

# SEEKING A RIGHT WAY

Chris Sidoti  
Director  
International Service for Human Rights  
Geneva

Keynote address  
Revitalising Human Rights and Social Justice Conference  
20 January 2005

## Acknowledgements

I recognise that we are gathering today on Aboriginal land. There is now a tradition of recognition in Australia that has grown in the last fifteen years, one that we should endeavour to maintain.

I recognise as well that today is the Islamic feast of Eid al-Adha, the feast of sacrifice, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son if God so required of him. Some three or four thousand years ago God instructed Abraham to turn away from human sacrifice. Yet we still have children of Abraham, Christians, Jews and Muslims, taking human life in the name of God. Some things we never learn.

## The retreat from human rights

Ten years ago Australian human rights lawyer, Nick O'Neill, wrote one of the best textbooks we have got on human rights law in Australia. He called it *Retreat from Injustice* and he said the book and its title reflected a quiet confidence that the development and enforcement of human rights in Australia were destined to move forward at a rapid rate, demonstrating that the retreat from injustice in Australian law was complete and irreversible. Last year, ten years later, Nick O'Neill wrote the second edition of his book. In the preface he expressed the view that the events of the past ten years had shown that retreat to be a "slow and halting" one. More than a slow and halting retreat from injustice, it seems to me that the last ten years have shown not a retreat from injustice but rather a retreat from human rights and a retreat from social justice. It is easy to instance the areas where we have gone backwards.

First and foremost we have retreated from human rights in relation to indigenous Australians. The recognition of indigenous rights is back to where it was in the 1960s rather than constituting, as Nick O'Neill puts it, "a complete and irreversible movement away from the past". I refer in particular to the legislation that imposed qualifications on native title, the end of the enthusiasm that greeted the Mabo decision, the failure of the federal government to deliver the indigenous social justice package that was part of the post-Mabo agreement between indigenous and non-indigenous leaders, the demise of the commitment to and process of reconciliation and the end of mechanisms for self determination and self management. Relations between indigenous and other Australians have been setback forty years in the space of a mere ten.

Second, we have retreated from human rights in relation to asylum seekers. Over the last ten years mandatory detention has been extended, the Tampa affair has tainted our reputation and brought shame to us, the so called "Pacific Solution" has proved to be no solution at all and those who have come here and are accepted as genuine refugees are placed, not in a situation of permanent protection, but rather on insecure temporary protection visas as second-class

residents of Australia. These factors have been personified in the Bakhtiari family and their sorry saga. The Bakhtiari family has been the focus of the greatest degree of contempt and vindictiveness perhaps ever directed by an Australian government against a single family, simply because they refused to accept the government's dictates. This is the family whose two boys escaped from detention at Woomera and later presented themselves to the British Consulate General in Melbourne to seek asylum and protection, the family whose father was first accepted as a refugee and then, when the rest of the family became "nasty", had his refugee status revoked. The Government said repeatedly in recent years that the family was Pakistani rather than Afghani, as they had claimed, and so they were not entitled to refugee status in Australia. It is curious that yesterday morning ABC news reported that the family was now believed to be "back in Afghanistan", even though they were supposed never to have been there.

The retreat from human rights is evident too in the increasing inequality in Australia in the distribution of both income and wealth, making us a more unequal society now than we were ten years ago. The simple fact is that in Australia today the rich are richer and the poor poorer than they were ten years ago.

We can see the retreat from human rights also in the undermining of important national institutions. Attacks on the courts are one example, when courts deliver decisions that are contrary to the views of the government of the day. Senior appointments to the bench have been politicised, with the government seeking to affect, in far more explicit ways than we have seen in the past, the nature of judicial decision making processes and, of course, the nature of the decisions themselves. We have seen budget cuts for major human rights institutions like the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, attempts to change its legislation to water down its independence and its powers and again attempts to change the nature of the organisation through the appointments. We have seen the muzzling and politicisation of the public service in ways that we would not have considered acceptable in the past. The great tradition of the public service, a service of independent experts giving frank and fearless advice to the government of the day, has been replaced by an attitude that requires public servants to provide the government only with advice the government wants.

