

## BISHOPS' ELECTION STATEMENT SHIRKS KEY MORAL ISSUES, IRAQ

*by Bruce Duncan*

Australia's Catholic bishops on 1 June released a statement to highlight issues to consider before the next election. But astonishingly, they failed totally to mention the central issue of the war in Iraq, the dilemma facing Australia over our endorsement of US policies of pre-emptive strike, our complicity in the undermining of international organisations and systems of governance, Australia's hosting of new US training bases, the explosion in US arms spending, or our involvement in the proposed missile defence with all the risks of starting an arms race in Asia and the Pacific. The US is to spend US\$70 billion on research into missile defence in the next five years alone. Amazingly, the Australian government has made many of its decisions in secret, without public debate.

As for the overarching issue of eradicating world poverty and hunger, the bishops merely called for "a better distribution of the world's resources", instead of highlighting that Australia had done practically nothing to support the UN Millennium Goals greatly to reduce hunger and the worst forms of poverty by 2015. The bishops failed to point out how miserable was Australia's foreign aid at 0.25% of Gross National Income, half the percentage of 30 years earlier.

The bishops' statement rightly noted the "increasing gap between rich and poor", and supported the call for a national forum on poverty, as well as the need "to ensure a fair go for all Australians, especially the weakest and most vulnerable". It recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "still suffer serious disadvantage" and urged "genuine dialogue, in the quest for reconciliation".

Yet there was little to cause serious discomfort for the Howard government here. There was, for example:

- no mention that the health system was in serious crisis, especially aged care and hospitals;
- no forthright recognition of the massive setbacks to Aboriginal reconciliation;
- no sense of alarm about the unprecedented redistribution of wealth to richer groups in the community, and the casualisation of much of the workforce;
- no lament about the acute shortage of public housing;
- no urgent warnings about global warming and the need to reduce greenhouse gases;
- no concern about the dangerous levels of foreign debt and the growing trade imbalance; and
- no questions about the financial mismanagement resulting in a housing bubble that will deprive many in future generations of home-ownership, with significant implications for a still lower birth rate.

Nor was there any mention of the term "social justice" at all. This key Catholic social principle may be politically incorrect for the government, but it should be a badge of honour for the Church.

One can understand the need by the bishops to avoid being politically partisan with an election looming. And leaders in the government have been making vaguely intimidatory statements warning the churches to stay out of political debate. Yet it is difficult to be even-handed after long efforts by church groups to moderate public policies have been repulsed by the government. At such times, the church is morally bound to speak in defence of the vulnerable, to attempt to clarify the moral issues involved, and to help inform the social conscience of the public. The church has a most grave duty to speak the truth fairly but unambiguously, especially when

human rights have been grossly violated or the nation deceived in matters of utmost importance.

### **Bishops oppose detention of asylum-seekers**

The strongest part of the statement reiterated the bishops "opposition to mandatory detention of asylum seekers. We insist once again that children not be held in detention. People released into the community on bridging visas need appropriate support".

After years of often ineffectual lobbying by church, medical, professional and community groups against the government's detention of asylum seekers, public opinion consolidated in May with the findings of the report, *A Last Resort?* By the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Dr Sev Ozdowski that detention was cruel and "inhumane", and contravened Australia's obligations in international law. The bishops backed Ozdowski's report and on 14 May issued a strong statement condemning Australia's treatment of asylum seekers and calling for an end to the harsh detention policies. During a visit to Ballarat, Cardinal Pell added that he thought "our policy for imprisoning the refugees" is too tough. I've said that publicly many times 'People have been kept in gaol too long'.

With public opinion turning strongly against the detention of children, the Howard government has been trying to release most of the children before the election. Yet contrary to claims by the government, as at 19 July, 85 children remain in secure (closed) facilities and there are 112 children in immigration detention overall (source: [Chilout](#)). Two families in Port Augusta have been detained for more than four years.

Should the government not be held account at these elections for policies which repeatedly drove not just their mums and dads but small children to self-harm and make serious suicide attempts? No Australian parents could imagine for a moment their own children being forced to endure such conditions. Yet the overwhelming majority of children were eventually found to be genuine refugees, 98 per cent of those from Iraq and 95 per cent of the Iranians.

No church personnel working with the asylum seekers could be in any doubt that the detention policy was driven by cynical political motives, to whip up fear and hysteria in the community in the context of the 2001 election. Government officials deceived the Australian people about the children overboard incident and events around the *Tampa* incident. For the basest reasons our government deliberately inflicted extreme cruelty on these people who legally sought our protection under international law.

### **Bishops shirk questions of Iraq and US alliance**

Australia's involvement in Iraq poses even more serious moral questions not addressed in the bishops' election statement, questions that directly affect national security and our role in international affairs.

Despite repeated assertions by the Australian government about Iraq posing a direct threat with its alleged weapons of mass destruction, these purported reasons for war have been found specious: Iraq posed no serious threat to the West, had no stocks of weapons of mass destruction, and no proven links with Al Qaeda terrorists. Yet far from apologising for these egregious mistakes, Prime Minister Howard has not held anyone to account. Not a single head has rolled. Instead, the government has carried on the ludicrous charade that weapons might yet be found.

Has the Australian government shown serious interest in finding out why it was wrong? Surely the Australian people deserve an explanation, and indeed an apology. None has been forthcoming. In the gravest of moral issues a nation can face, Australians were misled by their government.

Yet in response to Britain's Butler report in mid-July, Mr Howard blithely commented that "I would have taken the same decision, again. Mr Downer, too, felt 'very comfortable with what we did'".

It will soon be up to the electorate to decide if it demands some accountability for rushing into a war on trumped-up pretexts, at vast cost in money and tens of thousands of lives.

