Harold Wilson Lecture – April 2015

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Response and Responsibility – Christian Faith Engaging with the World of Politics

Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great privilege and pleasure for me to deliver this year's Harold Wilson lecture at the University of Huddersfield. The University has been most generous in its support for my new ministry as the first Bishop of Huddersfield and I am most grateful for the partnership we have begun to forge in working together for the good of the wider community in this town and region. It so happens that there is also a small personal link between my family and that of Lord Wilson, in that he and my father read Modern History at Jesus College in Oxford at the same time in the 1930s, with Harold Wilson having commenced at the College in 1934 and my father going up from the valleys of South Wales in 1935. There is some small evidence of their having had contact with each other on a display in the recently re-named Harold Wilson Room in the College: the records of the college history society from 1936 list my father as the Secretary and Wilson as one of those presenting a learned paper to the Society; he was clearly destined for higher things even then!

In terms of the subject before us this evening, I can make no claims to practical experience in the world of politics, though I did read Politics and Philosophy as an under-graduate and did dabble a little in debates at the Oxford Union, around the same time as another Yorkshire lad — William Hague — was making his mark! But my interest in the subject has never waned since those days and even if my vocational path took a rather different turn, I have always sought to make connections between my faith and my thinking about the business of politics.

What I would like to do this evening is to offer some perspectives on how I see the connection between faith and politics, on why I believe that people of faith have an important contribution to make to political life, and in particular to suggest some ways

in which the Christian faith may have something relevant to say to the situation we are presently facing.

I am going to begin with a brief and inevitably sketchy historical overview of the relationship between the Church and politics in Britain in order to set the background for our discussion. In historical terms, the question as to *whether* the Church in this country should be involved in or stay out of politics was a complete non-starter. From Anglo-Saxon times, bishops and other senior figures in the church were regularly consulted by kings and rulers, both in terms of seeking spiritual guidance on important matters and also as major landowners with significant temporal responsibilities, most famously perhaps as the "Prince Bishops" of Durham who were a bulwark of Norman authority in the North of England from the late 11th century onwards. And with the formation of the Parliament of Westminster, bishops were included as a matter of course in the Upper House along with the nobles, and therefore continued to be consulted by the King as part of the parliamentary process.

Henry VIII did a good deal to curtail the power of the Church at the time of the English Reformation, dissolving the monasteries and relieving the Church of much of its land and wealth, but the Bishops still retained very large holdings of land and continued (except for the period of the Commonwealth) as members of the Upper House of Parliament – which was in general becoming more significant as an instrument of government throughout this period, and especially after the Restoration in the late 17th Century, with the establishment of what we now call our "Constitutional Monarchy".

The wider context of this involvement of the Church in the realm of politics is that England as it was (and Britain as it became) was unequivocally a "Christian" nation from the end of the first millennium and onwards. In fact the term "Christian" can probably be applied rather earlier than we can speak of the "nation" at this period. As a result of successive phases of evangelisation, the rulers of the various English peoples had adopted the Christian faith and under the principle of "cuius regio, eius religio" their peoples had fallen in behind them. That was the way it worked – very different to today of course – and if the king converted then so did everyone else as well!

At the time of the Reformation this principle had some fairly devastating effects, with the successive martyrdom of Catholics and Protestants who refused to fall in line with the wishes of the monarch of the day. But then this was precisely because politics and religion were utterly inseparable at the time – with political allegiance being very clearly determined by religious affiliation. After the Civil War and the creation of the Commonwealth, bishops may have been removed from Parliament but it certainly

could not be said that religion and the church in one way or another were any less involved in politics – in fact quite the reverse, with the creation of a virtual theocracy under Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector.

Perhaps as a result of the experience of this period, and as an example typically English pragmatism, the role of religion and the Church in political life underwent a gradual shift in the eighteenth century, with the rise of the power of Parliament and the development of what we can recognise as political parties. Parliament rather than the Crown became increasingly the focus of power, even if not of perceived authority, and to some extent as a result, Bishops and religious leaders came to play an increasingly marginal role in political life. Added to this of course there was the growing philosophical scepticism of the eighteenth century and the rise of new ideas emanating especially from continental Europe, ending with the French Revolution with its deepseated anti-clericalism and of course the American Revolution, championed by anti-religious writers such as Thomas Paine, as well as Deists such as Thomas Jefferson, who were certainly no lovers of the established church and framed their constitution accordingly.

