

Love Making A Way

Is the *Love Makes A Way* campaign a new phenomenon? Maybe, maybe not. It certainly is within this generation of Australians.



For those who are unaware, it is a movement grounded in the Christian churches, that protests our government's (and therefore our nation's) utterly appalling treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. There is much that can be said, and *is* being said, about this, the real issue: Australia is mistreating men, women, and children – real men, real women, real children, real people. The justification is a veil of spin. The execution of the policy is empty, not only of humanity, but of foundational political principles about accountability, transparency, and the power of executive government. My commentary here would only add to the noise, particularly since the devastatingly draconian amendments to the Migration Act were recently passed. A good place to start, however, would be this article by two political heavyweights from both sides of the fence (a former conservative PM, and a former Labor Minister) who rightly note:

We should rightly ask, if the government is prepared to be so cruel and give itself this much unchecked power over refugees, who's next?

It is genuinely scary stuff.

But to return to *Love Makes A Way*: The form of protest adopted by this group is one of non-violent civil disobedience. Pastors, priests, nuns, and other Christians, enter the electorate office of a politician; they sit down and pray and politely refuse to leave while their concerns about refugees remain unaddressed. In the vast majority of cases they are eventually gently lead away by police, charged, appear in court, and are given a rap over the knuckles or even vindicated. Awareness is raised, the alternative voice is heard.

Personally, there is much that I admire about this:

1. Civil disobedience in the “pure” sort is when you find yourself in the path of a wrongdoing and you refuse to cooperate. *This is the next step*: In physical, practical terms, by entering the electorate offices the protestors are placing themselves in the path, and then refusing to cooperate. To the extent that silence in the presence of oppression is a form of cooperation, it is my view that this next step is justifiable.
2. It aspires to protest *in the right spirit*. There is nothing about this that is angry young chanters who are violent in their words if not with their actions. This is about polite, gentle, peaceful, but firm refusal to cooperate with wrong, and I find that admirable.
3. It is (and I hope it remains) *distinctively Christian*. Not in the sense that only Christians can protest this way, but by the self-identity of the protestors: it is Christian spirituality that is their common ground (across quite a diversity of other distinctives), and it is their Christian spirituality which motivates them. This not only gives coherency, but also identifies the movement with a much wider swathe of the community than your typical banner-waver. [NB: There have been rabbis involved in some of the protests, so perhaps “Judaео-

Christian" would be the more precise descriptor]

As to its effectiveness, that remains to be seen. In terms of public perception, it is surely more notable when a nun gets arrested for sitting in an office than if an angry young student gets arrested in a caterwauling face-off with police.

In political terms, not much has changed. It certainly hasn't checked the resolve of Abbott, Morrison and co. (many of whom claim a Christian faith) in their policies, nor even in their attitude and manner of executing that policy. I've always said that it's one thing to have to be "tough" in a world of terrible choices, it makes a whole new other thing when such toughness is crowed about with triumph, not exercised as a perceived necessity with tears and trembling.

In electoral terms, it's complicated. On the one hand, from a conservative point of view, these are not protestors that can simply be wiped away into the corner of "loony lefties that would never vote for us anyway." No, those who sympathise with and support *Love Makes A Way* includes the full-range of swing voters (like myself), and is encroaching into conservative home territory. And many of those who are protesting are thought-leaders. If I were a Government MP I'd be counting my numbers. But... and this is the big but... I wouldn't be too worried because the Opposition's track record on this issue is almost as bad. It's a matter of "who else you going to vote for?" Unless there's a viable alternative, the electoral effect of *Love Makes A Way* is severely dampened.

But there's nothing quite as persistent as those who know they're on a "mission from God" (just ask the Blues Brothers). Except of course, those who are on a mission and also *have blood in the game*. And this is what we now have with *Love Makes A Way*. It takes a certain level of courage to face arrest. But once that hurdle is passed, the resolve is strengthened. I mean, "What's the worst that could happen? We get arrested?... Again?" Movements that pass that point are

persistent, and people notice, and it scares them.

In these last few days, *Love Makes A Way*, has passed this particular threshold. On December 10, Human Rights Day, another round of “pray-ins” occurred throughout the nation. It could have been just another round of polite conversations, awkward-looking but very-professional police, a file past the TV cameras, and an obscure court appearance a few weeks later.

But in Perth, for some reason, someone thought an increase in intimidation would be sensible. A media release describes it:

Australian Federal Police and WA Police attended the scene. WA Police repeatedly threatened the church leaders with strip-searches and attempted to provide the group with inaccurate information about other sit-ins around the country. More than 7 hours elapsed between the arrival of police and arrests being made. At the Perth Watch House each of the church leaders was refused the opportunity to seek legal advice, stripped naked and searched. The church leaders repeatedly expressed that they did not consent to the search, and repeatedly advised police that they were not in possession of firearms or drugs.

