

With the independence referendum less than two weeks away, the Bishop of Brechin, the **Rt Rev Dr Nigel Peyton**, looks at faith and the future of Scotland

Have faith in the future

WHERE IS faith in the referendum? People are asking me this more frequently as September 18 approaches, the debates get noisier and a certain weariness and anxiety pervades daily life. Amidst the barrage of assertions, from both the Yes Scotland and Better Together campaigns, faith may not seem to be the loudest voice but people of faith are, I believe, significantly engaged with the issues.

Whether our concerns are about Scottish identity or self-determination, about the currency or Trident (or indeed all of these and more), in modern times Christians in the UK have learned that faith's best contributions tend to stand apart from party political blueprints for the establishment and the state. As Professor Chris Whatley of Dundee University counsels, history is not predictive but it can give us range of enduring values for society rather than short-term vote-winning fixes.

Speaking from my own viewpoint, the Scottish Episcopal Church, in common with most other churches and faith groups, is officially neutral or agnostic about issues of constitution and jurisdiction. This does not mean we are not part of the debate, however. We have members who are on either side of the divide and we shall continue to serve our communities across Scotland as we have done for hundreds of years, whatever the decision turns out to be.

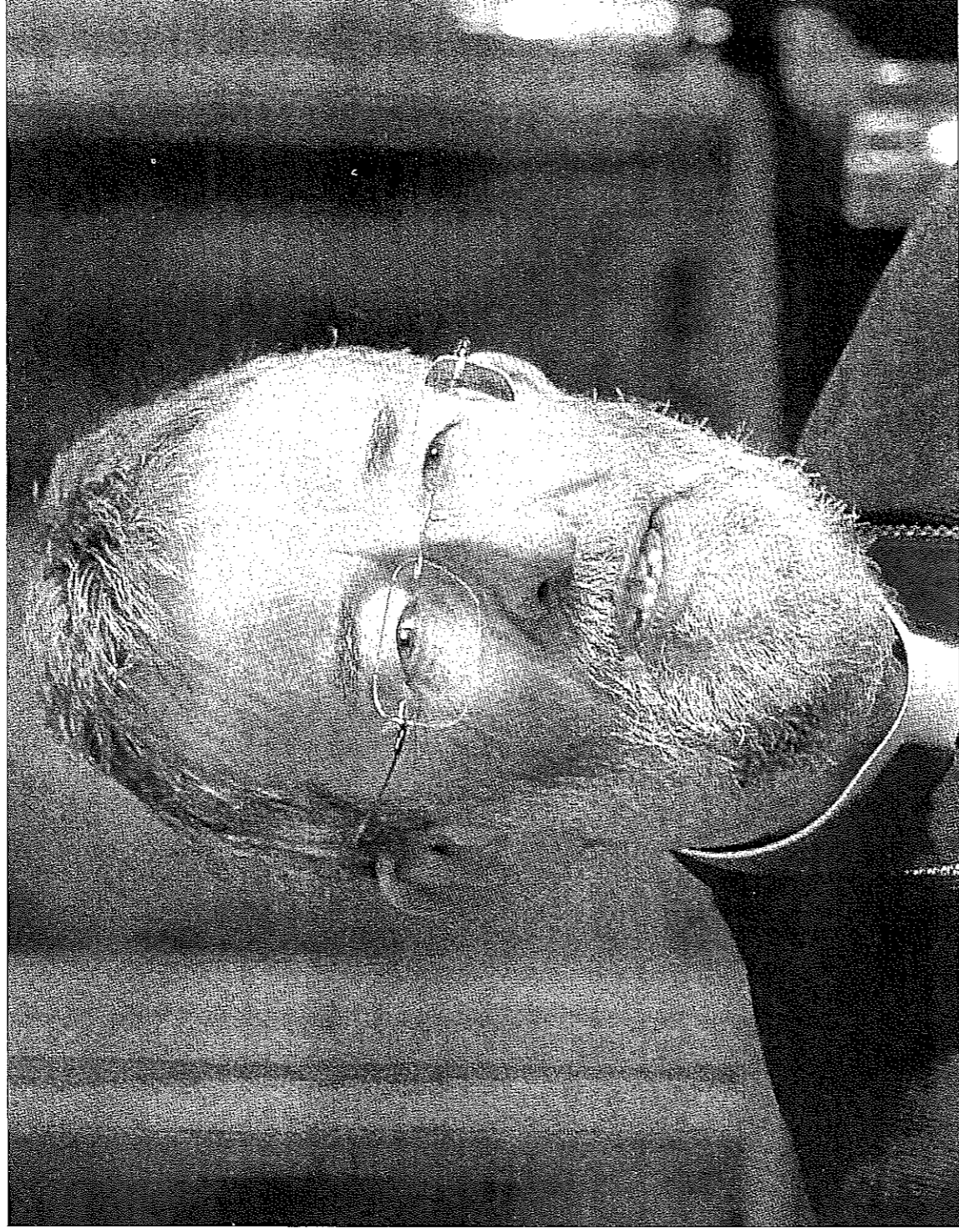
Nevertheless I have three concerns about the coming months. First, participation in the referendum is crucial and a high turnout is desirable. Despite some disdain for politicians and distrust of the promises and forecasts of governments both sides of the border, this is not an historical moment for any of us to simply opt out of.

