

# Talking Cents

June 2015

*Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the 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 the Reverend Peter Bargh tssf, from the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.*

## Finding a Voice

By now, we will have seen Budget 2015 – released on May 21<sup>st</sup>. A budget which introduces some new taxes that are not called taxes, removes the Kiwisaver kick-starter and increases the incomes of the poorest families.<sup>1</sup> These are some of the several interesting aspects to do with the budget, which is well summed up by the Catholic Diocese of Auckland’s Justice and Peace Commission as “some good news but more is needed.”<sup>2</sup> This relative positivity can also be seen in the sort of national grandstanding that comes with the contrasting fortunes of our economy and budget compared to our neighbours across the ditch.<sup>3</sup>

These are all things worth mulling over. One thing to consider is whether or not we are hearing any faith engagement, much less vision, being presented, in light of the budget, about the sort of nation we want to live in.

On June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1215, at Runnymede in England, there was a local political discussion. A group of rebel barons and a despotic king, encouraged by an archbishop (of Canterbury), signed a pact which failed to give them the peace they hoped for. The legacy of that pact, the *Magna Carta*, has, however, become a lasting symbol of freedom and justice against oppression.

Eight centuries later, and the current Archbishop of Canterbury is still trying to be involved in the local political discussion. Earlier this year, the Church of England addressed issues pertinent to the UK general election, hoping that all political

parties would seek to discern “a fresh moral vision of the kind of country we want to be.”<sup>4</sup>

In May, the UK General Election saw a Tory majority government duly elected.<sup>5</sup> The Conservative party (Tories) had earlier rejected the Church’s efforts to address political issues as mere “meddling.”<sup>6</sup>

The English House of Bishops comprehensively addressed significant issues ranging from the role of the family to immigration, from defence to welfare reform, and from education to the economy.

The Bishops, in questioning whether the UK has become a “society of strangers” noted that:

*Consumption, rather than production, has come to define us, and individualism has tended to estrange people from one another. So has an excessive emphasis on competition regarded as a sort of social Darwinism. (This is a perverse consequence of allowing market rhetoric to creep into social policy. For an economist, competition is not the opposite of cooperation but of monopoly).<sup>7</sup>*

Understandably, this critique was not well received by those profiting from the status quo.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2015/02/house-of-bishops%27-pastoral-letter-on-the-2015-general-election.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> The June edition of *Do Justice* offers, amongst other things, an analysis of the recent UK elections.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/05/church-radical-voice-politics-christianity-justin-welby> The Guardian’s Julian Coman observes that the Church’s “testimony to Caesar might be unwelcome at times, but its passion and conviction might just help British politics to regain its own sense of vocation.”

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2170230/who-is-my-neighbour-pages.pdf>, 19 (paragraph 45). Parenthesis in *Who is my neighbour?* text.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.budget.govt.nz/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.catholicjusticeauckland.org.nz/justice/News/tabid/7785/language/en-NZ/Default.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> An early example of this can be seen here. [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=11450199](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11450199)

Some claimed that the bishops were being party political; others repeated the old argument about separation of church and state. *The Sun*, targeting Archbishop Justin Welby in particular, drew attention to the Church of England's hypocrisy in supporting the living wage whilst offering jobs that pay less than it.<sup>8</sup> Archbishop Justin wryly reflected on the media coverage of *Who is my neighbor?* that "it has been strongly disapproved of by some and strongly approved of by others - principally those who read it."<sup>9</sup>

We are now into what our liturgical calendars tell us is ordinary time. We have come through the 90 days of the Lent and Easter seasons, culminating in Pentecost. Lent is often a foci for parish studies. One of these Lenten study options is a reflection on the film, *The King's Speech*.<sup>10</sup> This particular study reminds Christians of how we are called to find a life-giving voice. With the celebration of Pentecost fresh in our minds, it is appropriate to pray that we may find a voice to speak a vision that honours the giving of the Spirit and the birth of the Church.

This is especially true when we consider our local communities. Auckland is predominantly, though not exclusively, an urban community. There are numerous political and economic issues facing us, not least to do with transport and housing.

Societal changes are reflected in the way we do everything from working to shopping to recreation. Often our public policies struggle to keep up with these changes. Globally it seems we are eight years on from "peak car" and now less

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/6343191/Fair-wage-hypocrisy-in-Church-of-England-exposed.html> It is also worth noting that *Who is my neighbour?* makes reasoned arguments why the church should engage in political debate.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-2965020/Churchs-Living-Wage-goal-defended.html> Catherine Ogle, Dean of Birmingham, commented that "[t]here have been 105 Archbishops of Canterbury - many have been canonised, some of them have been beheaded. Looking at [Archbishop Justin's] press coverage, I imagine daily life for an Archbishop feels somewhere between the two."

<sup>10</sup> Hilary Brand, *Finding a Voice: A Lent Course on the Film the Kings Speech* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2011).

than half of eligible US drivers have a licence – down about 25% from figures in the late 1990s.<sup>11</sup> How we respond to changing transport needs globally and, more particularly, locally can reflect our vision for what sort of urban environment and community we want to live in.

In terms of housing, Budget 2015 has included what was initially seen as some sort of capital gains tax applied to the property investment sector.<sup>12</sup> This is likely to have a limited effect on Auckland's property market, being more about improving compliance with the existing tax code relating to investment properties.<sup>13</sup> For a good summary of current developments in housing policy and responses from some churches and tenants, see the *May Talking Cents*.<sup>14</sup>

As important as it is to learn about these issues, this learning ought not come in isolation. As good Methodists know, Word must be accompanied by Deed. Our learning must be accompanied by finding our voice and taking action around these issues. As Jean Brookes exhorted us in the previous *Talking Cents*, let's "**raise the roof on housing!**"<sup>15</sup>

Whether it is housing, transport or other issues, we are called upon to find our voice and speak a vision for the sort of world the Gospel calls us to strive for. As the Church of England reminds us: *The advice of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians may help to defend us against the temptations of apathy, cynicism and blame, and instead seek – because we are disciples of Jesus Christ who long for a more humane society – a better politics for a better nation.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/30/have-we-really-reached-peak-car> "Peak car" is the observation that the distance travelled by cars, or other motor vehicles, has peaked, per capita and will now continue to decline.

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=466&objectid=11450644](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=11450644)

<sup>13</sup> <http://taxpolicy.ird.govt.nz/news/2015-05-17-budget-2015-property-compliance-proposals-announced>

<sup>14</sup> <http://auckanglican.org.nz/Anglican/media/Images/PDF/Talking%20Cents/TC-May-15.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Bold in May TC text.

<sup>16</sup> *Who is my neighbor?* Paragraph 126. The reference is to Philippians 4:8