From the Government’s point of view, the escalated response is stupid. It just brings more attention, it engenders more sympathy, it’s a lose-lose in every conceivable outcome. My first thought was, “What were the authorities thinking?” And my second thought was: Dear *Love Makes A Way*, keep in the opposite spirit; to indignity and violence, render gentleness and respect. Keep “on attitude” as well as “on message.”

If they can do that, they’ve won. They may not see it for a while, but they’ve won already.

The response from *Love Makes A Way*, so far, is pretty good:

Us pastors & a female priest being strip searched “for

weapons & drugs" is not the story. The dehumanisation of refugees is. #LoveMakesAWay

– Jarrod McKenna □ (@jarrodmckenna) December 10, 2014

Perth #LoveMakesAWay arrestees being released slowly. All strip searched. Nothing compared to indignities suffered by those in detention.

– Father Chris (@FrChrisBedding) December 10, 2014

'I was outraged to be stripped naked' 'but more outraged at the way gov is treating helpless babies' <http://t.co/ouLZB9GLYH> #LovesMakesAWay

– Sydney Hirt (@Sydhirt) December 10, 2014

We can confirm Perth #LoveMakesAWay group were indeed strip searched by police. But the real story is the ongoing dehumanisation of refugees

– Love Makes A Way (@lovemakesaway) December 10, 2014

They are right, the real story is the asylum seekers. But it is not the only story. The story of a growing number of ordinary Christians, willing to do the hard yards of finding the right spirit, and refusing to cooperate with evil, is also real. And it's a story that hasn't readily been heard in Australia, certainly not in this generation.

Postscript: As I write, a group of seven *Love Makes A Way* protestors are facing court in Geelong for their protest in October. They are pleading guilty but asserting their belief that they have done the "right thing." They are giving no guarantees of good behaviour, because in all honesty, they will not commit to repeat their actions. They have been fined \$200 without conviction recorded. This of course would be very

interesting if it ever gets this far in Tasmania, considering the recent passage of new anti-protest laws in this State.

Q&A: 'Ministers: we accept equality'. What are your thoughts?

Clara asks (on my facebook wall): *I read an interesting article today titled, 'Ministers take aim at religious extremists: we accept equality'. Wondered your thoughts on this issue.*



The article that Clara refers to is this: <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/federal-election/ministers-take-aim-at-religious-extremists-we-accept-equality/story-fnho52ip-1226676430143>

The signatories to the letter referred to in the article can be found here: <http://www.australianmarriageequality.com/wp/2012/04/04/42-multi-faith-clergy-call-for-marriage-equality/>

The letter is actually quite old (April 2012). The fact that it is being raised in July 2013 as a rhetorical riposte to ACL attacks on Kevin Rudd is symptomatic of how these things get used as political footballs: "Christians talking against gay marriage? Well, here's our Christians talking about gay marriage and they support us!" There's nothing particularly wrong with that, that's one of the reasons the letter was written in the first place I'm sure.

So what are my thoughts? Nothing profound really.

This not a surprise. The signatories to the letter are mostly your left-leaning Anglicans and Unitings with the odd Baptist and so forth. Nothing unexpected. We could talk about how representative these leaders are of the Christian populace and the fact that they generally belong to the parts of the church that are in decline, but whatever, that isn't the point.

For me the two interesting things are this:

1) Firstly: Christians must demonstrate that their views are Christian.

I'm not saying that these leaders aren't Christian. What I am saying is that it is not enough to say "I'm a Christian and I support SSM." They need to articulate and demonstrate the connections between the Christian philosophy and the SSM agenda and why they are congruous and supportive of one another. This is how you give your support substance and weight.

It is particularly so when you have signatories from a wide range of faith positions (including non-Christian) – what philosophical ground, that is common and not antagonistic to the positions held, is being used to espouse the opinion? Without that it's not much more than a rather small petition.

From what I can see of the text of the letter (not easily accessible as far as I can see, even through the AME website) this hasn't been done. The two texts I do have are this excerpt:

"As clergy from various different faiths and denominations in Australia, we believe marriage is a fundamental institution in our society. It fosters greater commitment between partners, provides children with a sense of security and stability, and strengthens ties with families and communities. Marriage is a blessing to be shared, so we

encourage people of faith who support marriage equality to voice their support for the reform by responding to the House of Representatives inquiry on same-sex marriage today."

This isn't much more than the "marriage is a blessing" and "blessing should be shared" argument. Which says nothing at all really. None of us will disagree on the blessing of marriage. What we do disagree on is the characteristics of marriage which inform and construct and advance that blessing.

