



the Beacon

Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church

Dec 19/Jan 2020 • Price \$2



EDITORIAL

Oh the hypocrisy of it all! 'Peace on Earth and goodwill to all men' and 'Blessed are the peacemakers' are fine inspirational aims but far removed from the actual behaviour of our politicians and governments.

One particular church in the US summed up their government's (and ours) attitude to refugees rather well with their 'nativity scene' displaying the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph locked up in separate cages. Our 'deeply religious' Prime Minister waxes lyrical about locking up refugees offshore in what are effectively concentration camps. The recent repeal of the Medivac legislation adds another dimension to just how far these people are removed from common decency, never mind the aforementioned inspirational aims.

While our leaders seem to have an empathy bypass on matters affecting ordinary folk, they certainly show goodwill to the god of private profit. Based on the 2018 Anglicare Cost of Privilege report, John Lord (AIM Network) added: 'A staggering \$68 billion in taxpayer dollars is spent keeping the wealthiest households wealthy.' That is greater than the cost of Newstart, disability support, or any other benefit.

The 2018 Cost of Privilege report also found that tax exemptions on private healthcare and education for the wealthiest 20 per cent cost over \$3 billion a year, superannuation concessions to them cost over \$20 billion a year, and their capital gains tax exemptions cost a staggering \$40 billion a year. Not to mention franking credits that are 'rorted on an industrial scale', and the 'real' or net company tax, which stands at zero for one-third of Australia's top corporations, mostly foreign owned.

In previous issues of the *Beacon*, we have highlighted the government's obsession with privatising everything that moves. As journalist Paul Bongiorno observes:

This model of outsourcing government services, which so often sees taxpayer funds being funnelled to some of the government's biggest friends and supporters, is increasingly problematic. It is operating in the National Disability Insurance Scheme and in the aged-care sector – where, as the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has shown, millions of dollars of public money are going to the private providers' profits.

On the question of war and peace: today we do not have a situation of a particular war, or the war, but rather continuous war conducted on a global scale. Australia has been described as a deputy sheriff of the US, the dominant global imperial power. On every continent, both overt and covert wars have been waged to protect the interests of monopoly capital, resulting in the deaths of millions. The US military industrial complex expenditure represents almost two-thirds of all discretionary spending.

It was Susan Sontag who spoke of moral courage and the power of principled resistance to injustice with the following words:

'Fear binds people together. And fear disperses them. Courage inspires communities: the courage of an example – for courage is as contagious as fear.'

Let us resolve in the coming year to continue to work towards (in the words of the American Unitarian hymn) 'A world made free for all her people one.' 🕯

tribute to **Joan Lucas**

Every *Beacon* subscriber is like a diamond: valuable, shining and long-lasting. Not only do they read our journal, which is based on Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity, but in many cases, they pass on their *Beacon* to others so that we are never sure how many people read the truth.

Sometimes a *Beacon* reader values *Beacon* beyond price and decides to ensure its continuation for future generations by making us a bequest. Such a person was Joan Lucas.

Joan and her husband Frank could not attend our church because of the distance to travel.

Instead they became associate members i.e. non-voting, but strongly supportive of our church and its work. Joan and Frank were associate members from 2001–2013 and *Beacon* subscribers from January 1985 to February 2014.

Joan passed away on 4 October 2017, having lost Frank some time before. She left her entire estate to the church, a considerable sum that will ensure that our work for peace, democracy and social justice continues.

Joan and Frank were committed to these principles, just as are all our *Beacon* readers.

We will ensure that Joan's incredibly generous donation to our work is used wisely and we pledge that her commitment to *Beacon* and the Church will encourage us to work harder and ensure that the *Beacon* will continue to shine a light towards a better society. This is our pledge to Joan and Frank. 🕯





The other day I picked up a little gem of a book in a local bookstore. The title is: No one is too small to make a difference. It's Greta Thunberg's first book in English – a collection of her speeches at climate rallies and other fora across Europe. This is what everyone on my Christmas list will be getting this year.

Given the enormous turnout for the recent national student climate strike, and Greta's incredibly moving statement to the UN Climate Action Summit, I can't think of a better time to be talking about the importance of community activism in our society.

We're at such a crucial tipping point in Victoria's history and, even more importantly, in the history of the entire human race.

When one Swedish schoolgirl can take a stand and catalyse a global movement, there's no question that each of us has the power to make a difference of some kind, whether it's at the local level or more widely. All we have to do is reach our own tipping point...and make the courageous decision to act on it.

I'll explain how I reached my tipping point – my 'rubbish tipping point', you could say, a bit later. However, before that I want to share one young family's recent experience of living in Melbourne – a city that has topped the charts as being the world's most liveable city for seven of the past nine years.

Castor Murillo's wife was heavily pregnant when SKM's recycling compound in Coolaroo erupted in flames in July 2017. The fire took twenty days to extinguish. The massive fallout of toxic smoke and fumes forced more than one hundred families to evacuate their homes.

The Murillo's home was just outside the forced evacuation zone. They were renting and had no money to pay for emergency accommodation.

However, the toxic fumes were badly affecting the family. Castor, his wife and their four young children moved into the family car. They drove to a safe location and lived in their car for the next three days until they were offered relief accommodation.

Six days after leaving, they returned to a home that had been completely infiltrated by smoke, soot and toxic fumes. Soot is a by-product of the incomplete combustion of hydrocarbons. Exposure to soot has been linked to cancer and lung disease.

Castor's family had to clean their home themselves, as did everyone else affected by this fire. The local council gave affected households a small domestic cleaning kit – and that, I've been told, was the only support anyone received.

Castor was subsequently diagnosed with carbon monoxide poisoning. In August 2019, a \$1.2 million compensation payout was awarded to more than 200 residents and business people affected by the Coolaroo fire. The lead plaintiff in the class action was Castor Murillo.

The family has since moved interstate; however, they still suffer from nausea and breathing difficulties. We can only hope that those will be the worst health impacts they ever face from this experience.

