

# ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

ANN HOLT



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**“BECAUSE IT’S ALL NO USE**

**They do as they please any how**

**Because I don’t want to get**

**My finger burnt again**

**Because they’ll just laugh:**

**It only needed you**

**And why always me?**

**I’ll get no thanks for it**

**Because no one can sort this out**

**One might make things worse**

**Because even what’s bad**

**May have some good in it**

**Because it depends on how you look at it**

**And anyway whom can you trust?**

**Because the other side too**

**Gets wet when it rains**

**Because I’d rather leave it**

**To those more qualified**

**Because you never know**

**What you are letting yourself in for**

**Because it is a waste of effort**

**They don’t deserve it”**

**These are the causes of death**

**To write on our graves**

**Which will not even be dug**

**If these are the causes**

“Death certificate” by Erich Fried published by Calder Publications Ltd in *100 Poems without a Country* and used with permission.

Swampy may not be your hero. After all, it probably takes more fitness than most of us could muster to climb a tree and stay up it in protest at a bypass being built. You may even have more fundamental objections to direct action as a possible threat to democratic ways of doing things. But the fact is that most of us provide no other models for changing opinion and policy. Apathy rules OK. And that poses a threat to the very heart of democracy itself.

“The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid dens of crime that Dickens loved to paint ... but it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warm and well lit offices by quiet men with white collars, cut finger nails and smooth shaven

cheeks who do not even need to raise their voices.” So wrote CS Lewis in 1943.

The truth is that all kinds of evil (that which is not pleasing to God) flourish while “good men and women do nothing”.

Two things get in the way of Christian action when it comes to trying to change things. The first is that we are influenced by the general climate of disengagement from the political process. We also take democracy for granted! The other reason is the perceived hostility to Christianity in the public square. “It will be too difficult, unsuccessful and pointless” we reason with ourselves. “A waste of our precious time!” The tide of secularism is inexorable and will not turn. Such thinking has led to considerable privatisation of Christianity, reducing our faith to personal, often sexual morality and acts of private devotion.

Such a response to cultural and political engagement is not good enough and not very Christian. Nor is it good enough to leave it to the Church of England as the established church and then proceed to criticise it when we don’t think its stance is strong enough.

The events of September in America may have started a new climate of appreciation for the freedoms that democracy, for all its faults, offers us. Governments throughout the Western world are acutely aware of popular opinion as they make some of the most important decisions of their political lives.

Romans 13 suggests that as Christian citizens we do have a biblical mandate to respond to the authorities with obedience where we perceive that those authorities are acting justly and mercifully; in short, walking with God. To this end, there are prayerful evaluations to be made and it is vital that these contribute to the public debate in every aspect of political life.

Our society is not uniformly secular or Christian. We live in a pluralistic society where the sound of the public voice is uncertain. The lack of clarity may be frustrating but it does offer many opportunities for contribution. The real obstacle to constructive engagement is our own lack of imaginative thinking which, correspondingly, leads to loss of confidence and an ensuing diffidence.

How might we be more faithful to the great commission of Matthew 28 at the beginning of this new century?

We would do well to look back in history and take encouragement from our antecedents, such as ►

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► William Wilberforce and the rest of the Clapham Sect who not only achieved the abolition of the slave trade, but also created a movement for wholesale societal change.

As a member of the leadership team of Care (Christian Action Research and Education), I need no convincing that this is a biblical imperative, part of the creation mandate to engage with the concerns of the world which manifest themselves in the economic and political issues of the day. I am the director of the department that deals with Education, one of the major spheres of influence in our knowledge-based society. However, we work closely with our Public Policy colleagues to develop a vision of how the sphere of education might reflect more of the wisdom and glory of God. Then we look for opportunities to engage with the movers and shakers of the day.

Obviously, this will involve lobbying Government using the legitimate channels of public consultation. As I write, we are working on the White Paper, *Schools Achieving Success*. It is arguable that one of the reasons that we have this White Paper at all is because Care worked on amendments to legislation in the early 1990s to establish the principle that other Christian groups and other faith groups should be able to establish their own schools as well as increasing the provision made by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic churches.

Establishing laws that permit something to happen (or not) is only the beginning. We then have to go on and work with the providers, such as local government, or with non-governmental organisations that will shape the policies and control the resources that are needed to make anything happen.

We could not play our part in working for changes that more reflect the counsels of God if the churches were not behind us. Together, we strive to form a renewed Christian mind, as Paul remarks in Romans 12, and so continue working in the many places of influence still open to us as citizens in a free democracy.

Increasingly, these places of influence are not just the MPs' surgeries, government departments, political parties, local councils and the ballot box but the shareholders and boards of companies and those who control the media. Writing letters to newspapers and television channels or owning a few shares – so that you have a vote on the environmental policies of a large supermarket or a multinational oil company – are other avenues of potential influence that more and more of us can choose.

We can make a difference on the ground as well as in the corridors of power.

From September 2001, the Government has put "Citizenship" into the National Curriculum. When addressing the Citizenship Foundation, the Lord Chancellor remarked, "Young people often show a material and spiritual generosity that seems to disappear in adulthood". He then posed the question, "What is it that we do to them?"

The answer is that we all get caught up in the prevailing culture and provide few role models for alternative action.

That is why Swampy is their hero. Is Jesus Christ ours and will we engage in action that demonstrates what a hero of grace and mercy and justice he is for yesterday, today and forever? ■