

World Day of Social Justice.

Address by Dr Frank Purcell, PhD.

Voices of Harmony Observance - UN World Day of Social Justice

On behalf of all gathered here today I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this Goulburn Murray area by using the wording adopted by the Victorian government for insertion in this State's Constitution:

We recognise that Victoria's Aboriginal people, as the original custodians of the land on which the Colony of Victoria was established –:

- 1. have a unique status as the descendants of Australia's first peoples;*
- 2. have a spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationship with their traditional lands and waters within Victoria; and*
- 3. have made a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the identity and well-being of Victoria.*

Extraordinary Australians

I also wish to acknowledge the role played by Camerun Albanoi, an Albanian born Muslim resident of Shepparton who took the initiative to organise this U.N. World Day of Social Justice in the Goulburn Valley. Camerun puts me to shame with his knowledge of United Nations efforts to build a better and safer world. He has been a member of the United Nations Association in Australia since shortly after his arrival early in the 1980s. The very day he arrived in Australia, at Darwin, he went into the Employment Office and came out with a job as a ranger in Kakadu National Park. An extraordinary man and the Employment Office spotted it.

I also want to acknowledge the important role that our MC today, Azem Elmaz, plays in our community. He is President of Voices for Harmony and a driving force within People Helping People's Soup Kitchen service. Wherever there is a need to be addressed, whether for the homeless sleeping rough in the bush over the river from Victoria Lake or providing meals for volunteers and victims of bushfire or flood in the wider Goulburn Valley, Azem will be there.

These two men have done so much to present the real face of Islam in our community. Migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds Camerun and Azem, by the way they have become part of this society while maintaining their religious and family traditions, have done so much to give Shepparton its reputation as one of the more successful multi-cultural, multi-faith communities in Australia.

Social Justice is a moral force

What then is this Social Justice thing which the UN is celebrating today? Social justice or the fair go, is the moral force which guides a community in building a civil society. A civil society is one which focuses on building relationships between its members which result in an economy which nourishes human flourishing. It gives all its members equality of opportunity. That means giving all members access to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, affordable housing and income support when people are unemployed, sick, elderly or disabled. It enables its members to live fulfilling lives and to make a contribution to the community.

To do this we seek ways of making ever better use of our natural and human resources. We develop ways of providing leadership, of processing natural resources, finding ways of marketing and distributing them through commercial, financial and communication services. We provide education, health care, and a range of social security services. We also develop protective services to defend us from attack.

Social justice is the moral virtue which also alerts us to any failings in the system and urges us to get back on track. In the Australian vernacular, social justice urges us to give people a fair go.

This World Day of Social Justice is a good opportunity to reflect on how well we are building a civil society here in the Goulburn Valley. The acid test is how well we treat

the most disadvantaged groups in our community. What I plan to do is give a short overview of the situation in which six disadvantaged groups find themselves. After that, some comment on issues we can't afford to overlook.

Six Disadvantaged Groups:

The first group is the Aboriginal community. Basically, racist attitudes towards members of the Aboriginal community are not far beneath the surface in many circles in the Goulburn Valley. This makes it difficult for them to get work, and the sense of not really belonging can cause all kinds of problems in such a group.

Then there is ugly reality of domestic violence. Many men have a deep contempt for women. Last year the St Vincent de Paul Society's Marian Community assisted 295 women and 400 children who were victims of domestic violence and the police recorded 1124 incidents where charges were laid against the perpetrators.

The homeless is another big group. In October 2014 there were 627 on the waiting list for housing, some families having to be supported for months in motels and caravan parks. Victoria last year had the lowest per capita allocation of funding for social housing of all Australian states.

Next, the unemployed. This area has the highest unemployment rate in the State, with an appalling 25% of young people under 25 out of work. And if funding for TAFE Colleges and Universities is cut, the children of rural and low income families will have even less chance of employment in the future.

Another disadvantaged group – those with mental and physical disabilities are not always accurately counted in statistics. Employment opportunities for them are not great. Moreover, in many families aging parents have the extra worry about care for their adult sons and daughters when parents pass away.

Another seriously disadvantaged group are the new arrivals on Temporary Work Visas. If work arrangements collapse for New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders. They have no entitlement to Centrelink support until they have been here for three years. This leaves them in a pretty desperate situation.

Finally there are those refugees who are not allowed to work but are ineligible for Centrelink support.

Now I'm not blaming the people of Shepparton for all these problems. Something has gone wrong with our political system. These issues are not being treated by governments as major issues for our economy. The official line seems to be that a good economy is one in which there is no deficit, the share market is strong, banks have plenty of money to lend, and border protection, detention centres and new goals are top priorities.

