

Forge Podcast with Baroness Cox.MP3

Peter Wooding: [00:00:13] Welcome to the Forge Leadership podcast. This weeks special guest is the peer Baroness Cox. Simon Barrington went to meet her in the House of Lords to record this special episode.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:23] So today on the Forge Leadership podcast I'm joined by Baroness Caroline Cox. Baroness Cox is a cross-bench peer in the House of Lords and is the president and CEO of HART the humanitarian aid and relief tr which she describes as "not just another aid organisation". Baroness Cox welcome to the podcast.

Baroness Cox: [00:00:40] Thank you very much. It's great privilege to be with you.

Simon Barrington: [00:00:42] We're in the Royal Gallery here. Tell us what it looks like here and where we're sat.

Baroness Cox: [00:00:49] Well before I tell you what it looks like I have to introduce myself by saying that I am a nurse and a social scientist by intention. That's what I thought I was doing in my life. I'm a Baroness by astonishment. God's sense of humor. I wasn't into politics I don't much like politics so much not in this world. I was the first Baroness I'd ever met. You wake up one morning and find a baroness looking at you out of the bathroom mirror, quite a shock. But you think what a privilege, how do I use it. And I think the message came very clearly that to be able to speak in the House of Lords one of the houses of the British Parliament is a wonderful place to be a voice for those who don't have a voice or whose voices are not heard. So that's how I try to use my position here and that's why I set up my little charity NGO HART = Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust to provide aid and advocacy for people whose voices on the whole are not heard and I spend quite a lot of my time crossing borders illegally, quite shamelessly, to reach people who are suffering from oppression and persecution and who on the whole are not reached by the major aid organizations for political reasons because the government doesn't give them permission to go - we go anyway - or for security reasons because they're risk averse. And to some extent I can understand that if you are taking people to work on the ground, you're responsible for them and therefore you have to be responsible for them. But we work through local partners and they're the heroes and heroines. They're local, they're there they're local, indigenous, so risk averse doesn't come into it. So that's what I do and that's why I'm sitting in this beautiful place to which you've just referred, the royal gallery and this is part of the Palace of Westminster which was burnt down in the 1830's and rebuilt in this glorious unashamed Victorian Neo-Gothic architecture.

Simon Barrington: [00:02:29] There are some beautiful paintings around and some of the scenes that are in these galleries have biblical themes to them. You were pointing out the Ten Commandments and Moses in one of the rooms as well. How do you bring your Christian faith to bear in the work that you're doing as a Baroness.

Simon Barrington: [00:02:48] Well I try to fulfil the Biblical mandate through our little NGO Heart which is to try to speak for the oppressed, heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked. And so that's what we try to do. And of course to speak in the British Parliament is a wonderful place to speak for the oppressed. It's a wonderful place to get their stories on the record. It's a wonderful place to try and call the British government to account to do more to help them.

Simon Barrington: [00:03:16] Tell us about some of the places around the world that you're currently involved in through HART and the things that concern you really you get to travel quite a lot into often very dangerous places. Tell us about.

