

CHRISTIANS FOR AN ETHICAL SOCIETY; WHERE IT CAME FROM

1. The idea of Christians for an Ethical Society was hatched by two friends, Terry McCarthy and David Goss, retired officials and diplomats of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. They had a grand vision for what they termed a “Centre for an Ethical Society”. They saw it as a means of promoting social justice as core Christian values. They felt that “the Christian social conscience has tended to be overlooked, even by some Christians, as a central Christian issue and value.” A CES could “provide a public ecumenical voice of the Christian social conscience focusing on social Justice issues.”¹ In the words of its website, the Centre was created out of concern that, “despite public activities and statements by the churches, a narrow range of moral issues, largely concerning sex and beginning and the end of life, have increasingly come to be seen by the public, and portrayed in the media, as the totality of the Christian view.”² Business ethics and sexual and personal morality were regarded as lying outside the CES remit.³ At the same time the CES has been careful to make the point that Christian concepts of social justice are not solely a Christian issue, that similar values are widely shared and that the CES should be prepared to cooperate with any other organisation that shares them.⁴ Thus the Charter stated that the CES “seeks to join with all persons of goodwill, regardless of their religious beliefs, who share this ethical vision and who, in their own ways and through their own organizations, are similarly focussed on these ends.”⁵

Although established with the support of the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting churches, it was appreciated that there was value in the CES being autonomous, not least because church organisations as recipients of large government grants are constrained from speaking out on public issues.⁶ It was thus envisaged that the CES would not be “inhibited by the wider considerations which may inhibit churches from engaging in vigorous public debate generally or in following up such statements.”⁷

2. Terry and John’s vision was that the CES would be a national ecumenical body managed by a board with different states and territory advisory committees. They “canvassed church leaders and others in five States⁸ securing the support of the leaders of the three mainstream churches: Anglican, Catholic and Uniting.⁹ This endorsement was intended to provide it with authority while ensuring sufficient flexibility for its autonomous operation.¹⁰ The centre was established with an interim advisory committee under the chairmanship of the Rev Prof James Haire. This met three times in the first part of 2006 to advise and guide the initiating group and approve the Constitution, a statement on the relations between the CES and the churches, underlining the ecumenical but timeless nature of the CES. It also initiated work to draw up a charter setting out the CES approach.¹¹
3. On 26 July 2006 the CES board adopted the charter and a statement on its role and relations with the churches. The board included directors nominated by the heads of the Anglican, Catholic and Uniting churches and the board of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.¹² The resulting board consisted of a group of distinguished Australians including the Rev Canon Dr Ray Cleary, CEO Anglicare, Victoria, Mr Philip Glendinning, Executive Director of the Edmund Rice Foundation, Prof Larissa Berendt of UTS and from Canberra, Rev Prof James Haire and Bishop George Browning.

1 Statement on CES role and its relations with the church is (adopted by the Board on 26 July 2006 as resolution 2006/9).

2 Quoted in e-mail from Bill Bush dated 26 June 2007; Annual report of Bishop George Browning 5 June 2007.

3 Comment by David Goss in minutes of inaugural meeting of the A/C tea advisory Council on 28 August 2006.

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5 Charter of Christians for an Ethical Society, ACT, 19 May 2009 (edition 2). As reflected in the range of speakers at forums, similar sentiments guided the Centre.

6 Canberra chapter minutes of meeting of 27 February 2007.

7 Some thoughts on the value that CES adds to the pursuit of social Justice, board resolution 2006/12.

8 Annual report of Bishop George Browning 5 June 2007.

9 Resolution 2006/9.

10 Some thoughts on the value that CES adds to the pursuit of social Justice, board resolution 2006/12.

11 Annual report of Bishop George Browning 5 June 2007.

12 Annual report of Bishop George Browning 5 June 2007.



4. The CES received much practical support from the Society of St Vincent de Paul which provided office space and office equipment at Lewisham in Sydney and a grant of \$10,000 to help the centre to become established. Terry McCarthy himself had been president of the National Social Justice Committee of the Society.¹³ It was conceived that the CES would become financially independent with funds sufficient to support a professional secretariat.
5. The national launch of the CES by Sir William Deane took place in Sydney on 21 November 2006. The broad intention was that under the oversight of the National board, a network of regional chapters and advisory councils would be established in each capital city to focus on State or Territory activities in the social justice field.

