

The McCosker Oration  
Catholic Social Services Australia National Directors and Senior Managers Forum  
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***How can churches shape better community and political attitudes toward the poor and marginalised?***

**In honour of Frank McCosker**

It's a delight to be with you. I got in from Beirut last night so if I start snoring during my own speech, just quietly go on with dinner. I'm a little jet-lagged but it's lovely to be here.

I'm sort of a Baptist-Catholic. My father was baptised Catholic- how could you not when your name's Costello- and a sort of nominal Catholic family and culture. My father wanted to play cricket where he grew up in Ascot Vale, with the best cricket team, which happened to be Presbyterian. So being Protestant is really a testimony to the power of sport, which is a very Australian religious experience when you think about it. When my parents settled in Blackburn, the nearest Church (when they didn't have a car) was a Baptist Church, thus, I'm a Baptist. That's how it works.

I know, and I'm sure many of you know, five medical brothers in Melbourne, all called Costello. Simon and Tony etc. And they're always being asked if they're related, we're always being asked if we're related, so Tony asked me over for dinner with the brothers to explore the family history. And I met them all, and I met Tim Costello, who's an anaesthetist, and one of the five brothers.

And we sat down to dinner and Tim looked at me very intently, and he said "I can't tell you how much you've ruined my life."

I was a bit shocked, I said, "what have I done?" and he said, "I get your mail and I have to send it back, I get calls from desperate people at all hours of the day."

He said, "the worst of it was, I was about to do an operation, with St Vincent's, and this old lady looked up at me, my patient, and she said 'thank you Reverend for doing this operation.'"

"I just lost it. I said, look, I'm just a doctor, I'm just doing the operation, I'm not praying for you." Well poor old Tim and I swapped some good stories.

I do think that when we come to honour people like Frank McCosker (who I didn't have the pleasure of knowing) - many of you in honouring him, are honouring a pioneer of Catholic Social

Services in Australia whose shadow I'm sure still stretches over your work, the national conversation, and the relationship between Church, State and Society today.

From what I have read, he understood that service to the poor and marginalised is one of the most powerful forms of Christian witness. He saw the importance of performing that service well, and that good intentions were not enough; he saw the need for a professional approach. And he perceived that it is not the role of the church simply to act as a subservient implementer of the intentions and programs of the state. He understood the Church will and must always work in creative tension with government; that it occupies the ground, that it plants its feet in a different place to where government plants its feet. And that difference will always be there.

The conversation about the interaction of church, state and society is as relevant now as when Frank McCosker was part of that conversation, and shaping and leading that conversation. Relevant because the churches remain indispensable in holding Australian society together, even as fewer Australians maybe are actually participating in organised worship. Relevant because while the state and society can hardly be said to be in crisis, they are certainly beset by palpable discontent, and the churches have a profound role to play in addressing this.

On our table, not inexplicably, the conversation turned to politics, and I think we're agreeing that very few of us have seen politics at such low ebb. The Australian today published surveys by the Lowy Institute talks about people under 30, saying they're not convinced about democracy. That's pretty profound distress. What are they convinced about? What other alternatives are there out there?

The extraordinary toxic language in my view has led Australians to be more polarised, aggressive, grumpy, and losing perspective like I have never seen before in my time. It is deeply deeply disturbing. We were talking about Prime Minister Gillard; whatever your politics, whatever you think of her, I think you'd agree, that the way people talk about her, not to mention the office, with such vitriol is not commensurate with anything she's actually done. There is something profoundly disturbing going on. That it isn't simply explained just by a minority government, and a loss of legitimacy and an alleged broken promise about the carbon tax; there is something profoundly dysfunctional and disturbing.

When public broadcasters like Alan Jones can talk about putting her in a chaff bag and dumping her at sea, and say that her father died of shame, when Howard Satwick can ask the questions he asked of a Prime Minister, there is something profoundly disturbing. Which is why even though the state and society are by any measure not in objective crisis, there is a crisis. And why the role of the Church, even with fewer people attending, I think, has never been more important. To name what is- and I use this word- evil, dysfunctional, unacceptable and say words that our children, any of us raising them, would never be acceptable should never be acceptable on the lips of public broadcasters, virtually without too many sanctions still.

The Church has a profoundly important role in its vision of transcendence, its vision of perspective - how blessed we are - and to name language that is destructive and deteriorating and evaporating hope. I think the role of the Church has never been more important. In the courtesies and the protocols and the profound sense of respect for people with difference, remembering that our faith comes out of respect for difference; the widow, the orphan, and most particularly the stranger. The Hebrew Scriptures says God's face is known in the stranger. The person who isn't our mob, our faith, our ethnic group, God's face will be known there. How fundamentally important this is, in these times.

