

**NSW.ACT**

## Using the Right Language

*Speech given by Harry Herbert,  
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at the Social Justice Expo, May 25, 2002*

Earlier this month the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Rev. Peter Jensen, had an article published in "The Sydney Morning Herald" which was an edited extract of the Halifax-Portal lecture that he had given earlier in the week. The article was headed "Fear of criticism has made Christians silent instead of significant". My first reaction to that headline was to question the accuracy of Christians being silent, but when I read the extract I realised that what the Archbishop meant was that Christians, in his opinion, were not saying the right things about the right issues. His argument was along the lines that we have fallen for secular language in which to speak on issues, and we would do better to conduct our conversation in the community along strictly theological and Biblical lines. In one part he says: "Instead of explaining and defending the Gospel, we have sought the path of relevance". At the end of the extract, he writes: "One of the chief reasons why we have ceased to speak the truth is that we are fearful of the reaction of those around us...We have contributed towards the gagging of God, perhaps because we are frightened of suffering."

I think it is good that the Anglican Archbishop is entering into public debate about these issues. However, I would beg to differ with some of his arguments and conclusions. First up, I don't think it is true that Christians have been silent in recent times. Also, I agree with the letter of the Editor from Rev. Stephen Reid, Uniting Church minister at Cherrybrook, who got the word "humility" into the debate, and I endorse that suggestion because the Church and Christian organisations need to avoid self-righteousness, especially in the prevailing climate. Although the Christian community has not been mortally wounded by the issues surrounding inappropriate sexual behaviour by ministers and priests and the Church's long failure to address this matter, nevertheless it would be wrong to think that our standing in the community has not been shaken. I notice that in a responding article in "The Sydney Morning Herald", Rev. Tim Costello picks up this theme where he reminded us that "like Jesus, we must expect no privileged access to power nor automatic respect because of our institutional and cultural role".

Certainly Philip Jensen's article reminds us that language is an important aspect of social justice advocacy. And this is my main difference of view from him. I don't believe that we can use Biblical and theological language exclusively in the broader community and always expect to carry our argument. I didn't object when Peter Jensen, shortly after his installation last year, suggested that the Prime Minister, John Howard, should spend more time reading his Bible in order better to understand issues of reconciliation with indigenous people. In that instance, we had the Prime Minister, an Anglican, being addressed by his own Anglican Archbishop, and such language was appropriate. But, it would be no good for me to go to the Premier of

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NSW, Mr. Bob Carr, and say that he should not sponsor stem cell research because my Biblical analysis and my theological understanding led me to believe that stem cell research was wrong. Indeed, in yet another “Sydney Morning Herald” article, the Premier let everyone know, that on that topic, he had no intention of being influenced by old fashioned theologies.

In order to argue a case in the wider community and in order to either mobilise other forces or join in with them, Christians will have to adopt a language which allows them to advocate their cause in a way that the community understands. On this issue I am in good company. The Pope, no less! In his Statement at the Beginning of the New Millennium, Pope John Paul II gives this advice to Catholic Christians. “For Christian witness to be effective”, he says, “it is important special efforts be made to explain properly the reasons for the Church’s position, stressing that it is not a case of imposing on non-believers a vision based on faith, but of interpreting and defending the values rooted in the very nature of the human person”. Although I wouldn’t always agree with the official Catholic view about some of those values, eg, in regard to homosexuality, nevertheless I believe that the Pope has the right methodology.

I think that Christians need two types of language when they are engaging in social action. First, they need to get their language straight within the Church and in the context of their faith and belief. Second, they need to marshal the arguments within the community in order to rally support among others and also present a convincing case to decision-makers. Sometimes, of course, the two languages will overlap. Recently, I attended the launch of a pamphlet on globalisation which had been funded through the UnitingCare 2% for Development Fund. Rev. Ann Wansbrough was asked to speak at the launch and her speech on that occasion contained both these elements. Firstly, she explained why the Church and Christian people believed that the issues of globalisation were important from our own theological perspective. This included our understanding of the nature of the human person and our understanding of the nature of God. Secondly, she explained to the audience why it was that we were wanting to join in coalition with other people to pursue issues related to globalisation and, especially, international treaties which provided access to service delivery for multinational companies.

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### **An Emphasis on Moral Discourse**

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BUT, and this is a big BUT, I do not mean that we abandon moral discourse, and deal only with the practical. I mean that we must find a moral resonance with the rest of the community. We must use a language that the community understands. Indeed, the perspective with which we must address issues of social justice must be morally based. While we may not be able to say to John Howard that he needs to say sorry to the Aboriginal people about the stolen generations because repentance is an important christian value, nevertheless there is a moral issue there which the broader community appreciates.

