the BEACON

Journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church

March 2017
Price $2

SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY

EDITORIAL

WE STILL LIVE IN A DEMOCRACY, DON'T WE?

We have written many times before about democracy, but never has it been more critical to discuss it except perhaps at the time of the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The question needs to be asked: We still live in a democracy, don't we? Of course we do: we get to vote every three years for people we haven't selected, knowing very well they don't really represent us; we have free speech, which allows every bigot to express dangerous and anti-democratic slanderous and untrue statements about migrants and Islam; we can stand for Parliament, except that most of us couldn't afford the campaign; we have a right to work, only the jobs are not there; we have the media, only it is privately owned and controlled. But we have a democracy of sorts for the moment!

A recent ANU study is billed as a wake-up call for politicians and government. It indicates that public trust, confidence and satisfaction with Australian democracy have dropped to record lows and trust in politicians has dropped to its lowest level since 1969. Close to half of the 2,800 surveyed were dissatisfied with the state of Australian democracy. It is surprising that this wasn't higher, given the current state of our nation. Australia's democracy is a fragile beast. Let us examine some of what is happening in our democracy. If knowledge is power, we desperately need this examination.

Firstly, we have a federal government desperately clinging to power with a one-seat majority and a recalcitrant backbench, with no direction or real policies to deal with the present economic and political situation. It is a government committed to serving not the Australian people, but a small group of national and foreign bandits interested only in acquiring bigger and more obscene profits at the expense of the most vulnerable in our society. Their other interest is simply in retaining power and they will lie, dissemble, do deals, sell us out, take us into wars, in fact do anything to remain in government, and they do.

We have a Senate made up of a few good people, but also some maniacal cranks, crackpots, bigots, racists and morons who hold the balance of power … and isn't that scary for democracy! We also have an Opposition whose primary interest is in gaining power at any cost and will make decisions based on that self-interest rather than genuine policies that will serve the majority of the people. We have both sides of government believing in the nonsense of the 'trickle down' theory, that if we make foreign and national corporations rich, it will somehow enable all of us to share in those riches.

The following statement relates to the United States. Replace the words *America* with *Australia* and omit Wall St and it is our position in a nutshell:

> *To be innocent in America is to permit the continued theft of hundreds of billions of dollars from the state by Wall Street swindlers and speculators. To be innocent in America is to stand by as insurance and pharmaceutical companies, in the name of profit, condemn ill people, including children, to die. To be innocent in America is refusing to resist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that are not only illegal under international law but responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of people. This is the odd age we live in. Innocence is complicity.*

Chris Hedges (Presbyterian minister and journalist)

CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF MARRIAGE: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Contemporary marriage in advanced societies

As has been previously mentioned, in the early twentieth century moves were made to raise the basic marriageable age from bare puberty, and as a logical corollary, the age of consent. One notable exception was the French Napoleonic Code of 1804 whereby the marriageable age was set at 15 years for women and 18 for men. The United Nations 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages had 55 parties agree to specify a minimum marriage age by statute law, overriding customary, religious, and tribal laws and so forth. In addition the 123 parties to the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery agreed to adopt a minimum age for marriage. Today most countries have established the marriageable age as a right at 18, but also with exceptions for the marriage of minors, typically with parental or judicial authorisation. For example, in Europe the age of marriage as a right is 18, regardless of sex, and with parental consent and court permission it is 15 or 16 in nearly all cases. In Australia, in the original 1961 Marriage Act, the marriageable age was set at 16 for females and 18 for males, but the age was equalised in 1991 by the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Act 1991*.

Divorce laws vary considerably around the world, but with only two (the Philippines and the Vatican City) that do not allow it at all. A number of countries, all with a large Roman Catholic population, have introduced divorce relatively recently, including Italy, Portugal, Brazil, Spain, and Argentina in the 1970s and 1980s; Paraguay, Colombia, Andorra and Ireland in the 1990s; and Chile and Malta in this century. Apart from the practical universalisation of divorce laws in advanced economies throughout the world, a significant change in the last fifty years has been in the increased prevalence of no fault divorce. Before the late 1960s nearly all countries that permitted divorce required proof by one party that the other party had committed an act incompatible to the marriage. This is no longer the case, Poland being a notable exception, requiring 'the irretrievable and complete disintegration of matrimonial life'. In Australia prior to 1975, grounds for divorce had to be established, the most common being desertion, separation for five years in certain circumstances, adultery and cruelty. In Australia, the Family Law Act of 1975 established the option of no fault divorce after a period of separation after twelve months.

