

CANTERBURY WORKERS ASSOCIATION ADDRESS

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Ms/Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed a privilege to address you tonight and to deliver to you the annual Lincoln Efford Memorial lecture for 2009.

The subject of my lecture is to present a blueprint for the future, a way forward to a more humanitarian and equal society where there is less emphasis on materialism and more importance granted to democracy, in the sense that we must care for all members of society. The fight for social justice and equal opportunity for all in our community is a bitter and often lonely struggle. It is indeed a fight that has never been won and possibly never will, but if there is joy in this engagement and I believe that there is, it is in the attempt, even with the pain involved but rarely in the victory itself.

This battle for justice and fairness has involved over the years thousands of people, some of whom are well known but most of whom are not recognised. The names that immediately come to mind are Karl Marx, Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst, Bertram Russell, Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi. In a more indirect way, the mission has been carried on by artists and writers such as Charles Dickens, Emily Zola and Jean-Paul Satre.

In New Zealand we had our own James K Baxter who was a great humanitarian who used his pen to fight injustice. I quote briefly from his poem, 'The Private Conference of Harry Fat':

*We must keep watch said Holyoake,
On any man who reads
Said Harry Fat, if you take*

*A business man's advice
Tell me a voters income
And Ill tell you his price;
Although it's wiser not to come
With the same fondness twice.'*

*'Upon my word,' said Holyoake,
 'The point is very nice.'
 Said Harry Fat, 'I'll call the man
 Who digs my garden, "Burt"
 He has his place and I have mine,
 His job is to shovel dirt.
 But I'll have no truck with a Chinese ape
 Who wears a peasant shirt.'
 'Except with guns' said Holyoake –
 'The message then is curt.'*

In respect of art and social reform Mahatma Gandhi once said:

*"To a true artist only that face is beautiful which, quite apart from its exterior,
 shines with the truth within the soul."*

I submit that the finest contribution any person can make to our society is to assist the downtrodden to an elevated, humane, decent state of welfare and physical comfort.

It is this ideal which is being forgotten by so many New Zealanders and indeed elsewhere in the world. We have developed a society where the acquisition of material wealth for some is more important than the eradication of poverty.

New Zealand is by nature a wealthy country with plenty of water and fertile land. We pride ourselves on being a democracy. The axiom of a democracy, the hallmark of a democracy is that the government representing the people cares for all the people, not just a chosen plutocracy.

In New Zealand there are hundreds of thousands of people, particularly the elderly and children, living in poverty. If we were truly a democracy, if we were governed by people who genuinely cared for the whole population then a determined effort would be made in the future to eradicate all poverty.

Where do the pockets of poverty lie?

It is possible to live in a wealthy suburb in New Zealand and to be totally ignorant of how much abject poverty exists in other areas of our community. Basic poorness is caused by people not having adequate money to provide the fundamentals of life and the necessary comforts to make life civilised.

I particularise now the areas where poverty exists although this list is by no means complete. Benefits; old age pensions, sickness benefits, unemployment benefits are all far too low. It is impossible for a person to live with dignity who is in receipt of a benefit in this country unless his or her income is supplemented from some other source.

There are thousands of people in New Zealand who are not being paid an adequate wage. Firstly the minimum wage is too low to enable recipients to live in a reasonable fashion. More recently there has been a tendency for employers to employ workers as independent contractors and not only pay them smaller sums of money but not to provide a regular 40 hour per week income. In this regard the employers do not pay holiday pay, sickness pay, paid parental leave, bereavement leave nor ACC levies, and it is the worker who suffers.

Another group of people who are often reduced to poverty are immigrants, particularly those who do not speak the English language fluently. These people are exploited by farmers and city folk as well, who often use them as domestic semi-slaves.

