



### **Moral Responsibility**

Woe to those who began this war if they were not in bitter earnest!

These words come from the diary of Mary Chestnut, a prominent socialite and politician's wife from South Carolina, who, in the years leading up to the American Civil War, was closely acquainted with many of the leaders of the movement for southern secession which ultimately saw the creation of the Southern Confederacy and the initiation of a conflict that cost the lives of 600,000 Americans. Chestnut wrote these words in the heady days at the beginning of the Civil War, precisely because she recognized that those who had gotten their way - southern secession - now bore a terrible moral responsibility for what happened next. For it was not enough to have won a political argument and to have persuaded one's fellow citizens to your own viewpoint: having made the argument and won the debate, you now were responsible for creating outcomes that realised the positive claims that formed the argument with which you persuaded others.

In other words, if you argue against a certain course of action - in this case, not seceding from the United States - on the basis that doing so would result in certain harms, and that following a different course - forming the new Confederated States of America - would produce certain goods, you were obliged to ensure those goods were realised and those harms avoided. If, however, your arguments were not based on any intention to follow through on

the moral obligations they created, but were instead predicated on opportunistic self-aggrandizement or power playing, you were morally culpable for the harm that resulted.

Mary Chestnut realised the moral responsibility of those who led the movement toward the creation of the Southern Confederacy. And she realised that this responsibility was all the more evident if those leaders, far from doing so on the basis of conviction or principle, had done so in order to obtain power and office. In other words, if they had behaved opportunistically and with their own benefit in mind. Being closely acquainted with many of the leading actors in the secession movement, Mary Chestnut was likewise aware of the egos and vanities involved; greatly fearing that these had played the greater part, she pronounced a dire warning about the consequences that would follow.

Mary Chestnut's prophetic words proved to be correct. The forcible reintegration of the Confederacy into the United States was a hugely destructive process that left deep social, political, and economic scars on America that persist to this day. Whether or not those who led the secession movement did so from principled belief or were driven by opportunistic desire, the consequences of their actions were far-reaching indeed.

We have, I fear, passed a similar milestone in our own national story. Perhaps not one that will result in civil war; but certainly one that will leave deep scars embedded in our society, and which will have unforeseen consequences for years to come.

I refer, of course, to the recent referendum to recognize the First Nations peoples of Australia through the establishment of the Voice to Parliament. There can be no question that the ballot was fair and open, and that the result is reflective of democracy in action. But there is, I believe, considerable doubt about the motivations of those who led the "No" campaign, and whether or not

they acted on a matter of principle or were directed by their own sense of political opportunism.

Regardless of whatever criticisms may be levelled at the "Yes" campaign - and I have quite a few to make myself - there is considerable evidence to suggest that those running the "No" campaign did so because they saw it chiefly as a political issue, rather than as a social or moral issue. In other words, for them it was another chapter in the so-called "culture wars" in which the forces of "wokism" had to be defeated.

For example, some while ago, internal documents from the Federal Opposition emerged in which the Leader of the Opposition, Mr Dutton, characterised the referendum process as an opportunity to inflict maximal political damage on the Government. Likewise, the claims made by Mr Dutton and others that the proposed change would be "constitutionally risky" were comprehensively disproved by constitutional scholars, lawyers and jurists - and yet he continued to make such claims right up until polling day.

It begs the question - if Mr Dutton saw the referendum as an opportunity to inflict political damage on the Government, and if he was prepared to repeat statements that were, to say the least, questionable, then what was his real motive? Was it to score political points he thought might help him at the next election? Was it to position himself for a demographic within Australian society he thinks might swing their support toward the Coalition in the wake of their decisive losses to "Teal independents" at the last Federal election? Was Mr Dutton's opposition to the referendum a matter of actual principle - or was it simply a matter of cynical political calculation?

Of course, Mr Dutton is by no means the only person who led the No campaign and who thus bears moral responsibility for the outcome of the referendum. But as the leader of the Federal Opposition, he is arguably the person with primary

responsibility for what happens next, especially in light of the many demonstrated irregularities surrounding the "No" campaign: including false insulations that Australians' homes were potentially at risk; that the creation of the Voice would result in the payment of massive reparations to Indigenous Australians; and that the creation of the Voice would "divide" Australia along racial lines, despite the fact that countries as diverse as Finland, Norway, Japan and Canada have either legally recognised their Indigenous populations and/or made provision for parliamentary representation for Indigenous communities without any "division" along racial lines occurring in those nations.

Jesus condemned the religious and political leaders of his time because he understood that, far from acting on principle or from commitment to the obligations of the Law, they were instead acting out of their own self-interest and advantage. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees - hypocrites!" Jesus declared. (Luke 11: 47-52) For Jesus saw that while they made a great show of piety and righteousness, they oppressed the people and neglected justice. The same burden now lies on Mr Dutton and other leaders of the "No" campaign: having argued against what they declared to be the negative effects of the Government's Voice initiative, it is incumbent on them to put forward a positive program to address the injustice and disadvantage which Indigenous Australians continue to suffer. If they fail to do so, not only will they have been shown to have acted purely out of cynical self-interest rather than on a matter of principle, but, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time, they will also have contributed to the suffering and harm of those whom they were supposed to protect and nourish.

### **Remember In Your Prayers**

Amid all the bad news that seem to come at us from every direction last week, one ray of good news was the release of Australian journalist Cheung Lei after three years in detention in China without trial. Ms Lei was accused of providing

state secrets to foreign powers, a charge she has categorically denied. China is an authoritarian state, and its judicial system reflects this reality, stripping those accused of crimes of the fundamental rights we take for granted; all those who come to its attention undergo a terrifying and traumatising ordeal. Let us give thanks to God that Ms Lei is now safely returned to her family in Australia; and let us pray for all those around the world who continue to be detained unjustly or in arbitrary circumstances.

### **Halleluiah Chorus Concert**

On **Wednesday 13th December at 7:30pm**, Ringwood Uniting Church will host a rendition of George Fredrich Handel's famous Halleluiah Chorus. But it won't be just any old concert - attendees will also have the opportunity to join in the singing of this Christmas favourite.

For full details [click on this link.](#)

### **Synod Newsletter**

The latest edition of the Synod e-newsletter is available. To read, [please click on this link.](#)

Blessings,

Brendan Byrne



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