

15 December 2010



It is possible but not easy to avoid being caught up in the Christmas hysteria. As with my lack of interest in organised sport and its celebrities, my failure to be enthused about Christmas is sometimes looked on askance by those around me. Even the government tries to make me feel guilty for not contributing sufficiently to the economic welfare of the nation by my refusal to join the feeding frenzy at the retail trough.

Just as love seems to be expressed through ever more expensive gifts, our economy seems to be increasingly dependent on the purchase of things we do not need, on the collection of traffic infringement fines and on the taxes imposed on gamblers. A nation's wealth used to depend on what its citizens could manufacture and grow. There were also unfortunate periods during which the wealth of some nations depended on how much they could pillage or how much they could get citizens in other nations to produce or grow for next to nothing.

Such imperialism is not dead. A lot of what we buy in Australia and other 'developed' nations is grown or produced by poor people who are paid a pittance for their exertions and whose environment and culture are often destroyed in the process. In fact, through an effort to move to less-polluting fuels in Europe and the USA, those countries are exporting the pollution and the environmental destruction to other countries, where rainforest is cleared and burned to provide land to grow soy and palms for biofuel; and farmers are abandoning food crops (needed locally) for the more lucrative biofuel crops.

There are also positive stories to tell. The growing Fair Trade movement is encouraging people to grow such things as coffee and cacao in an environmentally and economically sustainable way, with the local growers and their communities able to improve their economic and social wellbeing and increasing the availability and standards of education and health services for them.

If we are mindful of what we buy and eat for our own wellbeing, we can extend that mindfulness to the consequences of our purchases for the wellbeing of others and ask about the source of what we buy, the transport that has been involved and the necessity of the packaging. This can also extend to questioning, where relevant, how animals were treated and how much dangerous chemical was used in the process of food production. You probably will not find any of this information on the items you buy but most of it can be gleaned on the Internet.

It is a sad indictment of the way we live, that financial considerations so often outweigh more important ones, such as the impact on health and wellbeing and on the environment on which we rely for our existence. How can anyone justify the promotion to children of cigarettes, alcohol and junk, the overindulgence in which is known to cause ill-health? Passing more, and more restrictive, laws will not change the situation; education may, if it leads to greater awareness amongst consumers and consequently leads to changed buying behaviour. If demand for junk, for unethically-produced food and for unsustainable

indulgences is reduced and demand for healthy, conscientiously-produced food and goods is increased, the producers and retailers will change what they make available. We will all be better off.

What can we do about this at Christmas? We can opt for smaller gifts. We can come to agreements with the adults in our lives to not buy gifts for each other that neither of us needs – limit the gift-giving to children. When we buy a gift, we can think about the effect of its production on the lives of those involved and on their environment. We can choose to spend the money we save to make some improvement to the lives of those who are not as well off as we are, invoking the spirit of Christmas – especially relevant to Christians who purport to live according to Jesus' teachings.

I have noticed fewer houses this year with Christmas lights, Santas on the roof, or reindeer and elves on the lawn. Maybe that, and the drop in retail spending, is an indication that more people are rethinking what Christmas is all about. I have also noticed we have fewer meaningless cards on our mantelpiece from businesses we have never dealt with and politicians we have never spoken to. Hoorah to that.

It is possible to put our personal resources to good use. Some time ago I was approached by a young man asking me for money for food. Would he spend it on that or on alcohol or drugs? I suggested he come with me to a nearby café and I would buy him a meal. He agreed and we sat and ate and talked a bit. He had lost his place in a homeless shelter and was sleeping rough, begging for food and feeling uncomfortable about it. What if each of us could take a hungry person out for a meal at Christmas? It would certainly boost one sector of the economy.