

Do Justice

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

A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the July edition of Do Justice as we continue to discuss issues of social justice from a Christian perspective in the tradition of Micah and St Francis.

Water and milk production

It was surprising to read in a recent article on Newshub¹ that some 11,000 litres of water are needed to produce one litre of milk on the dairy farms in Canterbury. The very high water demand is because of the need for irrigation and also to dilute the waste from the cows and from fertiliser used to grow the grass the cows eat.

Up until the 1990s the Canterbury plains were not a dairying region because the climate was too dry. Most of the farming was cropping but, with the encouragement of the Government and subsidisation of irrigation schemes, many farms were converted to dairying at considerable cost.

Methane produced by ruminant animals such as cows and sheep is a major contributor to New Zealand's greenhouse gases. If we are to meet our promised reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, then the amount of methane allowed to get into the atmosphere must be very significantly reduced and it must start now. Despite much talk there appears to be little likelihood of technological advances to significantly reduce farm methane emissions, which leaves herd reduction as the only presently viable alternative.

Farmers, however, argue that if they reduced their stock numbers, farmers in other countries, not nearly as efficient as New Zealand farmers, would increase stock numbers to replace New Zealand's reduction and this would only lead to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. This claim is based on New Zealand pastoral farmers being able to keep animals outside in paddocks 12 months of the year feeding off lush green pasture and not requiring feed supplement, etc. This argument appears to ignore the move by people worldwide from meat-based diets to vegan or vegetarian diets which will require the world's farmers to move out of livestock farming over time.

Sooner or later the farming industry is going to have to look seriously at stock reduction and the first place they should look is farms dependent upon irrigation, not just in

Canterbury. The sooner these farms move out of pastoral farming and back into cropping the better. Now is that time as wheat prices soar because of the war in Ukraine.

Fragile democracy

Sir Winston Churchill is quoted as saying in the House of Commons on 11 Nov 1947 that, *"Many forms of government have been tried. and will be tried, in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those others that have been tried."*

Churchill was speaking some two years after the end of the 'war to end all wars, part 2'. He had seen what other forms of government could do.

When our Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, recently spoke to the graduating class of Harvard University, she quoted another female prime minister speaking at the Harvard commencement address in 1987, Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto, who said, *"We must realise that democracy ... can be fragile."*

Jacinda Ardern then went on to say, *"When facts and fiction have become a matter of opinion and the trust that underlies democracies is being eroded, blind faith in the resilience of democratic governance is short-sighted."* She continued, *"It ignores the fact that the foundation of a strong democracy includes trust in institutions, experts, and government — and that this can be built up over decades but torn down in mere years. ... It ignores what happens when, regardless of how long your democracy has been tried and tested, facts are turned into fiction and fiction turned into fact. ... It ignores the reality of what we are now being confronted by every single day."*²

The Rev'd Adam Russell Taylor, President of Sojourners, a USA Christian organisation working for social justice, ended an article about the need for American Christians to watch the televised hearings on the 6 January invasion of Congress, writing, *"Our nation is embroiled in a tug of war between the dangerous push toward racialized totalitarianism and the push to become a more inclusive and just multiracial democracy. Whether we listen and how we decide to respond*

¹ [11,000 litres of water to make one litre of milk? Questions raised over freshwater impact of dairy farming \(msn.com\)](https://www.msn.com)

² [Jacinda Ardern's forceful reminder: Democracies can die – Harvard Gazette](https://www.harvard.edu)

*to the findings of the committee investigating Jan. 6 will play an important role in determining which side gains further momentum. Let's push together with all our might to ensure that multiracial democracy wins."*³

The more one thinks about the protests in February in Parliament's grounds and the protests outside and in the US Congress on 6 Jan 2021, the more certain similarities become apparent. False news appears to have been a driving force, if not the main driving force, in both instances. Trump with his claims about having won the election and, in our Parliament's case, supposed issues with vaccination and other related issues around Covid. Both sets of 'protestors' called for 'death to' in the case of 6 January, the Vice President Mike Pence and at Parliament, our Prime Minister.