I don't believe in compulsory voting but not considering the issues or bothering to vote gives a poor example to the 16-18-year-olds newly given the vote and to our grandchildren. We also owe it to those parts of the world where political opposition is crushed, where full democracy is not yet achieved and where women or minorities are discouraged from voting, to treasure the opportunity we have to participate.

The Courier Referendum Roadshow's encouraging indications are that the numbers of undecided (or perhaps undeclared) are diminishing. I guess that, come the day, for many it will be quite a head or a heart moment – confidence in a long overdue liberation for the Scots or fear of sleepwalking into a big mistake. Faith in our honest convictions is important but, oh that we could see around political and economic corners!

Second, the values and resources of Christian churches and other faith communities have a lasting contribution to make to the kind of Scotland we want, whether separate from the UK or remaining within it. 'Changing for the future' is the strap line of Dundee City Council – so what makes for a life worth sharing together?

Faith affirms the dignity of the individual citizen within democratic civil society, protected by accountable government and the rule



of law. Subsidiarity – valuing family, one's locality and relationships borne of shared interests – is complementary to solidarity – an awareness of the bonds of interdependence beyond our immediate horizons. Faith challenges inequality and injustice and is persistently hopeful in the transformation of people and structures, enhancing the common good.

People of faith are concerned about wealth sharing and meaningful employment, especially watchful that the poor and vulnerable are properly cared for. We engage in current debates about bringing up children and their education, the future of marriage and care of the dying as well as challenging intractable secularism.

Faith recognises that politics is far too important to be left to the politicians. I find the belittling and authoritarian tone of much referendum dialogue depressing. The attempted gagging of some business and intellectual, public, personality and voluntary sector voices is frankly disturbing. Back in 2002, in Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland, Neal Ascherson wrote elegantly of the cultural bond between landscape, kinship and freedom stap-

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ing a nation which he thought would probably achieve self-government outside the limits of the union. However, it is his insight of a ‘St Andrew’s Fault’ – a deep historical mistrust of self-assertive elites of whatever ilk by a more self-doubting majority – which may yet prove most prophetic.

Third, more than the referendum result itself, the aftermath could signal the defining character of a 21st century Scotland. The biblical concept of the peaceable kingdom – where the lion and lamb live together, the meek inherit the earth and all those who accept their need of God are blessed – offers an important vision of faith in the future. We’ll need it because the fall-out from a very close “yes” or “no” vote and the moral fragility of a simple majority even on a high turnout will be a bruising experience.

Faith groups will therefore highlight the importance of working together for reconciliation in the aftermath and gather people of good will in practical ways.

However, we face continuing turbulence, whether in negotiating separation from the rest of the UK or pressing for major further devolu-

tion of powers, not forgetting the wider in-out Europe question. All sides working together on these challenges will not eradicate strong feelings.

Indeed, my own experience of 20 years’ ministry in post-miners’ strike Nottinghamshire suggests that acrimony casts long shadows. Faith’s values of tolerance and patience will be much needed.

Visit Scotland vigorously markets Homecoming Scotland and a sense that home is where we feel we belong. ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’ is the referendum question which begs our sense of personal and political belonging.

Like many households who will be voting in the forthcoming referendum my own situation is a complex emotional geography of birth-place, family membership, occupation and residence, of cross-border Scottishness and Britishness. True independence is to vote honestly and we should keep faith in the referendum.

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