

## Christianity, the vote and social change

A federal election looms, and for the first time in a long time it appears to be an interesting contest. The Australian public has taken to Rudd like a cat takes to cream, and Howard is on the ropes, struggling to shrug off the blows of successive negative polls. Part of the enthusiasm with which Australians are approaching this election is due to the belief that this time, maybe, our vote will mean something more than exchanging a rotten Golden Delicious for a rotten Pink Lady, that our participation in the political process will have some effect. But is the reverse in fact the true state of things?

*Voting at elections helps to perpetuate the fallacy that social change occurs by electing governments to carry our reforms on our behalf.<sup>1</sup>*

Australia is a proxy nation, like most developed nations. We sub-contract to others the things we find distracting or distasteful, or just too hard. We authorise others to look after the poor, grow our vegetables, slaughter our meat, educate our children, make our clothes, fix our taps. Why would it be any different when it comes to government? Voting every now and then seems a small price to pay so that we can get on with the real task of being relaxed and comfortable. But can real change occur through such a means? Is there value in social action that is tangential to, and even irrelevant to legislative government? These are some of the questions I intend to address. As a doorway to these questions, let me take you to Ringwood Magistrates Court in 2002.

### I. Refusing to vote

The case preceding me was far more interesting. Although we had committed the same crime (failure to vote) we had entirely different approaches. For a start, our appearance. I'd taken the time to iron some pants, shave and put on an inoffensive shirt. She was decked out in colourful attire, and her wheelchair was struggling under the weight of stickers proclaiming her allegiance to every possible cause. Then there was our attitude to the court. I pleaded guilty as I had broken the law. She pleaded 'no jurisdiction', meaning the court had no authority to hear her case. When pressed by the puzzled judge, she explained this land had been stolen from the indigenous people, so she did not recognise the institutions of the invaders. A faint ripple of giggles passed through the suits. So when my turn came, I think the judge breathed a sigh of relief.

I have not voted in a federal election or state election, though there have been at least 8 since I became eligible. Why? Let me quote from the letter I send prior to the election:

- 1. Australia's system of government claims to be a "representative democracy". That is, elected members of parliament represent the interests and concerns of their constituents. However, to gain and consolidate power, members of parliament must sacrifice the concerns of their constituents for the sake of their party - hardly representative.*
- 2. Because members of parliament rarely represent their constituents, ordinary citizens have little meaningful participation in the political process. Democracy means "government by the people, for the people". Surely that means more than a vote every three years.*
- 3. At present our state and federal systems of government are too large:*
  - True democracy requires that citizens be involved in the political process in an ongoing way. The size of our systems of government means they cannot take into consideration the concerns and contributions of ordinary people.*
  - State and federal systems make decisions that affect huge numbers of their constituents. This is not healthy democracy. Decisions made on this scale cannot consider the complexities and nuances of a local community.*
- 4. As a Christian, I believe that those who are poor, marginalised and oppressed should be our priority. A system that is not representative, participatory or sensitive to local*

*communities will inevitably lose sight of those who are on its margins. My beliefs compel me to reject such a system.*

I came to these conclusions through thinking about what Jesus' had to say about change. To both Jesus and Paul, law-making was a blunt instrument when it came to personal and social redemption. In essence, a law is a coercive strategy, whether coming from the left or right. It embodies a desire for a particular way of life, but insists that such a way of life will only come about if everyone is forced to obey it. But surely people don't change their behaviour and their societies simply by force – there are a whole host of reasons why people behave the way they do. For Jesus and Paul, change came through the Spirit indwelling a person so fully that their outward lives altered drastically. That person, as Ammon Hennacy put it so succinctly, *'does not need a cop to tell him how to behave.'*

But it's never that simple. I spent a few months in South Africa, and witnessed an event that made me rethink my non-voting stance. We visited during an election campaign, which happened to coincide with the tenth anniversary of democracy in South Africa. Lindilani, a youth worker with street kids who was taking us around, was voting for the first time. There had been rumours of violence, but our polling booth was quiet. Kylie and I didn't have permission to enter, but when we said we wanted to see this momentous occasion, the electoral officials opened the door with broad smiles! Lindilani was literally shaking with excitement as he filled in his ballot form and stuck it in the ballot box. This meant something to him! It was not simply casting his vote, it was a continuance of the struggle against apartheid, a participation in an ongoing task of social transformation in which he was intimately involved, and in which friends and members of his community had suffered.

How then can I refuse to vote when others take it so seriously? Is my refusal to vote a cheapening of the sacrifices others have made to ensure democracy, both here and elsewhere? To this I can only say two things. Firstly, my desire is that through refusing to vote and participating in social change according to the model of Christ, I am working for real democracy. Secondly, unlike South Africa, Australia has long lost the sense of being involved in a struggle for the poor and suffering, hence the vote has become a way of reassuring citizens that they have influence over government, while in the meantime injustice continues.

## **II. Christianity and Social Change**

Social change through legislation is limited and coercive, and rarely changes things at a deep level.

Therefore, because legislative politics is rarely about real change, Christian action for social change needs to be tangential to legislative politics. Why?

