
THE SECOND
F. OSWALD BARNETT
ORATION

WHERE ARE
TODAY'S
OS. BARNETTS?

by Professor Evan Walker
Dean, Faculty of Architecture and Planning
Melbourne University

With responses by Associate Professor Renate Howe
and Rev Tim Costello

at the Collins Street Baptist Church

9 November 1995



Ecumenical Housing Inc



Copelen Child and
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F. OSWALD BARNETT



After a visit to a slum mission, F. Oswald Barnett, a public accountant and a member of the Methodist Church, became involved in the establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home in 1929. In 1934 Barnett formed a study group focused on housing reform, including slum demolition and the establishment of a state financed housing authority. The Barnett Study Group, which included in its membership, G.K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, became the driving force behind a campaign which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1938, on which Barnett served as a Commissioner until 1948.

Then as now, there is need to campaign against housing poverty and for the renewal of the partnership between the state and the community that is necessary to ensure housing justice.

The F. Oswald Barnett Oration seeks to acknowledge the contribution Barnett made to eliminating poor housing conditions. It also seeks to remind contemporary society that the task is not yet complete - housing poverty remains a social problem of the highest significance. The oration provides an opportunity for the churches and others of goodwill to recognise the significance of the work of F. Oswald Barnett and to renew their commitment to housing justice which ensures appropriate, secure and affordable housing for all Australians.

This oration is jointly sponsored by Ecumenical Housing, (a commission of the Victorian Council of Churches) and Copelen Child and Family Services (formerly Methodist Babies' Home).

WHERE ARE TODAY'S OS. BARNETTS?

This is not an academic paper in the normal sense – so please put down your ‘scholarly’ listening mode. Nor am I necessarily speaking as a politician or an architect or a planner. And if some theological reflection appears, it is from a layman.

My intention is to share with you some observations about the nature of the society we are living in, which come as a natural response to reading Renate Howe’s excellent paper from last year on Oswald Barnett, the Inaugural F Oswald Barnett Oration¹, and in particular her reassessment of his key initiatives and of his capacity to re-cast his own understanding of the problems he set out to tackle. His story, as told by Renate Howe, is full of interest and meaning and I commend it to you.

This Annual Oration, which is sponsored jointly by two organisations which can rightly claim to be heirs to two key initiatives of Oswald Barnett, Ecumenical Housing (which naturally takes up the concern for housing justice), and Copelen Child and Family Services (successor to the Methodist Babies Home), acknowledges and celebrates the remarkable contribution of Oswald Barnett to our city and our community.

Briefly, Oswald Barnett was born into a working class family in Brunswick in 1883. As a child, he attended the large Methodist Church and Sunday School in Sydney Road where he developed his *‘firm and thoughtful Christian belief’*,² and a commitment to social reform and self improvement which lasted through all of his nearly 90 years.

He studied part-time for many years to eventually become a successful

qualified accountant so that by the early 1920s he was a happily married family man living in the eastern suburbs. But, as Dr Howe writes:

*'...the boy from Brunswick was dissatisfied with his comfortable life. After visiting the ragged schools and missions of the 'back slums' areas of inner Melbourne... Barnett anguished over the dichotomy between life in the slums and the suburbs.'*³

His response was to enlist the support of young Methodist laymen in rescuing children from appalling living conditions. His first project was the establishment of a home for the care of 'slum babies'. It was to become the Methodist Babies Home. Later, he tackled the broader but related problem of slum abolition which led to the formation of the Housing Commission.

Having been moved by the telling of the Barnett Story; by his capacity to tackle social problems directly; by his willingness to admit the need to adjust policy directions as his knowledge grew; by his capacity to recruit others to join his causes; I couldn't help asking myself: *'Where are today's Oswald Barnetts, and what has happened to our capacity to 'hand on' positive and constructive community values?'*

Now, let me explain that a little. I don't mean to suggest that the problems Os. Barnett tackled are not now being addressed, nor that there are not many admirable people, such as the 'People Together' group, making their voices heard (this morning's excellent letter to the *Age*, signed by Jean McCaughey and Ben Bodna, is evidence of that). Nor do I suggest that we are not much better served now by State and Federal welfare programs than we were in the 20s and 30s.

