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Key Social Changes

July 15, 2000
Thank you for your invitation to your conference. 
Independent Schools: Enduring Values and Changing Structures-

I am provoked and challenged by such an invitation. I am pleased to accept, then as I settle in to preparing some sort of coherent paper, I find it very demanding. There is too much material floating around, there are media reports of community concerns, TV coverage of disasters, accidents, pain in our world, yet not much analysis or programs to solve problems. Politicians like teachers and schools are expected to have the answers, yet we get and take light time to think issues through. So thanks for the impetus to think it bit.

You’ve asked me to address “Key Social Changes”.
As your program notes explain; you have started the task for me.

Your three main themes: Society: Economy: Expectations: describe very well the world where, at least for the last 50-25 years, expectations have been related to the economy, to money, material wealth, getting richer, improving one’s lot.

What is emerging now is a clear message that money/wealth is not sufficient. There is a great hunger in the community for values, for something ‘more’ in peoples’ lives.

I recently asked a young colleague how the world had changed over the last 20-25 years. The answer was, too my surprise, not much. It is essentially his lifetime and he thought things were “more or less much the same”

I disagree, changes in the world since 1975 have been monumental. The Cold War has ended, the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall have come down, apartheid has been overthrown and Nelson Mandela has been the first black President of South Africa. The women’s movement has emerged, anti discrimination legislation is in place, environmental issues are now major political concerns.
Over those 25 years communism has been crushed and capitalism reigns supreme. Lest I be misunderstood, let me make it clear, I do not support the totalitarian regimes of communism, but I regret there is no alternative to capitalism. There is much that is good in capitalism and much that is bad. It has become an overarching ‘policy’, instead of serving political and social goals. The institutions that stood against the excesses of capital, like the union movement and National Governments, are under unrelieved pressure and attack. Only now are people beginning to organise against capital’s pursuit of profit before people. I’ll come back to this later.

Computers have emerged in this period, and they have brought with them a whole new world. There is the dramatic increase in communications, and access to information. E-mail and the Internet (Sunset and Evening Star)

“and one clear call for me, and may there be no moaning at the bar, when I put out to E”

E-mail and the Internet have and are changing our lives daily. In business and industry, computers have seen people replaced by machines and robots, and thousands of jobs have been lost to working people. The new jobs require computer skills and many displaced workers do not have them. Let me interpolate here – all of us are glad that machines have replaced people in doing back breaking and dangerous heavy labour, and in doing repetitive, uninspiring assembly line type jobs.

However, replacing people’s jobs has not been accompanied by new job and skill training and many many workers have to face long term unemployment.

Further replacing humans with machinery has gone too far in any number of areas. People are distressed and offended when they find a message and instructions instead of a person at the other end of the telephone. We know about road rage and now we hear about phone rage. Very Understandable!

For many people their income and job prospects require them to call government agencies like Centrelink and Job Network, and they find that from Tanunda SA they are talking to someone in Perth, Brisbane, or Albury – Wodonga, after they have pressed the numbers and waited on the line.

Into this world of changes now comes the double helix of DNA – our genetic maps.

I have mentioned only a few of the changes of the last 25 or 50 years. Over that same time, there have been some remarkable achievements. Education for all Australians, improved health care – surgical techniques, antibiotics, contraception and family planning, potable water across the country, a clearer woman’s voice and an ever increasing aboriginal voice.
For some years now, people have been recognising that there is something wrong in our societies. Despite all the gains, and there are many of schools, hospitals, roads, telephones etc, people are not happy or contented, and they are saying so in ever louder voices. From the new age to the deeply philosophical, writers are describing a crisis of confidence in our political and social institutions and their failure to meet the needs and the hunger of the people. There is a great hunger in the community for values, for something ‘more’ in peoples’ lives.

At the very time people are recognising a need for “something more”, the very institutions they would in the past have turned to, are now seen as out of date and out of touch.

At the centre of all this change stand our schools, still recognisable, still much the same, still there and families are more and more turning to them.