Recycling compounds like SKM's Coolaroo site are naturally crammed full of plastic waste. And when plastics and other hazardous waste material burns, it releases dangerous chemicals such as hydrochloric acid, sulfur dioxide, dioxins, furans and heavy metals, as well as extremely fine particulates.

They are so fine you could fit up to 30 of these particles across the diameter of a single strand of human hair. These emissions are known to cause respiratory problems. They put the human immune system under stress. And they're potentially



WHEN ONE SWEDISH SCHOOLGIRL CAN TAKE A STAND... EACH OF US HAS THE POWER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE OF SOME KIND...

carcinogenic. Particles such as these are far too fine for our lungs to successfully filter out of our bodies. They pass directly into our vital organs, including our brains.

Recently published research from a Belgian study confirms that black carbon particles breathed by pregnant women pass through the placenta directly into unborn fetuses.

While some health effects such as asthma can be immediate, it can take 15 to 30 years from the time of exposure for diseases such as cancer to manifest in individuals who have been exposed to these high intensity pollution events.

These are just some of the many unhappy facts I've been learning since I became the Founding Chair of the Anti-Toxic Waste Alliance in April this year. I'll tell you about the Alliance shortly, but first, let's hear more about what catalysed its existence – and why I was involved in its creation.

THREE MAJOR WASTE STOCKPILE FIRES IN MELBOURNE

There have been three major waste stockpile fires in Melbourne's northern and western suburbs in the past 26 months. The Coolaroo fire, which I've already mentioned, was the first. The second was in August last year, in my own neighbourhood. I'm talking about the horrific fire in a West Footscray warehouse packed full of illegally stockpiled waste chemicals.

Like thousands of other inner west residents, my husband and I were woken up around dawn on that day by the unnerving rumbling and banging sounds of explosions. We went outside to see thick black smoke surging over our neighbourhood. It was a surreal and frightening experience.

That fire was the second largest urban fire in Melbourne since the 1991 Coode Island fire. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade had 60 per cent of its resources there on the day trying to bring it under control. Fifty schools and kindergartens had to be evacuated across the inner west because it wasn't safe for the children to stay at school. Mind you, it wasn't necessarily safe for them to be at home either.

As the Secretary of the Friends of Cruickshank Park, I also soon found out that our local creek had been transformed into a cocktail of toxic chemicals. Cruickshank Park is one of the most beautiful and popular green spaces in inner west Melbourne. The park is based around a relatively natural section of Stony Creek where it passes through Yarraville.

The creek is only metres from the warehouse that caught fire. At the height of the blaze, 10,000 litres of toxic chemicals and firefighting foam were pouring into the creek every minute. Everything living in a five-kilometre section of the creek downstream of the fire was killed. And, of course, the pollutants also went into the Bay where Stony Creek outlets near the West Gate Bridge.

A week after the fire, it became apparent how incredibly toxic the smoke from that fire must have been. Dr Andrea Hinwood, the EPA's Chief Scientist, spoke at a community meeting and told us we were 'very, very lucky' that the smoke plume had been kept high by the weather conditions on the day of the fire.

So, what would have happened if the smoke had instead smothered our homes and streets, as happened in Coolaroo a year earlier? Given the deadly mix of chemicals stored in that warehouse, there would have been casualties, and most likely deaths – lots of them.

It doesn't bear thinking about; but it MUST be thought about!

SMELLED LIKE AN UNVENTILATED NAIL SALON

Stony Creek and much of Cruickshank Park smelled like an unventilated nail salon for weeks after the fire. Many local residents suffered headaches, blood noses and respiratory problems as a direct result. And for months, every time it rained, the smell would come back, re-traumatising local residents.

Even though the smoke was kept high, chemical-sensing smoke alarms were triggered in some homes. One Brooklyn woman, the mother of two young children, told me that 90 per cent of the plants in their garden died that day.

A single mum told me that her twelve-year-old son, who had never shown the faintest sign of asthma until a few days after the fire, now requires Ventolin at least twice a week.

Cruickshank Park has a primary school and two preschools directly alongside it, so they're also very close to the creek. Around 1,100 children attend these schools each weekday.

If you go to YouTube and search for 'anti-toxic waste alliance' you can watch our video submission to the Victorian Government's Recycling and Waste Management Inquiry. The video features the powerful

drawings and words of young children affected by the fires and asks our elected leaders what legacy they're leaving these children.

Despite intensive recovery efforts by Melbourne Water – and they've done a great job under extremely challenging circumstances – one year later the creek sediment still contains dangerous hydrocarbons and other pollutants. It's still out of bounds to the community until we have clear evidence that it's safe enough for kids and dogs to play in it again.

Something snapped inside me on the day of that fire and during the weeks immediately afterwards. It was triggered by the sight of the smoke. By the sight and smell of our local creek, full of what looked like metallic nail polish instead of water. By the feelings of anger at having our community – and my personal sense of safety – violated.

It was a shift in perspective caused by a deep sense of shock, disbelief and, above all else, grief. I've always been proud to call myself a Melbournian...I've loved living in this city. But those feelings are tainted now. I don't feel safe where I live. I don't feel as though this city is as liveable as it used to be; at least, not on our side of town.

As I got ready to go to a community meeting in the town hall several days after the fire, I decided to do something to symbolically express the grief I felt about the death of Stony Creek. I found some gaffer tape and made myself a black arm band, which I wore to the meeting.

I attended another community meeting a week later and suggested a mock funeral service for the creek, which was held on the steps of Parliament House a couple of weeks later (I was overseas at the time, but others thankfully acted on my suggestion). I have no political affiliations or ambitions – and that's not about to change. Up until recently, I'd never even attended a protest rally. Until late last year, community activism was never in my life plan. Then I reached my tipping point.

