

Talking Cents

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Talking Cents is a 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 issue is contributed by Kevin McBride, Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

“The whole world’s in a terrible state of chassis” *

I couldn’t help recalling this line from Sean O’Casey’s 1920’s drama “Juno and the Paycock” recently, as I read a series of articles and reviews dealing with the state of our world today. I had just returned from the 70th anniversary of the Catholic peace movement, Pax Christi, held in Bethlehem. There, I was exposed to the seemingly intransigent problems of the Palestine/Israel situation, so I was very open to commentators presenting me with a fundamental questioning of the ethics of our current society and the very survival of our world.

The first was a lengthy review by Jeremy Agar** of Naomi Klein’s “*This Changes Everything; Capitalism versus the Climate*” (Allen Lane 2014)***. Agar sees Klein making a fundamental point: that we can have capitalism or a viable planet. The world’s big players cannot be allowed to carry on as they’ve been doing; little is being done to slow climate change “because effective action would mean that the big global corporations ... would lose lots.” She cites several cases where attempts to switch from heavily polluting industrial practice to innovative plans for conversion to solar energy (such as the use of local content and other community/environmentally-friendly options) were opposed by members of the World Trade Organisation because, for example, the use of local content threatened ‘free trade’ rules.

Klein also quotes cases where “some major German cities which had privatised power companies have voted to take them back into public ownership, and not necessarily for ideological reasons. Privatised outfits make more money from dirty energy, and have a vested interest in polluting. Restoring public control is the precondition for switching to clean renewable sources. There’s an economic gain

too. Wind, solar and other sustainable providers create around eight times as many jobs as oil and gas. Similarly, public transit creates 31% more jobs than are provided through the obsession with ever more roads.” Yet, she says, all this is continually opposed by big business.

In the face of increasingly cogent evidence for climate change and its links to industrial processes, several world gatherings, beginning with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, have agreed that “the Earth was getting dangerously hotter and the longer we delay, the harder it will be to rectify”. But in reporting this conference, the United Nations added a seemingly offhand postscript: that “measures taken to combat climate change, including unilateral ones, should not constitute ... a disguised restriction on international trade”. The Kyoto Protocol, the next international treaty, had the same proviso, favouring the interest of business over the common good. Basically, as University of Auckland Professor Jane Kelsey has pointed out in relation to the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, corporations are intent on tying governments into trade agreements which allow the corporations to take legal action if government measures restrict their trading, and therefore, their profits.

Sadly, in Klein’s view, countering this is difficult as we live in an ‘eroded democracy’. “In practice that means that, despite endless griping, tweeting, flash mobbing, and occupying, we collectively lack many of the tools that built and sustained the transformative movements of the past. Our public institutions are disintegrating, while the institutions of the traditional Left – progressive political parties, strong unions, membership-based community service organisations - are fighting for their lives”.

But she still sees the solution not so much in individual action as in social revolution, equivalent to the abolition of slavery movement in America. This could begin when “*activism becomes an entirely normal activity throughout society – its rent payers’ associations, women’s auxiliaries, gardening clubs, neighbourhood assemblies, trade unions, sports teams*”. To get there, we need to choose the right early policy battles, aiming to change not just laws but patterns of thought. She offers an example, saying that fighting for a guaranteed minimum income might do more for the environment than a fight for a minimal carbon tax if it engages more people. With more money, workers would be in a better position to say no to dirty jobs and there could be a new relationship between the reds and the greens, leading to a new debate about values.

Another article I came across, “*Capitalism Could Kill All Life on Earth*” (The Daily Take Team, The Thom Hartmann Program, Tuesday, 26 May 2015), made a similar point: “*coal, oil and natural gas dominate the global politics and economics: wars are fought over oil; communities are destroyed for coal; and increasingly scarce water supplies are poisoned by natural gas extraction Capitalism as we know it isn't the solution – it's the problem.*” The authors concluded that: “*Science says that we can keep global temperatures from rising another half degree – but it can't be left to a private sector that makes its profits from leaving the costs to everybody else. It's time for a New Green Deal – we need to stop directly and indirectly subsidizing the fossil fuel industry and we need to invest in a large-scale deployment of current clean energy technologies – one that will create permanent, sustainable jobs, and protect the Earth for future generations.*”

Other pieces I came across pointed out that a lifestyle like mine requires 2.9 Planet Earths to sustain it, and further: “*The extinction of 200 species a day is just one manifestation of how capitalism and the industrial civilization it has spawned is killing the planet.*” (Dylan Murphy, *Dissident Voice*, May 25, 2015).

* “*Chassis*” is seen as Dublin form of “*chaos*” or “*crisis*” in this context.

** Jeremy Agar is a columnist for “*The Peace Researcher*”

*** Naomi Klein is a Canadian journalist, social activist and author of “*The Shock Doctrine*”

It was all depressing reading, particularly seen in the light of my experience of the conflict in Palestine and struggles there for control of water and land. It certainly challenges the semblance of security which I currently enjoy. But it is also a rallying cry for all of us in the Church who believe that humankind is created in the image of God and that we have the task of carrying on the mission of Jesus: “*I have come that they might have life and have it to the full.*” (John 10; 10)

But first, we have to confront the history of a Church which has so often acted in contradiction to the teaching of the Gospel; witness the 15th Century Doctrine of Discovery which underpins the shameful colonisation of the non-European world. And while in Bethlehem, I couldn't help reflecting on how much of the recent trouble in that region can be traced to the thirst for power and wealth of traditionally- Christian nations of the West.

In his just-released encyclical on the environment, “*Laudate Sii*”, Pope Francis openly criticises the greed and selfishness of many nations today. Such comments must lead us to question many of the policies of our own government as it promotes the Trans Pacific Partnership in the interests of big business while at the same time refusing to consider assisting refugees from nations tragically devastated by the downstream effects of those same policies.

Amid his wide-ranging analysis of today's world, directed to the whole world, Francis sets out a warning and a challenge: “*Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction. Yet all is not lost. Human beings while capable of the worst are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start ... to embark on new paths to authentic freedom.*” (“*Laudate Sii*”, 204 – 5, Pope Francis, Rome, June 2105)

The choice, it seems, is ours to make. (rf. Deut. 30:19)