



Response to the Contribution of the Hon Sir Gerard Brennan AC, KBE

An address by the Rev. Geoffrey Dornan,
Director of Ministry and Mission, UnitingCare Ageing,
at the Pitt St Uniting Church, Sydney
Tuesday 21 November 2007

“But if it is possible to bring into the market place of ideas the notion that the true purpose of public life is the achievement of the common good – a common good which creates benefits for the rich and poor, the powerful and the underprivileged, the strong and the disabled; a common good which recognizes the equal dignity of all people and presents every person with the opportunity to live a truly human existence, the Centre will have achieved its purpose. Please God it will.”

Sir Gerard, thank you for your superlatively rich and nuanced contribution this morning as you have graciously launched this new organization. You have expounded upon the concerns that are ours, and you have dwelt upon the relevance of the Centre’s commitment to the rediscovery and the interpretation of the powerful public metaphor “the common good”. We dare to hope that the Centre will become an integral part of Australia’s national debate concerning the challenge of national values as enshrined in policy and practice.

As one involved in the organizational planning these last 18 months or more, may I **explain our motivation in the founding of ‘The Centre’ and the reasons for our emphasis upon the common good as the ground upon which we stand.**

As to our motivation - what has stood as central to the Centre’s understanding is that people are moved by great ideas; that once an idea is captured, thought through, interpreted; that it is capable of transforming realities. So it has been these last decades with the idea of prosperity - both personal and collective. The dramatic increase in production and trade within and beyond our borders has enriched us, ‘added value: but it has not enriched all of us; indeed as you have suggested Sir Gerard, some have become poorer - absolutely and relatively - materially and socially.

It is clear that the distribution of wealth in Australia is at its most skewed in generations; it is clear that many in our commonwealth lack for opportunity - especially when it comes to health and education. We of the Centre believe that the time has arrived when other ideas, other values need to be energetically and convincingly espoused: that along with prosperity and wealth creation, there must be a conscious embracing and promotion of our common life together.

As to why the Centre has chosen to focus upon the “common good” as a central aspect of its platform:

First, there is the practical consideration of the broad acceptability and memory of the term: yes it is a concept grounded in the Christian Church. But equally the common good has been a central component of Western political wisdom: always at least in the recesses of the minds of the legislators, the judiciary, not to mention general political culture. It has been a term that has encouraged concern for equality and social justice.

Second, there is the moral consideration: notwithstanding the term's broad acceptability, the memory of its meaning has faded - not surprisingly as we have been overtaken by the 'good news' about prosperity. Australian political, social and economic culture has progressively and markedly loosened its grip upon what we hold in common, our togetherness. It is as if we have slowly slid down the path toward a sort of "Hobbesian" world where, as you eloquently pointed out Sir Gerard, our main if not altogether exclusive preoccupation is for our individualistic security and well-being. In essence we have come to see ourselves as independent of each other, as finished products in our separateness. It is to that problematic view of ourselves that the conviction of the common good responds: for it reawakens within us an understanding of our fundamental connectedness as Australians.

Third, there is the political consideration: that a social model based upon the almost exclusive consideration of wealth creation that excludes significant numbers of people - it could be said, the majorities of the global community - is increasingly unviable: not only because of the resentment it generates but also because we live in a world of finite resources, where societies of unparalleled affluence are impossible to duplicate *ad infinitum*.

In this connection we would do well to turn back a few hundred years to Emmanuel Kant, who developed the principle of "universalizability". There he explained that we shouldn't act according to any principle of behaviour that cannot be universalized. For example, if I were tempted to thief then I need to ask the question whether such an action could seriously be accepted as common practice. Clearly not: for if we all thieved from each other then society would be reduced to a chaotic, violent mess. Today this principle bears real meaning not just for the individual but more importantly for our national and global communities: globalization grounded in consumerism alone, is not just unethical but unworkable because it cannot be applied universally - it invariably leads to obscene imbalances of wealth and consequently injustice.

The common good, then, challenges us with a practical insight: its contemporary version suggests that we must look beyond consumerist models solely preoccupied with wealth generation; that we need to seek out alternatives that can be converted into practical, sustainable behaviour for all people across social, cultural, ethnic, economic and political boundaries. The common good brings into the reach of all citizens the possibility of **really living**.

Sir Gerard, the true purpose of public life is the achievement of the common good. God willing "The Centre" *will* play a part in its re-introduction into Australian public life.

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