

Christians for an Ethical Society

Annual Report 2016-2017

In the last 12 months there has been considerable public debate about values, more particularly Australian values. This debate has been set within the broader issue of migration and expectations we might have about those who would make Australia home.

Clearly Australia's unprecedented run of recession free growth has come largely on the back of migration. Wealth has not increased qualitatively (as wage stagnation shows), it has increased quantitatively through an increase in the population. Wealth resides with those who have assets and the equity gap increases between asset wealth and wage earners.

So what about values? Are there any values that are distinctively Australian? I would argue there are many characteristics that are distinctively Australian, not least self-deprecating humour, but as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation our values are global. They are common to humanity as a whole. Commitment to a mate is not a specifically Australian trait, it is a character of being human. A desire for justice and fairness is a human longing, for we know that its absence brings conflict and violence. Care for the vulnerable in our midst is a universal response for we know that each one of us have been vulnerable (as babies) and will be vulnerable again (old age) quite apart from crises which in one shape or another are almost inevitable to all.

Whether we are part of the shrinking number of Australians who claim to be Christian or are part of the growing number who assert no religion, the facts of the matter are that values of humanness in Australian society have been honed through a Christian ethic which is much greater than, but never less than, 'do unto others as you would have them do to you'.

Values and who has the right to define them in modern day Australia became an acrid debate following ANZAC Day 2017. Yassmin Abdel-Magied, the Sudanese born, Muslim, civil engineer and ABC commentator was roundly taken to task for asking whether the values we associate with the ANZAC tradition are being applied on Manus and Nauru. If the ANZAC 'values' are deep within our psyche why wouldn't they be universally applied? Yassim was probably ill-advised to comment in this way on ANZAC day and thus be open to an over-reaction; however in my view her point is exactly the right point to make. If we claim to hold certain values but only selectively apply them, then we cannot claim them as national values at all.

Let me be very specific. There are a number of current issues that fail to be addressed and because they languish without leadership and in ineptitude I would argue that those who hold positions of political leadership in our land are not the ones to hold sway over what may or may not be considered an Australian value:

- It is un-Australian for Australia to manipulate our common border with Timor Leste that Australia might gain the lion's share of gas and oil – which is what we have done.
- It is un-Australian to hold Asylum seekers, confirmed as refugees by the UNHCR, in cruel and indefinite detention – which is what we have done.

- It is unAustralian to inflict permanent psychological damage on refugee children known only by their boat arrival number – which is what we have done.
- It is un-Australian for inventive ingenuity to be focused solely on profit. It is very Australian to invent a piece of technology which enables life-giving productivity to African subsistence farmers. CSIRO has been changed from an institute committed to pure science which better the lives of all, to an organisation which focuses on commercialisation. This is what has recently happened – it is unAustralian.
- It is un-Australian not to recognise that our nation has been built on many injustices against its indigenous people including an attempt at ethnic cleansing. Mark Tedeschi's account of the Myall Creek massacre, its aftermath, and the role played by John Hubert Plunkett the NSW Attorney General should be compulsory reading for all Australians.
- It is un-Australian for Yasmin Abdel Magied to have been pilloried because of her comments about ANZAC and its place in the Australian psyche. What was it about her that made her comments unacceptable? Is it that she is Sudanese born, that she is a Muslim, that she is female, or perhaps that she has had the audacity to put her head way above the parapet?
- It is un-Australian not to face and overcome challenges. The environmental crisis is observably obvious as well as scientifically documented. We still have no clear policy to meet this challenge. The policy vacuum in the energy sector is outrageous and causing real suffering to the marginalised and poor. It is un-Australian for us not to rise to this challenge and be world leaders.

These are but a few reasons why Christians for an Ethical Society has such an important role to play in the shaping of debate both within the Christian community of faith and beyond.

In the last 12 months we have again been able to host some outstanding forums:

2016:

July:

Our well attended Dinner forum, Father Frank Brennan: ***What makes for the Common Good***

September:

Dr Helen Szoke, Oxfam CEO, led a colloquy of NGO leadership and then the evening forum: ***Strategy not Charity: Why we need effective aid now.***

October:

Joint forum with the Catholic Social Justice Commission discussing the Catholic Social Justice Statement.

November:

Dr Graeme Garrett and Jan Morgan ***Does beauty say Adieu? The call of beauty in a disfigured world.***

2017: Our theme: **Seeking our Moral Compass**

February:

Father Peter L'Estrange gave a theological introduction to our theme *Seeking our Moral Compass*

April:

Dr Andrew Leigh: *The Politics of Love*

May:

Dr Clive Hamilton *Defiant Earth: The fate of humans in the Anthropocene*

Our Executive over the last 12 months has comprised: myself as Chair, David Hunter (Vice Chair), Jeremy Dawson (Treasurer), Robyn Coghlan (Secretary), Stephen Pickard (ACC&C), Bill Bush, Clive Rodger, Ingrid Moses, Werner Padarin, Cath Blunt and Peter Malone. We were blessed to retain Dr Thorwald Lorenzen for a further 12 months as our patron.

After many years of very faithful and dedicated commitment Robyn has given notice that she will not be available for election to the Executive in the coming year. As a foundational member and source of much energy she will be greatly missed. Cath Blunt has also had to stand down because of a change in her commitments. We will miss her very much. Peter Malone finds it very difficult to balance his work commitments with afternoon meetings and will continue to support, but will not be able to serve on the executive.

We continue in a very effective partnership with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture. Our greatest challenge has not changed, namely to develop an avenue through which the content of our forums reaches a far bigger audience. Clearly this is to happen through our website, face-book, twitter etc. We have much to do to make these facilities far more effective and I sincerely hope this year will see considerable progress.

I am much looking forward to a forum of different style in November when a small group of young Christians will sit in conversation with a group of young Muslims. This will be a night not to be missed.

As I said last year, CES is not politically aligned, least of all a representative of either left or right. We seek to represent what we believe should be the Christian Centre of Australian life.

Bishop George Browning

Chair: Christians for an Ethical Society

29 August 2017