Role of the Economy

Federal and State budgets built on that understanding of the economy have been rejected by the people. Two first term governments in Victoria and Queensland have failed to be re-elected.; A first term Coalition Federal Government budget has been stalled because of a perception that it has been unfair. The Prime Minister and Federal Treasurer have both lost popular support.

The major political policy debate has focused on "the economy" as assessed according to interest rates, the rise and falls of the stock exchange, and the effectiveness of our border protection and anti-terrorism services. Parliamentary debate seems to have forgotten that a sound economy is one in which the costs and benefits of developing a civil society are borne by all the players according to their means and capacity.

The success of spending to avoid the worst of the Global Financial Crisis has not led to any serious debate about the possibility of being able to resolve the debt crisis by postponing the recovery to surplus for ten years or so. It worked during the depression of the 30s and the GFC. Why not again? Ross Gittens raised this at last in ***The Age*** on Monday.

The new Greek Government has a Finance Minister who taught for some years in an Australian University but went back home to assist in the financial crisis that country is facing. His government is rejecting the remedy of more austerity. He makes the point well:

No more "reform" programs that target poor pensioners and family-owned businesses while leaving large-scale corruption untouched. We are

asking for a few months of financial stability that will allow us to embark upon the task of reforms that the broad Greek population can own and support, so we can bring back growth and end our inability to pay our dues.

The lack of such serious debate in Australia baffles me. *It is now alleged that the research used to justify austerity budgets for resolving deficits was fundamentally flawed.* Consequently, I am not surprised that the public perception is that a fair share of the burden of the deficit is not going to be borne by the big end of town but by the middle and low income sections of the community.

Role of Volunteers in the Economy

Some big players seem to be getting more than their share of the benefits but not putting in their share of the cost to build our civil society. Tax avoidance by a number of major multinationals has become a scandal, but parliament seems reluctant to tackle the issue. Extraordinary financial rewards to CEOs of some of our big companies are almost obscene when one considers the impact of labour deregulation. The growth of the workforce into casual employment means smaller take home wages for many families. The financial bullying by big corporations to reduce the prices they pay to food producers and canneries have wiped out many small businesses but been very good for the corporations. The M Director of Coles took home \$19 Million in 2013, and a total of \$44 Million over a four year period.

Last week the latest issue of **The Monthly** magazine featured an article by Tim Flannery and Catriona Wallace on “*Fixing Politics: How can we put power back in the hands of the People?*” The article explains how the rich and powerful, through political donations, are able to protect their interests at the expense of the rest of the community. The tax avoidance by many individuals and multi-national corporations doesn’t seem to be high on the “to do” priority list of our political parties.

Gina Rinehart as quoted in the episode of the *House of Hancock* last Sunday, claimed that it is the millionaires and the big companies of Australia who do more for the poor in this country than anyone else. Not according to research done by the University of Adelaide. The contribution of volunteerism outstrips that of the mining industry.

When I came to Shepparton in 1979 there seemed to be a group of volunteers working with every disadvantaged group known within the community. Throughout Australia the strength of Volunteerism is confirmed in the findings of that university research project. It claims that volunteering contributes more monetary value to our economy than the mining industry, more than \$200 billion a year. The unpaid work of volunteers, pensioners, grandparents providing unpaid childcare to let their daughters go back to work, parents of families using precious family time in Fire and emergency services, the unpaid members of service clubs and hospital auxiliaries raising money for projects among the needy, church charities like UnitingCare, Anglicare, the Salvation Army and St. Vincent de Paul society to name the ones most familiar to us all, and for the endless hours given by parents and others to providing sporting and other activities for the children of our communities - this voluntary input into our economy makes a bigger contribution to the Australian economy annually than the whole mining industry. So let's get things into perspective.

Yet, rather than support and strengthen this free input into the needs of the community, I have had phone calls from a number of organisations telling me of the cuts to their funding from the recent budget. Many small groups have one or two paid people and administrative costs which are sometimes subsidised by government funding. They have lost that, but I haven't heard that the fuel subsidy to the mining industry has been cut.

Cost of Disconnection with Australian Values

The growing failure of our major political parties to defend the fair go and search for better ways of doing things is out of step with our culture. A commitment to give everyone a fair go is one of our Australian ideals. For us, a civil society strives to give everyone a fair go. The lack of concern for that value in our current parliamentary debates is a sign of the major political parties being out of touch with Australian values. Is this the explanation for the recent extraordinary political developments across Australia?

First term governments in Victoria and Queensland have failed to be re-elected; the same may happen in NSW; and the collapse of the honeymoon for the Federal

government's Prime Minister and Treasurer was over after its first budget was perceived to violate the "fair go" test..

