Living Justly in Aotearoa

Inserts August 2009

Talking Cents

July 2009

Talking Cents is a 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, Pax Christi Aotearoa-New Zealand.

SURVIVING DEMOCRACY

When I was recently in England, TV and the news media in general was dominated by the scandal over MP's expenses. A June 3 *Guardian* article by Tom Clark analysed a survey of 5000 readers showing a perception that there were severe faults in the British democratic process. 45% of readers thought that "*parliament* [the elected representatives of the people] *couldn't control the government*"; another 45% thought "*the party line strangles independent thou*ght" while 43% deplored "*the sway of monied interests*". The general consensus was that an old and revered democracy is losing the ideals of democracy because of dominance by interests representing wealth and power.

I returned home to find a crisis of democracy in my own home setting. As a citizen of 'the People's Republic of Waiheke', I joined most of my community in resisting the demands of the Auckland City Council that we dismantle a well-functioning locally-run waste management system in favour of a multi-national owned and operated enterprise in Auckland City. The case was a good one: the local trust-operated scheme employed local people, reduced the waste sent off the island, recycled an increasing amount of useful material, selling it at reduced costs to ratepayers, and was even turning plastic waste into building material. Users do their own kerbside recycling, reducing street-side hindrance and enabling the usage of smaller collection vehicles. An efficient, locally-driven and ecologically advanced system. It will be replaced by oversize trucks collecting large, partly-filled wheelie-bins along the fringe of narrow roads to be shipped in increasing volumes off the island and subjected to less efficient sorting at an Auckland yard, which seems to be unable to sell much of its salvaged material.

Next, came the news that the Government had severely modified the recommendations of the Auckland Governance Commission by removing, among other items, those referring to the reservation of a number of seats for Maori, including some for Mana Whenua, customary guardians of regional lands. Another action taken in defiance of the will of the public (to say nothing of Maori community submissions) as presented to the commissioners.

Is our democracy then in trouble? Indeed, what is our democracy?

Perhaps the most popular definition is that of Abraham Lincoln, delivered in his 1863 Gettysburg address: "*government of the people, by the people, for the people.*" The Readers Digest dictionary defines democracy as: "*government by the people, exercised directly or through elected representatives*", tracing the origin of the word to its roots in the Greek word 'demos', the common people. Democratic government developed in Athens around the time of Pericles (495-429 BC) partly in response to the rule of a series of good and bad tyrants. It firmly centred government in the will of the public assembly. From then on, it has had its avid critics and supporters: Plato and Aristotle considered the Athenian form whimsical, slanted towards the poor and subject to demagoguery. 18th century 'enlightenment' philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau moved it progressively towards the idea of universal franchise, though not without residual opposition from those who wanted more consideration given to the votes of the richer and better-educated. Latterly, Winston Churchill probably summed up the ongoing controversy attached to the efficacy of modern-day democracy:

"*It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except for all others that have been tried*." (Hansard 11 November 1947.)

In spite of this affirmation, democracy has increasingly fallen out of favour. Even among its enthusiastic advocates, like the United States, growing numbers feel disenfranchised by prevailing systems and stay away from polls which don't seem to be able to represent their preference. Cynicism in some cases is related to a perceived 'tyranny of the majority' which excludes minorities whether ethnic/cultural (as with Maori in many local body elections) or community (as in the case of Waiheke mentioned above). In others, it arises from situations like that in Palestine/Israel, where one democracy (Hamas-ruled Gaza) is not perceived as equal to another (Likud-ruled Israel) in spite of a perceived fairness in the elections held by both. The apparent rigging of votes in the recent elections in Iran and the 'hanging chads' of George W. Bush's triumph in Florida in 2001 add to the suspicion expressed in my opening comments, that many results of so-called democratic processes don't represent the will of the common people.

Can democracy survive its own faults?
Can minority communities 'survive' democracy?

