Welfare agency calls for more mutual obligation in 2002

“As the head of a welfare organisation, I ask that in the New Year the Government give us more mutual obligation. I want the full Monty! (but John, please keep your dacks on) - something genuinely mutual, meaningful and universal.

“Mutual obligation last year was a fairly lack-lustre and one-sided affair. We cracked down on job seekers by cutting their allowance if they failed to answer computer-generated mail from an out of control Centrelink paper generator. This left some families without enough for food, let alone bills. We created a consumption tax, overburdening small business and taking most from those who spend the greatest proportion of their income as they receive it - a tax that’s hardest on the poor.

“Also in 2001 it was shamelessly asserted that we had no mutual obligation to people fleeing for their lives who arrive at our borders in leaky boats. Afghans were told that persecution in their country should be dealt with by closer (poorer) nations, even while Australia quickly joined the US-led war. Presumably we have a mutual obligation to the US, but not to the Afghan civilians fleeing the war we are jointly waging there. And what sort of mutual obligation sees us continue to lock-up without trial citizens fleeing Afghanistan’s former repressive regime, while their family members fight on our side?

“No, I want a meaningful and universal sort of mutual obligation in the new year, one which acknowledges our obligation to treat refugees with dignity, basic hospitality and respect; which recognises the international conventions on human rights, especially regarding children. Most of our ancestors arrived by boat, many as convicts or refugees. Surely we have an obligation to respect our own history.

“Meaningful mutual obligation between job seekers and the wider society would include investment of new tax revenues in job creation. We need teacher’s-aides in our schools; staff in hospitals and aged care facilities; construction of low-cost housing; and environmental initiatives to safeguard our climate and access to fresh water. These would create new markets and jobs, including in remote, rural and regional Australia where private investment is currently insufficient.

“A universal mutual obligation would see us continue tax reform so that those who currently pay the smallest percentage of tax, the wealthiest 20% of Australians, meet their obligation to support an Australia where we all can play a part.

“Mutual obligation to date has been a one-sided and punitive affair. As a priest and a welfare worker, I suggest we start 2002 with a public and clear commitment to something fairer. May I suggest we start by saying sorry. Sorry is (paradoxically) the word that has been most missed in 2001 by all those Australians wanting an Australia they can be proud of. It’s an important step if we are to achieve an Australia that knows its past, pays it dues, and sets its sights higher.”

Father Nicolas Frances  
Executive Director, Brotherhood of St Laurence

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