



INFORMATION

Newsletter of the Social Action Office - Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes Queensland

Looking Forward, Looking Back

Looking forward, looking back is the title of one of the last songs composed by the Australian country music icon, Slim Dusty. The theme speaks to where we find ourselves in many of the events and issues of 2007.

2007 marks the 40th anniversary of the promulgation of the Encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (The Development of Peoples). It was the first encyclical devoted specifically to the issues of international development and the growing poverty and injustice of the developing world. Paul VI wrote that 'Development is the new name for peace', advocating that, since the root cause of most conflicts in our world can be traced back to extreme poverty then, *just* development is a means to peace.

2007 also marks the 40th anniversary of the referendum in Australia which granted, by a 90.77% majority, the right to citizenship and the right to vote, to Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. Forty years later we, in Australia, need to look again at the teachings of *Populorum Progressio* in relation to the issues of development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The current campaign being run by Oxfam Australia, *Close the Gap*, which calls for urgent action on the issue of Indigenous health is one such opportunity to affirm the rights of Indigenous Australians for health equality. It is a national scandal that the life expectancy for Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders is almost two decades less than the general Australian population. While most women in Australia can expect to live to an average age of 82 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can expect to live to only 64.8 years. The situation is even worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men whose life expectancy is only 59.4 years. (Source: www.oxfam.org.au/campaigns/indigenous)

In an article in the April 2007 *Habitat* Professor Ian Lowe outlines a vision for a sustainable Australia. In his vision –

- Australia will have appropriate safety nets for those who are less privileged, treat refugees with compassion, and develop technologies and approaches that will be available for the whole human family, rather than restricted to a privileged minority.

- It will take an eco-centric approach that acknowledges the ecological parameters within which we must live.
- It will be efficient in its use of natural resources – especially energy and water.
- It will be powered by renewable resources that are unlimited, rather than relying on fossil fuels.

This vision aligns closely with much of the thinking, reflecting and speaking that we have engaged in this year at SAO, along with our view that the current WorkChoices legislation needs to be changed so that the less privileged are not forced to forgo their rights at work in order to get or keep a job.

2007 is a time that offers Australians the opportunity to critically evaluate where we have moved as a society and to set a direction for the future – such is the opportunity provided by a federal election year. In our society today SAO speaks for a minority position, but that has always been the way of the gospel and of the Church's own social teaching. Wherever we are the challenge is to remember that and to be heartened by the voices of those who speak and act for justice and who continue to work to bring about

God's transformative dream for all creation. As Frank Brennan notes in his latest book, *Acting on Conscience*: "Keeping religion out of politics is neither a worthy ideal nor a practical objective in robust western democracies, because the subject matter of

politics will inevitably include issues about which citizens care passionately and on which they disagree vehemently, some of these drawing their inspiration and vision from a religious tradition."

This year SAO plans to engage in the political process as the year unfolds by providing a critique of policies in the areas of climate change, Indigenous affairs and industrial relations, drawing our inspiration and vision from our religious tradition.

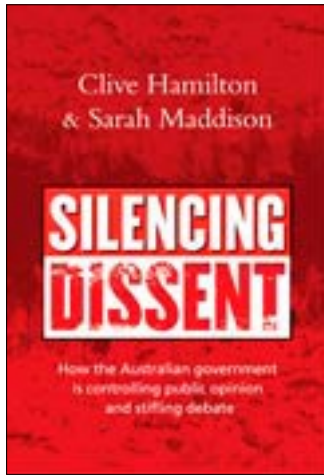
(Sources: *Habitat*, Australia April 2007, I Lowe, *A Sustainable Australia, My Vision*; *Acting on Conscience*, Frank Brennan p 51)

Kathleen Tynan pbvm
SAO Coordinator

CLOSE THE GAP
Indigenous health in crisis

A Cautionary Tale

A recent volume of articles edited by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison begins with the tale of the boiling frog – sitting happily in a pot of warm water unaware that beneath it lies a fire, slowly but surely bringing the water to a boil and the frog to its demise. What the frog is missing perhaps is an awareness of the gravity of its circumstances. Or it may have some awareness but by now it has become so enervated, so ‘relaxed and comfortable’ it is too late to make its escape from the pot. The melting pot of our democracy is the frog of the book *Silencing Dissent* which details how public debate, dialogue and dissent in Australia have been



stifled and eroded and public opinion controlled, under the Coalition Government; through manipulation of parliamentary processes, threats of defunding, bullying and intimidation, increased red tape and a concentration of power in the Prime Minister’s office.

