

BEACON

the



Journal of the
Melbourne Unitarian
Peace Memorial
Church

May 2015
Price \$2

SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

WAR ... WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

EDITORIAL

Do you not sometimes wonder whether politicians and people live in alternative universes? We have spent millions on our very expensive and extremely commercialised ANZAC commemoration. There are some very important questions to be asked and answered about this. Have any politicians articulated why that war occurred, who benefitted from it, and why Australia, geographically so far away, was involved? Why did so many of our courageous young people have to die on foreign soil? Have we learned any lessons from this, and importantly, how much has the commemoration of their deaths cost us? Do these commemorations make their deaths and sacrifice any more bearable or understandable?

Headlines in *The Age* (21/4/2015) 'Disgrace. Million in poverty' draws no comment from any of our leaders, nor is money thrown at this acute crisis that affects the living, not the dead. Indeed, funding is being withdrawn. However, an article also in *The Age* (22/4/2015), written by no less than the Prime Minister himself, clearly indicates his priorities. In his article on ANZAC he states 61,000 never came home and 152,000 were wounded and that 'The Great War was the crucible in which the Australian identity was first formed. The sacrifices of our forebears have left us an enduring legacy of freedom'.

What kind of freedom is he articulating? The more than one million Australians living in poverty have not chosen to live in poverty. (According to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia we are in our 24th year of uninterrupted economic growth.) It is clearly freedom for the wealthy to increase their wealth at the expense of the working poor; freedom to wage wars against people in other countries; freedom to punish people fleeing those wars by locking them up in concentration camps; freedom for a growing number of Australians to become homeless; freedom to cut essential services that provide a safety net for those living in poverty in this wealthy land.

Has the Prime Minister and his government explained to the working poor and the over one million living in poverty, or indeed to us all, how much his government has spent on the anniversary of that 'Great War', the millions of dollars that should have been used to alleviate the poverty our people are suffering? Has he explained to the people the purpose of that 'Great War' so that everyone may know why our young men were sacrificed? In what way is ANZAC being taught to ensure that jingoism doesn't replace facts?

If those same young men could speak now, do you not think they would say to government: Never again! Would they not say: Look after our young men and women. Do not sacrifice them to other wars. Ensure they have the opportunity to develop the skills that will make a more important contribution to our society than dying for it. Help our young people to live and participate and contribute to making Australia a fairer, more just and more compassionate society. Give our young people the jobs, support and resources they need and they will repay our society a thousand-fold. This should be the mantra of our ANZAC commemoration. ■



CORRUPTION FLOURISHES WHERE SECRECY EXISTS

This is the 4th and final article on corruption that we have written in response to a reader who felt that corruption was too strong a word to use. We hope that this small series has dealt decisively with this, and if readers feel strongly either way, we would welcome your comments.

There is little argument about corruption among politicians of both sides. The evidence is there and has been revealed through various commissions and inquiries; however, this is only the tip of deeper and more sinister issues and is not the most pernicious form of corruption.

Corruption occurs when governments, corporations, churches, private schools, etc., are given licence to operate without public disclosure on issues that affect the people. It is only when there is a huge public outcry that the spotlight of disclosure emerges. Whenever disclosure is demanded, the old arguments about 'confidentiality', 'in confidence', 'not in the public interest' are trotted out to defend the indefensible.

The fact is that the adage, 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely', still holds true. Corruption permeates the halls of power because it is easy for those in it to do so.

Isn't it fraud and corruption when tax evasion by the major corporations is allowed to flourish? Governments who allow it to go unchallenged commit fraud on the people. This is corruption.

Is it not corrupt for government to deliberately ignore the huge body of scientific evidence that global warming is a major threat to our world? And is it not corrupt that a government closes down the very Australian scientific organisation that demonstrates this fact?

Is it not fraud and corruption for government to pretend that removing the first Australians from remote communities is

'in their best interests', berating them for 'lifestyle choices' while withholding their real reasons for such relocation?

Is it not corruption that allows a million Australians to live in poverty while protecting the wealthy who continue to accumulate obscene levels of wealth?

Is it not fraud and corruption to lock up those seeking asylum (a human right) in concentration camps and deny the Australian people the information needed to assess what is being done in their name?

Fraud and corruption have now been exposed in the Victorian Education Department at the top levels where it is alleged that 'more than \$800 million earmarked for Victorian schools had disappeared into a black hole'.

A Victorian Parole Board executive has stepped down after revelations that he acted 'improperly'.

BHP Billiton has 'revealed the true extent of its sweetheart deal with tax authorities in Singapore' admitting the Australian Tax Office is chasing it for \$500 million in unpaid taxes and fines.

BHP admitted it gave \$4.25 million to the Minerals Council to fight the Rudd government's mining tax.

Governments that were aware and didn't act are complicit and, if they were unaware, they are incompetent.

Those who would limit the words *fraud* and *corruption* to a narrow base deceive themselves and condemn us to a real threat to our democracy ■

DID YOU KNOW...

How about a budget that hits the rich?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our government presented a budget that hit the rich, instead of low-income earners? This is what such a budget would do: abolish tax breaks for big mining, raising \$10.5 billion; reinstate the price on pollution, raising \$18 billion; implement the original super profits tax on big mining, raising \$18.6 billion; impose a \$2 per tonne levy on thermal coal exports, raising \$1.7 billion; reduce tax avoidance by taxing discretionary trusts (excepting farmers) the same as corporations, raising \$3.6 billion; implement a millionaires' tax on incomes over \$1 million, raising \$637 million; apply a public insurance levy on the big four banks that are 'too big to fail', raising \$16.8 billion; introduce a progressive superannuation tax system, replacing the 15 per cent flat rate, to prevent tax loopholes being rorted by the mega-rich, raising \$10.16 billion. Quite easy, really.

Mike Puleston, Brunswick/Fairfax Syndication

How many of you have travelled overseas by plane?

