

REVIVING CHURCH INFLUENCE IN PUBLIC POLICY

by Bill Frilay

**Bill Frilay reports on the conference on
“The Churches and Public Policy” of 19 July 2011.
The conference was organised by Social Policy Connections
at the Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne.**

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Mr Robert Fitzgerald on the Role of the Churches in Public Policy

Robert Fitzgerald AM gave the keynote address at the conference. He is a Commissioner of the Productivity Commission but was speaking as a private individual.

Despite the current sense of negativity, Fitzgerald pointed to reasons for optimism. Firstly, faith-based organisations are by nature optimistic, drawing as they do from the gospel message, belief in life after death and so on. Secondly, history is on our side – Australia has achieved much in respect of social policy, and church organisations have been at the centre of this. Thirdly, we have the wit and the wisdom to continue to strive for a better world. How to do this is the challenge.



Mr Robert Fitzgerald delivering his address, with Mr Denis Fitzgerald (left) listening attentively.

He outlined the history of how central church organisations and networks had been to the development of social policy in Australia. In the 1830s in Victoria, we would have been talking of poverty as the key issue. In the 1930s, the key was fair wages. Today, it is social inclusion or exclusion, an individual's part in society, climate change, indigenous wellbeing, the aged and housing affordability.

He identified three common themes: poverty; injustice and inequality; and faith-based influence.

He drew his historical perspective from Brian Dickie's "*No Charity There*", written in the late 1980s. Dickie had considered three phases historically – the charity phase, the welfare phase and the assistance phase. Robert suggested now we are in the "wellbeing" phase.

Prior to 1850, the colonies were predominantly convict settlements. Social welfare was institutionalised in government actions, e.g. asylums. The Benevolent Society was formed at Governor Macquarie's invitation as a Christian charitable organisation to assist the needy. The period 1835-90 was one of laissez-faire capitalism and free trade was dominant. It saw the immigration of people belonging to many different congregations, and the institutional churches played a predominant role in charity.

From the 1890s to 1949, capitalism and individualism were challenged by the growing concern for universal rights. Health care, children's care and the basic wage were major issues, as was the issue of socialism. It saw the first move by the institutional churches regarding advocacy on social justice. A key driver here was Pope Leo XIII's 1891 social document, *Rerum Novarum*.

The period 1949-86 saw capitalism regaining dominance. A compromise was to accept rights to universal assistance. It was the first time that faith-based organisations started to collaborate with each other. ACOSS was formed in the 1950s and was religiously based.

What emerged over this latter period? The dignity of the human person was key in the 1950s. The following decade saw the enunciation of the concept of the Common Good; the preferential option for the poor; the issue of economic justice; and the promotion of peace and justice. Subsequent years saw the notions of participation and also the rise of ecological concern. The 1990s saw a rich dialogue. Up till then the not-for-profit sector believed in partnership with government. This changed; governments want to govern and not be partners.



Denis Fitzgerald gives his response to Robert Fitzgerald.

The current era can be characterised by an economic approach of market-based solutions, the notion of personal responsibility, the emphasis on economic prosperity, and the emergence of green issues. There has been extraordinary growth in middle-class welfare because of the notion of universality (e.g. in universal healthcare). In a strange way, the concept of universal entitlement contrasts with personal responsibility.

Robert continued that we currently see a significant shift. What we focus on are “wellbeing” or “feel good” objectives. He is optimistic about this development. He has spoken in 2011 to the Anglican hierarchy and to the Salvation Army this year and concluded he is more optimistic that they are!

Robert welcomed the emergence of the concept of Social Capital. This involves the level of social relationship in the community, e.g. trust, involvement, and reciprocity. More recently the notion of Social Inclusion has been introduced. He said Fr David Cappo described this as “where all people feel welcomed, differences are accepted, etc”. Robert considered that these two concepts are real and based on respect and trust. They give a new insight into wellbeing.

Economists had used GDP per capita as a measure of living standards. Today all recognise that this is important but insufficient. The development of a more complete measure is a work in progress. It also has some problematic and potentially dangerous aspects as a measure.

What are the domains of wellbeing? Fitzgerald identified six. The first domain is that of a sense of self, and a sense of confidence that the person is valued. The second involves consumption, the ability to acquire food and sufficient material goods. The third is engagement in meaningful activity, for example for the indigenous community this can mean engagement in cultural and sporting activities. The fourth is connectedness to others. The fifth is the ability to exert influence, for example in workplace arrangements and having some say in these decisions. Finally there is safety from personal harm.

