



Do Justice

"Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the November edition of Do Justice as we continue to discuss issues of social justice from a Christian perspective.

When is an election victory not a victory?

The reaction of many political commentators to the crushing defeat of the National Party and the rule-alone possibility for Labour has been interesting and at times strange.

The more centralist and centre-right commentators focused on the assumption that the reason for the Labour victory was that so many National voters, realising Judith Collins could not win, voted Labour to ensure that the Greens were not part of a Coalition Government; the argument being that the Greens would move the Government too far to the left.

Irrespective of how valid the impact by the Greens on Labour is, the obvious question that does not seem to have been asked is: Why didn't National "strategic" voters move to New Zealand First and ensure that it stayed in a Coalition Government with Labour, as a "restraint" that they, New Zealand First, claimed to have been for the last three years?

However, could it be that a very significant majority of New Zealand voters, around 58% if Labour and Green are combined, had finally realised that 30 years of failed neoliberalism had to end, and that the time had come for a new approach to government and politics?

Over recent months Do Justice has advocated a new normal as we move into the post-COVID period, a new normal based on equality and climate justice.

In the April 2020 edition of Do justice we suggested that the 'Donut' economic approach advocated by British economist Kate Raworth was a good starting point for such a new normal and nothing that has happened since has changed that view.

In September 2020 we listed the following possible changes a new Government could make:

- Move towards 100% sustainable electricity by requiring all new and existing buildings to have solar power installed and provide funding for solar power on all existing buildings.

- Ban the import of all fossil-fuelled vehicles including cars, trucks, and farm tractors by 2035.
- Introduce a Universal Basic Income at a level of the Living Wage for all adults.
- Ban health insurance and private schools which would soon improve the health and education system if the wealthy had to rely on state-funded health and education systems.
- Make education free, up to and including university.
- Ensure that there is dry, warm well-built accommodation for all New Zealanders at an affordable price either to rent or buy.
- Reform the taxation system to pay for the above.

While the new Government is unlikely to implement every one of the changes listed above, there appear to be good prospects that:

- We could move to 100% sustainable electricity generation by 2030.
- Reducing dependence on fossil fuels in transport as well as manufacturing will be a priority of the new Government.

Both the above items are covered extensively in Labour's fact sheet on 'Clean Energy'.¹ This includes costing details.

Also:

- Housing issues and a move towards warm, dry housing for all New Zealanders appears to be a possibility if Labour actually implements the policies in its fact sheet 'Building on our Housing Progress'.²

As far as the other suggestions we made in September are concerned, no political party appears to have promised action on them except a partial promise from the Greens on a Universal Basic Income.

However, there are other policy promises by both Labour and the Greens that could move us towards a more equitable society. For the first time for some elections, political parties are actually suggesting increasing income taxes. Labour's promise of an additional tax step at \$180,000 is a small step in the direction of a truly progressive income tax system. The Greens went three or four steps further with some additional marginal rates of tax.

¹https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/nzlabour/pages/18628/attachments/original/1599690526/Clean_Energy_-_Factsheet.pdf?1599690526

²https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/nzlabour/pages/18725/attachments/original/1601587722/Housing_-_Fact_Sheet.pdf?1601587722

Regrettably, New Zealand First's opposition to a capital gains tax caused the Prime Minister to back herself into a "not on my watch" reaction. The Greens suggested that wealth tax was certainly a way around this but is unlikely to be taken up in this term of Government.

The Labour Party manifesto, if actually carried out in the next three years, has some good progressive measures that could result in a "new" normal. If the commentators are correct and large numbers of supposed National voters switched to Labour to stop the Greens then they may be disappointed. However, it could well be that the move towards Labour was a long overdue reaction to the neoliberal policies of other parties. Time will tell.

The privilege of denial

In a recent article Erin Wathen starts out by saying:

The longer it takes for people to admit this thing is real, the farther reaching the damage will be.

The longer it takes for people to accept their own role in this reality, and accept some accountability for stopping its spread, the more people will die.

As long as those who have not suffered the symptoms can flatly ignore the disease, we are nowhere near a cure.

I'm not talking about a virus. I'm talking about racism.

Actually—slow that roll a minute. I'm talking about both. Because there are some striking parallels between those who refuse to mask up, who call the whole thing a hoax, who continue to gather in large crowds; and those who insist that "All Lives Matter," that racism does not exist in 2020, and that they, themselves, have no implicit bias that affects their worldview or behaviour.³

This is an interesting assessment of the way in which many, but by all means not all, Americans have reacted to both the pandemic and to racism. She then goes on to look at what happens when the virus deniers actually are infected with the virus and become advocates for precautions:

I don't wish sickness on anyone, and I hate that it has to come to this for so many. But the growing shared experience of this disease is beginning to turn the tide, however slowly. As more people experience the pain for themselves, more people are willing to do what it takes to spare others.

But racism is different. If you're a white person, you are never going to experience the level of pain that our brothers and sisters of color experience in this country. You are never going to know about the missed opportunities, the fear, the feelings of invisibility, or the fall-out of being on the losing side of generational wealth and privilege for centuries. You have to actively choose to put your privilege aside and want to learn about these realities.

I know that white folks in America right now are in all different places when it comes to recognizing our privilege and reckoning with our role in the current inequality crisis. I also realize that we do not all agree about the best way to make change. But I'm struggling mightily these days with those who continue to adamantly deny that we even have a problem—those who will not hold space for experience outside their own. This innocuous brand of racism is possibly the most dangerous of all right now: because you can't fight it if you can't see it.

The most basic commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself" requires that you possess a measure of empathy; the capacity to believe your neighbour's story when they tell you they're hurting. Our faith demands that we cultivate a compassionate imagination, one that can grasp an experience beyond our own. I don't know that this is a thing that can be taught; but perhaps it can be modelled.

We've heard the stories of those who denied the reality of COVID-19 until it happened to them. They see differently now (if they survived). What I'd love to hear are some testimonies from white folks who could not grasp the realities of racism until some tangible something opened their eyes. What was that thing? When was that moment? How did you finally step out of your own long-centered comfort enough to witness the suffering of your neighbor? I'm literally asking. I'd love to hear your experience. I think those of us trying to learn and lead right now could benefit greatly from your story.

In the recent crisis of a pandemic and in the ongoing crisis of racism in America, there are some deeply entrenched narratives in play that are hard to unwind. But those narratives are not unrelated; in both kinds of contagion, those least likely to experience suffering are those most likely to perpetuate it. There's no easy answer, but I do know this: for white people with the privilege to ignore certain hardships, it's time to take the mask off of our eyes and put it over our mouths. In more ways than one.

It is not unreasonable to ask if we in New Zealand, or at least some of us, have reacted in the same way. The answer is yes, but as the election results appear to indicate, a very small minority. But this is not all. The other interesting observation Erin Wathen makes is that it is difficult to appreciate a situation without actually experiencing it and with racism it is difficult for a white person to actually experience the impact of racism as a non-white.

This is where the teachings of Jesus come in. Jesus did not teach us to love our neighbour as ourselves as long as our neighbour looks like us, acts like us and has the same social habits we have. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbour without condition. To love our neighbour if they are Māori, if they come from China, or the Pacific Islands, or India or anywhere. And love our neighbour even if they have COVID-19.

³ https://www.patheos.com/blogs/irreverin/2020/07/the-privilege-of-denial/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Christians+For+a+Better+Christianity&utm_content=43