

Two Cheers for Kevin Rudd:
What's left to do in the Decade to Overcome Violence?

(an address to the AGM of Pax Christ NSW, 7 April 2008 by the Revd.Dr.Jonathan Inkpin)

In late 2002, I took on the role of Coordinator of the *Decade to Overcome Violence* (or DOV) initiative¹ for the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA). Shortly afterwards, I was asked, by a long-time Quaker stalwart of the ecumenical and peace movements, what I would consider, by 2010 (the end of the Decade), to be success in Australia. I offered five suggestions. Above all, I hoped that there was some significant progress in transforming the injustices endured by Indigenous Australians. This was, and still is for me, the underlying foundational work of DOV in Australia. Secondly, if DOV achieved anything in Australia, more compassionate and just policies towards refugees were urgently needed. Thirdly, and associated with the first two issues, when would Australia return to its past role as a leader in international affairs on issues of human rights and international law? Fourthly, beyond violence inflicted by humanity upon humanity, we were ever more urgently impelled to address what Dr.Norm Habel calls 'the sins against Creation': the massive ecological challenge of our times. And fifthly? Well, if the first four are not sufficient a mountain to climb, they also presuppose, for Christians, significant advance in addressing the intense violence within and between churches, and inside individual Christians, themselves. For if DOV (the Decade to Overcome Violence) means anything to me, it is about developing, in our own contexts, a profoundly transforming *spirituality*, of word and deed.

So how far have we come?

I believe that, on each key aim, we have made important steps, although the jury is still certainly out on the last point, not least in regard to the churches. For despite much rhetoric in some high places, and despite the amazing practical witness of so many more humble peacemaking Christians, Peace and Reconciliation, never mind the Sermon on the Mount, are hardly mainstream in many church circles,. Moreover, it is almost a cliché to say that we are still living through an 'ecumenical winter', despite some promising new signs of life and faith. Yet, for all that, we must rejoice, both for the gains that have been made and for the part Christians, with others, have played in them. Of course God has much more to do through us, but let us also give thanks for the blessings, for they are real.

Among the blessings must certainly be the recent Apology made by the Australian Prime Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition, to the members of the Stolen Generation. Symbolically, this was, is, and, I believe, will continue to be, a profound moment in our history. At our joyful ecumenical service in Canberra later that day, Professor James

¹ The Decade to Overcome Violence: Churches Seeking Peace and Reconciliation is an initiative launched by the World Council of Churches for the years 2001-2010. This was adopted by the NCCA in 2002. More information can be found at www.overcomingviolence.org and www.ncca.org.au/dov

Haire expressed the views of many in saying that ‘today marks the real birth of Australia, not 1788, 1901 or 1915 in Gallipoli’, and the Torres Strait Islander Bishop Saibo Mabo also affirmed what so many of his fellow Indigenous Australians were feeling when he proclaimed that, at last, ‘a bridge has now been built over which we may genuinely walk together into a new future.’ I also had the profound privilege on that historic morning of standing alongside Aboriginal elders and friends from the Darkinjung and Guringai lands where I now live. With many, many more, they had come all the way from the Central Coast to be there on the lawns of Parliament House to witness that moment, and the impact was deeply, deeply, felt and moving. It was a turning-moment in the shaping of the Australian soul, or its reclaiming, and its impact has reverberated around the world.

Kevin Rudd deserves great credit for this and for other achievements to date. Indeed, his actions in his first few months in power have seen significant advances on the critical Decade to Overcome Violence issues. Apart from the new emphasis with Indigenous people, his Government has ended the scandalous so-called ‘Pacific Solution’ and significantly improved the approach to and processing of asylum seekers. Australia is also no longer an abject lapdog to the United States, has announced withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and has once again become a leading participant in seeking crucial international agreements and standards, such as on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and on Torture, and, vitally, on the Environment.