### **The challenge today**

I am not going to concentrate today on the catalogue of horrors, the litany of errors of the last ten years. Those I have cited are given merely as some examples that concern me about the direction we have taken and are taking. My focus today, however, is on the need for a return to human rights and social justice. We have gone from the retreat from injustice to a retreat from human rights and now it is time to start the long trek back. The groundwork for a return must certainly be laid now, the foundations prepared. It seems that a return to human rights and social justice in Australia is not yet on the political or community agenda in this country. One response to that is to say that there is nothing that can be done. In part, that is true: we cannot change the direction of the nation overnight and certainly not under the present prime minister. But unless we take the time now to lay the groundwork, to build the foundations for the return to human rights and social justice, then starting the rebuilding process when we end the slash and burn policies of recent years will be all that much more difficult. So my focus today is not on the need for change but on the "how", how to start to rebuild the foundations.

The return to human rights and social justice will require a multi-pronged, multi-disciplinary approach over a period of years, across the range of social institutions that are interested in this. The simple fact is that building takes more time and more effort than destroying. The rebuilding effort that we have to make has five components:

1. investigation and exposure of violations of human rights and social justice
2. advocacy of human rights and social justice

3. policy research and development,
4. human rights and social justice education in schools and communities and
5. development of more effective local, national and international networks.

Let me deal with each of these five elements in turn and in respect of each ask three key questions: what is the current situation? what do we need? how are we going to get there?

### **Investigation and exposure**

It is all very good and well to assert, as I have, that we in Australia have retreated from human rights and social justice. But a greater need than assertion is hard data: the research that is required to investigate and expose violations and abuses when and where they occur.

At the moment, however, we have increasing government and community hostility that seems to be drying up the wells of activism among human rights and social justice groups. We can see this hostility in a number of ways, not least electorally, but also in community-based campaigns that seek first to intimidate those who are interested in working for human rights and social justice, and then, second, to put the victims of violations “in their place”, so that their heads drop below the parapet of public gaze and public consciousness, seen sometimes, heard rarely, effective as little as possible.

The hostility is seen too in government attempts to have the Human Rights Commission focus its priorities not on investigation and exposure but on what the government considers to be human rights education. It sees this education as an alternative to the kinds of national inquiries into human rights violations that the Human Rights Commission has conducted over the past nineteen years since its establishment. Those inquiries have focused community attention on government deficiencies, past and present, and that is precisely what the government does not want.

Academic research priorities and funding too are being refocused away from significant social needs and significant political needs to the needs of industry. The government now sets the academic research agenda through its funding policies and priorities. So the investigation and exposure of human rights violations have become even more difficult, including within a university environment that traditionally has guarded its independence.

There seems as well to be far less investigative journalism, certainly in the mainstream media, than we have found historically in Australia. The movement away from good, thorough investigative journalism is part of the process of deadening the awareness and consciences of Australians to situations that occur right within our borders. It is really about shielding us from knowledge about ourselves, lest we challenge those who benefit from the current situation.

We need to address this kind of development with different levels of information and action. We certainly need information, good information about what is happening in the daily lives of people in this country, and good analysis. That requires community links: an ability not to research from academic ivory towers but to be actively engaged with the community that is experiencing social justice or human rights deficits. Developing good links with people who are disadvantaged in one way or another requires us, who are not, to build their trust and to act with sensitivity. It can be very difficult when do-gooders like me seek to do something good and yet find constantly that we lack the sensitivity, the knowledge, and the ability to work with people rather than for people. Investigation and exposure, the acquisition of good knowledge, require those kinds of relationships.

Second, we need to develop better research skills including forensic skills. In Australia we have tended to distinguish between criminal justice work and human rights work, taking the attitude that we do not really have major human rights problems that require forensic skills. Increasingly,

however, it seems, human rights violations are also common crimes - the treatment of those who are in detention and in prisons, racially-based violence, violence based on other factors like sexual orientation, family violence - but we lack the kind of skills necessary for this kind of investigation. Research skills more generally are also required: the upgrading of the community's ability to conduct its own investigation and then to move into the area of exposure.

