

Where is Australia Going?

InfoAction Sheet

May 2006

What does our faith say?

Christians recognise the absolute value of human beings. God created humankind in God's image. God's love for all humankind is made known in Jesus Christ. This shapes our understanding of how we relate to one another. We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves.

We believe in the God who rescued slaves, who brought the Israelites out of slavery and oppression and gave them not only a place to live, but also a different way of relating to one another as a community.

The peace that God offers us involves wholeness, community, justice, participation and cooperation. Part of the rhythm of life is a widely shared day of rest from work, a day available for worship, family life and community participation.

To be a Bible-believing Christian means to examine public policy from the viewpoint of the poor and those whose human rights may be violated. We may not consider only our own self-interest. Poverty and human rights are moral questions.

The legislation seems to be based on fear, suspicion, distrust, resentment, a willingness to sacrifice individuals, alienation (a view that others are different, perhaps dangerous), a sense of "whatever it takes", a denial of human dignity and a desire to control life and to avoid risks. All three pieces of legislation violate human rights.

Our faith calls us to live as people of faith, hope, trust and love, recognising the absolute value of human beings, acting in solidarity with those who are the least fortunate and the least loved.

Where is Australia Going?

Rev. Dr. Ann Wansbrough and Justin Whelan

Introduction

In November 2005 the Australian Parliament passed three pieces of legislation which seem to take Australia in a particular direction. These were the WorkChoices, Welfare to Work and Anti-Terrorism Bills. The Uniting Church made submissions to each relevant Senate inquiry raising serious questions about the basic direction of the legislation. There were some amendments which we support, but the overall direction of the legislation is still questionable.

The 2005 meeting of the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church adopted a vision statement "Moving with God, transforming communities", which committed us to be a church which is "courageous, inclusive and generous". These same qualities shape our assessment of legislation offered to us by Government. We will be courageous in challenging legislation that makes Australia less inclusive and less generous of spirit.

As we consider these three pieces of legislation, we must ask: What shapes our world view? What values and attitudes are shaping Australia? What sort of Australia do we want?

WorkChoices

The NSW Synod in 2005 expressed serious reservations about the proposed changes to industrial relations. The new laws tilt the balance alarmingly in favour of employers over employees by undermining collective bargaining, removing unfair dismissal laws for companies with fewer than 100 full-time employees, removing benefits and protections such as penalty rates and leave provisions and even preventing ethical employers from agreeing to certain provisions.

The abolition of penalty rates is unhelpful to families and the community. Once employers can insist on work at night, on weekends or on public holidays without penalty, the shared time for family life and community activity is reduced. Work becomes the priority of life, rather than being seen as a means to an end, to be kept in its place as only one of many important activities.

Legislation governing industrial relations should have due concern for the needs of families and individuals who are poor, lesser skilled, legally vulnerable and economically disadvantaged.

(NSW Synod 2005)

One of our main concerns is the way minimum wages will be set. People have a human right to work, to receive "just and favourable remuneration" and conditions such as annual leave and public holidays. Australia has a proud and just tradition of providing a "living wage" which takes into account the needs of workers when setting safety net wages. The WorkChoices legislation destroys this tradition. Minimum wages will be based only on economic factors related to reducing unemployment. The needs of workers are no longer a matter to be considered. This is a recipe for creating an underclass of "working poor". Work will no longer be a way out of poverty.

Actions you can take now

Take responsibility in the workplace

Act justly as an employer:

- Provide just and favourable wages and conditions
- Provide family friendly workplace and cooperate with unions

As an employee:

- Join a union
- Insist on collective agreements
- Participate in union actions

Monitor what happens

- Collect stories, tell advocacy organisations like UnitingCare NSW.ACT
- Support people in need by doing voluntary work with a local community service organisations

Challenge

- Tell stories (with permission)
- Meet your local MP to ask for change
- Write letters to newspapers
- Attend public meetings
- Attend protest rallies

Resist through non-violence

- Resist violations of human rights through advocacy, argument, acts of solidarity and political action
- Undertake non-violence action training. Contact UnitingCare justinw@nsw.uca.org.au

Support human rights

The Public Interest Advocacy Centre has published a human rights kit at

<http://www.piac.asn.au/publications/hrkit.html>

Contact UnitingCare NSW.ACT about human rights training using this kit

justinw@nsw.uca.org.au

Welfare to Work

The church supports any Government efforts to help more social security recipients into jobs. We welcome the promised increased investment in employment assistance and child care. But we do not believe that the change in requirements is the best way of achieving the desired outcomes.

The 2005 Welfare to Work legislation marks a significant shift in policy and a changed attitude to people receiving income support. It shifts the language from partnership and participation, to compliance and coercion. People who were once seen as worthy of income support such as sole parents or people with disabilities, will now be required to find a job or be considered unemployed and required to fulfil the long list of "job search" requirements.

*We are not called to avoid life and all its struggles, but rather to take risks, standing up for what is just, acting as neighbour to those most in need and sharing the great love of God in all that we do and say.**

UnitingCare knows from the clients of its many services that people on income support usually want to work but face multiple barriers in trying to enter the workforce. People need to be encouraged and empowered, not coerced by negative incentives that stigmatise individuals and reinforce fear and poor motivation.

The policy change deprives people of both dignity and income. Most importantly, the change requires people to find a job, but fails to create jobs or to remove the real barriers to workplace participation. It is a punitive recipe which will create more poverty and more stress for people who already experience difficulties in their lives.

Anti-Terrorism Bill

The Uniting Church opposes terrorism and recognises the need for laws that prevent terrorism by enabling people to be prosecuted at the planning stage rather than after the act occurs.

The latest Anti-Terrorism laws significantly expand police and intelligence powers in order to combat the perceived threat of "home-grown" terrorism. The most controversial provisions include two new forms of detention: preventative detention (up to 14 days) and control orders (up to a year, renewable), for people about whom there is intelligence but not hard evidence. The other major change was to update sedition laws which set limits on political expression that "threatens" the government or the community.

The Uniting Church believes that the legislation takes Australia down a dangerous path. Far from 'getting the balance right', many of these laws threaten the very democratic values of our society that they aim to protect.
Dean Drayton, UCA President

The Bill contravenes the basic principles of the rule of law, violating fundamental human rights including the right to a fair trial, the presumption of innocence, freedom of speech and freedom from arbitrary detention.

The primary concern is that under this Bill innocent people will be detained without any hard evidence, and they will be denied key rights (including communication with family and employers) while so detained. Furthermore, the sedition provisions limit freedom of speech, including the right to criticise the government.

The Uniting Church expressed opposition to both the specific measures of the Bill and the underlying logic of the Government's approach to terrorism in which it systematically erodes human rights in order to protect "national security". While the churches are deeply concerned about the threat of terrorism, this particular Bill was not an appropriate and proportionate response to that threat.

* Churches of the NCCA "Security at all costs?" Social Justice Sunday 2004