Baroness Cox: [00:03:29] Well some of the countries we are working with through HART at the moment are Sudan and South Sudan. I'll come back to that in just a moment because I've just returned from there. Jos in Northern Nigeria where there's been a very very disturbing escalation of attacks on Christians recently. I mean there have been attacks on Christians for decades and thousands of Christians have been killed hundreds of churches burnt. And since Boko Haram quite a few Muslims have been killed as well. But recently there's been an escalation of attacks on Christian villages and a worrying development is there are the well known tribesmen the herdsmen who drive their huge herds of cattle across vast swathes of land. They've always done that. And as they've driven over peoples land it's always caused some tension, understandably, no one likes other cattle eating your crops. They started attacking Christian villages and driving Christians out and killing some of the Christians. Last time I was in northern Nigeria I was up in Plateau state. We went to four villages that had been attacked by the Fulani and a Pastor had been killed and we saw his ruined home and most Christians have been forced away and Fulani cattle were grazing there and it's very worrying because it's shift from moving cattle through and moving onto land grab and driving Christians off their homelands and there is a fear that they seen increasingly well armed and well trained. Maybe they could be a proxy army for Boko Haram or other Islamist regimes. So Nigeria is another area where we're working. We're also working in eastern Burma we call it Burma because the local people prefer that to Myanmar and we're working with the Shan people who are predominantly Buddhist and the Kachin who are predominately Christian you don't hear about them we hear about the Rhoyminga and the needs of the Rhoyminga are huge but there is heavy fighting going on Northern Shan and Southern Kachin states. We don't hear about it. There are thousands of displaced people and the aid organizations have tended to stop giving their money to eastern Burma. It's going to the Rhoyminga. So they're in a terrible situation and we work with them and for them. We have a wonderful partner organisation the Shan Women's Action Network the lovely name of SWAM and we work through them. And we also work in the little Armenian enclave which mostly we haven't heard of. I hadn't heard of it before I went there and it's called Ngorno Karabakh. But it's part of ancient Christian Armenia which Stalin with his salami tactics stuck inside Azerbaijan. In the early nineties Azerbaijan tried ethnic cleansing Armenians from Karabakh. It was the most high intensity conflict of the early 90s. I used to count 400 missiles a day pounding in their little capital city. Low flying aerial bombardment. 150,000 Armenians against seven million strong Azerbaijan. David against Goliath. Hunting rifles against tanks but with faith and a lot of mirles and determination they managed to hang in there. So there are still Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh. Azerbaijan unleashed another war two years ago in April. That was contained but sadly it needs a lot of prayer. Azerbaijan is developing Aremniaphobia - disseminating hatred even in school textbooks which could be a prelude for another war and that needs a lot of prayer.

Simon Barrington: [00:06:44] You said you'd recently come back from South Sudan. That's something that's a country that's been on your heart for a long long time. Obviously since it is the youngest country on the planet there are still lots of refugees both within IDP's within South Sudan but also refugees who fled South Sudan. What are the conditions like there currently within South Sudan and also in the Nuba Mountains as well.

Baroness Cox: [00:07:10] Well the situation in South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan which is the old North which of course since the South got its independence is now an independent republic they are dire but for different reasons. In South Sudan the people inherited a legacy when they got their independence of the completely destroyed land. Devastation. There were only eight qualified midwives in the whole of South Sudan. Two generations of kids who couldn't get education because of constant aerial bombardment. It was a desperate place and very very hard to bring democracy into that kind of situation especially as Khartoum was trying to destabilise it. And when civil war broke out I think it's well known that Khartoum provided quite a lot of weapons to the rebel leadership particularly the Vice President Matra and it's been a very very difficult situation and there is a lot of starvation a lot of it as you said displacement of people in huge numbers. A lot of killings very

tragically but there are also good things happening and it's really important to recognize and support those. Our partner there is the Anglican Archbishop of the diocese of Wau, one of the most wiped out areas in South Sudan and he is doing wonderful work. He had 5000 people fled into his compound dying of starvation from the fighting. And he had hardly any nothing to give them and he sent an emergency SOS to Hart. So would HART do what HART always does give us some emergency food. Well, we're not very big and we could only give ten thousand pounds. He said that would buy a lot of Sorghum and save a lot of lives. And then as the people poured into his compound from different tribes who had a lot of tribal tensions and hostilities. He made them all live together. Some of the camps they separate them. He said no, you are all here, and as they came in in their hundreds he allocated parts of a compound to them. They lived there for five, three months and they made friends. They came in as hostile tribes and left as good friends. They are now in a pretty bleak camp for displaced people on the outskirts of Wau. But the bishop archbishop also does some amazing things. He has developed a theological college. St John's theological college which does really really high standard work. It's superb and also teaches other courses as well which are needed like business administration and so on. He supports schools especially girls schools and health care. We were just able to provide money to build a clinic for the displaced people who are still stranded there and very important he does a lot of reconciliation work he goes around his diocese preaching reconciliation and peace. One of the hopes of South Sudan is what is going on at the grassroots. Not at the top political leadership - there are problems there- but there are good things and the churches are doing really good work at grassroots level.

