



Do Justice!!

“Do Justice, Love Kindness and Walk Humbly With Your God” Micah 6:8

A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the June 2015 edition of Do Justice. This newsletter prepared by Auckland Diocesan Social Justice Group looks at various Social Justice Issues.

Is this really democracy?

Now that the British General Election is over and all the bally hoo from the Murdoch controlled press has subsided it is interesting to have another look at the results. Yes, the Conservatives got a majority of the parliamentary seats – with just 24% of those eligible to vote. Yes 24% of all eligible voters voted Conservative. This represented 37% of all who cast a vote an increase of 0.8% over the Conservative vote in 2010. Labour actually increased their vote by 1.5% but lost 26 seats. On the other hand the Scottish Nationalists gained 50 seats with a 3.1% increase in actual votes. The Greens and the UK Independence Parties polled over 5 million votes – 16.4% of all votes cast, for 2 seats out of 650 in the Commons.¹

Interestingly enough if the NZ version of MMP were used in the UK there would still be a Right leaning Government with 330 seats and a Left leaning Opposition of 320 seats made up as follows

<u>Right Leaning</u>		<u>Left Leaning</u>	
Conservative	244	Labour	201
UKIP	83	Lib Dems	52
Ulster Unionists	3	SNP	31
		Greens	25
		Other minor Parties	10
Total	330		320

Not surprisingly the big winners would have been UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. This assumes that under an MMP system the British people would have voted in the same way as First Past the Post (FPP). What it does show is that FPP is not a very democratic system of voting in the 21st Century.

The origins of FPP go back to the 18th century when communications between communities were poor and there were no political parties as we know them today. There were also a number of other requirements before you could vote including being a man and not a woman, aged

over 30, owning property etc. Reforms in the 19th and 20th centuries not just in Britain but in most other fledgling democracies, got rid of these impediments to voting but still the FPP system continues in a number of countries including Canada, the USA, and India.

One city that had an interesting result was Brighton and Hove in Sussex and on the South Coast in some ways a dormitory suburb of London. Brighton and Hove has three members of parliament representing Brighton Pavilion, Brighton Kemptown and Hove. When these constituencies were established in 1950 all three followed the Sussex tradition and elected Conservative members. Sixty five years later Brighton Kemptown elected a Conservative with a very narrow majority down from 2010, Brighton Pavilion re-elected a Green MP, the only one in the Commons, with a big increase in her majority and in Hove Labour had a gain from Conservative. Not a typical City or is it!!

Thankfully in New Zealand we changed our system from FPP after a number of elections where parties who gaining significant total votes failed to be represented in Parliament. Should there ever be another referendum on our voting system it will be worth remembering just how distorting the First Passed the Post method is.

More on Housing

Housing seems to be dominating the political agenda at the moment. But there are actually four different agendas within the Housing discourse:

- Firstly there is the increasing concern about the rapid increase in house prices mainly in Auckland. This seems to be **market** driven
- Secondly, the need for many more affordable houses. This seems to be **politically** driven as more and more people, particularly the young cannot afford to buy their first home
- Thirdly the terminology change from State Houses to Social Housing. This appears to be **ideologically** driven as a way for the Government to get some \$60 billion of assets off its books.
- Fourthly, and generally forgotten in the posturing over agendas one to three, is the question of

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results>

housing for the elderly, particularly the poor elderly. This just seems to be **ignored**.

Although agendas one and two appear to be linked as much of the concern about affordable housing in Auckland where couples have to find up to \$100,000 as a down payment on a very basic house because of the rapid rise in prices over the last four years. The reasons for this rapid price increase have been hotly debated and include not enough housing being built, non-residents buying houses to rent, high immigration etc. But if the market was as brilliant as its advocates say why hasn't the market built more affordable houses in Auckland?

The problems with State housing and housing for the elderly have different origins. Housing NZ has been having to pay dividends to the government for years and as a result there has been little investment in new or refurbished state housing resulting in poor houses in the wrong place and the wrong size.