Silencing Dissent is deeply concerning. It systematically lays out the evidence of how most sectors of the nation

have been co-opted into silence through various ways and means. Universities, the research community and the welfare sector have been effectively silenced through contracts that stipulate ‘no comment’ and threats of defunding or no funding. Senate Inquiries and other parliamentary processes have been thwarted through intimidation and manipulation and the independence of Statutory Authorities such as the ABC, the Fair Pay Commission and the National Museum of Australia undermined through ‘stacking the board’; the appointment of people loyal to a conservative government’s particular view on things. Diversity, once the underpinnings of a robust democracy, is now a dirty word, along with multiculturalism which has recently been removed from the name of a government department.

The fallout of all this is that the very things which are crucial to the health of a vibrant and mature democracy – debate, dissent and public opinion – are stifled and controlled. But while the government of the day is enabling the silencing

of dissent we need to recognise that this is happening in no small measure as a result of our own complacency.

It was religious dissenters such as the Rev John West who, as a leader of the anti transportation league in the mid 1800s, sought justice for convicts and later, as Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and as an independent minded person, began the movement for a federalism divorced from vested, colonial interests.

Dissenting – taking a courageous stand on principles like those embodied in Catholic Social Teachings – is essential to the re-visioning and shaping of a nation that values ethics and a vision of justice and peace for the common good.

Silencing Dissent can be borrowed from the SAO library. Highly recommended.

Angela Ballard
SAO Project Officer



Graphics taken from <http://www.silencingdissent.com.au/>

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The Story of No Stories.

will the heroes please stand up?

It is by telling our stories and listening to others' stories and experiences that we create a shared story. When we are prevented through fear from telling our stories and hear only those stories deemed valid by those more powerful we lose sight of a greater truth and lose a capacity to be inclusive and accepting. Grace somehow begins to elude us.

Late last year the SAO was invited to write a submission for the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission Inquiry into the effects of WorkChoices. However, as the researcher on the Patchwork Project investigating the impacts of the IR legislation, I had discovered it was exceedingly difficult to get people's stories documented and so there were no stories to tell – publicly at any rate. In reading *Silencing Dissent* I understand the experience of the Patchwork Project more fully. I too was told that people were frightened from coming forward to share and document their experiences – lest they be fired or be seen to be a troublemaker in a town where employment was limited. I also was told that organisations, particular welfare and employment agencies, would not participate as they felt they could not be seen to be participating in something that might be construed as anti government for fear of being defunded. People's jobs were at risk, important work supporting people on the margins at risk also.

At one point last year St Vinnies took a courageous stand refusing to be co-opted into aspects of the government's appalling Welfare to Work (W2W) regime by refusing the funds to implement the policy. Other organisations followed suit. Another policy detail needed a six month coordinated lobbying campaign by the community welfare sector before some of the W2W policy was amended. A small win for a lot of work but a win that has made a huge difference – relative to their meagre income – to the lives of single parent families.

More recently I was privileged to meet and listen to Prof Graeme Pearman, eminent climate scientist, at the

“Transforming Energy” courageous conversation. In 2004, as CSIRO's Head of Atmospheric Research, Pearman was drawing together the report of the Australian Climate Group that looked at the environmental, economic and social impacts on Australia of accelerating climate change. It was made clear to him that scientists were not allowed to comment on government policy, putting him in the ludicrous position of not being able to speak to the scientific evidence that overwhelmingly maintains that emissions of CO₂ must be reduced substantially to stabilise the planet's climate systems – because this would be construed as commenting on the government's policy of not setting targets for emissions.

The impacts of censoring and controlling the stories that need to be told to ensure the health and well being of people and the planet have the potential to be catastrophic in many ways. However, like the circumstances of the frog flopping about in its ever warming pot (cf page 2) there are amazing potentials and opportunities in every crisis – to become aware, to refuse to be complacent, to retain our independence and agency, to take quick and decisive action (jump out of the pot!), to tell our stories, to participate in policy debates, to insist on policy change, to stand up and be counted for justice in all the myriad forms that must take these days and, in order to do all these things, to become critical thinkers, questioners and listeners who ‘speak truth to power’.

It seems that our democracy and the gargantuan challenge of accelerating climate change are bound up together in the same pot. If the frog had paid close attention she would have noticed the changes apparent in the slow boil and deeply questioned where those slow imperceptible changes were taking her.

In the forthcoming months the SAO will be campaigning for justice, peace and sustainability and we urge all to reflect deeply on what could be termed the parable of the frog.

