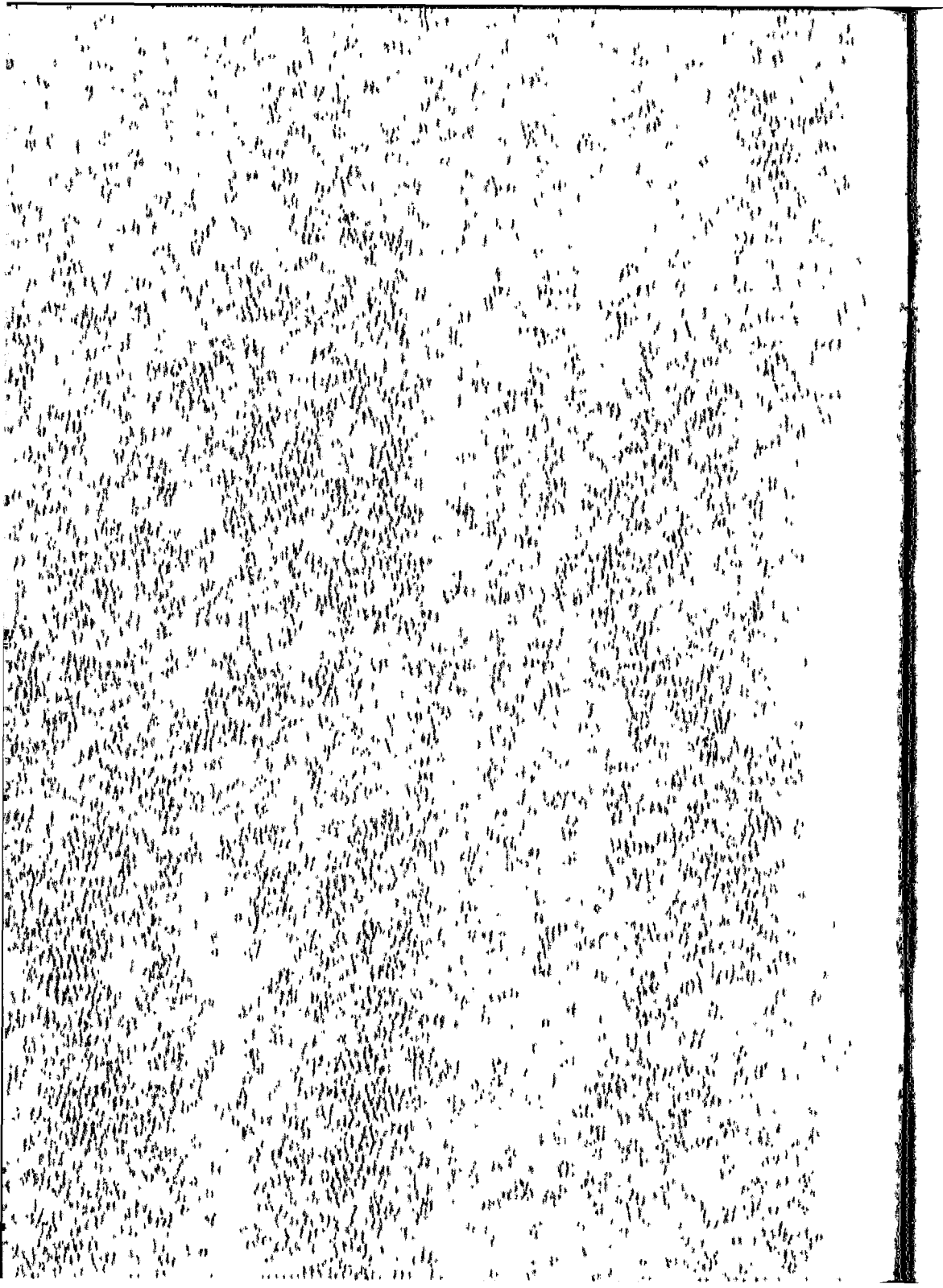


Ancient Laws and Modern Dilemmas



David Scott



1985.06

ANCIENT LAWS
AND
MODERN DILEMMAS

The Fifth G.T. Sambell Memorial Oration
delivered by

David Scott

on

8th December, 1985 at the

55th Foundation Festival of the
Brotherhood of St Laurence

G.T. Sambell Memorial Trust
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FOREWORD

In honour of Geoffrey Tremayne Sambell

Geoffrey Tremayne Sambell was born in Broadford, Victoria in 1914 and later attended Melbourne Boys High School. His leadership qualities were recognised when he was selected for the Lord Somers Camp, after which he played rugby with Powerhouse. This fostered his interest in young people and led him into a leadership role in the Church of England Boys Society.