Housing for the elderly poor used to be something that local authorities provided but some years ago local authorities were encouraged to transfer their houses to Housing NZ. Also a number of social service agencies were established 50 to 60 years ago primarily to address issues of accommodation for the elderly poor, some church based, are now much more focused on retirement villages for the relatively wealthy.

The last time housing was a major political issue the response of Government was to build thousands of State Houses, is this the answer this time?

The Church and Politics.

In the run up to the British General election the Bishops of the Church of England issued an unprecedented pastoral letter entitled "**Who is my neighbour?**". This was no once over lightly commentary on some of the political issues facing the British people but 52 pages of carefully thought out analysis of what God wants for our society. It offers no specific policies for people to vote for or against, nor encourages people to vote for one or another of the many political parties who fought the election. Rather it looks at the underlying values that should be taken into account and calls for a new direction in British public life.

Much of what the Bishops wrote about is as relevant to us in New Zealand as there are to those living in Great Britain. As Christians we should be pleased that a group of very busy leaders have taken the time and trouble to craft such a document. Maybe our Anglican Bishops in New Zealand, possibly in collaboration with the leaders of other denominations, could produce a similar document before our next General election in 2017. If so they need to start now!

Whilst we would encourage anyone interested to read the whole document² we have highlighted some of the key comments and conclusions from the letter.

Approach to voting:

The privileges of living in a democracy mean that we should use our votes thoughtfully, prayerfully, and with the good of others in mind, not just our own interests. Pursuing the common good is a Christian obligation and is expressed in how we approach our role as voters as much as in our personal priorities. Para 5

Limits to the free market:

Our political life would be equally enhanced if it were possible to speak about markets, business and the profit motive as an impressively effective system of distribution in a complex society and hugely liberating of human creativity – but one which also tends to entrench inequality, diminish human sympathies and, unchecked, damage the conditions for its own flourishing. Adam Smith, the father of market economics, understood that, without a degree of shared morality which it neither creates nor sustains, the market is not protected against its in-built tendency to generate cartels and monopolies which undermine the principles of the market itself. Para 32

Community and Place.

People are not so much divorced from place as seeking a place where they can be most at home.And today, attempts to address the shortage of suitable housing will create new problems if they neglect people's attachment to particular places and the social networks they create there. Para 50

A Humane Economy:

We have seen the burgeoning of in-work poverty –people who, despite working hard, cannot earn enough to live decently. The market can, and does, allow wages to rise and fall in response to demand and supply. But human lives are not infinitely flexible in the way the price mechanism expects, and people cannot live properly when their work brings in too little to sustain dignity. This is why the Church of England has backed the concept of the Living Wage – an agreement with employers to ensure that all their staff earn a modest hourly rate that is sufficient for a full time worker to live decently. The Archbishop of York has been at the forefront in arguing for the Living Wage. It represents the basic principle that people are not commodities and that their lives cannot adapt infinitely in response to market pressures. The labour market cannot enable people to live and flourish unless the moral limits of the market are recognised .Para 112/3

Key values:

We encourage voters to support candidates and policies which demonstrate the following key values:

- *Halting and reversing the accumulation of power and wealth in fewer and fewer hands, whether those of the state, corporations or individuals.*
- *Involving people at a deeper level in the decisions that affect them most.*
- *Recognising the distinctive communities, whether defined by geography, religion or culture, which make up the nation and enabling all to thrive and participate together.*
- *Treating the electorate as people with roots, commitments and traditions and addressing us all in terms of the common good and not just as self-interested consumers.*
- *Demonstrating that the weak, the dependent, the sick, the aged and the vulnerable are persons of equal value to everybody else. Para 120*

Good points for us to consider when we next have to vote.

² <https://churchofengland.org/media/2170230/whoismyneighbour-pages.pdf>