

**Reflection for Ecumenical Service**  
**St. Peter's, Eastern Hill, Melbourne Victoria Australia**  
**Tuesday 28 June 2005**  
**delivered by Bishop Philip Huggins**

**Human Dignity and Equity in Employment**

**Introduction**

Welcome to this Ecumenical Service on **Human Dignity in Employment**.

It is an opportunity to reflect on important themes. Thank you to all who are contributing.

St. Peter's has hosted worship like this before, perhaps without so much amplification!

You can smell the incense in the atmosphere. May our prayers rise like incense.

This is a Church that treats profoundly the Incarnation : God amongst us born of Mary.

We'll hear Mary's song about God's plan for justice and peace in scripture and in "Tell out my Soul".

The doctrine of the Incarnation says all creation matters to God! God in Christ reconciles the world to Godself.

Our material, physical, sensual life on a tiny star in a vast universe matters to God our Creator.

In all its detail and immediacy.

Salvation - healing and wholeness - is for all of our being. That's why this Church, like many, feeds the Soul in sacred worship, **and** runs breakfast programs for the homeless and lonely.

Clergy here since the 1850's have expressed concerns about working conditions for the poor. You will have seen the reference to Canon Hughes' work in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Here at St. Peter's he was an advocate for those in poor working conditions.

Looking back, it looks rather a more innocent era but it was tough then too.

Creating a just and free society is always tough, demanding. The oppositional forces are interior and exterior.

- This time of worship is an opportunity for reflection.

An opportunity to be honest about our own capacity to misuse power; to deny in ourselves, what we see more clearly in others.

To live with a pure heart is such a journey! Jesus promises that thus we may see God (Matthew

5:8).

This is also an opportunity for ethical reflection around the Federal Government's I.R. proposals.

Our hope is that our ethical consideration may lead to some changes by the time the final draft of the legislation comes into the Parliament in August.

So let me offer what I hope are some helpful comments.

## **1. Trade Unions**

Trade Unions have an honourable Christian history. For example, John Wesley's preaching amongst the British working class meant that the Methodist Church took up the cause of working conditions.

The Methodists helped with the establishment of unions of workers, to improve working conditions, ban children from factories, and so on.

Making it harder for workers to unite, to be represented by a union, ignores the power differential between the individual worker and the employer.

It also ignores history's lessons about humankind's capacity for sin. Power needs to be checked by structures and laws to prevent the more vulnerable from being abused.

Trade Unions have a vital role in a healthy democracy.

The I.R. proposals don't appear respectful of their role. It is important that we have respect for all the institutions that contribute to a stable democracy.

Along with the Industrial Relations Commission, the Trade Unions help us resolve differences in a largely ordered and non-violent way. They are integral to a stable and healthy democracy.

The I.R. proposals would seem to make it more difficult for trade unions to represent workers.

## **2 Unfair Dismissal**

Any plan to take away from small and medium business, the obligation to observe 'unfair dismissal laws' exposes that half of Australia's work force which is employed in small business.

Under the proposals, unfair dismissal protection will go for all businesses of 100 workers or less. That is, for most Australian workers.

The question is whether any savings to business will expose workers to unfairness.

Whilst many employers strive to look after their staff in a positive, healthy way, protection is needed regarding those who may treat people unfairly

It is a serious social justice issue to diminish workers' protection.

People are not commodities to be exploited. They have dignity as individuals in God's creation.

We all carry the image of God our creator.

We all need protection against any misuse of a power differential.

Some of you know from your daily work how the current unfair dismissal laws have protected workers from termination in circumstances which are harsh and unjust. What will be their protection now?

### 3 **Casual Work**

Australia has one of the highest rates of casual labour in any Western country. (28% or 2 million of Australia's 9 million work force).

Casual work is really an arrangement for low wages with fewer rights to holidays, super, sick pay, overtime rates, etc.

It is an arrangement to degrade wages and conditions. It provides workers with little security to plan for the future.

These issues aren't improved by the proposals.

### 4 **Minimum Wages and Conditions**

- Minimum wages and conditions are an effort to prevent poverty, including that of the 'working poor.'