With Kevin Rudd, I also believe we have witnessed a seismic shift in how we view and approach one another and the outside world. There is a new spirit abroad at the moment. Indeed one might also say a new public theology has been made possible, as one can see reflected in Kevin Rudd’s Apology speech. This could be developed at some length, but for the moment it is enough to note his understanding of Reconciliation in that speech. For the key worldwide themes of the Decade to Overcome Violence have been addressing the spirit and ‘logic’ of violence; the use, misuse and abuse of power; doing justice; and valuing religious and cultural diversity: or, as we have expressed them in Australia, the key Christian themes of Truth, Mercy-Power, Justice and Community (Koinonia). Each are highly prominent, and in some cases, quite explicit in Kevin Rudd’s speech. The Apology was given, in Kevin Rudd’s words, ‘*to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia.*’² This is about facing the Truth, he said, for:

The pain is searing; it screams from the pages (of the Bringing Them Home report).... These stories cry out to be heard; they cry out for an apology.... as of today, the time for denial, the time for delay, has at last come to an end...

This is not, as some would argue, a black-archband view of history; it is just the truth: the cold, confronting, uncomfortable truth—facing it, dealing with it, moving on from it. Until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people.

² Hansard, Wednesday 13 February 2008

It was also about recognising how Power has been used, and must be used differently. As Kevin Rudd specifically acknowledged:

We, the parliaments of the nation, are ultimately responsible, not those who gave effect to our laws. The problem lay with the laws themselves. As has been said of settler societies elsewhere, we are the bearers of many blessings from our ancestors, and therefore we must also be the bearer of their burdens as well.

It is about Justice, or as an Australian Prime Minister must put it, in our distinctive terms:

There is a further reason for an apology as well: it is that reconciliation is in fact an expression of a core value of our nation—and that value is a fair go for all.

And this is about reconnecting our (Australian) Community, in a way which truly honours and values its diversity:

...we begin a new chapter. We embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are truly blessed to have among us—cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet. ... Let us turn this page together: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, government and opposition, Commonwealth and state, and write this new chapter in our nation's story together. First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago— let's grasp this opportunity to craft a new future...

So far, so, very, good. Yet there is far to go, as Kevin Rudd himself acknowledged in that great speech: not least, as he said, in terms of 'closing the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous standards of health, life expectancy and opportunities for development.

Is Kevin Rudd also a genuine DOVe? He is certainly more of a Christian Socialist than Tony Blair (even before Iraq) ever was. I think however that he is not a peacenik, never mind a pacifist. There is also still a gap between what I believe to be the central challenges of the DOV and the Rudd Government strategy, especially when we consider the nature of the ALP and what I understand to be the nature of Australian politics more generally. Indeed, apart from conservative economics, which must raise a question mark over real and lasting justice, there are some remaining issues even with the successes to date. Will we see, for example, any justice of compensation for the Stolen Generations? If we genuinely seek an Australia built on Truth and not the lies of dispossession and murder, where is 'Treaty', our recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty? Signing Kyoto is a big step forward, but we have yet to see the new demanding targets and measures to address climate change effectively. Similarly, beyond troop deployments, what about genuine solutions for Iraq and Afghanistan?

Soon it will be 2010 and the end of the Decade to Overcome Violence. What can we aim for now? This is the question I should like to open up. Here are a few of my suggestions. Firstly, because this is so intractable, and so crucial, I would still say that justice for Indigenous Australians is the baseline and that it will continue to be, even when the current media focus is gone. Secondly, alongside the continuing challenges of global poverty, living at peace with the earth is even more pressing than it was in 2002. Indeed, unless we get this right, all kinds of other conflicts will continue to arise, not least over water in our world. Displacement of peoples due to environmental degradation and climate change is, next to poverty, the most important driver of refugees in our world, and this is increasingly exponentially, as, daily, we can see in the Pacific. Thirdly, inter-religious dialogue and action together on issues of violence, is now even more important. This has always been integral to DOV as part of the fourth key theme and area of its work. It is now even more vital, however much some in some churches obstruct, or are blind to it. Fourthly, alongside Iraq and Afghanistan, the time has surely come for more concerted action on Palestine and Israel, and it is good to see recent movement in this respect from across the Australian ecumenical constituency. There is a long way to go, and the issues are complex, but we can tarry no longer in developing more effective advocacy as well as deeper solidarity. Then, finally and, depressingly in many ways, we must renew our efforts to promote a culture of peace *in and between* our churches. Indeed, on the global level, I have to say that, as an Anglican, it grieves me deeply that members of the worldwide Communion can not even bring themselves to meet with one another, which is of course the absolute presupposition for growth in unity, peace and reconciliation. What a witness to the world is that? Yet Anglicans are hardly alone in this. How do we do better? More locally, I also lament our failure, and even our apparent disinterest, in standing together when we can, as witnessed by the very limited support for such events as the Palm Sunday Peace liturgy and march. Why is this so? And how can we change it?