Another very substantial change in the past century to the definition of marriage has been the question of sexual consent within marriage. Historically, exemption from consent was derived from the idea that by marriage a woman gives irrevocable consent to her husband. Also included in Anglo-American law up to the 20th century was the notion of coverture, where a married woman's legal rights were subsumed by those of her husband. The marital exemption became increasingly viewed as inconsistent with the concepts of human rights and equality, with the feminist movement, especially from the 1960s, seeking to overturn it, although it was not until December 1993 that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which included marital rape as a human rights violation. In Australia it was not until the 1980s that various state-based jurisdictions overturned the previous common law principle that a person could not be sexually assaulted by their spouse, starting with South Australia in 1976. Some politicians seem to think that the right to refuse sex from a partner is limited. For example, as part of a panel discussion on 'Religion, Sex and Politics' on 19

March 2009, Tony Abbott said: 'I think there does need to be give and take on both sides, and this idea that sex is kind of a woman's right to absolutely withhold, just as the idea that sex is a man's right to demand I think they are both, they both need to be moderated, so to speak.'

A cultural and legal shift to marriage in recent years has been the rise of legal rights and obligations associated with cohabitation, de facto, or common law marriages, which largely correlates with the decline of expected religious authority in the area of marriage. Cohabitation and de facto relationships with a relative equality of laws initially rose to significance in the Scandinavian countries and eventually through Western Europe and then into the east after the fall of the communist regimes. Deeply religious areas, such as southern Italy and Greece remain exceptions to the metric that shows an increasing number of births to unmarried (but usually de facto) mothers. In Iceland, Sweden, Norway, and France this now represents the majority of births (as of 2007, 66%, 55%, 54%, and 50% respectively), with Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands being close to a majority. As with other countries, as cohabitation has increased the median age of first marriage has also increased, and the rate of marriage has fallen. In Australia, the Family Law Act of 1975 established the legal principles for a de facto relationship and required that two people, who may be of the same or opposite sex, have a relationship as a couple living together on a genuine domestic basis, whether through living together for two years, having a child from the relationship, or if the relationship is registered under state or territory law. If a de facto relationship breaks down the same legal systems as a legally married couple apply and they can apply for child support, spousal maintenance, and the division of assets.

If a de facto relationship breaks down the same legal systems as a legally married couple apply and they can apply for child support, spousal maintenance, and the division of assets.

Finally, a particularly pertinent issue in Australia has been the introduction of same sex marriage in various jurisdictions. Starting with the Netherlands in 2001, marriage equality was established in Belgium in 2003, then in chronological order, Spain, Canada, Sweden and Norway, Portugal, Denmark, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Luxembourg, and the United States, with Finland introducing it next year. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Greece have other legal partnerships, whereas a number of eastern European countries have constitutional limits to recognise only opposite sex marriages. Various forms of civil unions, which differentiate from marriage and have been compared to 'Jim Crow' race laws in the United States, encourage discrimination, and do not provide the same degree of legal recognition. As expected, there has been no change to the general rate of decline of marriage overall where marriage equality has been introduced, nor has there been an increase in same-sex attraction. As an associated aside – and one which opponents of marriage equality often bring up – what evidence exists suggests that the children of same-sex parents have equal, if not better, life outcomes to those of other-sex parents.

Marriages of the future

The trends occurring in contemporary society with regard to marriage are not going away. Equality between partners within marriage and other legal relationships will increase, as will cohabitation, de facto, and common law marriages, expected church authority over marriage will decline, the general rate of marriage will continue to decline, the median age of marriage will increase, and same-sex marriages will be introduced in more jurisdictions without any ill-effect on society as a whole. At their foundation, these changes are given the opportunity with the increase in general household wealth over the past century, which removed the necessity of patriarchal family-bound welfare, and the political importance of social liberalism that promoted the need and assurances for individual rights, and feminism that encouraged legal and substantive equality between the sexes. For those who express fears at the prospect of changes to the definition of marriage, this historical survey should indicate that they are certainly in for a very rough time because the changes that will occur in the next one hundred years are certainly going to be at least as significant, if not more so, than the changes that have occurred in the previous one hundred years.

This is not to suggest that some of the more hyperbolic fears are going to be realised. Unlike the claims of US televangelist Pat Robertson, people in the future will not be able to marry a duck. 'Lest one think this is just another one of those utterly ridiculous claims that come out of the mouth of a person whose increasing ability of prophecy is shown to be quite wrong, this sort of reasoning was repeated by Senator Cory Bernardi just prior to his resignation from the front bench: 'Will that be a future step? In the future will we say, "These two creatures love each other and maybe they should be able to be joined in a union".' Likewise it will not, as Rev. Fred Nile suggests, lead to child brides. These claims are either maliciously disingenuous or the people who make them don't seem to understand that the principle of matrimony is founded on informed consent. Without some serious genetic uplifting, one cannot imagine the legalisation of a journey down the aisle concluded with the quack 'I do'.

However, the principle of informed consent does leave open the possibility of marriage between relations and group marriages. In modern liberal democracies, consensual adult incest is viewed as a victimless crime where there is any legislation at all, and likewise various household relationships of multiple partners even if the ménage à trois and other forms of polyamory do have some popularity in intellectual counter-cultures. With regard to the former it must be acknowledged in a sense being of the same species, every relationship is incestuous albeit one with a varying coefficient of relationship. Is there the possibility of marriage between close relations? The possibility is indeed there based on principle, but for the immediate future the probability is very unlikely. As

Continued page 10

Do 8 men really control the same wealth as the poorest half of the global population?

