



The Crofton Cabin at Crofton Hammond Infant School

Bishop highlights mental health issues in Forces

BISHOP Christopher used the opportunity to introduce a House of Lords debate on a subject of his own choosing recently.

He urged ministers to provide better mental health care for military personnel as he introduced a debate about the impact of the Armed Forces Covenant – which ensures that serving and former Forces personnel and their families are treated with fairness and respect.

The bishop told peers that mental health provision for the military was often “less than adequate” – especially for reservists, who are more scattered and less visible. He also raised concerns about accommodation for military families.

He praised the fact that those on the lowest incomes in the Forces had seen wage increases, despite the public sector pay freeze. He also praised the fact that advances in healthcare at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan had been mirrored by specialist centres in the UK.

And he highlighted the way that Service Pupil Premium Payments had enabled schools to fund projects to support the children of military families.

One example was the Crofton Cabin in Crofton Hammond Infant School, which was built with a £20,000 grant from the Covenant. It provides a space for children to Skype their parents while they are overseas, and specialist counselling to help with the

stress of deployments.

But on healthcare, the bishop said: “There have been undoubtedly improvements in surgical care and rehabilitation for physical injuries, but mental health care provision lags behind. It depends on an NHS which has been chronically underfunded in this area.

“Mental health provision is strained at best, and provision for military personnel is often less than adequate. Can the minister give us reassurance on the way this essential provision can be delivered?”

“This applies with as much or greater force to reservists, who are increasingly important to the Armed Forces and yet are scattered and less visible.

“Mental health problems are known to put a strain on relationships: and it sadly remains the case that the divorce rate among military families is double that of the civilian world.

“The principle of the Covenant is that those who serve in the Armed Forces and their families should face no disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services.

“For this to be the case, there has to be a clear understanding of what is fair and what is achievable.

“We all need to ensure that none of us fail to pay due respect to the men and women, with their families, who are prepared to lay down their lives in our protection.”

YOU may think it's an outdated debating chamber – but the House of Lords has a vital role as part of our democracy.

Bishop Christopher is among 26 Church of England bishops who are part of the Upper Chamber in Parliament.

The Lords have a vital role in examining legislation that comes from the House of Commons, and provide an alternative perspective to the elected Chamber.

Bishop Christopher first took his seat in the House of Lords back in 2014, and regularly contributes to debates on issues from welfare benefits to the future of the Armed Forces. So what is it like for a bishop to be a part of this great British tradition of government?

While walking through the endless wood-panelled corridors of the Palace of Westminster, it can be difficult to see past the history of the building itself. The statues of former leaders and the beautiful mosaics lining the lobbies are a clear reminder of its heritage.

But modern technology is also vital. In the corner of almost every room in the Palace of Westminster is a television monitor giving times and information on the next debates. For Bishop Christopher, it has become a vital tool in helping him keep up with proceedings.

“I never sit with my back facing the monitors while I'm working here as I think it's important to keep an eye on all of the proceedings,” he said.

“Although I do sometimes make an exception when I'm showing around school children who have come to visit Westminster. It's a welcome break from the hustle and bustle of government.”

Bishop Christopher is part of a rota of bishops who are each ‘on duty’ for a week at a time. He also travels up to London to take part in debates where he has a specific interest or responsibility.

He prepares for speeches in the Bishops' Robing Room in the heart of Parliament. The Robing Room is unique, as no other peers have a work space like the bishops.

The large room has dark wooden panelling, tall Georgian windows and four big desks – as well as wardrobes lining two of the walls. These contain the vestments the bishops wear while participating in the debates in the Upper House. Each wardrobe comes complete with three brass plaques on each door listing the name of the bishops whose robes are inside.

During the day, bishops come in and out of this room all the time. More often than not, that room is buzzing with discussion. The bishops meet here to discuss how they would tackle the debates in the Lords, giving them a private space to make their preparations.

