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9. Australia at the Crossroads – Time for Change

As politicians from both sides of the fence endeavour to reassure the US and corporate Australia, how much attention is given to fundamental issues of peace and social justice?

The key issues for all Australians should be a reduction in fear and inequality:

- Most of us are scared and insecure. Why else would we treat refugees so inhumanely, have so little tolerance for the malaise of our indigenous Australians and cling to an American military alliance that doesn't appear to be in the national interest?
- Most of us are relatively worse off than we were 15 years ago. Economic studies show that during this period there has been a steadily growing gap between rich and poor in Australia. Rather than seeking to remedy this appalling trend, why is the Government aggravating it further by directing health and education funding away from the more disadvantaged sections of our community?

Our political leaders, Nero-like are fiddling around at the edges while Australia burns. We are now at the crossroads. It is time for ordinary Australians to speak up and demand fundamental changes to the policy direction of this country. The very basis of our social fabric and way of life is at stake. Act now in the interests of all Australians, not just the wealthy few, by making your voice heard. It is time for change – but you must act.

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has. -Margaret Mead

This pamphlet was produced to coincide with the public meeting initiated by *Just Peace* in order to bring together a range of groups working for social justice in Australia. The themes outlined in this pamphlet do not represent the main areas of activity of *Just Peace*, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all its members. *Just Peace* is committed to working towards a world free of conflict, and where there is justice for all. Our main focus is on issues of war and peace.

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The VOICE of the COMMUNITY will be HEARD

1. Overview – the Unravelling of Australia

There is a mood for change quietly building amongst ordinary Australians. People are becoming increasingly restive about how our social fabric is unravelling. Particularly in the last few years:

- We see social services such as health, education, public housing and social welfare being slowly and deliberately eroded
- We see environmental policies which focus more on economic benefits than on a genuinely sustainable environment for future generations
- We see defence and foreign policies seemingly dictated by foreign powers rather than by what is in the national interest of everyday Australians
- We see the official promotion of attitudes of rejection of refugees and asylum seekers, rather than understanding and acceptance of them
- We see economic policies determined by rigid adherence to globalisation that sweep aside the rights of working people and small businesses while the gap between rich and poor widens
- Indigenous Australians, women, and Muslim Australians all lose out in a society held in the vice-like grip of fear, intolerance and inequity.

The politicians we have chosen to represent us seem hell-bent on taking Australia down a path that is eroding our wellbeing and is not in our long-term interests as a nation. What can be done to turn this situation around?

There is no real option except for ordinary people to provide leadership and explain to our elected representatives that things must change. Alternative policies on the issues described above should be aired and debated, and a more compassionate and just Australia emerge. In an election year, the voice of the community must be heard.



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This pamphlet has been published by *Just Peace* in the interests of general discussion and inquiry. Any views expressed do not necessarily represent those of individual members of *Just Peace*.

2. Defence and Security – Solving the Real Causes of Terrorism?

What diplomatic and military role should Australia play in our region? Should our forces be equipped and trained for intervention anywhere in the world at the behest of our allies the US and the UK? Should we establish fully fledged US bases in Australia to assist in the new flexible “forward defence” posture of the US? Or should we be focused on a mutually supportive strategy built around relationships with regional countries? These kinds of issues are strongly debated within the US but not really aired in Australia. Our international role should be a matter for broad, public discussion.

How much should the Australian Government spend on high tech weapons, and on increasing the role of security forces? The current total defence budget is about \$15 billion per year, with an additional \$2 billion proposed over the next few years. Included in these plans are \$700 million to be targeted on security in the “war on terror”. Is this the best way to address the threat of terrorism, or should instead the poverty and exploitation in many third world countries be addressed? Basing foreign affairs on the ‘politics of fear and insecurity’ can blind us to alternative realistic, sustainable options.



3. Maintaining Equitable and Effective Government Social Services

The National Welfare Rights Network recently conducted surveys showing that 9-out-of-every-10 Australians would prefer the Government to fix problems in health, education, aged care, homelessness and relief from poverty, rather than get a \$5 weekly tax cut, which would cost a total of \$2.5 billion.

When the Federal Government promises even-higher tax cuts to all Australians, it is timely to ask if that money could be better spend on much needed social services.

In comparison with defence spending or the tax cut figures above, \$500 million would build 1500 units of public housing; \$160 million a year would provide alternative accommodation so that aged people would not have to live in nursing homes, \$500 million would provide an extra 32,000 fully funded places for university students, \$150 million would provide a guarantee of substantial assistance (such as wage subsidies and training) for all long term unemployed people.

4. Diminished Community and Individual Well-being

Dedicated pursuit of global competitiveness, ‘user pays’, and privatisation coupled with a diminishing public welfare regime, are having a corrosive effect on Australian society. The gap between those on the lowest socio-economic rungs and those on the highest is widening dramatically, with opportunities for those at the bottom decreasing.

7. Environmental Degradation and Resource Depletion

“Global warming”, the thinning of the ozone layer and other cataclysmic environmental events forecast by environmentalists thirty years ago are now commonly mentioned in news and weather reports. Meanwhile, the world’s land, ocean and atmosphere are becoming increasingly polluted. But perhaps even more serious, the long-predicted energy crunch is rapidly approaching. Reserves of oil which can be extracted cheaply will run out within decades.

We need to develop renewable energy sources coupled with a determination across all levels of society aimed at changing to a low-energy, sustainable lifestyle. The alternative is increasing conflict and human suffering caused by environmental degradation, and wars fought over access to diminishing resources, especially oil. The recent invasion of Iraq was just one such war. There may be many more to come.