No, my concerns are grounded in the obvious symptoms of a growing

selfishness and cynicism in today's society including:

- The decline of the church and its impact on public policy (this is not principally a criticism of the Church itself, but of its decline as a symptom of social decline generally);
- In the scramble for wealth by the already wealthy with little or no sense of community responsibility;
- In the widely-held, and very negative, attitude that all politicians and community leaders are dishonest;
- In the dearth of young radical voices calling for change;
- In what one might call the 'cult of the individual';
- In the steady decline of volunteering... (and you might add to the list).

Of course, I speak of trends not absolutes, but the signs of an ailing society abound and are all too obvious. It's not as if such concerns have not existed in previous times, but for me the most disturbing element now is the obvious reduction in numbers of men and women motivated to speak out on issues of concern, or who are moved to tackle social or community problems by one means or another.

And dare it be said that the voices of concern and reform calling for radical action are mostly grey and ageing!

More and more we are missing that important brand of person who is naturally inclined towards community service, or what we might call 'good works'. Os. Barnett was a good example.

So, one is moved to ask oneself the important question: 'What moved Os. Barnett to take the initiatives he did in tackling the causes and products of poverty the way he did?'

Barnett himself saw the matter simply. The establishment of the Babies' Home was, he said, 'youthful Christian faith in action',⁴ and, as Dr Howe points out, it was the natural end of a desire to relate his Christian belief to social action.

Of course one accepts that explanation wholeheartedly, but it seems there might be more to it than that. Not that it doesn't make sense to people who themselves are Christian believers. But the service motivation is not exclusive by any means to the people called Christians. And in any case the social gospel theology of those between-war years has not lasted all that well with a rapidly diminishing Christian churchgoing proportion of the population, not to mention the dramatic change in Australia from an essentially monocultural community in the thirties to today's many-stranded, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation.

As it happens, the underlying motivation toward community service has never been the exclusive preserve of the Christian. In fact, many of Os. Barnett's contemporaries became disenchanted and frustrated with the narrowness of their church-relatedness and preferred to continue their social activism under different and broader umbrellas. A great many liberal social-gospel thinkers of the thirties were attracted to one or other stream of political activism (usually of the left), and many chose to work towards social reform and social justice in the political arena.

Indeed, an acute awareness of the inadequacy of well-meaning but essentially charitable social initiatives, developed in the face of immense

social crises, led a growing proportion of reform thinkers away from dependence on church-based social justice initiatives towards a political context for their inputs.

Let me elaborate.

In his excellent Sambell Memorial Oration of recent date titled 'What Happened to Compassion', Melbourne University historian Stuart Macintyre begins his paper with a graphic example.

He tells the story of the Australian churches engaged in a debate over social policy in the 1920s (and I am taking the liberty of editing for brevity):

'...the question at issue was unemployment and the debate was over a proposal for a system of employment insurance. The Prime Minister of the day had established a Royal Commission...'

'Most of the religious spokesmen who gave evidence were opposed to any such scheme of compulsory contributions.'

'Those who spoke for charitable organisations argued that only they could distinguish between genuine deserving cases and undeserving impostors. 'I prefer the idea of private charity', said the President of the St Vincent de Paul Society... 'the element of private benefaction is to my mind more elevated and pure than anything the state could do.'

'The real cause of poverty', another Churchman argued, 'was sin, and consequently the only effective cure was moral redemption.' Or, as the officer in charge of the Salvation Army's social mission work put it... 'the remedy is not by a legal enactment, but by getting at the heart of the man himself.'⁵

In his paper, Stuart Macintyre indicated that, although some years

later the Royal Commission did recommend that the Commonwealth introduce a system of national employment insurance, it did not occur.

It was to be two decades before a Labor Government established a national system of unemployment benefit in the 1940s. By then, the churches had significantly changed their stance, and not without cause. The searing effects of the depression followed closely by the Second World War had seen Australians turn to a government with a socialist policy base willing to tackle social issues on a more comprehensive basis, and with less of the 'charitable' base as expressed by the churches over 20 years earlier.

