

116 "Who's in charge round here?"

At present there is a fearful jostle going on in Britain concerning TV debates between party leaders before the General Election in May. This unseemly argument raises fundamental issues over our title for this week's Reflection, "Who's in charge round here?" - for the answer is less obvious than it should be, (and is just as relevant in the countries of our overseas readers too).

You would think the answer is clear - that the Prime Minister is in charge, and when all is said and done, it is he who "says what goes". But life has become more complicated than that, for two great rivals to the political establishment now wield tremendous power, and all too often either or both of these in practice now "say what goes", either openly or behind the scenes.

The first rival, the "newest kid on the block", concerns social media, the implications of which, for those holding political power and for the rest of us, are only now starting to be understood. For the first time ever, thousands, millions, of "ordinary" people are engaging together in ways entirely beyond the reach of the politicians, who for their part can do very little about this, apart from join in themselves.

But we will focus this time on the other, longer-established rival - television. No politician can prosper for long without being "good" on television: looks, hair, clothing, manner, mannerisms, confidence, clarity, all boiling down to "message-effectiveness" - did he or she get the required message over to the viewers, and did they warm to what they saw, as opposed merely to what they heard?

While the politicians are seriously dependent on the TV companies, the TV companies also need the politicians, so as to fulfil their own agendas. In part their work is no doubt virtuous, in their desire to discover the truth and to hold to account those in power - but it doesn't stop there. The TV channels have to preserve, and preferably increase, their "viewing figures", which means they thrive on sensation, shock, controversy, excitement. They are hardly bothered about the effects their programmes may have within society, meaning that they actually wield tremendous power while accepting very little responsibility.

Another feature of television is often overlooked. Wherever television becomes involved, it has an inexorable knack of gradually taking over what it sees and shows, and then shaping this to its own ends. We have seen this with the televising of sport for example, where TV money pours in and the particular sport

is never the same again. The same has happened with the televising of Parliament, despite all the restrictions on camera positions and angles. Those little cameras undoubtedly affect the proceedings of the House of Commons, and Parliament has been permanently changed as a result - for better or for worse; but the change has come because of the subtle but great power of television.

Now that power is to be wielded again, in one or more leadership debates in the run-up to the General Election, occasions which have become far more crucial than they merit. The outcome of the Election, always important but particularly so this time, is likely to be influenced by these shallow, ill-tempered, TV-concocted debates, which will actually militate against the electorate carefully considering the great issues affecting the country. All will be trivial "biff-bang-knockabout", with the TV studios, newspapers and pollsters then instantly passing judgement on "who won?". This gives TV far more power than it should possess, and is hardly the behaviour of a mature democracy, with, still, a Christian constitution.

So in the scrap over "Who's in charge round here?" - politicians, social media or TV - we find ourselves set as ambassadors of Christ in the midst of all this. We are being called upon, as never before, to speak up for the Lord God and His righteousness - for He is the One who is truly in charge, (a dose of Ephesians Chapter 1 is a blessing!). A letter, to politicians or TV or radio people, is more effective than an email; and praise, whenever possible, goes a long way. We can expect our fair share of no replies or stock replies, but we are to keep at it.

Yes, Almighty God is the One in charge, and "God is not mocked" (Galatians 6.7). When He is mocked, as is happening today, He has ways of intervening in no uncertain terms. We are to blow His trumpets, of warning, and of guidance as to the way back to the old, God-is-in-charge, Christ-focussed, true paths.

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