

# Talking poverty: an interview with Basil N. Varghese

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*This article is based on an interview with Basil N. Varghese, who chairs EMC's Committee of Management, and is Education Coordinator at the Brotherhood of St. Laurence. He is also involved with a number of groups which promote social justice issues in the community.*

*A: How do you define poverty? Is it simply a question of having a low income, or is there more to it than this?*

B: Poverty is a complex term, because if you take the view that every perception is its own consequence, then people will perceive it in the way they want to perceive it. So very often that comes from the kind of socialisation they have been through, and the sort of traditions they have come from. By and large, you could say there has been a tradition in the English speaking world that poverty tends to be an individual attribution.

There is a tendency to say that if someone is poor, it is almost as if it is something to do with them, as if they were somehow responsible for being poor. That is why if you put that in the colloquial context, we have terms like 'bludger' or 'slacker' or 'not the full quid', depending on where you are in the Australian context. What that says to me is that poverty here is viewed as something to do with how good or bad you are. It also tends to avoid some of the structural issues of our society, so people do not look at the fact that we have an unequal distribution of wealth and income, which means those people who are on the top have access to so many things that enhance them, things which make them more intelligent or more educated.

So it is really a question of where you stand in society. If you are out on the margins and you are poor, you are still given the message that somehow it is because you are not smart or you are not intelligent. And at the same time if someone is wealthy, we therefore tend to assume they must be intelligent, they must be smart. So it seems unfair when we know the reason why people are smart and intelligent is because they have had an opportunity to develop whatever skills they have.

So to understand the whole issue of poverty I think what is useful is the notion of *absolute* poverty, absolute depriva-

tion, and here the sort of images we have are for example of the third world, of people in slums and so on. In Australia we do have some people who suffer from absolute poverty, like our street people, our homeless, and obviously a majority of Aboriginal people, but most Australians, when we talk about poverty, would come under a concept known as *relative* poverty. In other words, to be poor in Australia is not the same thing as being poor in some poor part of Asia or Africa or South America.

Then we have a problem because it sounds very good, but what does relative poverty mean? To me it would mean that in Australia, we have a certain standard of living, and if you do not have access to that standard of living then you are poor. And I think to sharpen that definition of relative poverty, what we have, without going into the complexity of it, is the Henderson poverty line, which is an objective measure of whether someone is poor or not, and that is to do with income. And there is no doubt that when income is a problem, then your capacity to function is also lessened. Ask any student. But the difference between a student and someone on a low income is that at least the student has got a view that his or her life is going to be better and it is actually quite chic to be poor as a student. It is quite open, there is nothing shameful about being poor as a student.

So we have an objective criteria to say that someone is poor by the Henderson poverty line and it is interesting to note that most of the social security benefits that are given to unemployed people are all below the poverty line. So that tells us something about our society, that if we say we are egalitarian, and we believe in a fair go, we should at least recognise the level of income support that poor people get.

Now that is not to say that there are not other factors that go into poverty which are important. There is no doubt that some families who are poor seem to have a capacity to move themselves out of poverty and you could look at some sort of cultural reason for that. The problem with that debate, however, is that it gets high-jacked by conservatives who say that you know, really, if they only worked harder they would get out of poverty.

*A: It's an easy way of dealing with a complex problem, isn't it, to blame individuals for the predicament they find them-*

*selves in, when in reality their situation is part of a larger picture.*

B: Exactly, and particularly when you look at employment in Australia, the fact is that we have structural unemployment, which basically means there are not enough jobs to go around for the people that want to work. The figures hover around 8 or 9 per cent, which I think is a very conservative figure and doesn't actually tell the full story because we have situations now with couples where one party is unemployed but can't claim the dole because the other party is working. So that is how I would talk about poverty. But I think also the other thing is that poverty debilitates. There is a type of debilitation that takes place in the sense that one has not got the capacity to enjoy the good things about our society that most of us take for granted.