Secondly, the fact that 20% of the electorate failed to vote in the 2013 Federal election and 25% of the under 25 population didn't bother to enrol is significant. Politics is losing the respect and participation of a growing number of people.

Thirdly, the surprising election wins of independents in Murray and Indi are signalling a deep dissatisfaction with our main political parties.

Economists today are recognising this and are calling for governments to respond to reduced revenues and deficits, but not by discredited austerity programs. Those have crippled the European economies and hit low income earners most. Economists are now urging the adoption of *Environmentally Sustainable Inclusive Growth* policies. They are calling us to build an economy harnessed to the creation of the Good Society but living within an environmentally sustainable usage of natural resources.

It won't be easy. When the going gets tough, or self-interest becomes central, powerful interests in society tend to fall back on the scape-goat mechanism. The disadvantaged are blamed for their own situation. The Aborigines are lazy, the unemployed don't want to work, people on disability pensions are shirkers and refugees are illegals. Even the children of refugees in detention are treated like criminals and the Australian Commissioner for Human Rights is asked by our Prime Minister to resign for drawing attention to their plight.

The Place of Reconciliation

To finish off, however I want to focus on something which we, the people, can do for the Aboriginal people of Australia. The reconciliation process with the Aboriginal community still has work to do. They were scapegoated as sub-human, a pre-historic human sub-species like the Neanderthals, fated to die out. They were treated like dingoes – shot, poisoned, used like slaves on cattle stations, their children stolen from them. Here in Shepparton they were left to live outside the community, in humpies on the river bank. That was until the Queen visited

Shepparton in the 1950s. We were shamed and began to face up to the task of working with them to bring them into our community.

There have been great apologies by Prime Ministers, better funding for Aboriginal controlled health and education services, but the attitudes which fed the racism they suffered and still suffer need to be tackled. Nelson Mandela showed us the key to reconciliation. The underlying cause of victimisation has to be addressed. Until that happens, the victims cannot forgive. Only then can reconciliation be achieved.

Our Federal Constitution deliberately denied Aborigines protection from unfair treatment by the States. It also determined that they were not to be counted in any census of citizens. They had to be forgotten so that our consciences could be clear. That's what scapegoating does. It blames the victims.

The 1967 Referendum removed those insults, but we still haven't made it clear that we respect them and see them as part of the Australian community. The coming referendum on Aboriginal recognition in our constitution gives us a chance to take that crucial final step in the reconciliation process.

I look forward to something like the recognition in the Victorian Constitution being written into the Constitution of our Commonwealth of Australia.

We recognise that Australia's Aboriginal people, as the original custodians of the land on which the Commonwealth of Australia was established –:

- 1. have a unique status as the descendants of Australia's first peoples;*
- 2. have a spiritual, social, cultural and economic relationship with their traditional lands and waters within Australia; and*
- 3. have made a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the identity and well-being of Australia.*

I would like to end with an observation about the response to the death of Gough Whitlam last year. I expected a renewed debate about ***The Dismissal***. Instead there was a bi-partisan outpouring from both sides of politics acknowledging him as the political leader who had changed Australia. Whitlam presumed that the economy was there to serve the people. He opened up higher education to anyone with ability,

not just for the wealthy. He introduced a public health system, one of the best in the world. He handed over a pastoral property to its original owners, won acceptance of his Racial Discrimination Act which opened the way for the Mabo case. That led to the acceptance of the existence of Aboriginal Land Rights.

Finally, perhaps in our own funny Australian way, almost to rebuke our major political parties, we have voted into the Senate a group of independent and minor party Senators. They have managed to defend the poor of this country from the worst of the current government's proposals to make them carry the main burden of solving the deficit problem. Hopefully, their stand may cause the major parties to pause, rethink and build policies for all Australians. Many Australians are very uneasy with an economy favouring those with the funds to walk the corridors of power. Social justice and the fair go calls on all of us to maintain a commitment to keep on building a civil society in this great land of the Southern Cross.

Dr Frank Purcell was a priest for 22 years and obtained a Doctorate in Theology in Rome. He served in Japan and Ireland. In 1976 he returned to Australia and began working in health and welfare services, and lectured in Australian Politics at LaTrobe University, Shepparton Campus. He became interested in understanding Islam and the challenges facing



Catholic and Muslim migrants in adjusting to Australian society. Dr Purcell serves as President of the regional St Vincent de Paul Conference in the Goulburn Valley and is President of the Shepparton Interfaith Network. He was awarded a PhD in 2014, and recently published *Islam, Christianity and the Secular State*.