Simon Barrington: [00:10:01] And that's often the case isn't it right around the world that actually it's the churches and grassroots communities who give us hope. You must have some amazing stories of individuals you have seen all around the world who rise above their circumstances and create light in dark situations. Can you tell us any more like the Archbishop are there any individuals that are really inspiring to you.

Baroness Cox: [00:10:26] Well there are so so many time is at a premium so I'll just choose a really short story. But going back to eastern Burma there was really heavy fighting against the Karen some years ago and the Burmese army attacked villages and they are made of wood so they go up like tinder. And I visited one of those villages after it's been attacked. I met a lovely lady Marsu in her thirties. Her home had been burnt and then a Burmese soldier running through the burning village just shot civilians and shot her. She was quite badly wounded. She was in someone else's remnants of a home. When I asked her what she felt about the soldier who shot her and her reply was unbelievable but she said I love him. The Bible said that we should love our enemies. So of course I love him. He is my brother. To say a soldier who shot you is your brother is outside my spiritual capabilities. But that's what you find you find amazing stories. In Syria also working in Syria we were up in Aleppo when Aleppo was still eastern Aleppo in the hands of the Islamist jihadists and the bombs would come in all the time. And we arrived in the evening some local Armenians actually prepared the evening meeting that was an outdoor dinner which is generous because he had hardly any food. The bombs that come in all the time he had a quartet playing music. That's the Armenians for you while the bombs fell. In the morning we had a service in the Armenian church. Everybody came, the Mullahs, the Imams, the Yazidis, as it is it was very inclusive as was the dinner the night before. Communities are very close knit and the bombs were coming in all the time. But after the service a Catholic Caldean priest came up and I never forget his words. He said I've been thinking about the story of Doubting Thomas and of course Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appeared to the other disciples and say I am not going to believe unless I see Jesus myself and put my hand into his wounded and inside the Lord appeared to him and said put your hands in my wounded hands. I know you believe, go and tell. And priest said to us and this is the powerful phrase. You came you put your hands into the wounds of our suffering now you believe, go and tell. You put your hands into the hands of our suffering. You cannot feel or endure their suffering but we can at least engage with it.

Simon Barrington: [00:12:39] This was often what people said to me when I went to visit them in the refugee camps in South Sudan was actually your very presence here is a tonic to us it's a balm to us it brings peace and hope to us as well. Do you find that as you go around the world and visit Christians who are often persecuted.

Baroness Cox: [00:13:02] So often they say the effect you're here makes all the difference sometimes one feels so inadequate. What we have to offer is very very small in HART is not very much. I wish I was Bill Gates but it's something. I remember once again back in Burma, we heard it many times the fighting was going on and we crossed over illegally into Burma into Karen state. We crossed the river and we climbed up Sleeping Dog mountain. I didn't like Sleeping Dog mountain it was really steep. It was three steps up and two steps back. Hanging on to vegetation. I getting in a bad mood and thinking Caroline Cox you're a grandmother was then six grandchildren, now got 10. Isn't it about time you grew up and you stop coming on these ridiculous visits. Then we had to run bent double along the ridge of the mountain because the Burmese Army were on the other mountain. Then we reached this little Karen village and I had been feeling really a crisis of confidence. It seemed we had so little to offer them and the needs were so huge. I'll never forget what they said. They said thank you so much for coming. The fact that you are here makes all the difference it gives us the strength to continue to struggle to survive. The words were a balm to my anxiety. It wouldn't matter if you didn't bring anything. The fact that you are here is all that matters. That makes all the difference. What a privilege.

