

**ADDRESS TO 'CHRISTIANS FOR AN ETHICAL SOCIETY**

**Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2008 at The Centre for Christianity and Culture,  
Canberra.**

**“BY 2020, CAN THE MYTH OF AUSTRALIAN EGALITARIANISM BE MADE A  
REALITY?”**

I acknowledge the traditional ownership and occupation by the Ngunnawal people of the land on which we meet tonight. It is to our national shame that Aborigines are the most socially deprived and excluded group in Australia.

In 1845, British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, in a speech to The Commons said:

**“Two Nations, between whom there is no discourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by different breeding; are fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws.  
I speak of the Rich and the Poor.”**

He could have been talking about Australia in 2008. In this affluent country there are over 2 million people who are socially excluded and a good proportion of another 2 million on the margins. ‘Monsignor David Cappo who is a member of a South Australian Cabinet Committee defines social exclusion this way:

**“A socially inclusive society is defined as one where all people are valued, their differences are respected, and their basic needs are met so that they can live in dignity. Social exclusion is the process of being shut out from the social, political, economic and cultural systems which contribute to the integration of a person into the community.**

(Quoted in the Victorian Health Research Summary No 2- January 2005).

Tonight, in the short time available, I hope to do three things:

1. Trace the journey of the shift of Australian egalitarianism (social inclusiveness) to mythical status.
2. Examine some of the shameful aspects of social exclusion in this nation.
3. Outline what I believe is necessary if we are to return to being a just and compassionate society.

**1. THE JOURNEY TO SOCIAL EXCLUSION.**

People of my generation, have experienced the development of an egalitarian society after years of depression, nation building and a world war, where as a nation we did pursue the common good and where we all felt proud to be part of the community.

In the dark days of World War 2, Prime Minister John Curtin and his Cabinet foresaw the need for a Post War Reconstruction Program. He appointed two young public servants, each of whom was to make significant contributions to this nation over the following 30 years, namely John Crawford and Richard “Nugget” Coombes, to prepare and then implement the program. Returning service

men and women came home to a struggling but hopeful country where opportunities were available for their full integration and for them to be full participants in nation building.

Programs had been put in place to return industrial production to peacetime needs; government infrastructures such as the SMHEA were established; increased rural production encouraged ; essential services reinvigorated following their deterioration as resources had been directed to the war effort; and as the troops were discharged they were given the wherewithal under the CRTS to re-educate and up-skill some and to educate others who had previously not had that opportunity at universities, technical colleges and trade training schools. Many were also settled on the land on “Soldier Settler” Blocks.

This did not come without difficulties. To maintain trade and to keep other workers from losing their jobs, PM Chifley put the troops on the wharves to break the strike which threatened many of the plans for reconstruction. He also faced a difficult time with the coal miners. These were not easy times for a leader who himself came through the union movement and the depression.

In 1945 the population was around 6.5 million

Life was not rosey for all. There were many poor and disadvantaged individuals and families. We still had rationing and the housing shortage was worse than it is now. Those of us who lived in low income households knew poverty, but it did not seem so bad at the time because there were plenty of us, and we had expectations and hopes. Decent education was available for all, rich and poor, and there were means- tested Commonwealth Scholarships for children from low income households to attend University and Technical Colleges. There are thousands of leaders in our community who would not been there without these scholarships. Other essential services were readily available. We knew that if we studied and worked hard then we could escape the poverty.

Governments of both persuasions, some more so than others, have supported the ‘Welfare State’.

In all of this the Churches played a major role by providing, with very limited government financial support, many services such as hospitals, healthcare, aged care, refuges and ‘soup kitchens for the destitute. Today most of these are now heavily funded and controlled by government, and church agencies in effect often act as agents of government.

**From around the mid 70’s Australia began to lose, and has now lost, its European (Christian) social democratic values with its ethos of the common good to one of American neo-conservative individualism. This encouraged the trend towards reliance on unbridled market forces as the dominating influence on society. And we have seen the results of this in the current credit meltdown crisis which has been caused by ‘greed at any price’.**

This trend has also resulted in an exponential growth of the rich/poor gap, with a large section of the population in structural deprivation and social exclusion and little or no hope of escape from the poverty cycle. Even Adam Smith, the father of the free market economy, argued that markets should be forced to operate “with compassion for the less well off”.

