The Full Loaf

In "Half a Loaf" (ALR 142, August) Muriel Porter writes of the Anglican women's movement as "tired and despondent now as we take the last weary steps to the rescue tent". The General Synod in July gave women's ordination as priests the highest vote since the issue has been debated (80% of bishops, 70% each of clergy and laity), but the vote was still too low for the measure to come into effect.

Yet, far from being tired and despondent, many Anglican feminists are full of life despite—or because of—recent experiences. These years have been filled with legal decisions about the ordination of women (in some cases the lack of them) in church and secular courts, with bishops announcing dates and times for ordaining women and then cancelling the ceremony. We have been ashamed at our opponents' statements about women and about the church, exasperated by those in the church who put legal niceties above institutional structures to bring justice and laity), but the vote was still too low for the measure to come into effect.

We did, however, have a gathering of considerable note, just before the service. Women and men packed Pitt Street Uniting Church to hear Wendy Fatin (the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women) launch Changing Women Changing Church, a collection of essays in honour of Patricia Brennan, MOW foundation president. The minister also launched the Australian Feminist Theology Foundation, which will enable us to continue to challenge the high levels of testosterone in all the Christian churches. The book's contributors (who included Sister Veronica Brady and Bishop John Spong) were international and Australian, academics, clergy and lay, women and men, Catholic and Anglican. This occasion, deliberately planned to precede General Synod and to which all General Synod members were invited, spoke as eloquently as banners and singing have done in the past. It celebrated intellectual strength and pastoral commitment, horizons and bonds far broader, more vigorous and more imaginative than institutional church structures such as the General Synod.

We are caught up in a revolution—or, if that is too strong a word for Christian sensibilities, a transformation. That is what is happening as the churches encounter the women's movement. And their structures are changing: slowly and very differently, but enough to keep Anglican feminists going. There are a dozen women priests in the Anglican Church in Australia, and another 170 deacons. Snatches of conversation can be heard about women as bishops. Church language is changing, although you have to know where to go to hear "sisters and brothers" and biblical images for God other than "Almighty" and "Father". Women make up the largest number studying in many theological colleges; as women understand theology very differently from the way men do, a quiet revolution may be under way there too. And women are increasingly apparent in the decision-making structures of the church.

As in any revolution, change begins as sporadic and scattered; '1789' is not the same as 'the French Revolution'. Institutional forces for continuity are always greater than forces for change. There is, however, great energy in the feminist organisations of various Christian traditions, of which MOW is only one. FUN (Feminist Uniting Network), New Vision for Woman (Catholic Church), and Women and the Australian Church (Catholic Church), as well as numerous informal groups such as the Geelong Feminist Group are where the energy flourishes. Many such women are involved in their church's structures, but they sit lightly in them. More importantly, we realise we have more in common with our feminist friends in other denominations than we do with some members of our own. Half the Kingdom, a documentary shown last year on SBS, revealed how close the experiences of exclusion and stereotyping of Jewish women are to those of many Christian women. The first two ecumenical Christian feminist conferences drew hundreds, with prominent speakers such as Justice Elizabeth Evatt, President of the Australian Law Reform Commission.

The links between feminists in the church and the wider women's movement are not a whim of moments of sorrow or joy. Supporters in the women's movement have encouraged renewed energy. Anne Deveson and other prominent women were much in evidence at the non-ordination rallies in Goulburn. Likewise, in Perth in March, Wendy Fatin, Pat Giles (first woman senator from WA) and other pioneering women politicians were present, all full of admiration for Patricia Brennan and MOW generally. And, of course, there was the deluge of support from women in the community in phone calls and letters, as well as that ubiquitous forum of views, chat-show radio.
The Movement for the Ordination of Women is now faced with a dilemma. The agenda we have persistently brought to the church’s notice is now part of the mainstream debate in that church. Some of us are involved in the church’s structures. The issue for us is the future after ordination—for the women ordained, lay women, men in the church, for the church as a voice of justice in the community. We will continue to be a prophetic voice to the Anglican Church. We will continue our ministry of irritation, of support for women who have been ordained or have not been ordained. We will continue to explore priesthood, language about God, authority. We will continue to expand our ecumenical and international networks. And while bishops’ names might appear on the successful motions and historic plaques, we and our families and friends and the community at large will remember the sacrifice and energy that was such a challenge to the institutional church.

Some supporters of the ordination of women regard MOW as counterproductive, negative, and a hindrance to their way of addressing the issue. We have made and will continue to make a strong contribution to the transformation of the church. We speak with clarity and excellent information; we are moderate and reasonable under the most trying of circumstances; all we have ever really done is tested the sincerity of the establishment and shown that the establishment message so often lacks substance and life.

One cannot possibly be tired and despondent in such an environment for long. Energy in the Christian feminist movement is abundant, generous-spirited, and undaunted by the institutional churches’ ridicule and dismissal. But it is in danger of being lost to those churches.

JANET SCARFE is president of the Movement for the Ordination of Women.

Radical Changes

Pat O’Shane’s interview in ALR 141 (July), on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, failed to highlight the radical changes and the progress which has been made in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in recent years as a result of policies of the federal Labor government.

The establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) is no mere bureaucratic reform but a radical and fundamental shift in power to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The decision-making control over expenditure and policy formulation of the former Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Aboriginal Development Commission has now been transferred from Canberra to the 60 elected Regional Councils of ATSIC and a national Board of 20 Commissioners, 17 of whom are elected by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

ATSIC will no doubt evolve in the years ahead to give further effect to the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to self-determination, but the fundamental shift has already occurred and the effect of greater indigenous control over policy and expenditure will have a dramatic impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Governments and politicians need to come to terms with this radical shift in decision-making power and it is important that Australians generally—and particularly those on the Left—also keep pace with the nature and extent of the reform.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody began in 1987 and reported in 1991. However, its significance and ongoing impact is still not fully appreciated. The Commission’s final report did not accord with the expectation of many in the community that the 99 deaths it investigated were the result of foul play—a conclusion which many found difficult to accept. But the report stands as an indictment of the legal and corrective services system in respect of the most disadvantaged group in Australian society, and of our society itself, in allowing that situation to develop and persist. It found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over-represented in custody at a rate 29 times that of the general community. In some states the rate is considerably higher, and even escalated during the time of the Royal Commission. The Report found that those who died did not lose their lives as a result of isolated acts of unlawful violence or brutality. They were found to be victims of entrenched and institutionalised racism and discrimination. Their deaths were found to be the tragic consequence of two centuries of dispossession, dispersal and appalling disadvantage.

The federal government announced its support for 338 of the 339 recommendations. With limited exceptions, state and territory governments came forward with responses which were broadly comparable to the Commonwealth response. An extensive regime of accountability has been established to hold governments to their obligations. ATSIC will give an annual account of the extent to which all Commonwealth agencies are meeting their obligations, and states and territories are expected to make similar arrangements. A consolidated report to parliament on the implementation of Commonwealth undertakings will be made each year.

Pat O’Shane identified features which she saw as essential to a response to the Royal Commission recommendations—land, health, employment, education, housing, training and law and justice procedures. Not surprisingly, the federal government agrees with these priorities, as they are largely similar to the priorities that were identified in extensive consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the development of its response to the recommendations.
Over $400 million of new funds has been committed for programs to address these priorities over the next five years. This funding includes some $60 million for land acquisition and development programs, $450 million for Aboriginal Legal Services, $71 million for drug and alcohol services, and an array of new and expanded employment and economic development programs. Training and skills development programs have been restructured and put under the direction of local Aboriginal communities, through the 60 elected ATSIC regional councils. Funding has been provided to implement the National Aboriginal Health Strategy, and Commonwealth Aboriginal Housing programs have been restructured and put under the control of ATSIC.

Although I had announced proposals for the framework of the process of reconciliation before the Royal Commission reported, the concept of that process was endorsed in the Final Report of the Royal Commission. Commonwealth legislation has established a council of 25 people, the majority of whom are indigenous people, to guide the process of reconciliation at the national level. The council is chaired by Patrick Dodson, and its members include Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Archie Barton, Jennie George and Ray Martin.

The process of reconciliation has three key objectives which seek to keep faith absolutely with Aboriginal aspirations. First, it seeks to initiate activities to educate non-Aboriginal Australians about Aboriginal history, culture, dispossession and continuing disadvantage, with the objective of convincing the wider community of the need for governments to support Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people to give effect to their aspirations. The second objective of the process of reconciliation is to elevate Aboriginal aspirations and Aboriginal social justice issues as critical issues of the national agenda in the lead up to the centenary of Federation in 2001. Third, it aims to place on the public policy agenda the question of a document or agreement on the rights of indigenous people as one of the outcomes of the reconciliation process.

A treaty, 'makaratta' or agreement between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians has been a long standing objective of indigenous people in this country but a process with the potential to secure such an agreement has never before been put in place. In this process several matters of critical importance need to be re-emphasised.

First, there has been no attempt made by the government to define the terms of any document, instrument, treaty, compact or agreement which may result from the process. Second, there has been no attempt to give any final name to the document or documents. Third, the option has been left open for a separate document related to Aboriginal people or a separate document for Torres Strait Islanders should this be the wish of Australian indigenous peoples. Fourth, no decision has been made on which party or parties should be responsible for negotiating any document. These matters have been deliberately left open and must, first and foremost, be the subject of extensive consultation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

It is time that Australian people got serious about the issue of a document. The most recent public opinion polls have told us that 65% of Australians agree that there should be a treaty with Australian indigenous peoples, and there has been a call by many indigenous people for such a document. In Canada there is a greater level of maturity in political discussion about treaties with Indian and Innuit people. Such modern treaty agreements are supported by conservative politicians in that country as a means of addressing the aspirations of Canada's indigenous people.

As a result of the establishment of ATSIC, the response to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the unanimous Commonwealth Parliamentary support for the process of reconciliation, an agenda has been set which commits the nation to self-determination and social justice for indigenous people in this country.

ROBERT TICKNER is the federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs.

A Platform for the Right

Criticisms of Left positions and discussion on current issues in ALR have been interesting and useful. Events overseas and past acceptance of dogmas have combined to create serious problems for socialist ideas and the Left in Australia.

However, it is disappointing that the number of articles in ALR which are largely an intellectual wank is increasing. The Howard interview in the August issue was a negative for the Left. Failure of overseas socialist experiments, while creating massive immediate problems for socialist ideas, does not mean the Left should accept capitalism and feature its foremost advocates. It was a bureaucratic model of socialism which failed in Europe. Russian tanks crushed the Czech bid for socialist democracy in 1968.

Currently there is need for promotion of creative alternatives to the increasingly crisis-ridden capitalist system. ALR was, after all, brought into being to further human progress, not merely to inflate egos and provide a platform for the extreme Right of politics.

Aided by circumstance, Hawke and Keating used their positions in the Labor Party to help shift Australian politics to the right in the 1980s. The current drift in ALR, if not arrested, could be a pressure for a similar slide in the Left itself in the 1990s.

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