Simon Barrington: [00:14:09] And when you talk to people who are persecuted who are experiencing in suffering what do they ask you to pray for and what do they ask you to give us a message back to the UK church. You know if you if could say to a UK church and church leaders here what are they asking you to say on their behalf.

Baroness Cox: [00:14:32] That's incredibly humbling because we're going to places like Nagorno Karabakh in the war. People in basements and cellars with no food no medicines or in South Sudan, similarly they often have no food no medicines. Syria and you say what's your priority going back. What's your priority message and it makes you so humble when people say prayer. Please please ask my brothers and sisters to pray for us and I would be asking for the food they ask for prayer and that's very sincere and very humbling.

Simon Barrington: [00:15:03] Now we've touched on Syria a little bit. Give our listeners just a view. You've been there a number of times during the conflict. What hope do you see for the people in Syria. Do you see any changes happening. Or is it you know just as bad as it always has been or getting worse.

Simon Barrington: [00:15:24] We've been in Syria as you say when the fighting was still very bad up in Aleppo. I've been back again just a few months ago and it's a very different scene. The Syrian army together with help from Russia and this is a place where Russia is doing the right thing getting the priority to getting rid of ISIS and related Islamic groups. It's driven those jihadist groups out of most of Syria now. While we talk this afternoon as fighting going on in Eastern Ghouta which is just right near Damascus. What the media doesn't cover is the fact that but you watch the BBC all you get is the Syrian armed forces and the government attacking the rebels in East Ghouta. Well you don't see or hear about the fact the bombs are falling in on Damascus. And we have in touch with our Christian brothers and sisters in Damascus and the other people in Damascus and thousands have been killed in Damascus and injured and so on. The government has offered humanitarian corridors and ceasefires to the rebels in East Ghouta which up to now they've declined. There has been humanitarian relief just allowed in but it is it being shelled. They say that this is the rebels saying this from the rebel area that the safe corridors for civilians to flee are

bombed by government forces. Well that's not the entire truth by any means. Our friends in Syria. The rebels, as they're called in East Ghouta are hard line Islamists. They are really terrorists of some of the most extreme form as well supported by Saudi Arabia and by Qatar and two little kids just escapes and they got into government held areas and they described how their parents coming through one of the humanitarian horrors have been killed by the rebels fighting them. So it's a very complex situation. When you meet the people of Syria that's what we do and we meet a complete cross-section. We don't just meet the politicians and we do make them and the opposition politicians but you meet the church leaders the faith leaders in Syria, the Patriarch, other Christian leaders, the Grand Mufti the Mullah's and the Imams, the Yazidi's. They are all terrified about British foreign policy. British foreign policy is still forced regime change. Now Assad has done some things which one cannot condone. They are very serious. But you listen to local people and they have really changed. <any of the people who really opposed Assad in the early days and I think one can understand why they say now they are really grateful to him. He saved them from ISIS. He does protect the rights of women. He protects the rights of religious minorities the faith leaders really appreciate that. We met somebody in Malulu who as a Christian Town which had been taken by ISIS. They did their terrible things there. I was in a room in a home in Malulu. Three Christian men had been martyred for refusing to convert to Islam. It's quite a thing to stand in a room with modern day martyrs. And one of the local people there said I used to really oppose Assad. Now I would die for him. A Muslim lady in the Natakia who had to flee as a displaced person from ISIS described how she'd seen her husband and son beheaded in front of her. Maybe she summed it up she said war is terrible, people die in the shelling from both sides. On one side you die from shelling. The other side you die from shelling and beheadings and we don't want the beheadings. And my plea is when you come back from Syria, let the people of Syria decide their own future. Lets not interfere and let's not insist on that regime change which they are terrified of. Because there is no moderate armed opposition left. So if there were forced regime change it would just become another Iraq another Libya. Everyone who knows Syria agrees with that. I got three former British ambassadors to Syria. I didnt get them. They I just helped organize it. They actually wrote a letter to the Times. Three former British Ambassadors to Syria saying that British foreign policy is wrong. To impose regime change would create another catastrophe like Iraq like Libya. Let the people of Syria decide their own future. That's our message from from Syria. I think it's something that needs a lot of prayer.