During a short but promising business career he was involved with St Mark's Social Settlement during the 1930s. He was then called to the ministry and he entered Ridley College and was ordained in 1940. After serving a curacy at St John's East Malvern he served with great distinction as a Chaplain with the Australian Military Forces, both in the 57/60 and 2/11 battalions in New Guinea where he was mentioned in despatches. After the war he completed his B.A. at Melbourne University.

In 1947 he was appointed Director of the Melbourne Diocesan Centre, a co-ordinated multi-parish and chaplaincy venture based in the inner city. While in that position he was appointed as Archdeacon of Melbourne in 1961 when he became for a time the Director of Home Missions. In the midst of his Diocesan responsibilities, and his leadership of the Brotherhood of St Laurence he was also Warden of the Mission to Streets and Lanes, and involved in other welfare activities including the Victorian Council of Social Service. He was consecrated Bishop in St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on 24th February 1962 and subsequently enthroned Archbishop of Perth in 1969. He died in December 1980 after an outstanding Episcopate in Western Australia and throughout the national church.

The G. T. Sambell Memorial Oration has been established by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to commemorate his work. His connection with the Brotherhood was longstanding and arose out of his deep social concern which had been the chief among the several forces which led him into full-time service of the church. He had great organising ability, recognised by Fr Tucker who invited him to join the Brotherhood in 1949. He was firstly involved as a member of the Board of Directors, then as Bursar, Director of Social Services and in 1956 Director and Deputy Chairman of the Board. Later in the 1960s he became Chairman of the Board, a post he retained until he moved to Perth.

Geoffrey Sambell was a big man, in body, mind and spirit. Long before he died (at the age of 66) his influence had been felt far and wide in the Anglican Communion and in the ecumenical movement beyond. He twice represented the Australian Church at the East Asia Christian Conference, and was the representative of South-East Asia on the Executive Officer's Advisory Committee of the Lambeth

Consultative Body. In Australia he was the dynamic Chairman of the General Synod Social Responsibilities Commission, which under his leadership spoke out for the national church on social question. He was respected and listened to by Government at both State and Federal levels, and in 1978 he was appointed Chairman of the Federal Government's Social Welfare Advisory Committee.

He was a forceful character who could, and sometimes did, ride roughshod over opposition, backing his judgment and knowing that he was right. But behind the bluff exterior he had the heart of a pastor who never spared himself for anyone, clergyman or layman, who needed his help. He had vision, but it was a very "down to earth" vision; he was a loyal Anglican but at the same time a wholehearted ecumenist; he was a missionary and a missionary, but spurned paternalism or ecclesiastical triumphalism; he was an ordained priest, but no one welcomed the rediscovered "priesthood" of the laity more than he did or had more friends amongst them.

Leader, pastor, organiser, financier - he was all these, but much more, a man of God.

December, 1981.

G.T. Sambell Orations:

- 1981: Why Care? The basis for Christian social action; Archbishop Sir Frank Woods.
- 1982: God, People and Resources. A Christian comment on the values of Australian society; Oliver Heyward.
- 1983: Educating for Justice. A Conversation with the Church about its life and Gospel; Denham Grierson.
- 1984: Giving and Receiving. The framework of social support for individuals and families; Jean McCaughey.

ANCIENT LAWS AND MODERN DILEMMAS

Geoffrey Sambell was essentially a man of action. He had many other qualities but, like Gerard Tucker, it was necessary for him to translate his beliefs into purposeful social actions.

Others who have been honoured to deliver the Sambell Memorial Oration, notably Frank Woods¹ and Denham Grierson,² have addressed the fundamental question of the basis for Christian social responsibility.

I want to consider how effective we are in influencing community and political values and actions, when we have decided what it is that we should be saying and doing.

First, though, a brief return to the consideration of the basis on which we act, or do not act.

Archbishop Woods showed that the history of the application of Christian experience, and understanding of the resulting doctrines, is a story of adaption to personal, political, and environmental circumstance.³ How well, then, are we adapting to the 1980s, and how well equipped are we for the twenty-first century? Have we, in fact, moved far, or at all, since the nineteenth century?