OPINION

The Conversation

By **PETER WHITEFORD**, Australian National University, 19 Jan 2017

A new Oxfam Report has a number of startling claims about wealth inequality around the world – the world's eight richest people control the same wealth as the poorest half of the globe's population, Australia's two richest billionaires are wealthier than the bottom 20 per cent of the population, while the two richest Canadians are richer than the bottom 30 per cent of Canada's population.

Oxfam has published similar reports for a number of years, released just before the annual World Economic Forum.

The methodology has been criticised in the past by free market think tanks in the UK as well as in the Australian media, but with numbers this dramatic, it's good to ask how reliable the data is, and whether this really captures world inequality trends.

Who are the richest eight?

1. Bill Gates – $US75 billion
2. Amancio Ortega – $US67 billion
3. Warren Buffett – $US60.8 billion
4. Carlos Slim Helu – $US50 billion
5. Jeff Bezos – $US45.2 billion
6. Mark Zuckerberg – $US44.6 billion
7. Larry Ellison – $US43.6 billion
8. Michael Bloomberg – $US40 billion

Where the numbers come from

The Oxfam Report calculates the wealth of the richest individuals using the Forbes Billionaires list and the wealth of the poorest groups from the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report.

Wealth is defined as all assets (financial and real i.e. housing) minus debts.

The Forbes Billionaire Report estimates are based on investigative reporting, while the Credit Suisse reports have been put together by a research team headed by Anthony Shorrocks, one of the world's leading experts on the distribution of wealth (he has more than one type of statistic named after him).

According to the Forbes list of billionaires, the richest eight individuals have net worth of between US$40 billion (Michael Bloomberg) and US$75 billion (Bill Gates) with a cumulative total of US$426.2 billion. According to the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook the bottom 50 per cent of the world's population has about 0.16 per cent of the world's wealth of US$256 trillion, or about US$410 billion.

So we can say that the calculations are roughly correct, given the data. But are they meaningful?

A closer look at the numbers

First, it should be noted that while Credit Suisse undoubtedly is the best source of world wealth data, there is an enormous number of technical complexities involved in generating these estimates.

Credit Suisse has household balance sheet data or high quality survey data for about 55 per cent of the world's population (with 88 per cent of the world's wealth), and have incomplete data for another 10 per cent of the world. For the remaining third of the world's population (with less than 5 per cent of the world's wealth) the wealth data are estimated in various ways.

Critics of these figures point to two main issues. Firstly, the Credit Suisse figures calculate wealth as assets minus debts, so the bottom 1 per cent of the world wealth distribution actually have a negative net worth.

But people with negative net worth can include students, with student debts but who are about to enter a high paying job and people who have just purchased a house and whose equity is less than the mortgage outstanding. Should these people be counted as impoverished?

Oxfam directly addresses this issue, pointing out that if you take out net debt then the wealth of the bottom 50 per cent rises from around US$400 billion to US$1.5 trillion. This means the wealth of the bottom half is roughly equal to the richest 56 individuals in the world.

While this figure is not as dramatic as focusing only on the richest eight people, it still shows enormous disparities in wealth.

The second issue relates to the fact that Credit Suisse uses market exchange rates to convert wealth within countries to US dollars, as does the Forbes Billionaire list. This means that estimated wealth can be sensitive to exchange rate fluctuations. For example, average wealth per adult in Australia dropped by more than US$40,000 – or nearly 10 per cent – between 2012 and 2016, largely due to a falling Australian dollar.

Oxfam argues that exchange rate fluctuations cannot explain the stability of the share of the bottom 50 per cent of the world, who have not had more than 1.5 per cent of the world's wealth since 2000. This is a reasonable point, but at the same time the more widely accepted way of comparing economic circumstances across countries is to use Purchasing Power Parities. This gives a better representation of the purchasing power of people using different currencies by eliminating the differences in price levels between countries.

For example, in his study of global income inequality, Branko Milanovic argues that to calculate true global income inequality we have to adjust for the fact that if we are interested in the real welfare of people, those living in 'cheaper' countries get a boost to their incomes because price levels tend to be lower.

Using exchange rates ignores this effect, with the likely result that measured inequality is higher using the exchange rate approach used by Credit Suisse.

The verdict

The data used to estimate the distribution of global wealth inevitably has significant technical limitations, but it certainly appears that it is the best available.

If we disregard debt then the extent of the disparity between the wealthiest minority and the poorest majority is likely to be lower, but the disparities still remain massive. There are arguments for using purchasing power parities rather than market exchange rates to adjust for differences in wealth across countries, but it remains unclear whether this would make a significant difference to global wealth disparities.

Peter Whiteford is a professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University.

DID YOU KNOW...