The change is also evident in the work of Oswald Barnett (and in his political leanings). His work in welfare housing resulted in the establishment of the Victorian Housing Commission in 1937 where he was appointed one of four Commissioners. This reflected his developing view (and a growing view within the churches) that any really effective attack on slum clearance and large-scale provision of housing for working families must involve government, at least at State level to begin with. And, after the war, Barnett became involved in advising the Chifley government's Post-War reconstruction Department on national housing issues.

So the question of motivation towards social change is an interesting one. Where the lead in the 1920s had centred on initiatives of the established churches and their agencies in terms of social welfare programs and social action generally, by the late forties the engine-room of change had become more political. Not that the churches withdrew, but their lead thinkers tended as well to be supporters of political social action – and were generally within the moderate left.

Although the conservative establishment, following the Menzies

Government win in 1949, tended to prefer the maintenance of traditional roles for church and state (at least from the establishment Protestant church's point of view), the Labor Movement and the Catholic Church had become inexorably involved in a complex power struggle which would change the face of Australian politics forever.

It's not my intention to follow that development here, except to indicate that the dialogue between the non-conformist Protestant churches and the left of politics was also rapidly developing a new force in national and state arenas which has not been satisfactorily analysed and described.

And it is this stream (the Protestant/left connection) which is the natural successor to the work of the Oswald Barnetts in our society. I speak of the politically-active adherents of the Uniting Church, the Baptist Church, the Churches of Christ (and others) who have aligned with left political parties (in some cases) or who have become publicly active on particular social and/or political issues. I speak also of the radical interventionist activities of environment groups and social action groups who effect a 'religious' fervour for their political causes, and many of whom admit to a church base in the first instance. It is from this pool that a considerable number of reformist politicians and politically-involved figures have come – typified most notably by individuals like Brian Howe.

But can we continue to depend on it? Will the church (or the churches) continue to provide that leavening stream of value-based contributors to the world of decision-making? And I suppose one might add – 'does it matter?' – but that question is, I think, rhetorical.

A few months ago, I chatted with Hal Bisset about this. Hal is the Director of Ecumenical Housing and a one-time Baptist pastor. I was

interested to know whether he felt the churches would remain a primary source of 'service' oriented people for the community.

He doubts it. He feels that men, in particular, have been let down by the church. He detects that, from about age 35 onwards, with their natural service instincts 'blunted', men tend to gravitate towards service organisations like Rotary and Lions to express their natural service tendencies. (Note: It's interesting to note Hal referring here to a 'natural service instinct', and then to the church as blunting it rather than developing it.)

And some recent attitudinal research indicates evidence of a further change. A Study for the Commission for the Future earlier this year shows that a major shift of attitude now occurs in young people between the age of 15 or so (when many are still under the influence of home, school and sometimes church), and age 25 or so (where very few are now attached to church or an effective organisational substitute) and they become socially inward-looking and cynical. These 15 to 25-year-olds sense the lack of a community to belong to, and they indicate that they:

'would be wasting their efforts and energy by focussing too much attention on the future.'

The study indicates that four emergent themes underpin this perception (and these have been edited for brevity):

'Firstly, ...as they see it, there is no existing goal or vision for Australia's future...'

'Secondly, there is an underlying impression that there are no clear morals or values...'

'Thirdly, ... there is a growing feeling that modern Australia has become something of a spiritual vacuum... '

'Fourthly, there is a lack of any leadership to follow... '6

Hal Bisset feels that, in relation to these findings, the church seems to have lost its way. He believes it has accepted the mentality of a 'minority' organisation and has become defensive, whereas in the two post-war decades it functioned more like a confident majority organisation with a relatively high proportion of young people gravitating to church-based youth organisations for their sporting, social and religious life.

Not now. And it is difficult to nominate many effective replacement organisations with community-oriented ideals and programs. Indeed, the diversity of ethnic and cultural streams now is so great that it is hard to make general comment. Our world has altered a great deal.

As far as the non-Catholic Christian churches are concerned, there are some fundamentalist congregations that draw large attendances of young people, but they are still marginal in number and there is fair evidence that causes of that kind do not sustain the bulk of their followers beyond the age of 25 to 30. They tend to be what are known as 'feel-good' congregations preaching a simple, personal gospel which tends to hold the secular world at arm's length.