- The Bible continually warns that power is like red cordial. It has to be diluted to stop the children crazily running around in circles. Legislative politics assumes that if given enough power it is able to create a better world, but such power simply gives the agents of legislation licence to ignore real needs and maintain their influence. In 1 Samuel 8, having tired of the corruption of the sons of Samuel, the Israelites look the neighbouring nations for guidance rather than God. They see a structure of power that is attractive despite the warnings Samuel gives them: of militarism, theft, exploitation and slavery. Despite living in a democracy, power still corrupts and leads to these same things. We need to be careful about our relationship to power.

- Jesus never sought political office or tried to implement his vision through law-making. Granted, he did not live in a democracy, but he could have become a scribe or Pharisee. That he chose not to shows that his vision encompassed, and encompasses, so much more than laws can achieve. When he said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” he did not mean that his kingdom was somehow separated from the world or not concerned with the world. Rather, the kingdom of God is *different* to the kingdoms of this world. It has a larger vision than gaining power. We also need to have a larger vision than legislative alterations.

Christian social change will need to deal with the laws of the land, but we should not be using the laws of the land as our main strategy. They are not conducive to our ends (being coercive in nature) and the economic order that legislative politics upholds is frankly antagonistic to a Christian view of the poor. So if legislative politics is tangential to Christian social change, what means should we use to work towards a society that is Christ-like? I’m now going to draw upon the thinking of Jonathan Cornford, a Melbourne writer and thinker. In his tract ‘...longing for a better country’<sup>2</sup>, Cornford outlines three essential tasks for the church to engage in:

**1. Seeking Holiness:** as Cornford acknowledges, “Holiness is a word that has been debased by generations of self-righteous moralism and superficial piety”, and scarcely the first thought of any aspiring Christian activist. Holiness, however, is the condition of being whole, of the spiritual and material being woven together indistinguishably in a life that honours God in every dimension and aspect. Such a life will of course be a threat to the current system which we call home. Cornford points to Revelation 18, in which the church is called to ‘flee Babylon’, and concludes “...that holiness means *difference*” in terms of the whole human experience – work, money, consumption, time, recreation, family, community. For Christian social change to be at all faithful, we need to be living a way of life that is markedly different from the surrounding culture.

**2. Building the Church:** Cornford sees Paul’s language of the Church as ‘Body’ as expressing the fact that the Church is “...the continuing incarnation of God’s presence with humanity”. The very life of the Church communicates a political message to the world, and we need to make sure this message is one of holiness, of difference. Confirming what I have claimed about Christian social change being tangential to legislative politics, Cornford writes:

*Christians cannot expect the government to lead us to a better country; it is our role to begin the new society now, in the midst of the old. That is what the church is...*

That is, we can no longer allow others to act as proxies for us. We need to, as it were, take the law into our own hands.

**3. Making Disciples:** If the church is seeking holiness and building itself up into a community of difference, it becomes a witness to the good news. By ‘good news’, Cornford is careful to emphasise that the good news concerns both body and soul, ‘that human life can be restored to the wholeness...for which it was originally intended.’ Cornford sees the need for evangelism as related to the demands, insecurities and hardships of embodying a way of life that is different:

*...if we are being asked to step away from all that we have been taught about success, security and happiness, we need to be able to entrust our lives to something else...We need to know there is a God who guarantees our wellbeing through such a momentous journey.*

What encourages me about this trinity of political formation is that so many missionary organisations and churches are already doing it! What needs to change is how they do these things and on what issues. The above three tasks can be taken narrowly and self-righteously, but they can also be practiced honestly and authentically. The church needs to start evangelising on political issues of all types, it needs to start making political formation a dimension of discipleship and it needs to become different in more ways than refusing to swear or wearing a WWJD bracelet.

### III. Concluding Remarks

Would I ever choose to vote again? Perhaps. I must admit that Howard's continuous deception, arrogance and abuse of the powerless has made me think over my decision. Refusing to vote is not a good in itself, but a means by which I can publicly remind myself and others that political responsibility means more than voting. Let me be honest here – I don't think that refusing to vote is going to change much. But neither do I believe that simply voting will do so. Refusing to vote is a way of explaining to myself, others and my nation that it will take more than a vote to solve the problems we face. It is an attempt to show that our vote is being used as a way of reassuring us that we have done our political duty, and that we can trust the political experts to take things in hand on our behalf, a trust that is so regularly abused without public outrage that you have to wonder where the famous Australian intolerance of authority figures has escaped to.

Christian social change involves much more than Christians attaining positions of political influence and voting every few years. Christian political responsibility involves a broader embodiment of God's kingdom, a kingdom that will never be established by violence, law or coercion. It will only be established as together, we take personal responsibility for living a life that points to the God of love and justice that we find in Jesus.



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<sup>1</sup> Burrowes, R.J. *Vote Refusal*, in *Nonviolence Today*, No. 13, Feb/March 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Cornford, J (2006) '*...longing for a better country*': *Christianity & the Vocation of Social Change*. Copies can be obtained from the author – [kimandjon@iprimus.com.au](mailto:kimandjon@iprimus.com.au)