Because poverty is so widespread in this country there has been a proliferation of crime which is one of the explanations why our prisons are so overcrowded. Lack of money also leads to lack of education because parents cannot afford to properly educate their children and also lack of resources to give them the right home environment. Poverty leads to inadequate housing because people cannot afford to pay high rents, nor do they have the resources to buy houses. Poverty leads to lack of

family solidarity as poverty leads to parental separations, violence and matrimonial unhappiness.

Poverty is like a blight in an orchard. It affects all the people that are the recipient of it and manifests itself in many unpleasant ways. What we have seen in New Zealand over the last few decades is an increasing gap between the rich and poor and under the present government that space is increasing at an alarming rate.

Trade unions in New Zealand do their best to protect wages and to maintain income at a level sufficient to enable workers to have their fair share of the national bounty, but they have been fighting a losing battle.

It is very difficult for any man or woman with a family to live in New Zealand and maintain his or her family adequately if he or she earns less than a \$1,000 a week. This abysmal lack of proper remuneration in New Zealand has led to the need for both spouses in marriages to work with a result that often children are inadequately cared for at home. A further injustice resulting from this imbalance between the have not's and the haves is that the educational facilities in this country are favouring the wealthy and making it virtually impossible for a person on a basic wage to properly educate his or her children.

If a child comes back to a house where six or seven people occupy each room at night it is very difficult for that child to attend to his or her homework. If the household has a chronic shortage of funds it is hard for the parents to pay school fees that are now required and to supply the children with the every day requirements such as school books, clothing, sporting equipment and money to attend school functions.

The abolition of the poverty trap in this country should be a prime object of government in the future. The abolition of people being without the necessities of life in New Zealand is more important than New Zealand participating in wars overseas and more significant than spending huge sums of money on high remuneration for so-called top civil servants and heads of state financed corporations.

There is a need to investigate why a certain class of person in New Zealand is able to become extremely wealthy at the expense of the community under the umbrella of company and trustee law.

In the future we must look very closely at the activities of people, even though technically legal, who make huge sums of money from gambling with currency, financing, housing and subdivisions of land. Similar critical attention should be paid to entrepreneurs exploiting our natural resources such as petroleum, timber, coal, fish and other natural commodities without care for the environment or future generations.

We must look more closely at how these people protect their wealth by the establishment of trust funds which means that they can take risks with their financial gambles and if they lose, then their assets are still secure in trusts.

In the future we must examine the laws relating to the acquisition and accumulation of assets. Presently it is possible for one person to own a couple of hundred farms. We should go back to the policies of the early Labour government when it was necessary to obtain consent before one person could accumulate property in this way.

We must again look at the laws of inheritance and establish rules preventing people inheriting unless there is moral duty on the part of the testators to provide for those beneficiaries.

We must examine with care our educational system. It is often said that this is a land of equal opportunity, but is it?

We must in the future gradually eradicate private schools or any type of institution that indirectly or directly establishes a class system in New Zealand.

I believe that in the future there is a challenge to meet in regard to Maori gangs. Maori gangs must be dealt with in a civil and constructive manner. Gang members should be settled on farmland, where that is their wish and land should be transferred

to them so that they can set up communal farms. It is the lesson of history that if you provide people with land and a means of making a reasonable livelihood then those persons will turn away from violence and crime and become good citizens.

There is plenty of land in New Zealand, including Maori land that could be made available to members of Maori gangs. With the right assistance and instruction kibbutzs could be set up where these people could live together in harmony and establish for themselves farms, orchards, dairy herds and any form of remunerative and lawful income.

It is also vital for the future of this country that we meet the challenge of our prisons. The first principle on running a prison is that it must be a humane place. Presently our prisons are not healthy places but are vast dens of violence, sexual perversion and where there is inadequate meaningful work training.

We should look to the models overseas, particularly in Holland and devote resources in our prisons to training young people so that when they are released from prison they can find a job in the community and restore to themselves self-esteem and the desire to lead a lawful life.

