

NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER 2011

Editorial by Bruce Duncan

Why the widespread protests?



Occupy Sydney by 'Newtown Graffiti', Flickr cc

Many Australians have been surprised by the demonstrations in key cities, mobilising under the badge of 'the 99 percent movement'. Whatever one might think about the conduct of these protests, the underlying message is urgent and serious. It should particularly engage people concerned about social justice and equity.

The name 'the 99 percent movement' is a response to the article by Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, in the US magazine *Vanity Fair* in May 2011. His article, *Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%*, demonstrated the astonishing inequality in the United States: the upper 1 percent of Americans currently takes 25 percent of the nation's income every year, and controls 40 percent of the wealth.

The title of his article was a play on Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address insisting on government "of the people, by the people, for the people". Stiglitz highlighted the increasingly extreme inequality in the United States.

Twenty-five years ago, the top 1 percent of people received only 12 percent of the income, and had 33 percent of the wealth.

In the past decade, the incomes of the top 1 percent rose by 18 percent, while the incomes of middle-income groups had actually fallen, and markedly so among low-income groups. Moreover, Stiglitz wrote, the 1 percent has captured enough political power to ensure it increases in wealth at the expense of the nation. He warned that this form of corruption is undermining the US economy and future stability.

Another eminent economist, Nouriel Roubini, elsewhere warned: "Any economic model that does not properly address inequality will eventually face a crisis of legitimacy." In his view, the "laissez-faire Anglo-Saxon model has... now failed miserably."

As the churches have long pointed out, one of the chief culprits is the neoliberal ideology that disguised policies that redistribute wealth in favour of the wealthy.

Australia is not immune. Though we have escaped the worst of the financial and economic crises, neoliberalism has also been a significant force here, resulting in growing inequality, distorted taxation policies, a housing crisis, efforts to reduce wages and punitive measures on the unemployed.

The street protests around the world are like the canary in the coal mine, a warning that things must change and produce fairer outcomes for ordinary people.

Fortunately Australia has the resources to do this, and a culture favouring social equity. But we need to do much better than we are doing at the moment.

**We invite you to join us at the
SPC 6th Annual General Meeting**

7pm Thursday 24 November 2011

in the Study Centre of the Yarra Theological Union 34 Bedford Street Box Hill

with a Forum at 7:30 on

Morality & Climate Change: A Response to Cardinal Pell

by **Geoff Lacey**, author of *Sufficient for the Day: Towards a Sustainable Culture*

Geoff will be available to sign copies afterwards, and refreshments will be served.

Tax us if you can!

John Christensen, founder of the UK-based Tax Justice Network, discusses how tax havens cheat developing countries, and mean the rest of us have to pay more tax or miss out on services – and how to combat this corruption

6pm Thursday 24 November

Lecture Theatre, Cardinal Knox Centre
383 Albert Street East Melbourne

RSVP before Friday 18 November

jim@victas.uca.org.au | 9251 5271

Yarra Institute on harm to asylum seekers from prolonged detention



Rev Alistair Macrae with Caz Coleman & Dr Tony Ward

Significant media interest followed the launch of a report by the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy on the effects of prolonged detention on the mental health of asylum seekers. Ms Caz Coleman, one of the main researchers, was interviewed for two articles in the Melbourne *Age*, appeared on the ABC's 7.30 Report several times, published commentary in *Crikey* and elsewhere, and has spoken on several radio programs.

In his innovative study, Dr Tony Ward looks at the likely damage done to the mental health of people who claimed asylum successfully, and estimates the likely costs of treatment to remedy the effects of prolonged detention.

The report, *Long-term health costs of extended mandatory detention of asylum seekers*, was launched on 12 October at St Brigid's church, North Fitzroy, by Rev Alistair Macrae, President of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church of Australia.

He said that all the mainstream churches opposed the current policies of mandatory detention in remote camps. Australia was the only developed country to treat asylum seekers so harshly. He urged church and community groups to continue mobilising public opinion against such cruel and unnecessary policies. He cringed when he heard the rhetoric of "turn the boats back", when what this was really saying was to refuse to listen to people pleading with us for protection.

Dr Tony Ward of Milbur Consulting highlighted that prolonged detention results in significant mental health costs after people are released. He conservatively judges that trauma sufferers will have lifetime mental health costs 50% more than the average – amounting to an extra \$25,000 per person.

His study has reinforced findings that being in detention for more than two years resulted in significant new mental

health issues for more than one third of detainees in 2006-07. This was ten times the rate of mental health problems for those detained for less than three months.

Commending the study at the launch, Ms Caz Coleman said that Dr Ward provided further hard evidence of the negative results of prolonged detention. She said it was urgent that governments and the community think carefully about what arrangements were needed so that Australia could end prolonged mandatory detention.

Ms Coleman is a current member of the Council for Immigration Services and Status Resolution advising the Federal Minister for Immigration, and also on the Detention Health Advisory Group. She was previously Director of the Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project which has extensive experience providing accommodation and services for asylum seekers and refugees. She is now one of the lead writers for this project of the Yarra Institute, along with Dr Erin Wilson.

Dr Ward's report is part of a larger project proposing practical alternatives to mandatory detention and is being funded by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand. The project is being supervised by Dr Rowan Ireland and Dr Bruce Duncan.

Readers can access Dr Ward's full report, the *Age* articles and the launch on the Yarra Institute website. For a printed copy of the report, please send \$10 to SPC.

Action needed to reduce poverty



Fr Bruce Duncan, Brian Dalton CEO St Vincent de Paul, Lucy Adams, Cassandra Goldie, Michaela Guthridge, Tony Tome State President St Vincent de Paul

Urgent action is needed to help redress the deepening disadvantage of unemployed and homeless people, according to Ms Cassandra Goldie, CEO of ACOSS.

Speaking to about 55 people at an Anti-Poverty Week forum on 21 October at the

St Vincent de Paul offices in Box Hill,

she warned about increasing poverty and inequality, and urged social agencies to campaign to lift the unemployment allowance by \$50 a week. The single Newstart allowance is now less than \$35 a day, compared to the single pension of \$53.50 a day.

The forum, Human Rights & Poverty: State of the Nation, was organised by St Vincent de Paul (Melbourne), the Public Interest Clearing House, and Social Policy Connections.

Responding to Ms Goldie, Ms Lucy Adams (PILCH) and Michaela Guthridge (Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand) took up human rights and international aspects.

The coordinating organisations agreed to host a full-day conference on Human Rights as part of Anti-Poverty Week in 2012.