Transparency International is a civil society organisation leading a global fight against corruption, one method of the wealthy and powerful to overrule the will of the 'demos' or common people. Their attention is not only directed to African dictatorships or Asian military juntas; they have also commented on the transparency of elections, consultative processes and business operations in countries like our own which have a top-level grade regarding our freedom from corruption. Such civil society bodies make a major contribution to ensuring a level of openness that maximises the store of social capital, the pool of trust and reciprocity among citizens which enables them to participate actively in the governance of their lives. Similar non-professional civil society groupings have strengthened the capacity of the Waiheke community in the struggle against the tyranny of urban corporate interests.
In moral terms, civil society seeks justice for its members and all in society, specifically through the exercise of commutative justice: the human right to fairness in all social contracts and exchanges, in recognition of the human dignity of all. Civil society affirms the right of people to participate in decisions which affect them, thus claiming a role in the process of democracy.

Needless to say, the Church is called to be part of civil society and to initiate and support action which ensures that all people are treated with dignity and justice. In the 1980s, Pope John Paul II exhorted the Catholic Church to exercise 'solidarity', defined as "*a firm and persevering commitment to the common good of all and each individual*" as a moral counter to the dominance of "*a desire for profit and thirst for power*". He saw the latter overcoming the traditional Christian " *commitment to the good of one's neighbour … instead of exploiting him* (sic)… [serving] *him instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage."* ("Pope John Paul II "*On Social Concerns*" Para 38 1987).

Another moral principle guiding the activities of civil society is the principle of subsidiarity, whereby any activity which can be performed by a more decentralised entity should be. This was included as a principle in human rights law in Article 5 of the Treaty setting up the Council of Europe, seeking to ensure that all elements of society would be able to take part in their governance to avoid takeover by the rich and powerful.

As elements in civil society, our parishes and church communities should find ways to take part in action that opposes centralised decision-making to the exclusion of the will of "demos" or common people. A recent sermon delivered to the Anglican congregation on Waiheke on the waste-management issue did just that, picking up the links between Christian belief and engagement in community issues. It gave a fine example of participation of the people, by the people and for the people.

Democracy is all the more healthy for such interventions by civil society. They reinforce the capacity of ordinary people to engage in the achievement of the common good, the fullness of life for all. They help 'survive' democracy, to preserve it in its best forms.

Talking Cents

June 2009

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Gossiping the Gospel

Several years ago the Auckland Anglican Women's Centre published a book entitled *Gossiping the Gospel* and pointed out that at one time the verb carried positive connotations.

For a long time many of us thought economics was something we would never understand but now we are gossiping about the global crisis just about every day. Economic gossiping now includes issues about the world financial crisis, financial structures, the gaps between rich and poor peoples and nations and the causes of poverty. Frequently breaking through to the surface is the question of what we mean by wealth, and who is being deprived of it. And recently, with the appointment of Helen Clark to her position at the United Nations, sustainable development and aid have demanded equal attention. In a short period of time the links between global and local economic factors have become a matter of widespread gossip.

Many of us were already using energy-saving lightbulbs, growing vegetables, sharing recipes for healthy food, encouraging use of public transport, telling each other about exercise programmes, encouraging our street to look after rubbish well, and caring for each other in times of sickness. But now all this has become part of a conscious appreciation of the world-wide economic scenario. Interest in what the church is doing and saying about all this is considerable, including from some who have few recent links with organised religion. So, what does the Gospel have to offer in this multi-faceted and multi-leveled crisis?

At the international level, on 27th March 2009 the World Council of Churches published its letter to Prime Minister Gordon Brown as Chairperson of the early April Summit meeting of the G20 group. Some of the issues it raises are similar to the statements that came out of the World Social Forum in Belem earlier this year that John Roberts and David Tutty spoke about in the March and May editions of Talking Cents

The proposals in the WCC letter were based on the theological critique of globalisation that the organisation has been undertaking for some years. It was presented to the G20 meeting as a basis for on-going wider debate.

<u>It contained 12 points</u>:

1 That this crisis is an opportunity for the international community to create a new financial architecture to be developed under the aegis of the United Nations where broad participation of all countries and the civil society could take place. The G20 discussion should therefore prepare the way for a fuller discussion at the May UN General Assembly debate on the issue.