The political philosopher of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Hobbes(1585-1679) described life “.....in an unregulated state of nature.....as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” And so it is!

The saddest and most insidious aspects of the resultant changes to the economic, political, social and cultural environment have been that as we became more affluent we shut our eyes to those left behind in the process; we became frightened to disturb our comfort zones; wealth creation and individualism was promoted by Christian fundamentalists; and Christians in the mainline churches, because of the silence of their leaders, were complicit. Three quotes to illustrate:

- **Nelson Rockefeller**  
**“If what these people are talking about what to do with the poor, if that became a reality, then the interests of the United States are in danger”**  
(1968 following the Medellin Conference of Latin American Catholic Bishops’ on Liberation Theology)
- **Schultze, White House economic advisor**  
**“Market like arrangements reduce the need for compassion, patriotism, brotherly love and cultural solidarity as motivating forces behind social improvement.....harnessing the basic good motive of material self interest to promote the common good is perhaps the most important invention mankind has achieved.”**

**Pastor Houston of Hillsong Congregation in Northwest Sydney”**

**“If you change your thinking and develop a healthy attitude to money, I believe you will walk in prosperity and the blessing of God.”**

These neo-conservative ideologies were fostered by, inter alia, Milton Freedman of The University of Chicago Economics School; and Friedrich Hayek whose writings so influenced Margaret Thatcher who said: “There is no such thing as community, there are only individuals”. In Australia, institutions such as The Institute of Public Affairs and The Centre For Independent Studies have pushed these same ideological theories about the so called benefits of leaving the economy to the unfettered free market.

There have also been some other contributing major cultural and social developments in the last 40 years, such as:

- Population explosion- now 3 times that of 1945.
- The gender revolution;
- Economic rationalism and globalization;
- Information technology;
- Change in family size and structures from 6 to 1.7 and by 2010 Hugh Mackay estimates that 30% of people will never marry, 30% will be divorced at least once and 30% will still be living with the same spouse;
- Privatisation and Outsourcing of Public Services-CBA, Job Network, Information Services, Telstra, etc.
- Welfare reform;
- International trade barriers by wealthy nations;
- Weakness of the Left- since 1949, Labor has been in power for only 15 years and the trade unions now only cover 13% of the workforce.

## 2. SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN 2008

Poverty is the ultimate of social exclusion. It has four elements:

- (i) Lack of secure and adequate income is the most obvious and most easily measured.
- (ii) Lack of access to essential services such as housing, education, healthcare and jobs.
- (iii) Spatial – where you live.
- (iv) Loss of hope and self esteem.

All of this was detailed in the 2003-4 Senate Poverty Inquiry, but more of that later. Let me make a brief comment about each of the elements:

(i) Income

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

**MILLION AUSTRALIANS LIVE IN HOUSEHOLDS WITH AN AVERAGE EQUIVALISED WEEKLY INCOME OF \$225.  
ANOTHER 3.982 MILLION AUSTRALIANS LIVE IN HOUSEHOLDS WITH AN AVERAGE EQUAVILISED WEEKLY INCOME OF \$414.**

**THAT IS NEARLY 8 MILLION LIVING IN HOUSEHOLDS ON LESS THAN \$414 PER WEEK.**

### **Could you live on that?**

(ABS Household and Income Distribution Survey, 2005-6. Doc 6523.0-01/08/08)

What should be of concern to those who want a just, compassionate and egalitarian society is that despite the affluence we have a significant and growing rich/poor gap.

The Howard government dismissed this reality and preferred to quote a series of averages - a very misleading tactic. For example, the average weekly wage is around \$1000, but 8 million Australians are in households with incomes less than half that amount.

The burden on the poor has been exacerbated by the rising costs, particularly those for essential services most of which have risen well above the CPI. For example, from 1990 to 2007 health costs have risen +300% above CPI, public Transport +250%, and energy +70%. Education, child care and other services follow this pattern and can be seen in Gavin Dufty's Prices and Income Survey ( See:[www.svdp-vic.org.au](http://www.svdp-vic.org.au)). This burden is particularly heavy on the poor as they have little or no discretionary income.

