

The Task ahead for Outlook

This issue of *Outlook* brings it to the end of its ninth year of publication. When we began *Outlook*, it was difficult to convince everyone of the need for such a magazine, and more difficult to find financial and other resources to run it.

We were convinced about two things in particular. First, we desperately needed a forum for debate about the Christian's role in modern Australian society, a forum which was as open as possible within our basic value stance.

Others would have preferred a more narrowly conceived "Catholic" or "religious" focus, and were disappointed that we did not produce this. But we thought that there were many publications catering for this market in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

We also felt that the Church publications were generally too timid in their social and political analysis, or neglected it entirely. They were often under severe constraints from conservative readerships or hierarchical control. Hence the need for a publication which was genuinely independent and focused on current affairs.

Some expected us to develop the magazine around a cogently argued social philosophy or ideology, which could deal with matters in an authoritative way. However, our approach was much more humble and pragmatic, taking issues one by one and trying to establish a position from an examination of them empirically.

This is both a strength and a weakness: a strength because it recognises the complexity of most issues which may not readily be elucidated by the "grand vision"; messy situations have a way of resisting neat synthesising. Yet it is also a weakness because without a general overview, analysis and debate can lose their sense of direction.

Secondly we were committed to establishing a paper which fostered ecumenical engagement in the social field. It would have been easier, I suspect, to have begun an explicitly Catholic publication which could more readily have plugged into the Catholic distribution network.

We did not do this because we believed that the call of the Catholic Church itself was to invite the collaboration of other Christians in social affairs and Christian reflection. We were not wrong in this, I believe, as *Outlook* has been a major Christian publication in Australia linking the denominations in social concern.

A big disappointment has been the remarkably poor financial support the magazine has received. With the notable exception of the Catholic religious orders and some priests who supplied most of the funds to launch *Outlook*, it has operated almost entirely on its sales, supplemented with valuable small donations as subscribers renewed.

At the start, this was more understandable. People did not know if the proposed publication would be of the "trendy left" or the "righteous right" and were understandably cautious

about supporting it. Over the years, however, I think we established our credentials as reliable, accurate, open, honest and fair. How then do we explain the lack of financial support? We had hoped to turn *Outlook* into something between the London *Tablet* and *America* in the US. To do this would require solid financial resources, able to support a properly paid staff and management. This is still our dream.

What has most impressed me, however, has been the generosity, large-heartedness and quiet dedication of the few dozen people who have invested much of their time, energies and lives in seeing that *Outlook* comes out regularly each month. Most of the central people have fulltime and responsible jobs and families to support. It has been a joy and a privilege to be associated with such a group.

I would particularly like to single out Bill Neville, who has played the main co-ordinating and planning role in recent years as well as contributing a constant flow of informed and reflective articles. Getting *Outlook* together and into print has been the genius of David Thomas. As well, his Quaker and South African perspectives have broadened and enriched the magazine. And Cath Corbin has patiently handled the day-to-day affairs, maintained the communications, sorted out all the tangles and hosted the volunteers, without whom *Outlook* could not appear. Thanks to all of you.

For the actual content in *Outlook*, of course, we are indebted to our contributors, who have generously written without payment. Not all of them agree with one another, which is as it should be in a forum of debate. I have the hope that this has been lively, fair and intelligent and can be more so in the future.

At times, I have had a sense of *Outlook* going out on a limb over some questions, particularly in the early years in our analysis of the Church and social questions in Latin America and the role of the United States in world affairs. Now those views are more generally accepted, but so many other questions need incisive thought and comment, especially as Australia enters a new era of social change and realignment in Asia and the Pacific.

The danger for *Outlook* is that it will coast along without searching out the thought-provoking articles of breadth and insight. Our editorial committees in various cities exist to make sure that the magazine doesn't lapse into bland or repetitive boredom. Let us have more articles that are talked about and quoted, that informed people cannot afford to miss.

I cannot mention everyone who has been a friend to *Outlook*: collaborators, subscribers, regular writers, promoters, helpers and donors; but a very warm word of thanks. I am convinced the effort is worthwhile.

(Written by Dr Bruce Duncan, founder and first editor of Outlook.)