2. Set a process for democratisation of all global finance and trade organisations.

3. Deter destabilising currency speculation by transforming and strengthening regulatory institutions.

4. Develop a practice of ethics and social justice that can guide financial markets in the world.

5. Establish international, permanent and binding mechanisms of control over capital flows and capital flight.

6. Implement an international monetary system based on a new system of reserves, including the creation of regional reserve currencies in order to end the current supremacy of the US dollar and to ensure international financial stability.

7.Prohibit hedge funds and the over the counter markets, where derivatives and other toxic products are exchanged, without public control.

8 Eradicate speculation on commodidites, primarily on food and energy, by creating public mechanisms that will monitor speculative behaviour.

9. Dismantle tax havens, bring the users to justice (individuals, companies, banks and financial intermediaries) and create an international tax organisation to combat tax competition and evasion.

10 Establish a new international system of wealth sharing by creating a system of global taxes (on financial transactions, polluting activities and high income) to finance global public goods.

11.Cancel illegitimate debt and address unsustainable debts of impoverished countries and establish a system of democratic, accountable, fair sovereign borrowing and lending that serves sustainable and equitable development.

12. Ensure that this crisis will not lead to the reduction of the Official Development Aid (ODA) to poor countries, nor adversely affect the Millenium Development Goals.

The letter concluded by saying, 'The essence of a new global financial architecture should be to connect finance and real economy'. Copies were sent by the WCC to the UN Secretary General, and the President of the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly that was meeting in May.

The WCC Letter to the G20 meeting reflects the work of many Christian theologians and economists including people from Europe, Africa, South America and Asia. The WCC has identified common ground and differences between it and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in critical dialogues over the years, especially since 2004. So this March 2009 letter is not a bolt out of the blue. For example, *Wealth Creation and Justice: the WCC's Encounters with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund* was the title of the WCC Report of the first of these encounters. It raised issues about the mandates of these institutions, their views on development, and their policies on wealth creation, justice and the commodification of public goods; issues that remain crucial in 2009.

Meanwhile, the on-going WCC programme of world-wide consultations entitled *Poverty, Wealth, and the Ecology*. continues to flesh-out the relationship between these factors (www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness). These regional and local voices help us examine what the G20 Summit did and did not address. We are then able to assess whether such economic decisions create enough space at national and local levels for a re-distribution of wealth, and forms of development that make a significant difference for the marginalised in each local context.

In this multi-leveled economic crisis, we have the opportunity to gossip an energising understanding of the Way of Jesus that does more than make sense to us. Our expression of the Gospel needs to carry tangible hope of freedom, joy, and lasting peace for those who are prevented from fully participating in their societies. To meet such criteria, we may need to re-examine some of our theological assumptions: an absent God and the false splitting of personal and structural conversion may be two examples of in-depth work we need to do.

Families of the poor frequently articulate angst to me about the economic state of the world. Acute suffering can lend support to the idea that only an absent intervening God can get us out of bad situations. But if God has always been among us, embracing our complex mixed potential for good or ill, then we see Jesus reflecting that divine call for both personal and structural transformation. As we gossip about the core issues facing us, the poor of the world and the environment might be heartened to hear us searching for ways to re-distribute the wealth of God's gracious activity.

Would Jesus Smack a Child?
Glynn Cardy, St. Matthews in the City 5 Jul 2009

Children throughout most of recorded history have been seen as the property of their fathers, similar to women and slaves. It was the father in the ancient Roman world who determined whether a child would live or die. It is estimated that 20-40% of children were either killed or abandoned, with some of the latter surviving as slaves. A child was a nobody unless the father accepted him or her within the family. It was girls who were more often the victims of this rejection.

This is the context for the story of Jesus overriding the objections of his disciples and blessing children. In Mark's Gospel Jesus takes the children in his arms, lays his hands on them, and blesses them. These are the bodily actions of a father designating a newborn infant for life rather than death, for acceptance not rejection. Scholars think there was a debate going on in the early Christian community about whether to adopt abandoned children, with some leaders staunchly opposed. Mark aligns Jesus with adoption. Jesus was good news for children.

Children in the ancient world were generally viewed negatively. They were physically weak, understood to lack moral competence and mental capability. The Christian notion of original sin as developed by Augustine underlined this negativity and provided the imperative to beat the child in order that it grows up aright. Further, Augustine saw no distinction between a child and a slave. The discipline of slaves had always been more severe than for freeborn, even to the extent of the availability of professional torturers to do such physically demanding work. The doctrine of original sin was bad news for children.