THIRTEEN MORE ILLEGAL CHEMICAL STOCKPILES

Around the same time, the discovery of 13 more illegal chemical stockpiles in Melbourne's northern suburbs, and then a third major fire – were also pushing people in those communities to breaking point. They too were feeling angry and betrayed by the laws and institutions that are supposed to be protecting us from harm.

The third and most recent fire was in April. It was in an overstocked chemical recycling plant operated by Bradbury Industrial Services in Campbellfield.

Bradbury Industrial Services is now under administration, but at the time, it had a licence from the EPA to operate. Media reports since April's fire have suggested there may be connections between Bradbury and the perpetrators of an alleged chemical waste stockpiling racket.

If you've been following this story in the media as each shocking new chapter unfolds, you will know that the abysmal lack of regulation of chemical and

hazardous waste in this state has been allegedly exploited by criminal elements for some years – and on an epic scale.

Over 20 million litres of chemical waste was being illegally stored in warehouses across Melbourne's northern and western suburbs and another 50 million litres is buried under farmland near Kaniva in the state's far west. This toxic haul amounts to more than thirty-two Olympic swimming pools full of chemicals. Not only stored illegally mind you, but transported illegally, in unmarked trucks, around our road networks, on busy freeways, through road tunnels and along residential streets. The sheer scale of this operation is mind-boggling!

How on earth was such a staggering volume of industrial chemicals able to be hijacked and taken off-grid? It fills you with confidence in our state's regulatory and enforcement processes, doesn't it? Of course, we shouldn't be surprised by any of this. The warning signs have been there for decades. Everyone's known the EPA's been under-resourced, undermined and largely toothless for years – it hasn't been the best kept secret.

Nine years ago, in June 2010, the Victorian Auditor-General reviewed the EPA's regulation of hazardous waste. The auditor's report was scathing, saying that the EPA was not effectively regulating how business and industry managed hazardous waste. It said there were no sound compliance monitoring or effective enforcement regimes in place in this state.

That was nine years ago. And now this community is suffering the consequences of too many years of inaction, complacency and neglect. And let's be absolutely clear about this: when the EPA isn't doing its job properly, the health and safety of everyone in this community is at risk.

It was after last April's Bradbury fire that community groups on our side of the city really got fired up! We held a meeting in Broadmeadows, which was attended by representatives from 15 organisations, who voted unanimously to form the Anti-Toxic Waste Alliance.

WE'RE CONTINUING TO GROW

We now have 37 member groups and organisations across Melbourne. We're a non-party political community alliance. Our members include environmental groups, residents' action groups, local Facebook communities, unions and a school in Coolaroo. The Alliance is committed to giving people in Melbourne's northern and western suburbs a strong and unified voice. We have a combined social media reach of over 42,000 members of the community...and we're continuing to grow.

Our primary goal is to have our communities free from the health and safety threats of toxic and hazardous waste. We want dangerous waste stockpiles recognised as immediate fire and pollution threats that require a joined-up emergency response before they turn into potentially deadly fires.

Here's one glaring case in point that demonstrates the apparent lack of emergency response currently being given to these threats. In mid-August, Hume

City Council took Glass Recovery Services in Coolaroo to court to get an order forcing them to clean up their premises. There had already been two small fires in this glass sorting plant and the EPA had banned them from accepting any more combustible waste.

The Council's building surveyor told Broadmeadows Magistrates' Court that the lack of fire protection at the site was potentially 'catastrophic' and 'a matter of life and death'.

He said there were flammable and combustible materials everywhere, in the buildings and around the buildings, and stored to quite high levels. The court was shown photos of fire hydrants and fire alarms blocked by piles of waste, fire hoses that had fallen off walls, blocked exits and one fire hydrant that hadn't been tested for years.

What horrified us the most was that the photos submitted to the court as proof of the completely inadequate fire protection at this site were date stamped the first of March this year – almost *six months earlier!* So that's the level of emergency response given to a 'catastrophic fire risk' in the middle of a heavily populated metropolitan suburb in this city.

This site is only a few hundred metres from homes. It's close to schools, churches, mosques and an aged care facility. And Merlynston Creek – a tributary of Merri Creek – runs directly behind the premises.

Members of the Alliance were incensed when we learned about the situation at this extremely dangerous site last month. We immediately mobilised and held our first community protest rally outside its front gates.

What makes this case example even worse is that Glass Recovery Services is directly beside SKM Coolaroo, the source of the devastating fire in 2017. And it's reportedly owned and operated by the same family that once ran the now defunct SKM! And yet it was still permitted to deteriorate into such a dangerous state!

Surely this is a no-brainer – it certainly seems black and white to me. Monitoring a catastrophic fire risk does not make it safe. And telling unreliable licensed waste stockpilers – rogue operators, as they're being called – to clean up their own mess is not going to guarantee that the work gets done! And when they fail to do that work and the threat persists for months or even years, how is that protecting the community and the environment from harm?

We want to see immediate interventions by the authorities to effectively diffuse these fire risks. Anything less is negligent and failing in their duty of care to protect the community and environment from harm. The seriousness of the current recycling and waste management crisis cannot be overstated. The potential health and safety impacts for this community cannot be overstated.



FOUR NON-NEGOTIABLE OUTCOMES

The Alliance has four non-negotiable outcomes we want the government's strategies to address. Firstly, this state must adhere to the approved waste hierarchy pyramid, which puts Reduce, Re-use, Recycle and achieving a circular economy as the top priorities. Sending waste to landfill must be the very last resort.

Secondly, we want fewer greenhouse emissions generated by waste management activities.

Thirdly, we want no hazardous emissions or discharges from recycling and waste facilities.

And finally, we want no more waste-related disaster incidents affecting Victorian communities.

Members of the Alliance are very worried. We fear it's only a matter of time before there's another massive waste fire and that this time the smoke will come to ground and not be kept high. And when this happens, whose homes will be smothered in disease-causing particles, soot and toxins this time?

It could be *my* home. It could be *your* home. None of us can feel safe until these threats have been fully addressed.

