

David Coles
BISHOP OF CHRISTCHURCH

JUST CONCERNS 1999 ADDRESS

INVESTING IN SOCIAL CAPITAL - A CHRISTIAN IMPERATIVE

An address by The Rt Revd Dr David Coles, Bishop of Christchurch at Christchurch Cathedral at 10.00am on Saturday 7 August 1999

This is election year and it is essential that there be plenty of opportunities to talk about what kind of society we hope for in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the new millennium and to question all those who aspire to political office about their vision for New Zealand society and also to question and clarify how that vision will be fleshed out in political policies, strategies and budgets.

At the start, I want to declare that I am not a member of any political party; and will not be as long as I remain Bishop of Christchurch. I value my independence in being able to address issues in our society regardless of which party or coalition is in power. I value this opportunity to raise the profile of a Christian vision for society at a time when there is, I believe, a growing dissatisfaction with the concept of seeking political answers to all our ills.

It is also election year in the United States next year. American Vice-President Al Gore is running for the Presidency and recently called for a working partnership between government and faith-based institutions. He claimed that his faith "is the centre of my life", and once took a year of full-time theological study to help him explore his relationship to God and his obligations to others. He said "Ordinary Americans have decided to confront the fact that our severest challenges are not just material, but spiritual. Americans know that the fundamental change we need will require not only new policies, but more importantly a change of both our hearts and our minds."

And then he went on with what was clearly election year talk: "If you elect me as President, the voices of faith-based organisations will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration."

Well, could those sentiments be applied to this country? Al Gore's use of the phrase "a change of both our hearts and minds" brought back memories of the then Minister of Finance, Ruth Richardson in her 1991 budget when she said the Government was engaged in a battle for the "hearts and minds" of New Zealanders. A year later, in 1992, The Revd Richard Randerson now Assistant Bishop of Canberra, published a book entitled "Hearts and Minds: a place for people in a market economy". In that book, responding to Ruth Richardson's phrase he said:

"Her words were prophetic, for that is precisely the nature of what is going on. There is indeed a battle as to whether New Zealand can

retain the reality of community in the face of continuing policies which seek to emphasise the individual. Will there be a warm heart of community, or only the coldness of individuals out to pursue their own interest with diminished regard for the circumstances of those around them?" (page 5)

He wrote that 7 years ago, and I believe Richard's comments remain as valid today as then. If anything there has been a continuing hardening of policies which protect individuals at the expense of community life and development.

The Hikoi of Hope promoted by the Anglican Church in September last year drew together an amazing mixture of Pakeha, Maori and Pacific Islanders from right across the socio-economic spectrum and also bridging rural and urban communities. Some 40,000 people took part in that Hikoi on the walk from Bluff to Cape Reinga to Wellington. While there was a great deal of sidestepping of the issues raised in that Hikoi by some politicians, I believe it struck a chord with middle New Zealand in a way which surprised many.

In this address I want to talk about social capital and the importance of our investment in it if we are to retain the strong community ideals based on Christian values which are central to the fabric of this nation.

"Social capital is a term invented by political theorists to describe the benefit to a community when people associate together for some common purpose" The concept of social capital argues that when the total number of people belonging to community and voluntary organisations declines, social capital also declines. Wherever people group together for mutual benefit and especially for service in the community, that is undoubtedly a valuable asset and worth investing in. I believe there is evidence that community organisations in this country are facing in many instances a crisis of membership and of funding. For several years now, uniformed youth organisations have struggled to find leaders. Community service organisations also struggle to find volunteers, and the churches and their social service organisations are no exception. Even political parties are aware of the difficulties of recruiting members and party workers! While many people applaud the deregulation of retail trading hours and the flexibility brought about by employment contracts in terms of working hours, there has been a huge cost, I believe, for community groups and the recruitment of volunteers who in many cases no longer have regular time available for voluntary groups after work or at weekends.

The argument which has been espoused by National, Labour and coalition governments over the last 10 years that "if we get the economy right, all else will follow", is, I believe, in tatters. It has simply not been the case that economic well being has been followed by successful healthy communities. Social capital cannot be created by any government but it may be encouraged or discouraged by government policy decisions affecting our social fabric. The poverty issues which were highlighted by the Hikoi of Hope - unemployment, inadequate benefits, the increasing costs of education, health and housing, all result in a deconstruction of social capital. As more and more victims of poverty withdraw from society, social capital is diminished. This increase in poverty leads to a form of social and psychological deprivation characterised by feelings of hopelessness, shame,

depression, despair and even aggression and violence. As people experience these feelings they pull back from participation in society into isolation and withdrawal. Thus, much of our present poverty becomes unseen, and consequently ignored and denied by society and government. Poverty has been described as like "a new, undiagnosed cancer in our communities. It is both hidden and growing and without investigation and intervention".

I am arguing that whatever you may think about the virtues or shortcomings of a free-market economy, the side effect of this is an increasing individualism and a decline in the recognition of the "common good".