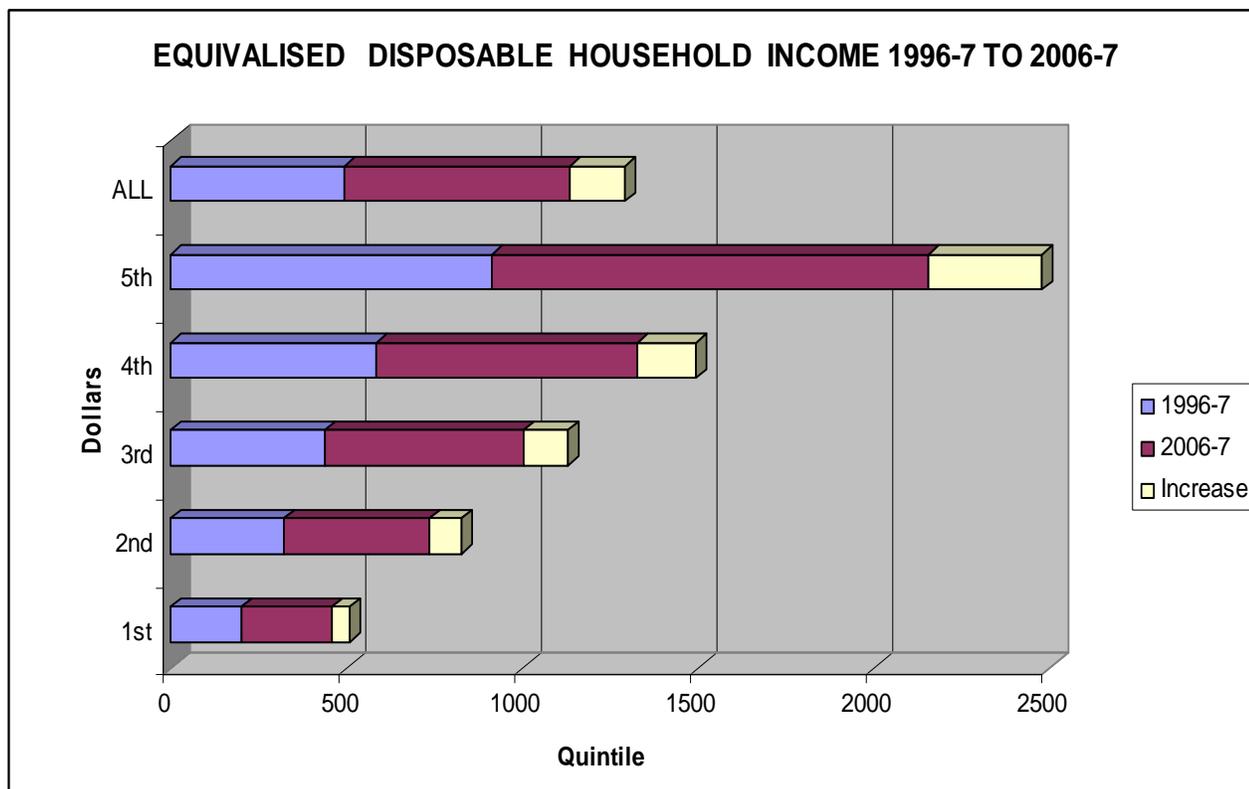
The Government also argued that the rich and poor had grown wealthy at the same rate. This was wrong on two grounds; firstly, it is not true and secondly, it was inevitable that even had they grown at the same % rate, there would still have been an exponential growth in the gap.

There is no shortage of reliable and official data to prove this point and the following Table and Graph, made from ABS Data, clearly show the rising Rich/Poor gap over the last ten years:

**EQUIVALISED DISPOSABLE HOUSEHOLD INCOME– 1996-7 TO 2006-7**

<b>Quintile</b>	<b>1996-7 (\$)</b>	<b>2006-7 (\$)</b>	<b>Increase (\$)</b>	<b>% Increase</b>
1st	203	255	52	25.60%
2nd	321	414	93	28.80%
3rd	437	565	128	29.30%
4th	582	746	164	28.20%
5th	912	1239	327	35.90%
ALL	491	644	153	31.20%