If like me you travel economy – I am sure that you have envied those up front as you enter the plane in Business Class at a steal of \$6000. And what about those in First Class who have a chauffeured car pick them up from home, personalised immigration and lounge services, whole room and a personal menu sommelier and butler, all for only \$10000!

We all get to the destination at the same time, just with a different modicum of comfort. But do the people in First or Business expect those of us in cattle class or even those who do not fly to subsidise their lifestyle choice?

Well, that's how our education system in Australia works!

PUBLIC FUNDING OF PRIVATE SCHOOLS

By **Dr David Zyngier** Monash University

A TALK GIVEN AT THE MELBOURNE UNITARIAN CHURCH ON SUNDAY 12 APRIL 2015

Australia is one of the very few countries in the OECD that publicly funds students in private schools. More than 40% of Australian secondary children now attend private schools – either so-called independent or religious schools. Australia has one of the most privatised school systems in the OECD.

Prior to the late 1960s private schools received no government funding whatsoever in this country. While most OECD countries have a private school system, very few of them receive public funding. Think about England, the home of the elite private school, and the exclusive private schools in the USA: not one cent of taxpayers' money goes into their budgets.

Priority for government funding in Australia must be to support public education

The purpose of an excellent, appropriately funded public education system is to help ameliorate the inevitable inequalities that result from the lottery of birth. No better mechanism for creating a well-educated general population has so far been discovered.

The choice model promoted by federal and state governments has contributed to the decline in enrolments in public schools nationally. The importance of choice for parents has been promoted at the expense of equity for students.

Choice is only available for those who have the wherewithal to make that choice. We have heard about the end of the age of entitlement. However, when a person on the basic wage of \$55,000 a year pays his or her taxes, that person does not have a choice, but their taxes

go to enable someone who is on a salary of \$150,000 or more per annum to exercise that choice. So it is a bogus choice. Over the last 40 years we have seen an increasing commitment to privatisation of our education system.

Stephen Dinham of University of Melbourne and the president of the Australian College of Educators wrote that:

It is hard not to conclude that what we are seeing is a deliberate strategy to dismantle public education, partly for ideological and partly for financial reasons. If these developments continue then the inevitable outcomes will be greater inequity and continuing decline in educational performance that will provide the proponents of change with further 'evidence' to support their position and for even more far-reaching change.

The more that our public education system becomes residualised the greater will be the flight of those who can flee. People are now buying properties in middle-class suburbs in order to be in the zone for the middle-class schools. Property values have gone up more than \$150,000 in those areas. It is still cheaper than sending your child to the equivalent independent school – instead of sending them to Scotch College you would send them to, for example, Balwyn High.

Government schools therefore experience a higher demand on their existing resource base than similar private schools operating within the same area. Indeed, they can find themselves in the position of having to cater for students where the private systems have been unable to meet a student's educational needs. Additional funding

is an immediate requirement if equity of outcome is to be achieved by all students. It is not the responsibility of governments to fund private schools or families using private schools; that responsibility rests – or should rest – with the private individual or the private institution.

Since the 1970s Australia has seen significant increase in inequity of funding and has a much wider achievement gap. In fact we can actually chart the decline in our PISA results with the growth of state and federal funding of private schools; they correlate. International comparisons show Australian students are among the best performers in the world but one of the lowest ranking in terms of the size of the achievement gap.

Socioeconomic differences are strongly associated with patterns in the outcomes of schooling

Middle-class parents, well-educated parents, parents who have got university degrees – their children will do well no matter where they go. We know, from research that has been done, that 50 per cent of a child's academic outcomes – not that that is the only measure – is derived from their home background, before they set foot in the school. Increasing funding for well-resourced and middle-class schools where there is a lot of what is called cultural capital already in place is not going to further advantage those children. It is a case of diminishing returns, because adding extra money at that top level is not going to give you any advantage. In fact it is wasted money. Where we need to be focusing as much of our pie as possible is on the long tail of underachievement.

Chile's divestment in private schools

It's time to rethink this mistaken inequitable policy and, like Chile, stop all public funding to private schools and redirect it to disadvantaged public schools.

Due to the market structure imposed in the 1980s by Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, the education system is the most socioeconomically segregated in the OECD, favouring private, for-profit schools with nearly 52% of enrolled students attending them. The same thing has occurred here in Australia – not imposed by a dictator – but under our very noses in a democratic country.

These Chilean reforms include the end of public funding to private, for-profit schools, to make all primary and secondary education free of charge, and prohibit contested selective practices used in school admission processes. Their education reform bill is an upheaval of the system in order to change the benefits of education from being for an affluent minority to the deserving majority. These reforms are to be paid through new taxes on the wealthy and business.

So where is our (public) education money going?

New figures from the Productivity Commission show that government-funding increases, between 2008–09 and 2012–13, massively favoured private schools over public schools.

Funding for private schools in Victoria, for example, increased by 18.5% per student, or eight times that of public schools. Across Australia the dollar increase for private schools was nearly five times that for public schools. The average increase for private schools was A\$1,181 per student compared to only A\$247 for public schools.

Other research indicates clearly that the equity gap between our school systems has continued to grow since the Gonski review in 2011.

Each private school pupil now receives, on average, a non means-tested public subsidy of over A\$8000 per year at the expense of the less privileged public school student. So much for the end of the age of entitlement!

Do private schools outperform public schools? Is there a return on this public investment?

Parents can spend up to A\$30,000 a year on private education. According to the Australian Scholarship Group, the forecast cost of sending a child to private school in Melbourne is \$504,000 over 13 years of schooling after tax, in addition to the massive public subsidy these schools receive.

A new analysis of school NAPLAN test results shows that the results in like public schools are just as good as those in private schools. The analysis reported:

The often-presumed better results of private schools are a myth. Public schools are the equal of private schools. Public, Catholic and independent schools with a similar socioeconomic composition have very similar results.

Other research found similar results for HSC in NSW:

If you're just looking at academic results, it probably isn't worth paying all that money for an elite private school.