As well as dealing with increasing demands on the academic curriculum, schools are being asked to provide values for our children.

Schools are becoming the one last and only enduring institution. At the same time they are being asked to deal with more change more rapidly than ever before.

What is it that people want?

The public clearly wants leaders who can tell the truth, not just what they think people want to hear, leaders who know how to listen to what ordinary people are saying and most importantly, leaders who can articulate a coherent and compelling vision, that gives expression to the deepest aspirations of the community.
This put me in mind of the playwright Vaclav Havel’s speech in the early 1990’s upon becoming the new chief of State.

He said,

“For 40 yrs you’ve heard on this day from my predecessors the same thing. Our country is flourishing, we believe in our Government and beautiful prospects are open to us. I assume that you have not named me to this office so that I too should lie to you.

Our country is not flourishing; the great creative and spiritual potential of our nation is not being applied meaningfully. Entire branches of industry are producing things for which there is no demand... Our out-moded economy wastes energy. We’ve spoiled our lands, rivers and forests inherited from our ancestors and we have the worst environment in all of Europe. The worst of it is that we live in a spoiled moral environment ...we’ve become morally ill, because we are used to saying one thing and thinking another,” (Creative Spirituality)

How do we do that?

Whether we are a politician, teacher, parent or citizen we are all charged with the responsibility of evaluating the changes and I think that this conference is about looking at how do we do the evaluation and how do we impart it to the next generation in our care.

One of the very important changes that our evaluation must take into account is the collapse of our religious institutions. In times past, much of the old source of ethic or moral was based on the institution knowing what was right and wrong, good and bad, and telling us. To be moral all that we had to do was to obey without question.

Nowadays people are better educated, less dependent on the “ethical handout” from church pulpits and more questioning and sceptical. To my mind this is only for the good. However, at the same time, they are searching and often feel isolated and alone in their quest.

One of the great benefits of our religious institutions was the community that they created. We may not have been accepting of the advice about the way to goodness but at least we all know where we belonged. We were part of a tribe. That is now largely gone.
Other institutions are going through the same thing, in particular politics. There are increased numbers of swinging voters replacing the tribal loyalty to the Labor and Liberal parties. The very independence and right to make up one's own mind, which people have fought for, also carry with them an onus, a responsibility, a burden and also the seeds of separation of the individual separate from the group.

Your challenge is not only to deliver the evaluation of the changes it is to do it with the students and parents who are more and more able, more and more stroppy and opinionated, and more and more demanding, with less and less time.

When I chaired the inquiry into the Status of teaching – A Class Act – a recurring theme in the submissions and from witnesses was the pressures on TIME. There was little or no time to deal with issues, to push ideas around, to think. Yet what is being asked of our schools demands considerable and deep meditation.

Schools are being asked to provide values for our children, but how do we know what values?

Some parents may express this explicitly, but usually the school advertises it's mission statement and the parents in choosing that school are presumed to endorse those values.

The nature of teaching is changing again, indeed it may even need a changing pedagogy.

Teaching is no longer about providing information. Students have it by the bucket load, particularly with the expansion of computers and the Internet. This easy access to information is leading to great changes in the lives of our young people and in their employment prospects.

What teachers now have to do is help children know where to find information, how to order and assemble that information and then how to make an argument, how to use the information.

Examining information and how to use it must necessarily lead to evaluating that information, indeed a discussion of values.

How do we decide what is important, what factors are involved in the decision making process, and what values do we draw on?
This necessarily has to put new and great demands on teachers. Whether we like it or not our teachers are forced to confront moral and ethical questions with their students everyday.

Intruding into the curriculum everyday are issues of major social concern. Whether or not children at your school are doing drugs do you, that is your school, address the issue of safe injecting rooms? What do you say as a school about contraception, condoms, pregnancy and AIDS?

What about Youth Suicide? Sexual Abuse? Domestic Violence?

These are tough social issues that we know our kids are talking about, and if not should be.