The bishops all know each other fairly well and tend to address each other by their first names. There is a shared understanding of the responsibility they have as moral and spiritual representatives.

What does remain quite formal is much of the



Bishop Christopher outside the Houses of Parliament

by Will Nestor-Sherman
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ceremony that takes place in the Lords. The process of prayers, the way the chamber is run, and the duties that Bishop Christopher participates in are quite regulated.

“The first and most formal role, and perhaps the most obvious task the bishops are responsible for each day, is the leading of prayers at the start of every debate,” he said.

“While many may not entirely appreciate the purpose of the prayers, it represents a continued

understanding in this country that the principles of our constitution are founded upon the ideals of a Christian society, the reason in fact why bishops gained representation in the Lords in the first place.

“These prayers are private in the Lords, which means that no members of the public are allowed in. “Despite this, the presence of the 26 bishops represents an understanding that in political affairs there is a spiritual perspective recognised by the nation.”

The actual Chamber of the House of Lords itself is a vision of pomp and circumstance, with its vibrant red seats and wood panels overshadowed by an enormous throne area that sits on the north side

Our man in Parliament gives a faith perspective to debates



The House of Lords, with the throne area clearly visible behind the Lord Speaker (photo: Annabel Moeller)

of the chamber. Often the Lords have to sit on the steps that lead up to it for the simple reason that the chamber is actually quite small.

A total of 825 peers have the right to attend the debates in the House of Lords, and it is quite common for them to be seen sitting unglamorously on these carpeted red steps during sessions.

The Chamber is full of diversity, with peers of different colours, races, religions and professions, which Bishop Christopher makes clear is one of the main reasons that the role of the Lords remains so important.

“One of the great things about the House of Lords is the wide variety of relevant modern day professions and experiences that are reflected in the House,” he said.

“There are people here who are great sports people, politicians, brain surgeons, people from industry and commerce, from the whole broad spectrum of life, and from that is drawn the religious and cultural perspective that bishops can bring.

“There is more that we can do and room for improvement, but we remain steadfast in our commitment to our work with all our partners on removing disadvantage and instilling fairness and respect.”

The responsibility of representing the nation in the House of Lords can be overawing, especially given the prestige of Parliament as the world's oldest constitutional democracy.

But Bishop Christopher remains convinced that his role, and the roles of all the Lords Spiritual, remains as important and colourful as it ever has been.

BISHOPS IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Bishops have been part of the Upper House since the 14th century.

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester automatically sit in the Lords. The 21 longest-serving diocesan bishops then join them to make up 26 ‘Lords Spiritual’.

The first female Lords Spiritual were appointed in 2015 and 2016 – Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, and Christine Hardman, Bishop of Newcastle.

BISHOP'S SPEECHES MAKE THEIR MARK

EXTRACTS from speeches made by Bishop Christopher in the House of Lords recently:

On the government's Autumn Statement (29th November 2016):

“I want the Government, to reflect on what they ought to do – and I do introduce a moral note in using that word – to repair the fractures of trust, to address growing injustices that are perceived as more hurtful than inequalities, and to create not just a flourishing economy but a nation where people believe there is more that unites us than divides us. Indeed my question to the Minister is whether the Government can better articulate its rationale and approach in the important area of inequality and injustice.”

On the impact of the Brexit vote on Higher Education (3rd November 2016):

“In varied universities the present excruciating uncertainty following the Brexit vote is having a serious impact in a range of areas. The risks around recruiting future staff are hard accurately to gauge but must be expected that it will become more difficult to recruit EU staff. 10.7 per cent of academic staff across the sector are EU nationals with a focus on research staff.

“These are much more likely to be on fixed term than permanent contracts so there will be ongoing need for recruitment in what are now very uncertain circumstances and likely to be in changed circumstances. It would be enormously helpful if the Minister and the Government could be much more precise about freedom of movement for all categories of worker that will be available post-Brexit.”