But don't private schools save public money? We all pay taxes!

The private school lobby often makes this spurious claim alongside the claim that those who choose private schools already pay taxes so should receive at least a contribution from their taxes to pay for that education choice.

Independent Schools Victoria claims that sending a child to a private school is actually a saving to the taxpayer of A\$5000 per student.

This is akin to the Automobile Chamber of Commerce suggesting the use of private cars not only saves public money on public transport but actually wanting their members to receive a subsidy on the purchase of their new Mercedes or BMW.

Similarly no one believes that those choosing to use private toll roads should receive a subsidy for the use of the toll instead of driving on the public and free road system that their taxes have funded.

The massive ongoing disparity in funding increases for public and private schools is a national disgrace and scandal. The learning needs of disadvantaged students are being ignored by the priority given to funding more privileged sections of the community.

Unacceptably large percentages of low socioeconomic status, Indigenous and remote area students do not achieve national standards in literacy and numeracy. There are huge achievement gaps between rich and poor schools.

More than 80% of low socioeconomic and Indigenous students are enrolled in public schools. Only the full implementation of the Gonski recommendations would ensure that we improve educational outcomes in our under-resourced public schools without additional drain on the budget bottom line.

Given there is an ever-shrinking tax base, we need a discussion about gradually reducing public funding to private schools by 25% every four years until it is zero. This should give these schools time to get their budgets in order. Prior to 1972 they were doing quite well without public support.

Findings provide compelling evidence that 'money does matter and that better school resources can meaningfully improve the long-run outcomes of recently educated children', a paper released this month says.

The results ... highlight how improved access to school resources can profoundly shape the life outcomes of economically disadvantaged children and thereby significantly reduce the intergenerational transmission of poverty.

The Minister of Education, Christopher Pyne, has stated that 'education spending increased in real terms by 44 per cent between 2000 and 2009. Class sizes have been reduced by about the same number. We must look to the evidence to show us where we should spend taxpayers' money'. He argues that resources are not the issue but teacher quality, principal autonomy and parental engagement.

So what does the evidence actually show about funding?

This figure of 44% has been used by politicians of all sides and comes from flawed research by Jensen in the Grattan Institute. Apart from the 2008–2009 BER capital investment in all schools that helped save Australia's economy from meltdown, Australia's spend on education as a proportion of GDP according to the World Bank and OECD has declined from 4.9 per cent in 1999 to 4.4 per cent in 2008.

Over the same period government expenditure on education as a percentage of total government expenditure in Australia fell from 14.2 per cent to 12.9 per cent.

Only 71 per cent of Australian government spending goes to public schools – the majority of the increase in government school funding over the past decade has gone to private schools.

The percentage of gross domestic product spent on all education per head in Australia has dropped from almost 5.5% in 1974 to 4.9% in 2012.

Over the same period Australian governments have transferred large amounts of public money to private schools.

More importantly the gap between the lowest and top-performing students as is evidenced by the PISA results, NAPLAN results, continues to widen. The Minister claims that 'much of this expenditure in the last 20 to 30 years has gone towards efforts to reduce class sizes, despite evidence that this does not have a significant impact on improving student outcomes'. My research refutes this claim.

What has been happening over the last 20 years is a flight of the middle-class from the local schools, where they can afford the choice to leave their local primary or their local secondary school which then increases the marginalisation of the children who are remaining and those parents who have absolutely no choice to take their children somewhere else. These schools become marginalised and self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. Hence over the last 10 years we

can see the decline in our results in PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, and in NAPLAN as well in these particular schools. With the movement of middle-class cultural capital out of these schools, the peer support, which research shows is almost as important as the school itself, who you go to school with is almost as important as the school itself in its contribution to students' academic outcomes. They become marginalised and that peer factor needs to be alleviated with increased funding to support that disadvantage.

What needs to be done?

What we need are targeted resources to support students and teachers related to the school's needs. This can ensure that all students meet required standards.

We need to deliver the most funds and resources to students who are the most difficult to teach. These schools need the best teachers, and students must get more time to enable them to catch up.

Funding should continue to be directed to students through their school systems and funding systems should be designed to ensure that these funds are directed to the schools on the basis of need.

In terms of prosperity and stability, strong, well-funded and supported public education systems are indispensable. In sheer economic terms, the fact that other nations are more equitably educating all their available talent will inevitably rebound on our international competitiveness in the future