History generally has been bad news for children. In ancient times children in many cultures were victims of ritual sacrifice, mutilation practices, sold as slaves or prostitutes, and were sexually and physically abused. In the Middle Ages abandonment and infanticide were common. It was common too for children as young as seven to be sent away as apprentices or to a monastery. Severe corporal punishment was normative. The apprentice system continued into the 16th and 17th centuries. Although the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance saw changes in how society viewed children, abuse was still common. The Industrial Revolution was also bad news for children. They were made to work in mines, mills, and up chimneys for 14 hours per day – and of course punished if they didn't work hard enough.

Slowly though changes came. The Enlightenment of the 18th century drew heavily on writers such as Locke and Rousseau. It was an age that challenged the orthodoxy of religion, seeing a child as morally neutral or pure rather than tainted. In response to the wider economic and social changes of the Industrial Revolution there arose a philanthropic concern to save children in order that they could enjoy their childhood. The 20th century understanding of child development evolved in the context of falling infant mortality rates and mass schooling. With these changes also came an emphasis on children's rights culminating in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989.

The Bible generally has been bad news for children too. In the Book of Proverbs we read "He who spares the rod hates his son" (13:24) and again "You shall beat him with a rod and deliver his soul from hell" (23:14). For the most part the Bible is unsupportive of non-violence and children's rights, or for that matter the rights of women and servants.

Throughout history it has been considered self-evident that all people were not created equal. Only men, particularly those of wealth and high-class, were considered fully human. Women, slaves, servants, and children weren't. Being less than fully human they belonged to a man. They also needed to be corrected and disciplined by that man or his surrogates. Physically punishing and beating children, women, and servants has been normative for centuries.

Men administering such punishment were not considered to be errant or criminal. From time to time there would be those who acted brutally and cruelly and most societies and religions admonished them for it. In 13th century England, for example, the law read, "If one beats a child until it bleeds it will remember, but if one beats it to death the law applies".[1]

In this context it is helpful to understand the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007 as deleting an escape clause for the brutal and cruel. The question in the upcoming referendum, whether a smack should be a part of good parental discipline, however raises the broader issue of the acceptability of New Zealand's culture of physical punishment of children.

Those who administered the violent correction in times past were usually thought to be well-meaning and understood their actions to be a necessary part of their responsibilities. In times past supposedly well-meaning men thought they were entitled to physically discipline their strong-willed wife. Likewise in times past many masters thought beating an uppity servant was necessary. When the laws changed preventing such things the husbands and masters decried the loss of their rights. Likewise this upcoming referendum is a cry from those well-meaning adults who see their right to use violence on their children being eroded.

Today in New Zealand we are in the midst of a cultural change. It is similar to the change regarding the rights of women and the rights of slaves and servants. We have ample evidence from paediatricians, child psychologists, and educationalists about the detrimental effects of any violence meted out upon a child by an authority figure. Although society has sought to restrain and punish adults who are brutal and cruel it has also condoned a culture of medium to low level violence towards children.

Christianity has been complicit in this, citing selective texts from the ancient past, and giving them a divine imprimatur. With an adult male God it has implicitly supported all the human male 'gods' in their homes and workplaces to the detriment of others. With the destructive doctrine of original sin the Church has harshly dealt to children and other supposed inferiors. Yet the only texts Christianity has regarding children and Jesus show its founder to be unfailingly kind, compassionate, and non-violent. He never smacked anyone.

From the practice of spirituality many Christians have learnt that what they do to others in effect they do to themselves. The kindness offered to others does something to one's own soul. Similarly hitting or hurting others is detrimental to one's own spiritual well-being. It harms one's capacity to love.

We know from psychology that one method we humans adopt to minimize the self-harm of being violent towards others is to categorize the recipient of the violence as in some way deserving of it. There are numerous examples of women, gays, and people of non-European races being categorized as intellectually and morally inferior in order to justify the physical or institutional violence meted out upon them.