Where do we go on peace, and a truly transforming spirituality of peace?

At the risk of simply providing another shopping list, I would identify four key things. This begins with the need to support, monitor and hold leaders, such as Kevin Rudd, to account, lest, like the Blairites in the UK, it all goes pear-shaped when it comes to peace in our world. Secondly, and to support that political work, there is a pressing need for more effective institutional work: for better networks, greater ownership by churches and other groups, and stronger key bodies. Should we not be pushing the Rudd Government hard, for example, for a well-resourced Peace Institute? How far have we come in developing adequate doctrines of 'just peace', 'responsibility to protect' and non-violent conflict management? Thirdly, there is need for greater prophetic witness. Personally, for example, I currently exercise what I might call a ministry of 'therapeutic witness' through the institutional ecumenical structures, with and to the churches. This is important, albeit often trying. However, without effective prophetic acts of witness, such as those of the Pine Gap 4, we will not move forward. Indeed ministries like my own become increasingly frozen and useless. And then, fourthly, and above all, we need to

develop our prophetic communities of prayer. Speaking again personally, Fr. John Dear's visit a year ago had a deep effect on me, as on so many. The occasional visit from such an inspiration is not enough however. Do we not need in Australia, in addition, as someone suggested to me recently, our own Richard Rohr-type Centre for Action and Contemplation? Perhaps Brendan McKeague's current work is a starter on this.

As is by now well known, Kevin Rudd is an admirer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.³ In a letter to his brother, the great German theologian and resister of violence once wrote these words: *'The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this'*. Just as Bonhoeffer was right about the 'Cost of Discipleship' in so many things, I believe he was right about this. Fortunately, we see signs of this 'new monasticism' around us in many places today: I think of groups and networks such as the Waiters Union and radical Catholics in Brisbane, Urban Seed in Melbourne, Pace e Bene and Pax Christi itself, and my own Wellspring Community. Such signs and seeds of hope are scattered and very diverse however. So how best can we nurture them, with other expressions of what some call the 'emerging church': how do we do this most effectively, and *together*?

Let me finish with that question, but also with two other possible vehicles of hope, one local, one global.

The local sign of hope is the current development of the Sydney Alliance, which seeks to bring together diverse union, church, community and other third sector groups, to build a stronger civil society in Sydney. Now a strong peacemaker whom I greatly love and admire says to me that this will not work in Sydney. I hope he is wrong. We simply can not allow ourselves to put up with the divided cacophony of our civil society, not least in the area of peace and justice. It may be one of the realities of this glorious schizophrenic city of Sydney that we have such diverse strong opinions amongst us – thank God for that – and it is indeed hard to see how some could be reconciled, but we really, really must, and can, do better. The structures of globalisation, of militarisation and of violence are too strong unless we do, and the current window of opportunity will close.

The global sign of hope is the current work of the World Council of Churches towards a major international Convocation in 2011 which will proclaim a global Covenant on overcoming violence. What is it that we in Australia could offer to this, do you think? What could we work on to take to Kingston, Jamaica in 2011? What quilt of stories, experiences, insights, questions and hopes could we weave – metaphorically, at least – to add to this concluding phase of the Decade to Overcome Violence, and to take us forward into a brighter future? Perhaps we should even construct such a quilt literally, as a visible sign of this hopefully not always invisible grace? That would be a practical project to which we could all contribute and a way of advancing the spirituality of word and deed, of dream and action, to which we are called... Over to you...

³ cf. K.Rudd's celebrated article in *The Monthly*, October 2006.