An address delivered by **Marion Harper**, Honorary Secretary of the Melbourne Unitarian Church, on Sunday19 March 2017

THE FORCES OF **EVIL** ARE GATHERING

We are living in momentous times. Global capitalism is in its deepest crisis and has no way of resolving it except by war, which it uses to feed the global machine. The unabated, excessive greed of monopoly capital and its very existence is predicated on a ceaseless search for increased profits at any cost. There is no room in that search for concerns about people's needs, for sharing the wealth, for building a better world – only for personal power, greed and an insatiable need for more of both.

Planning and decision-making to maintain control, grow wealth and protect ownership take place in boardrooms, in secret conclaves and in deepest privacy. There they hatch the plans and policies to take over, subvert, destroy, plunder and colonise other countries and their resources. They are aided and protected by a corrupt media and what we shall call the state apparatus: the armed forces, the police (both secret and overt), security services, the courts and parliaments, regardless of who is currently misrepresenting us in power.

Today, surreptitiously, legislation is introduced that limits democratic rights, purportedly to protect the community from terrorism, a terrorism that grew from their imperialist policies.

At the same time there is a concerted campaign to provide a tangible, visible enemy: yesterday Jews, today Muslims. Both major parties preach 'law and order' while propagating the politics of fear. At the same time, trade unions are under savage attack and the programs and services we need are either cut completely or underfunded. Jobs are disappearing, unemployment is growing and austerity is savagely promoted. Yet no link is drawn between disappearing democratic rights and growing poverty, between the lack of hope and destruction of community, between the growing and no longer concealed corruption at all powerful levels and the inevitable increase in crime as people are denied the resources to live and hope for the future. This is not just a viewpoint – these are undeniable facts!

Nor is it only an Australian problem. It is a global problem, because we live in a global world and the policies of fear, austerity and inequality come from those who control the global markets, not from ineffectual but compliant politicians.

In previous addresses I have given examples of these problems in the US and the UK, and they are far worse than ever, but today I want to illustrate what is happening in South Africa.

Let me read a statement from South Africa's biggest trade union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, which held its 10th National Congress from 12–15 December 2016 in Cape Town:

1. This 'Workers' Parliament' could not be meeting at a more critical time for the world working class in general and the South African working class in particular. All over the world, workers are under attack from employers who, as always, are making us, the working class, pay for their global crisis of monopoly capitalism. They are destroying jobs, cutting wages, attacking trade unions and reducing spending on essential social services.

2. The foundation of South African racist capitalism is the super-exploitation, impoverishment and unemployment of, and extreme racial inequalities against, the majority black and African working class. The ongoing global crisis of the capitalist system simply worsens these already pre-existing horrible conditions of the black and African working class. Congress will be sending a clear warning that unless these are urgently attended to, the country is headed for a violent class and racial confrontation, as so many voices have warned already.

Jobs, especially in manufacturing, are becoming ever more precarious. Whole industries like steel are in danger of disappearing, throwing thousands more onto the streets. The shocking employment statistics released on 22 November 2016 confirm beyond any doubt that South Africa's economy is in deep crisis. Unemployment rose to a record 27.1% in the third quarter of 2016 – up from 26.6% in the second quarter and the highest since 2003! South Africa now has the highest unemployment rate among more than 60 emerging and developed countries.

Of particular concern to our members is that the manufacturing sector suffered the most job losses – 91,000. Quite apart from the human misery this level of unemployment causes, it adds up to a colossal waste of potential for the 5.8 million unemployed people to create wealth and to supply essential goods and deliver services to the poor.

An inevitable consequence of these levels of unemployment is that employed workers will have more unemployed family members to support from their meagre wages. The pathetic proposed R3500 (AU$350) minimum wage will do virtually nothing to improve this lack of income for millions of South Africans, especially in those households where nobody has a job. It also encourages employers to bully their workers into even worse levels of exploitation, using the threat of the sack to quell any resistance.

What makes all this even worse is the country's white racist level of inequality. An international survey of CEOs pay by Bloomberg revealed that South African CEOs (who are still predominantly white and male) are the seventh highest paid in the world – receiving more than those in Norway, Spain, Australia, France and Japan. These, like the six with higher-paid CEOs, are all rich countries in which the working class is far better off than in SA.

This shows that South Africa is now by far the most unequal society in the world. CEO's pay exceeded that of the average person by a greater ratio than in any of the 25 countries Bloomberg measured. The income of the average CEO is 541 times more than the income of an average South African, as measured by the gross domestic product per person. Only second-placed India with a differential of 483 times comes anywhere close.

The most important conclusion from these horrifying statistics on unemployment and inequality, which will be drawn by delegates to next week's Numsa Congress, is that both are inherent features of the racist monopoly capitalist system, based on the super exploitation of the African working class.

This crisis also makes building strong unions more vital than ever and the National Congress will be a platform for Numsa members to plot a fight-back strategy, to build a powerful, united army of workers to resist the horrendous levels of unemployment, poverty and unemployment and to fight for a living wage.