One of the most important things we can contribute to the wider community is to put issues in a moral framework which they can understand. It is always a mistake to think that you cannot engage with an issue unless you have all the facts at your disposal. Of course, you need to know about the issue but you don’t need to know every single thing. There are complexities about some social justice issues in our community, but you don’t need to be a complete expert in order to look at the issue

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from the perspective of the framework of social justice – rights, participation, equity and access, and have a viewpoint.

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## Countering the Spin

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There are many complexities about the issue of asylum seekers, if you go looking for them. The Minister for Immigration is a wonderful example of a person who has all the facts at his disposal, and yet none of the facts can overcome the end result which is that we have not treated these people fairly. In other words, you don't have to be an expert in immigration policy to figure out when something is unjust and unfair. When the GST was announced I made the comment in a media interview that you didn't need to be an expert in taxation matters to see the unfairness of creating a tax mix change. In other words, of substituting in part a universally imposed consumption tax for tax cuts which favoured the rich.

But what can we do about these issues – asylum seekers, immigration policy, Aboriginal reconciliation, criminal justice, housing, etc etc. How do we approach them from a practical perspective once we have put them in the context of which I have been speaking?

Nothing beats putting a bit of information down on paper. In the case of the asylum seekers issue, Mr. Ruddock and his spin doctors have been experts at the use of language. “Unlawful” is one of his favourite words, not to mention “jumping the queue” and his insinuations about Shayan Badrai about his stepmother. If the ‘children overboard’ episode has done anything it has shown in full view what most of us always knew – that politicians will package information in any way they like in order to achieve their own electoral goals.

We must be ready at all times to oppose ‘the spin’.

Let me give you an example.

The following is the transcript of an interview given by Ruddock on the 7.30 Program after the Four Corners program on Shayan Badrai was shown

**Ruddock:** A lot of psychiatric conditions arise because you have a predisposition to them. You don't know to what extent it may be related to the family's situation and I don't want to go into that. Some people might think it was prejudicial if I introduced those elements.

**O'Brien:** But in effect you are introducing it. You appear to be implying something without actually being prepared to say what.

**Ruddock:** Well, I'll simply say that the child is not the natural child of the mother – it's a stepchild.

*[Mungo Mac Callum, in his essay “Girt by Sea” points out that four times in the interview Philip Ruddock refers to Shayan as “it”]*

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Countering the spin is therefore essential. The sheet prepared by the Edmund Rice Centre for Social Justice on the myths of asylum seekers has been re-circulated in endless places and shows how important it is to have the other side of the story told. So, the first thing is always to tell the other side of the story. The same could be said about globalisation. How many wonderful things are trotted out by the proponents of globalisation, giving such a rosy picture about the positive outcomes for developing countries, when the real agenda is to allow the first world to get their hands on global control of the services industry.

No area is more prone to a lack of facts than drugs. We have found with the establishment of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre that constantly putting forward the facts is a valuable exercise.

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### **Practical Tools**

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So, preparing counter information and distributing counter information are essential tools for social change advocates. Letters to the editor of newspapers, local as well as national, letters to politicians are all useful. I don't think people always realise the value of a well written letter. I am involved on behalf of UnitingCare as a member of CASA [Coalition for Appropriate Supported Accommodation]. The convenor is Sr. Myree Harris, who is an expert at the well written letter to Minister Fay Lo Po'. For example, she wrote to the Minister about the unfair influence which boarding house owners were having over Government policy. She wrote this: "There is a widespread community perception that the Residential Carers Association and other boarding house owners have easy access to you and are strongly influencing your thinking. Perhaps it is your background in Fair Trading which leads you to understand their position and concerns. However, this industry does not make pots and pans, it deals with vulnerable human beings". In regard to the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre I have found that letters from people, both for and against, do receive serious consideration in the bureaucracy. I am not a great advocate for petitions because they have no real place in the parliamentary system, but if you can get thousands of petitions on a petition at least you can quote that as a sign of community support for your cause.

Setting up a table in the shopping centre to collect signatures or hand out information is an effective way of marshalling support and gives good visibility to your cause. We did that with the Injecting Centre and it was a good way of getting letters of support for our licence application. I know that other church groups are using it to get support for asylum seekers. It is often a way of finding support that you didn't know about.