Exposure, as distinct from research, requires good communication skills: the ability to provide the results of investigations to the rest of the community so that investigations actually have an impact upon the consciousness of our fellow Australians. It requires media that is sympathetic for the results of the investigation to become more broadly known and therefore to influence opinion.

So we need the ability to work with and in the community, good research skills to produce good information and analysis and good communications skills to be able to influence community opinion. Getting to this point, however, is a difficult task. Certainly there is an urgent need for the reinvigoration of communities and community organisations in Australia, inspiring them with confidence and giving them the motivation to explore and articulate their own concerns. There are many examples of community organisations that have struggled to do this over the last ten years. But it seems to me, as someone who has been an activist here and more lately an observer from afar, that the level of community-based activism is less than it was. It also seems to me that part of the reason for that is a loss of confidence in the capacity to influence the rest of the community, a deep seated pessimism about the ways in which change can occur. Reinvigorating communities and community organisations requires a rediscovery of optimism and faith in the possibility of inspiring people with the confidence that they can make a difference. That cannot be done overnight: it is part of the long-term task of seeking a way back to human rights respect.

Effective investigation and exposure require as well new forms of partnership between research academics, that is, universities, and community organisations. This is an essential building block for proper research and investigation but also for the development of the skills required for this work. We hear a lot of talk from universities these days about community partnerships. Unfortunately most community partnerships seem to be partnerships with industry rather than partnership with the community, partnership with business for economic purposes rather than partnership with the community for social advancement. The partnerships that human rights work requires are partnerships with the community and of course that has research implications. One of the attractions of partnership with business is that "they've got the money that we haven't got". The community has even less money than universities. So I am talking here about partnership at a cost, partnership at our cost, rather than partnership that will see money flowing into universities. Given the ways in which universities too have been the victims of social change, social regression, over the last ten years, that really is a big ask.

Partnership between academic institutions and community organisations must include a dimension of protection and support. Most academics and indeed many human rights advocates, myself included, do our work with very little personal cost, other than the hatred of government. Yet many of those working in the front line of human rights do so placing themselves at significant risk, at least of economic disadvantage but sometimes even of personal harm. We sometimes ignore that in Australia. Of course, those who are the most vulnerable are also those facing the greatest risk of all but I am not talking exclusively about the most economically or socially vulnerable. Let me draw an example from my experience during my time in the Human Rights Commission, when I was not one of the most popular people around town. I was always amazed that in all my nine years there I did not receive one single death threat. I guess you can think, "Well in Australia you would not expect to get death threats". But throughout those years, my colleagues in the Commission who were women from non-

English-speaking backgrounds frequently received death threats. They were not classically vulnerable people. They were well educated, public office holders within our system. And yet those so motivated seemed to consider it acceptable to threaten women of non English-speaking background with serious injury or death or, even worse in one case, with the kidnapping of their children, whereas I, as a nice white Christian male, was exempted from that kind of treatment. So some people will pay a personal cost, at least the cost of intimidation and threats, for their work for human rights. Better investigation and exposure of violations requires proper systems for support and protection of those who are truly vulnerable because of the work they do.

## **Advocacy**

The second element required for the return to human rights and social justice is advocacy. There are two dimensions to this advocacy: advocacy on behalf of individuals, taking up their cases and their claims and seeking either protection from violation or redress after violation occurs, and advocacy that is institutionally or policy oriented, taking up issues and trying to effect changes in public policy and institutional conduct. Work with human rights and social justice requires both these forms of advocacy.

Australia has many organisations with lengthy advocacy experience and proven track records of success. For example, we have a very good range of legal aid services now: a network spread right across the country providing legal advice, assistance and representation to people far more effectively and comprehensively than we saw twenty years ago. They are under-resourced and the demands on them are great but at least there is a good range of services with good experience. We also have very articulate community groups and individuals who are capable of taking up individual cases and broader issues for the purposes of advocacy. Part of the retreat from human rights over the last ten years, however, has been increasing government-imposed restrictions on the capacity of non-government organisations to be advocates for individuals and for policy. In the early 1990s the Kennett Government in Victoria pioneered the introduction of conditions in service agreements between government funders and funded organisations that restricted the organisations' ability to be critical of government policy and to advocate policy issues on behalf of their clients. The Kennett Government's initiative has been taken up with alacrity by the Howard Government federally and by virtually all the State Labor governments. Here we have an example of genuine bi-partisanship. It has affected the capacity of organisations to be effective advocates for their clients, those for whom they provide services, in the ways in which they should be.