This is a far cry from the social gospel that captured Oswald Barnett and so many others in his time – one of whom was my father who knew and admired Oswald Barnett.

Let me use him for a moment as an example.

Charles Fitzroy Walker is an interesting case since he reflects very clearly the optimism and the liberal theology of the 20s and 30s. Like Oswald Barnett, he grew up within the Methodist church and was active in Sunday School teaching and youth work. He completed an MA at Melbourne University and trained as a teacher. For 36 years he was Principal of a small Methodist co-ed Boarding School in Box Hill then known as Box Hill Grammar School, now Kingswood College.

He was a progressive educator influenced by Froebel, Montessori and A S Neill, and very much interested in the importance of character education; the teaching of values; and the social value of co-education. Like Barnett, his natural political tendency was towards socialism although he didn't ever join a political party.

In the late 60s, a year or two before he died, my father wrote a series of essays which he published under the title 'On Education'. One paper he called 'On the Church' and he subtitled it 'Can we do without it?'

In it, he reflects on the decline of the church in numbers and in influence, and he suggests that it might only be worth maintaining the church if it updates itself in the light of new knowledge. I quote him to reflect a common attitude, not because I agree with him:

*'We do not need to retain outworn beliefs', he writes, 'in fact, we must get rid of them. A determined effort needs to be made, by both laymen and the clergy, to cast out all the antiquated, unhelpful religious beliefs, and set the church free to proceed with general humanist enlightenment.'*⁷

He seeks to 'demythologise' the church. He is convinced that the

belief structures of the church are a stumbling block to the application of its day-to-day living values. He writes:

*'... we tend to think of the church as being an organisation with an authoritarian message or doctrine... We need to get back to the simple meaning of 'church' as 'meeting-house.'*⁸

His definition of a church is then simply:

*'a fellowship of good people, who meet together to promote the ideals of truth and right living.'*⁹

Well, as I pointed out, I found myself not agreeing with him, but in humanist terms it's not such a bad concept, and he meant it. His school was notable for being a surrogate family for hundreds of young people who needed to belong to a family; as a supporter and encourager of those whose talents were not at first obvious; and as a non-competitive, co-educational community build on cooperative lines. He consistently promoted and taught the ideals of truth, fairness and cooperative living. His relationship to the institutional church, as you might imagine, was not always easy.

Later in life, he began to withdraw from the church and found more agreeable outlets in Rotary, the United Nations Association and, in the end, the Unitarian Church.

He worked for many years, with others, on what was called the 'Character Education Inquiry' which investigated the notion that it is possible, indeed desirable, to teach values and ethics directly. And he and his Deputy Principal of 30 years, a remarkable Quaker named Rupert Brunning, spent most of their working lives endeavouring to prove that contention. Brunning was especially memorable for his 'scripture' classes

where he made use of excellent role models of great reformers and servants of society such as Ghandi, Wilberforce, Joan of Arc, Savonarola, Florence Nightingale, Lord Shaftsbury and many others.

In all of this, my father exhibits a significant rejection of the church as the Body of Christ. He doesn't accept what he calls 'magic and miracles'. That, he believes, is simply the church exercising its traditional (and unscientific) control over a fearful and submissive following.

And he has no time for the doctrine of Original Sin or the Atonement. The notion that we inherit a faulty or fallen nature at birth was, for him, an offense to human dignity and intelligence.

And yet C F Walker was a follower of Jesus as a great teacher and he sees great merit in much of the work the church does. He writes:

*'The Churches, be it said, do a splendid amount of social work. They are making an even stronger stand for social justice and equality of opportunity. They are a force making for democracy.'*¹⁰

I have used my father as an example because he reflects a very widespread view of his time and indeed of today. He sees the value of the church as teaching a caring gospel where to 'love thy neighbour' means to be thoughtful and generous, and to accept responsibility for working for the welfare of others.

But he was convinced the church and its influence would not last long if it could not change. One might say that 30 years on his predictions seem not too far from the mark. There's some wisdom in what he says. And who can deny the critical importance of inculcating service values in our young people?