There was something of a shift in British political life in the early nineteenth century as a result of the Evangelical Revival and the advent of such notable Christian figures as William Wilberforce and the Earl of Shaftesbury, for whom the Christian faith was clearly the driving force behind their reforming political agenda. Often in this context the Church of England and its bishops were far from being in the vanguard of political reform; they were more likely to be found defending their interests in the colonies and in the trade which underpinned much of their substantial wealth! For the most part in the nineteenth century bishops were either little involved in the business of politics or were most likely to put their weight behind the maintenance of the *status quo* – they were largely both in word and deed "the establishment at prayer".

On the other hand, the latter part of the nineteenth century did see the beginnings what one could call a more "visionary" or prophetic strand within Christian thinking in England, with the writings of F D Maurice and the Christian Socialist movement. Many of you will remember the remark, made by Harold Wilson but probably not originating with him, that "the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marxism" and indeed it is difficult to over-estimate the significance of religion (and especially free church and non-conformist religion) in the formation of a peculiarly British form of socialism, as distinct from that in mainland Europe.

You will note of course that this was not primarily an Anglican phenomenon, at least until the arrival of William Temple and his massive contribution to the development of a social vision for the life of both Church and Nation. Temple's short volume "Christianity and Social Order" was one of the key elements in the formation of the post-Depression and post-war consensus which gave rise to the Welfare State, the National Health Service and the reform of education. Temple, Beveridge, Butler and Bevan – from across the political spectrum – were the founders of a new approach to politics and a new understanding of the role of the state, which largely prevailed until the challenges of the 1970s and the advent of the Thatcher government of the 1980s.

And that brings us of course to perhaps the most obvious period in modern times when Bishops and the Church have been seen as active in the realm of politics, and often in controversial ways. Whatever your perspective, there can be little doubt that Margaret Thatcher's government effected a major shift in the focus of British political life. I realise I am treading on dangerous ground, so let me say no more than this: Margaret Thatcher was determined come hell or high water to dismantle what she saw as the stifling effects of state-sponsored corporatism and trade union control of employment practice. Recent biographies of Thatcher have stressed that this was almost a religious mission for her, rooted in the ethics she had learned from her Methodist lay preacher father.

At a time when for one reason or another, the political opposition was often riven by its own disputes and divisions, the Bishops of the Church of England responded to what they saw on the ground in their dioceses and parishes as the consequences of the Government's policies in a landmark report in 1986, "Faith in the City". The report infuriated the Government which saw it as a thinly-veiled (if veiled at all) quasi-Marxist attack on their policies. There was a lot of noise and thunder, but in the end the Church in a sense retreated from the barricades and followed up what was a genuinely challenging and visionary report by setting up the Church Urban Fund, which did and has done fantastic work supporting brilliant projects in many of the most deprived parts of England; but crucially the Church did not pursue the debate in the political arena about the future of the nation and the kind of society that was being created as a result of the Government's policies.

And I think that was a real shame. Not because I want to take sides in that debate (though of course I have my own views) but because I think we missed an opportunity to help re-shape the terms of the debate, in a way that Britain still really needs. In a real sense, Margaret Thatcher altered the political landscape of the United Kingdom in a way that was just as radical as what happened in the 1940s. Everyone who came

after her, and not least Tony Blair, was shaped by her legacy. She herself is reported as having been surprised and disappointed by the consequences of what she had done. I think the quote goes something like this: "I thought that if we cut taxes and gave people back their money, it would make them generous; but it didn't". Now there may be either an extraordinary naivety about that or perhaps something more culpable, but I think we can all recognise that the last thirty years have seen the creation of a more individualised culture and a more polarised society — and that is the situation that we are facing today.

