

# TOWARDS A ROBUST SOCIETY: A STATEMENT FROM NATIONAL CHURCH LEADERS MAY 2005

Every three years the electoral cycle reminds us of the inestimable value of democracy, and the opportunity for voter and candidate alike to actively participate in determining the future shape of our society. The period before an election represents a unique opportunity to intensify discussion about the type of society we want to live in. Church leaders welcome the opportunity to contribute towards this discussion. In this paper we seek to highlight the type of society we believe is worth striving for.

In our own discussions we frequently turn to the word “robust” in describing the type of society we would like to see in New Zealand. The word robust means vigorous or strong, words that need some explanation or qualification when used to describe society. The Latin origin adds another dimension to the understanding of robust – it is derived from *robur* meaning oak, a reference to a tree known for its sturdiness and vigorous growth. In our Christian tradition there is a parallel in the story of the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that grew larger than any other plant and provided places for many birds nesting in its branches. To be robust our society must offer to everyone support and opportunity, shelter and freedom, resources and vision.

## Understanding ourselves as persons in community

Underpinning each person’s vision for society will be a number of assumptions about what it means to be human. We think there are range of views of the human person at work in our society that can be characterized by two broad emphases. The first tends to regard each person primarily as an autonomous individual, each with his or her own needs, aspirations and interests. This view places a strong emphasis on such things as realizing individual potential, pursuing individual goals, and preserving individual freedom. It often refers to such things as self-esteem and self-interest. Noticeably lacking from this perspective are references to other people and the common good. As a result, the view of society that tends to emerge is that of a conglomeration of individuals, each exercising their individual rights, and whose obligation towards others is largely derived from overlapping areas of self-interest. The consumer mindset tends to reinforce this utilitarian perspective.

The second is derived from the conviction that our humanity is constituted most profoundly by our relationships. Neglect those relationships, and both personal wellbeing and society suffer as a result. These relationships include both family and neighbour. We are persons in community.

It is this relational view of the human person that is most often promoted by cultural and religious groups in our society. It carries with it a holistic view of personal wellbeing including, for many people, a spiritual dimension through which we acknowledge a transcendent reference point to our understanding of human dignity and purpose.

A relational view of the human person further suggests that the good of the individual and the common good are not opposing poles – properly understood, they are part of one another. The common good

must aim at what is best for the individual, and what is best for the individual must include a commitment to the common good e.g. women and men, families, cultural groups, low and high income groups, business leaders and working people.

## Giving priority to the wellbeing of world and neighbour

In addition to its commitment to a relational view of the human person the Christian tradition maintains that human activity is characterised by an interplay between freedom and restraint. The freedom we aspire to is not the unrestrained freedom of the autonomous individual; it is freedom that learns to identify and respect certain parameters and responsibilities, including a commitment to the integrity and health of the natural world, and is utterly bound up with the wellbeing and freedom of one's neighbour.

Moreover, as the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan suggests, we are obliged to take a broad view of who our neighbour is. This view will include the most vulnerable in our society, including the unborn; it will include those who are most different from us, including refugees and migrants; it will include the stigmatised, including welfare and sickness beneficiaries. One of the marks of a mature society is the extent to which it cares for, and upholds the dignity and worth of its most vulnerable members and refrains from indulging in politics of exclusion, which most often take the form of scapegoating certain groups for society's ills.

A broad view of who our neighbour is will also encompass obligations to the international community. National interests will be worked out in the context of global responsibilities towards the poor and suffering in other countries, and towards environmental and climate issues that impact upon us all.

It is entirely possible, of course, for parties representing different points on the political spectrum to share a commitment to a relational and holistic view of the human person and yet develop markedly different policies. Take, for example, the debates over student loans and judicial sentencing after a crime. The church leaders are not promoting one political manifesto over another. At the same time, over the last twenty years the churches have been concerned that New Zealand's commitment to a robust society has too often been compromised by decisions that appear to have served economic, ideological and pragmatic interests without sufficient consideration being given to the impact of these decisions on the most vulnerable in our society. This concern was reflected in the Hikoī of Hope in 1998. In the current debate over tax cuts for example, it is important to ensure the self-interests of a few does not compromise the services required for the majority of New Zealanders.

A political commitment to the wellbeing of every person in society should result in an adequately resourced public service, including the police, welfare agencies, the public health system and the educational sector. The role that not-for-profit community organisations play in enhancing the fabric of society should be recognised and encouraged through sympathetic policies. In recent years many such organisations have felt either unable to continue their work because of inadequate resourcing or forced to apply for funds from sources to which they have a moral objection – i.e., community trusts that derive their income from the proceeds of gambling.

## Avoiding the politics of fear

In its affirmation of the human person and the potential for building a robust society, the Christian tradition remains fully aware of human fallibility and the corrosive effects of self-interest and greed. The shadow side of our humanness will always be present, at both personal and societal levels. If we allow this shadow side to be a dynamic in ascendancy we will live with one another in an atmosphere of fear, division, suspicion, stigmatization, and inequality. It is all too easy for us all, including political candidates and religious leaders, to both consciously and unconsciously play on people's fears and push for quick-fix political solutions which ignore the long-term effects on our society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the areas of law and order, welfare, immigration and health.

It is incumbent upon voter and political candidate alike to refrain from reducing the election to a single issue and a catchy slogan. On the subject of law and order, for example, it is always tempting in an election year to join the call to "get tough on crime" without realizing that this country already has one of the highest per capita rates of incarceration in the western world. In recognizing the humanity of both the victim and perpetrator of a criminal offence the Christian tradition maintains there is a moral obligation towards both parties. While the victim is entitled to comfort, support and recompense, the perpetrator also has certain entitlements, no matter how grievous the crime, including the right to a fair trial (and appropriate sentence) and a judicial system that is committed to the principles of rehabilitation and reconciliation, not just punishment.

Similarly, on the subject of welfare, it is tempting to join the call to "get tough on welfare" and to lose sight of the very real plight of those whom the welfare system is designed to help. While there will always be a need to review the adequacy and effectiveness of welfare assistance, we must be careful not to react to stories of people taking advantage of the system in such a way that the most vulnerable people in our community are stigmatised and punished simply for being poor.

## The responsibility of public office

Our pastoral responsibilities as Christian leaders mean that we walk beside many New Zealanders on their daily journey through life. Some are members of our congregations, others we meet as part of working with those who are disadvantaged or in difficulty. We see the pain that can be inflicted on individuals by the climate created by those who have a public voice. With public office comes great responsibility. We pray for all political candidates and their parties as they head into this year's election, that they will act and speak with integrity and grace.

The tree that we used as the image of a robust society has a place for many birds in its branches. Our words uttered in public or private may speak about who is acceptable, who is valued, what contributions matter in our society. Our words help shape society.

A robust society is one that encourages and values the contribution of all people towards the common good. In the Christian scriptures the story of the widow's mite tells of a woman being commended for giving, not out of her wealth but out of her poverty, not with a mean-spiritedness but with spirit of

generosity, not out of coercion or self-interest but out of a sense of gratitude. It is a story about life in community in which the contribution of the most vulnerable is valued. It is a story that speaks to every generation about one of the building blocks of a robust society. The challenge facing all of us, and particularly our leaders, is to shape our society in a way that reflects what is best in our human nature.

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