appreciate good ideas. They won’t **all** appreciate it, but enough of them will to make it worth your time.

So that’s a message of encouragement for politicians, telling them not to give up on public opinion. And for the public to listen to politicians and give them feedback, especially when you have some special experience of life, or expertise.

And to vote for them when they get it right.

2. Don't give up on the justice system

My second suggestion: don't give up on the justice system, including the electoral system.

If I could quote the American elections again the American faith in justice was severely tested in their last election. There were accusations that the Russians had been interfering in the election, and that question has still not been answered. There were accusations that the FBI has been biased when director James Comey said he was investigating Hilary Clinton's emails a week or two before the election. It turned out just a day before the election that he said she was in the clear.

Months later Comey himself was sacked, and this time there was an accusation that he was biased against Trump, and then Trump was accused of being illegally biased against him.

What a wild west string of complaints.

But it's impressive how the American justice system is holding all these people to account. And in the latest scene in this pantomime, Donald Trump junior has been forced to admit that he attended a meeting with a Russian lawyer, trying to leak bad news about Hilary Clinton, to affect the election.

Trump and family seem incredibly unprincipled, but how strong the American legal system has been in calling them to account.

Similarly there were accusations that Trump's campaign was biased against Muslims, and making illegal threats against Mexico. And he was going to build a wall to keep them out. And this time it was the American Courts which said this action was discriminatory. How often do our courts tell the government it's acting illegally?

Most significantly, the Republican's own senate or some of them, have fought back. And one is trying to impeach him.

So I think there have been some strong features of the American legal system.

But also some dubious ones, where a biased president can install biased judges.

And our own justice system has flaws. One is that our courts can't re-write the laws when something is wrong with them. They can only point out the mistake, and leave it to the government to change it, if they've got the inclination.

So there are many ways the justice system can go wrong, and sometimes you get people saying we shouldn't have to fight to get our basic right to justice. It should be free; it should be automatic.

But that is being childish nearly every campaign for justice is a fight, because there are usually other people who benefit from the status quo, and why would you expect them to give up their privileges without defending them.

And I'd like to quote another parable of Jesus, which deals with this very idea that you have to struggle to get justice.

In this story, a widow had a claim that somebody was harming her, and the judge refused to listen to her case.

But the widow kept on coming back to him and saying give me justice against my opponent.

And finally the judge said to himself: I don't care about this woman, but she is going to give me no peace, so I will hear her after all.

Now the moral of that story, is not that this was a good justice system but that even in a bad justice system, you can sometimes get justice if you don't give up.

It seems to me the US elections are a flawed system, because Hilary Clinton won more votes than Donald Trump, but he got more electoral college votes, so some states had more influence on the result than others.

But that was nothing new. The Americans have had that system from the start. So if you want to get elected, you have to devote extra time during your campaign to the swing states and it seems Donald Trump did this better than Hilary Clinton.

So the message here is, it's not enough to have justice on your side ... you also have to be persistent, and loud Virtues which Donald Trump seems to have, alongside his negative points. I think Donald Trump would have got the widow's judge to hear his case.

So that's another reason we should get out and vote. The election fairy is not going to give us what we want on a plate; we need to give enough energy to win out, in spite of the peculiarities of the election system.

I think our system is fairer than the American system. But the effect is that you get lots of smaller parties that cannot form a government on their own, and have to join sides with bigger parties and form a government.

But this is not the time to complain about the system; and say I'm not going to vote it's a time to study how the system works and what's the best way to use it.

We **can** get justice through an imperfect system, if we persist.

3. Don't give up on yourself

I suggest a third principle is not to give up on **yourself**. We can improve the world with our own private efforts.

Martin Luther King III made this point in 2008 at the US Democratic Convention. "If we are to be a great democracy, we must all take an active role in our democracy. We must do democracy. That goes far beyond simply casting your vote. We must all actively champion the causes that ensure the common good."

I thought one of the most inspiring political events of the last 12 months, was on June 1 this year, after, after President Trump had announced the United States was

withdrawing from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It was hardly a surprise: he had promised to do this during his election campaign last year. And he had given a countdown a couple of weeks beforehand, saying he might just tweak it a bit to make it fairer to the United States.

But many people had a sense of doom about it world wide, including me. Scientists were saying what'd be the results of global warming. Politicians were picking that if the US pulled out of the agreement, other countries would do the same, and it'd all fall over.

But the dreaded day came and went. And to my amazement, in the following days the was not gloom but **hope** as numerous countries and leaders said they would fight climate change without America's help.

