

YARRA INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION & SOCIAL POLICY

PRESS RELEASE

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NEW INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION AND SOCIAL POLICY

Former Deputy Prime Minister, Professor Brian Howe AM, on 23 April launched a new ecumenical Institute in Melbourne to focus on the interaction between religious belief and public policy in Australia. The work of the Institute focuses on research and postgraduate teaching.

Speaking to more than 80 people in the new study centre at Yarra Theological Union, Mr Howe said it was 'very timely for this Institute to be established', since it was 'a means for serious work to be undertaken along the lines of theology and public policy'. This initiative was especially significant because of the 'very serious issues' Australia faced, including from climate change and the global economic crisis, and he urged the Institute to forge links with overseas networks as well.

In his view the Institute was based on 'a big idea, a good idea', but its task would not be easy, since relating theology and public life was a 'very tricky and difficult problem'. He urged the Institute not to be confined to modifying 'bits and pieces at the edge of policy', but to think 'about what are the central issues, and how we can really make a difference for the future'. 'This Institute will concern itself about broader visions of public policy, and alternative directions'.



Professor Brian Howe (centre), Fr Bruce Duncan (left) and Rev Stephen Ames (right)

Professor Howe is currently Director of the Centre for Public Policy at the University of Melbourne. As a member of Federal Cabinet from 1984 to 1996, he held a range of portfolios in the fields of Defence, Social Security, Health, Housing and Community Service. He is perhaps best known for his initiatives in the areas of Social Security reform of family payments and the introduction of Child Support.

The director of the Yarra Institute, Dr Bruce Duncan, said that the Institute 'offers a significant research capability, with access to deep academic resources in Melbourne. It also provides networks of social involvement and a platform for wider conversation about public policy.' A Redemptorist priest, Fr Duncan coordinates the social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union where he lectures in history and social ethics. He has written widely on social issues, and sees the Institute as a means to sharpen the ethical focus in policy debates in Australia.



Section of the audience at the launch of the Yarra Institute

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An ecumenical body, the Yarra Institute also provides a forum for closer interaction among the various Christian social traditions. As an independent organisation, the Yarra Institute does not claim to speak for the churches, but to speak and publish in the public forum on the basis of its research and scholarship.

The Chair of the Board of Directors, Dr Stephen Ames, said that the Yarra Institute already had one project under way, and was in discussions with other organisations about research partnerships and new projects. Areas of concern include the churches' involvement in the development of social policy, indigenous issues, overseas aid and development, employment and social equity in Australia, taxation, environmental problems and ethical aspects of the current economic crisis.

The Yarra Institute is the result of initiatives of the advocacy organisation, Social Policy Connections, and is sited at Yarra Theological Union in Box Hill, one of the Recognised Teaching Institutions of the Melbourne College of Divinity, which is part of the national university system and has DGR funding status. For the time being, the Yarra Institute has a web presence on the SPC site at www.socialpolicyconnections.com.au. Its postal address is PO Box 505, Box Hill VIC 3128, or by mobile 0432 991 085.

Members of the Board of Directors are well known in church and academic circles. **Revd Dr Stephen Ames** is an Anglican priest and Canon of Melbourne's St Paul's Cathedral. He is also an Honorary Senior Fellow at the University of Melbourne, where he lectures in the History and Philosophy of Science program.

Revd Dr Wes Campbell is an ordained minister of the Uniting Church in Australia and is currently chaplain at the University of Melbourne. Among other roles, he has been Executive Secretary of the Victorian Synod Division of Social Justice and Minister of Hotham Mission.

Dr Jim D'Orsa is involved in pastoral planning in the Catholic Diocese of Sale and chairs its Diocesan Strategy Team. He is also involved with Broken Bay Institute in the areas of leadership and missiology. His current research concentrates on the Theology of Mission as it applies to education; secularisation/secularity and their implications for education; and issues around 'Catholic identity' in schools.

Dr Therese D'Orsa is head of the Missiology Department at the Broken Bay Institute in Sydney. She recently completed eleven years as Director of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Sale and also her term as Executive Director of the Catholic Education Commission of Victoria. She gives a special focus to the interface of missiology and education. She is also an honorary professorial fellow of ACU National.

Dr Rowan Ireland is an Honorary Associate in the School of Sociology at La Trobe University in Melbourne. He has had extensive field work in Latin America, and is investigating urban social movements in three Brazilian cities. He is also involved in studying the processes of secularisation and new forms of religious life and civil society in Australia.

Mr Peter Price is a former Director of Mission for the InterChurch Trade & Industry Mission (ITIM Australia). In 2004 he retired as Director of Human Resources for Publicis International and now lectures at YTU in the Theology and Practice of Pastoral Planning. He provides Pastoral Planning and Lay Leadership Development Programmes, and is on a National Working Group sponsored by the Catholic bishops for the Development of Parish Pastoral Councils. His PhD at Monash University is on late 19th century English Catholicism.

Dr Robyn Reynolds Olsh has for many years lived and worked with indigenous Australians. She lectures at YTU in Missiology and in Pastoral Theology and Ministry Studies.

Dr Paul Rule taught Religious Studies and History at La Trobe University where he remains an associate, and is now engaged in major research projects on Christianity in China for the Ricci Institute, University of San Francisco and Macao Ricci Institute. He is a former member of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council and the Melbourne Justice and Peace Commission.

For more information, contact

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