

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Kevin McBride from Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Making Sense at Christmas

It's that time of year again, time to drag out "*More of Tom Lehrer*" and remind myself: "It's Christmas time again, by golly, disapproval would be folly; deck the halls with hunks of holly; brother, here we go again." US 1960s satirist Lehrer's "*A Christmas Carol*," is said on the well-worn dust-cover to glorify "the spirit of 20th century American Christmas – that cherished season during which we honour the nation's manufacturers." It's difficult not to share the ditty's cynicism when, from about August on, supermarket shelves are filled with hams, otherwise unseen turkeys and Christmas mincemeat tarts. Elsewhere in Shopsville, more and more "one-off exclusive" Christmas sales tempt the affluent and send the less well-off into greater debt and despair at their failure to answer the stimulated wishes of their children. And that's only a small part of the market pressure at this season of the year to buy more holiday packages, overseas cruises, new furniture, appliances, clothes, in fact anything that can be bought and sold.

But what about the season of peace and goodwill? This year, a month before Christmas, "Peace City" Auckland hosted the 75th anniversary of the New Zealand Navy. That in itself might be justified, though it can hardly be seen to contribute to the spirit of peace and goodwill when numerous vessels of varied military capability crowded our harbour and filled our streets with parades and uniformed tourists. However, its association with an international Arms Trade Fair showed that our faith in military capability and alliances is the foundation of our peace. But more than all that, it was a visible sign of how much we prefer to spend our resources on military hardware rather than the needs of the victims of an inequitable capitalist system.

It gets worse. Writing in "*The Nation*", 25 October 2016, Dennis Kucinich, former chair of the US Congressional Progressive Caucus, claimed that "war is first and foremost a profitable racket", putting a face to some of Tom Lehrer's "manufacturers" who are doing well out of current United States foreign policy. These are the military contractors who were so strongly represented at last month's Arms Trade Fair. Kucinich claimed that Washington's "so-called bipartisan foreign policy elite has promoted wars in Iraq and Libya, and interventions in Syria and Yemen, which have opened Pandora's box to a trusting world to the tune of trillions of dollars". The only winners from such policies, he says, are "arms dealers, oil companies and jihadists". According to a report in "*The Nation*", the Center for American Progress, one of the think-tanks advocating for increased bombing in Syria, has received funding from the very war contractors, Lockheed Martin, who were largely behind Auckland's pre-Christmas Arms Trade Fair. So much for "Peace City".

And now we are due to have in the White House a man who in his pre-election campaign called for increased bombing as a counter to ISIS ("bomb the hell out of them") and cited greater personal gun ownership as the counter to random terrorism ("I'm a big 2nd amendment person"). Nothing in Donald Trump's campaign indicated that he would not continue to support the military industrial complex which has so much to gain from the continuation of lucrative policies which have "kept the US at war since 9/11 and made the world a more dangerous place." (Kucinich, op cit). Trump would be strongly supported by the likes of former Democrat US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who famously said

to four-star general Colin Powell, “What’s the point of having this superb military you’re always talking about if we can’t use it”. She recently said, referring to the Middle East, “We do think there needs to be more American action.”

This, says Kucinich, is part of “a concerted effort ... being made through fear-mongering, propaganda and lies to prepare our country for a dangerous confrontation”, wherever it may occur. Even if President Trump offsets such threats by carrying through his expressed intention of joining forces with Russia’s President Putin, it seems likely that they would bomb perceived enemies to the detriment of civilians, providing continuing profits for arms manufacturers and defence contractors.

So much for the season of peace and goodwill to all. How can we find our way back from such distrust of political systems that so many would choose a liar, self-professed tax-evader and womaniser, an obstreperous advocate of power politics as a means of opposing the status quo?

Kucinich says that there is a need for a new peace movement that includes all sectors, that does not accept war as inevitable but insists that any advocates for war are exposed via a list of the sponsors, donors and donors who support it. What he is calling for is transparency and a retreat from what has been called the “post-truth” era, where presentation, slogans and sound-bites obviate the need for scientific, historical or moral truth to guide us in our social, political and economic decision-making. Those who voted for Brexit in Britain and for Donald Trump in the USA, or refrained from voting at all, appear to have expressed a deep disillusionment with a neo-liberal free market which has undermined their right to the basics of life, which holds them in thrall to corporates and systems which enslave and exploit. “A plague on both your houses”, as it were.

To make sense of Christmas, we need to take heed of current disillusionment but not be distracted from its call to engage in work for

the fullness of life for all, everywhere. Instead of taking refuge in meaningless shopping or allowing ourselves to be taken in by slogans and militaristic demagogues, we need to find inspiration in the story of Christmas, of the child who grew to be the standard for commitment to the ideal of the fullness of life for all, even to the extent of sacrificing his own life for that cause. To do this, we must search for and heed the truth in what Jesus says and lives, so that we “will learn the truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). We can also heed Jesus’ cry for unity, “may they all be one” (John 17:21). This is extended to the unity in all things by Pope Francis in his encyclical “Laudato Si” and found in the unity of Atua, Tangata and Whenua (God, People and Land) in Māori and so many indigenous cultures. Again, we can take an active part in and vote in election processes at local and national levels to express our faith in democratic systems; if necessary, we should ensure that they are worthy of that faith.

We can also take inspiration from the widespread movement calling for divestment from enterprises which support weapons’ manufacture and trade, the use of climate-changing fossil fuels and other threats to human welfare and existence. Above all, we can cross the barriers of prejudice and misinformation to find common ground with those we may have avoided out of fear and suspicion. I have been personally inspired by the recent news that the Catholic parish of the Good Shepherd in Australian corporate town, Mt Isa, has opened its facilities to the local Muslim community, inviting them to worship there.

That really makes sense of the message of Christmas.