Simon Barrington: [00:19:37] Now one of the things that seems to come through very strongly in what you're saying is you put a very high value on going and sitting with people and listening to them and hearing their story. What's formed that in you and shaped that in you.

Baroness Cox: [00:19:52] I think my first profession was nursing. And one of the things that is very special about nursing is a wonderful book by Professor McGrath on a moderated moderated love - a theology of professional care and it describes the nursing profession as skilled companionship. Other health care professionals are crucial and critical obviously. Doctors and surgeons provide critical diagnoses and operations etc. etc. but the great thing about nursing is that you are with the patient. Professor McGrath described it rather beautifully. You're on a journey with the patient you are there as a nurse or nurses 24 hours a day. You are there when they are at the most vulnerable you're there at night when they are lonely. An the nurses role is to be alongside and help the patient and be with them on their journey. Whether it's a journey through to health and healing or to death. It's skilled companionship and I think that emphasizes the importance of being alongside people listening to them not imposing our own ideas our own prejudices or beliefs but just listening and being their voice which goes back to the heart of HART which is trying to be a voice for those who don't have a voice or those who have voices more often the case but their voices are not being heard.

Simon Barrington: [00:21:08] Now what stories in the Bible really speak to you, what are the ones

that really touch your heart and speak to you in the ministry that God has given you.

Baroness Cox: [00:21:21] Well quite often we go into dangerous areas we must be clear then I almost always get what I call my fit of faithless fearful dread. I shrink from the idea of going and being shot at going in the helicopter to Nagorno Karabakh or wherever it is. And so I do get my fit of faithless, fearful dread and then I think the devil gets in it gives me a good reason why I shouldn't go. Now remember I once way back when our kids were young and the war was going on in Nagorno Karabakh and we used to fly in under fire and it was a Saturday afternoon I got my fit of faithless fearful dread and I didn't want to go much and I didn't sort of share it because there's no point in spreading gloom and doom amongst a family so I kept it to myself. The following morning we went to church and the Gospel reading was that passage. "He who does not leave or is not willing to leave husband wife brothers sisters for my sake is not worthy to be my disciple. But he who does will find new brothers and sisters even under persecution" and I know that if one can cross that frontier of fear and go then you will meet amazing people. New Horizons will open up and you come across some incredible miracles of grace and you'll come back blessed and receiving more than you ever give. And to think you have to cross that frontier of fear. If you do then you had the most amazing blessing.

Simon Barrington: [00:22:38] Turning our attention to the UK, your also passionate about some of the things that are happening in our country as well and on what you are speaking out on in terms of UK culture at the moment.

Baroness Cox: [00:22:51] Well alongside this work a wonderful partners some frontlines of Faith and Freedom became increasingly aware that in this country there are voices and are not being heard. And I think perhaps because I am known to be concerned about human rights, womens rights and so on and people started coming to me particularly Muslim women suffering from the inherent gender discrimination in the application of Sharia law in many of our Sharia councils in this country and it's horrendous. If you have a religious marriage which is not legally registered then of course you are vulnerable to the Islamic divorce where a husband just says "I divorce you" three times and you're divorced. You haven't got a legally registered marriage and you've got no rights whatever. Polygamy. And a very brave Muslim lady and she's put her name to her publication called Habiba Jaan. She wrote a report on the plight of 50 Muslim women in the West Midlands. These issues were really causing them agony and they come to see me and other women many have come to see me now and they literally weep they're suicidal. And I felt just can't spend all my time focusing on people who are suffering oppression and persecution abroad. If people are suffering in this country whose voices are not being heard. And so I began to engage with these and I had submitted quite a few private members bills trying to raise awareness about these issues and trying to introduce measures that might help their predicament. And I've got one at the moment which would require every religious marriage in this country to be legally registered and that would give them protection that they need. And that has huge support from Mulsim women in this country and the Muslim Womens Advisory Council and other Muslim women and there's also a wonderful Canadian Muslim, Raheel Raza, who is an academic who is a Muslim lady. She stopped Sharia Law getting into Canada and she is very much on side so on the homefront is trying to help women whose suffering would make our suffragettes turn in their graves.

