

Talking Cents

April 2018

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This issue is contributed by Kevin McBride of Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

It's Time to Speak Truth to Power

On the day I set aside to write this article, the power went off in our street. Vector Limited had decided to replace five older concrete telegraph poles with five new ones and, not having received the notice that told me of this intention, I was reduced to relying on what was left of the battery in my laptop (two minutes) to get the task done. At the time, my lack of power seemed significant, for I was intending to review two articles relating to the activities of a man aiming to utilise immense power in his capacity as President of the United States. In effect, he is setting his nation on a contrary path to most of the rest of the world in the two critical fields of energy and military dominance.

Since 1945, the nations of the world have striven mightily and made great progress in efforts to reduce the possibility of such international catastrophes as World War II and the preceding World War I recurring. International bodies like the United Nations and collaborative alliances such as the European Union, ASEAN and various treaty agreements have worked to find and develop peaceful ways to solve the inevitable conflict situations which are part of human relationship. My own base organisation, Pax Christi, was set up by French and German Catholics at the end of World War II to find ways for disputing nations to resolve their conflicts through dialogue and reconciliation. Its work has been duplicated at personal, community and national levels by many similar groups devoted to peace among nations, between groups and increasingly, with nature.

Therefore, it has been vastly disappointing to see the good work of so many people and

groups placed in jeopardy by the aggressively narrow-minded views of one man, who happens to be the president of the most powerful country in the world.

Michael Klare, Professor of Peace and Security Studies at Hampshire College, Amherst, Massachusetts, says that President Trump is seeking to increase America's global dominance through "stealing from the future" by "freeing Big Energy from every form of restriction and regulation" (Tomgram: Michael Klare, "Militarising America's Energy Policy", 11 February 2018 www.tomdispatch.com/authors/michaelklare/).

Klare believes that Trump's "addiction to fossil fuels" amounts to "stealing everything from [our children and grandchildren] including, potentially, the very environment that's nurtured generation after generation of children on this planet." In addition, "the expansion of the fossil fuel industry and its exports has been transformed into a major component of American foreign and security policy", seemingly, the motivation underpinning all this president's erratic activities in "making America great again".

Trump's approach is radically opposed to international and national agreements restricting the extraction and use of fossil fuels in an effort to limit and counter the effects of climate change. He has reversed the Clean Power Plan of his predecessor, President Obama, which required cuts in coal usage in the United States, and has repudiated the Paris Agreement, in which 194 nations agreed to tackle climate change. He claims to be doing this in the interests of preserving America's "sovereignty".

As Michael Klare says, “the militarisation of energy policy and the lodging of fossil fuels at the heart of national security policy ... also threatens to doom the rest of us. With prolonged droughts, increasingly severe storms and hurricanes and killer heat-waves affecting ever-larger swathes of the planet, with sea-levels rising and extreme weather becoming the norm, the urge for progress on climate change is only growing stronger.” He goes on: “for President Trump, with his thoroughly fossil-fuelised view of the world, this is just the beginning.”

The second document I read was the “Nuclear Policy Review”, published by the Office of the Secretary of Defence in February 2018. In this review, President Trump, whose “priority is to protect the United States, allies and partners”, expresses a need to “sustain and replace its nuclear capabilities, modernise NC3 (nuclear command, control and communication) and strengthen the integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning ... effectively assuring allies and partners ... on their confidence in the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence.” The review goes on to specify areas and levels of renewal, replacement and enhancement of existing weapons in order to assure “an effective, responsive and resilient nuclear weapons infrastructure ... [which] offers tangible evidence to both allies and potential adversaries of US nuclear weapons capabilities and thus contributes to deterrence, assurance and hedging against adverse developments. It also discourages adversary interest in arms competition”.

This last has already proven to be “fake news”, as reports coming out of Russia tell of renewed weapons upgrades being taken up there as a direct response to Trump’s own policies, increasing the danger of a renewed Cold War.

Where does our country stand in this return to aggressive stand-off military posturing? Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has already declared his “best mates” relationship following a visit to President Trump; our prime minister has been more cautious thus far, so there is still time for peacemakers among us to act.

New Zealand retains, in spite of some softening under recent leaders, our non-nuclear policy. We led the world in our resistance to nuclearisation under the 1980s Lange Government, including our rejection of nuclear ship visits and strident opposition to nuclear weapons testing in our region. But we also have a history of alliance with powerful protectors and a feeling of obligation to a more powerful friend who “saved us” from the Japanese threat of the 1940s. In the light of current US policy developments, we need to make it very clear where we stand on these two issues of energy and militarisation. The directions being taken by the Trump administration require an unequivocal statement of our position on both energy and nuclear weapons. President Trump’s nuclear policy review makes several mentions of “allies and partners”, necessitating a clear need for us to declare our position lest our compliance be taken for granted.

America under Trump is stepping back from international advances made in addressing climate change and demilitarisation (both of which New Zealand has backed), increasingly isolating itself from those humanitarian advances. We have to take sides in this process with those who base their policies on the need for their children to live in a safe and peaceful world, working to reverse self-centred policies which have already brought the Doomsday Clock to a heightened state of danger.

We are called to make a clear response to the situation created by President Trump on these two issues. We again have before us what amounts to a choice between life and death; in the interest of our children and their children’s children: “It’s long past time to get up, stand up, get on the streets, make our voice heard, not slink in the shadows, bemoaning our fate while there is a way to win the struggle for disarmament, for peace, for putting power under our control” (Christopher Black; “US Nuclear Policy Review; The World Is Our Enemy” <https://journal-neo.org/2018/02/08/us-nuclear-policy-review-the-world-is-our-enemy/>).

Or, in the words of Deuteronomy 31; 19, we must exercise our power to “choose life that we and our descendants may live”.