



34 Bedford St, Box Hill  
PO Box 505, Box Hill VIC 3128  
Phones: SPC: (03) 9890 1077  
Yarra Institute (03) 9899 4777  
Mobile: 0432 991 085  
info@socialpolicyconnections.com.au  
www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au

## NEWSLETTER

March 2009

### *Striving for a sustainable future*

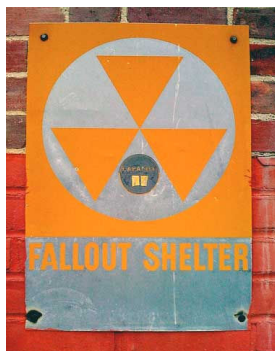
*Editorial by Stephen Ames*

Everything is changing much faster than expected, even given our adjustment to a frantic pace of life. We are now taken by surprise at the speed of events. It suggests that we are out of touch with the processes of which we are a part. In what way?

Let me put it in a theological context. Micah says what God wants of us: to love kindness, do justice and walk humbly with God. But we find other possibilities for life more attractive, more persuasive, and our actions produce effects that gain a life of their own, even to the point of 'living us' more than being lived by us. This can overwhelm us individually, socially and as a planet. It involves an expansion of technological capability, of the market without limit, and the corresponding expansion of desire.

Theologically this is code for a denial of finitude, of our being created as living bodies. This is code for the newly predominant role in our lives individually and socially, of 'fantasy', of 'virtual reality', in which everything is possible – another surrogate for God. All this 'turbo charges' the process of actions and their effects, gaining a life of their own and this because neither human beings nor anything else are autonomous entities – every thing is connected to everything else!

We are radically out of touch with the processes of which we are a part, which we have unleashed, because of the nature of the processes involved. We are also out of touch because all this clashes with the 'self image' of 21<sup>st</sup> century post-modern human beings, the leading edge of what is happening. We are the actors, not the acted on. We know.



Micah's word about humility is needed. It is not a question of grovelling, but of recognising our self-deception. On the one hand the search for abundance could lead us into a fight for survival, including wars for

*Photo: Chris Devers, flickr CC*

## SPC events

in the Study Centre at Yarra Theological Union, 98 Albion Rd., Box Hill. The Centre can also be entered from 34 Bedford St.

### **'Making taxation more equitable'**

**Conversation with US tax specialist, John Fox**

**18 March, 7.30 pm. Entry by donation**

John is a frequent media commentator on the distortions in the US tax system, and the author of *If Americans really understood the income tax: uncovering our most expensive ignorance* (2001) and *10 tax questions the candidates don't want you to ask* (see [www.10taxquestions.com](http://www.10taxquestions.com)). He argues that the Obama and Rudd governments have a fresh opportunity now to undertake a major reform of tax policies to make them more equitable.

### **'A response to global warming'**

**Mr Geoff Lacey, with Dr Stephen Ames.**

**Wednesday 1 April, 7.30 pm. Entry by donation**



*Photo courtesy of sunrise.seven, flickr*

A civil engineer, Geoff is also well known as a pioneering environmentalist and naturalist. He is the author of a landmark work on the ecology of the Yarra: *'Still Glides the Stream'; the Natural History of the Yarra from Heidelberg to Yarra Bend* (2004). He is an honorary Senior Fellow at the University of Melbourne.

**Dr Stephen Ames** will draw out some theological reflections on the implications for how we might adjust to environmental threats. Stephen is an Anglican priest, a Canon at St Paul's Cathedral and lectures in the History and Philosophy of Science programme at the University of Melbourne. He is one of the founders of Social Policy Connections, and first president of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy.

scarce resources, and finding ourselves at odds with nature. On the other hand the surrogate divinity is a desire for a false transcendence. But 'in your face' real transcendence is first met in justice done and loving kindness given.

*continued over page →*



However, it is not as if we lacked warning on the financial crisis, climate change, the Murray Darling, the fires. It is that in different ways we did not take sufficient account of the ferocity of the processes involved. The fires were outside the parameters based on prior experience. The 'fire index' was many times the danger level. A powerful warning, perhaps too difficult to digest.

There were also warnings about the looming financial crisis by reputable economists. There were plenty of warnings about the level of debt and its potential consequences should things go wrong. These were dismissed. The state of the Murray Darling had not gone unnoticed, but suddenly now we find there could be a disaster for Australia's food production and for all who depend on the river system. The political bickering goes on.

Likewise the scope and speed of climate change are themselves growing. What is truly amazing is that this is not factored into the policies set by government, or by industry. The latest statement about climate change by the Australian Industry Group makes no mention of a probable time-frame in which to deal with climate change before an irreversible tipping point occurs. The ferocity of the fires and the floods in North Queensland indicate the sheer power of nature to overwhelm and crush human life. Geoff Lacey in his address at the SPC forum on 1 April will explore the implications more at length.

All of us need to adapt to the enormous changes required if we are to fashion a sustainable future, of which one part is radically reducing the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, but not in a form where a cap-and-trade scheme means the contribution of individuals allows big polluters more room. Industry, unions, the government and opposition all emphasise the need to protect people's jobs and that we can't get ahead of the rest of the world.

Yet the question is: what will provide protection – in the short term and the long term? It is not provided by the route we are taking now. What are called for are vision, policies and political will, to make the vast transition to a sustainable way of life, including a sustainable economy. This includes the prospect of significant employment opportunities in a green economy. But climate change is happening faster than we think, faster than we want to think. ♦

### SPC submission to Enquiry on Nuclear Non-Proliferation & Disarmament

On behalf of Social Policy Connections, Bill Frilay made a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties' Inquiry into Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. Appended was a summary by Bruce Duncan of Catholic efforts to curtail and ban nuclear weapons and press for



genuine disarmament. Revd Wes Campbell also made a submission to the Enquiry drawing from Christian social traditions. These will be posted on the SPC website after they appear on the government website. Other submissions came from Pax Christi Australia, Uniting Justice Australia, the Campaign for International Cooperation and Disarmament, and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

The International Campaign against Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) has coordinated non-government organisations to meet with officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra. SPC was pleased to nominate Bill Frilay as its representative.

### Launch of the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy, Thursday 23 April, 7.30pm at the new Study Centre, YTU, 98 Albion Rd., Box Hill, (or via 34 Bedford St)

The Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy aims to explore the social traditions of the churches as they engage with wider social issues, and offers a new research capability in areas of social ethics and public policy. It is an ecumenical organisation under the umbrella of the Melbourne College of Divinity, and hence part of the national university system.

**Prof. Brian Howe** from the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne will speak at the launch from his extensive experience and scholarship on: **'The churches and social policy: past and future'**. He was Deputy Prime Minister of Australia (1991-95) and a member of the Federal Cabinet from 1984 to 1996.

### Globalisation Encyclical still coming?

Pope Benedict's encyclical on globalisation will likely be released shortly. On 26 February, Benedict said the encyclical was delayed because of the turmoil in the global economy. He lamented that people everywhere had been affected as a result of 'these fundamental errors revealed in the failure of the large American banks; the error at the basis of is human greed.' 'We must denounce this [system] with courage, but also concretely because moralising will not help unless supported by an understanding of reality' that will help remedy the situation.



Benedict added that individuals would also have to make sacrifices to help the poor and secure a more just order. He insisted that economic reforms would not succeed without 'just people'. Benedict said that the world would never achieve a perfect system, but all must strive for a better world more fully supporting human wellbeing.