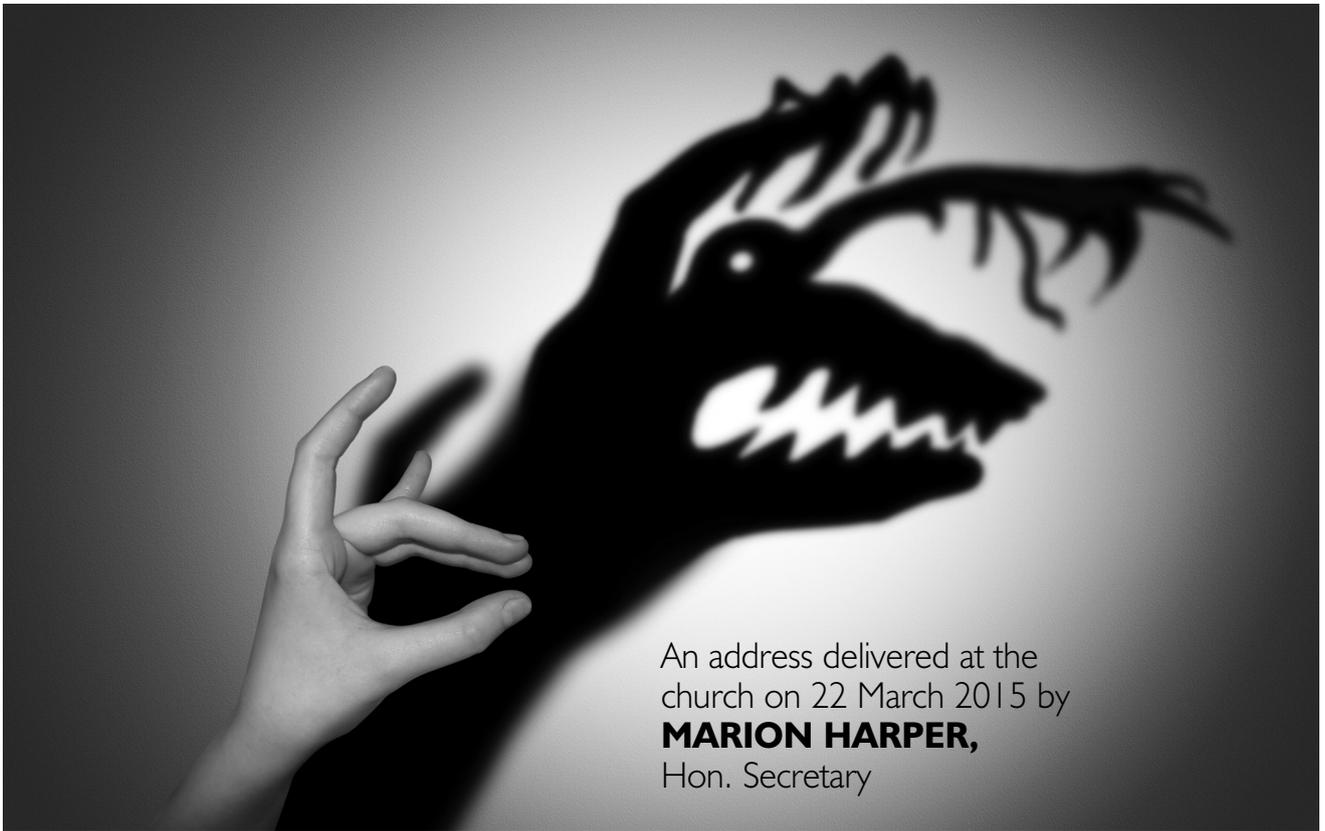
The role of SES

The equity implications of school SES are considerable. Not only are individual students advantaged or disadvantaged by their own background but the impact of this can be reduced or magnified in the schools they attend. School choice is exercised in Australia, favouring those with resources for choice – while reducing opportunities for disadvantaged students who are increasingly sitting in classrooms alongside their own peers.

One of the things that independent schools do, especially the high fee-charging independent schools, is cherry-pick the best from the public school system to enhance their final-year outcomes, to raise them up the ladder. They offer them scholarships and they therefore attract them to their schools. Again that diminishes the local public school and enhances their reputation. Of course, when independent schools have children who are troublesome, they shunt them off as they can, because it is within their right to do so, back to the public school system – because the public school system has to take all children regardless of their needs or difficulties. Of course it is also anecdotally known that the private schools do not shunt off high performers, no matter what they do. If their students are high-performing and yet they are a bit naughty, they will tolerate them because that will enhance their – I was going to use the words 'bottom line', but it is actually their upper line – their achievement level.

What I want to emphasise is funding according to **real** need:

- Properly resource those schools which disproportionately serve the most needy students.
- Enhance confidence in apparently underachieving schools.



An address delivered at the church on 22 March 2015 by
MARION HARPER,
Hon. Secretary

THE LIBERTY OF DEMOCRACY IS NOT SAFE

Some weeks ago I spoke from this platform on the topic 'State of the nation'. It was, in the main, an exposure of the corrupt nature of government in Australia and the dangerous direction in which our country, indeed the world, is travelling. Daily my deep concern grows at the path society is pursuing; it has long lost sight of the fact that society is people and that the lives of these people are more important than power, profit or parliament. It is not the economy that is paramount: it is the needs of the people who create the wealth of our society by their daily work and voluntary contributions.

I have been a supporter of socialism all my adult life and have spent that life fighting for a more just, less exploitative society. Some would say, indeed some of my children say, given you have been doing that work for over 50 years, your achievements have been small, and if I compare what I want with what I see, then that is probably correct. However the desire to continue that fight doesn't diminish as you get older ... it intensifies. In fact that old canard, 'If you're not a socialist when you're young you haven't got a heart, if you're still a socialist when you're old, you haven't got a mind', is wrong, wrong, wrong. As you get older and wiser your commitment to a better society deepens, not lessens. I would suggest that a better set of words should now be that capitalism's excesses intensify while you are ageing, so fight on.

I know that many people deplore the state of our society, sometimes in despair, feeling the problems are too large, too complicated, too overwhelming for them as individuals to have any long-lasting effect on change. Nothing can be further from the truth. As Margaret Mead said, 'A small group of thoughtful people can change the world, indeed that is all that ever has.'

Historically most Unitarians take a very strong position when it relates to social justice and attacks on democracy. The issue is, how do we know what is just and what is unjust? How do we know what must be challenged? Only involvement and the experience learned from the people can answer that.

Some remain silent in the face of injustice because of their employment, some because they are not confident, some are seduced into believing the media, and many have inbuilt prejudices on which the media and government stake their claim. Some become Uncle Toms and improve their own position at the expense of society's victims, and there are clear examples of this in the trade union movement, the Aboriginal movement, and all political parties. To challenge what is wrong, to fight injustice, to defend democracy in all its forms, this is our role as Unitarians and committed supporters of social justice and democracy.

This is the role our church in Melbourne has followed historically for decades and it is a role of which we can all be

proud and participate in at whatever level we feel comfortable with. John Pilger, a brilliant writer and journalist, who spends his life exposing the true nature of capitalism said, 'These are surreal times, as if mainstream politics has come to the end of the road. In Britain, the US, much of Europe and Australia, the policies of the principal parties have converged into single ideology states with rival factions that are little more than brotherhoods of power and privilege'.

The issue of what kind of society the majority want and the one we have is so diametrically different, surely it must lead us to ask how is this possible, how is it possible that what the majority want hasn't been achievable, given that this majority pay the most tax, do the most work, contribute the most value and provide the necessities of life for all?