Angela Ballard
SAO Project Officer

The Weeks of Prayer for Christian Unity and Reconciliation run from 20 May to 3 June. *Breaking the Silence* is the theme chosen for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Posters (\$5 each) and Prayer Cards (\$7 for 20) can be ordered NOW from Queensland Churches Together – phone (07) 3369 6792 or email qctadmin@tpg.com.au.

The Order of Service and Daily Scripture and Prayer Guide can be downloaded from http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/faith_unity/weekofprayer

Reconciliation Week and Sorry Day resources will also be available from the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission – phone (07) 3336 9173.



TV Review

Eco House Challenge SBS Wednesdays 7.30pm

Just how do we go about doing our bit for sustainability?

Take two large families, two power draining, high water usage, rubbish generating, petrol guzzling households.

Then there is Glen, the guy in charge of the challenge which sees both households lose all four keys to the standard comfortable, taken for granted modern western lifestyle. Enter also Tara, the high tech eco guru to help the families learn to live within sustainable means. There is a comic, even irreverent, touch to the program. The families' vastly different reactions when they face the reality of having the power and water supplies cut off and the cars and wheelie bins clamped are fascinating. Members of one family sneak next door to siphon off neighbour's power to charge their mobile phones without a skerrick of guilt! We see the same family reward themselves for their 53% reduction in water use by allowing themselves to use the dishwasher – except there's still no power to run it. The other family sets to challenge with gusto – collecting rainwater with tarps and taking the bus to the beach for a swim for their 'showers', yet still doesn't manage to meet their target reduction of between 30% to 50% of prior water usage. Much detective work and water divining later they discover that dad's DIY garden watering system is leaking 500 litres a day!

This is a reality show with a difference. It is about the reality we must all face and the sooner the better for the planet and our own sustainability. Watching it you cannot help ponder – how would I go about this challenge of becoming sustainable? Would I meet it with gusto and good humour or with frustration and anger at being deprived of a lifestyle I see as a right. The program shows us we all have choices to make and a big choice is in the way we choose to approach sustainability. It doesn't have to be hard and it can actually be a lot of fun!

Read more at <http://www21.sbs.com.au/ecohousechallenge/>

Make a Change for the Future

For those looking for practical home devices to save water and electricity and to use greywater, check the website www.neco.com.au (or call 1300 882 640), an online eco superstore which offers products online that could be purchased as eco-friendly gifts or to use in your own home or business.

*Compassion and tolerance are not a sign of weakness,
but a sign of strength.*

Dalai Lama



For Your Calendar

MAY

- 1 International Workers Day
- 3 World Press Freedom Day
- 8 World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day
- 10 Nelson Mandela's Inaugural Address as President of South Africa 1994
- 12 International Day for Nurses
- 13 Mothers Day
- 15 International Day of Families
- 17 World Telecommunication Day
- 20 Timor-Leste becomes fully independent 2002
- 21 World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development
- 22 International Day for Biological Diversity – Theme: *Biodiversity and Climate Change*
- 25 *Bringing Them Home* Report released 1997
- 26 National Sorry Day
- 27 Pentecost Sunday and National Reconciliation Week begins – Theme: *Their Spirit Still Shines*
- 27 Week of Prayer for Reconciliation begins
- 28 Amnesty International founded 1962
- 31 World No Tobacco Day

JUNE

- 3 High Court Decision in Mabo Case 1992
- 3 Day of prayer for Catholic and Anglican Reconciliation
- 4 International Day of Innocent Children – Victims of Aggression
- 5 World Environment Day – Theme: *Climate Change*
- 10 Myall Creek Massacre 1838
- 11 Assent for Racial Discrimination Act 1975
- 12 World Day Against Child Labour
- 17 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought
- 19 Equal pay for women in Australia 1969
- 20 UN World Refugee Day
- 26 International Day in Support of Victims of Torture
- 30 Closure of ATSIC Regional Councils 2005
- 30 Introduction of unemployment benefits in Australia 1945

JULY

- 1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday; National Aboriginal and Islander Week begins
- 7 International Day of Cooperatives
- 10 Sinking of Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland 1985
- 11 World Population Day
- 12 Aboriginal Flag first flown 1971
- 16 First Atomic Bomb detonated in New Mexico 1945
- 20 Neil Armstrong walked on the moon 1969
- 23 Arbor Day

For more significant dates and links to more information go to <http://sao.clriq.org.au/calendar.html>