Perhaps the most worrying issue in the USA is that large numbers of Republican supporters continue to believe that Trump actually won the 2020 election despite strong statements to the contrary by senior members of the Trump Administration including the Secretary for Justice William Barr. In our Parliament's case none of the elected political parties supported the protestors although Act came close, and Winston Peters visited the protest site.

The freedom to criticise government goes to the heart of our democratic process but attempting to overthrow a government by force is not, nor is attempting to negate a fair election. The advent of social media has made the spread of fake and false news much easier, speedier and almost impossible to control. This puts much more pressure on politicians, particularly Opposition politicians, not to be tempted to join the false news crowd hoping to obtain political advantage.

But false news is not the only threat to our democratic institutions. Hyperinflation in Germany in the 1920s led to Nazism in the 1930s and World War 2. The negative impact of neoliberalism and the worship of the 'market' from the 1980s on workers in the USA has led to the rise of Trumpism and the attempted coup on 6 January 2021. We also appear to be moving to a globalisation of protest, one feeding off the last one wherever it may be.

Money and politics

It has been very interesting to read about the trial of the two people accused of fraud in their dealings with the New Zealand First Foundation. In particular, the report about the Hart family's donations to New Zealand First as reported in Newsroom⁴ on 15 June and also reported by other media.

The Hart family is reputedly the wealthiest family in New Zealand and in 2019, when serious consideration was being given to introducing a capital gains tax after the recommendation from the Tax Working Group, made some substantial donations to NZ First Foundation (thinking it was going to the NZ First Party). NZ First in 2019 then vetoed any possibility of a capital gains tax. A strange coincidence? There has also been evidence that members of the racing industry

had made substantial donations to NZ First. Winston Peters was Minister for Racing.

Our electoral laws require political parties to make public all single donations over \$15,000 by individuals and companies. It seems from the trial reports that people were encouraged to donate just under \$15,000 so as not to be publicly identified. Various members of the Hart family are reported to have made at least three donations of \$14,950 each in 2019.

One of the reasons we have relatively strict legal requirements covering financial donations to political parties in New Zealand is because of the situation in the USA where large companies can make very large donations to both political parties and individuals seeking office in return for favourable consideration both in favour and against proposed legislation before Congress. Perhaps the most notorious example is the apparent power of the National Rifle Association (group of gun manufacturers and owners) which has successfully opposed any meaningful controls on guns in the USA for years, despite polls indicating that over 80 percent of Americans support stricter gun laws.

The ability of rich individuals and families to influence legislation secretly is behind our relatively strict disclosure laws as far as political donations are concerned but are they strict enough? The situation revealed in the current trial seems to indicate they may not be.

It would seem there are two ways to improve the situation: to publicly fund political parties or restrict individual funding to no more than say \$1,000 per year and ban funding from companies. Public funding of political parties raises other issues, such as which parties and how much. Restricting funding to as little as \$1,000 per person per year (not per donation) would certainly make the sort of action by the Hart family much less important. But it is the secrecy that is even more important

However, it is important to recognise that if we are to have political parties, and our electoral systems recognises them through our list members of parliament, then political parties must be able to raise money by some means. For our present system to operate, it appears that we must allow individuals to contribute to the various parties; however, the appropriateness of companies, both private and public, contributing is much less desirable. If political contributions were restricted to just individuals then that would also exclude trade unions and all other organisations from making contributions but, of course, it would not stop individual members of trade unions, etc. from making direct contributions. Overall, individual donations, probably without limits will be the best way to go but any donation over say \$1,000 in any one year should be publicly notified.

It is interesting to note that since this item was first written, the Government has announced legislation to reduce the amount requiring notification to more than \$5,000. But more needs to be done.

³ <https://sojo.net/articles/why-christians-need-watch-jan-6-hearings>

⁴ [NZ's Richest Man Explains Donation to NZ First | Newsroom](#)