

CYNICISM AND DESPONDENCY FOLLOW ELECTIONS

by Bruce Duncan

The recent elections in Australia and the United States have plunged many people into gloomy cynicism and disenchantment with the political process. Yet the elections raised critical issues, including how faith or values bear on social and economic issues, and the role of the churches in the political process.

The Australian election

Some commentators have claimed that the Coalition election win represents a decisive mandate for the full range of government policies. However I would suggest that far from being an enthusiastic endorsement of government policies, the election was won because a small majority of voters preferred the economic policies of the Coalition.

In my view, it would be a great mistake for the government to ignore the fact that even some of its core constituents are deeply troubled by specific policies, especially our involvement in Iraq and treatment of asylum seekers.

The late Marie Tehan illustrates this very well. She had been health minister in the Kennett Liberal government in Victoria, but was very troubled by the Howard government's misleading claims to justify our military intervention in Iraq. Her visit to the Maribynong Detention Centre in Melbourne shocked her deeply, and she became a tireless advocate for the rights of asylum seekers. She was a vigorous member of the Melbourne Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace and other groups working for asylum seekers.

Its election win gives the Coalition government the chance to revise its harsh populist policies, and for Mr Howard personally to exercise more considered statesmanship if he values the judgment of historians.

Many Australians were also deeply disturbed at the election by the cash hand-outs, blatant vote-buying and the financial extravagance, especially by the Coalition that prided itself on its financial management.

Asylum seekers

Church and community groups throughout Australia, in parishes and schools too, have been vigorously advocating more just treatment for asylum seekers. People working with asylum seekers have given many hundreds of talks, explaining how cruel and inhumane is Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, to use the words of the Catholic bishops not long ago.

These activities have stirred the social conscience of many, helping them see how the public has been misled. No one I know working with asylum seekers is in any doubt that these people have been the victims of cynical political opportunism.

Many Australians have been contributing regular donations to help feed and house those asylum seekers who have been released into the community awaiting reconsideration of their pleas for asylum, but who are denied any public source of income or support, and not allowed to work. How are they even to eat?

The government has simply absolved itself of responsibility for these people, and thrown them on the charity of church and community groups for everything, including housing, food and clothing. Other asylum seekers are still behind razor wire or under detention, including significant numbers of children, some for over four years.

After years of advocacy and patient lobbying with governments, people in the church and community agencies have been deeply shocked by the slow progress on this issue, and by the apathy of much of the general public. This is not just a criticism of the government, but of the Labor Party as well.

The Iraq war

The Iraq war also posed urgent moral questions for the electorate. Political leaders in Australia, the United States and Britain repeatedly made claims that were untrue. In the view of Pope and overwhelmingly of the Catholic bishops and other churches worldwide, the war did not meet the moral criteria for a just war.

Ominously Australia as a nation crossed a line here. For the first time in our history as western democracies, we went to war against the protests of the mainstream churches. An extra responsibility fell on Australia since we were one of only three invading powers in Iraq. Our government could have exercised a moderating influence on the United States. Instead it consistently encouraged intervention.

The opposition of the Catholic and other churches to the war in Iraq is not based on hindsight. It was based on moral principle and a careful evaluation of outcomes judged likely from the evidence available at the time. Before the war I examined the case against war in a pamphlet *War on Iraq: Is it just?* published by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

The pamphlet drew from expert opinion that was readily available in the public arena, including from UN weapons inspectors and specialist research institutions in Britain and the United States. My point is that the truth was readily available for those who wanted to see it. Some of the fearful consequences of a western invasion of Iraq have unfortunately been borne out, as Iraq teeters on the brink of prolonged civil strife or even civil war.

What can we learn as Christians from Iraq?

As a community in Australia we have neglected to master the just war tradition, which the churches historically did so much to fashion as a means of constraining war and violence. Where were our numerous intellectuals, able to take part in the debate and help form public opinion on the issues involved? Some did of course, but they were too few. It came as a great surprise to me how thin were our resources in the Catholic Church, despite some outstanding exceptions. Why do our universities and theological colleges not give more attention to courses in these areas? Why aren't students clamoring for such courses? This is surely part of our core business as Christians.

