



News comment with Rod Benson

Broadcast on 2CH Sydney for the NSW Council of Churches, Sunday 19 Feb 2012

<http://rodbenson.com>

9 am – We need another Wilberforce

On Wednesday *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a great article on gambling reform by World Vision CEO the Rev Tim Costello.

Like the end of apartheid, he says, when it was impossible to find a white person who was ever in favour of the policy, slavery now seems a clear-cut issue. Yet there were many political leaders who opposed Wilberforce's abolition bill from 1787 to 1807, even though all believed slavery to be distasteful.

While there is no moral equivalence between slavery and pokies, Tim Costello says the same arguments are being used by the pokies lobby. There is no politician who likes pokies, but many argue that reform is too hard because we are dependent on pokies revenue.

And as there are only 100,000 Australians addicted to pokies, and it is a matter of personal responsibility, it is not that big a problem anyway. But why should even 100,000 people be sacrificed on the pokies altar on the grounds of personal responsibility? When will the next Wilberforce stand up in Parliament for justice?

I'm Rod Benson for nswchurches.org

12 pm – Parallels between slavery and pokies

In an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on Wednesday, the Rev Tim Costello noted three extraordinary parallels between the arguments that stymied the abolition of slavery and those made today to quash poker machine reform.

The first is substitution. It was claimed if the British slave trade was abolished, competitors in France and Spain would benefit. The pokies lobby claims that reform will only drive problem gamblers elsewhere.

The second argument is the economy. Slavery, like pokies today, was not "top of mind" for most people in Britain. Prime Minister William Pitt was busy reforming the economy by introducing income tax and consolidating revenues to fight Napoleon, and said he could not expend political capital against powerful vested interests on a "side" issue. Think Gillard and Abbott, says Tim Costello.

The third argument is incrementalism. Slave traders accepted amendments such as six inches more room for each slave in ships' hulls. Similarly, the pokie industry reluctantly accepts more natural lighting, less predatory targeting, and voluntary pre-commitment technology. But voluntary is as sensible as optional brakes in a car.

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2 pm – Should Australia export uranium?

One week after the ALP national conference removed its ban on uranium exports, Premier Barry O'Farrell said he was open to overturning the 26-year-old ban on uranium exploration in NSW, and cabinet has now agreed.

Uranium mining and export has long been opposed by those who fear it will lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and potential global conflagration.

But these days, green issues dominate debate. Greenpeace campaigner Julien Vincent invoked the first anniversary of the nuclear disaster in Fukushima as "one of the best reasons for not going nuclear." And Greens Senator Scott Ludlum asked why Mr O'Farrell would want to implicate NSW in the next nuclear disaster.

Former premier Bob Carr supported Mr O'Farrell, saying the ban was "irrelevant today when to beat global warming we urgently need every available source of carbon-free energy."

Green arguments are important, but let's not be complacent about the serious danger still posed by nuclear weapons in the wrong hands.

I'm Rod Benson for nswchurches.org

5 pm – The Achilles' heel of atheism

The Reverend Dr Giles Fraser isn't your most mainstream Anglican minister, especially since he resigned as canon of St Paul's Cathedral to become a lead writer at *The Guardian*. But in a BBC radio interview with atheist campaigner Richard Dawkins on Monday, Fraser capitalised on Dawkins's arrogance and reduced him to incoherent spluttering.

They were debating figures produced by Professor Dawkins's think tank which purport to show that people who think of themselves as Christian turn out to be overwhelmingly secular in their attitudes to certain social issues.

Dawkins claimed that "an astonishing number [of Christians] couldn't identify the first book in the New Testament." So Fraser asked Dawkins to name the full title of Charles Darwin's classic book *On the Origin of Species*. He couldn't, and his awkwardness was both hilarious and symbolic.

As Jewish journalist Stephen Pollard put it, "the arrogance and intolerance of the atheists, exemplified by Professor Dawkins, is their Achilles' heel."

And, for the record, the first book in the New Testament is the Gospel of Matthew.

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