Let me tell you of two interpretations of Christian social responsibility. It is a tale of two grandfathers . . . and of two cities.

One grandfather was the Vicar of this parish one hundred years ago. Horace Finn Tucker was the Vicar of Christ

¹ Archbishop Sir Frank Woods. Why Care? The Basis for Christian Social Action. Occasional Paper, Companions of St Laurence. 1981.

² Denham Grierson. Educating for Justice. Occasional Paper, Companions of St Laurence. 1983.

³ Woods. Op.cit. .

Church, South Yarra for the extraordinary period of 28 years. Sunday by Sunday he looked from this pulpit over the crowded pews. Many of the worshippers represented the professions, wealth, and political power of Melbourne. Few of those who lived in the small, weatherboard houses at the bottom of Punt Hill were among the congregation, but Tucker knew that they were his people too, and he built two chapels in those parts of the parish.

He was an extraordinarily active person. He formed organisations, initiated building programmes, travelled around the parish on his bicycle, wrote books, helped bring up a large family, and raised funds for, among other purposes, the construction of the spire which is again the object of a public appeal.

Tucker was deeply moved by the misery of the 1980s depression. He became a leader in the settlement movement, whose purpose was to re-settle unemployed men and their families in rural areas.

He had a strong commitment to the notion of a Christian society. One of the books he wrote in 1884, **The New Arcadians**, is the story of a Christian co-operative. But, for all his concern and intellectual capacity, there is no indication that he believed he could, or should, address himself to the political and economic causes of the suffering of his people.

At the same time, in the industrial, working-class suburb of Footscray, Henry Ford Scott was the Vicar of St John's. He was an energetic, articulate Anglican of Irish ancestry. He had arrived in Melbourne in 1855, a 15 year-old orphan sent to join his two brothers who were seeking fortunes in the goldfields. After several adventurous, and poverty stricken years, he entered the ministry. After a time at Woods Point, he arrived in 1877 at St John's in the thriving industrial suburb of Footscray.

He was a sturdy individualist "who believed that men are in a large measure what they make themselves". He took pride in describing himself as "one of the men of the fifties" who took great risks to achieve fame and fortune in an unhospitable land. He wrote extensively. In the first decade of his ministry at Footscray he preached that poverty was the result of idleness

and extravagance.. He lectured the poor to help themselves in this fortunate land of opportunity. Scott's "religious training, belief and experience taught the same lesson that poverty and success were tied to individual human nature".⁴ Henry Ford Scott's Christianity was a celebration of the virtues of self help linked to an admiration for the Howards, Wilberforces, and other followers of Him who taught His disciples to sacrifice self for the good of others.

The social consequences of the depression in Footscray had a profound effect on Scott's deeply held beliefs and attitudes. He looked to the causes of the misery of his parishioners. He argued strongly for redistributionist policies, for Factory Acts, graduated taxation, and land distribution. He was a supporter of the settlement movement of Tucker of Christ Church and Strong of the Australian Church, but he went beyond Tucker. "In a few desperate years, the advocate of moral improvement had also become the champion of sweeping social reforms".⁵ Concerned and involved as they were, Tucker in prosperous South Yarra and Scott in working-class Footscray, only went so far. Scott's limits seem to go beyond Tucker's, but neither questioned the social order or the structures that frame it.

Are we in any different situation today? Has understanding of Christian social responsibility and of social structures advanced?

It seems to me that our responses to devastatingly complex social and political issues are still limited to relief and reform. We make reasonable, but narrow responses, to situations that require an ideology, that is, a consistent set of beliefs that are relevant to our times.

Why couldn't those grandfathers see how limited their

⁴ Alistair Thomson. A Construction of One Man's Mind: Henry Scott and the Depression of the 1980s. History Department, University of Melbourne. 1984.

⁵ Ibid.

responses were to a system that periodically throws the lives of large numbers of people into jeopardy, divides society into rich and poor, rewards competition rather than co-operation, measures success in terms of wealth and possession, and is so vulnerable to subtle commercial, political, and media manipulation?

This is not to deny the achievements of science, technology, or of a largely private enterprise system of providing goods and services, but we must not let the benefits conceal the social impact on those who do not have the capacity or opportunity to participate successfully in the competitive world.

