SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Now today the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales is urging the faithful to think carefully about who they vote for in May’s General Election. A letter from the bishops of the church, which will be read out at masses this morning, asks Catholics to reflect on what kind of society they want here and abroad. So just how political is this message and does it favour any particular party? Well I’m joined now by the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols. Good morning. Thank you very much for joining us.

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Good morning.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Should the church get involved in politics like this?

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Well politics is about the well-being of our country. It’s a big part of that well-being
and that’s everybody’s business, so it’s certainly the church’s business both as a body that contributes very significantly to the educational system, to the welfare work, and to a body that represents a long, long tradition of thinking about what makes for healthy living and a good society. So I think what we’re trying to do really is to urge people to get involved and to ask those questions: what kind of a society do we want to be and how do we see our role in the world and in the wider world? It’s really about trying to push the horizon back a bit and say what hope do we offer to youngsters about a vision of our society to which they will have a part to play.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
But the letter that will be read out this morning, I mean it covers in great detail all kinds of issues, doesn’t it, and literally tells people what questions they should be asking of their political candidates. It does give you the impression that you think there’s a real sort of disconnect between the public and the politicians.

**CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:**
Well it’s quite brief actually, so it doesn’t go into too much detail. I hope we can follow it up with some more detailed consideration of each point. But it is urging that connect – let’s connect with this process of the General Election, let’s get involved, let’s talk to candidates, let’s test them on how they think about some of the fundamental issues.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**
Because there is a disconnect, do you think?

**CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:**
Well I think there is. I think people are struggling to stay with this very long General Election campaign. There’s still another ten weeks to go and I don’t want, we don’t want that to kind of drift away. Nor do we want it to get into criticism of individuals. In a sporting term, we want to say let’s play the ball, not the man; let’s keep an eye on the issues and the underlying values that are there behind some of the issues. For example, the university fees. What’s behind that is well what kind of an educational system do we want? What is university education? What’s its purpose? And that then would lead to a more detailed consideration that is rightly the political sphere about
how you manage that.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

Immigration is another thing that you address and you do say workers and students from abroad contribute much to the common good of our country and there’s a great danger in blaming immigrants for the ills of society. Obviously it is an issue, a big issue in the forthcoming election.

**CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:**

It is, it is.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

Does it mean though that you think that Catholics shouldn’t be voting for parties like UKIP – anti-immigration parties?

**CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:**

Well I think every party has to be tested on its approach to immigration. No government in the last three decades has solved the problem of immigration, so it is a really difficult issue. But what I want to keep saying is these are people we’re talking about – the people who drown in the Mediterranean trying to get into Europe, the people who are caged in Calais because they’re desperate. We have to somehow keep the human person at the front of all of these issues and remember that this city, for example, would grind to a halt without the contribution of people who’ve come to this country. The vast majority of immigrants come here and work hard and make a very positive contribution. That’s the tone in which we should be having this debate.

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

And of course parties like UKIP, they want to control immigration.

**CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:**

Well …

**SOPHIE RAWORTH:**

Are you dismayed that immigration is such a big issue in this forthcoming election?
CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Well I am because I do think we need to go back and say what is our stance towards the world around us? Do we see ourselves genuinely as a player, as a contributor wanting to build something that is better for everybody? It’s not surprising that for example yesterday Pope Francis is really very forthright about levels of poverty in the world and whether the overall global economic situation is geared towards serving the majority of people, is geared towards serving the common good and not just towards profit enterprise.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
You’ve been in the past very critical of the … Well you were very welcoming of the coalition when they came to power. You were less welcoming a year ago when you criticised their welfare reforms and there are messages in this letter as well. You say that you’re shocked by the fact that there are still people who are having to rely on handouts.

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Well it is simply shocking in a country that is as wealthy as ours that there are people still dependent on absolute charity. Now I think it’s perfectly clear the government’s intention is that there would be a longer term reform [to the] social welfare system and certainly at times of that the incidental damage that’s been done to many people is very clear and that is a remaining problem. But you know the objective facts are just there to be seen. If you move around this country, you’ll see great pockets of poverty and great areas of wealth. That’s a discrepancy which creates in people real tension; and unless we see it addressed, I think people lose hope as to what is their role in this country in the future.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Can I ask you one more question just about obviously the papers today dominated by extremism and … Do you think that Muslim faith leaders have done enough?

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
I don’t know the internal life of the Muslim communities - and they’re very… varied
– well enough to answer that question. But I do believe that as a society we have to fashion the place that youngsters from the Islamic traditions can take in our society because sometimes you know it’s a lack of hope that I think drives people into private areas where they get manipulated and where these terrible tragic … Tragic for these three girls, terrible I think for the older men who go off to commit these awful crimes.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
So do you think that the faith leaders should be doing more to combat the rise of extremism, radicalisation?

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Well I think every religion always attracts extremism and it is definitely the duty of its leaders to try and make sure that those extremists do not find a place in the presentation and exploration and celebration of that faith because it cannot be actually at the heart of that faith. We hear Muslim leaders over and over again in this country condemn the violence of Isis - they’re not always reported, but they do it - but I think there’s always a task for all of us to engage in that.

SOPHIE RAWORTH:
Cardinal Vincent Nichols, thank you very much.

CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS:
Thank you.

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