

Talking Cents

September, 2017

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 the Reverend Peter Bargh tssf, from the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.

Just love

This is the kind of fast I'm after: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts. What I would like you to do is: share your food with the hungry, invite the homeless poor into your homes, put clothes on the shivering ill-clad, be available to your own families.¹

These words of Isaiah's, words about what true worship looks like, were the words that greeted those who attended the "Public Meeting on Poverty" in Whangarei on September 3 – a meeting of local parliamentary candidates.

This general election has been decidedly lively since Jacinda Ardern became Labour leader. The polls have recently shown it is incredibly close between Labour and National with the lead changing hands depending on the poll.

In some ways, the polls change nothing for us as voters. Hopefully, we will continue to be motivated by the same issues and ponder the same questions. In the August 2017 *Talking Cents*, Mary Betz covered these questions comprehensively.² She gave us the wonderful image of the electoral issues as *trees*, each of which, from housing to taxation to climate change, needs to be examined carefully. She also drew our attention to the need for change for the *forest* as a whole, "which needs a radical change in orientation and worldview," away from idolising economic growth.

Of the myriad ways in which we can engage in discerning how to vote (as well as how, where and why we can help change the forest), one is by attending political meetings. There are many opportunities to engage with the parties and candidates in Auckland.³

Auckland is the heart of the Anglican and Catholic dioceses of Auckland, however, they span rural and provincial areas, too; and, this article offers a reflection on the aforementioned political meeting, the "Public Meeting on Poverty," organized primarily by the Methodist/Presbyterian and Anglican social justice groups in Whangarei.

All the candidates for the Whangarei and Te Tai Tokerau electorates were invited, with most responding warmly to the invitation.⁴ Those candidates who were in attendance, with the possible exception of Shane Jones, are not likely to be known outside Whangarei. Under MMP, with proportional representation for the major parties assured (and with National and Labour candidates likely to win most electorate seats as well), electorate battles are less important. For the northern electorates, however, the electorate battles do potentially have national importance.⁵ Apart from Epsom, this is not the case in Auckland, or for most other general electorates around the country, especially since Peter Dunne withdrew from running in Ōhāriu.⁶

¹ Isaiah 58:6-7 (adapted from The Message)

²<http://www.auckangelican.org.nz/Anglican/media/Images/PDF/Talking%20Cents/Talking-Cents-August-2017.pdf>

³ The Roman Catholic sponsored electoral forum in Ponsonby on September 14 being an example.

⁴ On the day, only candidates from the Whangarei electorate attended, with all candidates, except for the Conservative Party candidate, Jim Taylor, present.

⁵ Were the New Zealand First party to start to poll under the 5% threshold then electorates such as Northland

(with Winston Peters the incumbent MP) and Whangarei (where Shane Jones is standing) become the party's lifeline to Parliament. The same applies within Te Tai Tokerau electorate where Hone Harawira is standing for Mana.

⁶ The Māori electorates are all relatively live as, unless their electorate candidates win, on current polling neither the Mana or Māori Party will be represented in Parliament either.

The Public Meeting on Poverty was arranged to feature presentations by local community and church based organizations who are engaging with poverty on a regular basis. Ultimately, only Adrian Whale, from Te Tai Tokerau Emergency Housing Charitable Trust (TTTEHCT), presented.⁷ This gave the meeting an emphasis on housing and homelessness rather than other issues or symptoms relating to poverty.

It was Adrian who shared the words from the prophet Isaiah to begin the meeting. He shared stories and details of the Trust's work, saying they were the "landlord of last resort." Adrian concluded by asking the candidates what they would do to put him out a job by the next election.

The candidates then responded with what they would do to engage with poverty, as well as responding to questions from the floor:

- The ACT party candidate, Robin Grieve, began by indulging in some hearty parochialism. He drew attention to the increased numbers of Aucklanders moving to Whangarei as the cause of the increase in housing prices. Grieve laid the blame for that squarely with the Auckland Council and their failure to "deregulate."⁸
- The MP for Whangarei, Shane Reti (National), faced the challenge of incumbency and having seen poverty rise under the government he has been a part of. He responded to this challenge by pointing to some signs of success, such as impending increases to housing allowances as well as how the government has expanded its funding for emergency housing provision in Whangarei, primarily through increased support for TTTEHCT as well as the Salvation Army.⁹
- Marie Minhinnick, an independent candidate, responded that iwi needed to do more for their people. She also emphasized individual responsibility, rather than any structural change, being key to tackling any social issue.

- The Green party candidate, Ash Holwell, spoke to the party's commitment to warm, dry homes by reminding people that 235,000 homes had been insulated under a plan driven by the Greens. He decried National's plan to increase allowances for beneficiaries who are renters as a scheme to keep rents artificially high. Holwell also said statistics can obscure reality, noting how people who work 10 hours a week – on a wage they can't survive on – are considered to be fully employed.¹⁰
- Chris Leitch, the Democrats for Social Credit candidate, proposed providing personal mentors to people who were currently unemployed, linked with financial incentives for those who would follow clearly established job-training pathways. There would be an increased cost in this approach, however, which could be met by implementing true "economic sovereignty," and printing money to cover debts, rather than borrowing from overseas.
- The Labour candidate, Tony Savage, stated that the only measure of, what he hoped would be, his government's efforts in three years' time, would be how far they have gone towards eradicating poverty. A marker for this would be to see young people and tangata whenua feel they have an opportunity to buy a home.
- New Zealand First candidate, Shane Jones, declared the state's role was to correct market failures - and the housing market was one big failure. His view was that things had gotten far worse under the current government and only a strong independent voice in government could offer any hope to those currently in poverty.

From the words of the prophet Isaiah to those spoken by Jesus, "just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," we know as Christians we are called to show love to one another.¹¹ Being ever more mindful of where our politicians stand, may our calling to love one another shape our hearts and minds, votes and lives.

⁷ See their website, <http://emergencyhousing.org.nz/> for more information.

⁸ Grieve regularly returned to the theme of deregulation, particularly with scrapping the Resources Management Act, throughout the meeting in traditional libertarian fashion.

⁹ TTTEHCT currently have 16 units in Whangarei with the Salvation Army providing 8.

¹⁰ <http://www.cpag.org.nz/making-sense-of-the-governments-housing-numbers/> Alan Johnson, of the

Salvation Army's Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, critiqued the governments numbers around housing, describing plans to increase the number of social houses over the next three years as "at best fanciful and at worst misleading."

¹¹ Matthew 25:40 (NRSV) These words were referred to at the last Auckland Anglican synod before they agreed to call on the government to introduce a more progressive tax regime.