Why are these critical now? Because they are targeted to the sense of wellbeing. And in particular, they are central to faith-based organisations which have at their core notions of subsidiarity, of community and of a sense of self.

Fitzgerald’s optimism is based on a significant shift and what he sees as a new opportunity for faith-based organisations (he is concerned they may miss the opportunity, focussed as they can be on empty pews and issues of sex and power).

He sees the concept of wellbeing as a critical tool to influence public policy, because the enhancement of wellbeing is not contrary to economic development – they need not be in conflict. He noted the notion of wellbeing is in many Productivity Commission reports (e.g. they form flow-on benefits and the externalities). Wellbeing is not ephemeral, it is real.

Robert insisted that in public policy, the role of the churches is critical. Major reforms before us are in human services and in education for example. The ability of church organisations to influence these is essential.

He concluded that the churches can lead in addressing the challenges. He is optimistic – we can create a better world. He said that it is important to re-establish

trust and reciprocity as a basis of policy, and more and more care will have to be provided by the community itself. We don't have endless supplies of labour, and so we need neighbour to support neighbour. We need to re-establish and reassert the notion of Common Good, which is at the heart of the gospel message. ♦

Response from Mr Denis Fitzgerald

Director, Catholic Social Services Victoria .

Denis Fitzgerald addressed the issues in terms of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Yesterday, the gospels as always were our basis and essential for us. There were catastrophic mistakes in our practice, but at the same time great achievements, for example, the mobilisation of services, human rights and the rebuttal of atavistic capitalism. We are called to build on these achievements. Significant landmarks were *Rerum Novarum*, the Harvester case, and the great work of people such as Justice Higgins, Fr Brosnan and Peter Norden.



Mark Zirnsak led the workshop on human trafficking.

Today, the central tenets are welcoming the stranger, comforting the afflicted. The churches have a role to play and have the experience to engage in the dialogue of public policy. We (the churches) need not withdraw – we can engage with vigour.

Future: we are very prosperous (this is a positive) although many in our society are not. We have many people such as Robert Fitzgerald and Bill Scales who are products of a church background and who are capable and involved with policy development. Another positive is the churches working together much more.

But there are challenges: the secularisation of society, the diminution of the role of churches, and shameful behaviours and the consequent need to restore trust and respect. There is need for increased cooperation, since the voices of the churches can be softened because of different positions. ♦

Question Time

In question time, inter alia, Robert Fitzgerald urged church organisations to be confident in the important roles they play; they are influential, i.e. they must reassert their influence, but at the same time they must do the hard work to justify this (they/we do not have an entitlement *per se*).

Forum: How are faith-based organisations meeting the challenges?

Chair: Marilyn Webster, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Services

Panel: Major Brad Halse, Director of Government Relations, Salvation Army;

Dr Mark Zirnsak, Director, Justice & International Mission, Uniting Church;

Kasy Chambers, Executive Director, Anglicare Australia;

Tony Nicholson, Executive Director, Brotherhood of St Laurence.

The panel was asked:

What are the top three factors determining your social justice priority areas?

Responses to these questions included:

- The boards must be based on a perceived need on the ground
- Internal policy discussions are important, but don't overdo them
- The government space i.e. discussions with government and other organisations
- The mission of the church and the gospel, focussing on the vulnerable
- The sense of injustice occurring and can we help to address this
- Engagement of our supporters
- Expertise – we must have this if we are to address an issue
- Opportunity – is it time to be heard? (.e.g. on asylum seekers).
- Because we cannot not do it, i.e. it would be wrong to ignore it (as with indigenous issues)
- What would be the organisation's unique contribution, given our capabilities and knowledge; and are we able to bring this all together?



Mark Zirnsak and Major Brad Halse during the panel discussion.

What are two top policy areas you are focussing on in the next 5 years and why?

Responses to these questions included:

- A close alignment between social and economic policy as described by Robert Fitzgerald, in part arising from changes in population, ageing etc. This gives the opportunity to have more than a moral argument, e.g. opportunities for employment

- Social cohesion is important especially in immigration. If migration is perceived as unfair then Australian people will not support it, e.g. if disadvantaged Australians are not helped then other Australians may not support immigration.