Apart from the minimum wage differential, this report could be referring to the US, the UK, Australia or Europe. We are living in the period of capitalism now commonly accepted as imperialism. What is the definition of imperialism? One is 'a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means.' The US has been the major imperial power for the best part of the last 80 years, but it is struggling to maintain its position.

Imperialism is in dire crisis, a situation that has not occurred before, so any resolution remains an unknown. We are in new territory. We don't know how the crisis will unfold yet but we can look to the past for examples. In the crisis of the First World War in 1917 Russia it was resolved by revolution; in the 1930s in Germany where revolutionary activity was on the rise it was resolved by fascism.

What is fascism? Some think it a relic of the past, indigenous to Nazi Germany, that it is jackboot and swastika. In fact fascism was a product of Mussolini's Italy. Fascism is a form of radical authoritarian nationalism that came to prominence in Italy in early 20th-century Europe, influenced by national syndicalism (the Italian equivalent of national socialism). Both used the language of genuine socialism to mislead the people. I have mentioned fascism many times in my addresses and described some of its tenets. The fourteen steps to fascism have been described and hang on the wall in our foyer. We need to rid our minds of jackboots and Nazi insignia, and learn to recognise the dangerous steps so significantly and accurately described by Lawrence Britt. How many can we identify now? How many can we identify as being practised now?

What happened in Germany in the 1930s and what is happening here was the gradual habituation of the people little by little to being governed by surprise; to receiving decisions deliberated in secret; to believing that the situation was so complicated that the government had to act on information that the people could not understand, or so dangerous that even if the people could understand it, it could not be released because of national security. A scapegoat was required and found, fear needed to be instilled, and it was. Legislation gradually introduced to deal with the 'scapegoat' extends to the curtailing of everyone's freedoms, but we convince ourselves it is needed for our safety and security. Laws are introduced that traduce democratic rights but we accept them because we are told they are necessary for our protection. Trade union rights are curtailed, leaving workers unprotected and less able to organise but these are supposedly necessary to deal with corruption. Slowly the net tightens but lives go on as before because as yet we are not all affected. 'They came for me, but I was not, and when I was, it was too late', said Pastor Neimoller of Germany.

That is how fascism crept into Germany. Yes, the German people were cultured, democratic, freedom-loving people, but they were also starving. The situation was so dire that a revolution was probable. To counter that devastating eventuality, the German ruling class turned to fascism. It developed in the 1930s like a disease, a cancer spreading so slowly and insidiously that the people didn't notice the changes until it was too late and they were living in a fascist state.

Listen to the following by German historian Irene Guenther:

Germany appeared to be on the brink of civil war. The young Weimar Republic was wracked by armed street fighting waged mainly between Communists and Nazis. Foreclosures, bankruptcies, suicides and malnourishment all skyrocketed. Six million Germans, 40 per cent of the working population was unemployed and thousands found themselves without a place to live … By 1932 German industrial production was at 58 per cent of its 1928 levels. The effect of this decline was spiraling unemployment. By the end of 1929 around 1.5 million Germans were out of work; within a year this figure had more than doubled. By early 1933 unemployment in Germany had reached a staggering six million.

The effects this unemployment had on German society were devastating. While there were few shortages of food, millions found themselves without the means to obtain it. The children suffered worst, thousands dying from malnutrition and hunger-related diseases. Millions of industrial workers – who in 1928 had become the best-paid blue-collar workers in Europe – spent a year or more in idleness. But the Great

Depression affected all classes in Germany, not just the factory workers. Unemployment was high among white-collar workers and the professional classes. A Chicago news correspondent in Berlin reported that, '60 per cent of each new university graduating class was out of work'.

The real beneficiary of the Great Depression was Adolf Hitler. With public discontent soaring, membership of the NSDAP (Nazi Party) grew to record levels. In September 1930 the NSDAP increased its representation in the Reichstag almost tenfold, winning 107 seats. Two years later they won 230 seats, the most won by any single party during the entire Weimar period. Revolution was avoided by fascism.

Could it happen again? Could it happen here?

Think about what is occurring in Australia today. Could you have imagined our country locking up innocent men, women and children in concentration camps simply because they wanted to live a decent, free life? Could you have imagined Aboriginal children being tortured in white jails? Could you have imagined that we would go to war without parliamentary decision or that we would witness the cancellation of so many of our civil liberties? Could you have imagined people being denied the pension, university students incurring huge debts simply to be educated, people working until 70, trade unions under threat, legal services denied, growing job losses, hungry children, homelessness and hopelessness? Surely these were relics of the 1930s? No, they are characteristic of the 21st century!

Today we must choose either to seek the truth or bury our heads in the sand. The truth of course is a difficult path to follow. To seek the truth is to open a Pandora's box, because once you examine the truths, you are confronted with choices. Do I believe this? What impact will it have on my life? How do I know it is true? Can I ignore it? What are the implications? What can I do?