Rowland Croucher (say it ain't so Rowland!) is the other text which does inform this a bit:

"How can I, a heterosexual who's been very happily married for 50 years, tell anyone else they don't have the right to form a loving, committed, lifelong union and enjoy the fruits of marriage as I have done?" wrote Reverend Dr Rowland Croucher, from John Mark Ministries, Victoria. "Marriage is not a club to be restricted to some. Like the Gospel, it is a blessing to be shared."

And at least he gives some reasoning, albeit thin. Here Dr. Croucher connects "marriage" to the inclusivity of the gospel. Which has some merit, because the gospel is inclusive.

(The "how can I tell anyone else line" is rhetorical fluff because it doesn't speak to the core issue of what marriage actually is, just to the fact that whatever it is it cannot be arbitrarily restricted – we all agree with that.)

Now this is all great, but as Christian leaders, these people need to present a clear and coherent connection between a Christian framework and their position. I won't reiterate all that here, but the sorts of questions that go unanswered by Croucher et al. include clear rebuttals "OK, Rowland, but the Gospel is also exclusive (Christ alone) and calls for a

surrender of one's whole life (including sexual activity, both heterosexual and homosexual), how do you coincide these Christian truths with your statement about marriage?" And also fundamental questions of epistemology, Scriptural affirmations of the connection of marriage with the created order and so on.

In other words (and this speaks to why marriage is so contentious), our understanding of marriage derives from the full sweep of Christian philosophy. If you're going to talk about this you need to demonstrate coherence across the whole. These signatories haven't done this.

2) Secondly: "Christian" is not a badge. It's used that way by revisionists all the time who think in terms of "attributes" and "minorities."

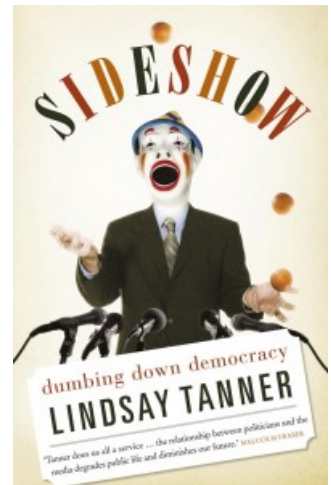
Religion has become an "attribute" of a person, not a voluntary and adopted wholistic framework for life. Therefore if you can demonstrate that one "Christian" agrees with you, you can assert that there is no reason why someone else wearing that badge shouldn't also.

This is an insipid and patronising understanding of how religion and worldviews work. The badges don't matter, it's the substance that counts. The people that don't support SSM have good reasons for not doing so. It's not enough to throw their badge back at them, you actually have to deal with their reasonings and demonstrate their unreasonableness.

To conclude. What are my thoughts? Nothing unexpected, just another demonstration of the insipidness that tends to dominate this debate.

Review: Sideshow – Dumbing Down Democracy

I've been looking forward to reading former Federal Finance Minister, Lindsay Tanner's *Sideshow*. Tanner always came across as a thoughtful politician when he was in public office – it was clear his book was going to be no Lathemesque tell-all whinge but a critique of our governance in our society from a unique perspective.



But it isn't a groundbreaking revelation of the whys and woes of Australian politics. Tanner gives a thorough commentary – particular with regard to the events surrounding the 2010 federal election – but often he is simply shedding light on the bleeding obvious: our politics has become driven by spin, show-horses get more power than work-horses, and ideas and thoughtful governance are being forced to give way to the charade of “look like you're doing something and don't offend anyone important” (crf. p15).

Much of this book explores the codependent interplay between journalists and politicians. “Calm makes for terrible telly” – Tanner quotes Michael Roux on page 58 – and so politicians are forced to create drama and manhandle debate into narratives that excite but don't invite a consideration of social value.

There was a modicum of challenge for me: I was one of those who bemoaned the “Kath & Kim” nature of the last Federal election campaign which seemed ruled by focus groups made up of the disengaged. My opinion firmed up – let's get rid of compulsory voting – let the engaged people vote, and the disengaged exercise their abstention by default. Tanner

himself muses on the possibility (p208). The challenge is in the recognition that I am, perhaps, one of the "cultural elites" with "waning power... to enforce notions of respectability and community values across our society." (p180). I hope not. I long not for enforcement but for engagement, yet we are caught in a spinning spiral of cynicism and childish, formulaic, leadership-by-the-numbers.

The book is a good read. It will continue to form some of the political engagement I have the opportunity to participate in these days. My one frustration was that Tanner does not leave us with a solution. I think perhaps it will take a crisis and a miracle to restore our national political integrity, let us pray they go together.