Getting actively involved in the issue and finding out about what is really happening is another important aspect. This also allows the telling of people's stories and this can be crucial. You can have all the theoretical, social, moral, and theological arguments you like about the acceptance of gay people, the stolen generation, asylum seekers, people with disabilities living in boarding houses, but actual encounters and the telling of the real stories can change people and also policies. The Four Corners program on asylum seekers because it gave voice to the people themselves. The power of the Human Rights Enquiry into the Stolen Generations was because it gave voice to the people themselves. Of course, there are dangers in it, and it can be manipulated, but it still remains a high priority to put the human face on issues.

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If the issue you are pursuing is one where Government is involved, then use of the Freedom of Information provisions can be important in order to get the facts to the surface. Also, the Ombudsman can help in some cases. Also, there are people who can help with legal advice if the matter concerns legal issues.

Using the media is important. I have already mentioned letters to the editor, and while people smile about it, it should never be dismissed. Again, phoning up the talk back programs is another technique. Not everything will work its way onto the 7.30 Report of the Channel 9 news, but there are lots of other media outlets, some of which can be overlooked. Community radio, local newspapers, email distribution, is also important. There are resources for finding out how to write up press releases, and how to distribute them, but journalists and their newspapers and programs are on the phone and can be contacted and given information and asked about whether they will do a story on it.

Organising networks is also effective. With the use of the email this has been made easier and cheaper, and the email system is probably the greatest advance ever and can certainly be a great way of networking.

Then, there is direct action. This doesn't necessarily mean a demonstration, but you should not dismiss this. A small group of people with effective placards can be a great way of getting information across to the public. I think that the decision of Rev. Ray Richmond from the Wayside Chapel to open the T Room in 1999 in order to get the issue of drug injecting centres onto the agenda, was an important initiative.

I know I keep stressing this, but getting others to put their names and efforts to support yours is important. A letter, statement, submission etc from the XYZ Uniting Church is good, but if it comes from the Catholic Church as well and the Baptist Church, etc, it is even better. When we were desperate to save the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement a number of years ago, we organised a joint delegation of church leaders to see the Prime Minister and we found out later that it had been effective.

I mentioned before the importance of getting the stories across. But, there is also the issue of action itself. One of the reasons why we have legitimacy in regard to issues is because we discern the moral issues involved. But also, we are dealing with the people affected and trying to help them. For example, UnitingCare can speak effectively about tenancy matters because of our work at Western Sydney Tenants Service. We can speak effectively about aged care issues, because of the services we provide. Our advocacy on housing is grounded in our work with people seeking accommodation. Advocacy that is linked to practical action is very effective. In recent times I have often quoted from Peter Mares book "Borderlines" which he wrote about the issue of asylum seekers in Australia. In one part of the book he refers to the work of an Anglican lay minister in Melbourne who is helping asylum seekers by getting them medical visits to GP's who provide their services free and he got a pharmaceutical company to give him a supply of non-prescription drugs. Mares writes about this: "Such acts of generosity are testament to the well of sympathy for asylum seekers that does exist in the community. It is also a powerful reminder of the role of the churches in maintaining a sense of conscience and public responsibility in Australia. Time and again it is churchgoers or clergy who step in to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees – whether it is through pastoral visits to detention centres, or advocacy, or accommodation services or tins of food".

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So, the acts of helping can become in themselves powerful tools for conscientisation. And if our help is done with advocacy in view, it is more effective in every way. I quoted before from Pope John Paul II's statement for the New Millennium, and again I think his words are apt in this regard where he says: "Now is the time for a new creativity in charity, not only ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters".

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## **Conclusion**

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One of my favourite texts from the Gospel is about the woman and the unjust judge. It doesn't often rate a mention in preaching, but the text from S. Luke Chapter 18 is worth quoting here:

*"Jesus said: 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying: 'Grant me justice against my opponent'. For a while he refused; but later he said to himself. 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice so that she may not wear me out by continually coming'. [In my Bible the footnote at the bottom of the page gives an alternative reading 'so that she may not finally come and slap me in the face']. And the Lord said 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night'.*

Many years ago I attended a talk given by Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate who ran against Bush and Gore as the third party candidate in the last US Presidential election. Nader made his mark in the 60's as a crusader against car companies and other multinationals. In his talk he said that some students from Pennsylvania had said to him that they were less than convinced about his methods. They said that they had worked all weekend on trying to shut down a polluting steel mill in Pittsburgh and it was still there! Perseverance is an important quality in social action. Christians do believe that God will grant justice to his chosen ones, and that the Kingdom of God will herald the reign of justice and peace. Like the poor widow with her unjust judge, we need to persevere.

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