

Why Social Equity Is Absolutely Crucial

By Bruce Duncan CSsR

Parents and teachers are well aware of the need to treat children equitably and fairly. This does not mean treating them the same, as each child is different in personality, needs and talents, and lives with unique relationships and circumstances. Children with special needs require extra care.

If such equity is so obviously important in our care for children, why has the phrase 'social equity' shrunk so much in our public discourse? It was once a key concept, not just in the social reform agenda of the Catholic and Labor movements of the past, but also in Bob Menzies' Liberal Party.

But mention of social equity seems barely 'politically correct' in much political discourse, despite the fact that equity is such a crucial aspect in current Australian debates, especially about industrial legislation, taxation and family policies, and welfare reform.

Some on the far right of politics castigate the concepts of social justice and equity as if they were for the soft-headed or would even lead to communism or collectivism. Indeed an exaggerated rhetoric of the 'free market' and individual initiative often results in marginalising considerations of equity and social justice.

This trend is deeply troubling when the international community is trying to launch a concerted effort to roll back poverty and hunger everywhere throughout the world. It is especially worrying for those who take seriously the gospel imperative to feed the hungry and care for the sick.

Equity the key to a more humane future

The emphasis on social equity became more pronounced in western societies during the 19th century as the conviction grew that mass poverty was not inevitable, but could be greatly reduced with economic growth and good planning. It is hard to overemphasise the importance of this historic shift in thinking. Thereafter political debate within the democracies focused on increasing production and distributing wealth more equitably.

The churches played critical roles in these developments. The Catholic Church in particular developed a sophisticated body of social thought that influences political debate in many countries. In his 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII stressed the importance of greater social equity. Workers were not just cogs in a machine, but people to be valued and adequately sustained in their family lives. Leo emphasised the need for:

- a just wage, that allowed workers to support their families in modest comfort, and to save for illness and old age

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- the state to ensure working conditions were fair and safe
- the right to strike if workers were unjustly treated in grave matters

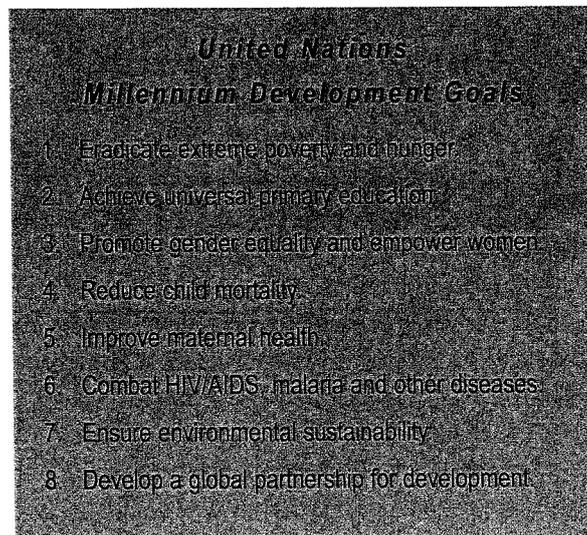
Leo particularly defended the right of workers to form unions, since the basic conditions for a just contract were violated if workers were forced to accept wages that were too low. The Pope argued that only if workers could aggregate in unions would they have reasonable equity in the bargaining relationship to ensure wages and conditions were just.

This did not mean that Pope Leo supported absolute equality for everyone in society, as some of the socialists at the time argued. Leo recognised that people had different gifts, that some worked harder than others, that differentials in income provided incentives for people to increase their skills or life opportunities, and that entrepreneurs need to be encouraged. He defended the right to own private property, but wanted ownership to be spread as widely as possible, so that all workers could have some share in ownership. Hence he called for a major redistribution of wealth in society.

Leo's thinking influenced groups in Australia, and coincided with the launch of the Labor movement and parties. Justice Higgins' famous Harvester judgment in 1907 used some phrases from *Rerum Novarum*, and helped found the Australian system of conciliation and arbitration.

Reflecting older elements in Catholic social philosophy, the phrase 'social justice' was adopted by Pope Pius XI before the Great Depression of the 1930s. The central idea was that both the state and society had an obligation to shape their institutions and values so that as far as possible all people have their rights protected and their needs met.

These notions have been vigorously developed in Catholic thought, especially by recent popes, including Pope John Paul II. He warned against 'a radical capitalist ideology' blindly entrusting outcomes to the unregulated free market, resulting in growing inequality between rich and poor. In his mind, social equity was absolutely critical in our efforts to build a more just and peaceful future.



Eliminating world hunger

Social justice and equity are key principles underlying the United Nations' program to halve the extent of poverty and hunger in developing countries by 2015. These UN Millennium Development Goals have received wide publicity, with the support of rock musicians like Bob Geldof, Bono and the recent Live 8 concerts. But awareness of these global issues needs to become broader and deeper.

This is part of the core business of churches and schools, to encourage a culture that can sustain a firm commitment to programs like the Millennium Goals over many years. More than good will is needed. We must be well informed about issues like the Millennium Goals, so that we can join in the public conversation. Schools in particular can help students use the splendid resources on the Net to monitor efforts to eliminate hunger.

We also need to introduce students to the rich philosophical resources available in the Catholic social tradition which robustly defend equity and the common good. Such an awareness would help students to critique the 'me-first' attitudes in much of our consumer culture. We might even hope that students deepen their sense of compassion and social justice so as to influence their choice of career and vocation.

Finally, we need to help mobilise public opinion, not just to support the Millennium Goals and the eradication of hunger throughout the world, but to reinvigorate efforts for social equity in our own nation.