### **State, society and the economy: 'the grumpy country'**

Well I am worried about the drifts towards attitudes of deep resentment, envy, judgmentalism and toxic language that seem to be reflective of a mood of pessimism that I don't think has any objective bearing. Sometimes I think that Australia is not just the lucky country, but that we've become the grumpy country.

That these characteristic of discourse are distorted representations of pretty amazing economic conditions and circumstances- not a lot of the people who you represent, but I'm talking more generally- amazing economic circumstances that Australians are living in. So why, discourse of blame and recrimination? And the ability to use language, which even 5-10 years ago, we would have felt a reflexive recoil, psychic vomit, a sense of 'that's not on.'

Well we can talk about the current political circumstances, we can talk about the media's concentration on negative stories, the amazing thing in Australian society, just every single day acts of kindness and courtesy and behaviour that respects law which of course isn't reported. The way we all know that bad news sells; "if it bleeds it leads", that old newsroom truism.

But when we think about the economy, it's puzzling. Australia has had 20 years of more or less uninterrupted economic growth: the happy exception to the Global Financial Crisis. By almost every international comparison, we are so prosperous, and we have lost perspective. Wages are high, unemployment is low, and inflation is well under control. We rank second only to Norway on the Human Development Index, which is largely a measure of health and community well-being. An Australian child born today can expect well to live into their eighties. We rank second on the Wealth Index, second only to Switzerland, per head of population.

So we're healthy, we're wealthy - why aren't we wise? What is happening in this conversation? Our GDP per capita is exceeded really only by Switzerland, and maybe a few tax havens. Our average household net worth is the highest on the planet. And yet our leaders aren't talking about this, this isn't in our conversation. According to Credit Suisse, Australia's median net worth is about four times that of the US. So is it a loss of security? A loss of leadership? What is going on?

Classical welfare economies regard the utility of wealth as lying in its capacity to allow people to meet their needs and wants – in other words to create happiness. Today's Australia is perhaps living proof that collectively, if not individually, money can't buy you happiness or contentment. This is why the message of the Church is so profoundly important. It reminds us of this very simple false gospel, the gospel that is so plausible and seductive; the wealthier I am, the happier I'll be. Now the opposite is not true either, that if I'm poorer I'll be happier.

World Vision exists to lift people out of poverty; we know that when parents can provide meals for their kids, and water that's safe, and education, they don't feel moral failures as parents. Poverty doesn't lead you to happiness, and so many of you working in grass-roots organisations will know how true that is. But equally, there is a line we cross but who knows quite where it is? Where greater wealth isn't leading to greater happiness? We are profoundly insecure, and feel able it seems, to say things of each other that should be unacceptable.

In Australia, before the end of a boom in mining, in construction, we were constantly reminded of Australia's two-speed economy. But it was always in fact more than two speeds, it's always been a patchwork economy, that's a better metaphor. But this was a boom that excluded, and in fact disadvantaged, some regions of the country. A boom for mining, but one that drove other industries – such as manufacturing, tourism, international education – into an uncompetitive situation. So people were hurting, and what is politics at the end of the day? It's how individuals and communities live together. That's what politics is about. It's how you share the prosperity, and how you share it out when there is a boom. It's how you share the sacrifice when there are hard times. Politics ultimately is about who wins and who loses.

Well we know there have been many people, many of those that you represent, who in this patchwork economy haven't been sharing the benefits of prosperity in quite the same way. If the Church, and Church agencies, don't raise their voice on that, who will? So this economy has put pressure on many people. And yet discontent is far from being limited to those experiencing disadvantage and dislocation - many of your clients and relationships that you work with.

Many Australians in comparatively comfortable and secure situations are also angry, and grumpy. Matt Cowgill, an economist at the ACTU, recently pointed this out very starkly. He was pointing out that people have lost perspective in Australia over just how well off they are. He cited a study that compared Australians' perceptions of where they sat in terms of relative income with the reality of income distribution. The study found 83 per cent of people placed themselves in the middle for income – of course, only 40 per cent are actually there. Only about one in 100 people placed themselves in the top 10 per cent. Where are the other 9 per cent? It's 10 per cent who should be identifying themselves. It is common to hear that Australians are in denial about the poverty that continues to exist in this country. And I think that's true. But I think also that as agencies working often at the cold face, we need to tell a story that says what's even more remarkable about the state of denial about wealth in this country. Where people locate themselves and the narrative they then construct around that.