Which leads me to ask whether the churches haven't been stressing issues of belief too much, where differences with other religions are very great, and not stressing issues of practice enough, where great similarities exist even in very diverse cultural and religious traditions.

I'm sure that both Oswald Barnett and my father felt a strong affinity with 'great teachers' in other cultures. Certainly C F Walker was an admirer of men like Tagore and Ghandi who belonged to quite different religious traditions. And without an agreed cross-cultural value base in Australia, how can we expect succeeding generations to maintain an outgoing drive to contribute? How can we expect to maintain high levels of volunteering? Indeed, how can we expect to recruit capable, well-directed politicians?

This latter question deserves some attention since it has been at the core of much press comment in recent months. We have seen many headlines asking 'How honest are our politicians?', press cartoons which reinforce anti-politician views, and polls which show that (for instance) 91 percent of Australians believe that '... politicians twist the truth to suit their own arguments.'¹¹

Well, it was comforting to see Gerard Henderson in *The Age* of 19 September in an article titled 'Dishonesty is not a common policy' write:

*'... Australian politicians are no less honest than those of comparable democracies – perhaps even more so. Even when recent events in Western Australia and Queensland are taken into account, the fact remains that there is very little corruption or dishonesty in the Australian body politic. It's time more opinion leaders said so.'*¹²

But do many Australians agree with him?

Present attitudes towards politicians in Australia would certainly not suggest so. Denouncing politicians for being dishonest and untrustworthy is a pretty common sport these days, and I can give you a sense for how that feels from the other side.

Some four or five years ago, after I had stepped down from Cabinet in the Victorian Government, Rev Kevin Green invited me to be one of his speakers in a series of seminars at Wesley Church titled 'Keeping Society Honest'. I accepted even though I disliked the implication of the title (and said so!), and I prepared a careful piece which was based on the theological understanding of the 'fallen' nature of humanity – we are all imperfect – and the affirmation that, for the Christian, truth is not a concept but is to be found in the person of Christ ('I am the Way, the Truth and the Life') – which is a quite different reality. The essence of being honest for the Christian was a matter of belief. As Paul says of 'being IN Christ': We are justified by faith, not works.¹³

Now I accept that that's not easy to explain. But, that said, I pointed out that politicians are really no more or less honest (in the ordinary sense) than anyone else. But they are sometimes put into difficult situations by their role, as are senior bureaucrats, businessmen, and decision-makers of all kinds.

For a Government Minister, when questioned by the media on current and difficult issues, it is not always right or proper to tell all that you know – indeed often it would be irresponsible or damaging. I gave examples which included the Pyramid Building Society controversy, current at the time, where to publicly comment on sensitive information would have been irresponsible on the part of any Cabinet member. I made the point that sometimes it was best to say 'I have no knowledge' when that wasn't exactly true.

What I did not know was that a reporter for the old *Herald* was there (not that I would have altered my talk). He must have been bored with the bulk of what I said, but he pounced on this confession by me of the need to be less than open on certain occasions. The next day's front page headline read: 'MPs LIE – Ex MIN TELLS!' ¹⁴

It was a terrible article, an altogether dishonest piece of reporting reflecting the fact that the reporter knew his readers would take perverse pleasure in yet another reassurance that all politicians were liars – and here was self-incriminating proof.

Kevin Green wrote a letter to the *Herald* putting the matter right, but of course it was not printed on page 1 in two-inch letters like the original headline. And he arranged to have the whole talk published in 'Church and Nation' which helped. But the public and political fuss was distressing. A few colleagues treated me like a traitor for some time, and I had to suffer hearing self-righteous talkback radio commentators saying how terrible it was to have such a blatant admission of lying by a senior member of government. For me, the worst part was the feeling that I had confirmed a widespread attitude that I don't accept or agree with at all. My treatise on truth and honesty had ended in me being branded as a lying politician.

I could tell you other stories indicating that that kind of reporting is generally believed without question, and there's no point in suing for a correction – it simply gives the story another run or two and the public isn't particularly interested. I had no real way of responding, and the paper knew it. (There was, however, something of a happy ending. Less than two months later, the *Herald* closed its doors, no doubt by divine intervention.)