The answer, of course, is that we are being constantly divided, misled and in some cases bought off. This happens with some trade union leaders, particularly those in right wing unions, and of course some Labor politicians. The great Russian revolutionary leader, Lenin, said, 'The receipt of high monopoly profits by the capitalists ... makes it economically possible for them to bribe certain sections of the workers, and for a time a fairly considerable minority of them, and win them to the side of the bourgeoisie'.

This is why our church creed is so vital and must guide our lives. 'Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity' sets out a whole standard by which we can judge our actions and it is never more needed than today.

On the threat to democracy by corporate power, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, 'The liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to the point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That in its essence is fascism – ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any controlling private power'. The fascist Benito Mussolini said the same: 'Fascism' he said, 'should more appropriately be called corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power'.

I am not suggesting for one moment that we live in a fascist society because we don't ... not yet. We know from historical experience that fascism doesn't arrive in one fell swoop, but surreptitiously and often silently, so that in our daily battle to survive we don't notice the subtle changes, or we have been so deliberately frightened by internal or external bogeymen that we prefer to ignore them. However the framework is being introduced and we need to be aware of the dangers.

In 1957 General Douglas MacArthur said, 'Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear – kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor – with the cry of grave national emergency. Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it ...'

This very same philosophy is at work today. It worked in the 1930s, it worked in the 50s, and it continues to work. Last week church member Hans Beyer very correctly talked of the need for us all to think about the kind of society we want to live in and to bequeath to our children and grandchildren. That is our urgent task. Capitalism has failed to do this and will have to be replaced, just as former societies were replaced. History shows that we moved from primitive society to feudalism, then

from feudalism to capitalism. Each of these forms of society changed when the productive forces changed. The productive forces that exist today are again due for change.

We now have the technology, the science and the creative ability to provide for all the basic needs of the world's people. The only thing that prevents this from happening is the private ownership of the means of production, profit that goes not to serve the needs of the producers of that wealth, but greedy private owners who use their influence and power to retain control at any cost.

What does this private ownership mean to us as ordinary citizens? It means that goods and services are produced for profit rather than need; it means that a smaller and smaller section of society becomes immeasurably richer while a larger section of that same society becomes poorer and more powerless. It means that basic essential services that should be the right of every citizen: a secure job, a secure roof over one's head, free education, the right to essential services such as gas, electricity, water, communication and transportation should be profit-free and guaranteed. Why they are not is because the powerful profit immensely from these necessities of life. Under capitalism, they are simply commodities and not services.

When I was very young and very idealistic I began to recognise these anomalies in our society and it was what drew me to join the Communist Party so many years ago. And now I am old, have I relinquished that commitment? No ... indeed, the circumstances that drew me to socialism have become far more compelling. I continue to witness the failure of all political parties to have the political courage and principled commitment to serve the people. We have had some committed and honest politicians – not many. There was one politician, however, I recall, one man who used his political position to serve the people. His name was Fred Paterson and he was the only Australian communist to be elected to parliament.

Fred Paterson was an excellent example of a socialist in parliament.

He made no bones about the fact that he did not represent that homogenous mass that politicians refer to as 'the people'. In one parliamentary session, he stated: 'So far as I am concerned, in this House I represent and stand clearly for one class and one class only — the useful people in this community, not the useless parasites who fatten on their lifeblood.' For Paterson, parliament was a means of educating the working class to take politics into their own hands. It was part of his struggle to bring about a society in which 'the degrading spectacle of man has no place, where all work for the good of all, where the function of the machine is to release man from labour, and not to make a monetary profit from those machines, where man freed from labour is at liberty to follow cultural pursuits, where the fear of want is banished and the law of the forest is no more.'

For too long we have allowed the greedy and powerful to use their media, their distortion of history and their 'uncle Toms' to make the issue of socialism the bogeyman of today. It is time we began to discuss the kind of society we want. For us all time is running out: environmentally, socially, politically and democratically. Where do you stand on the issues of today? This is my challenge to you all. ■

“
Always there has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it ...”

Bestselling author David Gillespie shows parents how to choose the best school for their kids, how to avoid fees, and how to make a less-than-perfect system better.

David Gillespie has six kids. Like many parents, he and his wife faced some tough decisions when it came to choosing a high school. He calculated that sending his kids to a private school would cost him \$1.3 million. A businessman at heart, he thought it worth doing some research to find out what he'd get for his money. In other words, would his kids get better results? The answer was no.

Intrigued, David continued his research, only to discover he was wrong on most counts – as are most parents – when it comes to working out what factors deliver a great education. Among other things he found out that class size doesn't matter, composite classes are fine, fancy buildings and rolling lawns are a waste of money, the old-school-tie network won't cut it in the new industries and NAPLAN is misread by everyone so is largely meaningless as a measure of quality.

Though he could afford to buy the best education possible, he writes:

Streaming our entire education system ... creating a multi-tiered system not only entrenches disadvantage at the bottom but weakens the entire system.

The only alternative is to implement the Gonski recommendations in full

In doing so we can improve opportunities for our poorest students and families by boosting their schools – and national achievement levels. All of the most important of these reforms cost money, and if they are to achieve an impact they must be targeted strategically at areas of greatest need.

We must end the flawed SES area based model of funding that continues to fund non-government schools needs to ensure that the education system is not one that promotes social segregation and generational disadvantage. There are good grounds for funding Prep to Year 2 at the same level as secondary schools. The national SRS should provide for this.

I work in primary teacher education. Any strong outcomes that children have at the end of 12 or 13 years of education is as a result of the foundation years, the early years of education. My research into class sizes, in particular in the early years, leads me to believe that that is where we need to focus our greatest target of funding, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds – Indigenous children, migrant children, children whose second language may not be English and children from low-SES communities. It is this area where we can make the biggest difference. In fact a Nobel Laureate in economics from the United States a few years ago wrote that for every dollar you invest in early years you get \$10 back in productivity gains over the life of that person.