Throughout this time, bishops and the Church of England have made occasional contributions to the debate on particular issues, but sadly we have spent a huge amount of our time and energy on internal matters such as the ordination of women, firstly to the priesthood and finally (at last!) to the episcopate. And now we are in danger of spending an equal amount of time and effort on matters of human sexuality. It is not that these things aren't important – they are – but they do mean that we have yet again taken our eye off the ball in terms of what is going on in the wider world. The same thing happened in the 1950s, when the visionary William Temple was followed by Geoffrey Fisher, who devoted all his time and energy to the revision of Canon Law! Now granted that it had not been properly revised since 1604 and was in need of some work, this is another classic example of the Church losing sight of its priorities, which surely ought to be more about the coming of God's kingdom on earth than about our own internal house-keeping!

And that brings us to today, and to the Church and the Bishops' most recent contributions to political debate, in the form of the Archbishop of York's book "On Rock or Sand – Firm Foundations for Britain's Future" and the House of Bishops' Pastoral Letter "Who is my Neighbour?", published in the run-up to the General Election. "On Rock or Sand", edited by Archbishop Sentamu, is a collection of essays looking at aspects of life in Britain today, including the economy, education, poverty, work, health, ageing, and representative democracy. It includes a contribution from Archbishop Justin Welby entitled "Building the Common Good". Among the contributors are leading figures from the world of business and commerce, the charity sector, academic theologians and one former Labour Government minister, Lord Andrew Adonis.

The book was perceived by some on the right of the political spectrum and among the press as a more or less explicit attack on the Coalition Government, and especially on the impact of its austerity programme. This was probably inevitable in the run-up to a General Election, but I suspect that many of those criticising the book (and indeed

those cheering for it) had never actually read what was inside it; and I think that most fair-minded people who have bothered to read it would agree that it is a thoughtful and well-balanced exploration of the issues and not an attack on any particular political stance.

And essentially the same thing happened with regard to the publication of the Bishops' Pastoral Letter, "Who is my neighbour?" which again attracted considerable media and political interest and was portrayed as an attack on government policy. In fact it is principally a call for serious debate about the future direction of our society and the creation of a new kind of politics. As stated in the preface: "This letter is not a shopping list of policies we would like to see. It is a call for a new direction that we believe our political life ought to take."

So why is it that both of these works were seen as an attack on the coalition government? And why were parts of the media so ready to interpret them accordingly? Part of the answer of course is that the media like to see things that way, because it makes for a sexier story that sells newspapers. But part of it is also to do with a changed perception about the role of the Church in relation to government and power in general. Although the Church of England is still the Established Church, and although its bishops still sit in the House of Lords, there is little doubt that at least since the 1980s the Church has been willing to "speak truth to power" (as the phrase goes) more readily and more openly than in former generations. In a real sense, and in relation to governments of all persuasions, the Church has re-discovered something of its prophetic voice and has sought to ask questions about where we are going as a society and where our politicians are trying to take us. And needless to say, I think that is a good thing.

In terms of the typology developed by my old research subject H. Richard Niebuhr, there has been a shift over the years in the Church of England from being largely a "Christ of Culture" church — where there was virtually no distinction between what the Church proclaimed and the prevailing culture around it — to becoming increasingly a "Christ and Culture in Paradox" church, where there is a clear tension between what the Church proclaims and the prevailing culture. On the other hand, the Church of England has never embraced a "Christ against Culture" position, adopted by some more radical Christian groups, because it still sees itself as an integral part of the wider culture, seeking to influence and change that culture from the inside. That after all is part of what it means to live with the uncomfortable position of being an "established" church.

The question we then need to consider is: on what basis should the Church participate in political debate? If the Church is there for the whole of the nation, are there dangers in its being perceived as either for or against particular political parties and policies? On the other hand, if we seek to avoid that perception at all costs, is there not a danger that its contributions will be seen as anodyne and irrelevant?

Now I actually think that the two works I have referred to, "On Rock or Sand?" and "Who is my neighbour?" avoid both of these pitfalls pretty well. Because what they seek to do is to articulate some key principles about the formation of our shared life as a nation, rather than advocating particular policies; and at the same time, they seek to encourage a fresh debate about where we are going and might want to go as a society. In other words, they are principally about <u>vision</u> and <u>direction</u>, not about concrete choices and specific policies.

I am surely not alone in thinking that this is something that is desperately needed in politics today. I have found much of the output from the political parties in the current election campaign deeply depressing. They seem determined to treat voters as children looking for handouts of sweets, concerned with what's in it for them, rather than as adult human beings who are interested in the kind of world we are making, both for our own generation and for those who will come after us.

