

Do Justice!!

"Do Justice, Love Kindness and Walk Humbly With Your God" Micah 6:8

A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the first edition of Do Justice for 2019 as we begin our 7th year of commenting on issues of Social Justice from a Christian perspective.

Are we in democracy's twilight?

From the end of the Second World War the number of liberal democracies increased significantly, included in the list of "new" democracies were the three major belligerents from the Second World War, Germany, Italy and Japan, plus a number of decolonised countries. Then, after the demise of Soviet Russia, a few more countries joined the democratic ranks.

The United States after World War Two was one of the main encouragers for countries to adopt democratic structures and was a major influence on the large colonial powers such as Great Britain and France to de-colonise. The United States was very much involved in the formation of the United Nations and offered a prime real estate site on the banks of the East River in New York City as the headquarters of the UN.

Not all the countries that adopted liberal democratic governance have maintained regular, free and fair elections. In parts of South America, Asia and Africa democracy has been replaced by authoritarian regimes for at least some periods of time. Two countries – Spain and Portugal – adopted democratic governance after many years of authoritarian regimes.

From the end of the Second World War until the 1980s liberal democracies strove to improve the living conditions of all their citizens. Reasonable paying jobs were available to most and there was a "welfare net" to support the poor. The gap between rich and poor was steadily decreased, mainly through a progressive income tax regime and inheritance taxes.

A number of inept democratic governments in the 1970s allowed both high inflation and unemployment to happen at the same time – the so called "stagflation" period. This opened the door to a group of people, mainly economists, who believed that the "Market" was a better governance tool than governments. Two free market believers - Ronald Regan and Margret Thatcher - came to power in the USA and the UK and the neoliberal revolution began. Skilled and tradespeople looked around for someone to blame for their resultant loss of income and status – these are the "rust belt" as they are called in the USA. The result was that by

the mid-2010s working people's income had become static or decreased in real terms and business and corporate leaders received grossly inflated salaries and "perks". In many parts of Europe and North American (and New Zealand and Australia) manufacturing declined and jobs disappeared. But the corporate structures that formerly operated the factories continued with manufacturing plants in "low wage" countries. The rust belts of American and Europe were the result with many skilled workers being forced to seek less skilled and less well-paid employment if they were lucky. Otherwise, they had to rely on welfare.

In many countries the left of centre parties, which had traditionally drawn support from the lower middle and working classes, were drawn into neoliberal thinking. New Zealand is a good example with Rogernomics in the 1980s. Even the British Labour Party embraced neoliberalism with Tony Blair and New Labour. The Democrats in the USA failed to reverse the neoliberalism of Ronald Regan and added to it by extending the deregulation of financial markets in the 1990s.

The result of some 40 years for so called Free Market economics has resulted in the creation of an underclass of skilled people in less skilled jobs or no jobs who feel betrayed by the traditional politicians of the left that they used to support. One could call this group of people the "rust belt class". Charismatic leaders in many countries are appealing to this disgruntled section of voters in ways that often defy logic.

The Global Financial Crisis of 2008, a direct result of the financial deregulation of banking in the US and UK, was a turning point. Governments in most of the "neoliberal" countries, moved rapidly to save the banking sector by injecting vast sums of money into the banks. At the same time no help was provided for individuals and families that had to default on mortgage payments because of "innovative" financial products that caused the GFC. Increasingly the inequality in society was becoming more apparent. The Occupy Movement that followed the GFC raised awareness of this inequality by highlighting the 10% over the 90%, and later the 1% over the 99%. Those most adversely effected, often older, manual, semi-skilled and trade skilled workers, looked around for someone to blame for their loss of income and status.

One of the main battle cries of the group of new political leaders that emerged after the GFC was to blame immigrants for the problems of the rust belt. And anyone who is of a different colour or speaks with a different accent is seen as an immigrant who has taken away my job. Ironically, in the USA and UK, in particular, there are few immigrants in the rust belt parts of the countries but that does not seem to matter when voters are faced with a vote to leave the EU(Brexit), or a vote to build a wall along the Mexican border in the USA.