Fifty years ago, even 20 years ago, it was easy to bury your head in the sand and ignore the signs, but today it is no longer possible. Changes are occurring so rapidly, with crisis after crisis erupting across the world. Terrible wars of aggression for profit and power; the appalling displacement and death of so many innocent people; the Trump disaster in the US; Brexit; the growth of ultra-right fascist forces emerging around Europe, the US, Britain, and Australia; the displacement of millions from their homes and destruction of their cities; the environmental disasters and the huge loss of so many animal species. Here at home there are aggressive wars, increasing government and private corruption, growing job losses and rising poverty, homelessness and despair.

So what is our choice as a Unitarian church?

Dialectics or the dialectical method is a discourse between two or more people holding different points of view about a subject but wishing to establish the truth through reasoned arguments. Melbourne Unitarians have always practised this kind of dialectics. That is one of our basic purposes, wishing to establish the truth through reasoned argument.

So let us provide the opportunities to have such reasoned argument about the state of the world and to determine possible solutions without fear or favour. We do all share concerns about the world and its crises and we do all recognise that we need to provide solutions.

What I have said today represents not just my deeply felt views. Ten years or more ago I would have suggested as such because what I observed then many people did not believe or did not want to be true. But now it is irrefutable. You may still try and disagree with my conclusions, but let's have that dialectical discussion.

CREATE PLACES OF HOPE, NOT HATE

BY **JOHN HARLEY**

Each morning since Donald Trump began his presidency I have woken up with a deep sense of dread and anxiety.

It feels like we have been plunged into a really bad Hollywood disaster movie with a dreadful script to match. It reminds me of the excellent novel by Philip Roth *The plot against America* – which imagines what would have happened if the aviation hero Charles Lindbergh, who had extreme isolationist views, had defeated Franklin Roosevelt in the 1940 presidential election. Roth describes the unfolding nightmare skilfully as America becomes a fascist ally of Hitler and Jews are oppressed and imprisoned right across America. We view this chaos and violence through the eyes of a particular family and slowly we see its members divided and broken by the political mayhem that explodes. Thankfully this story is just fiction.

What disturbs me is that Trump's hateful vision of ignorance, egomania and racism is already being made into reality. In my view his tirade of executive orders which include a ban on travellers from seven countries in the Middle East and Africa from entering the US sounds like the small-minded, reactionary views of a bigoted individual who, on finding himself president of the United States, now has the power to create government policy at the scrawl of a pen.

It was inspiring to witness the Women's March in Washington DC and marches all over the globe with some powerful, witty and clever banners. I know that many Unitarians took part in these mass demonstrations, including a few of us in Bridport. Walking in a crowd mindfully feels like a healthy, proactive thing to do, but one major challenge many of us face is what to do with our anger and our disbelief on a daily basis – where do we take these emotions?

Unitarians in Bridport march to protest President Trump's policies

I would suggest our beloved Unitarian places of worship have an opportunity to become welcoming places for people of all faiths and none, to find a safe, supportive space for solace, peace of mind and reflection. This need many people have to be grounded and to try and make sense of these strong feelings of injustice is far wider than religion and politics – it is a deep human need to find a sense of belonging and to reach out to one another compassionately. Belief in God, for me, is primarily about exploring and knowing our *oneness*, that we are all one body and that we have a profound connection with one another. I am planning a day workshop at the Unitarian Chapel in the Garden in Bridport called 'Creating Hope', an event open to everyone who would like to express and earth their reactions to the Trump presidency through creative activities, meditation, silence and companionship.

Religious communities have a responsibility and I believe, a deep spiritual obligation, not to be silent about Trump, but to provide transformational spaces for people to believe in hope rather than indifference. I would argue that Unitarian congregations have a unique dissenting and liberal legacy to open up their doors for the local community to find circles of renewal and retreat in these troubled times. There is such a variety of events we can organise – from vigils to engagement groups to interfaith worship with other faith groups. We just have to use our imagination and remind ourselves that there are many people across the country who, vocal or silent, are disturbed by recent developments in the US and are looking for ways of joining other like-minded people to restore their belief in humanity and feel they have a voice. To paraphrase the great parliamentarian Edmund Burke: The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to do nothing.

Many Unitarian congregations are already taking a stand and creating responses to Trump's idiocy. Doug Muder writes in the Unitarian Universalist US magazine UU World:

'On the weekend after the election, I was leading the Sunday service at the Unitarian Church of Quincy, Illinois, the town where I grew up, but haven't lived for many years. Adams County had voted 3-to-1 for Trump, and the local Unitarians were feeling not just defeated, but encircled. To them, the voters who had rejected their values were not some abstract demographic like 'the white working class.' They were the neighbours.

Church was well attended that morning. I think the members just needed to be together, to look each other in the eye, and to know that they were not alone. We read, the responsive reading that lists the UU Principles. It felt good to say them out loud and hear others say them too. *(The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.)*

'No, we implicitly assured each other, we are not going to fall into despair. We are not going to retreat into our individual homes and hide or hibernate until some future time when (we hope) the dangers will have passed. If we were alone, fear and discouragement might overwhelm us, and those options might seem irresistible. But we are not alone.