In recent decades science has discovered the impact of childhood experiences on brain development. Whether an adult is generous and loving is determined not only by their genes, but also by how they have been treated as an infant and young child. When a baby is cuddled, treated kindly, played and laughed with, their brain produces certain hormones. On the other hand when young children live with fear, violence, and insecurity their brain produces excessive levels of different hormones such as cortisol. These hormones influence which pathways develop in their brain – its architecture and the adult's ability to be kind and considerate or angry, sad and distressed.

Cultural change is always hard work. The evidence for the need to change may be there but we adults like the certainty of what we've known. There is a sense of security in replicating the past we know, even when we have been harmed by it. There is also a sense of fear that the unknown future may be detrimental to our family and us. Will our children prosper, respect and love us when we raise them without the threat of physical harm?

There is overwhelming evidence that violence has the capacity to change relationships and individuals for the worse. All violence produces fear, and fear is the antithesis of love. We have stopped sanctioned beatings in prisons, psychiatric hospitals, workplaces, and schools, and towards wives and partners. History is changing. Children, maybe the most vulnerable of all the vulnerable, are last. The real question with the upcoming referendum is do we have the courage to create a violence free society?

Beyond the Taliban Conor Foley Guardian/UK 27 July 2009

There is not just one enemy in Afghanistan but many, so a local approach to peace deal may be far more fruitful

Perhaps the most significant part of the announcement of a ceasefire agreement between the Afghan authorities and anti-government insurgents this weekend was its location – in Badghis province in north-west Afghanistan.

Badghis is one of the most remote provinces in Afghanistan, far from the cockpit of the current conflict in the south-east. Four of my colleagues from Médicins sans Frontières were murdered there five years ago; but although the Taliban claimed the killing it was almost certainly carried out by local commanders. Indeed, it was the failure of the authorities to bring them to justice that convinced the medical charity to withdraw from the country. The fact that insurgent forces are now sufficiently organised to be able to extract a ceasefire agreement from the central authorities shows where the initiative still lies.

The term Taliban is used as a convenient catch-all description for a range of disparate insurgent groups fighting the Afghan government. Foreign secretary David Miliband is correct when he says that the insurgency is deeply divided, with many of those fighting against international forces doing so for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. The last time I visited Afghanistan, one observer estimated that up to 80% of the violence came from criminal groups rather than organised resistance forces.

This was before the current offensive began, and one of the dangers of President Obama's new strategy is that it will unite these forces against a common foe. From this perspective, Miliband's analysis that the Afghan government should be concentrating on building "effective grassroots initiatives to offer an alternative to fight or flight for the foot soldiers of the insurgency" is right. Indeed, this is precisely the course of action that humanitarian actors have been advocating for the last six years. However, his prediction that "essentially this means a clear route for former insurgents to return to their villages and go back to farming the land, or a role for some of them within the legitimate Afghan security forces" sounds hopelessly optimistic.

The problem of most western pundits and politicians is that they believed their own propaganda about Afghanistan. The ousting of the Taliban was portrayed as part of the policy of "liberal intervention", that peculiar Blairite aphorism that linked the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But Afghanistan never really fitted this pattern. No attempt was made to introduce the governance model that was developed in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina and was then imposed, with varying degrees of success, in Kosovo, East Timor, Liberia and Sierra Leone – or indeed in post-invasion Iraq.

The initial United States "invasion force" consisted of a few hundred CIA and special forces operatives who flew into the country with suitcases full of cash and linked up with the various militias who were then engaged in an ongoing civil war. They bribed as many of them as possible to change sides and called air-strikes down on the rest.

The postwar governance arrangements were agreed at a conference in Bonn in December 2001, where the victorious Northern Alliance forces, essentially agreed to the imposition of Hamid Karzai as president, but kept most of the other key positions in the new government. Critically, this led to the exclusion of Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in the country, from the new

regime. This and the return of the deeply unpopular warlords, whom the Taliban had driven out, proved the basis for the movement's re-emergence in the autumn of 2003.