These are the consequences of successive governments, policymakers and regulators falling asleep at the wheel in this state. It's created a perfect storm of volatile and combustible ingredients just waiting to be ignited.

So, we're developing a perfect storm of community activism in response. Because if our current, strongly

mandated Labor government doesn't address this life-threatening problem in our working-class suburbs, whoever will?

Our political leaders and regulators need to be on an emergency response footing to overcome this problem. And we're not yet convinced they recognise that and are truly willing and prepared to do everything it takes to fully address this problem.

We're being told that everything's going to change for the better when the EPA's new legislative powers come into force next July. It's good to know there are tougher laws arriving soon. But as we've learned through hard experience, the law is worthless if it's not being properly enforced.

Members of the Alliance will finally start trusting in our environmental regulator when it actually starts living up to its name.



In closing, I'll come back to Greta Thunberg and something she says in her powerful little book.

Greta has Asperger's syndrome. She says this means she sees everything as black and white. She thinks that autistic people are the normal ones and the rest of us are pretty strange because, despite clear scientific proof that climate change poses grave threats to our very survival, we're still not making the necessary changes required to slow or reverse it.

NO GREY AREAS WHEN IT COMES TO SURVIVAL

Greta says: 'There are no grey areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilisation or we don't'.

Victoria's recycling and waste crisis is a complex threat on a much smaller scale, but to me, our local situation is also black and white. Either we actively protect the community and the environment from harm, or we don't. As we're discovering, the consequences of getting this wrong are far too great.

It's time for our own political leaders to actually treat this crisis like an actual crisis and not just pay lip service to it, and to this community. Prioritise protecting community and environmental health above everything else. Declare waste management the essential service it deserves to be. Ban single-use plastics and invest heavily in measures to reduce the amount of non-recyclable waste we're actually producing. And equip the EPA like you equip the police – with the strongest powers and resources needed to genuinely protect the community and the environment from harm.

If the State of Victoria, in one of the world's most liveable First World countries, can't get its act together and successfully address a critical public and environmental health issue, then what hope do we have of saving our planet and the human race?

Because for humans to survive climate change, every individual, every town, every city, every state and every country needs to reach a tipping point and take decisive action to address issues at the local level. Only then will we be able to drastically transform how we live in this world.

That's what will determine whether the dominoes fall in favour of the human race, or against us. So, what's YOUR tipping point? Have you reached it already, or is yours still to come? Don't wait until it's too late. 🍌

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WE ACKNOWLEDGE

Traditional owners of the Kulin Nation, past Warriors, Elders past and present.

CONTINUE THE WORK OF



On this day, 200 years ago, John Lees, a spinner of Oldham, died of sabre injuries he received at the Peterloo Massacre. Anthony Dawson remembers all the victims of government treachery.

On the morning of 16 August 1819, an immense crowd poured into Manchester, perhaps the largest the town had ever seen. They came in an orderly and peaceful fashion. They came carrying banners reading 'Liberty and Fraternity', 'No Corn Laws', 'Love and Liberty'. Most maddening to the Tory magistrates and yeomanry, some carried Tricolours and red Liberty Bonnets. But perhaps most poignantly, one banner carried a single word: 'Love'.

Bands played patriotic tunes including *Rule Britannia* and *God Save the King*. It was a fine and sunny day. They came in cheerful mood; organised contingents from Bolton and Bury; 6,000 marching from Rochdale and Middleton; others from Saddleworth and Stalybridge; 200 women dressed in white from Oldham, together with families bringing their children and picnics with them. More than 60,000 people gathered at St Peter's Fields that day: practically half the population of Manchester and the surrounding towns had come to attend a meeting calling for parliamentary reform. Having the vote mattered, having just laws mattered. The people would speak and make politicians listen to their views and needs – and respond.

MANY COULD NOT AFFORD BREAD

The monster reform meeting had been organised by the Manchester Patriotic Union, members of whom included John Wroe who was the founder-editor of the radical newspaper the *Manchester Observer*. The Patriotic Union invited known radical speakers to attend, men such as Major John Cartwright (a Unitarian) who had been championing the radical cause for decades, Richard Carlile, and of course Henry Hunt. John Wroe was probably a Unitarian. Membership of the Patriotic Union included known Manchester radicals John and Thomas Potter, Joseph Brotherton, John Edward Taylor (born a Quaker but

disowned by them for 'marrying out') and Absalom Watkin. Wroe coined the name 'Peterloo' in a punning reference to the Battle of Waterloo four years earlier. Wroe paid for his joke by seeing his newspaper closed down and being imprisoned for 12 months for seditious libel.

The crowds flocked to Manchester to protest the unjust Corn Laws, which were part of an isolationist political world view and protectionist economic position, that kept the price of bread artificially high and out of the reach of many. They came to Manchester to protest low wages. They came to Manchester to protest about unjust taxation – on dogs, flour, and windows even, some of the many taxes introduced by William Pitt to help raise money to fight the forces of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity unleashed by the French Revolution. Manchester was the fastest growing town in Britain yet had no MP, whilst a rotten borough like Old Sarum in Wiltshire – which had no population – could return an MP. They wanted to vote by secret ballot, something which we take for granted today.

It was not just men who wanted the vote, but women too. Female reform societies had sprung up across the north-west, calling for votes for women. As early as 1794, the Rev. William Shepherd had been championing female suffrage. These women had been subjected to ridicule, depicted by cartoonists such as George Cruikshank as whores, abandoning

their families to meddle in things they had no business in. That was why they dressed in white that day, in their Sunday best. To show they were not going 'dressed for a riot' and white showed their purity.

In Manchester they were led by Mary Fildes. And it seems that it was these women who were targeted by the yeomanry. Of the 654 injured, 168 were women – leading one academic to suggest that women had been singled out. In fact, the first victim of the yeomanry was a 23-year-old woman called Fildes, who was knocked down by a horse and her infant son was killed.