For the most part I find it very difficult to work out what people actually stand for, and much of the debate is couched in intensely negative terms, focusing on instilling fear about what the other lot might do if they get into power. It is divisive and it is corrosive – and somebody needs to say "STOP!" and then to try and set us off in a different direction.

And I think that is actually part of the responsibility of the Church – in theological terms because our loyalty is not to the state or even to our prevailing culture, but to God himself and to the coming of his kingdom here on earth. H Richard Niebuhr wrestled with exactly this kind of issue when he was writing at the height of the Cold War and the McCarthy era in the USA of the 1950s. He coined the term "henotheism" which referred to the worship of a narrow lesser god, which at that time meant essentially the idea of the United States as the sole focus of people's loyalty, and the demonising of those who were perceived as a threat. Instead Niebuhr called people back to a loyalty to what he referred to as the "radical monotheism" of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which insists that the God we worship and serve is the God of all creation and all people, which refuses to demonise the outsider and which seeks to practise Jesus' command to love even our enemies. As Christians, we need to resist the politics of fear

and replace it with a politics of hope. Of course there will be times when it is necessary to resist evil even with lethal force – but how much more fruitful might it be to reach out to those who fear and hate us? It surely can't be any worse than the chaos we have helped to create in Afghanistan and Iraq and now right across the Middle East.

Christians and the Church cannot of course (thank goodness) impose their moral and political vision on the life of our nation. But we can and must seek to contribute to the formation of a new vision for our shared life and a new way of doing politics. This needs to happen right down at the level of every local church and parish AND at the level of our contribution to political debate at a national and international level.

H Richard Niebuhr conceived of human life as a response to the world around us. If we perceive the world as a threatening place then we will either hide ourselves away or come out fighting our corner. If on the other hand we perceive ourselves and the world to be held in the hands of a gracious and loving God, then we will respond quite differently, even if our particular circumstances are profoundly difficult or threatening in themselves. This was the basis of Niebuhr's so-called "ethics of responsibility": we learn through the person of Jesus Christ (and above all by his death and resurrection) that although evil and tragedy may happen, they are not the end of the story and they will not finally prevail. Such a faith both challenges and enables us to resist the path of seeking to destroy our enemies, even if we may indeed need to seek to restrain and reverse what they are seeking to do to us. Our goal must be one of redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation, because the alternative is to allow evil to overcome us and to destroy any hope of a new and better world.

Christians and churches must seek to become beacons of hope, communities of people who are learning to live differently and to refuse the culture of fear and suspicion which so characterises much of life today. That means reaching out in friendship to those who are different to us, whether in terms of race, religion, background or wealth. It means nurturing young people and adults who take responsibility for their lives and who are willing to care for others and help them in their turn to take responsibility for themselves and the world around them. This is about helping people to achieve dignity and self-respect, moving beyond the false dichotomy of welfare dependency on the one hand or poorly-paid work on the other, because we have created a society where people value having work because it helps bring purpose to their lives and where in turn their work is valued and earns at least a decent living wage. AND It means encouraging people to take responsibility for the care of the world around them, whether in the streets where they live or in the impact of global warming on people on the other side of the world.

Churches should in a real sense be counter-cultural communities of hope, not private religious clubs. Our preaching and teaching should seek to raise people's eyes to the possibility of making a better world and to a vision of what God longs to do with us and with the whole of his creation. In one sense this really isn't rocket science — but it does require us to cut through the accretions which have come to overlay the core message of the gospel and which have deflected the Church from its true role as a servant and herald of the coming of God's kingdom.

The underlying theological vision on which I have been basing much of my work since coming to Huddersfield goes something like this:

God's primary purpose is to bring into being a people who share his divine life and who live out the life of his kingdom in the world.

That has been God's plan since before the creation of the world. It is expressed in the opening chapters of Genesis, where Adam and Eve are created to be in relationship with God and one another and to share in God's rule over and care for creation itself. It is expressed in God's call to Abram and God's promise that through Abram all the peoples of the earth could be blessed. It is expressed in the vocation of the people of Israel to be a light to the nations. And it culminates in the coming of God's Son Jesus Christ finally to fulfil that vocation in his own person and then to call and create a new people who would carry on that work, from Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the earth.