Presently in New Zealand our prisons are grossly overcrowded. Our prisoners are to be housed in metal containers and brutality seems to be an accepted fact. Education in our prisons is vital. Prisons should have as members of its staff top-line teachers and instil into inmates a love of education, art and culture.

I remember under the previous National government when Nick Smith was Minister of Corrections he suddenly cancelled all cultural visits and other privileges for inmates. Within a very short period serious riots broke out, particularly at Paremoremo Prison.

We must annihilate the present movement of 'throw the key away' and lock inmates up for inordinately lengthy periods in conditions which are deplete of any hope. This

inhumane and cruel attitude to prisoners not only is contrary to our Bill of Rights, but also in itself is a major causative factor in increasing crime in this country.

We have in our penal policy followed the failed USA system. Aut Gawande writes in the New Yorker as follows describing that system:

“Prison violence, it turns out, is not simply an issue of a few belligerents. In the past thirty years, the United States has quadrupled its incarceration rate but not its prison space. Work and education programs have been cancelled, out of a belief that the pursuit of rehabilitation is pointless. The result has been unprecedented overcrowding, along with unprecedented idleness – a nice formula for violence. Remove a few prisoners to solitary confinement, and the violence doesn’t change. So you remove some more, and still nothing happens. Before long, you find yourself in the position we are in today. The United States now has five per cent of the world’s population, twenty-five per cent of its prisoners, and probably the largest majority of prisoners who are in long-term solitary confinement.”

We must improve our justice system in a way that places a greater emphasis upon helping the disadvantaged and not kicking them further down in society. Thousands of people are unnecessarily arrested and brought up in court with charges, which are either unfounded or trivial, and obviously merely symptoms of major personal problems. These cases should be dealt with on an administrative level, as they would be in places like Holland, and the problems that these people have should be addressed, rather than concentrating on punitive measures.

An equitable rule of law and a compassionate administration of law are essential to the communal integrity of a country.

As the playwright and poet Bertold Brecht wrote:

*“Justice is the bread of the people.
Sometimes it is plentiful, sometimes it is scarce.
Sometimes it tastes good, sometimes it tastes bad.
When the bread is scarce, there is hunger.
When the bread is bad, there is discontent.*

*Throw away the bad justice
Baked without love, kneaded without knowledge!
Justice without flavour, with a grey crust.
The stale justice which comes too late”*

Now to deal with the blueprint for the future, on a global or international scale.

The first and fundamental premise is that we are on a small fragile globe that needs our care and love. There is only one race, the human race. Unless we look after our planet, disasters of catastrophic enormity will occur. There can be no doubt whatsoever that mankind is corroding the environment, polluting the atmosphere of the planet and contaminating the water of the seas, rivers and lakes.

Above all, there is the spectre of a future war where atomic weapons are again used as they were in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As George Preddey wrote:

“The dinosaurs became extinct 65 million years ago, probably because they were unable to adapt to a sudden global winter initiated by the impact of a meteorite on the earth. It remains to be seen whether the human species will adapt to the discovery of nuclear energy, or whether the inherited reptilian traits of primitive aggression and territoriality will lead to a nuclear war, a nuclear winter and a similar extinction.”

In 1995 when France’s Chirac exploded the French device at Mururoa I was privileged to be the elected leader of a group of international yachtsmen and women who sailed to Muruora and protested against the explosion of a French nuclear device. I may say that the promised assistance from the New Zealand government never arrived, from a National Bolger led government.

New Zealand has however established for itself an excellent reputation as being anti-nuclear, particularly where nuclear power is being used in a military manner such as in warships and bombs. However, we must continue to press for abolition of all nuclear weapons.

Free thinking people in the world supported the election of Barack Obama to the office of US President. His achievements so far are very mixed. Despite his positive steps to pull US troops out of Iraq and close Guantanamo, Obama committed himself even before he was elected President to increasing the US military presence in Afghanistan, and just a few days ago refused to consider withdrawal.