President Bush made clear early on that he was reluctant to engage in "nation-building" in Afghanistan. The UN mission there had no executive powers and the international military force was limited to 4,500 soldiers for the first few years of the occupation. Compare this to the 60,000 troops who were sent to tiny Bosnia and the array of international criminal tribunals and justice and reconciliation mechanisms established in similar post-conflict situations. Little of the promised foreign aid arrived and international attention shifted to the invasion of Iraq. Corruption and impunity thrived and over half the provincial governors and police chiefs were initially self-appointed gangsters who simply seized control at the point of a gun.

As the mistakes were recognised, more international troops and more foreign money began to pour into the country, culminating in the latest huge troop surge under Obama. But the initial failure to tackle corruption and the legacy of the country's bitter civil war has created a deep-seated culture of impunity. Afghanistan is a party to the International Criminal Court, but none of its warlords have been arrested and they continue to behave as if they are above the law. Two of the worst of them are currently Karzai's running mates in the presidential election.

This is the context in which the anti-government insurgency continues to thrive and, put simply, there are no quick fixes to the current mess. Localised peace deals are certainly better than thinking that the insurgency can be beaten by military means; but a more fundamental reassessment is required. The Afghan state lacks legitimacy because it is corrupt and compromised. It does not matter how many "military defeats" the western occupation forces inflict on the insurgents because the ground that they capture cannot be held while people remain alienated from the state.

A more sensible strategy would be to concentrate on creating a decent state in that part of the country where the writ of the central government still has some authority. Currently, the vast majority of the aid is being pumped into areas that are effectively under Taliban control in the mistaken illusion that this can buy the allegiance of local populations and convince them to stop killing our soldiers. Meanwhile, because the US refuses to provide its financial support through the central government, it cannot afford to pay decent salaries to its judges, policemen and civil servants who rely on bribes to supplement their meager salaries. This has created a vicious circle where donors refuse to fund the government through fears of corruption, which creates an environment where corruption will continue to thrive.

Afghanistan is suffering from a discussion based on the politics of illusion. It is debatable whether the type of "liberal interventionism" that has defined western foreign policy over the last few years would ever have been appropriate given the country's historical, cultural and political specificities. But despite all the hypocritical cant from western politicians about democracy and women's rights, this policy was never even actually tried. Beyond some vague, and unconvincing, claims about not allowing the country to becoming a base of an international terrorism, western politicians struggle to articulate the international mission in Afghanistan, because the claims to date have never matched the reality. That makes it all the more difficult to explain convincingly why British troops should now be asked to kill and die there.

The Big Lie of Afghanistan by Malalai Joya Guardian/UK July 26, 2009

In 2005, I was the youngest person elected to the new Afghan parliament. Women like me, running for office, were held up as an example of how the war in Afghanistan had liberated women. But this democracy was a facade, and the so-called liberation a big lie.

On behalf of the long-suffering people of my country, I offer my heartfelt condolences to all in the UK who have lost their loved ones on the soil of Afghanistan. We share the grief of the mothers, fathers, wives, sons and daughters of the fallen. It is my view that these British casualties, like the many thousands of Afghan civilian dead, are victims of the unjust policies that the Nato countries have pursued under the leadership of the US government.

Almost eight years after the Taliban regime was toppled, our hopes for a truly democratic and independent Afghanistan have been betrayed by the continued domination of fundamentalists and by a brutal occupation that ultimately serves only American strategic interests in the region.

You must understand that the government headed by Hamid Karzai is full of warlords and extremists who are brothers in creed of the Taliban. Many of these men committed terrible crimes against the Afghan people during the civil war of the 1990s.

For expressing my views I have been expelled from my seat in parliament, and I have survived numerous assassination attempts. The fact that I was kicked out of office while brutal warlords enjoyed immunity from prosecution for their crimes should tell you all you need to know about the "democracy" backed by Nato troops.

In the constitution it forbids those guilty of war crimes from running for high office. Yet Karzai has named two notorious warlords, Fahim and Khalili, as his running mates for the upcoming presidential election. Under the shadow of warlordism, corruption and occupation, this vote will have no legitimacy, and once again it seems the real choice will be made behind closed doors in the White House. As we say in Afghanistan, "the same donkey with a new saddle".

