

TO FIRMER GROUND: RESTORING HOPE IN AUSTRALIA

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John Langmore

The Old Testament

Thank you for the honour of the invitation to give the John Roffey Memorial Lecture. I did not know John Roffey so can say nothing about him personally, but I do know that he was an eminent Old Testament scholar. This offers a perfect starting point for this lecture, for although I am a theological layperson, for the last few years I have been studying the Old Testament instructed by some of Walter Brueggemann's books. Brueggemann is described by some as the finest Old Testament scholar in the US and by others simply as a master interpreter. A notable characteristic of his writing is reflection on the pattern of prophetic ministry in Old Testament times, which nurtured and evoked a consciousness alternative to that of the dominant culture, and application of those insights to the contemporary world.¹

One of the innumerable benefits of studying the Old Testament is that it is the story of a society, the people of Israel and Judea. That is, one of its many forms is social observation and analysis about groups and nations. The significance of this social foundation for the New Testament is sometimes forgotten by those who interpret the New Testament in as simply related to individuals. Yet the Bible is about relations of both individuals and societies with God.

For example, the Old Testament is saturated with expressions of God's commands for justice. A favourite example for many Christians is from Micah:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God

A verse which speaks clearly to our nation is Malachi 3: 5

Then I will draw near to you for judgement; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me says the Lord of hosts.

Another amongst innumerable examples is Psalm 146, which, starting at verse 5 proclaims:

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

Brueggemann describes the Psalter as ‘a rhetorical exercise ... by which the faithful live in an alternative world defined by issues of fidelity and infidelity about which the dominant world knows very little. The God to whom the Psalter ‘answers’ is the one ‘from whom no secrets can be hid’.² That is true for each of us individually and also for us collectively, as communities and as a nation. In his commentary on Kings, Brueggemann writes ‘The sustained claim of this account of royal history and of all Israel’s faith is that public power is not finally an autonomous process, but that power must answer to truth. That of course is a lesson that power must always relearn, always in painful ways.’³

A major stream of writing within the Old Testament is prophecy, a central element of which is speaking truth to power. In an article published in *The Age* three weeks ago, headed ‘Let us listen to those brave enough to speak the truth’, Archbishop Philip Freier wrote that ‘The truly prophetic are those who help us see the ‘not-yet’ world within our current circumstances. ... Prophets ... offer an honest critique of the world as it is – a critique that often strips away the comfortable veneers we use to avoid facing the truth.’⁴ He went on to gently chide the Government for failing to listen to Indigenous peoples who have for years been calling for urgent action to tackle problems in their communities and who want to be properly consulted. ‘Who is listening to them’ he wrote, ‘in the undemocratic and unseemly haste to force through 500 pages of legislation that affects them directly’.

Anglicare has long had such a prophetic role, through rigorous analysis of the nature and causes of deprivation, exclusion and injustice, and identifying effective ways of resolving conflicts, providing services and struggling for justice and mercy to prevail. Anglicare’s prophetic public speaking is most powerful when it arises out of acute awareness of the issues faced by the people you are serving. Such prophetic speaking is desperately needed in Australia now.

Australia

Australians are generally a privileged people. We are surrounded by the natural beauties in the Australian landscape - wattles, rainforests, grasslands and surf. We have high average incomes and live in relative economic security. Our country is a practicing democracy and though inadequacies are apparent to all of us, we have access to ways of addressing those. We are proud of the achievements of our sports men and women; the success of Australian films, actors and directors; our scientists, musicians, writers, and artists.

Australia’s privilege conceals neglect of many issues of overwhelming importance. Within our own society we see environmental destruction, inequity, social and economic injustice, under-employment, exclusion, violence, anxiety (both as a widespread feeling and a clinical condition), personal depression, obesity and addiction; and globally we see a future threatened by climate change, the breakdown of multilateral cooperation, escalation in the spread and sophistication of nuclear weapons, the risk of pandemics and the impoverishment of half of humankind, compounded by the erosion of international standards relating to the conduct of war and treatment of prisoners. Former Governor General Sir William Deane describes Australia’s situation with his usual honesty and wisdom:

Let us rejoice and be grateful for all the achievements of our past. At the same time, let us be honest and courageous about the failures and flaws which mar those achievements. The damage we have done to the land, its rivers and coasts, notwithstanding our love of its beauty, the unacceptable gap between the haves and

the have-nots, in this land of the 'fair-go' for all. How far we still have to travel on our journey towards genuine reconciliation between indigenous peoples and the nation of which they form such a vital part. Together we can overcome these flaws and look forward to a fairer Australia.

Eminent social analyst Hugh Mackay observes that:

In spite of many signs of personal optimism and buoyancy, there is growing concern about the state of Australian society: rougher, tougher, more competitive, less compassionate. This produces stress, edginess and a feeling of personal vulnerability. In our struggle to keep up with an ever-accelerating pace of change, we are sacrificing many of our traditional courtesies and values.