US drones are still bombing villages in Northwest Pakistan in the hope of eliminating Al Qaeda militants. Eight years on from 9/11 the world's military super power remains – together with its NATO allies, bogged down in a bloody and controversial conflict.

Threat of a nuclear war in the Middle East has been heightened. The allegation that Iran is obtaining nuclear weapons because her deadly enemy Israel is equipped with hundreds of nuclear warheads provides the basis for a real threat of a nuclear holocaust.

Violence is a world problem. Not only violence between countries, like the genocidal invasions we have witnessed in Vietnam and Iraq but also violence between individuals. Part of this future blueprint is to not only call for an end to violence but to provoke an examination of the reasons for violence with a view to suppressing and hopefully extinguishing the progenitors of violence.

Stephen Pinker wrote:

“Political correctness from the other end of the ideological spectrum has also distorted many peoples conception of violence in early civilisations – namely, those featured in the Bible. This supposed source of moral values contains many celebrations of genocide, in which the Hebrews, egged on by God, slaughter every last resident of an invaded city. The Bible also prescribes death by stoning as the penalty for a long list of non-violent infractions including idolatry, blasphemy, homosexuality, adultery, disrespecting ones parents and picking up sticks on the Sabbath. The Hebrews of course were not more murderous than other tribes; one also finds frequent boasts of torture and genocide in the early histories of the Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Chinese.”

It may well be said that religion has done little to abate violence in the past and in the future it will be necessary to examine religion to ascertain whether or not it is a basic reason for much of the violence in the world.

George Scott wrote:

“Man is cruel. He has always been cruel. He is cruel to everything which he considers inferior to himself. He is cruel to both his fellow men and to animals. The advance of civilisation has not resulted in man losing his capacity and appetite for cruelty; it has merely directed both into fresh channels, or camouflaged them, or temporarily subjugated them. The delight which man experiences in persecuting others shows itself today in various forms; and where physical persecution is impossible, psychological persecution takes its place. The fact that a barbaric act is practised under the aegis of justice, and the additional fact that it is conceived to be a fit punishment for the crime, do not alter or in anyway mitigate its basic cruelty.”

I believe as part of this blueprint that man must have faith in himself. We must have confidence that in the future we can overcome the cruel streak that humanity undoubtedly has manifested in the past. Not only to himself but to animals. Perhaps the worst crime that humanity has inflicted upon itself is the crime of slavery. Slavery still exists in the world on a large scale and there is no explicit passage in the Bible which criticises and seeks the abolition of slavery even though slavery flourished in the time that Jesus walked on this earth.

I have spoken about poverty in New Zealand and how we should eradicate it as part of our blueprint but our newspapers tell us again and again, that there are at least a billion people presently starving in the world.

How can any currency dealer who has made many many millions of dollars gambling with other people's money in the sterile trade of buying and selling international currency rejoice in his great wealth at a time when a billion people are starving in the world?

Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

“In India we have three million people who have to be satisfied with one meal a day and that meal consists of a chapatti containing no fat in it and a pinch of salt. You and I have no right to anything we have until those three million are clothed and feed better. You and I, who ought to know better must adjust our wants and even undergo voluntary starvation in order that they may be nursed, fed and clothed.”

In the future there must be severe curtailments on personal wealth. This is not just for the good of the disadvantaged but it is also to help those who are excessively wealthy. Excessive wealth in itself is a symptom of greed and self-interest. The symptoms of massive individual wealth include arrogance, vanity and selfishness.

We are presently witnessing in the world a huge exodus of people from the war ridden country of Afghanistan. These refugees are finding enormous difficulties in establishing places of asylum.

Jan Black wrote:

“Perhaps it should not be surprising that it has been the world’s poorest countries. Mostly African ones. That over the last decade have absorbed the greatest number of refugees. The richest countries seem inclined to stay that way by taking foreign money and resources in and keeping the people out.”

