

Archbishop says cuts are hitting the vulnerable the hardest



Archbishop Vincent Nichols of

Westminster has said in a speech to MPs, peers and charity workers that Government cuts are “already being felt disproportionately by the most vulnerable”.

It is the closest a Catholic bishop in England and Wales has come to criticising the Coalition’s austerity measures.

In his speech the archbishop urged the Government to listen to people on the “front line” of the social security, health and criminal justice systems.

Speaking at the Houses of Parliament, he painted a grim picture of the state of Britain.

He said: “None of us can be in any doubt about the severity of the challenges facing us in the coming months and years.

“The increase in youth unemployment, the pressure on housing provision and support, and the impact of personal debt are bringing hardship and distress to those least able to sustain them. At the same time some aspects of the distribution of wealth cause scandal and dismay.

“The summer’s disturbances in some parts of the country demonstrated a callous disregard for the common good of our communities, increasing the burden for those whose homes and businesses were affected.

“And, ever present throughout these developments, are enormous pressures on families and particularly on our young people, most of whom struggle hard to maintain their dignity and self-respect. They need our support.”

Archbishop Nichols was speaking at a parliamentary reception organised by Caritas Social Action Network, an agency of the bishops’ conference.

He urged peers and MPs to “utilise the wealth of knowledge and creativity available in this room”.

He said: "It is only by strengthening relationships between those organisations which work across the social action spectrum, and those parliamentarians who are shaping the legislative response to society's challenges, that we can together achieve a better future."

The reception is the first organised by Caritas and comes after the bishops' conference announced earlier this year that it wanted to give the agency a stronger national voice and more powers to co-ordinate Catholic social action.

Their resolution followed on from a promise in November last year to try to deepen the Church's social engagement in the wake of the papal visit.

The reception's timing coincides with the progress of the Welfare Reform Bill in the House of Lords. Caritas has worked with Baroness Hollins in her tabling of an amendment to protect benefit claimants from being penalised as a result of administration errors.

Kevin Flanagan, director of the St Anthony's Centre for Church and Industry, said: "If the present [Welfare Reform Bill] proposals go through, I am gravely concerned that a number of people who are receiving benefits could, through no fault of their own, be placed in debt and face other far reaching consequences for matters which are beyond their control."

Caritas Social Action Network is an umbrella organisation for domestic Catholic charities. It is separate from Caritas Internationalis, a global confederation of Catholic relief agencies.

Mark Greaves - Catholic Herald