What is your school’s policy in these areas and how is it formed. Is this formulated with the students or is it something that parents are also involved in.

Not long ago I addressed another Independents Schools conference on the question of Reconciliation. What struck me most, indeed even amazed me, was that some of the participants said to me that knowing their parents as they did there was no way that they would raise the question of Reconciliation in their school. They even said they feared parents would withdraw their children from the school.

Is this still the case and what other issues besides reconciliation are taboo?

There are other issues of concern that I believe fall into this “moral and ethical area” – environmental issues, saving the forests, protecting our whales, and there is the question of Globalisation, the dehumanisation of work and the obscene amounts of money some people get, while the gap between the rich and the poor only widens.

Would you agree, would your school agree to assist the students in preparing to participate in a whaling conference?

Would you agree, would your school agree to assist the students to demonstrate at such a conference?

In September the WEF (World Economic Forum) is meeting in Sydney, will you assist your students to participate in the conference? Will you assist them to demonstrate?
The schools tackling these value-laden, if not moral issues are doing so at a time when political leadership has retreated in Social Policy areas.

Politics is important, it is the ‘discourse of public life’ but there are real limits to what ‘politics can provide to improve the human condition.’ However, I’m of the view that Politics can respond with a larger vision that gives us a real sense of purpose, direction, meaning and even, community. Jim Wallis claims in the ‘Soul of Politics’ that,

"Real political leadership offers to lead people to where, in their best selves, they really want to go." (Soul of Politics, pg xv)

When I first got elected to Parliament, I asked my children and their mates to tell me what they wanted me to represent on their behalf. I told them it was clear that the morality of my generation was passe, so what was the new morality that they held, so I could know and represent it? They replied, “That is too hard Mrs C we’ll get back to you in six months.” They haven’t called yet. But in conversation with many of them and my sons, I have learned that they place great store by care and regard on their friends; being there to support them, seeing they’re OK, helping them through rough patches, and celebrating with them the good bits. They share things - clothes, houses, food, books and time differently from earlier generations-but perhaps not too differently from workers in 1891 and women in 1894.

What they don’t have is a clear creed or statement of values on which to pin their lives- the reason for what they do and how they live. They do not use expressions like human life is valuable. They do not talk about good and evil. They do make moral choices; eg the environment, but they do not describe it that way.

Whenever I talk with young people, I marvel at their commitment and their passion and their hunger and I especially marvel at how they choose to be that way without any clear articulation of why they do so. The best they get to is-RIGHTS-of anti-discrimination, of equity, of land rights, environmental protection- but why those rights?

Leadership has to take up that challenge. It has to articulate the reasons behind. To my mind, a vision of Australia as ‘comfortable & relaxed’ is not sufficient, either as a vision or as a description!

‘It’s the economy stupid’ won’t do either. Indeed that slogan encapsulates one of our main problems-it puts the economy at the centre and defines us all as stupid for not knowing and believing that.
Don Argus the CEO of the National Australia Bank had this to say in Copland Memorial Address in 1996,

"Today...As we approach a new century and a new millennium...that confidence is certainly not as evident. We are in a questioning phase. We are questioning the benefits of technology...we are questioning the benefits of the market, driven capitalist economies. We are questioning the relevance of basic institutions such as government...Church...Corporations...Communities...And Families. Ours is not so much an age of reason as an age of seeking the reasons."


Our generation has used technology to make a dramatic improvement in productivity and wealth but in pursuing Capitalism we have created a world bereft of meaning and without concern for the human spirit.

Al Gore, before he became Vice-President of the Unites States wrote poignantly of our fate:

"We have constructed in our civilisation a false world of plastic flowers and Astro-turf, air-conditioning and fluorescent lights, windows that don’t open and background music that never stops, days when we don’t know whether it has rained, nights when the sky never stops glowing, Walkman and Watchman, entertainment cocoons, frozen food for the microwave oven, sleepy hearts jump started by caffeine, alcohol, drugs and illusions."