Genuine choices

We can hardly refuse parents the right to enrol their children in any school they wish if that school meets religious or other requirements. That does not mean that the taxpayer must fund whatever lifestyle choice that parents make. A system of equal per capita grants

to non-government schools is inequitable and unjust and also wasteful.

The Catholic system and the independent system are not being philanthropic. They are very exclusive. Within the Catholic sector in particular there is a large number of high fee-charging schools that receive a lot of state and federal money. In the last four years we have seen it right down the eastern seaboard – Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria – where education budgets have been cut and cut very severely to the tune of about \$3 billion in total between those three states. The private sector, the independent and Catholic systems have not been touched. Their funding has been maintained.

One of the most alarming things is that in all the growth corridors of our major cities we are seeing that public infrastructure is not being supported. We are seeing the development of low fee-charging private schools, often Christian fundamentalist schools, being supported by our public taxation in those growth corridors. Our governments should be building public schools so that the parents have a choice and have the possibility of supporting public education.

Public schools are meant to be funded by the government appropriately through our taxes. Yet schools have to resort to chocolate drives, raffles and parent-run fetes to ensure that the 'extras' like computers, interactive white boards and aides are available.

How many of you saw the advertisement for Catholic education 'Having Faith: Catholic Education' (*The Age* March 22)? It inadvertently highlighted what is wrong with the way private schools are funded. Four pages of glossy advertising featuring four elite and very advantaged Catholic schools – all with very high percentages of students from the upper two quartiles of society, the lowest at 75% the highest 95% charging parents between \$5.3K and \$21K per annum but receiving between \$6K and \$8.5K per student from public funds in 2013. De La Salle, for example, charged parents \$7.8K and received \$8.1K from the public – which really makes them a public school! On top of this they received between \$1.5M and \$3.6M in public funds for capital works. Yet Minister Merlino has promised to ensure that these schools continue to receive as a minimum 25% of what it costs to educate students in the public system. It is time to put a halt to public funding of elite private schools and reconsider how public money is used to assist the most disadvantaged children – 80% who attend public schools.

However, as Connell wrote in 1993, 'if a poor child wants to do well in education then they should have chosen richer parents!'

My colleague Professor Jane Kenway has written that:

We can judge the virtue of a nation by how well it treats its most vulnerable people. Equally, we can judge the virtue and thus the quality of an education system by how well it educates its most vulnerable students.

A strong and viable government school system is vital for the nation's future. Australian society and its distinctive values depend on the practical expression of tolerance,

fairness, egalitarianism and equality of opportunity that public schools provide.

The Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul writes that 'the wilful undermining of universal public education by our governments and the direct or indirect encouragement of private education is the most flagrant betrayal of the basic principles of ... representative democracy'.

On the signing of the education reform bill, President Bachelet of Chile, said:

Today we are fulfilling what we promised Chile, to begin a process of deep transformation of our education system, which will ensure quality, gratuity,

integration and an end to profit-making in education. It is not fair that the resources of the Chilean people, instead of enriching our education, enriches private individuals.

John Ralston Saul observed that:

Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of the long-standing essential role universal public education plays in making us a civilized democracy.

If only such a commitment would be made by Australia's political leaders. ■

White Fella Dreaming – ecological spirituality for 'new' Australians

A TALK GIVEN AT THE CHURCH BY **DR GEOFFREY BERRY**, PHOENIX INSTITUTE OF AUSTRALIA ON 5 APRIL 2015

Easter traditionally means rebirth, whether we associate it with the Christian paradigm of spiritual Resurrection or the commercial realm of consuming chocolate eggs left by a magical rabbit (a combination of two explicit symbols of fertility). With reference to the ancient religion of nature, which follows and learns from the cycles of the seasons, I want to use this time of celebration to explore how we modern Australians can become more aligned with nature and a spiritual mode not aligned with conventional religion. This 'ecological spirituality' requires becoming more attentive to our inner lives, so that we can align our personal experiences with the wisdom traditions of the land. As Australians, this also means learning more from the Indigenous inhabitants of the land, who know so well how to live within its limits. The path towards ecological spirituality and reconciliation between native and new Australians thus can be seen as one and the same; because when we really pay attention to who we are *within*, we find we are part of a wider nature without, the physical world of all beings, to whom we are related and to whom we owe our loyalty. This resembles the Dreaming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and also finds many parallels in other wisdom traditions of the East and West.

If we think about Easter, it is obviously a ceremonial marking of a time of renewed fertility: the rabbit bringing the eggs. The connection with the Resurrection of Jesus is equally obvious; his survival of death represents the same miracle; that new life continually springs out of the depths of winter; that life is born all the time, out of the mystery, the matrix or the womb of the universe, giving forth life from who knows where, the same place the universe originally comes from, the original darkness or mystery that is the life behind the cosmos, behind the individual forms and beings of the world. The same place everything goes back to when it dies, and so on in the great cycle of life, growth, death and rebirth, without known beginning or end.

Seasonal cycles, whether in a temperate region like most of Western Europe or Melbourne, or in tropical areas,

all reveal a similar pattern. Whether it is obvious in the summer growth giving way to autumnal fall to winter's cold death and back again out into spring, or in a simple cycle of crops like rice dying into the ground only to be reborn, the pattern is the same: life constantly appears out of death. Although we are in a different hemisphere, the pattern in Melbourne is ironically not dissimilar at this time of year; where in the Northern Hemisphere this is a full moon time of spring, celebrating new fertility out of winter, here we have a relatively cool season, usually with some rain, and a spurt of growth following another long, hot summer (to some degree).