**Source: ABS Household and Income Distribution Survey 2005-6  
Document: 6523.0 – 010808**



Writing in the SMH on July 26-7, Professor Duncan Iveson, Head of the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry at The University of Sydney wrote:

**“A striking feature of political discourse since 1990s.....social injustice, as a way of thinking about politics and economics in general, is almost completely marginalized..... The short answer is that rising levels of inequality make the worst off even more worse off overall. And that is unjust.....Over 70 years to 2004 the ‘headline’ rate of poverty (50%of median income) increased from 7.6% to 9.9%.....Over the next two years, it increased from 9.8% to 11.1%....”**

**(Opinion article in SMH of Saturday, 2<sup>nd</sup> August,2008.)**

The media is reporting that NATSEM will tomorrow( 29/08/08) publish a new report showing the growing gap between the top and the middle of the income scales resulting in part from the more generous tax cuts given to the top between 1995 and 2005/6.

(ii) and (iii) Services and Spatial Elements of Poverty.

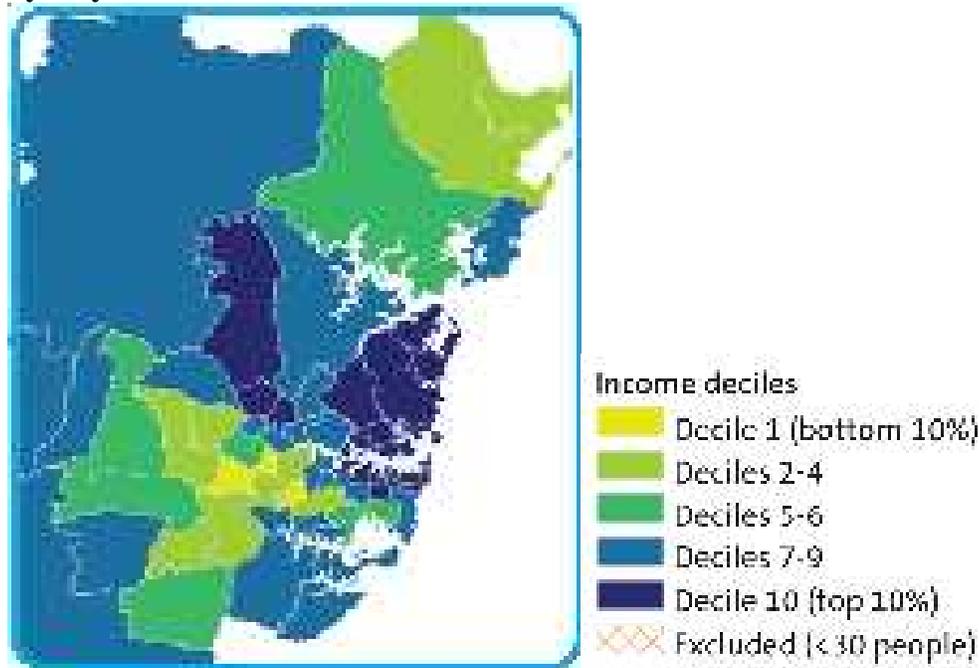
Access to services and where people live are so closely related I will deal with them together, albeit briefly:

ABS and other data show that the further one lives from the centre of a major city, the greater the inequity and lower opportunities to access services the rest of us regard as normal; and thus the greater the risk of being excluded from society.

NATSEM survey “Advance Australia Fair” demonstrates this with a series of Tables and maps. The latter are very helpful and I will use Sydney as the example:

### **Equivalised gross income deciles for small areas, Australia 2006**

#### **Sydney**



**Source: NATSEM Report – Advance Australia Fair? – Trends in small area socio-economic inequality 2001-2006, Dr Quoc Ngu Vu**

Until the 1970s, the Centre of Sydney was the Harbour Bridge. From that point if you drew a 15-17 kilometer arc and you would encompass most people and certainly an abundance of good schools, hospitals and health services, jobs, transport, sporting facilities, other venues and institutions. Now the Centre is around Auburn/Parramatta and you now need a bigger arc from that point to see where the growing population lives. The bulk of low income families live in parts of this area. They do not live in Bondi Junction where I grew up (which is now in the deep blue area), but in one of the 100 postcodes of Poverty mostly in the Southwest and Northwest.