The rich countries of the world have been very good at exploiting the poor countries, taking from them their natural resources and paying them with disease, and an influx of armaments. But when it comes to helping these countries faced with starvation and the devastation of wars caused usually by the rich countries, countries like Australia, New Zealand, Britain and others are very slow to take the refugees or to give adequate aid.

A blueprint for the future of the world is to eradicate global poverty and to establish infrastructures for remunerative employment in countries where unemployment is rife.

It is said that the combined sales of the world’s large multi national corporations are equivalent to the individual gross national product of all third world countries. We

have seen the growth of the international corporations; business entities without conscience, purely motivated to make profit without any regard whatsoever for the environment or its low level employees or other considerations.

Lori Wallach and Michelle Sforza wrote:

“One of the clearest lessons that emerge from a study of industrialised societies is that the centralisation of commerce is environmentally and democratically unsound. No one denies the usefulness of some international trade. But societies need to focus their attention on fostering community-orientated production. Very often such smaller scale operations are more flexible and adaptable to local needs and environmentally sustainable production methods. They are also more susceptible to democratic control. Are far less likely to threaten to migrate and perceive their interests as more overlapping with community interest.”

Particularly in third world countries it is necessary for indigenous trade to be fostered not to be annihilated by a swamp of imported cheap goods.

Our present recession was caused by the greed of American financial institutions. When Vice-President Cheney retired from the arms distributor, Halliburton, he was given what CNN reported as a golden parachute. I quote from John Dean, former counsel to President Richard Nixon:

“CNN reported that Cheney’s golden parachute gave him stocks and options with a market value of an astonishing 62.6 million dollars plus deferred income and supplementary benefits.”

How does Cheney reconcile his immense personal wealth with the fact that millions of people in the world today try and exist on less than a dollar a day.

Poverty must be eradicated in the world. The armaments trade must be controlled and hopefully prohibited. Unfortunately we now have the position particularly in the major so-called first world countries where millions of workers are dependent on the manufacture of armaments for their wages. How is all this energy to be transferred to the production of consumer goods so needed in a world full of want?

These are the challenges that must be faced in the future. We can only hope that men like Obama will bring about major change in this regard. A blueprint for the future include care for our environment on a global scale. Our carbon footprint into the atmosphere and the sea must be reduced. If this means financial hardship then so be it. Osmarino Rodrigus, Secretary of the National Council of Rubber Tappers wrote:

“At first, the people talking about ecology were only defending the fishes, the animals, the forest and the river. They didn’t realise that human beings were in the forest – and that these humans were the real ecologists, because they couldn’t live without the forest and the forest couldn’t be saved without them.”

The environmental cause in New Zealand and overseas is really a struggle between what is right and the forces of greed. So far the forces of greed are winning. It may well be asked how these blueprints for the future can be established. It is clear in New Zealand that little will be gained from right-winged governments whose mandate is to make the rich richer and by definition, the poor poorer.

It is indeed sad to see the Maori Party bolstering up a right-winged government. A disproportionate number of Maori people in this country are amongst those exploited, underpaid, suffer racial prejudice, are ill- housed, imprisoned and living in poverty. In fairness, however, the gap between the rich and poor in New Zealand continued to increase under the last Labour government.

The main weapon apart from the souls and consciousness of people themselves is the use of non-violent protest. Mahatma Gandhi wrote:

“Civil disobedience is the inherent right of a citizen. He dare not give it up without ceasing to be a man. Civil disobedience is never followed by anarchy. Criminal disobedience can lead to it. Every state puts down criminal disobedience by force. It perishes, if it does not. But to put down civil disobedience is to attempt to imprison conscience.”

We must have faith in the human spirit. We must have faith that man will survive and these obstacles facing human progress including poverty, greed and exploitation

will be defeated. The alternative is the extinguishment of the human spirit, and finally Armageddon.

In conclusion I quote with humble approval a passage from a book by Victor Frankl, a former inmate of Auschwitz, who wrote:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread.

They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Peter Williams QC

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