*A: So coming back to the structural inequalities in our society, what sort of role do you think cultural knowledge plays in the distribution of resources? I mean, it is possible to be poor in an immediate, economic sense, but also to have access to networks of people and relationships which enable you to move out of poverty. For example, you mentioned that students are poor in financial terms, but they have access to a certain amount of cultural knowledge which enables them to move up in the world. Whereas, on the other hand, someone who doesn't have access to those resources is less likely to be able to better their situation.*

B: If you take the idea of a tertiary student, you have to assume all sorts of things that have happened previously. One would assume that students entering university straight from school, have been to a school that has got them up to speed for tertiary entrance. Secondly I would suspect they come from a family that is reasonably well off. Thirdly they would come from a family that values education.

So our learning is very often cultural. In my family, the starting point is that you have a degree, that was the expectation. In middle and upper middle class families, there is an imperative that education is valued, and there is also the notion that we are going to 'invest' and make sure that our children get a good education, and therefore it is likely that these kids will perform better.

Now where you have a situation which in the old days we would call 'working class', the expectation was that you would get a trade, which was good. But the problem now is that people are being laid off, and there are fewer and fewer of those sorts of jobs, and the jobs are now being more influenced by high technology. This means those

jobs that we would have described in the old days as being semi- or low-skilled are slowly being edged out of the labour market, and in the new restructuring economy which is now competing in the global market, one could almost predict that they will not be able to get jobs unless there is a massive retraining.

*A: What do you think the future holds for the people who traditionally filled those semi- or low-skilled positions?*

B: If you are taking that from the basis that if someone that is low- or semi-skilled is being retrained for some sort of high tech job, I think that is a possibility, but what worries me is that most employers pick winners, so you are still going to have what I call a 'lag'. I think training is better than being unemployed, because it gives people a sense that they are being valued. The larger questions of whether their training can be translated into real jobs is always a question of the economy.

There are many arguments and discussions on how to deal with that. One is to lower wages, which I feel reluctant to say because it opens people to exploitation. I think we have to work with the question of how to have a vibrant economy, and how at the same time to ensure that people have an adequate income. There is no doubt that the naked face of capitalism with no sense of social responsibility is pretty hideous, so in some sense you could say we are almost going back to the 19th century. At the same time we know that the extreme left wing, Marxist analysis also does not work, so I think we are looking for a new way of trying to come to terms with the market. The question is does the market determine us, or do we determine the market?

I think what's obscene about the present thinking is to evaluate every human endeavour with dollars. So the notion of service is in dollar terms. It is important to be aware of costs, because we cannot provide the service if we do not have the costs, but at the same time we need to ask, can we have this service?, and what are the costs?, rather than saying it is only because of the costs that we have the service.

But then you have also got to ask the question of how well we distribute our resources. I would argue that we should have an unequal distribution of resources for equal outcomes. Meaning that we know that there are certain groups or certain people who are not 'on a level playing field', and we should be putting more money into them.

For example in education, we need to have our best teachers, our best musicians, our best literary people being paid well to do the education of areas of low socio-economic status. So that is an unequal distribution of resources. But

I do not think any government is prepared to bite that bullet.

It sounds very good to say that schools are going to be autonomous and self-managing, and that they have got to be responsible for their funding, but there is a big difference between a school in the Western suburbs and a school in a very wealthy suburb. You are asking a school in an area with a large population of unemployed to compete with a school in an area where parents have got good jobs, good skills, good expertise. Obviously they will bring far more to the school in terms of resources, both intellectual as well as economic, to make that school function. It is highly unlikely that a school in a poor area is going to have the latest computers or the best pedagogical system.

*A: So how do you think we should proceed in the new millennium? What is the way forward?*

*B:* There is a tendency sometimes in a critique to see the negatives. At the same time, we have got to look at the positives about this country, because in many ways if you compare it with other countries it is doing remarkably well. Which does not mean we should be complacent about the things we are not doing well. I think what is going for us is that we have a good democratic tradition. By and large we have a judiciary system that seems to be reasonably fair. It depends on who you talk to I suppose, but there seems to be a division between the legislative power and the judiciary.