SPECIAL CONSTABLES WERE ARMED

The Manchester meeting was but one of several monster reform meetings held that summer, so the Tory politicians were nervous and jittery. The powers that be were men of property – lawyers, retired businessmen and Church of England clergy – they were unsympathetic to political reform. They believed that non-conformists and agitators were stirring up the workers' discontent. The magistrates were taking no chances, and had signed up 400 special constables armed with long wooden truncheons. They also deployed 60 yeomanry troops from Manchester (with another 420 from Cheshire in reserve), called in 340 regular cavalry from the 15th Hussars, plus 400 infantry and two six-pounder cannon of the Royal Horse Artillery loaded with canister shot. There were more than 1,500 soldiers and constables in all.

As the vast crowd gathered, and Henry Hunt in his trademark white top hat appeared on the hustings, the magistrates watching from an upstairs window on Mount Street panicked. They ordered the Manchester yeomanry – who had to be sufficiently wealthy to be able to afford all their own uniform, equipment and a horse, and thus were recruited from amongst the wealthy Tory land and mill-owners of Manchester, – to arrest Hunt. The members of the yeomanry were diametrically opposed to the reformers, and in whose interest it was that the 'mob' as they saw it was 'put down.'

What happened next took less than 10 minutes. The yeomanry charged into the packed mass of human bodies. They were meant to disperse the crowd with the flat side of their sabres, and the yeomanry were meant to have blunt swords. Yet only the day before, the officers of the yeomanry had ordered their men's swords sharpened. At least 654 people are known to have been injured. But the figure may have been higher. Over 200 received sabre cuts of varying severity; 188 were trampled by horses and 70 battered by the truncheons of the special constables. In the aftermath, the government of the day denied any inquiry into the events. It blamed the protestors for attacking the soldiers, and denied the number of casualties. The Prince Regent sent the Manchester magistrates a note congratulating them on their actions. A panicked Conservative government passed the notorious 'Six Acts', which repealed habeas corpus; tried to muzzle the press and even sermons;

PETERLOO SHOWED THE POWER OF PEACEFUL PROTEST.

made political meetings or meetings of more than 50 people illegal; and stiffened libel, sedition and blasphemy laws.

In the words of Joss Wrigley, an unemployed handloom weaver:

'At Peterloo we fought for the Rights of Man, for freedom to vote, to be allowed to speak and write what we thought. To be allowed to be ourselves, as honest workers. We wanted to live our own lives, but the upper classes would not let us. That is what it was about. Peterloo taught working people to stand up for their rights and stand by the poor.'

The protesters at Peterloo had gathered peacefully to speak truth to power. They had gathered to peacefully demand rights that we now take for granted: the right for everyone to have a vote. The right to a vote by secret ballot. The right for representation at Parliament. The right to a living wage and affordable food. The right to protest.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Peterloo showed the power of peaceful protest. It showed the power of the ordinary man and woman in speaking truth to power. And, for those of us who are dissenters, we know that this can be dangerous, and even lead to death. But through such a tragedy there is often a deeper meaning and greater good to come from it.

John Edward Taylor, an eyewitness to the massacre was inspired to start his own reform newspaper, the *Manchester Guardian*, and much financial support came from Cross Street Chapel in this venture. Another Unitarian newspaperman, Edward Baines of Leeds (a member of Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel), was also an eyewitness and wrote his version of events in the *Leeds Mercury*.

'Their deaths were not in vain, so long as we work for those values they upheld, and which were worth them standing their ground.'

The Rev. Lant Carpenter, Unitarian minister, preached a powerful sermon against the Peterloo Massacre – and was taken to court for libel and sedition. The Rev. William Turner, also Unitarian, spoke against the killings at Peterloo at a giant reform meeting in York. In Liverpool, prominent Unitarians such as the Rev. William Shepherd of Gateacre, William Rathbone and Henry Booth were members of the radical 'Friends of Liberty and Law' and the Liverpool 'Concentric



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Society' and a delegation from the latter had been invited to attend that fateful Reform reform Meeting meeting in Manchester. Unitarians across the north established a fund to help the widows, orphans and wounded of Peterloo. Sadly, they were branded as traitors and seditionists.

ECHOES CONTINUE DOWN THROUGH THE AGES

Peterloo was not the first time that troops were used against citizens of this country and not the last. We just have to think of the use of soldiers at Ackton Hall Colliery in Featherstone (1893) when soldiers fired on striking coal miners; the General Strike, or when Churchill sent the troops in to break a south Wales miners' strike.

Peterloo echoes down the centuries in all movements for democratic change – and we see them today in Hong Kong and in Russia. And, in this year of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots, it also echoes in all movements for freedom, for justice and equality.

Yet, there are equally long shadows of Peterloo – whenever an overbearing and incompetent government overreaches its power and covers up the truth; think of the Battle of Orgreave in the Miners' strike; 'Bloody Sunday'; or Hillsborough. Whenever we hear politicians or newspapers targeting the vulnerable or 'send them home' rhetoric, we're hearing the voice of the magistrates and yeomanry at Peterloo. When one group uses its privilege to oppress or restrict the rights of another, that's the voice of Peterloo. It would take a century for the reformers at Peterloo to get their grievances listened to – universal suffrage amongst them. Yet their deaths were not in vain, so long as we work for those values they upheld and which were worth them standing their ground: Liberty. Equality. Fraternity. The right to peaceful protest. The right to be counted as an equal and valid member of society with alienable rights. In so doing, we honour the sacrifice they made.

We, as Unitarians and Free Christians, fiercely believe in the equal dignity and worth of all people. Those who died at Peterloo demonstrated to be seen as human; to be treated as fellow members of the same human family with the same inalienable rights and responsibilities as the moneyed men who owned the cotton mills and the factories, and who had the vote because of their wealth. They were there to show that men and women are equal.