Gavin Fufty speaking on new poverty indicators.

- How do we assist the disadvantaged to participate both economically (in the workforce and in quality of jobs) and socially? Points of focus here are health and education of the disadvantaged.
- There are different ways of support at different life stages. The reality is that over the next decade we cannot assume we can care and support the vulnerable, especially with the large group of baby boomers about to retire .
- Climate change, or as some prefer to call it, environmental degradation. This is not just a

negative but an opportunity, e.g. to help lower-income groups with tax relief (people can be harmed by the changes). An attraction here is that this is a new policy and can start at the foundations, e.g. on electricity tariffs.

- Poverty – some postcodes are indicative of poverty
- Asylum seekers
- Global poverty
- Homelessness

What are two challenges and two opportunities?

Responses were:

- Climate change
- COAG – overall agendas – the underlying aspect here is how we are going to live together – issues such as sustainable cities, housing, energy etc
- Strong economy helps: “time to mend the roof is when the sun is shining”. A strong economy can help with resources to address many issues, e.g. By moving more people into employment, caring, volunteer works etc
- Meetings with business (BCA, VECI) showed there are mutual concerns, e.g. the education of disadvantaged, their access to health, participation in the economy, and care for children and the elderly, workplace flexibility. Therefore there are big opportunities to collaborate with the business community.
- The world has changed since 1970-80; the new agenda calls for the ability of people to adjust to a changing world. Poverty is not just inadequacy of income.
- Asylum seekers – opposition to current Coalition policy. The opportunity here is that people believe we can accept increased numbers on humanitarian grounds, rather than boat people.

- Global poverty – challenge is persuading rich to share wealth, and the opportunity is the global momentum with the Millennium Development Goals, and movements against corruption.
- Corporate partnership and secular common ground are opportunities, as are more innovative approaches, e.g. neighbours caring for each other

What do organisations need to put vision into action?

Responses included:

- Discipline – stick to strategy
- Receptive public – way of simply telling the stories (cf “dole bludgers” etc)
- Shift in public opinion re asylum seekers; shift in politics, e.g. bipartisan approach
- Global poverty solutions beyond trade/aid. Corruption a global problem
- More considered government relations strategy
- Climate change – getting through to church communities and bishops

Audience Questions

Are you getting through to young generations especially faith values?

Responses:

- This is a big challenge. It is a struggle to engage with youth idealism. There is considerable engaging with youth in schools.
- Have an action plan, but youth want short-term (not long-term) projects. Most difficulty is with youth common values, i.e. getting them to consider matters beyond individual rights
- (Disagreeing with the question), the primary need is for all people to have care and security. Activism for youth is secondary.

Group workshops were conducted on

“Human Trafficking: an Emerging Issue”,

with Dr Mark Zirsak, Sr Carol Hogan SSS and Sr Carol McDonald

“Cost of Living Pressures”

Mr Gavin Dufty, General Manager, Social Policy & Research, St Vincent de Paul

“Church Agencies and Public Policy Networking”,

with Mr Denis Fitzgerald, Director, Catholic Social Services Victoria.

Summary of the closing address by Dr John Falzon

Chief Executive Officer of St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

Dr John Falzon offered an incisive quote for our motivation to engage in the effort to increase human wellbeing. He quoted Yeats: “There is another world but it is in this one”. This is of course similar to Jesus’: “the Kingdom of God is within you”.

Falzon said that much public policy was being developed at some remove from the problems themselves. He asked how can we find the answers to the social problems except by listening to the people forced to live in the guts of the social problems.

He argued strongly that we need to listen attentively to people : “Woe to us if we are not amongst the listening.” He was not surprised if governments aren’t listening, “but if faith-based NGOs don’t listen, I am disappointed”.

He opposed politicised moralising, such as: “What people are lacking is aspiration to climb over the wall.” The approach should be: “How do we tear down those walls to

give people a real chance.” He quoted (for parliamentarians) Isaiah: “Woe betide those who enact unjust laws...”

Dr Falzon concluded, urging church agencies and representatives not to be intimidated by power when lobbying, and not to go cap in hand to those who do not wish to change.

Thomas Borhez was a member of the Sandinista rebellion against the Somoza regime in Nicaragua but with his wife was captured. She was raped and killed. After the Sandinista victory, Borhez insisted: “My personal revenge – mercy and justice.”

Such optimism is well founded in the Gospel itself. ◀