

Maureen Postma, Secretary of the Victorian Council of Churches

As I begin tonight I wish to acknowledge the Indigenous owners and custodians of this land on which we gather – the Wurundjeri people. And as we gather to consider the needs of the vulnerable people in our communities, I would urge us to ensure that rights issues for Indigenous peoples are also addressed.

Tonight's gathering is about the community of which we are all part and these include the people in the churches that make up the VCC. Some of the members of these churches are:

- Employees, others employers. I would hope that those who are employers fit into the 'best practice' of model employer, but I know that this is not necessarily so;
- deliberately not members of any political party – others may be members of any one the number of parties that are around,
- are **for** unions or **against** unions.

BUT all of them – and this is not just for the Christian communities but also true for many other faith communities – in their teachings have a responsibility to care for, and work with, the most vulnerable people in society. There is a sense of needing to

- work for justice,
- work to make sure that conditions necessary for the best in human life are not degraded.

This is why the church leaders, despite the differences within their communities, have expressed unease about this legislation. They have been concerned about the impact on

- Families
- time for recreation
- AND they are not happy with the focus on the individual as if the person is primarily an economic unit – work being the major factor that defines how we live our lives. Economics must serve the human person, not the person be subservient to the economic theory and reality.

While this current legislation has been brought in by the Liberal/National Party Coalition (or the Howard Government as Mr. Howard would have us call it) – it is society as a whole that has helped create the climate for this legislation. It is for this reason that I would argue that we need to watch **all** legislation by **all** parties as many assumptions are being made about the type of society that we should be building for the future.

Although most of us here would want to deny it – and in fact many of us resist it – there is, in society an assumption that individualism, consumerism and materialism cannot be resisted. This Industrial Relations legislation and the welfare to work legislation rests on this assumption. And these pieces of

legislation that put the emphasis on the individual to negotiate and the individual to 'make good' will reinforce these tendencies and beliefs.

As opposed to much current coaching of football teams, I would therefore want to argue that we need to play the ball, not the players behind the scene of play.

We need to decide

- what type of community do we want to live in? one where the successful flourish and the less successful fall by the wayside?
- if we want to be part of a society that increases the gap between the rich and the poor and creates another class of the working poor;
- if we want to be the generation that formally breaks down the achievements won by our forbears – that there should be time to work, time to rest, and time to recreate. This vision was good for the individual, the families and the community.

ALL of these elements and rights have been slowly eroded over the last few decades, but do we want to be the ones that formally put them to rest, the ones who say that it doesn't matter?

We need to argue that Language is important:

- Why is wellbeing such an 'in' word – while welfare is 'out'?
- What is 'work choice' when the options are to take what is offered or be out of a job?
- What is it about these changes to Industrial Relations that **improves** or **amends** working conditions in such a way that they can be called 'reform'?

Welcome to this evening's gathering. You are in the right place, and at the right time to let the public and the politicians know that you want:

- REAL reform of Industrial relations and welfare policy,
- REAL choices for individuals and families and a
- REAL expectation that we together work for the wellbeing of all in society.