We honour the victims of Peterloo by continuing their work. To help build that new Jerusalem, to work for the world where, in the words of the Magnificat, the mighty are humbled; the poor and meek are exalted; where all are fed. By working for equality. For reform of unjust systems. Working for fairness. Working, above all, for peace, for hope, and for love.



Source: *The Inquirer* (The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christian 7 September 2019)

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Hong Kong Protests: 'Return' to the British Empire and the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing...?

Hundreds of young Chinese, in front of the British Consulate in Hong Kong, sing God Save the Queen and shout 'Great Britain Saves Hong Kong', a rally call in London by 130 parliamentarians who ask that British citizenship be given to residents of the former colony. In this way, Britain is emerging in world public opinion, particularly among young people, as a guarantor of legality and human rights. To do this, history is erased.

It is therefore necessary, before any other consideration, to know the historical episodes which, in the first half of the 19th century, brought the Chinese territory of Hong Kong under British rule.

To penetrate China, then ruled by the Qing dynasty, Britain resorted to the distribution of opium, which it shipped by sea from India where it held the monopoly. The drug market spread rapidly in the country, causing serious economic, physical, moral and social damage that provoked the reaction of the Chinese authorities. But when they confiscated stored opium in Canton and burned it, the British troops occupied this city and other coastal cities with the first Opium War, forcing China to sign the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842.

In Article 3 the Treaty states: 'As it is obviously necessary and desirable for British subjects to have ports for their ships and their stores, China will forever cede the island of Hong Kong to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain. and her heirs.'

In Article 6 the Treaty stipulates: 'Since Her Britannic Majesty's Government was obliged to send an expeditionary force to obtain compensation for the damage caused by the Chinese authorities' violent and unjust procedure, China agrees to pay to Her British Majesty the sum of \$12 million for expenses incurred.'

The Nanking Treaty is the first of unequal treaties by which the European powers (Great Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Austria and Italy), Tsarist Russia, Japan and the United States secured in China, by

the force of arms, a series of privileges: the cession of Hong Kong to Great Britain in 1843, the sharp reduction of taxes on foreign goods (at a time when European governments were erecting customs barriers to protect their industries), the opening of the main ports to foreign vessels and the right to have urban areas under their own administration ('concessions') exempted from Chinese authority.

In 1898 Great Britain annexed the Kowloon Peninsula in Hong Kong and the so-called New Territories, conceded by China to be 'rented' for 99 years.

The widespread dissatisfaction with these impositions exploded towards the end of the 19th century in a popular revolt – that of the Boxers – against which intervened an international expeditionary force of 16,000 men under British command, in which Italy also participated.

Landed in Tianjin (T'ien Tsin) in August 1900, the force sacked Beijing and other cities, destroying many villages and massacring the population. Later, Britain took control of Tibet in 1903, while Czarist Russia and Japan shared Manchuria in 1907.

China was reduced to a colonial or semi-colonial state and Hong Kong became the main door of exchange based on the plunder of resources and the slave labour exploitation of the population. A huge mass of Chinese people is forced to emigrate mainly to the United States, Australia and South-East Asia, where they are subjected to similar conditions of exploitation and discrimination.

A question arises spontaneously: Which history books are young people who ask Britain to 'save Hong Kong' studying? 🇮🇹

This article was originally published on Il Manifesto. Translated from Italian by **Roger Lagassé**.

The original article was published in Italian in *Il Manifesto*

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I am a proud descendant of the Yiman and Gangulu peoples of central Qld, campaign coordinator at the ACTU and, as an Aboriginal unionist, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet this morning: the Boon Wurung and Woiewurung peoples of the Kulin Nation. I acknowledge their struggle, their ownership of the land and their custodianship of culture. As my elders did, I carry the legacy of the campaign for civil, industrial and social justice for First Nations people – we stand shoulder to shoulder with all our sisters and brothers and on the shoulders of those giants that came before us. I must admit, before I was asked to speak here today on behalf of our president, Michele O’Neil, I had never heard of the Unitarian Church. And that probably says more about my religious upbringing than anything else. I was raised in the Anglican church, my mother was a devout Christian, and we attended a couple of different congregations ranging from strict adherence fire and brimstone to more progressive teachings. Suffice to say it wasn’t really my cup of tea, so I stopped attending church regularly many years ago. And in preparing for coming here today, I wanted to find out what you believe in, what you stand for. Well, I must say, having looked at your website and finding papers on ‘the impact of privatisation’, the ‘TPP – an exercise in treachery’, and ‘Auditing the Auditors – A Critique of the Coalition Budget Strategy’ and learning that your motto is ‘Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity’ with no creedal demands, no liturgy and a foundation in social justice, democracy, the environment and peace...I assume you can appreciate that this is not the ‘church’ that I was brought up in.

WE ARE MOB

But, also, I knew that in coming to speak with you today, I knew I was coming to speak with ‘my people’ – as a trade unionist, as a Unitarian, we are our people, we are mob. We all fundamentally believe in the same things: social justice, democracy, the future of our country, the environment and peace. Fairness.

In the lead-up to the federal election, we thought we campaigned long and hard on fairness. Our **Change the Rules campaign** was centred on working people in Australia getting their fair share: proper pay rises, more secure jobs and access to a fair go. We wanted change – there was a groundswell of working people, the community, taking to the streets and calling for a new government, and they too wanted change.

With the election the goal was big – to create a fairer, more equal country and this involved having a government willing to make the changes needed to help achieve this.

We had record numbers of people rallying to the streets demanding a change of government – a quarter of a million across the country.

The future had looked very different to what it does today. Polling, betting markets, every ‘expert’ was saying that Labor might form its fifth government since the Second World War. But the election campaign was fought dirty and we didn’t get the result we’d hoped.

One man had disproportionate influence on the outcome of the election. He spent \$60 million on an advertising and misinformation scare campaign

aimed at derailing the left. You might have heard of him; he's a Queenslander, his name is Clive Palmer. He created the United Australia Party.

This is a man that for three years failed to pay 800 of his sacked workers and taxpayers \$70 million after his nickel refinery went into liquidation.