One of the most astute commentators on the Iraq war, Geoffrey Barker in the Australian Financial Review (3 May), wrote that there is an "overwhelming consensus among senior foreign policy observers" that Mr Howard "neither sought nor was given any comprehensive and contestable policy advice on the economic, political and strategic costs and benefits of invading Iraq. Indeed, Howard appears to have decided unilaterally that Australia would support the US in Iraq, and his ministers appear to have followed his lead without question".

### **Freedom of speech, and of conscience, within the government parties?**

The problem extends also to the Coalition political parties, particularly the parliamentary members. Were members of the Liberal and National parties prepared seriously to challenge the government's determined push for war? Was there a single member of the government prepared to cross the floor of parliament on this vital moral issue, as did Mr Ruddock in an earlier incarnation? I believe that many members of the Liberal Party were opposed to the Iraq adventure, but the only member of the Coalition reported publicly to oppose the war has been the member for Pearce in Western Australia, Judi Moylan.

What does this say about the integrity of the political process within the parties? Mr Howard is renowned for his strict control within the government. But at what point does such control vitiate the democratic process itself?

In contrast to events in Australia, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, met vigorous debate within his party, and is being held accountable for his decisions over Iraq. It is astonishing that the Howard government has faced nothing comparable.

Contrast Mr Howard's leniency on our intelligence agencies (including the current investigation by Phillip Flood) and policy makers for their monumental failures that sent our troops into mortal danger in Iraq, with the vigorous measures taken against anyone who leaks an embarrassing government document.

### **Did the churches speak strongly enough?**

In the lead-up to the war, the mainstream churches generally considered that the case for war had not been demonstrated. The Pope himself led the Vatican and its representatives in strongly opposing the war. Even the US Catholic bishops from September 2002 reiterated that the evidence needed to justify an invasion of Iraq was lacking. They were followed by conferences of Catholic bishops around the world in a remarkable chorus of protest against the war. Millions of ordinary citizens concurred, pouring into the streets in protest.

A number of Australian Catholic bishops declared their opposition to war on moral grounds, notably Archbishop Frank Carroll and Bishop Pat Power in Canberra-Goulburn, along with Bishop William Morris (then chair of the Australia Catholic Social Justice Council) and a number of others.

The Australian Catholic bishops' Conference as a whole on 29 November 2002 urged restraint and supported the role of the United Nations, but altogether failed to endorse the views of their US and UK colleagues, and more curiously still, even of the Pope and leading Vatican officials, that the case for war had not been established.

Though the bishops were professionally briefed by their justice and peace agency, the proposed statement suffered death by a thousand cuts as each bishop could make modifications. Hence instead of making a decisive statement on the morality of the war, the bishops ducked the critical issues, and their response was unsurprisingly ignored in the media.

The relative silence of the Catholic bishops as a whole during the long debate leading to the invasion of Iraq was deeply perplexing. Despite the Catholic Church being one of the main custodians of just war thinking over centuries, the bishops were barely to be heard.

In defence of the bishops we must acknowledge that the sexual abuse crisis had greatly damaged their public credibility, and hence it was a difficult time to exercise leadership.

Cardinal George Pell had stood down from his duties from August to mid-October 2002 because of allegations against him but which were not substantiated. Sydney's *Catholic Weekly* was publishing regular articles opposed to the war, but people were wondering where the Cardinal stood. Finally in the *Australian* on 4 February 2003 he wrote that the decision to go to war belonged to the government, but that on the available evidence, war on Iraq did not meet the just war criteria. He favoured working through the United Nations and considered that a unilateral pre-emptive strike was "a dangerous doctrine". Thus he endorsed the basic line of the Vatican and the US bishops.

Not until 5 March 2003 did the Australian Catholic bishops issue a statement declaring that the conditions for war had not been met. This came much too late, less than two weeks before the war. A great opportunity to help form the social conscience of Australians about the moral conditions for a just war had been lost.

The Cardinal said little on the morality of the war after the war began. In his New Year statement for 2004 he declared that "For lucky Australia, it was another good year", and noted that "victory followed quickly" in Iraq. In May he reiterated his opposition to the war, but added that Australia had "some obligation to try to build a decent society" there.

According to the budget papers for 2004-2005, Australia has allowed a farcical \$22 million in aid to Iraq for next year.

What other leading bishops may have said, if anything, on the war can be seen on their websites.

### **What political accountability?**

With the Iraq issue high on the election agenda, it is completely inexplicable that the bishops' election statement should not refer at all to the moral issues surrounding the war, especially given the strong lead by the Pope and virtually all the major Catholic bishops' conferences around the world, along with other mainstream churches. We now know unmistakably that the reasons given for the war were spurious, and that the US, British and Australian governments misled their people. But many dissenting defence specialists, along with the churches, were saying this even at the time. Is this not of critical moral significance for our elections?

How do we now explore the moral dilemmas resulting from the invasion, including the use of torture and the killing of non-combatants by US forces? Have we nothing to say about policies that embroiled Australia as a key player in the war in Iraq, thus weakening the structure of international law and governance, particularly the United Nations, and casting our nation in the role of deputy to the current Bush Administration in its hegemonic adventure? Canada may have something to teach us here.

The Australian Catholic bishops must engage seriously with questions of international morality, such as the US bishops have long done, and as the Vatican has urged. These issues not only cover peace and disarmament, but the questions around international aid and development which are now so grossly neglected in Australia.

Vital principles are at stake: is the world to consolidate governance on the basis of universal rights and the rule of law, or will we revert to a Hobbesian imperial struggle where the power of might is right?

The Bishops Pre Election Statement can be found at:

<http://onlinecatholics.acu.edu.au/issue02/ACBCStatement.doc>