(Handy, pg13)

The gap between the rich and the poor both within countries in the West and between countries in the world continues to grow. Seventy Corporations now rank bigger than many a nation state. (Handy, pg3) The ILO calculates that one third of the worlds workers are unemployed or under-employed. (Handy, pg3) And the world’s environment cannot continue to tolerate the endless pursuit of economic growth. I’m sure I’m not the only one who finds it obscene that Bill Gates earns $50 million dollars a week.

As Charles Handy writes in the ‘The Hungry Spirit’,

"Many people know life is not a business. They sense that, maybe, it is love and friendship, a responsibility for others or a belief in a cause of some sort not money, that makes the real difference to the way life goes, that it is, in the end important to believe in a purpose for our lives, even though it may be hard to work out what it is. Most of us have modest ambitions. We want to live decent lives in a decent society."

(Handy, pg14)
After 2 decades of public quietness and docility, there are signs that public protests about the way of the world are beginning to emerge again.

In an article in the Weekend Australian, July 7-8, 2000, headed "Fights cameras, activists", Sian Powell writes about protests in Sydney recently against Nike and against the Olympics and Juan Antonio Samaranch. Powell adds "an elegant piece of hacking a couple of days earlier had diverted all those who logged on to the Nike.com to the anti - capitalist protest site run by the S11 Alliance. Nike was not amused."

"CACTUS – Campaign Against Corporate Tyranny United in Struggle – ran the anti-Nike protest in the Sydney shopping mall (no one was admitting to the hacking) and for them as for so many others all roads lead to September 11th when the WEF begins it's three day meeting in Melbourne."

Dr James Goodman, a lecturer at the University of Technology in Sydney, says: "its more a growing disquiet with the way the world is being run, and global organisations such as the WTO, the World Bank, the WEF and the IMF are cast as the chief demons."

Jesse Wynhausen – member of CACTUS says public protest is a democratic right. However he prefers neighbourhood teach-ins, discussions etc as they did before Seattle. He doesn’t like machismo stuff, he says "our strength lies in the moral high ground."

The article goes on to say that it is a moral high ground to which Australians are increasingly flocking.

The computer is central to all this because it the computer and the Internet that allowed these people to organise before the Seattle protest.

In the Australian Financial Review, July 1-2, 2000, there was an article headed "A radically different union movement".

"In the global economy Australian unions are embracing new tactics to sell an old message: - united we stand, divided we fall"

Amongst other things, the article referred to new approaches and new techniques by unions – through their shareholder muscle in boardrooms. They also refer to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the increasing inequality in society. Sharon Burrow the new President of the ACTU, condemned "the obscenity of CEO's collecting millions of dollars in salary packages and share options".
I said earlier that better education has meant that people are making up their own minds on issues, all to the good. But there is a corresponding loss of community. The process for protests like Seattle has built on an emerging network community. New groups, new communities are forming and old communities like the union movement survive by changing. By acting together with their families and communities as they did during the waterfront dispute.

"Several years ago now, Mahatma Ghandi warned against what he called the seven social sins. He named them as politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice. These social sins today provide an apt description of our leading institutions and cultural patterns; they are the accepted practises of the life of modern nations." (Soul of Politics, Pg xi-xii, 1994)

Many people argue that our present political institutions are not addressing these 'social sins,' and indeed may no longer be able to.

Wallis says:
1. "Liberalism is unable to articulate or demonstrate the kind of moral values that must undergird any serious movement of social transformation. The critical link between personal responsibility and societal change is missing on the left."

2. "Conservatism still denies the reality of structural injustice and social oppression. To call for individual self-improvement and a return to family values while ignoring the pernicious effects of poverty, racism, and sexism is to continue blaming the victim." (Soul of Politics, PG xii, 1994)

3. Constituency-based politics, with its fractional interests, will not lead us to this higher ground. Politics has been reduced to a selfish struggle for power among competing interests and groups, instead of a process of searching for the common good."

