

Anglicans and the baby bonus

Social Issues briefing #092, 29/04/2011.

It was a surprise for many Australians to hear news reports this week that a national Anglican body was recommending to 'dump' the 'baby bonus', a lump-sum payment of several thousand dollars made to mothers of newborns. This briefing tells the story behind the story.

The latest 'official' position of the Anglican Church of Australia only calls upon Government to 'consider carefully any incentive aimed specifically and primarily at increasing Australia's population while continuing to support low-income families.' (The relevant motion is reproduced at the end of this briefing.)

The body that made the news was the Public Affairs Commission (PAC) of the General Synod of Anglican Church of Australia. This is a 'think tank' of a dozen people, from across Australia's various Anglican churches, which advises General Synod on national social issues. It is like a national version of what the Social Issues Executive does for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. (I am also a member of the PAC.)

The news story arises from a [PAC submission](#) to a Commonwealth Government [enquiry on sustainable population](#). The PAC's submission included a supporting paper offered by the twelve members of the PAC. It also included the 'official' stance of the General Synod, above, but went further. The General Synod did not specifically endorse the submission, because Anglicanism is actually a sprawling democracy. It is common practice for various Anglican bodies to make their own submissions to government. (See our Briefing #093 for an example where in a different context, ten Sydney Anglican bodies made submissions.)

The PAC submission calls for debate on the drivers of Australian population growth. It does not revise orthodox Christian thought about reproduction, but proposes the 'removal of public incentives aimed at increasing the birth rate and replacing them with support for improvements in the capacity of parents to be fully attentive to their babies, e.g. by increasing paid maternal and paternal leave' (p. 17; see also the summary on p. 18). The comment is made in the context of a much wider discussion: for example, the submission also called for wider systems of support for families with young children, and noted the need to have a compassionate attitude toward humanitarian entrants to Australia's system of immigration.

The comment about the baby bonus only questions a public policy which may distort 'natural' population growth, and which is not necessarily the best way to support children and parenting. It need not be taken as 'anti-family' to question this particular public policy, if there are other and better ways to support families. For example, better provisions for maternity and paternity leave may be more helpful for a child than a lump sum payment at the beginning of his or her life, since such payments can easily be spent on other things, rather than on the child's ongoing needs.

Of course, the more substantial discussion is about whether population growth is a problem; and Christians disagree about the state of the natural environment and our response to it. Many Christians think that population growth is no problem, and defend its link to economic growth. (I question such views in a [more technical article](#).) However, even if population needs to be 'sustainable', **it remains very important not to make it so at the expense of children and the unborn.** That is, no Christian position on population can drift into the anti-human stance that abortion and severe reproduction controls are the answers. We can think much more creatively about how to uphold *both* the created order *and* the good of humanity.

Not all Christians may agree with the General Synod's stance on care for the environment, or with the PAC paper's stance on population. But the PAC has not drifted into an anti-human or anti-reproduction stance. Its proposal about the 'baby bonus' need not be taken as such.

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for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney

Caring for the Creation

(Motion 89/10, General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia, 21 September 2010)

That this General Synod of The Anglican Church of Australia gives thanks to Almighty God for the gracious gift of human life and for the privilege of being divine image bearers.

Synod acknowledges:

- a) that all human life comes from God, irrespective of age, gender, race, or ability, and that God does not delight in the death of any he has made, and notes:
- b) Resolution I.8 of the Lambeth Conference 1998, which
 - (i) reaffirms the Biblical vision of Creation according to which the divine spirit is present in Creation and human beings have responsibility to make personal and corporate sacrifices for the common good of all Creation; and
 - (ii) recognizes that unless human beings take responsibility for caring for the earth, the consequences will be catastrophic because of: overpopulation, unsustainable levels of consumption by the rich, poor quality and shortage of water, air pollution, eroded and impoverished soil, forest destruction, and animal extinction.
- c) the encouragement in Resolution 14.15 of the Anglican Consultative Council in May 2009 for Provinces 'to advocate sustainable restorative economies with national governments, the United Nations through the Anglican Observers Office, and local constituencies'.

And requests

1. Australian Anglican Dioceses and individuals to:
 - (i) Grow in understanding of global and national environmental challenges, and the role of human population growth in contributing to them.
 - (ii) Use resources including those identified by the General Synod's Public Affairs Commission and Environment Working Group to assist in developing integrated views of issues and potential responses, and take action to reduce our impacts.
 - (iii) Contribute thoughtfully and prayerfully to public debate about how to
 - achieve justice not only for current Australians but for our descendants,
 - nurture and protect, nurture and protect life on this fragile land with all its beauty and diversity life on this fragile land with all its beauty and diversity,
 - share in a world of finite resources, showing love for our neighbours, particularly those who live in the two-thirds world,
 - (iv) Remain confident in the gospel of Jesus Christ to address environmental challenges as it calls people to turn from human selfishness and greed.
 - (v) Prayerfully consider and reduce their levels of consumption.
 - (vi) Explore ways to ensure that every child is welcomed and has the opportunity to reach his/her full potential.
2. The Australian Government to:
 - (i) Recognise the role of population growth and unsustainable levels of consumption by the affluent in contributing to global and national environmental challenges, and avoid any reliance on continuing population growth to maintain economic growth.
 - (ii) Determine a sustainable population policy for Australia which is fair and just.
 - (iii) Consider carefully any incentive aimed specifically and primarily at increasing Australia's population while continuing to support low-income families and sustainable immigration.
 - (iv) Support agricultural research both to care for our land and to preserve our ability to produce food.
 - (v) Contribute more generously to improving the welfare of people in the least developed nations, and other life in their environments, in particular by including support for family planning and women's reproductive health programmes with aid for development, in ways that respect the cultures of those people and take account of Christian values including respect for the sanctity of all human life.
3. The reporting of the outcome of this Motion to the United Nations Anglican Observers' Office.

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