And it is this latter situation in the USA – the Wall – that raises some important issues about the long-term viability of democracy in some major countries.

In the stand off between President Trump and the Democratic led House of Representatives has been the possibility of the President using the National Emergencies Act to access funds to build the Wall; thus, by-passing the Congress. It has been interesting to listen to some of the lawyers and other experts explaining what can and cannot be done by a President under this Act.

The Act was originally passed by Congress in 1976 and signed by President Ford following the resignation of Richard Nixon. It was intended to regularise the many declarations of emergency that various Presidents had declared through the years as there was growing concern that Presidents could use the “Declaration of Emergency” as a way to by-pass Congress. In practice the Act does not appear to place limits on the President rather it requires the President to advise Congress of the reason for the declaration and what action the President is taking. To rescind a declaration, it requires both Houses of Congress to pass a motion and for the President to agree by signing it. Effectively the President has a veto over any move to rescind a declaration. The Act appears to give the President wide powers to deal with an emergency including using funds appropriated by Congress for one purpose for another purpose.

The Act does not specify what is and is not an “emergency”. Hence it would seem that the situation that President Trump describes on the southern border with Mexico could qualify if the President thinks so. However, the law is not clear, and a declaration could be challenged in the courts where the final decision body, the US Supreme Court, has become a very political body which could possibly come down in favour of President Trump.

At the time of writing President Trump has not declared a state of emergency on the southern border. The danger is that if President Trump does use the Act to get his own way over the Wall then where will he stop?

Many other liberal democratic countries have similar legislation to the National Emergencies Act. A worrying number of democracies are turning to authoritarian leaders because of the increasing numbers of “rust belt” and long periods of austerity policies imposed on their economies. There are increasing signs that significant sections of the populations of many liberal democracies have lost faith in the democratic process and are turning to more

authoritarian leaders who will take advantage of national emergency type legislation rule without any checks and balances. History tells us that there are worrying parallels between today's situation and the rise of dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.

Adding to the danger is the unwillingness of a number of the emerging authoritarian leaders to understand and act on the climate change crisis. President Trump is not alone in denying climate change, the recently elected President of Brazil also expresses such views. Brazil's Amazon jungles are a vital absorber of CO2.

We, in New Zealand, are in a reasonably good position. All our political parties have indicated that elimination of child poverty is a priority. We cannot eliminate child poverty without eliminating poverty and progress in this area will help to reverse the inequality in our society. We also have a government that appears to be taking climate change seriously and, hopefully, an opposition that appears to want to be involved in the process. But the temptation for a political leader to take advantage of the frustrations of our “rust belt” equivalents is always there. Should such a politician be successful and have a majority in Parliament then we could be in trouble as our unicameral parliament and an unwritten constitution makes National Emergency type legislation easy to enact.

Even with a second house as a restraint on anti-democratic legislation there are authoritarian dangers. Even with all the checks and balances built into the Constitution of the United States the possibility of a President once elected continuing as a President for life with a compliant Congress and a stacked Supreme Court

In the British model, that we broadly follow in New Zealand, some strange things have been happening. Traditionally a Prime Minister who has a large loss in a vote in the House of Commons would immediately resign, but this does not seem to apply to Prime Minister May. Her survival of the Vote of No Confidence that followed the rejection of her major policy on Brexit appears to indicate what some politicians will do to retain power even when defeated in the House of Commons.

Democracy has many failings but as Winston Churchill said it is the best option we have. Jesus lived and spoke out during a time of authoritarian rule. Jesus spoke about justice and peace. Jesus spoke out for the poor and chastised the rich. Authoritarian governance is not just or peaceful, does not address poverty and only enriches the rich.

It has only been in the last 200 plus years that parts of our world have adopted democratic governance which, despite all its shortcomings does, at least, acknowledge the importance of justice for all and peace in our society.

Let us hope and pray that all the gains of the last 200 years will not be lost because we cannot address the underlying reasons and frustrations of those who feel neglected by those they elected to hold power in their countries.