Simon Barrington: [00:24:51] What advice would you have for younger leaders, young people who see what's going on around the world who hear you talking so passionately about the cause of those who don't have a voice. What would you say to encourage them and how can they get started in getting involved in some of these issues.

Baroness Cox: [00:25:12] I think God calls everyone of us to a different calling. Not everyone would be called to cross borders illegally into Sudan and do the crazy things I do. But I think there's

a very profound statement it sounds like a cliché but I think it's actually profound and it means a lot and I try to live a little bit like it or by it and that is that God doesn't need our ability he wants our availability. Our ability for each one of us is a little thing mine is pathetic. If God choose the weak and the foolish he found his right number in me. But if we are available for God he will give us the ability to do what he wants us to be available for. SO he has a different calling for each one of us. But I think just to be open to His guidance to try to follow where he leads and I'd say particularly to a younger generation you don't have to plan all your life ahead of you at one stage. If you have a normal life expectancy you've got decades ahead of you. And I love the line in that hymn which begins Lead kindly light, amid the circling gloom by John Henry Newman. The words I ask not to see the distant scene, one step enough for me. If we are available for God then that's enough for me and you don't have to be planning 10 20 30 years. You know obviously there are times you have to make significant decisions like am I going to university, am I not going to University, am I going to do nursing which is mine. That stage those are obviously life changing decisions but if you're in the right place and it is not a decision imminent and I think it's another phrase that I find very helpful and that is the "sacrament of the present moment". All we ever have is the present moment. There's no point in living with regrets or nostalgia for the past. That's been. And God can I hope forgive what was wrong and bless what may have been good. There's no point in worrying about the future. Take no thought for the 'morrow, except for those decisions you have to take at critical times but for most of the time just be in the present moment and live in that present moment to the full, give it your all and give it to God. God can bless this present moment and then use your ability which you've made available for him and then he will show you where it is that he wants you to develop your life and sometimes it will mean crossing frontiers of fear. It may not be going to a war zone. It may be going into something you find disturbing and scary but if you feel God's calling you there then please do cross that frontier of fear and just be available to God.

Simon Barrington: [00:27:44] Wonderful. As we come to an end how can people pray for you. They will have been inspired by the stories you told and admire your courage even when you feel fearful and faithless. But how can people pray for you in the work that you do.

Baroness Cox: [00:28:03] Well thank you. Well I think above all that if you pray that I would be worthy of the privilege God has given me. As we began sitting in this amazing place in the Palace Westminster, this incredible glorious Victorian Neogothic paintings and architecture around us. It's a huge privilege pray that I would use the privilege of being here well, whether it's for the advocacy for partners suffering in places like Syria or Sudan. Whether it is for the Muslim women suffering from Sharia Law in this country that I use these privileges right. Pray for our NGO HART, because we are very small, we are very much on overstretch and we need a lot of prayer and perhaps seeing I'm 80 people may pray for my health.

Simon Barrington: [00:28:49] Baroness Cox. Thank you so much for joining us today and sharing a bit of your life story and your passion for issues that your advocating on behalf of people who have no voice. We're just so grateful for you and what you do here in the House of Lords. Thank you so much.

Baroness Cox: [00:29:05] Thank you for the privilege of letting me share a little bit of the pain and the passion. Thank you.

Peter Wooding: [00:29:10] Thanks for listening. We hope you enjoyed that special episode of the podcast. Do join us each week for stimulating insights into the leadership journeys of Christians living out their lives in business, politics, charities and the Church. Visit www.forge-leadership-podcast.com for more information and to subscribe so you don't miss an episode.