

Talk by Carmel Moore rsj at Electricity Privatization Meeting:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak against the Privatisation of Electricity Supply in NSW.

If the old list of deadly sins is sounding a bit tired and worn out from overuse (I'm referring to pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth) the announcement of newly revised seven deadly sins (including 'polluting the environment, causing poverty, financial gluttony and increasing social injustice') gives us a benchmark to consider our moral actions in terms of a much larger global perspective. These large-picture attitudes are very probably the reason that you are here tonight.

Maybe this listing of the new and improved sins is indicative of a direction the Catholic faith is taking: this is the integration of our moral and ethical principles into a larger and universal stage of global implications and effects. Sin not only provides an individual with a 'fall from grace' but very often collectively produces a division between people and classes and a worsening of the environment we live in.

In the light of this, I am sure we need to register our disapproval of the proposed privatisation of electricity supply in NSW. Experience and common sense tell us that essential services are best provided by governments, especially so that the poor and marginalised in our society are protected from profiteering. The Public Interest Advocacy Centre picked up this issue pointing out that the low elasticity of demand for basic power services means that the price rises and the poorer people are hit hardest especially because they still have to buy a certain amount. (This is unlike the situation when the price of bananas goes up because people can then switch to other foods.)

I believe that the goods of this world are meant for all and everyone has a right to what they need in order to live a decent life. The operation of markets must not be allowed to deny this right – and governments, all governments, should be concerned for the common good. This is at depth what the word 'Commonwealth' means. We share. The opposition of the church to privatisation, in this case, is based on the understanding that the role of the government is to organise and promote the common good, safeguarding especially the rights of the poorest, who are least able to defend their own interests. The Liberal Government came to grief last year because it lost its compassion and concern for the poor, making a god of profit and the economy.

It is worth considering, too, that profit-driven enterprises are likely to be less flexible or compassionate than a public authority in relation to debt collection and arrears.

Another question to be asked is: What will go into the contracts for the community service obligations of the private enterprise that wins the bid? Delivery of services is often in conflict with commercial imperatives and their fulfilment needs to be carefully monitored. (Remember the cross-city tunnel?)

Secondly, I believe that we all have a responsibility to be good stewards of creation and to work towards more sustainable energy production. The free operation of the market has contributed significantly to the current ecological crisis and a purely profit-driven approach to electricity generation is extremely unlikely to address the urgent need to move to greener energy now and in the future. This vital social objective warrants the direct intervention of governments rather than disengagement.

Moreover, those who sell for profit are naturally inclined to try to increase the demand for the product they are selling. Therefore, if electricity supply is privatised it will work against the effort to reduce demand in order to lower green house gas emissions.

(It is good to note the interest in Earth Hour – turning off the lights on Saturday 29th March. This began as one man's initiative. What we need is more encouragement by our leaders in these awareness strategies. Here is an initiative that is asking us to go further in cutting carbon emissions. Participation is a symbol of each citizen's pledge to cut their energy use by 5%.)

One of the findings listed in Ross Garnaut's analysis of climate change is that we need to make concrete moral choices about our personal stance in the face of human-induced and rapid climate change. He challenged the young people to choose an education and career path that will better equip the nation to face climate change and he asked governments to make ethical decisions about policy priorities. As he says, the problem is worse than we first thought it was.

Our NSW government must not neglect this responsibility in order to make quick financial gains.

A writer in Newmatilda (Dec, 2007) says, Morris Iemma has cleverly handballed the problem of future base-load energy supply to the private sector. New base-load power will be needed by 2013 or 2014, but (despite Greenpeace's efforts) it will be difficult to generate from anything but coal by then – solar is still seen as too expensive, biomass – too dirty, wind – too unreliable, nuclear- too controversial and expensive to build. Greenpeace is right. Mr Iemma and Mr Costa know that the next power station to be built to replace our outmoded ones will, in all probability, be coal-fired and they have cleverly arranged for someone else to do it.

The government must hear now from all stakeholders (unions, government departments, churches, all political parties and interest groups, etc) to see a way forward. But we have been ignored. We are being asked to trust the Iemma government at a time when its stocks have never been lower. Can we trust our future in their hands when there are so many unanswered questions?

Let us unite in action. The Electrical Trades Union has the motto "Power is Unity." In our case the rallying call should be **Unity is Power.**