Some of you may have seen last night's edition of *Compass* on ABC TV - I got in from Beirut at about 6 o'clock (unless my wife taped it for me, I can't remember if it was actually live) and it was about the state of philanthropy in Australia. It highlighted that wealthy Australians lag way way behind their counterparts in comparable countries when it comes to sharing their wealth. This was why Bill Gates' visit was so refreshing; here was a man who actually argues for state taxes, taxes on the wealthy, capital gains taxes. He might be a bit weak on what his own companies have been paying but he's issued the Giving Pledge challenge: give away 50 per cent. The extraordinary thing is, American and British mega-rich have always been way ahead of Australia's mega-rich in their giving; maybe inspired by that famous Andrew Carnegie phrase "the man who dies rich dies disgraced." The whole point of wealth is to give it away.

Some of you have perhaps heard me tell my Nagaland story, where I was blown away by the Nagas, North-Eastern India, forty different tribes who wear beautiful coats in different colours because they live high up in the mountains where it's cold. Each coat has a symbolic meaning; teachers wear blue, lawgivers, red. And now and then while you're travelling around Naga villagers you'll see a gold coat, with a beautiful gold lining. I'll never forget saying to my Naga host, who works with World Vision, with our programs there,

"What is it with the gold coat?"

And the Naga said, "oh, that's someone who has given a feast of merit."

And when I looked puzzled, she said, "don't you have feasts of merit in Australia?"

And I said, "well I don't know what it is, so tell me, I'll tell you if we do."

She said that in Naga culture when you become rich (by Naga standards - you have lots of bags of rice in the barn, lots of pigs - of course that's by Naga standards, every Australian is richer than the richest Naga), you can then choose to throw a feast of merit. And that's a feast where you feed the whole village, particularly the poor. And they gather to eat your rice and your pigs, and there's singing and dancing, and those who are poor are particularly celebrated and honoured. And the feast goes two weeks, four weeks, six weeks, it goes however long it takes for all your assets to be liquidated. And then when everything's gone, you're given a gold coat, and you start again with nothing.

I said "I'm pretty sure we don't have this in Australia."

Well I was quite struck by this. Here is this fundamental truth - Nagas are Christian by the way - we've brought nothing with us, we'll take nothing when we leave; the whole point of wealth is actually to celebrate and particularly bless the poor. It's for now, for community and relationships. Bill Gates, at least in our culture, and maybe you'll say he can afford to be, is a gold coat wearer, saying "let's make a difference now."

Well the mega-rich have been massively let off the hook in Australia. Who's going to have the courage to speak out? It will be, I hope, Churches. About benchmarks- not out of guilt, not because we've bought the franchise in guilt and we can intensify it and ratchet it up- simply saying this is invitational, and look at the international benchmarks.

At World Vision, where we have nearly a million names at our database, there's a little bit of support from some wealthy individuals, but we've ranked our database by postcode- here's the newsflash; by far the greatest amount comes from the poorest postcodes. Isn't that amazing? I didn't believe it at first, but the data's clear. Those (I speculate) who are closest to poverty, with that empathy about struggle, go 'wow, what would that feel like? I must give, I can do something.'

Faith-based agencies, I think, are incredibly important. I don't know if you'd realised, but in a recent book by Stephen Judd and Anne Robinson, [they found that] 22 of the biggest 25 charities in Australia are faith-based, Christian faith-based. In America, it's 10 of the 25, and it's a very Church-based culture. In Britain, it's apparently four out of 25. It's curious when you think how secular we are, but who has the tradition and does the heavy lifting and has got the legitimacy to say some of the tough things in the culture that is grumpy and polarised, because they've rolled up their sleeves.

Well, in a culture where people feel victims while they're living in McMansions with two cars, wearing brand clothing and eating out regularly, we need to say consumerism as a foundation for meaning, is a hopeless addiction. The latest flat screen TV, the latest Tablet, to get away to the best, coolest holiday destination is never enough. And the attitudes that somehow plug in to the 'wealth is happiness' story needs a voice to puncture it, and to speak out.

### **Australian churches: doing is being (service is witness)**

So this is where I believe churches come into the picture, well placed to speak from experience of the poor and marginalised. With virtually no other developed countries with as many Christian faith-based organisations providing social services (2nd out of 25 is us), and they're not just welfare services, they're health and education and aged care and housing.