The facilities and services have remained in the inner areas but have been established sparingly in the new areas. There is no broadband in many of these suburbs so businesses will not establish there; it is not possible to even have call centres without it; and students are already at a disadvantage with their inner city peers; transport is poor; hospitals are hard for many to access and some of these have limited facilities; education is below standard.

Studies like those of Professor Vinson for Jesuit Social Services, NATSEM and others tell a very depressing story of intergenerational poverty in clearly identified localities. They also set out the consequences for those affected in the paucity of many goods and services which we consider normal including: children's access to libraries, play sport and participate in recreational activities, go to sporting and cultural events.

A quick survey of some of these essential services to which I refer:

-Employment. A paid job is the best way out of poverty. The official unemployment figure is around 4.5%. This figure is based on the definition that one hour's work per week is employment and thus excludes the 500,000 people who are looking for more work or who have given up trying to find a job .

The Postcodes of Poverty show much higher figures, some over 20%.

-Housing. The Housing crisis is no more severe now than it was in the early post-war era. The difference is that as part of the Reconstruction Program, Governments rapidly increased their public housing stocks. The availability of a secure address and roof over the head is necessary to open a bank account, vote, get a job or even obtain government assistance- and thus to participate in society.

-Health services are very unevenly distributed; low income areas do not have bulk billing; hospitals are often inaccessible; mental and aged care services are inadequate; 500,000 people wait 2 years to see a dentist; specialist services are concentrated in the inner city and if you are poor you are likely to die 10 years younger than the rest of us- 17 years if you are an aborigine.

-Education. There is no shortage of good education facilities, both public and private, in wealthy areas. It is far different in low income suburbs. Commonwealth Scholarships for tertiary studies disappeared with the introduction of so called free education in the 1970s and were never reintroduced when HECS was imposed. Lack of a decent education ensures the maintenance of the cycle of poverty.

These are but examples of some of the ways people, particularly those in low income areas are socially excluded.

It is not as if we did not know about the depth of the problem with over 2 million Australians in deep poverty, millions of others at the fringes and 500,000 children living in jobless households. It was all laid out in the 2004 Report of The Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Disadvantage. The Committee travelled widely, including all States as well as rural and remote areas; it received

over 270 written submissions; and heard factual and anecdotal evidence from 340 witnesses, some of the more dramatic of which attracted media attention.

The Committee made 91 recommendations which provided a sound basis for a national plan for what remains a national catastrophe. The key recommendation was the need for a plan based on a co-operative federal/state working relationship. When the report was tabled in the Senate, the debate or discussion lasted less than an hour and when it was introduced into the House of Representatives the then Prime Minister dismissed its significance on the grounds that he had not read the report and could therefore not comment on it.

The media gave this important issue scant attention and reaction to it was left to some of the charitable and welfare agencies which tried to have it placed on the public agenda.

In September 2003 National Church Leaders from Christian, Islamic and Jewish religions signed a letter to the Prime Minister and all State and Territory jurisdictions urging that they agree to a national plan to solve the poverty problems. Regrettably Church Leaders withdrew and did not follow up. This was left to agencies and organizations which continued to lobby for justice and compassion. This was a real disappointment as the problem went, as it still does, to the very core of the Judeo-Christian ethic outlined to us by Father Fallon this evening. The acquiescence of the Leaders, by their silence, gave politicians room to ignore their public responsibilities. I have attached a copy of that letter to the text of this paper.

The same lack of compassion was the response to Australia's obligations as a wealthy OECD nation in addressing The Millennium Goals, and to those nations which "have not". Professor Barry Jones drew attention to this in a memorable speech to the CES in Sydney in March, 2007:

**“Relieving the scourge of global poverty, which imposes its own form of economic slavery, especially in Africa, compounded by global warming, high rates of HIV-AIDS and significant population growth, must be high on our agenda as an ethical society. I see little evidence that it is.**

(iv) Loss of Hope and Self Esteem.

This is understandable enough when one considers the plight of those in need of love, compassion and justice as they face huge problems on a daily basis.