Taking a more extreme example, advocacy has also been affected by the budgetary and other restrictions on the work of key organisations like the Human Rights Commission. The Commission's budget was cut severely from 1997-98 as punishment for its work generally but specifically its "stolen generations" report, *Bringing them home*. The government has also attempted repeatedly to amend the Commission's legislation to restrict its independence and effectiveness. In the past each attempt has failed in the Senate but now, with the government in full control of Parliament, the Commission's legislation is under real threat and the Commission with it. More seriously, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission has been abolished, replaced by a largely powerless advisory council. There is no doubt that this has seriously impaired advocacy for the rights of indigenous Australians. Advocacy then has become increasingly risky work for organisations that jeopardises their funding, their independence and their very survival.

Just as we require the development of new skills for investigation and exposure, so too we require new skills for advocacy. We require particularly new, more effective communication skills and skills particularly for individuals and community groups that are themselves affected by human rights and social justice violations. Advocacy requires breaking through some of the

static on the airways that constantly reinforces attitudes of prejudice and hostility towards people who are disadvantaged within this society. Advocacy needs us to find ways in which we can get to the “shock jocks” and, somehow or other, have our voices heard on their programs that so many of our fellow Australians seem to listen to and learn from, learn the wrong things from. Advocacy requires us getting a voice within the major newspapers. By that I do not mean the major papers of record like the Sydney Morning Herald and the Australian, which, whatever their shortcomings, generally do seek to cover alternative views, but the mass-read papers like the Telegraph in Sydney and the Herald-Sun in Melbourne. Breaking through the kinds of barriers that hostile media advocates provide is one of the greatest challenges facing human rights advocates in Australia today. It requires better communication skills but it also requires different, far more effective strategic approaches to the use of the media.

It goes without saying that good advocacy requires good reliable information. Information, in this instance, has two dimensions: accurate data and real people. We know that the most effective way to inform people, to win their understanding, is to provide specific examples of what happens to human beings. And so again our contact with people who are vulnerable to violation is important because we cannot advocate on their behalf without allowing them to tell their own stories.

How do we achieve more effective advocacy? First, we need to develop closer links between investigation and exposure work and advocacy work. This is part of providing the data required to convince others of the need for change. Second, we need skills training for community advocates. Here, both educational institutions and institutions for informal training can play important roles in providing training in the disciplines and skills that community advocates need and in targeting for the training those most capable of advocating for themselves and their communities. Third, it requires the identification and moulding of community opinion leaders: people in educational institutions, universities and schools, people in churches, people in the arts and sports and so on.

Let me say a little more about this last point. Community leaders continue to affect public opinion but in ways that are quite different from the 1970s and 1980s. Part of the anti-elitism, the anti-intellectualism, of government policy and public prejudice over the last ten or fifteen years has been a deliberate discrediting of those who, in the past, had credibility when they sought to lead community opinion. Put simply, many of those who in the past would have been believed by the broader community are not believed or listened to today. The credibility of the churches, for example, has declined markedly - some would say fortunately. And the credibility of many others too has declined.

In the late 1990s, when the situation of asylum seekers was becoming increasingly dire, a large number of significant community leaders made public statements in opposition to these policies: former prime ministers and ministers, archbishops and bishops, people from the arts, people from the universities and people like me. This strategy might have had an influence in the past but, in the then context of Comet Hanson, it was counter-productive. It reinforced the anti-intellectualism that underlay so much public opinion. We needed not the usual array of eminent persons but a different kind of community opinion leader if we were going to change the attitudes of most Australians.

We must start afresh and identify those who now mould opinion and then help those people themselves to understand what the issues are, briefing them on the facts and firing them up to go into the public forum. That is one of the critical advocacy tasks now and for the future. It must be accompanied by the identification of supportive workers within the media. We need to elicit their advice and their assistance in ensuring media exposure for those who are most capable of influencing public opinion positively. Past strategies and methods of advocacy are simply not working any longer. They have not worked over the last ten years. We need to find new ways

and new people to do it so that it can be more effective than we have been.