Did the grandfathers believe that the poor will always be with us? And is that our undeclared response to today's challenges? It appears to be for one group of Christian writers.

The Kindness That Kills: The Churches Simplistic Response to Complex Social Issues,⁶ is a disturbing collection of criticisms of the responses of other Christians in the United Kingdom to issues of poverty and injustice.

It is reasonable to call for political and theological rigour from church leaders and organisations making pronouncements about the world, but these writers go far beyond this. They are scathing in their rejection of anyone who believes that Christians and the Church have social and political responsibilities. Many of them deny, or are oblivious to, the existence of poverty and injustice. Their attitudes confirm David Sheppard's view that "the poor have a deep instinct that Jesus is on their side, but they are not so sure about the Church".⁷ Even more worrying are reports of the extent to

⁶ Anderson & Digby (Eds). The Kindness that Kills. The Churches' Simplistic Response to Complex Social Issues. S.P.C.K. 1985.

⁷ David Sheppard. Bias to the Poor. Hodder and Stoughton. 1983.

which these views, and those of Edward Norman,⁸ are a reflection of the beliefs of large numbers of Christians in England. There is no reason to suppose that the situation is any different in Australia. It is perhaps only the absence of theological argument that conceals similarly divergent views within our churches.

One contributor in this book writes that -

... while black workers wages are meagre by our standards low, the readiness of black workers to accept them is proof positive that the wages are more attractive than any available source of income.⁹

Another equates the calls for more equality of opportunity, with "the foul sin of envy which is grief at another's prosperity". A critic of David Sheppard says that, "we must not commit ourselves as Christians to courses of action because history may falsify such identification". He also takes Sheppard to task for his interpretations of the meaning of poverty and attempts to deny its existence as a social reality by arguing that the word had a different meaning in Biblical times.

These views stem from deeply held views of Christian belief derived from the text in which Christ asserts that "the poor you always have with you".¹⁰ It is a puzzling and troublesome passage. If it is taken as an injunction, it seems to legitimise the existence of poverty. It inspired the picture of "the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate" in the offending hymn removed from the hymnal not so many years ago.

It was comforting to believe, as the hymn declared that "God ordered their estate". From there it is only a short step to

⁸ Edward Norman. Christianity and the World Order. Oxford University Press. 1979.

⁹ Everard in Digby Anderson et al. Op.cit.

¹⁰ Matthew Ch.26, v.11.

accepting that the states of wealth and poverty and the margins between them are God-given and beyond our ability, or right, to alter.

Of course this interpretation does not absolve people from a responsibility to relieve poverty. That is a different matter. In many passages, notably in the story of the good samaritan, obligations to assist the poor are unambiguous. There are also the many acts of caring, sharing, and healing. In passing, we should remember that these were often the actions that compelled attention and drew people to want to understand the power that was behind them.

In a passionate and well-argued plea for a stronger Church commitment against poverty and injustice, Michael Paget-Wilkes¹¹ says that -

In facing the contradiction between Christ's identification with the poor and the way in which the Church exists today, the whole Church many find a key that unlocks a new understanding of what the Christian faith is all about.

He also maintains that giving alms should properly be translated as effecting justice.

It helps to look more closely at Matthew 26:10 and to consider the passage in its context. Christ was referring to an Old Testament passage in Deuteronomy 15:7 -

If there is a poor man among you in any of your towns you shall not harden your heart but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need whatever it may be . . . you shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him; because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to

¹¹ Michael Paget-Wilkes. Poverty, Revolution and the Church. Paternoster. Exeter. 1981.

your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.

There is an obligation then to be generous to a degree not apparent in the New Testament. There is still, though, the statement that the poor "will never cease".

There is another way of considering this troublesome text. It is possible that Christ was referring to the selfishness and frailty of men and women which he understood so well. He was not saying that the poor should, or will always be with us, but rather, knowing our weaknesses there are always likely to be poor people. If we interpret the passage words in this way, the challenge of determining and effecting Christian social justice is heightened, not diminished.

The question still remains though, as to whether Christian belief obliges us to work to eliminate poverty and to bring about the changes in structure, values, and the basis of authority that are required in order to eliminate poverty. Or, must we turn to secular ideologies to sustain action to eliminate injustice in a world of enormous wealth and with a capacity to distribute life's chances, and even life itself, more equitably?

