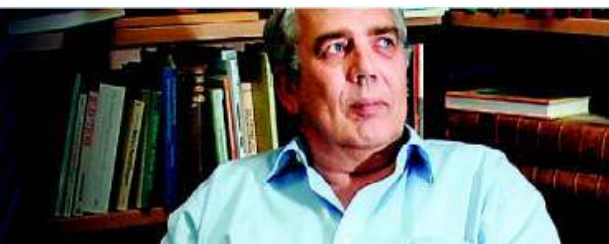


# JACK WATERFORD



**G**eorge Cardinal Pell and Mark Coleridge, respectively archbishops of Sydney and Canberra, are worried about what they see as efforts to drive religious organisations out of the public square. ACT Government pressure on the Little Company of Mary to sell back Calvary Public Hospital is seen as ideologically driven, by people opposed to having Catholics in public health care. It is probably the thin end of a wedge designed to defund other institutions, not necessarily only Catholic ones.

If they are right, there is an awful lot at stake.

■ Catholic schools: Australia-wide they educate one in five children. Originally, these schools ran on fees and relentless church fund-raising, particularly at the parish level. The organisation this involved, particularly among a then more homogenous and Irish-oriented Catholic population, was one of the strongest cultural forces separating Catholics from the mainstream. Now more than 90 per cent of the costs of operating schools comes from governments, and a good deal of the monoculture has collapsed.

In Canberra, the moral ownership problem is complicated not only by Menzies and the state-aid debate, but by the fact that many of the schools, and their major facilities, were built in the 1960s when large numbers of public servants were being transferred to Canberra. The

Commonwealth, recognising that access to Catholic schools was among the services these migrants needed, underwrote Catholic building programs here in a way that happened nowhere else in Australia.

■ Then there's health care. There are 21 Catholic public hospitals around Australia, and another 50 or more private hospitals. There are also facilities providing care to the dying, the aged, the demented, to convalescents, people with physical and intellectual disabilities and to children with special needs and the mentally ill. Most of their buildings and the overwhelming proportion of the resources supporting these activities (in the process making the Catholic church the biggest non-government employer in Australia) come from government.

■ And the social welfare field. Funding to religious organisations increased particularly during the Howard years, as government subcontracted out labour market and unemployment programs. Whether such bodies should take the government's shilling became a very contentious issue among some religious bodies – who feared their mission would be overwhelmed by duties to government, as paymaster, rather than to clients. But many could not resist.

In some fields, government has subcontracted everything to the religious sector, so that there is little choice. This is one of the complaints coming from the hospice organisation, which admires the way LCM

has been running the hospice but fears its being given, in effect, a long-term government monopoly of services. But, in Canberra, that problem does not stop at the hospice.

Back in the early 1960s, long before self-government, the Commonwealth began organising welfare services for a fast-growing community. When a Catholic order of nuns offered to provide government-style services on sub-contract, in what is now (post nuns) the Marymead suite of welfare services, government leapt at it.

Marymead is a good thing, doing a good job. It employs about 175 people. It has active community outreach. Most of its services are funded by government, and, as with Calvary public, most of its buildings, if registered as the property of the archdiocese, were paid for by ACT or Commonwealth taxpayers.

■ With other special deals, including, as it happens, the Archbishop's House on Commonwealth Avenue. This large site was given, free, to the Catholic Church for a cathedral, not for a magnificent residence for whenever the archbishop visits his diocese.

Its position on one of Canberra's great avenues makes it wholly unsuitable for the purpose for which it is now used, and vague talk of putting some sort of shrine to Caroline Chisholm round the back does not change the argument. When the church decided not to



build a cathedral there, it should have given it back – strictly indeed, government should have resumed it. If the archbishop feels put out, a land swap, perhaps a suitably modest house nearer to Canberra airport, might suffice.

I'm all for Catholics, including Catholic organisations and institutions, being in the public square. We are citizens, and with as much right to push our barrow as anyone else.

But I'm never comfortable about Catholics, as Catholics rather than as citizens, taking the government's shilling, or doing the government's work, let alone doing it on the cheap. Or Anglicans, or Muslims, or the League of Atheists for that matter. It's spiritually uneconomical: if people are moved by their faith to do individual or

collective work for the glory of God, they ought to do it in projects that make a difference, rather than by digging ditches.

There's nothing wrong with digging ditches, but it is essentially a secular job. Which can be done by individuals, the community or the state. With common human needs, such as health care and education, the state does provide, these days if not before. And there is not generally a yawning gap of the poor, the needy, and the ones missing out. Or not here, anyway.

But there are people who are hungry, and thirsty, and sick, and in jail, for whom the state is not providing so excellent a service. Those feeling called upon to serve their God by serving His fellow man should focus their attention in those darker corners. It's not so materially

rewarding. It's often dirtier and more complicated, though as one agnostic, Fred Hollows, used to say, much more fun. But it is what some – certainly Catholics – are called upon to do. If not always, and not often enough, by their archbishops.

As old G. K. Chesterton, or at least my grandfather purporting to quote him, used to say, giving help to the deserving is not charity, and earns no credit in heaven. That is simply our duty, as citizens if nothing else. Charity involves giving help to the undeserving. And only what you give them with your own hands matters or counts.

It's that public square, not one paved by taxpayers and not one containing an archiepiscopal throne on a dais to remind us what's what, that I want persons of faith to be crowding.

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