4. A vision of politics must be articulated that clarifies the essential moral issues at stake in any political discussion. Spiritual values must enter the public square. We are not calling here for the invasion of sectarian religion or theocratic grabs for power but rather for the contribution of neglected values to the political process. Most of us believe that institutional religion and the state must remain separate. But without values of moral conscience, our political life quickly degenerates into public corruption, cultural confusion, and social injustice. (Soul of Politics, xiii, 1994)
5. "We require a more insightful analysis of the globalisation of the economy and the degradation of popular culture." "What we seem to have lost is something as simple as respect for each other, for the earth, and for the kind of values that could hold us together. Most of the social, economic, and political issues we now face have a spiritual core. The profit driven structure of the global economy will inevitably produce an ever-widening gulf and conflict between us unless we submit our economic policies and institutions to the ethic of community." (Soul of Politics, xiii, 1994)

How might we begin to make new kinds of political judgements, what kind of criteria might we consider?

"We begin not by searching for new macro-economic systems to replace the ideological dinosaurs that have failed us. Instead, we start by subjecting all projects, initiatives, decisions, and policies to new criteria: whether they make justice more possible for all of us and especially for those on the bottom; whether they allow us to live in harmony with the earth; and whether they increase the participation of all people in decision making. In other words, we, must learn to judge our social and economic choices by whether they empower the powerless, protect the earth, and foster true democracy." (Soul of Politics, xix, 1994)

Schools and teachers today must face that last paragraph. Who besides you and your schools can subject projects and policies to new criteria – whether they make justice possible for us all – and who besides you and your schools can teach – pass the techniques for evaluation to the next generation and their parents?

I’ve said in my summary of this speech that often when things are bleak we look for people to blame and high on this list are women. I note that many of you here today are women and you may be encouraged and comforted to know that I certainly do not believe that the collapse of the community, our churches and political institutions and the general absence of values are all down (due) to women!

What I do believe is that the women’s voice and perspective will make a great contribution to finding solutions to these challenges. It is a time that calls for great compassion and understanding – heart as well as head, and women have much to offer in both these categories.

Finally, I want to leave you a challenge. In preparing a similar paper a year or so ago I noted some of the great symbols that marked the end of the 19th Century, start of the 20th Century – things like the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Federation of States and the vote for women in Australia, the Papal encyclical Rerum Novarum about rights for workers.
These symbols represented the understanding and the aspirations of the people that with technology, learning and good management we could make a better world. Well we have the material gains, but not the spirit, the soul.

What do you think we should build at the end of the 20th Century, beginning of the 21st Century – the new millennium?

Is it the Olympic ideal without the money, the crass commercialism?
Is it the Millennium TV Spectacle from the around the world last New Years Eve?
Is it the Millennium Dome in London? If so why is it that people prefer the Ferris Wheel? Is it because it enables them see further?

Somehow I believe that we must make the centre of our building respect for each other, for valuing humans, our brothers and sisters, our World Tribe. Community is nothing if not local, although it benefits when it resonates globally.

Young people in numbers are pointing the way to a world Environment protected and cared for – we can follow their lead!

How would you build it?

For me, the monument the building centres around the double helix of DNA. In it is all the sameness of and all the difference between the peoples of the world. It is so efficient, so compact and yet allows for such great individual difference and variation. Single units each critically important have a totally different value as part of the whole.

To look into the double helix is to marvel and meditate, to be in awe. It is in design, perhaps best expressed by John Donne –
“Ask not for whom the Bell tolls, it tolls for Thee.”

“The meeting of self and others, of individual, and the community, is probably the most complex issue of our time. Organisations, as well as individuals, have therefore got to decide what they are about before they can decide what they have to do. A philosophy for our time is needed, both for institutions, particularly those of business, and for individuals…” (Handy, pg8)

Certainly, I see that all of you have a vital role to play in addressing that challenge, in the communities of your schools and with the generation that will be the leaders in the new millennium.

Thank you