Social surveys show that the majority of Australians are paradoxically both relatively comfortable with the national situation but also unsure about some policies and longer term prospects. There have been fifteen years of relatively rapid economic growth, for which there is a widespread appreciation. Yet the high levels of personal debt, rising interest rates and high petrol prices during 2005 and 2006 increased anxiety.⁵ Though the majority have a general sense of material well-being, at the same time there are widespread insecurities, anxieties and fears.

One underlying cause of unease is the current economic ideology, sometimes misnamed 'economic rationalism' and often described internationally as neo-liberalism or the Washington consensus. Since this ideology is a direct descendent from nineteenth century liberalism it is both accurate and acceptable to supporters to use the descriptive term economic liberalism.⁶ At the extreme, however, economic liberalism can and does become market fundamentalism, which involves making markets an end in themselves rather than a means to other economic and social goals. For the last quarter century both major party groupings have adopted the ideology of economic liberalism and, though politicians have continued to take note of community attitudes, their perceptions have been skewed by the dominant ideology. The economic liberal fog has obscured voters' preferences.

Liberal economists have been so preoccupied with maximising individual income that other aspects of well-being have been excluded. Their principal recommendations for achieving growth of individual income have been minimising the role of the state by reducing public expenditure and taxation, privatisation of public enterprises, and deregulating the financial and corporate sectors. Many liberal economists have been so obsessed with efficiency that employment, equity, harmony, social justice and environmental responsibility have been forgotten.

After the quarter century of liberal economic dominance, under both Labor and Liberal governments, it would be timely for Australians to examine the consequences of the liberal economic ascendancy, to analyse consequences – both benefits and costs – and identify lessons, and to consider whether any re-evaluation of national goals and public policy could be beneficial. Two of the clearest outcomes of the economic liberal ascendancy are a striking dichotomy, for while the strategy has been associated with a long period of economic growth, market fundamentalists have actually made no progress at all towards their principal goal of contracting public expenditure and taxation. Public expenditure and taxation, as proportions of national income, are now higher than ever. Economic growth has been achieved by abandoning the main economic liberal goal, which is in itself a clear reason for scepticism about the ideology.

One feature of economic liberalism is the obsession with individual income maximisation to the exclusion of other dimensions of well-being. National public policy still focuses on growth of GDP and devalues many policies which would contribute to human well-being and equality of opportunity. This is not only an expression of ideology, however, but also reflects the interests of the powerful in preference to those of the whole population.⁷

In contrast it would be quite possible to orient policy towards seeking the well-being of all Australians, the common good of our society and a national contribution to global peace and justice. To make such a vision credible it is necessary to suggest policies which would contribute to achieving such a vision, so let's turn to some concrete proposals.

Major Proposals

This section of the address is based on a book commissioned by the Australian Collaboration entitled *To Firmer Ground: Restoring Hope in Australia*, which is being published in two weeks. Anglicare is associated with the Australian Collaboration through membership of ACOSS and also the membership of the Anglican Church in the National Council of Churches, both of which are members of the Collaboration. I will briefly mention eleven high priority issues.

1. *Climate Change* Climate change is at once a matter of constraining rising temperatures, climatic turbulence and drought, a survival issue and a major issue of social justice because the poorest communities will suffer the most. As the country with the largest average emissions per person, Australia has a physical, political and moral responsibility to swiftly and dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Three immediate actions are essential. First, ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, in order to signal the start of cooperation with the existing global strategy. Second, preparation and implementation of a national strategy with ambitious, short, time-based targets for reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, including a comprehensive tax on carbon emissions and emission trading. Third, and simultaneously, strengthening programs for reduction in energy use and adoption of renewable energy technologies.
2. *Education* Preschool experiences are potent influences in determining social, intellectual and emotional development, yet Australia spends barely a quarter of the *average* proportion of national income of other developed countries on preschool education and support. Correcting this perverse anomaly is arguably the highest priority for social policy. Investment in the physical infrastructure of primary and secondary public schools, vocational education and training institutions and universities to make up for the last decade of reductions and restrictions and to move forward is essential. Setting a target and timeline to cut child poverty would assist as would expanding investment in early childhood services, particularly for children in needy households, increasing opportunities for parental support; and sharply boosting intakes to quality trade apprenticeships and the innumerable forms of vocational and professional education.
3. *Employment* The claim made repeatedly by government and the media that Australia now has virtually full employment is false. Unemployment persists after fifteen years of economic expansion, and prevents one in twenty of the official labour force having the work which is essential to supporting themselves and their families, to making a contribution to the community and to leading dignified lives. Barely recognised are

the many more pushed out of the labour force and the further 700,000 people who are under-employed through being unable to find all the paid work they want. A goal of full employment would mean aiming to reduce unemployment to two per cent and for sufficient employment growth to eliminate underemployment. Transformed attention is vital to reduce underemployment through skills training, work experience programs, reductions in educational fees and to supporting all those who want additional work in their preparation and search for jobs. At least \$1 billion is required over the next three years for appropriately designed training and service sector jobs, especially in regions of particularly high joblessness.