One problem is the Christian attitude to suffering. John Kent,¹² in replying to Edward Norman's Reith lectures, says -

Popular Christianity never rebelled against suffering . . . but tried to work it into a theological system which would give it dignity, value and meaning.

He goes on to say -

Marxism refused to accept alienation as an unalterable part of the human condition. "Virtue" in the Marxist sense grew from joining in the conscious struggle to free humanity from all that mastered it from the outside.

¹² John Kent, in H. Willmer, et al. Christian Faith and Political Hopes. A reply to E.R. Norman. Epworth Press. London. 1979.

Marx rejected the partly Christian view which was, or is, that virtue (or holiness in the more Christian tradition) had to be attained by self mastery because nothing outside oneself could be properly mastered.

This is one of the dilemmas to be resolved in determining the role and responsibility for the Christians seeking to influence the social order.

Another problem is that people find it difficult to accept what Charles Elliott¹³ describes as structural sin. This brings collective political actions into the scope of faith. It is not a call for a politicised Christianity. It is a recognition that "religion and society are in tension". It is the difference between a political Christianity and one that takes political affairs seriously. It is the antithesis of the approach of the **Kindness Kills** writers who would leave all social and political affairs to the experts, as if anyone can be **the** expert on complex matters that have profound moral and social consequences.

The notion of structural sin is also an acknowledgement that it is difficult to identify who makes decisions in a highly organised modern world. As Galbraith¹⁴ pointed out years ago, the responsibility for decision making in large organisations is diffused.

A corporate process takes place at many levels. It results in courses of action that may have profound consequences around the world. This pervasive process makes it difficult to hold any one person, or even a group of people, responsible.

As we consider how to respond, there are lessons to be learned from the way people concerned with the environment have established a firm foothold in political and public life.

¹³ Charles Elliott. Praying the Kingdom. Darton, Longman and Todd. London. 1985.

¹⁴ John K. Galbraith. The Affluent Society. Penguin. 1969.

A series of, often angry and unco-ordinated, responses to threats to our diminishing ecological resources has grown into a well organised regional, national, and international movement with clear objectives, a coherent philosophy, and well thought out strategies.

There are now more than one million people who belong to more than 800 environmental values that are now acknowledged and increasingly upheld. The process through which this has occurred is described in **Environment** -

Perhaps the most enduring source of new strength will arise through a process that has repeatedly occurred during the history of the environmental movement in this country; a certain view of the world develops among a few people and is spread by their tireless work to a population that gradually comes to accept that view of the world as its own.

Like tributaries of a river, the varied themes of the movement have been added over time, each contributing to the strength and volume of the total flow without being completely lost itself.

Historically, important themes in the environmental movement have been the love of a special place (Thoreau), of a spectacular place (national parks and Stephen Mather), of wildlife (Audubon and others), of nature as a productive resource (the soil conservationists), of the chain of life (Rachel Carson), and of distrust of overblown faith in technology (Nader).¹⁵

Christianity and Christian influence has spread through the world in similar ways, but we can no longer rely on its values being maintained and communicated as a matter of natural event. Apathy, competition for interest and no assured place on the nation's agenda, mean that we have to be clear as never

¹⁵ Grant Thompson. "The Environmental Movement goes to Business School" in Environment, May, 1985.

before about the society we want to have, and then systematically set about making a more effective contribution in achieving it.

There are, of course, many people within the Church who are concerned and active. Synod charges contain many thoughtful and responsible comments on a range of social issues, as do the statements of social organisations and other leaders. But they are all prepared by busy men who have many other responsibilities and are unable to devote the time needed to reflect, discuss, and stir interest in a comprehensive theology.

We need an ideology that is not capitalist or socialist, the conventional and ageing moulds into which ideas are poured and set. There are aspects of these political beliefs that are relevant if we can consider them dispassionately, but we need to understand that those beliefs were evolved in a world of scarcity. We now live in a world with an almost unlimited capacity to produce goods, create services, and communicate.

We need an ideology that is relevant to this environment. One that established the values and structures needed for a distributive, post-industrial society. It should excite people with a new vision of what is possible and equitable.

This is a challenging task for a group which should include theologians, who seem largely preoccupied with matters of liturgy and doctrine, philosophers, political scientists, economists, teachers, and people concerned with means as well as ends.