### **Policy research and development**

In starting with investigation and exposure and then moving to advocacy, I was seeking to link the fact-finding role of investigators with the fact-presenting role of advocates. Presenting the facts is one aspect of advocacy. The other is presenting policy alternatives. To do this advocates require good policy research and development. This is important because we simply have to have policy alternatives. Too many times in last ten years, when confronted with complex issues of human rights and social justice, we have failed to convince people that there are viable alternatives to the policies being peddled by the government and its supporters.

Researching and developing alternative policies is a critical part of the task of returning Australia to human rights and social justice. Often human rights advocates are able to present to the community accurate accounts of human rights violations, describing them in impressive, forceful terms, but without alternatives the response that we inevitably get is, "Well, that's terrible and we don't agree with it but there's nothing we can do about it. There's no alternative." Or we can be challenged directly, "Well, what do you suggest? How would you address the problem?" We saw that, graphically and tragically, during the Tampa affair in September 2001. There we had a situation that was deliberately manufactured for political advantage and the opposition had nothing to say. The opposition not only had nothing to say but, having nothing to say, it made the unforgivable error of supporting the outrageous actions of the government of the day. It enabled the passage of six laws that are totally unacceptable in human rights and social justice terms. We have to have viable policy alternatives so that we can offer a way back to human rights and social justice.

Over the last ten years we have left the field of policy development to those who produce initiatives that are contrary to human rights and social justice. Today policy research and development is focused on areas relevant to business or to the government's priorities and ideology. Government departments both undertake and commission policy research and development but the penetration of political control into the public service has affected not only the final advice prior to decision making but also the research framework in which potential policies are examined. Within this system alternative policies are not even researched let alone seriously considered and debated. Simply put, political control of bureaucracy means that policy alternatives are not being explored.

Outside government, too, the most influential policy work is presently being done in government-approved and business-funded think tanks. Here too policy development is subject to the ideological straight-jackets of the think tanks rather than proceeding from a people-centred perspective. These think tanks have been established to meet the objectives of certain sections of the community and their policy development work is directed towards that goal. These sections of the community, it goes without saying, are not those that experience violations of human rights and social justice principles. Indeed, it is those sections of the community that are increasingly hostile to those principles and indeed that benefit most directly from their violation. So today we have a politicised public service and ideologically-based think tanks producing most of the policy directions and policy alternatives presented to the community. That is simply unacceptable.

Developing good policy alternatives is difficult. I refer again to the imposition of research priorities by the government and its agencies. The kind of independent research and academic exploration that we used to expect from universities is becoming increasingly difficult to undertake. It is hard to get money to pursue policy initiatives or develop policy alternatives that do not have government interest and government approval.

We need more policy work and we need more policy alternatives. We need more independence

in being able to decide areas for research and development and we need more resources. That is where the challenges lie. How do we find the resources that we require for good alternative policy work? Equally importantly, how do we re-establish the tradition and practice of independence in academic and public sector policy research and development? I have no easy answer for this.

### **Human rights and social justice education in schools and communities**

Public and political hostility towards human rights and social justice has undermined the capacity of educational institutions to deliver good, effective values education. I become quite despondent when I think how, after thirty years of good values education, we seemed to have failed to embed a culture of human rights and social justice in the community broadly or even in those who have passed through the education system during those decades.

For the last thirty years we have had a strong, explicit commitment to human rights and social justice education in Catholic, government and private school systems. That commitment has been backed with significant resources. Yet I wonder where all that effort has really got us at the end of that thirty year period. Since the early 1970s we have had national commitment to multiculturalism that has been promoted strongly through the educational community. We have had a commitment to informing people about the historical situation, the true situation, of indigenous Australians. Yet we have seen retreats in both these areas over the last ten years. More than that, we have seen the emergence, with broad public support, of organisations and political movements that are determined to undermine what has been accomplished in these areas and their determination has met with success.

