

# Talking Cents

August 2020

**Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the 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 issue is contributed by Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.**

## Building Structures of Love

“It’s a quare world, God knows, but it’s the best we have to be going on with.” This quote from Irish poet Brendan Behan’s autobiographical *Borstal Boy* (published 1958) has crossed my mind several times over the last few weeks. It was an echo, in some ways, of a similar reflection by a character in playwright Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), that “The whole worl’s in a terrible state of chassis.” This too, leads me to a consideration of some examples of chaos, partly associated with the effects of the Covid-19 virus on the health and stability of people across the world. Whereas the second comment reflects an almost despairing observation of the state of things as they are, the first has a hint of inspiration that even in a “quare world”, we have an obligation to address the challenges it presents with courage and integrity.

A couple of examples of this current “state of things as they are” which came to my attention while writing this were:

- the refusal by immigration authorities of New Zealand citizenship to a 13-year-old Vietnamese-born girl completing a double degree in maths and finance who was adopted into a New Zealand family;
- personal attacks, largely in social media, based on her hair colour and body shape on a microbiologist prominently involved in the assessment of Covid-19 risks;
- an extensive review by a Waiheke-based journalist on the failure of liberal capitalist

economies to provide the basic human needs of their citizens;<sup>1</sup>

- the vast amount of money spent by our Government on military hardware in order to comply with the worldview of a failing nation led by a minority-supported president of doubtful stability.

More recently, the surprising disintegration of the leadership of the National Party is another sign of dis-ease in the structures which have underpinned the generally smooth running of our society. Schools, churches, commerce and public sports events are only slowly trying to get back to some level of normality but, while the kinds of attitudes shown in the examples above persist, there is little chance of that happening with any consistency.

The first case brings to light some contradictory issues. On the face of it, the girl’s age, 13, which makes her academic accomplishments so outstanding, is the only factor which stands in the way of her becoming a New Zealand citizen. There is every evidence that she has proper adult care from her mother to provide for her needs, so surely her capacity to study here should be the major factor in her acceptability. If she were 16, which would lessen the pre-eminence of her achievement, she would be readily accepted. Surely there are more qualifications than mere “age on the page” which should guide such decisions. It is worth considering whether the same bureaucratic restrictions would be applied if her talents were in the sporting or arts field.

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<sup>1</sup> 'New World, New Views', Alex Stone, *Waiheke Gulf News*, 2 July 2020.

The type and level of abuse based on hair colour and body shape heaped upon a microbiologist prominent in the media following her public comments on the Covid-19 pandemic, indicate further a too-common obsession among those who use social and other media to air their opinion on current affairs. Comments like these, all too frequent in our Sunday newspapers, show a distasteful level of chauvinism too prevalent in our society and indicate a need for serious educational attention at family, institutional and social levels.

The built-in failure of pure capitalism, says the commentator in Waiheke Island's *Gulf News*, lies in its dependence on constant growth in the economy based on the exploitation of resources subject to depletion and eventual extinction. Even the seemingly endlessly renewable solar, wind and hydro sources of power being developed depend for the foreseeable future on the availability of finite materials to generate and distribute their electric power. We need new criteria beyond the accumulation of technology and appliances, such as measurable levels of recycling, by which to judge our levels of wellbeing.

And alongside these is the outrageous expenditure on militarism across the globe; even New Zealand allocated \$4.6 billion dollars to its 2020 military expenditure but that pales to insignificance alongside the stated US budget of more than \$720 billion (Wikipedia). These excesses represent what has been called a theft from the poor and dispossessed.<sup>2</sup> Although these features are not new in our society, the arrival of the Covid-19 virus in our midst has cast a new light on the way in which societies front up to threats to peace and the wellbeing of their people. Would the funds currently allocated to military preparation, with an underlying hope that they won't be used, be better used where they are needed now, to both treat the likes of Covid-19 and create systems of awareness which prevent their development and spread? Are there better ways of sharing power and resources

in the world than threatening our very existence through the creation of life-threatening military devices? Might we not convert the energy and resources - financial, physical and spiritual - wasted on weapons, towards addressing issues of human and economic inequality which underlie recourse to conflict and war to resolve differences and disputes?

A good start would be to accept and live by the belief that all human beings are created equal. This has been written into the constitutions of many nations and charters of international bodies. It would also help if we recognised the links between our very survival and the health of our environment.

Another more personal and private action was presented here as local links with the international Pax Christi movement were being established in the late 1980s. Pax Christi USA Vice-President, Mary Evelyn Jegen, on a visit to New Zealand, spoke of the practice of "benevolent glancing", which she has trained herself to use on public transport or when sitting alone in a café. This practice, traceable to Buddhist culture, consists of looking briefly and unostentatiously "with love" on those within sight. It links us to them, puts them in our context, recognises, establishes and affirms a relationship, whanaungatanga, and in turn puts upon us a duty of care, manaakitanga. It extends beyond the person to our care for our shared environment, to the world in which we live and enjoy our being. Our very glance can range from an acknowledgement of their existence to a prayer for their wellbeing, for that of all who share their lives and to all in our common environment that sustains us.

Even in a "quare" world, a world "in a terrible state of chassis", this is one small, easy way of caring for that world and its people, and a step towards transferring that care into action.

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<sup>2</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower, 'Chance for Peace', Speech to American Newspaper Editors, April 16 1953.