So far, Obama has pursued the same policy as Bush in Afghanistan. Sending more troops and expanding the war into Pakistan will only add fuel to the fire. Like many other Afghans, I risked my life during the dark years of Taliban rule to teach at underground schools for girls. Today the situation of women is as bad as ever. Victims of abuse and rape find no justice because the judiciary is dominated by fundamentalists. A growing number of women, seeing no way out of the suffering in their lives, have taken to suicide by self-immolation.

This week, US vice-president Joe Biden asserted that "more loss of life [is] inevitable" in Afghanistan, and that the ongoing occupation is in the "national interests" of both the US and the UK. I have a different message to the people of Britain. I don't believe it is in your interests to see more young people sent off to war, and to have more of your taxpayers' money going to fund an occupation that keeps a gang of corrupt warlords and drug lords in power in Kabul.

What's more, I don't believe it is inevitable that this bloodshed continues forever. Some say that if foreign troops leave Afghanistan will descend into civil war. But what about the civil war and catastrophe of today? The longer this occupation continues, the worse the civil war will be.

The Afghan people want peace, and history teaches that we always reject occupation and foreign domination. We want a helping hand through international solidarity, but we know that values like human rights must be fought for and won by Afghans themselves. I know there are millions of British people who want to see an end to this conflict as soon as possible. Together we can raise our voice for peace and justice.

 Malalai Joya is an Afghan politician and a former elected member of the Parliament from Farah province. Her last book is ***Raising My Voice***

Thanga's Story

This is the story of Thanga Mahasivam, who has been President of the NZ Tamil Senior Citizens Association for the last five years. She tells her personal story about what it has been like to be a Tamil in Sri Lanka, in an interview with Helen Doherty.

H: What I find difficult to understand, Thanga, is where this hatred of the Tamils originates.

T: Well, it all started when the British arrived in Sri Lanka. At that time the Sinhalese were mainly rural people and they did not want the British to set up schools in their area, nor did they want the missionaries there. So many schools and churches were established in the Tamil area and as a consequence, the Tamils became very well-educated. In 1948, Tamils were 10% of the population but 30% of the country's graduates were Tamil and Tamils held 60% of the best jobs.

H: So it was a kind of jealousy thing?

T: You could say that.

H: Thanga, tell me something about your early life.

T: I was born and grew up in Jaffna, in the North east, the Tamil area, did my degree in India and then taught in various schools in Jaffna. My husband and I got married in 1961.

H: So life was pretty peaceful at that time?

T: No, no, not at all. I had a terrible experience in 1958. I was going by train from Jaffna to Colombo when at 2 am the train was de-railed. The Sinhalese had damaged the tracks, knowing that the train was full of Tamils. The carriage ended up on its side and I was trapped, unable to move my leg. I really thought I was going to die. Eventually Tamil people came from the surrounding villages to rescue us. It took months for me to recover.

H: Wow! That was a scary experience!

T: Yes, but nothing to what my husband (fiancé at that time) was going through in Colombo during the '58 riots. That was a terrible time when the Tamils' peaceful demands for equal rights, (the government wanted to make Sinhalese the only official language) ended up with Sinhalese mobs attacking the Tamils. Fortunately my husband managed to escape.

H: So when you married in '61, did you both settle down in Jaffna?

T: Oh no, that was impossible. My husband was Assistant Commissioner of Labour and as a government employee he was transferred every four years to a different region. It was too dangerous for me and the children to be with him in the Sinhalese areas so we stayed in Jaffna and we only saw him at weekends.

H: So you just weren't able to enjoy a proper family life. How many children do you have?

T: Three - a son born in '63, a daughter born in '64 and another son born in '67. No, it wasn't easy bringing up the children more or less on my own – and always having to be the disciplinarian.

H: And you carried on teaching all this time?

T: Yes, Maths and Science, and I remember in '62 when we Tamil teachers couldn't get our increment until we passed an exam in Sinhalese language.

H: So why did you leave Sri Lanka?