Adding the idea of Jesus or the Easter Bunny to this is a way of trying to link this to the Sacred Mystery, in one way or the other. For Christians, the religious model works to bring the divine into life, using the myth of Jesus to help us see the glory of God, in our hearts and in the world. In the secular world, the Easter Bunny brings magical gifts of abundance from his invisible realm, beyond the rational world. And this brings us to the problem of the sacred in the consumer capitalist world of commercialism. Worshipping the sacred without religion should not be a problem in a secular society, where we're free to develop a personal connection to the divine. But commercialism consolidates the commitment to materialism that is part of a capitalist society, so that our intuitions of a better world, with higher values and more widespread compassion, are too easily consigned to the shelf of dusty ideas, past their use-by date or too 'unrealistic' to take seriously.

I'm not against materialism, in my defence of the spiritual; far from it. In fact what I am presenting is a new kind of materialism, which I am calling ecological spirituality. It takes our bodies and the physical aspect of life on earth far too seriously to side with the slide into lazy consumption, which is promoted as the good life by the propaganda machine of global corporate marketeers. Spirituality today requires a commitment to an ecological dimension, which means taking seriously what goes into our bodies, what 'resources' are used to fuel our lifestyles, how we work with the earth rather than assume a false order of mastery over it and its other peoples and creatures. Without this

dimension of care, spirituality is merely another version of escapism.

This is probably no surprise to most Unitarian readers, but I just want to underscore here how we can best live as planetary citizens and as Australians. Because as White Fellas – or Australians who were not born out of the ancestry of this land – we have a duty to try and better understand this ‘country’ and its original peoples. Aboriginal Australians consider their ‘country’ to be not only the place with which they identify; it is an enlivened spiritual cosmos, filled with other parts of nature that have just as much right to live and flourish as humanity does. The way to live right with this kind of natural environment is to build relations with it. To consider the river as a really alive, flowing source of replenishment, for people and for life itself; to consider the eagle as brother, the kangaroo as kin, the sky as part of the web of life. And to be responsible for part of this, via a totemic system, so that I may need to protect the Bilby Dreaming of our particular ‘country’ while you may be responsible for the Native Grass Dreaming. The system works by organising everything and everyone into a nested series of cares, where we all share empathy and compassion for all of life, together as parts of the pattern.

We may not be capable of mobilising this kind of wisdom overnight; as ‘new’ Australians we are socialised into a different way of categorising the different aspects of the natural and cultural worlds. But the imperative is upon us to learn new ways, fast, now that the ecological crisis is finally becoming apparent to all but the most hardened conservative ideologues. Now, loyalty to the earth must be paramount in our relationship with what we hold most meaningful and valuable – aka, the sacred. And to hold the earth itself sacred is not only a real aspect of most religious perspectives, it is a vital and living part of the Australian Aboriginal way of life. And this is something we can learn, both from wisdom traditions and from attention to our own inner knowing.

It is literally natural to rediscover this kind of knowledge, because all humanity lived in close relationship with nature for 90% of its cultural history and 99% of its genetic evolution. Urban civilisation has only existed for around 10,000 years. And the agricultural revolution that inspired large scale settlement society changed one fundamental thing about the way we humans live in relation to nature. It meant that instead of looking to nature for subtle signs about how best to survive and thrive – where the best patches of wild berries would be this spring, or the most likely river bank to forage for turtle eggs – we looked to the world as a resource for our own purposes. With agriculture we don’t give thanks to sacred nature for the life-giving gift of fresh water when we approach the river; we wonder how we can redirect this *resource* to better irrigate the crops we now plant in the alluvial plains. Both fresh water and the cereal grain itself are now things we use, to gain more yield, to create surplus, to protect and

defend, to feed larger families and more powerful armies with. Turning the earth into a resource was the single most significant fact in the history of the human race; and it leads directly from Mesopotamia and Egypt, through Rome and Medieval Europe, to the additional fire-power of the Industrial Revolution and the increasingly alarming realities of a modern world in ecological peril.

One of the ways to deal with our current set of dilemmas is to be even more inventive with technology; in fact, we already know how to scale fossil fuels out of the equation with renewable energy sources, we just lack the political will and vision. But another way is to recalibrate our relationship with nature; to reconsider the way we think about the earth, so that it is not merely a *resource* but a place we hold sacred. One of the keys to making this shift real is to recall our own deep affinity with nature. And one of the best ways to see that this can be a real source of deep satisfaction – of a materialism beyond consumption, in other words of an ecological spirituality – is to consider the Aboriginal inhabitants of this ‘country’ and their Dreaming, which sings the song of the land along its ancient, ever-alive Songlines.

So, for now, what can we rediscover about the hope held out by an Easter festival in contemporary terms, when we stand outside of conventional Christianity, on this ancient land, with our secular freedoms? We can consider Easter’s iconic imagery of the Resurrection, which is in turn a version of a much more ancient idea, that we can transform who we are in real terms, *in the body*, with a kind of rebirth out of ritual. When we think of the mythic story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we can’t help but recall the Mystery Schools of the Greeks, who likewise spent time in dim caverns, spending their symbolic dark days and nights of the soul being inspired by personal experience that went beyond the limits of the personal, so that they could be transformed in their everyday lives in alignment with a greater vision of what is possible. If ever there was a time we needed to tap back into this deep stream of European and Levantine wisdom, this was it. And with the knowledge we have of such processes, we can undertake them. Right now. We can re-find the inner riches of an ecological spirituality, which link us to the rest of nature, to the other creatures and even to the landscape itself, all of which now requires protection from the worst ravages of the human race.

My White Fella Dreaming project moves to offer all of this, as a counter-cultural alternative to the dominant paradigm and its damages, in the hopes of transforming modern society towards a more sustainable set of practices. I recognise that we need to do this within ourselves, at the same time as we activate it in everyday life and also in the wider community of the planet. And we have inner resources, our own links to early practices like this, and existing wisdom traditions of this land to learn from. ■

© Geoff Berry 2015

PAYPAL ACCOUNT

The church has now opened a PayPal account. If you have access to PayPal – all you need do is log on and the church’s PayPal address is admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au Visit our web page and click on the link. You will be able to pay your subscription and make donations.