Our research at World Vision shows there is a clear correlation between religious attachment and charitable giving. Some may see a paradox in such a large role being played by the Church in a society which is so secularised, and in which organised religion is a bit on the nose, and is certainly not fashionable; nonetheless, this is our context. The situation in which Australian Churches need to know that ground they occupy, that calling that's placed on them. That legitimacy because of their engagement, the traction, the engagement that gives authenticity, and allows you then to speak and how to speak.

This is appreciated by Australians when it's done right. They're distrustful of empty piety, they don't like words unmatched by deeds, they can smell bull a mile off. And yet they have an intuitive understanding that if Christian faith is worth its salt, there will be sacrifice, and there will be courage, and there will be a voice, and they will say thank God for the Salvos and for the Catholics, and for those who actually have that voice and that courage and that spirituality and that alternative ground that they occupy. Particularly in a time of individualism and materialism, the pursuit of ever greater wealth and consumption. To actually speak with moral clarity about charity, about compassion, about justice and social solidarity. That, though it may seem to many runs a distant second in a marketised world, actually is a deep yearning within a culture, to hear that tone, that voice.

I have just come back from Lebanon and the Syrian camps. We're responding to 130 000 people, feeding them and providing water in the Beqaa Valley. Some 500 000 Syrian refugees are now in Lebanon, another 500 000 in Jordan, 300 000 in Turkey. In Syria itself with very limited access, 4 million are internally displaced. And I was quite moved, not just by the lives of people and their faith, praying to Allah that this might end and they can go home, but by the Lebanese.

Thousands and thousands of Lebanese have taken Syrian refugees into their homes. I was completely amazed and moved when I was walking back to my hotel in Beirut after 11 o'clock, a voice called to me in English, it was a Lebanese guy. His name was Malik, and he was sitting there with some Syrians in his little workshop- he makes solar-panels by the roadside, very rough- and he had very good English and he asked me for coffee, and we started talking.

I said (the Syrian refugees didn't speak any English) "who are they?"

And he said "I've been feeding and sheltering them here for the last 5 months. A mother and her sons. I'm a Christian, they're Sunni."

I said, "wow, that's really impressive. Being a Christian, what do you think of Assad?"

He said "I totally support Assad, all the Christians do. Assad's a bad, bad person, but he has protected minorities, and they fear the Sunnis."

I said, "what about these then, who you're sheltering?"

He said, "they're praying to Allah everyday fervently that the rebels will win."

And I said, "wow, with such political tension, you're feeding them, and you're sheltering them, why do you do it?"

He said two words: "they're human."

Such moral clarity. As I sat there drinking coffee, I reflected that just a few kilometres down the road 2000 years ago, the moral clarity of the good Samaritan. Tens of thousands, including Christians, taking Sunnis in. And then I think about our loss of perspective in Australia about our refugees, and how many Australians take them into their homes.

Well part of my visit to Russia had been because their civil society, the C20 was meeting, as the forerunner to the G20. Russia has the presidency, Gillard's appointed me the leader of the C20, the Civil 20, which we're hoping an Abbott government will keep. And Putin was doing a bit of a show piece, showing he's a magnificent democrat, 1.5 million spent on the civil society summit, people flown in from G20 countries, and 7 tracks, corruption and inequality, and it was actually a really good summit. But distressing because Russian NGOs are being beaten up. There Putin has introduced the foreign agents law which says that if you're an NGO and you get \$1 from outside Russia, you must now register as a foreign agent, which basically means a traitor. They're all refusing to register because they know what the next step is. So because they're not registering, Putin's security people are raiding NGOs and charging people. So here is this bizarre world of Putin entrenching - for the first time of any G20 presidency- civil society, while he beats up his own NGOs.

So I was deputised by the Russian NGOs- holding a foreign passport I guess they figured I wouldn't be singing harmony with Pussy Riot in Siberia if he got upset- out to his dacha we went, an hour and a half out of Moscow, an hour and a half with the cameras rolling the whole time, so arrogant, so supremely confident, didn't need to actually do it behind closed doors. So I tackled him on the Russian NGOs, "oh no, we're just doing the same as America, they have a foreign agents law",

And I said, "yes, but President Putin, that was before the Second World War, targeting Nazis, they've never activated it, they're not raiding NGOs."

"Well this law, the NGOs have nothing to fear, you know, they just have to register."

I said, "Look. In Australia, World Vision raises \$300 million a year, from 22 million people. If we couldn't transfer these monies into lots of countries even though its foreign, Australian money, we could not function. For you to actually place these laws is to kill civil society and trust in NGOs."

Well perhaps because the media were there, he said "alright, I'm prepared to have a look at it, amend it if necessary, they've got nothing to worry about but I'll have a look at it."

