



SPC News

MAY 2014

The SPC Board: a mini social justice forum in its own right!

Peter Whiting

As our website explains, "Social Policy Connections draws on the rich resources of Christian social traditions, and works to bring them into creative engagement with contemporary challenges to human wellbeing". Some recent changes to our Board exemplify the rich diversity in traditions available to us.



The most recent addition is **Danusia Kaska**, who has been a keen supporter of social justice issues and involved with the St Vincent de Paul Society since her teenage years. Currently she is the soup vans operation manager for Victoria.

Attending his first Board meeting in April was **Chris**

Mulherin, an Anglican minister completing a doctorate at the University of Divinity on the relationship between science and faith. Chris is an ex-engineer and ex-missionary, and teaches in tertiary institutions on topics ranging from climate change and history of science to philosophy.

Her main areas of expertise being in homelessness, housing, and family violence, **Major Jenny**

Begent from the Salvation Army brings to the Board a rich background in social policy.

Also representing our rich diversity, is **Brendan Byrne**. A former trade union official in the furnishing trades industry and later in the financial (insurance and non-banking) industry, Brendan is currently an ordained minister at Mountview Uniting Church in Mitcham.

As we seek to provide a forum to help develop a renewed vision of a just Australia, the Board effectively operates as a mini forum in its own right. We are always keen to provide an inclusive list of Christian voices within the public forum. Drawing upon the different traditions and the networks represented on our Board will help us achieve this goal. SPC aspires to being more than simply another voice, preferring instead to follow a collaborative model, speaking out on key social justice matters along with our allied organisations, to whom we are much indebted for support and encouragement.



I would like also to acknowledge the contributions to SPC made by **Michael Liddy** who has recently resigned from the Board. Michael understandably needs to make some space to enable him to focus on his recent election to the position of Victorian State President of the St Vincent de Paul Society. I am sure all SPC members join me in wishing Michael well in his new role.

Easter marchers protest treatment of asylum seekers

Thousands of Australians marched on Easter Sunday in protest about the various forms of detention for 30,000 asylum seekers and refugees around Australia, and including Manus Island and Nauru.

Church groups were strongly represented, with large numbers in Melbourne streaming from churches to assemble with union members, human rights networks,



Protest at St Patrick's Cathedral, Ngoc Son Nguyen

and others assembling for the march to Parliament House.

Melbourne's Anglican Archbishop, Philip Freier, wrote in *The Age* on 17 April that nearly 1000 children are in detention in Australia, with another 177 in "grim conditions in Nauru" (<http://tinyurl.com/lxlfwva>). The Anglican bishops of Australia had expressed their "profound disquiet" about the plight of children in detention, and about our nation's treatment of asylum seekers.

Catholic Bishop Vincent Long spoke strongly to a large crowd in St Patrick's Cathedral before the march. Archbishop Denis Hart distributed a statement at the Mass, pleading with political leaders to adopt humane treatment of asylum seekers.

Uniting Church and Baptist leaders were among other religious groups raising their voices in protest, emphasising that religious faith demanded care for vulnerable and distressed people.

Minimum - or is that minimal? - wages

Tony French

You have to hand it the right wing Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and their ability to grab a headline, the latest being its call for the abolition of the minimum wage. In case you were unaware, the Fair Work Commission (FWC), responsible for setting the threshold minimum employee wage rate in April, was reviewing what if any increase should be made. Doing away with a minimum rate (and by implication the FWC itself) scored more headlines and comment than if the IPA had simply recited, which it then did, that the current rate should be left unchanged.

Of course there will be many submissions to the FWC, from unions, employer groups, welfare organisations and the Churches. In particular, there is a well researched and technical submission from the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER). These submissions have received minor publicity since predictably they advocate for an increase (modest) in the minimum wage. ACCER, though, seeks a \$10-a-week increase for those on awards below the lowest paid to a tradesperson - about \$724 a week. Maybe this calculation is too complex for a simple headline grab, so in the meantime the myth continues that the minimum wage will keep you and your family from poverty.

When deciding to grant an increase - or not - to the minimum wage (in April \$16.32/hour), the FWC has to consider five criteria. The first is the performance and competitiveness of the national economy; in short, can we afford to pay more to the working poor? Straight out, the IPA argues that any increase will act as a 'reverse tariff' (our wages will be even less competitive than those in Asian low-wage countries, as though this is a race to the bottom), and locally poor states (such as Tasmania) will be further



Mayday_NYC2013_DSC_0067, Michael Fleshman, flickr cc

disadvantaged if their minimum wage rate is the same as that paid in (more expensive) Sydney. So why not pay the poorly paid in poor Tasmania even more poorly?

ACCER reminds us that the past 10 years have been the most prosperous in Australia's history, yet this unprecedented rise in prosperity has not lifted the living standards of many full-time low-paid workers and their families. Poverty remains persistent among many working families. You might ask how their financial situations would improve if there were no minimum wage settings. The minimum wage is, well, pretty minimal.

Read this article in full at www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au/?p=7282

Minimum wages a guarantee of poverty?

Kate French

Following years of fruitless annual submissions to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), Brian Lawrence of ACCER (Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations) has had enough. He is fed up with the FWC, in particular with its failure to take much notice of the comprehensive



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economic studies that he and others have submitted, the miserly minimal annual wage increases awarded, and the evident social consequences of all of this: growing social exclusion at the expense of social cohesion. We are witnessing, he says, the undesirable rise of a permanent underclass, the working poor.

In *Working Australia 2014: wages, families, & poverty*, he has comprehensively detailed the economic "issues and evidence" provided to the FWC, showing that the "safety net wage is failing to keep workers and their families out of poverty". Poverty he simply defines as being precluded from having an acceptable standard of living. Brian wants his comprehensive evidence to be available to anyone wishing to make a submission to the FWC, for in spite of all the evidence, for some unexplained policy reason he says the FWC continues to allow poor workers to fall by the wayside of contemporary living standards.

Read Kate's article in full at www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au/?p=7282

Working Australia 2014: wages, families, & poverty

This ebook, published by the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER), and edited by the chairman of ACCER, Brian Lawrence, draws from ACCER's submissions to annual wage reviews in support of low-paid workers and their families, including to the Fair Work Commission's current wage review.

Download the ebook at www.accer.asn.au

The complexities of Anzac Day

Bill Frilay

Bill Frilay asks if we are romanticising ANZAC, avoiding the cruel reality of war, and failing to assess the moral decisions that plunge us into war.

Read this article at www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au/?p=7247

Pope Francis & John XXIII

Bruce Duncan

Bruce Duncan reflects on the surprising similarities between Pope Francis and John XXIII, on this anniversary of John's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*.

Read this article at <http://tinyurl.com/mnn5fuc>