'Have our countrymen forgotten why these values are important? Have issues we thought were closed forever come open again? Do we have to go back and make our case all over again from the beginning?

'Very well, then. Let's get started. Together. Why are we a congregation? This is why.'

The Rev. John Harley is youth coordinator for the Unitarian.

Source: The Inquirer, The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians February 2017

www.inquirer.org.uk (a special introductory offer for new international subscribers here: http://www.inquirer.org.uk/freetrial/

TUNE INTO THE UNITARIAN HALF HOUR

EVERY SATURDAY AT 10.30 AM 3CR • 855 AM • COMMUNITY RADIO

Continued from page 3. **Changing definitions of marriage: past, present and future**

for polyamorous households, the possibility of marriage equality or other forms of legal recognition is limited by the historical disparity in property and power relations. Indeed, various social reformers made significant effort to abolish polygyny in developing countries in the interests of equality. Now, with the same interest, there are advocates to introduce it in developed countries.

As with other changes to marriage, technology often plays a critical and almost invariably understated role. Recent developments in in vitro gametogenesis (IVG) allow for the possibility of multiplex parenting, that is, the formation of children from one, two, three, or more genetic parents, including those from the same sex. In 2015 the United Kingdom legalised multiple parent embryos as a means to prevent children from inheriting genetic diseases. This of course should end the final, desperate claim of opponents of marriage equality – that it cannot lead to progeny. Indeed, requiring progeny from marriage leads to all sorts of ridiculous mental gymnastics, such as the state of childless heterosexual couples, the possibility of cross-species fertilisation, and so forth. Whilst there is no current suggestion of multiple parent embryos being a justification for group marriage, or multi-member relations seeking to contribute to a 'group produced child', these are not just possibilities, but actually very likely in the near future.

All of this will of course be incredibly challenging for those countries around the world whose development is held back by the imposition of religious laws. Islam historically has allowed polygyny with justifications of economic responsibility. This is unlikely to provide significant impetus to a change in marriage laws in liberal democracies already deeply suspicious of anti-secular approaches. In this case it would seem that religious advocates would be better placed as followers not leaders in any political change and likewise the Shi'a Islamic tradition of temporary marriages or nikah mut'ah, whilst fitting liberal concepts of contract law and pre- or post-nuptial agreements, or the increasingly popular cultural tradition of renewal of wedding vows.

Despite these significant changes, it would seem that in its changed, diverged, and dynamic sense, marriage and other types of domestic relationships are here to stay, with associated legislation. There are those who feel that perhaps governments should get out of the marriage business altogether, and doubtless that if such an approach was taken up a great deal of the concerns that religious conservatives had with same-sex marriage could have been avoided – secular civil unions could have been applied for all, and marriages could remain a religious institution which would have varied according to creed or denomination. Alas, that opportunity has been largely lost as conservatives held too tightly to the notion that their sacred definitions should be enforced in law for everyone. Nevertheless, over time it is certain that relationship legislation will increasingly show aspects of equality between partners and as variable public contracts.

By way of conclusion, and especially given the date that this address is given, reference must be given to that satirical Australian vernacular 'Happy as a bastard on Father's Day'. Of course, it is just a reference to not being very happy at all in a general sense, but the basis was once quite sound. With intimacy and welfare bound to the patriarchal family unit, being a bastard did indeed once mean a childhood that was far more likely to be subject to much higher levels of indifference and impoverishment. The contemporary removal of many of the legal and cultural barriers to unfair discrimination has indeed reduced such incidence – even to the point that single-parent families have raised children that can reach the heights of US president, as both Barack Obama and Bill Clinton have illustrated and, in an Australian context, as Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Malcolm Turnbull have shown, and with contenders such as Anthony Albanese and Penny Wong waiting in the wings. Well, with examples like that, you can be happy as a bastard on Father's Day – as long as a society is capable of providing the financial and emotional support to provide the sense of integration. This is increasingly so now, and with the changes we can expect to see, certainly and inevitably much more in a complex future.

Increase our circulation:

Nominate potential subscribers for three free monthly copies without ongoing obligation! (Try before you buy.)

Our church is a public and usable asset with portable seating and excellent conference, meeting and function facilities. We welcome its use by those who support our motto 'Seek the Truth and Serve Humanity'. Interested individuals or groups can contact the church office – we would be delighted to speak to you. A donation is payable.

WE ACKNOWLEDGE

Traditional owners of the Kulin Nation, past Warriors, Elders past and present.

Lessons from Iraq: what has Australia learnt?