T: Things got steadily worse. We had a beautiful house in Jaffna that we put all our life savings into. But the Sinhalese army built their camp nearby and we used to get constantly harassed. If an army truck came by when we were walking along the road, they would spray us with water. Then, in 1977, my husband was in Anandapura when riots broke our, Tamil houses were burnt down, and a train full of Tamils was attacked. He fled to a hotel and managed to escape to Jaffna but his car was burnt out. Life was just getting too insecure. Then, in '78, Nigerians came to recruit professional people, teachers, doctors and engineers, so my sister and I went for interviews and got jobs in Nigeria. I only took my youngest son with me and we were sent to a place up in the North of the country, far from anywhere. That was in 1980.

H: That must have been dreadful, leaving the rest of your family like that and ending up in such a foreign country.

T: The first two years were very lonely but fortunately my husband was then able to join us, and there were other Sri Lankans to socialise with. The local people were kind and the children easy to teach.

H. But your two older children stayed in Sri Lanka?

T: Yes, to complete their education. But the worst was when the riots broke out in Colombo in '83 and we heard no news for five days. Later, we heard that our daughter had gone to Jaffna but our son was staying with my brother and his wife in Colombo. When they knew the mob was on its way, they packed up all their valuables and hid them in neighbours' houses. As the mob approached my sister-in-law and the children jumped the fence and ran next door. My brother, who had weapons in the house, stayed to defend his property but when a mob of 300 people broke down the gate and started throwing bombs, he knew he couldn't withstand them so he escaped to the other side and hid in the neghbour's toilet. So then neither of them knew where the other was but fortunately they did find each other, much later, in the army camp. Then they were sent to Jaffna in a ship and my brother returned to is job in Saudi Arabia.

H: After that terrifying experience, I'm surprised they stayed in Sri Lanka.

T: Well, no, soon after that, they left and came to New Zealand. They were helped by Dr Rasalingham, my sister in law's brother.

H: And what about your family – how long did you stay in Nigeria and why did you leave?

T: We stayed until 1986. The living standards in Nigeria became worse and worse. There was hyper-inflation and food rationing. All the oil money had been mis-managed and the country became impossible to live in.

H: So was that when you thought of coming to New Zealand?

T: Yes, in '86 we heard there were jobs for teachers in New Zealand, so I came on my own, hoping to find work teaching. That was not easy because I didn't have PR so I started by working long hours as a machinist in a fur coat factory in K road. Gradually I got a bit of relief teaching and finally I got a job, first at Cambridge High then I moved to Tangaroa College in '87. Then the rest of the family came to join me.

H: It seems like you have always led the way – been the pioneer in your family. That can't have been easy.

T: No, it was awful being on my own, but a very kind Kiwi lady offered me accommodation in her house and that was marvellous.

H: Since coming to NZ, have you been back to Sri Lanka?

T: Yes, I went in ’93 to try to get the pension money owing to me. That was a dreadful trip. From Colombo, we travelled by truck over flooded roads with check points everywhere. Then we were transferred to tiny boats, with no shelter (only polythene bags to keep the rain off us), disgusting toilets, no food or drink. We arrived in the dark and Jaffna was unrecognisable. Eventually I found my in-law’s house (they’d moved several times with all the attacks). There were road blocks everywhere and I couldn’t get back to our old house. Later, I discovered that it had been bulldozed in ’87, in fact the homes of all our family members were destroyed.

H: Did you manage to get your money?

T: Yes, fortunately an ex-student of mine was working in the bank and I transferred it to Colombo. I also donated some to the local orphanage.

H: So, what’s it been like for you living in New Zealand and knowing how bad things are for the Tamils in Sri Lanka?

T: We hear terrible things from friends and relative and we feel so helpless here, especially as the media seems to ignore the plight of the Tamil people. We’ve been holding protest in Queen Street and Aotea Square to try to raise people’s awareness and we’ve talked to MPs. It still feels that we’re doing so little. What is happening in Sri Lanka really is genocide.

H: Your own life has never been easy, simply because you are a Tamil, but I know you feel strongly that things are so much worse for the people suffering so dreadfully in Sri Lanka. How would you express what you are feeling right now?

T: I feel so desperate that something should be done to help stop the genocide and help innocent civilians with aid like clothing, medicine, shelter, food and freedom to move and share their feeling with their relatives. I am prepared to do anything I can – I would even be willing to take any form of aid to the suffering in Sri Lanka.