All of which ran on the news, and I read it myself in the Moscow times in English. What was moving was the Russian NGOs who said "wow that was stunning, the C20 has worked. Just though he was using it as a show-piece, we actually got a concession."

I raised Syria with him, saying "I'm going there, to the camps."

I pleaded for arms to stop from both sides, saying it's fungible in the region that more weapons would mean more than 100 000 dead that we've got already. I pleaded with him for Geneva II, I pleaded with him that he would take seriously that a diplomatic solution might mean he might have to make serious concessions, as the Americans and Europeans might. Knowing (and this is what I discovered) that it's a war by proxy now, there's Iran wanting to take-over its influence in Syria, whether or not Assad survives, they don't mind, they'll get access to the Mediterranean, sanctions are hurting, they want trade; there's Qatar, there's Saudi Arabia, there's Turkey, there's Russia, all with their need for a port, all playing in Syria by proxy. Well what struck me about Putin is that he wasn't making any concessions, but he had a pretty good line.

He said, "I will deliver my deal, I will get Assad to the Geneva II conference, will the Americans keep their side?"

And of course the Americans with the rebels saying we're not going until you give us weapons and we gain more ground, we've got something to negotiate, and who really speaks for the rebels, nearly 150 different groups. Putin had a pretty strong card to play then. But this tragedy will go on. There is going to be more and more refugees. Australia's response needs to be more generous.

The voices of Churches I mentioned to Frank, a young Jesuit, one of only 13 Jesuits in Syria- he's from Aleppo, I met him in Beirut, he can't go back because he's life's at risk- saying powerfully and prophetically as a young Catholic, "why do the Christian Churches always side with the baddies? Assad: sure he might protect our institutions and privileges, but he is a butcher. We have to stand with human rights."

It was refreshing; it was a tonic to hear that. The Jesuits are there on their own; there are a few evangelicals saying the same thing but they're way outnumbered by the Greek Catholic and the Greek Orthodox and the Malachites and the Maronites and all the rest.

### **The Catholic contribution**

Let me finish this lecture by just saying the contribution I think of Catholics; its social teaching is such an important strand in Australia's understanding of itself. I think the notion of fair distribution of the country's wealth as a political proposition in Australia has derived less from socialist ideals and much more from the 'distributist' tradition. It's been influential in the trade unions, the Labor Party, and through welfare advocacy from the Sunshine Harvester judgement on. And you might know that Justice Higgins who brought down that extraordinary notion of social solidarity of family wage, though a devout Methodist from Ireland, Justice Higgins was greatly influenced by contemporary Christian thinking about social relations, the condition of the working class. Justice Higgins also studied the 1890 Papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. That influenced his attitude to a 'family wage' –the argument that family wage isn't just clothes and rent and food, it's the cost of the daily newspaper. As he said, unlike Britain, here the working class need to be informed to keep the government accountable to perform their citizenship.

How can they do that if they can't afford a daily newspaper, as included in his measurement of the family wage by *Rerum Novarum*.

So the ideas expressed in Catholic social teaching find plenty of resonance with Australians of other denominations and secular Australians as well. So let me finish by saying that the Australian Church needs to avoid the mistakes of the Church I saw in Russia, and in Syria. In Russia, Putin's brought in a blasphemy law, on the back of Pussy Riot singing in St Xavier's Cathedral, a blasphemy law that says if the religious are ever offended, you can be charged with blasphemy, and they've brought it down from a prison sentence to huge fines.

Imagine if the Orthodox Church, who by the way are hand in glove with Putin and never criticise him, they're getting millions, the Patriarch and Putin are great friends, Putin's urging Russians to go back to Church. Putin's wrapping himself in the Church. Well imagine if the Orthodox Church after Pussy Riot had actually said we are offended and it was terrible- their singing was terrible apart from anything else- but Grace means we forgive. Imagine if the Orthodox Church had said, 'although offended, we don't want them punished. We take a stand that there are people who even if they don't like us (of course Pussy Riot was singing precisely to protest the fact that the Church was now so complicit with Putin, that's why they were in St Xavier's).

### **The church and the future**

Well I don't think the Church, I hope the Church, in this country is not anywhere near that sort of danger or risk. But to exercise influence, to speak of justice, to remind ourselves that the Church is a movement, not just an institution, to play a role in this time of grumpiness, toxicity of language, to play a role, to keep the fabric of Australia together, to be the glue, the Church just one agent of civil society, but civil society being the glue that holds together institutions of courtesy and respect and tolerating difference and speaking words to the powerful. This is why Australia not just values your work, but needs your voices. You may have more influence than you think.