So we have some good things going. We also have the very fact that we say we are an egalitarian society, or we believe in the fair go. Whether that is expressed in reality is obviously not true, but the very fact we have that is a positive. So it is a question of people imbibing that. Because one of the dangers that is happening now is that people who are poor are geographically located, so they are out of sight and out of mind.

A lot of the rural areas are actually having a very hard time, and by and large most urban Australians do not fully comprehend their plight. So it is not very surprising that the Hanson debate emerged in those areas. You could say yes, it was terrible about the racist aspects of that, but on the other hand it was also articulating the frustrations and the fact that they were not listened to. Unfortunately it became a type of politics of division, but you can see why it emerged.

Most extremist groups succeed when you have serious economic problems. The rise of fascism in Germany emerged because of what happened after the first war, and

the depression. So one could look at the Pauline Hanson phenomenon as an attempt to go back to a past where Australians perceived themselves as being better off, which on one level is an illusion, because we tend to do that when we're down, we tend to look back to a golden past with nostalgia.

So the way forward is for more and more Australians to be aware of what the issues are, to be aware of the difference between personal choices, and the structural things that come in the way of choice. It is a question of mediating that meaning, and I think true leadership does that. We need a type of leadership that creates a sense of optimism, but also creates the sense that we are trying to become a better nation, a nation that is more inclusive, that has a fair distribution of wealth, a fair distribution of income, and that is not to deprive in any way people who want to use their initiative and to be rewarded for their initiative.

So it is a question of finding a balance between individuals' legitimate self-interests, and the common good. How we arrange that is what a civilised society does. We need to keep in mind the most marginalised groups in society, and the mechanisms required to incorporate them into the larger society, which means that the larger society needs to expand in its thinking of diversity, of difference, whether it is multiculturalism, or whether it is understanding Aboriginal rights, understanding native title, understanding of the notion that this land was inhabited for 40 000 years, and that the history of Australia that is articulated now is only the last 200 years. So it is a reconciling.

I would call it a reconciliation between those two worlds firstly, because I really believe that is the ghost in the Australian psyche, and once we release that, then we can look at the other sort of healings that are required. Between those who have, and have not. Between those who are information rich and information poor. Between those who have a capacity to acquire a rich cultural inheritance, and those who are unable to celebrate the richness of the country.

When we do that, I think we will become a truly civilised place. And we have the capacity to do that, firstly because we are a democratic country, secondly because we have a small population, and thirdly because we have huge resources. But it's a question of the national will, and a moral will.

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*A: You've touched on this point throughout your discourse, but what do you think the role of cultural diversity in Australian society is?*

B: To me I think life is much richer when you have diversity. The notion of different cultures sharing a common land, and sharing a common allegiance to this country but expressing it differently is a wonderful concept. I think it releases all sorts of creativities, I think diversity stretches your mind and your imagination. I think it makes life more interesting.

Tolerance is not just about tolerating someone because they are different, it is about examining one's own culture, and discovering the blinkers in that. Maybe we could say Australia is a place where the blinkers of culture have the capacity to be lifted, so we can actually express ourselves better. Under the girth of that is our democratic system, and we protect that democratic system by ensuring we do not allow people to fall off the edges. There you are, I have come around to where I think we should be going and how we can do it. And I think we can do it, because we have had some attempts made in that direction. For example, in 1945 the Curtin government said the way to address the distribution of wealth was to ensure higher wages, and that was a mechanism that Australians used to get a certain standard of living that was the envy of the world. Obviously the terrain has changed, but we've got to look at other mechanisms.

We have the intelligence, creativity and energy to do this, but it requires leadership from all levels of Government, business, community groups, religious bodies etc. It needs political and moral will to start this process with agreed and shared social goals.

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