We have to question how effective our educational efforts have been. When we come to look at the situation today, we have to ask ourselves why our efforts have been so ineffective. There is a positive orientation in schools towards human rights and social justice education and that is a great resource that we can build on. There has been no turning back by our school systems, Catholic or government, none whatsoever. The challenge now is to work out how we can be more effective in values and attitudes education so that young people do not grow up inheriting the values and attitudes of most of our generation.

Certainly it is difficult for schools to meet these demands. The school curriculum is already overcrowded and the demands being placed upon schools are increasing all the time. It is difficult to add more work or different work to the program. Unfortunately, much of what has been added has little or nothing to do with human rights and social justice, even when it should. So far as values education is concerned, the government's flavour of the month, or rather the favour of the decade, has been citizenship and civics education. If ever there were an educational component within the school curriculum that should be oriented towards human rights and social justice, it is that. But it is not. In fact, in the late 1990s the Curriculum Development Corporation's very well-funded work on civics education curriculum contained no reference whatsoever to human rights. It seems inconceivable to have citizenship or civics education without referring to human rights. It is a logical impossibility that is ideologically acceptable.

Not only citizenship curriculum but other curricula need a firmer focus on human rights and social justice. It has not often been there. This needs continuing explicit commitment on the part of educational institutions to building a culture of human rights and social justice. That commitment must flow through all parts of the school and the school program. It should be much easier for religiously-based schools because they should already be values-based and ethically-based and these values should already be integrated right through the school. It is harder to do this in a more secular environment.

An explicit commitment to human rights and social justice is necessary but it is not enough. The commitment must be implemented, put into practice, in a more effective way than what we have

seen in the past. Part of doing that requires increased exposure for school students to opportunities for experiential learning. That means direct contact with people who are at risk of violation of human rights and social justice or who indeed experience it. Many people in Catholic schools are among the most disadvantaged in the community but there are also many Catholic schools that cater to the children of the elites. Those schools remain far removed from the communities that should be the top priority for Catholic education. If Catholic education is to be directed towards the children of the rich, then it must be education that leads students to a commitment to the service of the poor.

A commitment to human rights and social justice in schools also requires changes in the ways in which schools operate. It requires that schools be not mere dispensers of information and knowledge but rather models of a just, human rights respecting society. Children and young people cannot be expected to develop commitments to and skills for human rights work if they do not experience human rights in the environment where they live a large part of their young lives, that is, in school. So, for example, children have a human right, set out in international law, to participate in all decisions that affect them. Yet in so many schools, perhaps almost all schools, students are treated as empty vessels into which words are poured rather than as active participants in the process of their own education. Building a culture of human rights within the broader community requires a culture of human rights within schools themselves, that they be models of the kinds of society that we wish to develop.

When we come to community education, the challenges seem even more difficult. We have made major efforts over the last thirty years at broadly based community education on issues of human rights and social justice but again I have to ask how effective those efforts have been. There has been a range of well-funded, government-sponsored campaigns to change community attitudes. Some of those campaigns have been very successful. I have thought much about the successful campaigns, seeking to identify the factors that contributed to their success.

The most successful public education campaigns over the last twenty years, the ones that have had an effect on changing attitudes and values, have been the campaigns relating to HIV/AIDS, to road safety, particularly random breath testing, speeding and wearing seat belts, to smoking, to domestic violence and to the environment. They are the five that I would single out as the most effective community education programs in Australia over that period. Each of them is worthy and each of them has been successful and of benefit to the community. But I am struck when I look at those five campaigns that four out of the five are based on fear of imminent death or physical injury. The only exception is the environment campaigns where the focus is long term rather than imminent but even in these there is the element of fear. I worry that the only form of community education that seems to have an effect in this country is that directed towards frightening someone to death – or at least about death. Beyond these positive community education campaigns, we can also see how the strategy of fear has been used very effectively for political purposes over the last ten years.

I am not suggesting for a minute that we should adopt the strategy of fear for the purpose of more effective human rights and social justice campaigning. The challenge for us is precisely the opposite, to develop effective strategies for community education that are not based on fear, that in fact are based on re-assurance, on the vision of a better society. Appealing to people's fear is no way to win their support for human rights and social justice. This challenge has preoccupied me increasingly over the last five years but I am no closer to finding any answers than when I began. I can only reiterate the conclusion I came to five years ago: that twenty or thirty years of effort in community education regarding multiculturalism, indigenous rights, the situation of women, human rights issues and values seem to have had very little effect on the consciousness on most of our fellow Australians.