Those who are excluded from society have faced not only indifference from those who should know better, but also, demonisation, vilification and blame for the structural disadvantage they are experiencing. Government has imposed unnecessarily strict and demeaning rules on those who receive welfare benefits; thousands of them have been, often through no fault of their own, cut off from benefits; one Minister constantly replied to stories of hardship by stating “well, I can't stop them drinking alcohol, gambling and taking drugs”; little concern shown for the thousands who are suffering from some form of mental illness; and seeing the politicians playing a distracting ‘blame game’ between jurisdictions.

The biggest cause of this “blame game”, and the excuse used for inaction, has been the presence of Vertical Fiscal Imbalance. That is, the Federal Government collects most of the revenue while the states which deliver most of the services are starved of funds and then derided by Canberra for

both their lack of action and the taxes over which they do have some control. This has proven to be clever politics as the Federal Government has showered the middle classes (swinging voters) with billions of dollars through ‘middle class welfare’ such as Family Tax Benefits A & B, funding for private schools, child care rebates, and medical benefits subsidies, to name a few. As the beneficiaries were happy to receive these gifts, and since they were concerned about their own comfort zones, it proved a political winner.

This is a sad and shameful Australia, yet many still describe Australia as egalitarian. It is a myth! Will we be able to restore the situation?

#### **4. THE JOURNEY TO SOCIAL INCLUSION IN AUSTRALIA.**

It has taken 40 years to arrive at the point where we choose to have millions of Australians living in poverty and either excluded from, or are on the fringes of, society. We can also choose to remedy the situation but it will require courage, determination, personal and community sacrifices, statesmanship and a plan.

**Martin Luther King:**

**“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”**

And these things do matter!

The first step is that we need to redefine our values so that we are clear about what sort of a nation we want to be. The Judeo-Christian ethic of the pursuit of the common good provides a good basis. Father Fallon pointed out that for Christians there are just two simple commandments- To love God and love your Neighbour- and that we should do this with all our soul, heart and mind. It is a call to action and not passivity! We show our love for God best when we show love and concern for the poor, our neighbours.

The principles of goodness, justice, truth, honesty, courage and compassion inherent in the two commandments are shared by non-believers. It is a mistake to think Christians have a monopoly on them. Together believers and non-believers present a formidable force in the public arena.

The situation demands that church leaders should be actively involved and at the forefront of articulating these principles, rather than focusing on their ecclesiologies and institutions. A letter along the lines of that written by their predecessors in 2003 might be an encouraging start, particularly if they continued to be public advocates for the poor and excluded. Failure to do so would, in my view, make them irrelevant.

It seems that in his 2006 essay in “Monthly Magazine”, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd invited them to do so:

**Kevin Rudd:**

**“Christianity..... must always take the side of the marginalized, the vulnerable and the oppressed.... areas of social, economic and security policy, is to speak directly to the state to give power to the powerless, voice to those who have none and to point to the great silences in our national discourse where otherwise there are no natural advocates.”**

Individually, each has a duty to speak out in defence of the defenceless. Nelson Mandella, the most prominent of social justice advocates, and one we all admire, on the occasion of his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday said:

**Nelson Mandella:**

**“We are born to manifest the God that is within us. It is not in some of us; it is in all of us. As we begin to shine our light, so we invite others to do likewise.”**

In practical terms there needs to be a national plan for the eradication of social exclusion and because poverty is structural, government has to devise and implement that plan. The Federal Government has been presented with the basis of such a plan in The Report of The Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Disadvantage, 2004.

Professor Peter Saunders of The Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW told that Inquiry that all poverty in Australia could be eradicated with an expenditure of some 2-3% of GDP and he concluded by saying:

**Peter Saunders:**

**“We can thus remove all Australians from poverty if we want to; the fact we do not do so is a matter of choice, not affordability.”**

At the heart of a national plan must be a co-operative working relationship between the States and Federal Governments, and include local jurisdictions on certain issues such as housing and community development. It is for the Federal Government to make clear that the vertical fiscal imbalance is understood and on the table. Certainly a good start has been made in this regard.