**TUNE INTO THE
Unitarian Half Hour**
EVERY SATURDAY AT 10.30 AM
3CR • 855 AM • COMMUNITY RADIO

from our readers



Dear Editor

The Middle East, a new vision

The hard-fought protracted Iraqi rebellion against the US-led 2003 military invasion force, and the subsequent unexpected entrenchment in Syria and Northern Iraq of the well-resourced brutal Sunni Muslim fundamentalist Islamic State movement (IS) have unleashed an intolerable human tragedy throughout the Middle East with millions of people displaced, maimed or killed.

IS, declared a terrorist organisation (or death cult) by Western democracies and some Arab states, is bitterly opposed by (1) the Sunni Muslim Kurdish regional government which is struggling for independence from Iraq; (2) Shiite Muslim Iran, autocratic and currently sanctioned for its nuclear weapons ambitions by Israel and the West; (3) Israel, a nuclear-armed parliamentary democracy and largest recipient of United States (US) aid, whose continued oppression of displaced Palestinians is most unhelpful and regrettable; (4) the largely Sunni Muslim autocracies of the Gulf states of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen; (5) the fledgling US-backed mostly Shiite Muslim Iraqi government in Baghdad and (6) the US-led Western democracies, including Australia. Moreover, IS and some smaller Muslim rebel groups, plus the US and Israel, aim to topple Assad's Alawite Muslim dictatorship in Syria which is allied to Russia militarily and economically. Democratic Sunni Muslim Turkey has remained neutral, despite outside pressure to confront IS.

Another surge of foreign troops, as ordered by the Abbott government for Australian military personnel to fix this well-trodden Middle-eastern quagmire, is bound to fail. It would seem more sensible, in the first instance, to mobilise the international community, under the auspices of the United Nations (UN), to arrange a ceasefire and the withdrawal from Arab soil of all foreign troops, except UN peacekeepers. Thereafter the UN should work urgently towards placing Middle eastern countries under the umbrella of a loosely structured 'Middle eastern federation' with members retaining their linguistic and cultural traditions plus control over their natural resources.

Such a massive revamp of the political landscape in the Middle East would require entirely new peace-oriented

visionary leadership (recruited from across the warring Arab and Israeli factions), much lateral thinking and willingness for compromise. Since World War II the Europeans have shown the way forward in this regard by relentlessly pursuing economic, legal and political cooperation instead of the insanity of war.

The occasional well-intentioned US initiatives for peace and security, especially under US presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, have generally failed since 1948. The leadership of a new 'Middle Eastern federation' may therefore seek guidance from the 'European Union model'. Sound principles in this model worth adopting for peace in the region would appear to include: (1) free trade through open borders; (2) a common passport for all citizens; (3) inter-state work permits; (4) gender equality in education; (5) freedom of religion and the press; (6) tough anti-racism laws; (7) regular cultural and sporting exchanges; (8) a common punitive policy towards declared terrorist groups and lone fanatics; (9) effective health and quarantine laws and (10) an absolute commitment by all parties to outlaw war as a means of solving disputes and to honouring UN resolutions on contentious issues affecting the region.

If the UN can pull off such Middle eastern transformation, it would be a triumph for humanity.

Fred Neumann, Vic

NEW Unitarian E-Newsletter

The Melbourne Unitarian Church has decided to move into the digital world by launching an **E-Newsletter** every two to three months that will bring you up-to-date information and comment from home and around the world. If you would like to be part of our exciting E-Newsletter, please send an email to us at admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au and we will add you to our growing database. If, on receipt or at any point you decide you no longer wish to receive the newsletter, you can easily unsubscribe.

PAY BY DIRECT DEPOSIT

If *Beacon* readers would like to pay their subs via a bank, details are below. (You will need to go to an ANZ bank if you do not want to incur fees.)

Bank: ANZ
Account Name: Melbourne Unitarian Church
BSB: 013 275
Account No: 3011 30386

You need to add your surname and postcode in the reference.

Increase our Circulation:

Nominate potential subscribers for three free monthly copies without ongoing obligation!
(Try before you buy)

Our church is a public and usable asset with portable seating and excellent conference, meeting and function facilities. We welcome its use by those who support our motto 'Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity'. Interested individuals or groups can contact the church office – we would be delighted to speak to you. A donation is payable.

MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH

‘SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY’

Tel: 03 9417 4178 (9.30 am – 4.00 pm weekdays) Fax and Answering machine: 03 9417 4178
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne (opposite the Mercy Hospital)
Services, Sunday 11 am

IN THIS ISSUE:

Editorial

Corruption flourishes where secrecy exists

Public funding of private schools

The liberty of democracy is not safe

White Fella Dreaming – ecological spirituality for ‘new’ Australians

Beacon Editorial Board

Peter Abrehart

Marion Harper

Donna Sensi

Julie Stafford

The Editorial opinions expressed are those of the Editorial Board.

Opinions expressed in the editorial, articles, letters, etc., in the *Beacon* are those of the writers themselves and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Melbourne Unitarian Church or any other organisation to which a particular writer is affiliated. Titles and affiliations are used for individual identification purposes only.

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
100003043

SURFACE
MAIL

POSTAGE
PAID
E. Melbourne
Victoria
Australia
3002

Simply cut out this form, fill in the details, and forward it along with your subscription. Why not do it now? If you are already a subscriber, send one to a friend.

To: The Editor, **The Beacon**, Melbourne Unitarian Church
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia

Please forward a copy of **The Beacon** every month. Enclosed is \$20.00 for twelve months subscription. (A\$20 Overseas and \$10 concession)

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Also send a copy to:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

A GIFT THAT SAYS YOU CARE

A Gift Subscription to **The Beacon**, the ideal gift that lasts a whole year.
Please enter my gift subscription to the following:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Donor's Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Enter payment of \$20.00 (A\$20 Overseas, \$10 Concession) for one year's subscription to the Editor, **Beacon**, Melbourne Unitarian Church, 110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia. Cheques payable to Melbourne Unitarian Church.