In calling that people into being – the people we call the Church, the Body of Christ – Jesus gave them both a Great Commission and a Great Commandment. The Commission was to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" – that is to invite people into a relationship with God so that they come to share his divine life. And the Commandment was to "love one another as I have loved you" – that is with the same kind of outgoing, self-forgetting love that they had seen in Jesus, up to and including his death on the Cross.

It is by living that kind of life and embodying that kind of love that Christians and churches gain credibility and a hearing in today's world. Yes, bishops may still have some kind of place within the pecking order of our culture (for the time being), but in the end what will really count is the quality of life of individual Christians and local Christian churches, making a difference in their communities and in the wider world, and showing that there is another, better way of living even in a scary, hostile world.

It is Christians and churches like this that will earn the right to be heard and that will have the chance to change the terms of political debate in our society, calling people to a new and more fruitful way of living, which is not obsessed with either the latest material fads and fashions or the latest threat to our security and well-being from terrorists overseas or immigrants in the next-door street.

There is no other basis on which we can hope to be heard except that we are demonstrating the life of God's kingdom and speaking clearly of the hope we have in Christ which enables us to live that way. Perhaps in the end we will be a little more like H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ against Culture" model of the church – learning to walk out of step with the world in order that the world can see how out of step with God's rhythms it has become.

At the same time, I do think we need "vision casters", people who can help envision a new and better way of living which can capture people's imaginations as well as their hearts. For that perhaps we do even need bishops who can tell the story of what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ with clarity and confidence and maybe even (please!) a little passion and fire. I am genuinely so disappointed in much of what passes for political rhetoric today, because it reads so often like an extended list of "what we'll do for you" rather than a vision for a better world, or at least one marginally better than the one we inherited from those who have gone before!

This is something that our young people so desperately need and deserve; it is perhaps even why the myths and lies of Islamic State seem to have captured the imagination of so many – because in however twisted way they portray something bigger, better, bolder than sitting in front of a games console and knocking back a few beers. Over recent years, many of the young people I have worked with have been excited and motivated by the chance to make a difference to the lives of others and to their own lives by getting involved with projects in this country and overseas – projects that push them outside their comfort zone and that change who they are as well as touching and changing those with whom they become involved.

Quite understandably, as a result of the history of the last hundred years and the huge cultural changes there have been in that time, there is today a widespread suspicion of grand religious or political meta-narratives that purport to tell people how the world is or ought to be. In philosophical terms, such narratives are seen as a power-play, designed to close down and set the terms of the debate. So instead we have adopted an alternative pseudo-*narrative*, which says that there is no such thing as truth (at least in the moral or political sphere) and that all that matters is what is true for me.

Ironically, this has meant that people have no clear compass by which to set a course or to use as a basis for questioning what they are told by those around them; so we end up with a situation in which people's moral frameworks are almost completely fluid and where their views change depending on the latest trend on the internet, Facebook or Twitter. This is dubbed as giving us "freedom" when in fact in means that we are more vulnerable than ever to being manipulated by interests beyond our knowledge and control.

One thing the Church (and other communities of faith) can bring to the debate about where we are going is the richness of their perspective on such fundamental issues as what it means to be a human being: how is our personhood formed? Are we really just autonomous individuals, centres of freedom and choice (who are thereby alienated from others and potentially threatened by them at every turn)? Or are we rather infinitely valuable creatures made in the image of God and called into being through our relationship with Him and with those around us? Are we just consumers of the world's resources or are we not also *stewards of creation*, who are called to share in the oversight and care of the riches of the earth, as well as being given the privilege of using those resources wisely for the good of all.

The myth of "Homo Oeconomicus" – humans as beings who are concerned only or primarily with material production and consumption – is surely just that: *a myth*. We all know that we are more than the sum of our bank accounts and our ability to generate income – but so much of the way we talk about life and even the *quality* of life is defined in terms of numbers, measurable statistics and money. Yet we all know that this is nonsense, and that real quality of life has to do far more with relationships, with family, with community – and with the ability to stop and stare at a beautiful sunset which brings joy to our souls, but costs us nothing. Didn't Jesus have something to say about that at one point: "Man shall not live by bread alone..."? Christians and the Church need to stand up for that alternative narrative and to point out how stupid and self-defeating it is to conduct our common life as if money and wealth were the only criteria for deciding what is right and good.