So now I turn my question over to scholars. Research academies have an important role to play

in seeking answers to the ineffectiveness of the past and identifying ways ahead for more effective community education. We need resources for that, of course. This is a perennial problem but resources simply have to be found. We have to know why things did not work and we have to understand better what may work in the future. That requires solid research into the most effective means of positive attitudinal change. It seems strange for me to say that in a Catholic university, a university associated with an institution with two thousand years' experience in attitudinal change in the context of Christian conversion. Unfortunately the Catholic church, at least in this country, has also lost the plot in values development over the last twenty or thirty years. I am not sure that it has very much to offer in this particular debate at this stage but it too needs answers, desperately. Knowing how to do effective community education for positive values change is very important for human rights and social justice but tangentially it is also important for the future of the church itself. This is an area of research that fits easily and appropriately within the research program of a Catholic university.

The education of future educators is also an important task. Schools should be and could be one of the primary locations of human rights and social justice formation. For them to be that, teachers need to be equipped for the work. This will require advocacy with curriculum development agencies so that teachers have the materials they need, rather than more highly funded curriculum development initiatives that ignore human rights and social justice. It will require, again, contact with individuals and groups that experience violations so that they have opportunities to speak directly to the community and to students as part of the educational effort. It must include, again, partnerships between educational institutions and community groups. We particularly need to be exploring and trialling alternative methods of community education, backed-up by research into effectiveness to identify factors that contribute either to success or to failure. There is much work to be done in developing effective community education strategies and universities have critical parts to play in that.

### **Developing more effective local, national and international networks**

The last area I will mention is network building at local, national and international levels. Building coalitions or building networks for human rights and social justice, a different form of "coalition of the willing" if you like, is an important part of the task. We cannot do it alone. It is as simple as that. Even if we could, that would not be good enough. It would not be good enough because working alone does not provide the model of a society respecting human rights and social justice that we seek to build. The method of our work itself should reflect the values that we hold. In the same way that schools should become models for a human rights respecting society, so too should our mode of work reflect our human rights commitment.

There are many examples of successful coalitions of disparate groups brought together for particular purposes directed towards human rights and social justice. There are local examples of environmental campaigns that saved particular sites or forests of significance. There are national examples, including the campaign in support of asylum seekers where, although there have been few improvements in the law, there have certainly been successes in relation to some practices and policy of government and in changing community attitudes to some extent. At the international level, I can point to successful campaigns by coalitions of non-government organisations and others, including governments themselves, around human rights issues, for example, in United Nations forums. It is interesting that so many of the coalitions that are formed are so disparate, that they draw their support from a wide variety of sources, including many unlikely ones.

In talking about network building, I am not talking simply about like-minded organisations getting together as they have done in the past, but about building networks by moving outwards, reaching out to potential allies that sometimes can include business and sometimes government. We need to have solidly based community campaigns that cut across some of the traditional

sectoral or disciplinary divisions that have inhibited our work in the past. As I said, we have good existing experience in effective networks at local, national and international levels. Generally, however, these past networks have been gathered on the basis of sectoral or geographical or ideological commonality. That is what we need to escape.

The demoralisation of community and other groups at the moment makes network building more difficult. That demoralisation seems to have been accompanied, perhaps even to have caused, three deficiencies. There is a lack of focus, a lack of leadership and a lack of coordination. We need to remedy all three deficiencies. We need to find a solid focus for our work, in a common vision with a common strategy and common priorities.

We need new leadership that is more capable of speaking to the broader community and particularly of speaking to young people. That will include leadership of young people themselves, not only for young people but also for others. It will also include leadership from among the groups that are most affected by violations of human rights. It is no accident that the indigenous movement seems at this stage to be undirected at the national level. It is no accident because the heads of the movement have been lopped off. And it is no accident that there is a lack of leadership among the community groups committed to human rights and social justice.