We need this reference to challenge acceptance of scientific and economic determinism that directs us "we know not where". It is also needed to enable us to respond to a wide range of problems that we look at in fragmented ways yet they are all inter-connected . . . the contradictions of poverty in a world of unlimited wealth; the impact of high technology on people's personality and their relations with others; the implications of genetic engineering; land rights; environmental degradation; the changing role of families and individuals; leisure and work; culture and commercialisation; nuclear arms and just international relations.

People with concern and the capacity to develop ideas must set this process in train. They should also seek responses from

all parts of the Church. In an exercise such as this the process of bringing people together is as important as outcomes.

Another reason for involvement is that it seems to me there is a gap between leaders and the rest of the Church community in the understanding of social responsibility and how to respond to issues. If this were not so, and congregations, which are potentially powerful networks, were actively supporting the expressed concerns of leaders, we would have a different society.

Before considering other impediments to more effective Christian action, we need to be aware of the present political context in relation to one of the issues of central concern to the social welfare and policy arms of the Church . . . poverty.

First we must recognise that our response will be influenced by how strongly we feel about poverty. It is a condition that seriously handicaps large numbers of people psychologically, socially, and in many instances spiritually. Unlike earthquakes or some forms of physical and psychological handicap, it is within our capacity to control most of the circumstances that create poverty.

For those who are unemployed or who, for other reasons are on the fringe of our twenty-first century society, there is an added humiliation. There is little sense of a shared predicament and in many aspects of living, human experiences and self reliance are being turned over to the market place. Every kind of service is now provided on a commercial basis. As Jeremy Seabrook¹⁶ writes -

This mysterious alchemy transforms everything. Intangible moral, spiritual, human qualities are transformed into commodities that can be bought and sold.

One small example is the expansion of take-away foods. The

¹⁶ Jeremy Seabrook. "Have we reached the end of the working class epic?" in New Society, January 22nd, 1981.

next generation may be unable to prepare or cook food, let alone know how to grow it.

It is a world in which -

Commodities cry their competitive desirability at people from the moment they are born. Their only business, it seems, is to yearn and strive for possession of them.

If this seems overly dramatic, it is because the profound changes that have taken place in relation to dependency on the market, have occurred quietly over time. This is not to deny the market has produced benefits, but these should not blind us to the costs.

The relief and minor reform approach to poverty is inadequate. Poverty has structural causes. A structural explanation of poverty takes into account the power of institutions to achieve their objectives, and their impact on the distribution of resources and opportunities. The unequal distribution is influenced by prevailing values, and it takes place through wages and profits policies; attitudes to, and levels of, income security; the amount and direction of investment which affects unemployment, housing, and education; labour laws, taxation, and national and international monetary policy; the rôle of the bureaucracy and the procedures for decision making.

The creation of a "no poverty" society is an eminently possible objective, but it can only be achieved with a strategy that takes into account these structural factors.

There have been some improvements in our response to people who experience poverty . . . the introduction of a supporting parents payment enabled single mothers to retain their children. There have been positive developments in understanding the nature and causes of dependency, and in humanising the management of services. The range of government administered and funded welfare services has expanded and moved towards universalism; that is, the availability of services for all people. It was philosophically attractive to argue for universal services but it is questionable whether the potential of universal services to generate more

political and thus financial support has benefitted the poor.

Neil Gilbert¹⁷ in the United States, said recently that the expanding middle class client base has resulted in a weakened welfare system for the poor and "something else - not yet named - for everyone else". Treating as equal people who are not equal can only increase inequality. Universalism allocates resources up the social scale unless an equitable and efficient tax system ensures added value for the poor.

Certainly, universal entitlement to services has destroyed the patronising belief that welfare is only for the poor, but the hope of the development of a common interest among those who benefit from universal services, conceals the differences in needs and resources. Universalism has also created a situation in which, proportionate to numbers and need, the poor receive a reducing proportion of the total national budget and of social service expenditure.

We need to remember Titmuss,¹⁸ who said -

The challenge that faces us is not the choice between universalist or selective services. The real challenge resides in the question: What particular infrastructure of universal services is needed to provide a framework of values and opportunity bases within and around which can be developed acceptable selective services provided as social rights, on criteria of the needs of specific categories, groups and territorial areas and not dependent on individual tests of means?