4. *The Workplace* The Howard Government's workplace relations policy abolished the structure of fair industrial relations established in Australia for a century and globally affirmed by ILO conventions. By undermining trade unions, collective bargaining and minimum employment conditions the workplace relations legislation abandons the goal of security and equity at work. Employer power is dramatically strengthened so that the young, ageing, semiskilled and otherwise vulnerable are opened to exploitation and to having family life subjected to management whims. Restoration of an equitable framework of industrial relations is essential for personal well-being and national fair-play. Repeal of the falsely named 'Work Choices' Act and the system of individual contracts known as Australian Workplace Agreements is essential for establishment of a fairer industrial relations system. This would enable introduction of more family-friendly working practices and allow application of those ILO conventions which Australia has ratified.
5. *Health* Australia urgently needs expansion of capacity for treatment of depression and anxiety, promotion of understanding of mental health issues in the community and better integration of the mental health workforce. Reducing the private health insurance tax rebate would release resources which are urgently needed to repair the public health system. The Government should also set targets to reduce health inequalities and support a program to assist the many low-income Australians needing basic dental health care.
6. *Housing* Rapidly rising house prices and increasing interest rates have reduced housing affordability and so human security. Homelessness is widespread and some waiting lists for public housing are a decade long. Increased rent assistance to low-income earners is vital. The Commonwealth and state governments must act co-operatively to make housing more accessible and affordable by rapidly building much more public housing, and also new houses to be rented on limited-term tenancies to people whose income is currently too high to obtain public housing.
7. *Justice for Indigenous Australians* A renewed commitment to justice for Indigenous people is essential, expressed through concerted negotiations for reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians. One necessary condition for reconciliation is ensuring that Indigenous people enjoy the same access as other Australians to human services such as education, health, water, waste disposal and support for young children, older people and people with disabilities. A second condition is to rapidly expand employment opportunities. A third is to create new opportunities for regional and national political representation by Indigenous peoples to replace the abolished Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. One option that could be explored

is establishment of seats in the House of Representatives for election by Indigenous people as happens in New Zealand.

8. *Reinvigorated Multiculturalism* Since governments continue to approve large migration programs, renewal of the policy of multiculturalism is essential for effective inclusion of those arriving into Australian communities. Decency, humanity and recognition of human rights suggest that Australia should honour its commitments through the Universal Declaration to welcome refugees. Effective commitment to multiculturalism also requires political leadership, comprehensive arrangements for welcoming migrants, explicit opposition to discrimination and upgrading of educational and community development programs.
9. *Investing in the Future* About 1.2 million people are unable to find all the paid work they want, while at the same time there is a skills shortage. Investing in the future requires immediate initiation of a sustained program of upgrading of physical and social capital including education and vocational training at all levels, funded in part by recognising that investment benefits future generations and can therefore be properly financed through borrowing. Access to business credit must be accessible and interest rates kept as low as possible in order to provide conditions conducive to entrepreneurship and enterprise expansion. Renewed commitment to stimulating innovation through research, development and demonstration is vital to the dynamism of Australian manufacturing and services, and reducing dependence on mineral exports. Concerted, increased support for research and innovation is vital to Australia's economic vitality.
10. *Global security and justice* International security and development have been undermined by the Bush administration's unilateral aggression and contempt for international law. As a consequence, the world has become more insecure, violent, inequitable and climatically unstable. Obedience to such a regime has damaged Australia's security and international standing, and limited the scope for independent engagement in responding to threats to global well-being. Strengthening international security requires renewed commitment to the international rule of law based on the United Nations Charter. Australian security involves seeking peaceful solutions to conflicts through diplomatic negotiation, urging the abandonment of symptoms of American hubris like pre-emptive aggression, reducing wasteful and provocative military expenditure, and engagement in effort to strengthen UN forums. Improvement of global economic governance is essential. Extension of the range and depth of global public goods such as international cooperation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and curtail tax avoidance is essential, as are rapid increases in finance for development. Equitable economic and social development requires major increases in aid, especially by the least generous donors such as Australia. The rights of developing countries to decide their own economic and social strategies must be recognised, without imposition of the doctrinaire conditions habitually required by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Impediments to development such as agricultural protection and subsidies in rich countries need to be removed.
11. *Enhancing a Democratic Australia* Politics is a focus for resolving conflicts over competing interests. In recent years many interests and issues crucial to a harmonious, socially just, and environmentally sustainable Australian society have been neglected or repressed. Revitalising political processes involves replacing