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that politicians are paragons of

virtue, but I do say that the low regard in which they are held in Australia is a concern and that, unless some change of attitude occurs, we will find it harder and harder to recruit good capable people into all levels of government... and that's a tragedy in the making since the need for constructive government has never been more apparent.

The problems government face are well described by Jim Wallis in the introduction to his recent book 'The Soul of Politics':

*'The world isn't working... Bonds of family and community are fraying. Our most basic virtues of civility, responsibility, justice and integrity seem to be collapsing. We appear to be losing the ethics derived from personal commitment, social purpose, and spiritual meaning. The triumph of materialism is hardly questioned now, in any part of our society.'*¹⁵

More than ever, we need the strength of leaders of integrity to tackle these critical issues. Wallis says:

*'(All those) who believe that moral issues are at stake in our political choices can understand the need for renewal. Most people would probably agree that beneath the social, economic, cultural and political problems we confront, lie critical questions concerning our deepest values. Our crisis is also one of the spirit – deeper than just the turns and twists of secular politics.'*¹⁶

Where then does this lead us? Clearly a political construct which meets the real needs of our citizens will require the resources of our best ethical and spiritual traditions, and that means that, in Australia, we will need to reassess the exclusivity of much of our Anglo-Saxon and Christian heritage.

We need to develop a shared vision of the kind of nation we wish to become. An inclusive vision reflecting our multitude of cultural traditions.

And we need new ways of teaching and sharing agreed values to upcoming generations. Our schools will be critical in this regard. We would do well to downplay the underlying belief structures in this endeavour since, in modern Australia, they are very diverse and have the capacity to be divisive.

Our success to date with multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicity has been based more on an easy-going acceptance of diversity rather than a positive and agreed cultural ideal. We will soon need a better base than that. An understood value base.

And where will the initiatives come from?

I began this talk by expressing some concerns about observable trends in society today:

- The decline of the church and its impact on public policy;
- The scramble for wealth by the already wealthy;
- The low regard for politicians and decision-makers;
- The decline in volunteering...

I then reflected on the work of men like Os. Barnett and my father whose primary incentive came from the church, who developed a clear set of human values, and who moved inexorably towards the world of politics and government to tackle key social problems. (They varied in their method of value reinforcement. C F Walker sought to teach values through family and school; Barnett through the church and through his support group of influential professionals.)

But our world has altered dramatically in the last 25 years. We have become a different kind of society. We are no longer mono-cultural, and we run the risk of being less inclusive. The responses from our younger people would suggest so, and our key institutions have not been welcoming to new cultural representatives, and only slowly to women.

And what was once a reasonably effective system of transfer, by example or teaching, of positive and constructive community values has tended to decline or become irrelevant.

What we need, I think, is a new brand of civic leaders (one might use the word prophets) who are political but not necessarily politicians, ready to foster change. Men and women who reflect positive community values, who are not selfish or cynical, and who will tackle specific social issues with the intention of building a new, inclusive, just and positive society.

They may well come from any one, or all, of Australia's broad band of cultural or religious streams.

Where are today's Os. Barnetts?

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RESPONSE BY RENATE HOWE

In asking this question, Professor Walker is responding to what I believe is a growing disenchantment with the dominance of economic rationalism with its emphasis on efficiency, competition and the public over the private. It is interesting that Os. Barnett himself was challenged by a period of economic crisis in the thirties and looked to an understanding of economics as an important part of that solution, enrolling as a mature-age student in the new Commerce Department at Melbourne University. Also, as an accountant, he was not adverse to the goal of efficiency. The difference with today is that Barnett focused on how economics and efficiency could lead to a more equitable and just society and it is this commitment which is almost totally lacking among today's accountants and economists.

In a study of dominance of economic rationalism in the Commonwealth Public Service, Michael Pusey has noted the large-scale recruitment from a small number of economics department. There are few public servants with the broader social visions of the Keynesians such as Nugget Coombs and Ronald Mendelson in the Barnett era of the early post-war period.

