

Influential Christian Parliamentarian Stepping Down From Office

Sir Brian Mawhinney says Christians have a responsibility to influence the values of their nations' political systems

After 25 years of public service, an influential Christian Parliamentarian is stepping down from politics.

A native of Northern Ireland, Sir Brian Mawhinney served as the Conservative Member of Parliament for Cambridgeshire North West from 1979 to 1997. Once a professor at medical schools in London and Michigan, Mawhinney also served as head of the Conservative Party, Transport Secretary and Minister of State for the health department and in the Northern Ireland office.

While in Northern Ireland, Mawhinney helped begin the peace process when tension between Protestants and Catholics began to escalate. "We tried to find areas of common ground and build on it," he said. "It was difficult because they made attempts to kill us."

He said the experience taught him that no democratic nation should cower in the face of terrorism. "Democracies have to stand firm; they can't be pushed around," he told a TV audience during a visit to Orlando, Fla., in March. "You cannot accomplish by violence what should be accomplished through the political process."

Mawhinney said his party supported the British government's decision to go to war in Iraq, and he regrets Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's decision to pull

troops from Iraq in the wake of the Madrid terror bombing. Still, he said, "I think the cause on which we are embarked [in Iraq] will prevail."

Looking back on his career, Mawhinney said he marvels at how far God has brought him. He said he remembers sitting in an 800-year-old cathedral in Peterborough, later named Cambridgeshire North West, telling God he didn't know why He had brought him there. It was 1979, and he was one of more than 90 people to apply to be the Parliamentary candidate for the region.

He said while sitting on the pew, he heard a voice tell him, "This is where I want you to be." Though the people of Peterborough knew little about him, they chose Mawhinney as their representative, launching his political career.

Perhaps because he had such a dramatic experience, Mawhinney said he has had a keen sense of calling to public life. "God calls individuals to do what He calls them to do," Mawhinney said. "God has not called all people to be politicians, but He has given us the privilege of living in a democracy."

He says that privilege breeds a responsibility among Christians to get involved on some level, whether simply by voting, participating in school boards or city councils, or seeking state or national office.

He said if Christians believe this is the Father's world, "then we have the opportunity, and I would say the responsibility within certain limits, to try to engage in that process to try to shift the values of the systems to which we attach importance."

He said being known as a committed Christian has been an advantage for him. "People like to know their elected representatives believe in things, even if they don't share the beliefs," Mawhinney said.

However, he said he has received criticism from Christians who believed he had no business in politics. "There is still a ... stream within particularly the evangelical wings of the church, and I would guess the charismatic wings of the church too, there is still a strong sense of, 'Come out from among them and be ye separate.'"

He says many Christians are concerned that politics requires compromise. "If we didn't compromise with each other, there'd never be a church program," he said. "If you mean compromise in the sense of calling into question the fundamentals of my faith, I don't do that. In our system, we don't have to do that."

The 63-year-old plans to stay active in his retirement. Married with three adult children, Mawhinney is president of England's football league and serves on the board of World Relief, a Christian humanitarian organization. He said he may write another book; his autobiography, *In the Firing Line*, released in 1999.

Although he says Christians need more teaching about how they can fuse their faith with political activity, he is encouraged. "Twenty-five years ago I was a serious oddball," Mawhinney said. "Now, I'm just an oddball."

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