Palmer polarised whole regions of Australia who face both an insecure work crisis and wage stagnation. They wanted answers on the future of jobs and Palmer and the coalition government campaigned by instilling fear. He didn't secure a single seat but instead secured the coalition government's win with his preference votes.

His spend was double the expenditure projected for both the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party combined...and 167 times what the Greens spent.

Our campaign led the agenda nationally. Our asks became the narrative of most leading reporters and commentators in the country.

INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITY

At its core were a set of comprehensive policies that sought to halt, and reverse, the rise in income and wealth inequality that is gripping our country. And it said that inequality is threatening both social cohesion and economic growth and is in part responsible for the rise of an emboldened and increasingly mainstream far-right movement that should leave all of us deeply concerned.

We said addressing the problem of low wage growth and insecure work, which are narrowly thought of as issues that affect workers, but which are being understood more and more as problems that will have significant downside for businesses, must be a national priority. People agreed with us.

This campaign won some real gains and it was a campaign working people are proud to have been a part of. But it's fair to say the outcome wasn't what many of us expected. There's no doubt that we were disappointed that there wasn't a change of government at the last election. It was an opportunity to make some really big, real changes to the lives of working people, to all people really.

But...let's face it, Australia has been unequal for a long time. Working people have never had so little power. With so many people not union members, and inadequate, weak workplace rights that tip the balance too far towards employers, we have wage growth at such low levels that living standards are going backwards. While hundreds of thousands of people took part in the Change the Rules (CTR) campaign...we are now reminding ourselves in the Australian union movement that we're not a political party and we couldn't control everything that happened in our national election campaign.

We played a key part and we managed to push the national conversation about workers' rights and ensured that as many political parties as possible were committed to a progressive vision for the future of workers' rights in this country.

As a result, the ALP, the Greens and other parties signed on to our asks: from paid family and domestic violence leave to extensive reform of the bargaining system, a commitment to fight wage theft and reverse penalty rate cuts, from right of entry to ending racially discriminatory employment programs in Indigenous communities. Those commitments were a demonstration of the power of unions and the strength that working people have when we stand together and promote our mutual interest.

But now, it's important to reflect on the campaign and look at what lessons we in the Australian union movement can take away from it...but it is also a crucial time to be looking ahead – and that's what I will do today – look at the challenges we are facing and what we are doing to overcome them.

On the one hand, we should not be satisfied with election results that do not bring about change, but we must not lose sight of what was achieved through CTR or lose faith in our ability to create a fairer society for all working people.

We've reminded ourselves that two years of election campaigning is really nothing in the scheme of a 33-year push for neo-liberalism.

It takes much longer than two years to win **big things** that involve winning public opinion.

Thirty-three years versus two years, our campaign for better rights, to change the rules in favour of working people, has gone on for just two years.

Why 33 years? In 1986 – four men met – a National Party member, a Liberal Party member, a mining boss and a farming boss. One went on to be a senator and another, Peter Costello, the country's treasurer.

They formed a group called the HR Nicholls Society. The members of this society believed we should get rid of *all rules, all rights* for workers.

They said – the free market – really they mean employers – should make all the decisions and workers should have no rights and no say. At that time there were political leaders who believed the same thing and they were also inspired by them – Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan ...

These ideas were extreme...they're still extreme. They are precisely what we're up against.

Today...right now, it's more important than ever in Australia to face the significant threats to working people that the Morrison government are pushing through in the post-election environment.

One of the first things the Morrison government (who were elected without a mandate for industrial relations) did was to announce a review of industrial relations legislation by Attorney-General Christian Porter.

We have been left in the dark about what this review will consider, but it appears the government is rolling out the red carpet for business lobbyists to pitch their most destructive ideas for attacking workers' rights.

Our role is clear. We won comprehensive public support for a progressive overhaul of workers' rights

through the Change the Rules campaign. Now, we must fight against any attempts of the Australian Government, which did not once mention the phrase 'industrial relations' during the election to attack working people.

Despite this, he is now taking the opportunity to 'review' our laws and is trying to push through laws right now that are a serious threat to the very existence of many unions as democratic organisations.

I can't understate how dangerous one of these laws is. The outrageously named Ensuring Integrity Bill allows the minister and courts to sack union leaders and to shut down or impose administrators on unions.

If these laws get through, they will take out many of our union leaders. Not just full-time ones but rank and file members of executives and committees of management. You will not be able to be a union official if you have been found guilty of a crime that carries a maximum penalty of two years. This includes if any members of a union in Australia break industrial laws – anything from taking so-called 'unprotected' industrial action, to right of entry breaches, to not putting paperwork in on time.

SERIOUS THREAT TO THE UNION MOVEMENT

In Australia, we have our own full-time paperwork police force – the ROC – and, of course, the ABCC who have a stack of prosecutions already lined up to go. If these laws pass, the government will go about ripping through unions; it will give them the biggest stick they have ever had. This is by far the most serious threat the whole union movement has ever faced.

And it is not just an attack on unions as organisations, it's an attack on democracy itself, our fundamental freedoms, and on every single working, retired or soon-to-be-working Australian.

Another lesson is understanding that campaigns that are not just defensive are hard and they are different. We want to improve rights and improvements are never just given to us on a platter.

Most of our campaigns have been defensive over the last 30 years. The Your Rights at Work campaign against WorkChoices – the Howard government's proposed sweeping industrial relations changes – was defensive. We were trying to keep what we had. Our anti-privatisation campaigns have been defensive.

Our campaigns to stop something have always been important, as once you lose something, it is harder to get it back. They are also important to show that people power and the union movement are powerful and can win.

But getting and staying on the front foot and taking rights forward is something different and we need to understand that.

Sometimes it is easier to engage people in a 'stop' or a 'no' campaign – like 'stop privatisation' or 'stop penalty rate cuts' as people don't want to lose what they already have. They understand what they

have got so it is easier to see the consequences of losing it.