The case for abolishing the I.R.C.'s role in setting minimum wages has not been made.

Its replacement may well be Orwellian named the 'Fair Pay Commission.'

It's not clear that it will have the independence which has made the IRC so valuable.

After a minimum wage hearing, Trade Union leaders come out saying "it isn't enough" and employer representatives say "it is too much". But there is an acceptance of the IRC's independence which has been a stabilising influence.

- The Scriptures compel us to 'take care of the poor'. (Luke 4:18).

If the test of any civil society is how we take care of the most vulnerable, including the poor, a fair wage is a good starting point.

How will minimum standards - fair wages and conditions - now be maintained? It is not quite clear. What we do know is that the award system has helped maintain minimum standards. The proposals from the Government seem aimed at diminishing the award system.

## 5 Workplace Safety

Many clergy have taken funerals after workplace accidents. It is distressing work.

According to the ACTU, in 2004, 3000 Australian workers died from industrial disease or industrial accidents.

Any proposals that may make people less safe must obviously be resisted.

Our focus needs to be on workplace safety, including safety from bullying and intimidation.

The I.R. proposals are silent on any initiatives for greater workplace safety.

The onus of proof is with the Government: will these proposals make Australian workers more or less safe? How can we improve the safety of our workplaces?

## 6. Why the Church calls for I.R. conservatism

“If it’s not broken, don’t try to fix it”.

This conservative argument was convincing as regards referendum proposals for a Republic. Likewise, now, the I.R. system is working reasonably well. It isn’t broken

- Levels of industrial disputation are relatively low. The PM’s own statement to the Parliament (26<sup>th</sup> May) said “the number of working days lost per 1,000 workers is at the lowest levels in 90 years.”

Where is the case for changing a system that is working this well?

- Differences are resolved through negotiations.
- There are fairness provisions to prevent misuse of power differentials.
- Christian theology has a sober, realistic view of human nature. It is a basis for the careful development of institutions and the rule of law, to ensure there are checks and balances against any abuse of power. Our I.R. system has evolved over a long period of time. It doesn’t need radical reform.

## 7. Employment

The PM says I.R. reform is driven by employment considerations - to help create jobs.

[Sunday Age 26 June].

However, the PM recognises unemployment levels are not in crisis. His Statement to Parliament notes “unemployment is near a 30 year low”.

The I.R. system has not got in the way of job creation during the favourable economic conditions in recent years.

Those currently unemployed, including those subject to the 2005 Federal Budget’s “welfare to work” proposals, are likely to be low-skilled; on disability pensions; long-term older unemployed people.

These people need education and training.

Instead of tax cuts to higher income recipients, the Federal Government could improve employment levels by directing some of the \$9 billion surplus towards targeted education and training for those still unemployed.

The Church welfare agencies have been advocating this, including Anglicare Australia (which I Chair).

## 8. **Work/Family Balance**

A major issue in contemporary Australia is family balances. [This is meant to be the BBQ conversation piece.]

The I.R. reforms don’t address this issue.

Job insecurity, through the reduction in protections, may just add to ‘over work’ pressures. People will be more anxious about the risk they will lose their job in this new I.R. environment.

The pressure to ‘overwork’ in order to maintain employment is already a serious issue. It causes stress in marriages and families. Clergy already see this through their pastoral work.

## **Conclusions**

- The concern is that these proposals may damage the fabric of Australian society for no good reason.
- It may produce a few more poorly paid jobs with irregular hours and little security, but at what social cost?
- It may further marginalise the most disadvantaged individuals and groups in our society.

- Australia doesn't need unnecessary conflict and division at this time. There is so much we can do together for the common good.
- The wider world needs the hopeful example of a country creating genuine dignity and equity in employment, balancing economic and social considerations. We have the capacity to be such a sign of hope.
- It is important that the Government registers these concerns as it proceeds to the drafting of its proposed Workplace Relations Legislation.

Through the National Council of Churches, we have requested a meeting with the Prime Minister to quietly, respectfully, convey concerns such as these in my brief talk here today.

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