Mercifully various church leaders and some Catholic bishops took a strong stand, notably Archbishop Frank Carroll of Canberra-Goulburn, president of the episcopal conference, and his assistant Bishop Pat Power, along with Bishop Bill Morris of Toowoomba, then chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Cardinal Pell later, and a few others. As a whole the Catholic bishops spoke only very late in the day, and barely a few weeks before the war began declared their support for the US bishops who had opposed the war six months earlier.

Eliminating hunger

But perhaps an even more serious area of neglect concerns economic development in the third world. Informed discussion about global hunger and poverty is the most the most significant conversation we are refusing to have in Australia. It nowhere figured in the last election, and unfortunately even the churches in recent years have failed to mobilise public opinion on these issues.

One of the most significant things we could do as Christians is to help put global development back on the public agenda. The Action for World Development movement in the early 1970s brought together perhaps hundreds of thousands of Christians in ecumenical discussion groups across the nation. Should we attempt something like that again?

The irony is that we have a story to tell about development that is astonishingly good news: the world can abolish hunger and the worst forms of poverty everywhere within a matter of decades, if we set our minds to it.

The United Nations developed its Millennium Development Goals to halve the extent of world hunger and the worst forms of poverty by 2015, only ten years away now. In 2000, 189 nations signed on to this historic project, including Australia. But instead of doubling our aid and other assistance, Australia has done almost nothing extra. Instead, Australia's overseas aid languishes at 0.26% of Gross National Income, half the percentage of 30 years ago. We are turning our backs on a decisive push to save millions of lives and lift hundreds of millions out of the most degrading poverty. Yet there is barely a whisper of this shameful neglect in our media, though Tim Costello has recently begun raising the issue in the media.

Consider the contrast with the United Kingdom, where the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, have made third-world development a key political and humanitarian issue, and are driving the national agenda to support the Millennium Goals. Why are our Australian political leaders not so inspired?

As the head of the World Bank, Australian James Wolfensohn recently said behind the threat of terrorism lies the injustice and cruelty of third-world poverty, a breeding ground of resentment and anger against the West. Much of the threat from terrorism would diminish if the richer nations could demonstrate an effective mobilisation of resources to help eradicate hunger and poverty.

How can we in the churches, in alliance with other community and humanitarian organisations, help put development on the political agenda in Australia?

Onslaught from neoliberalism?

The new Bush Administration may well push ahead to implement more of its policies derived from its neo-conservative think-tanks and enthusiasts. Its philosophy of neoliberalism is likely to become more influential in the Australian government as well, with renewed emphasis on individual achievement, lower taxes for upper-income groups, further tightening of social security and close alignment with US foreign policy.

However the signs of the churches developing a convincing critique of neoliberalism are not good. Even in the Catholic Church, social and political philosophy are largely neglected in its tertiary institutes. Few theological colleges give it more than a token nod, and there are very few specialist scholars, lay or clerical. This is an astonishing situation, forty years after the Vatican Council called us to a closer engagement with social and political life.

The Catholic Church especially has a rich tradition of social thought and activism, which covers the whole range of social and economic spheres. Yet a danger at the moment is that church leaders will be perceived as narrowing their agenda to issues of sexuality, family and bioethics, and neglecting the wider field of social concern.

The release by the Vatican of the new Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church should help redress this problem, and highlight once more how critical is the need to wrestle with the wider social implications of the Gospel.

The Scriptures focus on key social imperatives: justice for the oppressed, peacemaking, solidarity with the sick and suffering, prohibitions on violence and killing. Church social teaching is not just about sexual ethics or bioethics, but about human rights, social and distributive justice, the eradication of poverty and hunger, responsibility for the environment, international development, world peace and disarmament, and international governance.

The public role of the churches in democracies is not to intervene directly in the electoral process itself, but to help form the social conscience by their efforts in education, advocacy and promoting an inclusive conversation about our human wellbeing. If Australia's responses to asylum seekers, the war in Iraq, world hunger and development are any indication, the churches urgently need to sharpen up their engagement in the public forum.