Regional chapters

6. The ACT was the first subsidiary chapter to be launched (on 14 February 2007). It was followed by one in Sydney (launched on 29 March) and in Brisbane (on 30 May)¹⁴; no further chapters were created. David Goss reported that there was no agreement to establish a chapter in Western Australia where it was “felt that there is already good co-operation on social Justice matters through the Australian Council of Churches.”¹⁵ On the basis of experience the chapters found it unnecessary to operate the elaborate system of committees that had been envisaged. In February 2007 the board recognised that “the lack of a full-time executive was a major defect at present which highlighted the question of fund raising . . .”¹⁶ The Sydney chapter organised an address by Hugh Mackay on 24 July 2007 asking “where do our values spring from?” and on 10 May 2007 by the Rev Keith Garner, superintendent of the Wesley Mission, asking whether social Justice was an “obligation or optional extra to Christians”.

The ACT regional chapter

7. In implementation of that national scheme, an informal ACT Advisory Council under the chairmanship of Rev Peter Walker took place on 3 April 2006 at Wesley Uniting Church in Forrest. David Goss, a member of that congregation, added the secretaryship of this advisory council to his secretaryship of the National Board. It took a year for the ACT chapter to develop a program of work. It was launched on 14 February 2007 before about 100 people at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. James Haire gave an introduction about the CES. The guest speaker was Robert Fitzgerald AM, Commissioner at the Productivity Commission and a former President of the Australian Council of Social Services. Inauspiciously for an organisation promoting values of Christian social justice, he insisted that whatever the CES recommended should be practical and recognise the need to maintain economic growth. The first meeting of the ACT Chapter, at which 14 attended, took place at Wesley Uniting on 20 February 2007 when doubt was expressed whether energy should be expended on raising \$300,000 to employ a professional director. Peter Walker continued as chair. The Meeting replaced David Goss as secretary with Bill Bush. As envisaged by the National Board, the meeting established four committees responsible for functions, publicity, fundraising and research to carry out the detail of its work. By this time the ACT chapter could ?? four financial sponsors and 16 supporters.

Initial seminars of the ACT chapter

8. The first year of operation of the Centre in Canberra in 2007 had as its theme “Building a just and compassionate society” developed in the following six forums:
 - 20 March 2007: Dr John Falzon, CEO of the St Vincent de Paul Society, led the first seminar (as forums were termed). It took place at Wesley Uniting Church under the chairmanship of Rev Prof Thorwald Lorenzen. Doctor Falzon asked whether building a just and compassionate Australia was “merely an option for Christians?”
 - 29 March 2007: at the Reinberger Centre in Yarralumla, Prof William Maley and John Weeks, vice-president of the National Social Justice Committee of the St Vincent de Paul society, asked whether “Australia is a just and compassionate society?” Bishop Pat Power chaired a lively evening.

13 CES media release dated 20 August 2, 2008.

14 Minutes of board meeting and retreat, 22 – 23 February 2007.

15 Canberra chapter minutes of meeting on 27 September 2007.

16 Minutes of board meeting and retreat, 22 – 23 February 2007.



- 19 April 2007: Dr Clive Hamilton spoke at the Kingston Baptist church on the environment, namely our obligations to God's creation.
 - 13 June 2007: at St John's Church Hall, Reid, Prof John Langmore, president of the UN Association of Australia, spoke on impediments to economic and social development and Paul Callaghan, Executive Director, Australian Council for International Development, on Australians as global citizens.
 - 25 September 2007: at the Reinberger Centre. Tony Kevin, in spite of his fear that he was succumbing to pneumonia, spoke on honesty in government. Bishop Pat Power chaired the evening.
 - 18 October 2007: Discussion of social justice issues for election '07 at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture; Sen Lyn Allison (Democrats); Sen Gary Humphries (Liberal); Bob McMullan MP (ALP) and Kerry Tucker (Greens candidate). Terry McCarthy as Honorary Executive Director had prepared an analysis of the position on social justice issues of political parties on the basis of their answer to a survey.¹⁷
9. These forums attracted an average attendance of 50 growing to 75 or more at the last two or three. This enabled the Canberra chapter to pay its own way and make a surplus of about \$65 a forum. This allowed it to maintain and enhance its website which was developed by Sepp Babler. By then it had approximately 150 supporters. This gave the committee confidence that the Canberra group could continue on a self-sustaining basis.¹⁸

