

Talking Cents

October 2014

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 Jean Brookes of the Anglican Social Justice Group

Walking which Way?

The September 2014 New Zealand General Election campaign opened up painful questions about ethical governance and accountability. This may have been one reason why some people chose not to vote. The Catholic Bishop of the Archdiocese of Wellington had a different response to the reactions that swirled around the publication of *'Dirty politics'* by Nicky Hager (Craig Potton Publishing, August 2014).

In an opinion piece on Friday 5 September, the Catholic Archbishop of Wellington John Dew said, 'The public discomfort and even outrage around the current revelations is a good sign for our political community – it shows that people have not yet become completely cynical and disengaged about New Zealand's political processes.'
(http://m.nzherald.co.nz/politics/news/article.cfm?c_id=280&objectid=11319165)

Many people also felt overwhelmed by the numerous policy statements before the election and would have been helped if political parties had made their values clearer. So, how could Christians evaluate policies of the newly elected government especially decisions in the first 100 days?

Catholics have a dynamic body of Social teaching that includes but is more than Papal Encyclicals. The annual Catholic Social Justice Week, 14-20 September this year, particularly drew attention to seven key principles:

- **Human dignity:** made in God's image;
- **Solidarity:** walking together;
- **Preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable:** protecting those in need;
- **Common Good:** the good of each and all;
- **Subsidiarity:** empowering communities;
- **Stewardship:** being responsible guardians;
- **Participation:** everyone with a part to play.

Examples of how Catholics in this country have applied these principles and a range of resources are available at www.caritas.org.nz/resources/cst

The three Anglican Archbishops of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia identified four key issues in their pre-election statement:

1. child poverty
2. income inequality
3. lack of affordable and accessible housing and
4. global warming.

The Archbishops also identified six Principles for Voting (I've highlighted the key words for comparison with Catholic Social Teaching):

- 1: Each person possesses a **dignity** that comes from God, not from any human quality or accomplishment.
- 2: We are called into **community**.
3. All are called to work for the **common good** of society.
4. Work is more than a way to make a living. It is **participation** in God's creation.
5. We are **stewards** rather than owners of God's creation.
6. The Gospels show a **preferential concern for the poor and the vulnerable**
(<http://anglicantaonga.org.nz/News/Comment/Life/Archbishops-see-four-challenges>).

Anglicans do not have the same sort of collective body of social justice teaching as the Catholics but the similarities in these two sets of Principles are noteworthy and suggest the possibility of dialogues about ecumenical social justice commitment.

Such dialogues could be between common Catholic and Anglican principles and feminist, contextual, liberation and indigenous theological voices. Such a holistic process might add to the structural power analysis in the See, Judge, Act model that many Christians use in their social justice commitment.

The recent Ashburton tragedies reminded us to distinguish systemic power from being employees or being clients with unmet needs. We know which groups in New Zealand society are socially and economically vulnerable. However, that knowledge does not necessarily lead to a commitment to social justice. A block that we may need to address is a widespread, pervasive, punitive, vindictive attitude towards the poor. A common symptom of it is NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) when a HNZC Special Housing Area development is planned for a site near to million dollar homes.

Alan Johnson is the Co-Chair of Child Poverty Action Group, Chair of Community Housing Aotearoa and a member of the Salvation Army Parliamentary Social Policy Unit. On 26 August 2014 Alan presented a paper about the history of and possible future of social housing in this country entitled *What might social housing become?* (www.cpag.org.nz): an important historical and analytical update in the quest for a moral compass as we try to address housing issues for the vulnerable.

'I guess it is our capacity to have good dreams that is essential to our ability to do good things, and in particular to our ability to develop decent, just and humane social and economic policies. In other words that unless we have a working moral compass then as the saying goes, 'we stand for nothing and will fall for anything' (p1).

Alan goes on to suggest a possible reason for so few people challenging the neo-liberal economic agenda. 'The compelling nature of neo-liberalism lies in its appeal to our nature. If we start from the Hobbsian premise that life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' it is relatively easy to build a world view based on the essential selfishness of humans, the competitive nature of our existence and of life, the need for authority and rules to avoid chaos, the virtuousness of wealth and the wealthy and freedoms built on that wealth. It is a self-contained, self-justifying and self-serving ideological framework which to date the Left has been unable to respond to adequately' (p6).

Alan goes on to say, 'We are by nature both generous and selfish so is it also possible to design institutions and ideologies that tap into the more generous side of our nature? This of course has been an enduring philosophical question since the demise of God as the source of moral authority. Self and selfishness have, I suggest, proven unable to fill this ethical void' (p6).

In a similar vein Bryan Gould wrote an article on 11 September 2014 entitled *A new version of Exclusivity and Self-Interest*. He challenged the same sort of selfish mindset developing in us as a nation (www.bryangould.com).

Meanwhile, the World Council of Churches and its partners round the world have continued to support the ecumenical Agape process that began in 2006. The latest update is *Linking Poverty, Wealth & Ecology: The AGAPE Process from Porto Alegre to Busan*, Edited by Rogate R. Mshana and Athena Peralta, WCC 2013 (<http://publications.oikumene.org>).

'Continuing inequities in the global distribution of resources and in the workings of trade and financial systems as well as the unlimited and unsustainable production and consumption are the root causes of the intertwined socioeconomic and ecological crises we face today. This great agenda must be at the ecumenical table as part of the mission for the public witness and service of the WCC' (px).

'Market fundamentalism is more than an economic paradigm: it is a social and moral philosophy. During the last thirty years, market faith based on an unbridled competition and expressed by calculating and monetizing all aspects of life has overwhelmed and determined the direction of our systems of knowledge, science, technology, public opinion, media and even education. This dominating approach has funneled wealth primarily towards those who are already rich and allowed humans to plunder resources of the natural world far beyond its limits to increase their own wealth' (p5).

'This ideology is permeating all features of life, destroying it from the inside as well as from the outside, as it seeps into the lives of families and local communities.....' (p6).

So, in the post-election period which W/way will we go? Local and international counter-cultural challenges encourage us to continue to engage in the critical struggle of values around socio-economic policies in Aotearoa New Zealand.

A major contributor will be the recommendations of *Our children, our choice: priorities for policy*, Edited by M. Claire Dale, Mike O'Brien and Susan St John, CPAG September 2014 (www.cpag.org.nz). The second of the ten recommendations reads: 'Review social welfare benefits for adequacy then, in future, adjust on the basis of relationship to the average wage, as it is done for the age pension, NZ Superannuation'. Will we do it?