HSV Public Lecture by **Dr Margaret Beavis**, President of Medical Association for Prevention of War (MAPW), at Hawthorn Library, 25 August 2016

The MAPW opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq. Of the allied soldiers 4,804 were killed and 32,223 injured; lots of veterans are now homeless. So far the cost of the war has been 1.7 trillion dollars and is estimated to be eventually 4 trillion dollars. The long-term health impacts have been post-traumatic stress disorder and moral injury. There are difficulties in obtaining exact data about the effect of the war. Some data are based on a direct count, some on a derived count. It is estimated that in the order of one million people died, based on media, hospital, police reports and regional surveys in the country. About half the doctors fled during the war; the health system collapsed – no immunisations were available. About 1.9 million Iraqis became refugees and 1.7 million were displaced inside Iraq. There have been huge health impacts on food, clean water, healthcare and housing.

In the world Iraq has one of the highest concentrations of landmines including those from its previous wars with Iran and the US; their effect is evident in the number of amputees in Iraq. There is an ongoing destabilisation in the region. Iraq is a failed state, with a loss of public service including the police force and a breakdown of sanitation. Sectarian conflicts have caused much destruction. There has been environmental damage in Iraq, including destruction, toxic materials, emissions from the conflict with oil wells burning; in the first four years 141 million tonnes of carbon dioxide were emitted. There have been indirect costs to Australia of the Iraq war including loss of dead to our society and its impact on families, the effect on military spending reducing funds available for health, education, housing, etc., militarisation of our society, increased risk and markedly increased fear.

The Chilcot report found that the UK chose to join the invasion before peaceful options were exhausted, intelligence was presented with an unjustified certainty and despite explicit warnings consequences were underestimated.

International military spending in 2015 was $1,676 billion. What could the reallocation of military spending achieve? The Sustainable Development Solutions Network found that its targets could be met with 51% of this money e.g. 13% would mean no poverty or hunger.

The number of people worldwide displaced by war has reached a staggering high of 65.3 million, consisting of 21.3 million refugees, 3.2 million asylum seekers and 40.8 million internally displaced people.

In Australia the decision to go to war is a 'captain's pick'; such a decision should go before Parliament.

Report by Joe Sampson

A *Beacon* reader, keen to promote *Beacon*, leaves his copy in public places such as transport or waiting rooms and passing it on to friends once he has finished reading it. You may like to do the same. More importantly, you can help promote the journal by seeking out new subscribers. Help to build our journal which promotes the truth; it is urgently needed in today's world. Let's double our readership.

from our readers

Dear friends

Here is my subscription for 2017!

I do enjoy your paper and know that I am not alone!

E Bron, NSW

Dear Madam

I am writing to you to let you know that our members enjoy reading your journal the *Beacon*.

We wish to renew our subscription for the next twelve months.

Enclosed you will find a cheque for the sum of $100.

Many thanks.

R Breese
CFMEU Retired Members Association, NSW
H Williams, QLD

MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH

'SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY'

Tel: 03 9417 4178 (9.30 am – 4.00 pm weekdays) Fax and Answering machine: 03 9417 4178
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne (opposite the Mercy Hospital)
Services, Sunday 11.00 am

IN THIS ISSUE:

Changing definitions of marriage: past, present and future
Do 8 men really control the same wealth as the poorest half of the global population?
The forces of evil are gathering
Create places of hope, not hate
Lessons from Iraq: what has Australia learnt?

Beacon Editorial Board
Peter Abrehart
Marion Harper
Donna Sensi
Julie Stafford
The Editorial opinions expressed are those of the Editorial Board.

Opinions expressed in the editorial, articles, letters, etc., in the *Beacon* are those of the writers themselves and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Melbourne Unitarian Church or any other organisation to which a particular writer is affiliated. Titles and affiliations are used for individual identification purposes only.

MELBOURNE UNITARIAN PEACE MEMORIAL CHURCH
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne 3002
Email: admin@melbourneunitarian.org.au
Website: www.melbourneunitarian.org.au

Monthly journal of the Melbourne Unitarian Peace Memorial Church
Est. 1852

Registered by Australia Post

Post Print Approved
100003043

SURFACE MAIL

POSTAGE PAID
E. Melbourne
Victoria
Australia
3002

Simply cut out this form, fill in the details, and forward it along with your subscription. Why not do it now? If you are already a subscriber, send one to a friend.
To: The Editor, **The Beacon**, Melbourne Unitarian Church
110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia
Please forward a copy of **The Beacon** every month. Enclosed is $20.00 for twelve months subscription. (A$20 Overseas and $10 concession)

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Also send a copy to:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

A GIFT THAT SAYS YOU CARE

A Gift Subscription to **The Beacon**, the ideal gift that lasts a whole year.
Please enter my gift subscription to the following:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Donor's Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Enter payment of $20.00 (A$20 Overseas, $10 Concession) for one year's subscription to the Editor, Beacon, Melbourne Unitarian Church, 110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, Victoria 3002 Australia. Cheques payable to Melbourne Unitarian Church.

Published by the Melbourne Unitarian Church, 110 Grey Street, East Melbourne, VIC 3002. Artwork: The Designery 03 9438 6232