There have also been most encouraging signs of a co-operative all-of-government approach to critical issues such as health, education, housing, broadband, to name a few. There are equally worrying signs, however, that selfish short term interests might derail the whole process. I cannot help but notice, for example:

- Some States are baulking at making any contribution to the provision of computers to schools in disadvantaged areas;
- In response to an attempt to plan for an equitable education system, some States, supported by the Teachers' Union, do not want to pass on information about the parlous state of some schools. Without information, and oversight, it cannot work.
- Similarly in Health, despite early generosity to assist with hospitals, some states and trade unions- in this case the AMA- are threatening to become part of the problem rather part of the solution.

- Plans to revitalize arrangements for water in the Murray-Darling System are being thwarted by selfish state and other interests- threatening, inter alia, the viability of some regional areas

Clearly, the task of restoring social equity and ridding the country of its shameful social exclusion will not be easy, but then, life is not easy for the poor, socially excluded, disadvantaged and disenfranchised now.

So to answer the question about whether or not the myth of Australian egalitarianism can be made a reality by 2020, I would simply say that there is no alternative. We must do so for those who came before us and established a just and compassionate Australia and ensure there is one in place for those who follow us.

**Note: Attached to this address is a copy of the letter sent to all political leaders in September 2003 by The Heads of Christian Churches and Leaders of The Islamic and The Jewish Faiths.**

30 September 2003

**LETTER TO THE PRIME MINISTER, STATE PREMIERS  
AND TERRITORIAL CHIEF MINISTERS**

Dear Prime Minister, State Premier, Chief Minister,

We write to seek your support for the concept of a national forum, the purpose of which is to develop a national strategy for the reduction of poverty, and hopefully the elimination of child poverty, in this country. We are also urging you to take positive steps to bring this about.

Our shared understanding is that God created all humankind and gave us responsibility for each other, with the strongest having a special responsibility to the most vulnerable. Our faith and ethical traditions affirm we are all called to respect our work for the dignity of each person, and the health and wellbeing of our communities. We believe that all Australians are entitled to a decent life, in which they have access to work, education, housing, food and recreation. For a significant number of Australians, however, these basics are not available.

The past few decades have seen significant advances in technology in many areas. Goods are moved around the world with speed and ease unimaginable in the 1960's. Information Technology moves knowledge and capital with even more astounding speed. Markets for goods and services, for capital and for labour have become irreversibly global and there have been some significant advantages as a result of this globalisation.

Australia, as a developed country, has not been alone in experiencing extensive macro-economic change as a result of the global trends. Much of that change has been good, but there have been some negatives. Australia has, perhaps because of the characteristics of the economy, seen one of the sharpest growths in the incidence of poverty, to the point where it now stands fourth on the OECD list of percent of population living in poverty.

If current trends of wealth distribution continue, our country is in danger of losing its traditional national character. Notions such as a "fair go" and "mateship" could become empty. We will become two, not one, country, and certainly not a "Commonwealth". We risk becoming a country of "haves" and "have nots", with all the undesirable social consequences which must follow.

Recent years have seen the emergence of second and third generation unemployment. Hundreds and thousands of children in Australia are growing up in poverty, in families that have never known an adult in regular employment.

The heads of the various churches in Australia, particularly the people who work in charitable agencies which deliver services to the poor and disadvantaged, see the depths of despair and deprivation of many Australians each day. We are concerned that Australia urgently needs a national forum, to develop a national strategy to reverse these trends and to focus on management, within Australia, of the adverse effects of global developments on our country.

Successful development of any such strategy clearly involves support and participation of many sectors of the community – including government, capital, labour, welfare services, academia and the media. But the prime responsibility rests with government – Federal, State and Local – for it is the only vehicle with the resources and power to manage the changes required. Gaining the support and driving participation of all sectors throughout the

nation requires a solid leadership mechanism, and it is our belief that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) may offer a suitable platform for this to happen.

If COAG proves to be a useful vehicle, it would then require the support of its individual members, and it is for this reason that we write to you today. We hope that you will find merit in this concept, and that you will lend support and provide leadership for its development.

We realize that the obstacles for achieving satisfactory outcomes at a national forum are enormous, but not insurmountable. We note that Ireland and the United Kingdom have already taken significant steps to introduce national strategies to alleviate poverty. We urge you to throw your support behind the proposal to make this wealthy country one in which all Australians can live decently.

Yours sincerely,

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