

Talking Cents

November, 2018

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 Peter Bargh, an Anglican priest and member of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis.

The Word and Deed for Today

Within our consumeristic world the Christmas and end-of-year function shopping season looms. In this season, a good way to feel contented is to view November as an ideal time to start shopping, and better yet to finish it before the December madness. For those of us who are less prepared we might begin the process of thinking, both for ourselves and others: “What would you like for Christmas?”

Politically, one thing that our young cousins across the ditch seem to want is an “authoritarian style political leader.”¹ The Australian National University’s recently released Australian Values Survey showed an increase in support for the idea of “having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.” In 2018 support for this view had increased to 33% from 28% in 2012. This was particularly pronounced among younger age brackets in my own demographic, those aged 30-34 years old, with a majority of respondents (51%) viewing this idea as either “very good” or “fairly good” as opposed to “fairly bad” or “very bad.”

This is reflective of a growing dissatisfaction with democratic processes and a rise of support for seemingly effective strong(man) leaders. A list of these sorts of leaders would include Recep Erdoğan in Turkey, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Xi Jinping in China, Kim Jong Un in North Korea and Vladimir Putin in Russia. Donald Trump in the US publicly admires these authoritarian leaders as well.²

Are the only requests to the political Santa going to be for authoritarian leaders?

At the end of last year there were a number of headlines noting that authenticity is now seen as more important than ever and that this is particularly so among millennials – a demographic which includes the Australian 30-34 year olds who wanted an authoritarian leader.³ There is a desire to see people walk the talk, for word and deed to be two sides of the same coin.

Yet it seems as though, when it comes to the crunch, more weight is afforded to deeds than words. While some of what Trump says resonates with people – the “he says what we are all thinking” crowd – most others find what he says disappointing, to say the least.

Those who struggle with what Trump says include other Republicans who are prepared to ignore words they do not like because they can celebrate deeds they do like. These deeds include headline-grabbing items such as: cuts to Obamacare and taxes; increases in military spending; and, making conservative lifetime appointments to the Supreme Court. The deeds also include a general swathe of “red-tape cutting” – the removal of regulations mainly intended to protect the most vulnerable, both people and the environment. Ben Sasse, a Republican Senator from Nebraska summed up this disjunction between word and deed, saying:

*there’s sort of a short-term, long-term thing going on and people feel like the president’s rhetoric is short-term playful. They don’t think it’s OK but I think people kind of tune most of it out.*⁴

¹ https://anu.prezly.com/support-for-authoritarian-style-political-leaders-in-australia-on-the-rise?asset_type=attachment&asset_id=128028#attachment-128028

² A mild example of this happened during Trump’s recent (October) interview with 60 Minutes where he elected not to distance himself from authoritarian leaders. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/donald-trump->

<full-interview-60-minutes-transcript-lesley-stahl-2018-10-14/>

³ <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/survey-finds-consumers-crave-authenticity-and-user-generated-content-deli/511360/>

⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/senator-ben-sasse-rebukes-trump-lauding-reporter-assault-1180259>

What about in New Zealand? Last year the *Wall Street Journal* compared Jacinda Ardern to Donald Trump (on immigration).⁵ Ardern denied the legitimacy of this comparison in terms of both style and politics. Where some Republicans might be dismissive of Trump's words but appreciate his deeds, the opposite case can be made in New Zealand: Ardern's words are appreciated even if the deeds fail to impress. This claim might feel a little out of place given the latest polling puts Labour ahead of National for the first time in more than a decade!⁶ Nonetheless, comparing Ardern's words with deeds is revealing, as *Guardian* columnist Eleanor Ainge Roy observes:

*As the months have slipped by it has become hard for New Zealanders to see evidence of transformative change in their day-to-day lives.*⁷

Ardern was clear that she wanted to aim high, being prepared to fail, rather than achieving goals which were mediocre. Her goals included: “[e]nding child poverty. Bringing kindness and empathy to politics. Tackling climate change and improving the lives of New Zealand’s most vulnerable people.”⁸ Her successes include “increases to paid parental leave, boosting the accommodation allowance for welfare recipients, and an increase in the refugee quota.”⁹ However, “[p]etrol prices are at a record high, synthetic cannabis deaths are soaring and tens of thousands of teachers and nurses have gone on strike for the first time in decades.”¹⁰

These are the sorts of frustrations with government that have led to young Australians expressing a desire for authoritarian leaders. While contemporary synonyms of authority suggest “right” and “power,” the Latin etymology leads us to words – *augeo*, and the more identifiable *authoritas* – which have meanings of enabling or nurturing growth among others. This understanding of authority is very much in keeping with the Christian concept of

servant leadership, which inverts the hierarchy of downwards control to being instead one of enabling others to bring life to yet others still.

Indeed, demonstrating a care for the least and bringing life to others are two of the principles which undergird the “alternatives to current economic and political thought” that the *Talking Cents* group have been charged with promoting. In this understanding of leadership, the right use of authority is to bring life to others, while being servant to all – the sort of leadership Jesus models for us. It comes from a place of humility which recognises that we are recipients of life through God’s loving grace and the service of those around us. As such, authentic service entails vulnerability, which is anathema to an approach of dominance.

There is more to assessing how Ardern is going than the previous summary might suggest. “[T]here is strong evidence her government is walking the talk;” and, she is also willing “to nail her colours to the mast and be held to account.”¹¹ Irrespective of other successes or failings, these speak to an approach to leadership which is resonating with those who value authenticity. This, coupled with the longer-term realisation of deeds, could bring life to those New Zealanders who are currently deprived of it in its fullness.

Ardern may ultimately deliver transformative change for New Zealand and remain true to this approach, or she may not. Regardless, the need for a general rediscovery of loving service as underpinning a commitment to transforming unjust structures, and celebration of it where it is evident, can mark a small beginning to bringing life to others.

As we ask ourselves what we would like for Christmas we could do worse than ask that, in word and deed, we live more fully into Christ’s spirit of generous, loving service.

⁵ The Journal’s tweet about the linked article on Ardern mentioned that “she’s more like Trump on immigration”

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/immigration-politics-turns-upside-down-in-new-zealand-election-campaign-1504520780?mod=e2tw>

⁶This seems to have more to do with a difficult time for the National party than anything else.

<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/96371473/politically-correct-the-poll-that-puts-labour-ahead-for-the-first-time-in-12-years>

⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/21/jacinda-ardern-first-year-new-zealand-grapples-with-jacindamania-hangover>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. Most of Ardern’s aims are longitudinal and require significant consultative, and other, groundwork before becoming a reality.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. Dr. Ang Jury, the chief executive of Women’s Refuge New Zealand, “cites an overhaul of the welfare system and the progression of the child poverty reduction bill as significant wins.”