The ACT striking out on its own

10. On 17 October 2007 David Goss reported to the ACT advisory committee that Terry McCarthy's last round of letters to potential donors had netted a mere \$250. The \$60,000 he had raised earlier would run out in January. He had therefore resolved to recommend to the board that the CES be wound up. As Terry McCarthy and David Goss explained in a paper to the board "to operate as envisaged required \$200,000 a year, and indeed some \$300,000 a year before proceeding with a full-time executive director. But it is clear that the funds needed for the CES to operate as envisaged will not be available."¹⁹ Accordingly, the board decided to cease operations and de-register the CES from December 2007.
11. In these circumstances, the ACT committee had to decide what it should do when that occurred. It was suggested that it might roll itself into the ACT Council of Churches or the New South Wales Ecumenical Council. The ACT committee understood that the Sydney chapter would fold. Planning quickly began for the Canberra chapter to continue. A further option canvassed was for it to become an arm of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.²⁰
12. At a meeting at Wesley Uniting on 18 December 2007 important decisions were taken to continue the ACT group:
- To retain the CES acronym and stress the point that social justice was a core Christian value, it was agreed that the continuing body should be known as Christians for an Ethical Society.²¹
 - The continuing body should establish a formal relationship with the New South Wales Ecumenical Council with which Prof John Neville had been closely associated.
 - Because of other heavy commitments, Peter Walker stood down as chair. Heather McLaren took over that role on an interim basis pending the identification of a cleric to take it on. Robyn Coghlan became secretary in place of Bill Bush who wished to concentrate on organising events. Sepp Babler continued to take responsibility for the website and assumed the role of Treasurer. He was succeeded by Brian Wraith as Treasurer.

