

VENTIVE MEDICINE FOR THE WOUNDS OF CONSCIENCE

THE AUSTRALIAN

FRIDAY 31 MAY 1991

Kirby, Michael (P)

Human rights

# Preventive medicine for wounds of conscience

By MICHAEL KIRBY

IN life we tend to concentrate on the visible manifestation of problems.

Courts punish people for theft. Yet the underlying cause of their anti-social activity may be drug addiction. Politicians lament our economic decline. Yet the cause may be traced to our flawed education system. The international community is outraged by abuses of human rights and the suffering of prisoners of conscience. It is time to address the basic causes.

One of the most potent forces at work in the world today is the assertion of the rights of peoples. It is truly a phenomenon of our time. Group identity runs deep in the human psyche. Collective awareness, loyalty and self-identification prove difficult or impossible to eradicate. The world is organised into States. States hold the power. They control the police, the armed services, secret services and the purse strings of manipulation.

Within these powerful States exist collections of people who may not identify with the majority of people of the State. Their assertion of their own identity and even of the right to self-determination and separation leads to political pressure. In many States this boils over into oppression, police action, violence and the imprisonment and murder of leaders.

After a period of relative quiescence, the assertion of the rights of peoples to political self-determination is on the march. It can be seen in so many contemporary situations: the Kurds in Iraq; Tibetans in China; Palestinians in Israel; Croats in Yugoslavia; Lithuanians in the Soviet Union; Armenians and the Azerbaijanis; Quebecois in Canada; and Zulus in South Africa.

Even the rise of Aboriginal identity in Australia draws



upon this phenomenon of group identity. States feel threatened by it. Their leaders fear disintegration, separatist movements and instability. They bring in the police and the army. Violence ensues. Prisoners of conscience are the result.

Sitting in their lonely cells, such prisoners are sustained by the knowledge that they are asserting the most fundamental of human rights, that to their own choice of political government.

As a signal of its fundamental character, the right to self-

**‘The basic right to self-determination’**

determination is set out in the opening words of the United Nations Charter. The charter is founded by the “Peoples of the United Nations”. The assertion of the rights of peoples to self-determination is a liberation principle. It has moulded the shape of the past 50 years of world history. It has seen the dismantlement of once-mighty European empires.

Amnesty International has played a vital role over the past 30 years in stimulating the conscience of the world. Its strength is its grass-roots organisation and its devotion to

accurate investigation and responsible reporting. It has firm links with the International Commission of Jurists. The ICJ is motivated by the same devotion to upholding fundamental human rights.

In the next 30 years, I predict that Amnesty will widen the focus of its concerns. It will continue to express its support for the individual prisoners of conscience who remain symbols of injustice and inhumanity. But it will increasingly address itself to the underlying causes of such injustice.

These include basic denials of the precious right of self-determination. That right belongs not to individuals but to “peoples”. Upholding the rights of peoples, even against the States in which they live, will be one of the chief challenges for the international human rights movement in the decades ahead.

My hope for Amnesty is that it will continue to do battle for precious individuals. But, learning from their experience, and from what caused their suffering and loss of liberty, that it will help focus the world's attention on the underlying problems.

Until the denial of the basic right to self-determination is cured, there will be no end to violence and oppression in our world.

Attending to the wounds of conscience is valuable, saintly work. But the wounds are usually evidence of an underlying disease. In the next century we must seek to cure the disease. Then we will truly have the New World Order President Bush has promised.

*Justice Michael Kirby is chairman-elect of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists, Geneva and president of the Australian section of the ICJ. He is also a member of Amnesty International Australia.*

84642