We see this expressed most dramatically perhaps in the recent scandals over the spending sprees of senior officials and executives in agencies which exist for the common good but which are now being modelled on a free-market approach in their management and salary structures. We have the ridiculous scenario that whereas once senior public servants' salaries were set with reference to commercial benchmarks, the reverse seems now to be true!

I accept that economic reforms have been necessary and desirable over recent years in this country. But like all swinging pendulums, there must come a time when there has to be a balancing, a return to those fundamentals which I believe are not just political or ideological matters for debate but are in fact central tenets of Christian faith, inherent in the Gospels.

In an address arranged by Just Concerns on May 16th, Christchurch Mayor, Garry Moore spoke about the criticism of the Christchurch City Council by Central Government over a period of seven years. He said it was about ideology.

"They took off toward their brave new market-driven utopia where nothing is more important than individual rights... we as a city said no thanks and stayed stuck in our community-minded ways. The revulsion against poverty is so ingrained in Christchurch people it is just taken as a fact of life the Council does operate as if it thinks it is its brother's keeper."

I applaud the Mayor for what I perceive as his essentially Christian view of society where individualism and self-centred policies are rejected in favour of the common good. The concept of loving your neighbour as yourself becomes fundamental in all our thinking, and can and should be translated into social policy.

Next year is the 150th Anniversary of the establishment of Christchurch and Canterbury by the Canterbury Association. Outside in The Square stands a statue of John Robert Godley, the leading figure in the Canterbury Association. That Association, so firmly built on Christian principles and which gave the name of Christ Church to this city, was in its essence a Reform Association moving towards a self-dependent society with self-government in contrast to some of the earlier British colonies in which Whitehall granted self-government in slow stages. That idea of responsible government, with the community taking care of its life and dealing with its social problems and policies has drawn from the experience of the earlier American colonies with their distinctive Christian character. The steady

erosion of this Christian character of our society by secular expressions of individualism and free-market ideology even into our health, education and welfare policies has brought us to a point of social collapse and community crisis. A point where the queues for food parcels get steadily longer while the salaries of senior public officials get steadily higher.

The late Cardinal Basil Hume, the much-loved spiritual leader of Britain's Roman-Catholic Church died in June this year. Shortly before his death he wrote about his vision for the new millennium. He referred to the inevitable fireworks displays which will light up the sky in a thousand cities to mark the dawn of the Third Millennium. (I guess this city has planned one too, and I'm not against that!). But Cardinal Hume says, "its brilliance is short-lived. A charred stick falls to the ground." What will be left when all the celebrations are over? What will be left when New Zealand has won or lost the America's Cup and the millennium sunrise has been watched, photographed and televised? Basil Hume says:

"A society without a common understanding of what it is to be human and without a shared morality is in danger of gradual disintegration."

Although he was speaking of the British scene, I believe his words apply here in Aotearoa/NZ as well. "Change is needed," he says. "We each have a role to play to bring about change; not least, of course, politicians, the media and business leaders. Beware of those with vested interests, those who are for no change, and cynics who are sceptical about the possibility."

So what changes are necessary if we are to regain a healthy sense of an interdependent community where everyone's contribution is valued and important?

I was intrigued by a Press report on Wednesday this week under the heading 'NZ lags behind Australia' in which Treasurer, Bill English says "If I'm worried about anything it's about New Zealand losing its belief in its own story." He was responding to commentators' concerns that New Zealand is worse off than Australia despite its purist deregulation of the economy meant to deliver a better living standard.

I believe it is precisely the relentless pursuit of a self-centred ideology of extreme individualism at the expense of healthy communities that has delivered us into our present social disorder. We are losing our belief in our story - our story of a Christian basis for our society. We see the expression of this in the teaching of the American philosopher Ayn Rand who has written that "to risk one's life for a drowning stranger only indicates a lack of self-esteem. Contrari-wise you cannot expect a stranger to save you if your are in difficulty. If the person at risk was someone you loved, then you might make a sacrifice on the self-interested basis that life without that person would be intolerable".

I simply want to contrast with that, the fundamental Christian ethic which is based on the concept of social capital when Jesus said:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have

loved you. No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:12-13)

or when, perhaps even more explicitly Jesus challenges his hearers with the parable of the Good Samaritan who rescued the injured man when his fellow citizens had passed him by. "Go and do likewise" said Jesus. If there is any Christian imperative which challenges this year's line-up of political candidates and parties and all of us who vote, it is that expression of caring for others. In my Christian vision for society, the weak, the sick and the most vulnerable stand alongside the strong, the healthy and the powerful and are included as valued members of our society, treated compassionately, generously and without hesitation.

As we meet in this cathedral today, my eyes are drawn to the tukutuku woven panel, a memorial to the 5th Bishop of Christchurch, Allan Pyatt. Beside that tukutuku is the Maori proverb:

"He aha te mea nui, he tangata, he tangata, he tangata
What is the most important thing in life?" "It is people,
people, people."