17 Undated (12 November 2007) CES media release, "Christian organization rates political parties on social issues."

18 E-mail from Sepp Babler dated 30 November 2007. The

19 Board paper dated 19 November 2007. It lists the reasons for inadequate support.

20 Options for a post-CES world e-mailed by Bill Bush on 10 November 2007.

21 Minutes of meeting of ACT chapter on 18 December 2007.

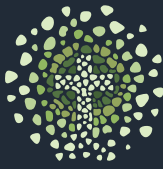


13. The committee applied itself to the tedious task of drafting a charter and constitution in accordance with which it became a Working Group of the NSW Ecumenical Council. It also became an Associate Member of ACT Churches Council Inc. The constitution provided for a president with a two-year tenure. This position has been held by Rev. Gregor Henderson, Bishop George Browning, Revd Professor James Haire AC, Revd Professor Thorwald Lorenzen and from 2018 Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO. To foster involvement with local church communities, the committee decided that a different minister or priest would be selected to chair each forum.
14. Echoing discussions within the committee, some reservations were expressed to the continuing group using the word "Christian" in the title, on the basis that some people might be put off joining the group on the grounds that they were not practising Christians.²²
15. While it reorganised itself, the group embarked upon a new set of forums, this time focusing on matters of particular concern to the ACT government, notably the ACT's own prison which was then being established. Not only did the CES extend its focus to local ACT affairs, it devoted extended attention to a single topic so as to consider the issue in depth over several forums. To achieve this it adopted a practice of having two speakers at each forum – one academic and one from a relevant organization to give practical insight.
16. The series of five forums on prisons began with an address by Prof Tony Vinson asking whether prisons can be human or even rehabilitate. This was followed by a forum at which the ACT Attorney General, Simon Corbell, and the criminologist, Prof David Biles, spoke. In the third forum, Sen Gary Humphries, Justice Richard Refshauge and the ACT Chief Magistrate, Ron Cahill, considered whether prisons have become the mental health institutions of the 21st century.²³ The prison/mental health link was addressed again the next year at a forum at which Professor Ian Webster and Deb Wybron, Convenor of the ACT Womens' Prison Group, spoke on 3 June 2009. On 25 September 2008 the CES convened a forum, chaired by Jack Waterford, of ACT Assembly candidates under the title "the ACT elections: addressing social justice?"
17. The charter provides that: "Christians for an Ethical Society seeks to join with all persons of goodwill, regardless of their religious beliefs, who share its ethical vision "and who, in their own ways and through their own organizations, are similarly focused on these ends." To that end, the CES has held joint forums with other organisations including Sustainable Population Australia and Catholic Social Justice Commission. Indeed there have been a series of annual joint forums with the commission focussing on the Social Justice Statements issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops.
18. The committee received some comment that the activities and preoccupations of the CES were too intellectual, elitist even. Social ills were identified and discussed but nothing done about them. There was clearly a strand of thinking amongst our supporters that the CES should roll up its collective sleeves and do something about what it talked about. The committee took several steps to take account of this feedback:
 - (a) It supported participation in a successful campaign championed by the union movement and Bishop Pat Power to improve the wages and working conditions of cleaners. As a group, the CES attended a demonstration and wrote letters of support.²⁴
 - (b) It sought to complement speakers promoting abstract concepts with a second speaker. Thus, for example, at the forum on Social Inclusion on 5 November 2008 Kasy Chambers as executive director of Anglicare Australia was the second speaker to Senator Urusula Stephens, the Parliamentary Secretary for Social Inclusion and the Volunteer Sector and in 2009 there were speakers from ACT organisations the work of which gave practical support to the matter in hand: Kat Szukalska a co-ordinator of several ACT youth programs for Anglicare spoke with David Crosbie CEO of the Mental Health Council of the ACT and Deb Wybron of the women and prison network spoke with Prof. Webster. These ACT organisations were encouraged to bring their publicity material;

22 Minutes of meeting of ACT chapter on 22 January 2008 [misdated 22 December 2007].

23 Letter of invitation dated 12 February 2008 to members of the ACT legislative assembly

24 Statement of support for the removal of exploitation of cleaners in the ACT dated 23 April 2008 (to be presented at a rally at the Griffin Centre on Tuesday, 29 April 2008).



- (b) background information on a number of forum topics notably prisons was made available with a view to encourage those who were interested becoming involved;
- (c) holding follow up meetings to the prison and others forums for those interested.
- (d) Making it a point to invite Canberra clerics to be forum chairs in the hope that doing so would spread the word about what we were doing amongst the broader church community and thus gain active support from Canberra clerics; and
- (e) Advertising the intended themes and forum topics with teachers responsible for SOCE (now Australian Civics and Citizenship) at church schools like Radford to have forums factored in to the teaching year.

Experience showed that none of these initiatives were self-sustaining as the committee hoped they would be and the committee did not have the resources to continue many of them.

19. Moreover, the committee felt it should play to its strength in the field of ideas by providing a strong Christian voice on issues of public importance engaging social justice. If it tried to do everything, it would achieve nothing. It also recognised that its forums provided means of connecting the audience with other agencies that were “doing practical things” and that, indeed, some of its members were heavily involved with such agencies. Since then, an annual theme has guided the choice of forums and speakers. The program of forums in 2008 and 2009 paid extended attention to mental ill-health (2 forums) and the predominantly federal issue of social inclusion (3 forums).
20. To the end of 2017 the CES has run 65 forums. Five were on refugees, 10 looked at climate change or the environment. Four considered social disadvantage or poverty, nine, unemployment and economics and two, taxation. Two forums were specifically devoted to indigenous issues. There would have been many more had speakers been available. No single speaker spoke more times than Father Frank Brennan SJ, who has addressed three forums.
21. A significant development in the governance of the CES occurred in 2015 when the CES concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. This formalised the close co-operation that had evolved. The ACC&C provides the venue for our forums and Committee meetings. Its Executive Director Rt Rev Professor Stephen Pickard and a member of its Board and Executive are members of the CES management Committee. The new arrangements facilitate cooperation and coordination of resources between the two organisations while preserving the separate identity of the CES.