It is in such practical ways which do not involve an assault on human dignity, which are not socially divisive, and which do not lead to the development of two standards of services for

¹⁷ Neil Gilbert. Capitalism and the Welfare State. Yale Press. 1983.

¹⁸ Richard Titmuss. Commitment to Welfare. George Allen and Unwin. 1973.

two nations, that more redistribution can be affected through services in favour of those whose needs are greatest.

In Australia, as in other western countries, the notion of collective responsibility, an essentially Christian principle, is represented by the welfare state notion. It is now under serious threat. Those who rationalise their own self interest by arguing that the trickle-down from a laissez faire competitive system will ensure social justice, despite historical evidence to the contrary, are in the ascendancy.

At the same time, the poor are in many respects, politically disenfranchised. They are scattered around a vast continent. Apart from poverty, they have little in common. Most of them live in electorates where there is little political gain to be earned by Liberal or Labor from concentrating resources in those areas.

The poor are largely disregarded by the most powerful political organisation in the country - the ACTU. In fact, many ACTU policies are detrimental to the unemployed and poor. The close association that has developed between the present government, business and trade unions may have benefits for economic growth and industrial relations, but this form of corporate government can become a closed shop that excludes outside groups and gives a low priority to their interests.

In the 1970's, the development of self-help movements raised hopes that they would become a political force to challenge the political status quo. There are now more than 400 self-help groups in Victoria alone, linked to the Council of Self Help Groups. They are important for a number of fundamental reasons, but they have made little political impact on redistribution policies, despite success in changing public and political attitudes towards dependency. They have also provided valuable opportunities for building, or re-building, the self-esteem and confidence of their members.

There have been successes in other areas. Aboriginal people have achieved significant gains through political activity and many of the white community now have, for the

first time, a knowledge of Aboriginal history, culture, and values.

Attitudes towards women are more just, and Australia has generally accepted large-scale immigration and the notion of multi-culturalism.

As I mentioned earlier, groups concerned with environmental issues have been in some instances spectacularly successful in developing and politicising conservation values. Why have these movements been successful? The answer is, I believe, that they have had strong convictions and commitment to pursue their objectives in a rigorous and professional way. They are passionate and, at times, angry. Their achievements demonstrate that the power to influence change, or to resist change, rests with us . . . people and organisations within and outside the Churches who profess a commitment to social justice or whatever other cause they espouse.

Why We Have Failed

If we wish to be more influential, we need to discover why we have not been successful and be prepared to learn from honest self-examination. That is what every political party does when it wins or loses an election, and that is what successful government and private enterprise organisations have to do . . . measure performance against goals and find out and correct the failings.

Often Christians use as a shield the notion that the results of our work and life are in God's hands. This is, in one sense, unarguable, but it can too easily provide an excuse for not being rigorous and accepting personal responsibility for failing to be effective.

There are other possible reasons for our failure as members of a large and supposedly socially concerned organisation to exert more influence.

We have allowed those who do not want change to set the agendas for public action and have been side-tracked into marginally important issues. This is a consequence of having failed to develop a relevant, comprehensive theology and set of social objectives that set the priorities for others to respond

to.

It is also necessary to have clear secular reasons for wanting change and to be sure that they stand up to ethical scrutiny. We cannot expect society to respond to a plea for change if all we can say is "because injustice is unChristian".

What then are our arguments . . . equity, "fair go", rights, responsibilities, humanitarian principles, guilt or an appeal to self interest . . . could an anti-poverty led recovery make us all better off? If we reject the "you'll be better off too" appeal as morally unacceptable, would we be denying the poor their best chance of improved circumstances?

Another appeal is to fear. Prime Minister Hawke, when in Opposition, predicted unrest unless we tackled unemployment. In some respects it is unfortunate that this way of putting poverty on the agenda is denied the Australian poor, because they do not live in multi-racial, pressure cooker, housing ghettos that generate social explosions.

Or, can we develop a credible argument from the opposite side; that is, that self-denying austerity would free resources for transfer?