authoritarian tendencies with inclusive, participatory opportunities for dialogue and consultative engagement. Parliament's role would be enhanced by independent funding, increased staffing, greater involvement in decision-making about major issues and strengthening of committees. Mobilising political imagination requires enlivening public discussion and party organisations and renewal of communication and accountability between ministers, parliamentarians, party members, community organisations and voters. Accountability legislation could set limits to political financing and set ethical standards for politicians and their staff. The inhibition of public discourse caused by the narrowing concentration of media ownership should be addressed immediately by establishment of an independent inquiry to investigate and make recommendations.

A Viable Path

To reach these goals and take these actions, strong leadership from government will be required. Economic policies and ideology will have to change.

These policies are both politically and economically feasible. Attitude and opinion surveys show that the issues of greatest concern to voters include: economic competence; security at work and work-family balance; climate change; health; education; and opposition to the Iraq war. A government with a strong commitment to economic security, enhancing employment opportunities, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improvement in the quality and accessibility of health and education services in all their aspects, and to a foreign policy aiming at international cooperation to reduce the threat of violent conflict would be politically attractive, providing it had credible policies for achieving these goals. Dissatisfaction with current values, with the balance between work and the rest of life and the change in voter intentions suggest that Australia may be close to a tipping point.

Economic feasibility for this alternative strategy derives from many aspects of the recommended policies including increasing opportunities for paid work, which both reduces public outlays and increases taxation revenue, and constraining expenditure in areas where it is not needed. Wasteful public spending includes irrelevant weapons systems, ineffective attempts to protect people and buildings against exaggerated terrorist threats, detention centres for asylum seekers, ineffective and unfair taxation allowances for corporations and high income earners and excessive allowances for MPs. Funds for long-term economic and social investment can responsibly be increased by borrowing. Improvements in human well-being would reduce the rate of growth in demand for services. Gradual application of such a changed approach would itself be attractive through avoiding the policy turbulence which has characterised the economic policies of the last quarter century. The decade and a half of sustained economic growth gives us an opportunity now to move to firmer ground by balancing economic and social policy so as to improve both efficiency and equity and so strengthen security for all Australians.

A paradigm shift depends on both leadership and community action. Leaders can inspire and enlarge our vision. People respond enthusiastically to the hope offered by leaders who dare to be innovative and to take risks and explain fully why specific policies are desirable. Renewal requires a strong moral commitment: 'that sense of compelling mission and moral purpose that marks out true leaders and truly transformational administrations'.⁸

We can't just rely on inspiring leaders. Each of us can act responsibly and in so doing contribute to inspiring others. Some years ago Peter Nicholson published a cartoon in the first frame of which a young couple is watching the first moon landing on television and one

remarks ‘There’s nothing we can’t do’. In the second, contemporary frame an old couple is watching a news report of a current disaster and one says ‘There’s nothing we can do’. This feeling of powerlessness is widespread. It is seductive but it is self-fulfilling. If we despair, we simply give up. If we retain hope and take initiative we can make a difference. Those people with clear aims, determination and persistence can and do influence outcomes.

Discussing 1 Kings 14 Walter Brueggemann wrote:

The Soviet Union did not fall and South African apartheid did not end because of supernatural intrusion. They ended because of the stirrings of justice and freedom in the small places of history. ... The working of God is slow, not highly visible. But, so says this narrative, that working is very sure.⁹

Surely the same recognition also applies to Australia. With committed determination Australia could become a country characterised by social justice, freedom, inclusiveness and vitality and in so doing grow closer to the Biblical vision offered to us.

¹ To paraphrase Richard Coggins in a review of *The Prophetic Imagination* in the *Expository Times*

² Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2003, p 291

³ Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, Macon, Georgia, 2000, p 183

⁴ Philip Frier, ‘Let us listen to those brave enough to speak the truth’, *The Age*, 14 August 2007

⁵ Irving Saulwick and Associates in collaboration with Denis Muller and Associates, *The Howard Decade: A Saulwick Age Poll Study of Voter Attitudes to the Howard Years*, Melbourne, February, 2006

⁶ This follows John Quiggin, ‘Economic Liberalism: Fall, Revival and Resistance’, in Peter Saunders and James Walter (eds.), *Ideas and Influence: Social Science and Public Policy in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2005, p 21

⁷ The *Australian Financial Review* provides plenty of evidence that Australia is being run by the income maximisers. It is generally written as though increasing income is the ultimate goal of productive life. The tone of the newspaper is unrelentingly acquisitive.

⁸ Geoff Mulgan, *Financial Times*, 29 May 06

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, Macon, Georgia, 2000, p 184