



## **Christians for an Ethical Society: 2019 Report**

### ***Wither Democracy***

The theme, *Wither Democracy* has proved to be a prescient choice for the past 12 months. A reasonable Christian assumption is that common good within a free and open civil society is best served by a healthy and robust democracy. However there are growing signs that globally democracy is not in a healthy state, and that in its home in the West there are worrying signs of decay. What are some of the contributing reasons? Clearly there are many.

The last decade has been marked by rapidly escalating inequity. Very considerable wealth is held in the hands of fewer and fewer people. Those who hold the wealth are anxious to ensure that conditions enabling wealth transfer from wages to assets continues to prevail. Those with wealth have considerable lobbying capacity, this capacity now has far more influence on policy making than the ballot box.

Unease and a feeling that those in power are not to be trusted has led to a sharp rise in populist leaders. While populism may masquerade as democracy at work, it is an illusion, because underlying problems are not addressed. Hidden underneath bland and dismissive aphorisms such as 'fake news', 'draining the swamp', 'how good is Queensland', 'more jobs and lower power prices', 'we are entering Britain's finest hour'; lies a political laziness that refuses to enact policy, or truthfully address issues. The scandalous lack of an energy policy in Australia which has directly led to the steep rise in the cost of power, is but one example.

The conflictual and binary nature of politics has led to the demise of good consensus policy making. Genuine reform in the interests of common good can only happen when carried within the general population by bipartisan support. No genuine reform has happened across a range of policy areas since the Hawke Keating government. It is long overdue. The May election result was a triumph of no policy over policy. With no end in sight to unseemly rivalry within parties, let alone cross parties, it is difficult to imagine much needed reform of policy any time soon.

Society, and the politicians who represent us, have become immersed in blatant self-interest in the mistaken belief that through the protection of self-interest all will be well. That is why back pocket issues always trump other issues at the ballot box and why politicians shamelessly promote them. The illusion takes us down a path of fragility and decay for it is only as that which we hold in common is protected that we can be confident about our future together. It has become a national scandal that on leaving office politicians of all persuasions are financially rewarded for representing self-interested causes. In the case of Christopher

Pyne and Julie Bishop it is a double scandal that an inquiry has cleared them of failing the 'pub test'.

Parliaments are paid to act in the best interests of the people. The complexity of many issues is such that it is unreasonable to expect the population at large to reach responsible comprehension without the expert briefing available to political leadership. For example, how was the British population to fully comprehend the complexities involved in leaving Europe? It should have been the responsibility of Westminster to weigh the issues and come to a decision. In Australia for economic reasons alone, quite apart from environmental reasons, we need a robust policy of transition from fossil fuels, whilst middle- and upper-income welfare is simply unaffordable.

On another matter, Christians need to be concerned enough to speak out against the push from conservative and fundamentalist religious elements for legislated 'Religious freedom' protection. There is absolutely no evidence that rights of religious freedom in Australia are under threat. The push for legislation is coming from groups who seek the right to impinge upon the rights of others. Christianity is increasingly under threat in many parts of the world, but not Australia. If Christianity is under threat in Australia, its cause is the Folau case and other instances like it which make a mockery of the Christian Gospel and make its voice in secular Australia that much harder to be heard. It is to be hoped that the *Australian Christian Lobby* which rushed headlong in support of Folau has had leisure to repent of its precipitous and misguided action.

## 2018-2019 Forums

1. Last year our dinner forum was held at the Southern Cross Club on the 10th October. **Hugh Mackay**, arguably Australia's most able social commentator gave a typically insightful address into the necessary and essential character of human society for all its members in an address entitled: *Why Neighbours Matter*.
2. Our **Joint Forum** with the Catholic Social Justice Commission on 25 October was focussed on homelessness and the housing crisis as addressed in the 2018-2019 Social Justice Statement: *A Place to Call Home – Making a home for everyone in our land*. The Forum was moderated by Father Michael Cockayne.
3. 2019 forums were kicked off by an old friend **Paul Bongiorno** on 12 February with his address *Journalism in a Post-truth Age*. Paul, a veteran journalist, one-time seminarian, and current writer for the Saturday paper, helped us think through the complexities of communicating and educating in a digital age.
4. On the 26<sup>th</sup> March, in the lead up to the federal election, **Gabrielle Chan** gave us insights into the trust deficit bedevilling Australian politics through insight into her recent book *Rusted off: Why is Country Australia fed up?* That Australian cities gain a disproportionate amount of political attention is driven by population density, but issues facing the bush, not least the fate of the Murray Darling will have a huge impact on the Australia we have and will become - city and country dwellers alike.
1. **Ebony Bennett**, research writer with the Australia Institute, was our speaker on June 4. Her address: *Why a national Integrity commission* was completely persuasive. Indeed, so important is the delivery of such a commission that Christian voices should be mobilised in its support. Present indications are that the government will legislate for something far less than a commission with necessary powers. It may be better to have nothing, rather than live with the spectacle of a toothless tiger.

2. Speakers at our dinner on 27 August at the Bella Vista restaurant in Belconnen are to be **Bishop Mark and Mrs Monica Short** speaking on the topic *Telling Truth, Building Community, What the Indigenous church Teaches Us*.

## **Website**

We are very grateful to Ms Catherine MacGregor who has worked with us over the past year to make the most of our enhanced website and provide invaluable technical support along with Cameron Thompson who has guided us in a more effective use of our e-publicity. We hope that our site will make search of our resources more widely accessible and make publicity of forthcoming events clearer.

## **Committee:**

The committee for the past year has comprised John Warhurst (President), George Browning (Chair), Ann Skamp (Secretary), Jeremy Dawson (Treasurer), Bill Bush, David Hunter, Ingrid Moses, Werner Padarin, Stephen Pickard, Clive Rodger and Peter Walker.

### Retiring members

We congratulate Peter Walker for his appointment as Principal of the United College, Sydney, and wish him well.

Werner Padarin who has been a committed and enthusiastic member of the committee from the commencement of Christians for an Ethical Society resigned in April. In particular, Werner's contribution to publicity of our forums has been invaluable and greatly appreciated.

## **Bishop George Browning**

**6 August 2019**