

## **Views from the Pews - Church and State**

By all accounts, there was an awkward telephone conversation back in May between Patriarch Kirill of Russia and Pope Francis. A dialogue designed to heal centuries of schism had just been derailed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the tension is illustrated by the Pope's reported admonition;

'Brother, we are not clerics of the State'.

Francis' concerns arose from evidence that the Russian Orthodox Church was openly backing the invasion, support which is generally believed to be a payoff for substantial assets transferred from State to Church.

This has uncomfortable echoes of Hitler's compromise with German Lutherans, and serves as a warning to Christians everywhere. The Church must follow Christ's example. The Gospels are full of examples of Jesus' irritating those in power, culminating in His execution as a troublemaker who had threatened the system once too often. The Church must remain at arm's length from those in temporal control. But that is not the same as asking the Church to stay out of politics, 'politics' being defined here as the sum of all society's discourse about its values and direction. Political creeds that do not fit with God's plans for society must be challenged head-on, and it is often said that the Anglican Church here changed for the better following its stance on the 1991 Springbok Tour.

Churches must be careful particularly not to align with political parties, nor should they be tempted to form political parties of their own, for that is the road to compromise. Advocacy for (particularly) the two great Commandments cannot be compatible with a party-political stance.

In New Zealand, the Anglican Church is not 'Established' and this is almost certainly an advantage; we stand outside secular power structures, which leaves us free to comment on any issue. Bishops are not 'Clerics of the State', and public occasions such as Anzac Day receive multi-denominational support. We do not expect senior bishops to sit in any future Upper Chamber of any future reformed legislature; we are better off speaking truth to power as Jesus did, even if that comes at a cost. Independence is critical, and has probably enabled Christians in New Zealand to lead discussions on the Treaty of Waitangi, the environment, and on economic policy especially as it affects the poor. That is politics. But we are not Clerics of the State. We don't provide chaplains to the powerful. That was not Christ's way.

*Richard Swarbrick*