

AS HAS HAPPENED overseas, a peace movement is stirring in Australia. Many people are anxious about the escalating arms race and threat of superpower involvement in wars or revolutions which not only risk global nuclear catastrophe, but consume valuable resources needed to end poverty in many countries.

they concern the renewed arms race and Administration claims that Russia is militarily taking the lead from the USA.

Basically, then, it seems that the peace movements are protesting the poor policy-making and what they believe to be mistaken and dangerous economic and foreign policies. The movements are trying to supply constraints to the Administration's politics and avert a Vietnam-like situation or worse developing.

What to make of movements for peace

The current movements are somewhat different from past ones. Firstly, there is no war which the West is currently fighting, though memories of Vietnam are prominent in people's minds and commentators have been comparing US involvement in Central America to that in Vietnam. Secondly, superpower relations are strained and the new arms build-up has aroused fears of a nuclear exchange.

What has basically alarmed people is the apparent incompetence and dissembling of the Reagan Administration. American foreign policy is frankly confused, and introduces an unnecessary note of instability into world affairs. At the highest levels, Reagan himself has demonstrated his ignorance about such important events as the causes of the Vietnam War before major press conferences.

Top White House advisers seem dissembling: the much-trumpeted 'proof' of Nicaraguan involvement in El Salvador degenerated into farce when the witnesses failed to co-operate. And further disclosures that the US has suppressed evidence that right-wing presidential candidate Roberto D'Aubisson was behind the assassination of Archbishop Romero in 1980 have further undermined public confidence in the Administration's judgement.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Reagan Administration is so blinkered by its anti-Communist ideology that it cannot understand what is happening in Central America and elsewhere. No wonder that US diplomats in Central America are complaining that the Administration is taking little notice of their reports.

As the level of incompetence in the Administration has become more evident, its credibility has declined. The immediate consequence has been to put into increasing doubt other US policies, particularly as

Role of churches

It is noteworthy, too, that perhaps for the first time in many countries this century, the churches are taking a leading part in promoting peace movements. Even in East Germany this is the case, much to the discomfort of the Communist regime. The willingness of Christians to take action arises from a reflection on their inadequate responses in Europe earlier this century, and, in the West, from their naive and unsatisfactory response to the early stages of the Vietnam War. Christian thinkers have been forced to think through issues of war and peace more carefully, and this has led to a resolve among significant numbers to actively engage in protest movements.

It is particularly significant that many church people consciously try to draw their Christian institutions into such movements. They recognise that churches have an institutional weight which can hardly be ignored by governments; they

also have the capacity to mobilise public opinion on issues and undermine public confidence in leaders by denying them legitimacy. The US Catholic Church and other churches in Europe have played such leading roles, though it remains to be seen just what the response of the Church institutions in Australia will be.

Peace coalitions

Peace movements like those of the present comprise many different groups of people, acting for various reasons and with their own rationales. Inevitably such coalitions mean that many of these groups may be competing and have opposing philosophies and objects in view. Communists, anarchists and others will undoubtedly be involved; and some may possibly try to use the protests for their own advantage or causes.

This of itself is no reason for Christians not to be involved. If the objects and means of action are good then all people should co-operate together to forward these objectives. It does mean, however, that Christians must be alert to the possibilities of various groups trying to use them for their own political and ideological purposes. Good sense and judgement then are called for to avoid any such instrumentalisation. It is also important for Christians to think through their positions clearly if they are to make their own special contribution to the debate.

The nature of that contribution was well summed up by the late Thomas Merton in 1962: "It is no longer reasonable or right to leave decisions to a largely anonymous power elite that is driving us all, in our passivity, towards ruin. We have to make ourselves heard. Christians have a grave responsibility to protest clearly and forcibly against trends that lead inevitably to crimes which the Church condemns and deplors. Ambiguity, hesitation or compromise are no longer permissible. War must be abolished". Current US policies have thrown down the challenge to Christians. ■

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