

Talking Cents

May, 2019

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Auckland Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This article is contributed by Peter Bargh, an Anglican priest and member of the Third Order of the Society of Saint Francis.

Easter – upending expectations

We have heard of the circle of life. Life begets life and things go on. Yet for the individual there is life and then there is death. That is the natural order of things. Other things live after us but we do not live again. The egg that hatched into a caterpillar that turned into a chrysalis and bloomed into a butterfly does not shrink back into an egg, but dies. Easter reveals a different reality, that subverts our experiences, and celebrates life after death. Christ is Risen and all is changed.

It has been a tumultuous few months in the wider world. Some stories follow trajectories which are akin to Easter. Others seem to herald false dawns.

We have seen the horrors of the Christchurch mosque shootings where 50 people were killed while they prayed. From the atrocity has come a sense of greater unity as exemplified by Jacinda Ardern's genuine, compassionate leadership. People have responded by calling out racism and other forms of bigotry at their source – challenging the “racist aunt or uncle” at family gatherings.

We have waited for two years for the Mueller Report in the United States. Among some liberal Americans there was a real hope that it would prove to be Donald Trump's undoing. The report did reveal unethical behaviour on Trump's part; it has also led to disagreement among Democrats over their best path ahead. Do they move towards impeaching Trump or focusing on beating him at the ballot box in 2020?

We have seen our Labour-led government promise to be a transformative one.¹ One of the approaches they undertook was to establish a number of independent, expert working groups to make policy recommendations. The Tax Working Group (TWG) recommended the adoption of a capital gains tax. While it would not be a panacea for all of the nation's woes, it would have been a

step towards reducing inequality and fairly taxing our populace. Jacinda Arden has now firmly rejected bringing one in while she is Prime Minister.

As Christians we know that we are formed in God's image. This means that we are called to use all of who we are – our senses, feelings, experiences and intellect – to inform our decisions and actions in the world. As such, we can carefully choose what we think and what we say, even if we do not always do so. Experience, and common sense, reveals to us that not every issue represents a ditch worth dying in. Experience should not, however, jade us such that we try to avoid dying at all – not least because in Christ we trust in resurrection!

Sometimes it can seem wise to take approaches that shore up political support, or are in some way expedient towards a greater goal. If, for instance, a government planned some massive infrastructure reform then allowing some questionable social policy tweaks might be an acceptable compromise to shore up support from partners or the electorate.

In other situations, such as the existential threat of anthropomorphic climate change, the path of failing to engage or seeking to placate the dissenters holds no wisdom. It is better to fail trying than fail to try.

The goal of governments can too often feel like saving their populations from the political evils of the opposition, rather than offering anything themselves – the “you think we're bad, look at the other people!” argument. Yet, surely there is greater hope than choosing the lesser of two evils? The Canadian political fable “The Story of Mouseland” reflects something of this frustration; as, the mice seem to suffer regardless of which colour cats they elect!²

¹ <http://nzh.tw/12224374> After forming a government in 2017, Jacinda Ardern promised that it would be a transformative government observing that in many respects capitalism was a “blatant failure.”

² This story was told by several Canadian politicians including Clarence Gillis and Tommy Douglas.

Fairness has been one of New Zealand's hallmarks. This is not just a myth that we tell ourselves, but it is something that others have observed as well. David Hackett Fischer's 2012 book, *Fairness and Freedom: A History of Two Open Societies – New Zealand and the United States*, was inspired by his experiences in New Zealand during the 1994 Selwyn by-election. Fischer, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American historian, observed that the primary underlying social values of New Zealand and the United States differed. As the title of the book suggests, the Americans valued freedom above other values, compared to New Zealand giving primacy to fairness.

This sense of fairness is what underlies the work of groups such as Tax Justice Aotearoa which seeks to reduce inequality in New Zealand. Betsan Martin, writing for the Methodist Church in support of Tax Justice Aotearoa, speaks to the sense of fairness which underlies their work as she observes that a "Capital Gains Tax starts to challenge the system of wealth accumulation."³

That New Zealand lacks a capital gains tax flies in the face of our sense of fairness ; it speaks to our growing inequality, ranking 29 out of 36 OECD countries on inequality.⁴ The need to overhaul our tax system, to try to make things fairer, was one of the key drivers behind the creation of the TWG.

This sense of fairness is not unique to New Zealand. American billionaire hedge-fund manager, Ray Dalio, is well aware of the dangers of rising inequality and has said that "the American Dream is lost."⁵ Numerous American progressives are making the case for universal healthcare and college access, tax reform and regulatory overhaul. An example of this can be seen with Democratic presidential candidate, Cory Booker, observing that employers have systematically sought to deprive workers of a number of rights. This has been in order to maximise profits which are spent on stock buy-backs (which drive up the prices of the company's stock) due to creating depressed wages.⁶

³<http://www.methodist.org.nz/files/docs/public%20questions/tax-wise%20cgt%20touchstone%20may19.pdf>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵<https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/money/111874077/the-american-dream-is-lost-billionaire-takes-aim-at-trump>

⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/24/workers-are-creating-massive-wealth-why-are-corporations-hoarding-it-all>

⁷<https://www.mediamatters.org/video/2019/02/05/foxs-charles-payne-blames-popularity-taxing-rich-fairness-being-promoted-our-schools-long-time/222760>

There is support for change to the status quo with a Fox News poll revealing that 70% of Americans supported raising taxes on those with incomes over ten million dollars, and 65% supporting doing so on those earning over one million dollars.⁷ The response to this information from Fox News' Charles Payne, however, illustrates the contextual differences between New Zealand and the United States. He declared that "[w]e're starting to see kids who grew up in this notion that fairness above all [sic] and now they are becoming voting age and they are bringing this ideology with them."⁸

Payne expresses an ideological opposition to fairness. The New Zealand Labour Party's opposition might be more opportunistic as Matthew Hooton cynically observes " [t]hose on the left who lament both the CGT decision and what it reveals about Ardern and her Government ultimately don't count...Ardern knows they'll be voting Labour or Green in 2020, and either tick serves her re-election."⁹

A similar sort of logic is playing out among American Democrats over whether or not to impeach Donald Trump. Is it a matter of principle to hold people to account for violating ethical and, likely, legal standards; or, is it worth ignoring this and sticking to campaign issues which seem to be more politically popular?¹⁰

Some events of late appear as false dawns, and others still seem murky. We give thanks during the Easter season that love wins, that through vulnerability God promises new life. The tomb is empty and Christ is Risen; something that seemed beyond comprehension after the finality of the Cross on Good Friday.

So, too, we give thanks for the outpouring of love that has come from the acts of hate in Christchurch. As Kevin wrote in last month's *Talking Cents*: "For all their tragedy, the events in Christchurch have moved us to talk, to share sympathy and to walk and pray together in response to a common disaster."¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://nzhtw/12225293> Hooton suggests abandoning serious tax reform will help to win over the soft centre and help Ardern "maintain her own position [rather] than take risks" for what she might believe in.

¹⁰ A practical consideration for Democrats regarding impeachment is that they lack the numbers in the Senate for it to carry it out successfully anyway.

¹¹<http://www.auckanglican.org.nz/Anglican/media/Images/Social%20Justice/Talking-Cents-April-2019.pdf>