The agreement by the US-sanctioned government of Afghanistan to an oil pipeline from Central Asia passing through their territory to the Indian Ocean reinforces the view that current US international policies relate strongly to their need to ensure they can maintain their unsustainable energy requirements.

The present Australian government is supporting the United States in an ugly, inhumane and very risky strategy. In our own interests, and in the interests of the planet, it would be far better for an Australian government to plan how our needs might be met in other, more-sustainable ways.

8. The Role of the Media in Holding the Government Accountable

It is of concern to many that the media has not performed its traditional role of holding the government accountable for its policy decisions. For example, in evaluating the media role in the recent invasion and occupation of Iraq, Anup Shah (January 29, 2004) wrote that “...while enormous in quantity, media reporting appears comparatively lacking in depth, historical context, and investigative analysis”.

The media seems content to uncritically report questionable pronouncements by the government. Again, with respect to Iraq, Robert Manne (2004) wrote that “Although a more critical media would probably not have been decisive, it would have at least given the Howard Government pause for thought”.

While the current government has been promoting the ‘politics of fear and insecurity’, the media has supported them by helping to create an ethos in which it seems inappropriate to focus on social justice or community well-being issues. Expressions of compassion and tolerance are now the province of ‘bleeding hearts’. Independent assessments of Australian media performance have highlighted the negative effects of having so many media outlets being owned by just a few multinational companies.

Svend Robinson (1997) was quoted in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* saying, “After you’ve had somebody say to you for the thousandth time, ‘How come we never hear about these issues in the media,’ you start to realize that the media itself is an issue”.

This trend toward inequity is not only an affront to social justice, but is conducive to a fractured society where those 'with' feel they have little in common with and even less responsibility for those 'without'.

The bonds of community are further weakened by the 'politics of fear and insecurity' that are currently used to justify military adventures, our lack of consideration for asylum seekers and increased spending on defence. An anxious society is one in which people are less confident in the present and more fearful about the future. Morgan Polls in the last year show that a majority of Australians expect a terrorist attack in Australia (with little justification) and that it is generally believed American foreign policy has a negative impact on Australia.

Government policies that promote fear and inequality are clearly eroding our sense of well-being as well as leading to a more unfair and divisive society.

5. Australia's International Reputation is On The Skids

Australia has had a longstanding reputation for being an egalitarian, tolerant and open society. On the international stage, this country has, at times, played a moderating role. We have traditionally supported multilateralism and the rule of law, although this has sometimes been obscured by our support for and involvement in the actions of larger "protector" powers (for a long time, this was Great Britain, but since the Second World War, this has generally been the United States). Even in the arena of war, our soldiers have a reputation for being not only very good soldiers in a military sense, but also people who observe the rules of good behaviour.

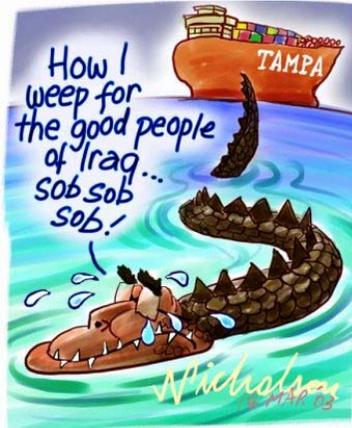
This hard-earned and, until recently, well-deserved reputation is now diminished in the eyes of the world and of many Australians. United Nations representatives, countries in our immediate region and retired Australian diplomats have raised concerns with how our international and refugee policies have changed. What has happened to bring this about in just a few years?

A quote from Singapore's Strait Times newspaper, 11 November 2001, made it clear what our near-neighbours think (referring to the then re-election of the Howard government):

"Following a very ugly campaign, where racism, xenophobia and bigotry became the main tactics to win the election, Australia's status - regionally and internationally - has been reduced to that of a pariah. The country can no longer lay claim to the high moral ground..."

I do hope, nonetheless, that in the end the Australian people will look ahead and not be influenced by short-sighted leaders who, for their own short-term political interest, damage Australia itself."

This is clearly a sad indictment of the Australian government.



Whether it is the slavish following of the US into war against Iraq, the rejection of the Kyoto Agreement, the cruel and amoral indifference shown towards refugees or the sidelining of the United Nations and our international obligations, the current government has actively or by neglect done more to harm the reputation of this country than any other in our history.

6. Globalisation and Free Trade – Exploitation and Impoverishment

Australian governments are uncritically surrendering this country to the global economy. While mutually-beneficially trade is in the national interest, the dogmatic commitment to corporate globalisation is a recipe for the loss of sovereignty and human rights as working conditions and practices are subordinated to the requirements of multinational companies to make a profit.

The Free Trade Agreement with the United States is the latest example of an Australian government allowing the exploitation of this country by a few companies and countries at the expense of the impoverishment of the majority of our workers and businesses.

The reality of the AUSFTA is:

- Agricultural market access will be tilted much more in favour of US access to Australia, with little or no reciprocal benefits to Australian exports
- The US will be able to influence our quarantine restrictions and food labelling laws (potentially adversely affecting our health and allowing GM crops into this country unlabelled)
- Higher cost for medicines through watering down the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
- Restrictions on regulation of investment, including less rights to review foreign investment
- Less rights to regulate essential government services, including health, education, water, postal, energy and environmental services, at all levels of government
- Restrictions on Australian content rules in new media, and no increase to existing local content rules for existing media
- Job losses from tariff cuts and changes to government purchasing rules

All in all, the AUSFTA is another in a series of government policies promoting inequality with the net result being the further loss of Australian jobs, threats to our democracy, and further erosion of Australia's independence and way of life.