Unless we establish goals and are confident and unambiguous about our grounds for change, we cannot expect to be taken seriously. We also act in fragmented ways against powerful, well-resourced, and politically astute organisations . . . political parties; business, unions, teachers, farmers, environmentalists. Co-ordinated initiatives are needed as well as -

A flair for spotting what can be achieved; for judging the precise moment for political initiatives; for assembling the necessary components that will give these political initiatives a chance of success . . . these are the essential attributes of those who seek to maximise the flexibility of institutional change. From this it follows that a degree of political "feel" is a necessary condition for confronting the

sin in the structures.¹⁹

Other failings include the reliance on re-organisation. It may sometimes be necessary but it can also be "a wonderful method for creating an illusion of progress while producing confusions, inefficiency and demoralisation";²⁰ rationalising the responsibility for social action on to other people or organisations such as the Brotherhood or Mission of St James and St John; becoming co-opted to advisory and co-ordinating bodies that compromise other action.

Another weakness is to have multiple objectives. This makes it easy to avoid being held responsible for the achievement of any particular goal. One failure can be traded against some success in another quite distinct area.

There is the danger to organisations of displaced objectives, that is, being diverted from the central objective of eliminating poverty to only providing services or raising funds, or being caught up in the social or political establishment.

We also need to face the fact that people who work in welfare and in the Church have personal characteristics that may inhibit their effectiveness in political activity.

There is an element of compulsion about social action . . . social change advantages some and disadvantages others. It requires a commitment to specific proposals that must be imposed on others. It is a directive activity that is repugnant to people in professions such as the ministry and social work, where the importance of not being judgemental is emphasised. Lawyers focus on rights and enjoy conflict. Social workers and clergy focus on feelings, needs, and growth through relationships. Other qualities are needed in political activity.

There is also a reluctance to act because we cannot predict the consequences. The complexity of social issues and the difficulty of determining who is responsible are deterrents to

¹⁹ Charles Elliott. *Op.cit.*

²⁰ Petronius.

involvement. Reluctance to be identified with controversial issues is another.

The cry of "political" which is used to silence legitimate criticism by those whose interests might be threatened, still has its effect on many.

An active commitment to achieving a "no poverty" society could bring clergy and lay people involved into conflict with Church members who did not accept that what they saw as "political activity" was the business of people who were identifying themselves as members of the Church. It might also offend people who saw the proposals as a threat to their own circumstances.

The prospect of local schism or disagreement is another deterrent to involvement in issues that generate controversy.

It is important that we examine ourselves to see to what extent these are the reasons why we fail. They are all capable of being overcome.

When this self evaluation has been carried out, it is necessary to establish clear objectives based on a relevant ideology, and prepare a strategy and time table for achieving those objectives, just as we do in our personal lives or in work as teachers, engineers, clergy, doctors, or tradesmen. These overlooked technical matters are critical but are beyond the scope of this address.

As Peter Cullen²¹ said to a social welfare conference -

If you want to be effective you have to use the methods that make you effective. If you do not, don't pretend that you are working for change for the people you are supposed to represent . . . you are being self righteous and self indulgent.

Finally, we are living and working in a changing ethical environment. Information technology, and particularly television, has made people aware of the suffering that occurs on a vast scale all around the world. It has also conditioned

²¹ Peter Cullen. ACOSS Conference, Hobart. 1974.

us to that suffering. It has dehumanised suffering so that it becomes increasingly difficult to get people to respond collectively and politically at other than a superficial level. What impact did the latest figures showing that the average duration of unemployment for 551,000 Australians is 52 weeks, have on you?

The release of the potential of Christian belief requires that the belief be made relevant for today and that people be given the confidence, knowledge, and skill to justify their faith through action. This would have an important influence on society. It would also protect people against the avoidable loss of holding themselves back when they could be among those who attempt to "do the will of our Father".

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES:

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David Scott joined the staff of the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 1954, with particular responsibility for social action activities. He was seconded to Community Aid Abroad, founded by Father Tucker as the Food for Peace Campaign, as National Director from 1960 to 1970.

In 1970 he became Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and remained in this position until retiring in 1980. The 70s were a time of considerable expansion in the influence of the Brotherhood, in the introduction of innovative projects, and the provision of support for the self-help movement.

David Scott's other appointments include President of the Australian Council of Social Service; Vice-President of the International Council on Social Welfare; founding publisher of **Australian Society**; member of the Committee of Inquiry - Victoria Police; Senior Fellow, University of Melbourne; and Chairman of the National Advisory Council on Social Welfare.

He is currently Chairman of the Land Conservation Council; Treasurer-General of the International Council on Social Welfare; member of the Council of R.M.I.T.; and a Director of **Australian Society**.

David and Diana Scott have two adult children; a daughter and a son.