The decline of Liberal Protestantism has contributed to this change. Pusey points out that the culture of public service among progressive sections of the churches was an important source of recruits to the Public Service and into Parliament which has virtually disappeared. Professor Walker points to the greying of the churches and the disaffection of young people. Clearly, Australia's churches feel marginalised in today's more complex multicultural society. However, Barnett showed the influence one person can have on a church and on social change. The current interest in Barnett is perhaps due to his amazing effectiveness and his ability to convince the Methodist church of the time not to be marginal to the social issues of the depression but to be a missionary church. Today, the churches

do need to see that no longer being 'mainstream' means that they are freed to be missionary in the way of the early church.

Having said this, I feel that Professor Walker is a little too pessimistic – that the churches in Victoria are redefining their position, forming alliances with a wide range of religious groups and operating as an effective lobby group on issues such as public ownership, youth homelessness and the gambling culture – all of which is in the Barnett tradition.

Undoubtedly, the new Os. Barnett will be a young woman. It is feminist theology that is at the cutting-edge of the church. Young women are not as disenchanted as young men with religious belief and are more committed to social change and community values. If they can break through the barriers to be powerful in the decision-making bodies of our society – Public Service, Parliament, Church – then a new Os. Barnett will surely emerge.

RESPONSE BY TIM COSTELLO

At a church I was speaking at recently, I was introduced as a prophetic voice in Melbourne. My nine-year-old son, who was sitting with me, started laughing and leaned across and said to me, 'Dad, he called you the pathetic voice in Melbourne'.

Oswald Barnett was most certainly a prophetic voice in Melbourne. His was a voice that we desperately need to re-hear today. We are living in a time when the centre no longer holds. Those institutions that shaped our society, whether they were military, church, government, law, are not trusted by people under 40. A radical anti-institutional attitude is abroad. There is a values vacuum at the centre of a rapidly-fragmenting culture. I suspect that Os. Barnett would be dramatically addressing such a values vacuum and would be fighting for at least five things if he were here today.

1. Oswald Barnett would believe in commitment to citizenship before customership. Whilst all of us are consumers of council services, we are first and foremost citizens. This means our right to participate in civic discourse through our representatives is prior to our participation simply through consumption. Customers are characterised by their participation through payment for services. Citizens are characterised by their inherent rights to speak, contribute and participate as fully as possible in the decision-making processes through their representatives and through consultation. Citizens shape the physical and social infrastructure of their cities. Customers privately consume services.

2. Oswald Barnett would believe in commitment to the public domain and not just the private domain. The belief that anything done in the public area is wasteful and inefficient and that the private area (dominated by business) is efficient and lean is an ideology that he would reject. Both public and private areas have their strengths and weaknesses.

Well-documented market failure, particularly that flowing from the spectacular failures of the late 1980s of private entrepreneurs, points to the falsity of this ideology. He would believe that we should take seriously the public domain of government.

3. Oswald Barnett would believe in the notion of common good and not simply the notion of user-pays. User-pays stresses that everyone must pay for their resources or they miss out. The notion of common good accepts that city subsidises rural, healthy subsidise sick, employed subsidise unemployed, those with homes subsidise the homeless. He would, therefore, reject a society that says 'we will document exactly how much people who are using resources cost us and if we determine that they cost us too much then we will withdraw those resources'. This way of thinking is particularly dangerous for those who are marginalised in our community whether by age, health or wealth as they are less able to appeal to their rights as citizens. They are reminded that they are merely customers who must pay their way.

4. Oswald Barnett would believe that co-operation is preferable to competition. Whilst there can be savings made through competition, commonly such competition is not sustainable and the quality of the service deteriorates. An ethic of using scarce resources wisely and therefore co-operatively is one that he would implement at every opportunity.

5. Oswald Barnett would believe that the nature of community should be emphasised and the rights of individuals should not be absolutised. One of the features of the former city of St Kilda is the remarkable number of communities. Such communities bring diversity and vibrancy to our city and need to be encouraged. The absolutising of the individual who has only one concern and that is of his or her rates atomises our cultural and community life. Strengthening communities and helping them celebrate and contribute to our city will be a priority.

