

# Talking Cents

July, 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 Big Con: the retreat of honesty and ideology

*The Big Con* is the title of an article in the Guardian by Richard Denniss.<sup>1</sup> With the subtitle *how neoliberals convinced us there wasn't enough to go around* Denniss explores the role of neoliberalism at shaping contemporary Australian politics. While the Australian and New Zealand contexts differ there are, nonetheless, lessons we can learn from our “big brother.”

The full title of Denniss’ article is a reasonable summary of the discourse with which *Talking Cents* was charged with promoting alternatives to, right back at the group’s inception 25 years ago.

Two years ago, in the June 2016 edition of *Talking Cents*, David Hall discussed Margaret Thatcher’s ‘dogmatic contribution...to the political landscape...TINA – there is no alternative.’<sup>2</sup> Denniss’ article affirms TINA’s power: *While much of neoliberalism’s rhetorical power comes from the assertion that “there is no alternative,” the simple fact is that the world is full of alternatives. Indeed, even the so-called free marketeers in Australia can see alternatives.*

At the core of Denniss’ argument lies the recognition of a reality to which we in New Zealand can equally well relate to: *Australian politics isn’t about ideology, it’s about interests. The clearest proof of that claim is that neoliberal ideas such as deregulation were never aimed at powerful interest groups like the pharmacists or the gambling industry. And savage*

*spending cuts were never aimed at subsidies for the fossil-fuel industry or private health insurers.*

This disconnect between rhetoric and reality comes with its own collateral damage: *Convincing Australians that our nation is poor and that our governments “can’t afford” to provide the level of services they provided in the past has not just helped to lower our expectations of our public services and infrastructure, it has helped to lower our expectations of democracy itself.*

That a side-effect of this disjointed application of neoliberalism has led to a loss of faith in our political institutions is clear. What is less clear is what the best alternative is. Some of the “unjust winners” from the current, fragmented application of neoliberalism in Australia would clearly lose out if there were to be a more uniform, ideological application of neoliberal values. It is equally clear, however, that this would not yield a system which worked for ‘most of humankind.’<sup>3</sup>

While I have not read the *Talking Cents* back catalogue from 1993, I have yet to come across an edition with a sustained argument for a coherent, potentially totalitarian, ideological framework as the ideal alternative. Instead, most of the ideas championed by *Talking Cents* over the last decade have focused on efforts from the bottom-up – things which have worked at the flax-roots – in conjunction with offering a robust critique of power structures which perpetuate oppression and

<sup>1</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/jun/04/the-big-con-how-neoliberals-convinced-us-there-wasnt-enough-to-go-around> The Guardian article is an edited extract of Richard Denniss’s [Quarterly Essay 70, Dead Right: How Neoliberalism Ate Itself and What Comes Next](#) All of the italicized quotes that follow are drawn from this article.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.aucklandanglican.org.nz/what-we-do/social-justice> See the June, 2016 *Talking Cents*, contributed by David Hall. Expect to see more on this topic, with a particular Auckland focus, in next month’s edition of TC.

<sup>3</sup>The Holy See released *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones* on 17 May, 2018. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/05/17/180517a.pdf> It begins by noting that: ‘Economic and financial issues draw our attention today as never before because of the growing influence of financial markets on the material well-being of most of humankind.’

inequality. The language we use, and the approaches we take, matter. Denniss uses a poignant example for us Christians:

*Just as conservative Christian theology provides an excuse for sexism and homophobia, neoliberal language allows powerful groups to package their personal preferences as national interests – systematically cutting spending on their enemies and giving money to their friends.*

*...[w]hen powerful groups want subsidies, we are told they will create jobs. When powerless groups want better funding for domestic violence shelters or after-school reading groups, they are told of the need to reduce the budget deficit.*

The Australian context differs from that in New Zealand however most of the principles Denniss describes apply to us here, too. The second half of the previous quote will, no doubt, resonate with many of us who have been involved with community projects that have either asked for, or once had, some form of government funding. The rhetoric and implied response that expenditure on key social services were a drain on the tax-payer is one community groups hear keenly.

Simon Bridges, the Leader of the New Zealand National Party acknowledged the power of language and rhetoric, embracing how National were supported by the public for being shrewd economic operators.<sup>4</sup> He complained, however, that ‘[t]here’s this perception I think that on the right of politics we don’t care as much as on the left and it’s always struck me as a deep injustice actually.’<sup>5</sup> His concern was not about the injustice stemming from a lack of services for the worst off – something which National governments, and Bridges’ current policies such as they exist, have been complicit in (just as Denniss writes about in Australia) – but the “injustice” of not ascribing care for the poor to “the right.”

While *Talking Cents* may not have promoted a fixed alternative ideology to neoliberalism, there

have been guiding ideological principles underpinning the contributors’ efforts.<sup>6</sup> The US Catholic Bishops summarise these principles thusly, ‘[t]he economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.’<sup>7</sup>

*Talking Cents* views people as ends in themselves, created beings with inherent values. In last month’s edition of *Talking Cents*, Margaret Bedggood proposed international human rights law as the ideal framework for social and economic policy. Hopefully this provides the sort of firm ground on which positive policy structures can be built.

*Ideology has a bad name these days, but it simply means a “system of ideas and ideals.” By that definition, it is possible to think of neoliberalism as an ideology focused on the idea that market forces are superior to government decision-making.*

Being honest about our motivations and identifying, or better yet asking about, others’ motivations, allows for a fairer public discussion about things which can often seem beyond our understanding much less control.

The conclusion to the Holy See’s recent *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones* offers us a hopeful reminder of our calling as Christians in the face of such injustice:

*In front of the massiveness and pervasiveness of today’s economic-financial systems, we could be tempted to abandon ourselves to cynicism, and to think that with our poor forces we can do very little. In reality, every one of us can do so much, especially if one does not remain alone... Today as never before we are all called, as sentinels, to watch over genuine life and to make ourselves catalysts of a new social behavior, shaping our actions to the search for the common good, and establishing it on the sound principles of solidarity and subsidiarity.*<sup>8</sup>

**Amen.**

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1803/S00042/the-nation-lisa-owen-interviews-simon-bridges.htm>

Bridges argued that with National polling at 44.5% they had to stay committed to the John Key/Bill English emphasis of being strong on the economy.

<sup>5</sup> [https://simonbridges.national.org.nz/simons\\_story](https://simonbridges.national.org.nz/simons_story)

<sup>6</sup> Observing that each contributor brings their own distinct perspective and voice to their work.

<sup>7</sup> US Conference of Catholic Bishops: *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/economic-justice-economy/catholic-framework-for-economic-life.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones* 34 (Conclusion)