Effective network building will require a return to willingness to accept coordination and collaboration in activities - or perhaps to discover coordination and collaboration for the first time. One of the strengths of community organisations is their individual vitality and individual vitality often makes collective action very difficult. We need to submerge some of our personal priorities and objectives within a more collective sense of commitment to advance the cause of human rights and social justice. That may mean postponing some of our own priorities for the sake of supporting some of the priorities of others. It may mean adopting not our own strategies of choice, but the strategies of others. But it requires joint meeting, joint decision-making and good coordination to be effective.

There is a need as well for greater linkage across the different levels of networks from local to national to international. What happens internationally affects what happens locally and what happens locally ultimately affects what happens internationally. Back in the 1970s, the slogan 'think globally, act locally' was promoted, within a philosophy developed in a book, *Small is beautiful*, by Schumacher. It is all very good and well to 'think globally, act locally' and maybe it reflected the world of the 1970s. But now, in a more highly globalised international system, we need to 'think globally and locally and act globally and locally'. It is no longer enough merely to have the big picture while we go about our local activity; we need the linkages that enable networks across local, national and international spheres to collaborate in the work they do. There is no longer such a thing as a purely global issue and there is no longer an international issue that can be resolved without local action. And there is no longer such a thing as a purely local issue either.

In building cross-level coalitions there is a particular role for organisations with existing links from local to international. There are certain categories of organisation that stand out. The churches are clear examples. However, at this stage, church organisations are not using their local to international structures for this purpose. Trade unions too have local, national and international structures that should be working in the service of human rights and social justice. Often they do but far less so in the last ten years when they have had to fight for their very survival and to maintain workers' hard won conditions. Persuading trade unions and workers to look beyond workplace issues has become increasingly difficult.

Many key non-government organisations also operate across a number of levels, either because their structures run from local to international or because they have excellent wide networks. They too have roles to play to provide these kinds of linkages. The challenge for them is to break

out of their existing modes of working, to be more open and more connected, seeking allies outside their comfortable circles of associates.

Across the levels we need joint strategising and joint action but we also need exchanges of information and experience. Perhaps in this way we can learn more about successful community education. Certainly we must ensure that information about human rights violation is made public. There are things that can be done still within United Nations forums, for all their shortcomings, but it requires information from the base to be presented to the hub of the wheel of human rights structures. There is need for opportunities for training and participation of activists and advocates at each level and across levels so that experiences can be shared. Too often international activists have very little idea of what goes on at the ground and almost always local activists do not know how to make use of the limited mechanisms that exist at the global level. Networking across the levels can help improve the effectiveness of all.

## **Conclusion**

It was very easy to turn a retreat from injustice to a retreat from human rights. It will be much more difficult to turn the course back to a return to human rights and social justice. No one said that it was going to be easy and certainly the experience is that it is not. But there are things that can be done and certainly there is an urgent need to start now.

This is not a good time for human rights and social justice in this country and indeed it is not a good time globally. Over the last fifteen months I have been based outside Australia, for the first time in my life. One of the things that I have seen time and again is just how much the negative social trends that we see in this country are reflected in most other Western countries. For example, 'One Nation' is not only an Australian phenomenon - it is a phenomenon that has its mirror in almost every developed Western democracy. Hardened attitudes towards asylum seekers, hostility towards minorities, cutbacks in essential social expenditure, especially for health and education, are all features of life in almost all Western democracies. The retreat from human rights is not merely an Australian phenomenon. It is a worldwide phenomenon.

The need is urgent. There is much that we have to learn and that we can learn and there are people willing to work with us. In this presentation I have avoided detailed discussion of particular issues of social justice and human rights within Australia. That has not been my purpose here. My hope is that, when you turn to consider specific issues and to develop strategies to address them, you will not forget the broader need to revive the human rights debate generally and to restart action for social justice generally and that work on individual issues will be undertaken as a contribution to the broader task that confronts us all. Our focus now needs to be where we go from here rather than merely continuing to lament the dire straits that we have endured for the last ten years. We have done enough of that and it has not got us very far. The great challenge that we face is to rebuild a culture of human rights and social justice in Australia and internationally. That task is a difficult one but there is no task more deserving of our physical and intellectual energies and our commitment.