I recall country after country saying we are not going to pull out. Germany saying it was already well down the road to abandoning the use of coal to generate electricity, switching to wind farms and solar heating. India, the second largest developing country announced which still has no national electricity grid, said it would exceed the Paris Accord's targets. It was boosted by technical developments that made solar power more efficient than before, so renewable power was the cheaper method, as well as the cleanest. It included developing solar energy on a massive scale in scorching desert areas, and making a huge grid of power lines across to urban areas far away.

In the US, the largest auto manufacturers said they had already spent billions on reducing vehicle emissions and were not likely to change course.

Russia's president Putin commented: Don't worry, be happy. Because he said there were still a number of years to change the American's minds..

Another reason Putin might be happy and other national leaders as well ... was that it marked the US backing off from world leadership, with others keen to fill the gap. They could make political capital out of working against climate change.

A number of individual comments, among my Facebook and other contacts has been similar. People said they are going to buy electric cars in future, several of my friends are going vegan, because beef farming makes huge demands on the land.

This church is a great way of making creative changes through our individual efforts:

- like our support for the Indian students who were facing deportation. This was a powerful action of compassion, but also a political message to the government that there are people who want a more humane immigration system.
- like the pantry outside our church for people in need built by Kay Parish and David Rohe last week. As I was arriving this morning a couple of members of the public walked over to it, and one said to the other "what a great idea". They didn't add any food to the pantry, and didn't take any away, but they were inspired by this example.

So the election is a time of hope, but we can also serve our goals as individuals or local groups, whether our government cares or not. We are not powerless when it comes to politics.

4. Don't give in to bitterness

And my fourth suggestion is: don't give in to bitterness.

A certain amount of disappointment **is built in** to politics, because politicians make choices between different courses of action. And invariably we don't all get our own way, and we tend to think in terms of winners and losers.

Which is a pity ... because, as we've been learning in our Wednesday night lectures the best way to treat conflicts is to look for win-win solutions, where both sides have had some input into the result. And ideally our politicians, too, will be looking for win-win situations. Which is why all our major parties tend to deal with the same issues, but with different fine tuning.

But some people are still unhappy with everything that's on offer. **And that suggests that maybe they are too negative???**

A week ago I read about 30 letters in the Herald,, almost two pages of them, and every one of them was bitter about the election. They hated what various parties were offering to do about poverty; they hated what was promised about the housing crisis; they despised several of the party leaders, and thought they were hypocrites or dishonest.

Individually some of these criticisms may have been justified ... but how come in an entire two pages, not one Aucklander could find one positive word to say about anything. You would think someone would have congratulated Labour for having the courage to consider a capital gains tax. Or congratulated the Greens on pushing for light rail. Or praised David Seymour for his right to life bill, or Gareth Morgan on his universal income idea. Where were all their fans that day?

It seemed to me these 30 letter writers were too negative to be taken quite seriously.

And that feeling came into focus when I read a similar thought from a Facebook friend of mine the day after we won the America's Cup, and he said what a waste of money, a rich man's sport, and how the money could have been used for families in financial difficulty. Well so it could any tax dollar could have been spent on any of a number of valuable goals but why couldn't this person see anything positive that day: Why couldn't he have joined the Labour Party, and worked for low income people, or join the National Party and vote not to spend money on the next Americas Cup.

Jesus told a story about this negative attitude to life ... in his parable of the talents ... and it's about three slaves, one of whom was always complaining. It starts when their master gives them different sized shares of his estate to manage. One was given a five billion dollars; Another was given two billion and the third was given only one billion. And the third slave was so miserable that he didn't get as much as the others that he buried his billion dollars in the ground.

This particular friend of mine who hated the America's cup is a minister, and has a churchful of people he is leading, and I felt pity for him that day, that he couldn't think of anything more positive to do than to complain that we won the America's cup.

This started me looking up the background to the Tindall foundation, which was one of the biggest contributors to the America's cup. Did they just back rich people's games? No, the Foundation also donated thousands to the Lifewise homelessness campaign. And I noticed they also give money for civil rights projects - one of a very few charities which treat civil rights as a charity. So I thought, Wow. I must apply for a grant from them for our religion in schools campaign. And I sure as hell won't complain that they also helped us win the America's Cup. Who would donate money to someone with an attitude like that.

Conclusion

So don't give up on politics. There are so many good things it can do. And so many ways that we can have an impact. Including sharing our ideas and our efforts through our church. It is a real seed-bed for positive goals.