A few years ago, someone suggested an idea called "The Big Society" – and some of our church leaders got quite excited. We don't hear much about it now (though it made a brief re-appearance a week or two ago in the election campaign) because it seems to have got lost in all the talk of budget deficits and austerity. I actually think it was a rather good idea – though principally because it is what the Church (at its best) has been about for a very long time! A big part of the contribution that Christians can make to the debate about where we are going as a society must be to do with this

dimension of our belonging to one another and being responsible for one another under God. Sadly the brand may have been a little tarnished – and mention of the phrase is likely to elicit little more than a groan in many quarters – but surely there is the germ of an idea here that we need to reclaim and proclaim to a society where elderly people can go weeks without speaking to anyone and where someone's body can lie decaying in a flat for months or years before anyone even notices.

Back in the first century, Christians were a tiny minority in a small province on the edge of the Roman Empire; yet within a century the Church had spread across the ancient world and within three centuries it was a major influence in re-shaping the life of that Empire. It did not start with media campaigns or political slogans; it started with individual Christians and small Christian communities living the new life of the kingdom of God – expressing the love of God in their daily lives – and proclaiming the hope that they had within them through Jesus Christ.

The same thing needs to happen in our day – turning our culture upside down from the inside out; offering to people a new and better way of living, which they can see is real because it is happening before their very eyes, so that people say as they did in the first century – "see how these Christians love one another – they even feed our poor people as well as their own!" That is what I am seeing in some of the churches and communities across Kirklees and Calderdale – people expressing the love of Christ to the people around them, and often to those who are neglected and marginalised by the rest of society, and those same people discovering the liberating love of Christ, which begins to help them on their feet and enables them to walk tall and even to dance with joy.

If the Church can learn to live more and more like that, then I think there can and will be a place also for bishops and others to speak into the political life of the nation and to offer a new and different vision of who and what we can become. I don't want to hear politicians trying to buy my vote by telling me what's in it for me. I want to hear what kind of a world they would like to see and how they propose to get us there, — and I don't mean some Brave New World where everything will be bright and wonderful (because it won't, and if the twentieth century taught us anything it is that Utopias are dangerous!). No, not a utopia but a world where my wealth and health are not the only things that matter and where what happens to an elderly lady living on her own in Huddersfield or to refugees struggling to survive in Syria really does concern *us*, because we are all created in the image and likeness of God and all matter to Him.

For now, I don't think many of our politicians have *got it* at all. And I think that means we do need bishops and others – people of all faiths and none – who are willing to challenge what we are being offered and what is being done in our name, in the hope and expectation of changing the terms of the debate and indeed the whole way political debate is conducted in our nation. But that doesn't let you and me off the hook either; we can't just palm this off on someone else. Real change will require ordinary people to get engaged in both action and discussion about forging new ways of doing things and new ways of working together for the good of all. I have had some really good discussions with colleagues in the statutory and voluntary sectors recently in both Calderdale and Kirklees; there are tremendous things going on across our communities and there is a real desire to find new ways of working together more effectively for the sake of everyone in our community.

If there is going to be real change in our nation, if we are going to discover better ways of living together and of making things work more effectively for everyone, then it will have to be "bottom-up" and not just "top-down". That means you and me finding ways of participating in the process of change, whether it's by volunteering through a local charity or getting involved in a political party and questioning both what is being done and how people are going about it.

The role of the Church in this is two-fold. Firstly, it is to create communities of hope – counter-cultural places which keep on celebrating the possibility that things can be different. And secondly, it is to help the world **see** that there is a better way of going about things, and **hear** about the hope we have in Christ that enables us to live differently even in a dog-eat-dog world.

Our politicians need all the help they can get. We should pray for them; we should treat them with respect (well, most of the time anyway!) and we should hold them accountable for the kind of world they are trying to sell to us, not least in the run-up to a General Election. But in the end politics is far too important to leave to the politicians. It is about shaping the future of our common life – and we all need to get involved (including the bishops!) – because everyone single one of us is responsible for our own response.

Thank you.

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