When we are campaigning for something new or to get something back it is different, and in some ways harder, as we need to convince people that change is actually possible.

So, one of the things we must do as a movement is to provide hope and inspiration that:

- by standing together we can win against the powerful
- unions can win better job security
- unions win safer workplaces
- wage theft is not okay and union members can fight back

Because the thing is – unless people believe things can be better, unless they can see that it is possible, it is harder to get them on board with the push for positive change.

And some of our challenges are this – a whole generation of young people know nothing about having a permanent job. They are told all the time 'that's just the way things are' or 'that's just the way the world is going' or they are even told that it is their choice or even their fault they don't have jobs with basic rights.

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

We need to inspire them that change is possible, and change comes through the union movement.

Young people who stand up to wage thieves show this is possible. Look at the protests outside cafes and restaurants. This makes other young people say, 'Hang on a minute, maybe it's not right I am paid \$10 hour and I can do something about it'.

So how should we see our fight for a better, fairer world in the face of this and in the face of the election result and the current government?

We've had to ask ourselves: Do we give up because of this election result? Do we pack up and quit? No, we don't. We are picking ourselves up and dusting ourselves off; we're learning from these setbacks.

Because there was not a change of government, Morrison is unlikely to bring in any laws to give working people more power...to create fairness.

The result means that we need to approach campaigning creatively, but the fight is still the same.

We're still fighting for:

- a living wage for the 2.3 million lowest paid workers – most women
- quick, affordable and effective access to justice in cases of wage theft
- rights to permanency and fair pay for casual, labour hire, temporary contract workers – the majority women
- stronger collective bargaining rights, including removing unfair restrictions on industrywide bargaining, secondary boycotts, and strike action
- family-friendly working arrangements for working parents and carers

- ten days paid family and domestic violence leave
- 26 weeks paid parental leave, shareable by families in any way they like
- fairer superannuation – stopping attacks on the system and making changes to strengthen the system for women
- stronger rules to stop violence and harassment at work

We're saying allegiance to trickle-down economics has blinded the Australian Government to the reality that exploitation of working people not only goes against the principles of fairness, but also stunts the economy.

Policies that protect workers from exploitation and ensure that they do not fall into poverty are often dismissed as bad for business.

This not only ignores the obvious duty of care that our society owes to all people, but also flies in the face of all evidence that shows that when working people benefit, so does business.

The way you know trickle-down economics has failed is that it hasn't trickled down...it's only trickled up.

We see the concentration of wealth in the hands of the already wealthy, while the quality of life of working people falls.

The result is that Australian workers have suffered the lowest share of our nation's wealth since work commenced on the Sydney Opera House in 1959 – with the 2-year average share of GDP going to workers at just 46.9 per cent – down from a high of about 58 per cent.

What we are asking for is still the same as before the election – ultimately for fairness. What we're asking for **is** fair – there is enough wealth being generated **every day** in Australia to lift **everyone's** standard of living to make things better for the next generation, so everyone has good quality education and healthcare through their life.

But the problem is, this wealth is just not being shared, and it's getting worse. It is not being shared by too many employers who are keeping it, rather than giving pay rises – profits are up 21%, while wages by only 2.3%.

It is also not being fairly shared because too many big companies and too many extremely wealthy people pay no tax at all. If it's only working people paying their fair share of tax, we will not be able to afford quality health and education.

Cutting taxes means ultimately cutting services – those who don't pay tax, don't care about this because they can easily afford to pay for the best when they need it.

So why are working people not getting their fair share of pay rises in Australia?

It goes back to bargaining power. Employers now have too much and workers not enough. It's also not shared fairly because too many big companies and too many extremely wealthy people aren't paying their fair share.

Because not enough people are in unions and because the current laws make it far too easy for employers just to say no.

So, we've been demanding a change to the system, for new rules to rebalance power so wealth can be fairly shared so working people and their families have better lives.

ON GROWTH

The key priority of our movement must be growing it. We will not be able to achieve a better world unless we do. A strong union movement is the only way to have an equal and fairer country.

This must be an expansive, collaborative effort. With everyone who is 'our people': faith communities, community organisations, NGOs. While it might feel like we are on the back foot, or the challenges ahead of us are difficult to overcome, the reality is that there is no endpoint to our struggle. Our density is at 15%, as every law that supported union membership was stripped away. We have some of the harshest anti-union laws in the developed world. Despite this, the average union member earns about 20% more than a non-member. Workplaces are safer. But union members now live on an island, surrounded by a sea of wage theft, insecure work and free riding. But there is so much more we can do.

So, we've learnt what we can from the campaign so far: we've reset and refocused.

This means we've focused on what we know is necessary – growing our movement and continuing to move towards the horizon we have set ourselves – better rights for workers, a better and fairer world.

It means understanding that achieving big change will not be quick or easy, but we can create moments to inspire people along the way.

Remembering those four blokes in that room started campaigning 33 years ago, but after all this time they have not achieved what they have been campaigning for. They have not got rid of unions. They have not got rid of our rights.

In Australia, we have a movement of people. Hundreds of dedicated leaders, thousands of workplace representatives, hundreds of thousands of retired union members and millions of workers who chose to be members of their union. No movement in our Australia is anywhere near this big.

And our movement is bigger than that – we have faith communities like yours, First Nations people, the defenders of country and culture, new Australians, migrants – communities – a country full of people who believe in what we do: social justice, democracy, protecting the environment, peace and dignity. Fairness.

When we decide to act together, we are powerful, and we can change the course of history – we've done it many times. But we must keep our eyes on the horizon, keep going and if we have setbacks, get back up. And we are all 'our people', we are all mob and we will get back up together and together we will win.



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MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH

110 Grey Street, East Melbourne 3002

Email: admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au

Website: www.melbourneunitarian.org.au

Monthly journal of the Melbourne
Unitarian Peace Memorial Church
Est. 1852

Registered by Australia Post

Post Print Approved

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