

Christians for an Ethical Society

Annual Report 2014-2015

My father was an avid reader of current affairs until his last few years when he no longer read a paper or listened to the news, he found it too depressing. I found this hard to understand at the time, but now that I am approaching the age he was then, I am beginning to feel the same. Perhaps with a subtle difference, I am acutely embarrassed by the role our government is playing (or not playing) in world affairs. I try not to stay in a continual state of anger about it, but to argue for a different path, seemingly in today's political climate, "a road less travelled".

Margaret and I have recently returned from the Middle East. Jordan spends something like 40% of its GDP on refugees: compare that with Australia's not only mean approach, but also its breach of decent international protocols. Europe is buckling under the flood of refugees pouring across from North Africa, and yet on the whole its response remains compassionate.

We spent some time in Palestine, including conversations with Palestinian leadership in Ramallah. The abuse of Palestinian human rights, the killing of any Palestinian hope for autonomy by the extreme right in the Israeli parliament, strongly influenced by membership from the illegal settlements on the West Bank, is breath taking and arrogantly dismissive of any world opinion. Almost alone in the international community (apart from the United States of America) we tacitly approve all that Israel does.

We spent several weeks in the UK. From my several friends and relatives on Britain's conservative side of politics I was astonished at their disdain for our national leadership and our irresponsible and negligent response to the global need for responsible Climate Change action. It is sadly obvious that our government is dismissive of scientific consensus, how else could it continually refuse to act responsibly?

The recent approval of the Shenhua Watermark coalmine on the Liverpool Plains in north-west NSW has stunned many, apparently including Barnaby Joyce. This proposed mine is not in the Hunter Valley as apparently the Australian Government and the owners of the mine assumed, but it actually sits in a significant part of the water catchment area of the Murray Darling Basin. There are so many reasons why this mine should not go ahead. Why has Greg Hunt approved it? Presumably because he feels obliged to under terms of the free trade agreement we now have with China. CES is not opposed to free-trade agreements, but it is opposed to agreements being struck without proper debate and without the possible down sides of such agreements being properly exposed.

ABC *Compass* on Sunday night 26 July fielded a panel in response to *Laudato Si: On Care of a Common Home*. The first question put to the panel was "should the Church meddle in matters such as Climate Change" or, by implication, any of the issues above. Paul Kelly argued no, it was not the business of the Church to stray into matters of economic policy, capitalism, (presumably capitalism that is not open to accountability or reform), he argued is the best chance of pulling the poor out of poverty. (Ironically Kelly resorted to a moral argument for the Church's non-involvement in the matter)! Paul Collins, on the other hand, argued it is not the Church's business to question science, but it is the Church's business to address the moral questions that flow from economic policy. That is exactly the position that CES has taken over several years, believing it is the position of the Gospel. Nowhere does

the Gospel condemn wealth per se, but it has a huge amount to say about how that wealth is distributed and how fairness and equity is to be maintained, not only within the human family, but also within the whole creation.

CES does not simply aim to raise issues (as I have above by way of example), but it aims to give hope that there is a more compassionate, equitable and sustainable way forward. From a small volunteer executive this is a big task. We have decided to work more collaboratively with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture with the aim of using their online social network capacity to engage a wider audience, especially of a younger generation. This will take a while to develop but we are hopeful it should make a big difference.

We have been thrilled and delighted to welcome The Revd Dr Thorwald Lorenzen as our new President. Thorwald is no stranger to the Christian community in Canberra. He has been one of its primary ecumenical leaders over a long period of time, he is a world renowned scholar and a champion of many justice issues in the name of Christ and the Christian Gospel. Prior to his retirement he was Senior Minister at Canberra Baptist Church.

We have been blessed to have had outstanding speakers for our forums in the last 12 months under the themes of “Responsible Citizenship” (2014) and “Equity and the Human Family” (2015). Under these general themes we have held six forums on the following issues:

July 2014: “The Common Good: A question of style”, Professor Will Storrar, Director of the Centre for Theological Inquiry at Princeton University; chair Bishop George Browning.

September 2014: “Unemployment: Causes, Consequences and Cures”, Professor Bob Gregory Emeritus Professor of the Research School of Social Sciences, ANU and Kasy Chambers, Executive Director of Anglicare Australia; chair Bishop George Browning;

October 2014: “SPORT: A force for Social Justice?” Joe Roff and Sally Shipard, Fr Peter Day, founder of HOME in Queanbeyan; chair: Tim Gavel, ABC broadcaster.

February 2015: “Free and equal! Towards a more humane society”, Revd Dr Thorwald Lorenzen, Professor of Theology and Principal Researcher, Charles Sturt University; chair Bishop George Browning.

April 2015: “The war on drugs: noble cause or tragic debacle?” Dr Ken Crispin QC, former ACT Director of Public Prosecutions and a Supreme Court Judge; chair: Revd Dr Thorwald Lorenzen.

May 2015: “Budget Equity?” Paul Bongiorno, distinguished journalist; chair: Bishop George Browning.

Your executive combines a variety expertise and meets with much energy. We have been glad to welcome on to the executive Clive Rodger, Stephen Pickard and Bernadette Layton, and we extend our gratitude to David Palmer, Ivan Roberts and Bernadette Layton who have retired. To reflect our closer link with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, we now hold our meetings in their Board Room.

We look forward to the year ahead and to creatively developing new ways of engaging a broader audience so that together we can contribute to a fairer, safer and more sustainable future.

Bishop George Browning

10 August 2015