

## PERSUING THE COMMON GOOD

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The core responsibility of those entrusted to govern is to promote the common good. This doesn't mean just what is best for most people. It means creating the social, economic and ecological conditions which enable **all** members of society – according to their capacity – to reach their human fulfilment and to contribute to the good of society.

Majority rule, and claims to be acting on the mandate of a majority, do not guarantee the common good. Majority rule can even lead to disadvantaged groups and indigenous peoples being under the domination of majority cultures, indefinitely.

Electoral systems are only a means to higher end. That higher end is the fundamental right of people to participate, and contribute to decisions that affect them. As ancient wisdom put it: "if it's about us, then not without us". "One person one vote" can need to be supplemented by other measures, especially at local level, to enhance people's ability to participate.

### **Same Treatment Is Not Always Equality**

To safeguard this right, fair-minded people recognise the need to level the playing field for disadvantaged groups. Opposition to this is based on the simplistic view that equality requires everyone to be treated "the same." In fact, sameness of treatment can prevent equality of opportunity. Worse still, sometimes that is the agenda: to treat "everybody the same" is convenient for those who want to reinforce the political and economic advantages they already have. They will call different treatment "divisive." What can look like advocating different treatment based on culture or ethnicity can be, in fact, advocating supplementary measures based on need. Failure to meet those needs is divisive.

### **Cultural Diversity Matters**

However, self-interest is not the only reason for opposing efforts to level the playing field. Opposition can emerge from poor understanding of why cultural diversity matters so much. One thinks of the decision of Australians to vote down a proposal that would have given First Australians a way of making their needs better understood by the nation's parliament. In our own country, there has been opposition to extra provision for Māori participation on local body boards, and slowness to allow Māori to manage vaccination roll-outs among their own people when the Ministry of Health's lack of success was evident.

These matters raise an interesting question: why do we readily accept the need to level the playing field for some disadvantaged groups, but resist doing so when the disadvantage relates to cultural or ethnic diversity? Is this just the typical failure of some within a dominant culture to understand the deep needs of people whose culture is different? Does it reflect an individualistic culture's tendency to identify need only in individuals, failing to recognise the shared needs of communities?

Or does this zeal for dominance by the majority culture come from something more sinister? After all, to eliminate te reo from public signage is a gratuitous, needless and mean-spirited thing to do. The more bizarre because it is an official language. A dominant culture's failure to recognise the needs of other cultural groups can only heighten a tangata whenua's felt need for full self-determination.

## Civil Society

Of course, a people's right to self-determination includes their right to enter treaties and agreed forms of partnership. But treaties, legislation and contractual agreements, though important, are not sufficient. Achieving the common good depends more on those forms of association that bring people together based on goodwill, friendship, loyalty, generosity, shared values and responsibilities... It is through these relationships that we become our true selves by being there for one another – civil society.

The markets and the state are meant to support that kind of society. But neo-liberalism has subverted these relationships: society's subjugation to polarising market forces, and the state's subservience to the market's most powerful sectors, are deemed to be normal, acceptable and inevitable; it's even called 'progress'.

Society has itself to blame for this to the extent that we have farmed out to the state and the markets the consequences of our poor choices. In discussions on social and economic problems, the glaring absence of any reference to personal virtue, moral formation or social responsibility is commonplace. We expect the state and the markets to fix what we have broken. They can't.

Pursuing the common good also needs freedom of speech and of association, including religious freedom. Faith-based values, and respectful faith-based dialogue, have a unique contribution to make to the common good, but can be obstructed by polarising religious fundamentalism at one extreme, and secularism disguised as 'neutrality' at the other.

### The "Logic of Gift"

In some remarkable documents, recent Popes have taught the need for giving what isn't owed. Lack of compassion was a feature of the pre-Christian cultures of Rome and Greece, and is a feature of post-Christian society today. In the early Church, compassion made Christians conspicuously different. Compassion, like God's love for us, isn't owed. That makes it a circuit breaker where otherwise tit-for-tat and getting even would be about as far as the common good could go.

Pope Francis has asked

those with institutional and political responsibility, and those charged with forming public opinion, to remain especially attentive to the way they speak of those who think or act differently or those who may have made mistakes... courage is needed to guide towards processes of reconciliation. It is precisely such positive and creative boldness which offers real solutions to ancient conflicts and the opportunity to build lasting peace...

Some feel that a society rooted in mercy is hopelessly idealistic... I would encourage everyone to see society not as a forum where strangers compete and try to come out on top, but above all as a home or a family, where the door is always open and where everyone feels welcome... (World Communications Day 2016)

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI dared to hope that compassion, gratuitous giving and forgiving could be brought into economic relationships – the very antithesis of neo-liberal economics. He thinks of what it would do to trading relationships, business and industrial practices... He sees this as a way of pre-empting the imbalances and inequities that otherwise need to be redressed afterwards. (see *Caritas in Veritate*, 6, 36-39):

On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other

hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion..." (Caritas in Veritate 6.)