

FEATURES

# Working for a return to absolutes

**T**O A GENERATION now in its 40s or older, Moral Re-arament conjures up an image from the past; a return to the nuclear-armed barricades of the Cold War of the 1950s and '60s in which East and West toyed with the future of humanity.

It was somehow associated with the anti-communist cause; a strident voice in an era of strident propaganda. It was perhaps best remembered for sponsoring conferences, most of which seemed to be announced in strident full-page newspaper advertisements.

To its critics, it was a kind of zealous freemasonry with significant footholds in Australian public life, notably certain sections of the bureaucracy and, curiously, the security services such as ASIO.

The image is only partly true, but is nevertheless an enduring one. To those who were part of MRA in that era, the linking of the movement to the anti-communist cause is dismissed as a crude oversimplification.

The Cold War might be over, but Moral Re-arament remains as a potent international force for change, even though its stridency might have been muted.

One of the most influential and high-profile Australians associated with MRA was the long-time Federal Labor MP and Minister for Education in the Whitlam Government, Kim Beazley, senior, father of the present Finance Minister, Kim Beazley, junior.

Mr Beazley, who remains active in MRA, says the movement incurred the wrath of the Moscow-controlled Left, especially in the trade unions, when MRA took a leading role in facilitating the post-war reconciliation between France and Germany, a reconciliation strenuously opposed by the Soviet Union.

"As a result, Moral Re-arament was always coping it because the Kremlin somehow saw it as this great Western-inspired strategy which of course it wasn't."

Moral Re-arament (though not originally known as such) was founded in the 1920s as a non-denominational, revivalistic movement by an American Lutheran pastor, Dr Frank Buchman, whose teachings centred on a framework of moral absolutes in which individuals would experience "life-changing" through personal work.

Friction with various church and academic authorities in the United States forced Buchman abroad where he found support among a loose group of interested people at Oxford University.

The inchoate movement had no name at this time, although sometimes it was referred to as Buchmanism. It was while his supporters were on a visit to South Africa, and their baggage was labelled by a railway porter as belonging to "the Oxford Group" that the name stuck for a while.

Over the next decade, a number

**It might have a low profile now, but Moral Re-arament is still achieving success. NORMAN ABJOJENSEN reports.**



Frank Buchman: his teachings centred on moral absolutes.

of well-publicised conferences were held in Britain, the US, Holland and South Africa and, in 1938, with re-arament very much in the news, the movement adopted the name Moral Re-arament.

With the name came a concerted effort to widen its appeal to embrace all religious faiths, and Dr Buchman preached a powerful message that war could be avoided if individuals experienced a moral and spiritual awakening.

War, of course, was not avoided, and after the six years of World War II, Moral Re-arament set about a new task of promoting reconciliation, sending emissaries around the globe promoting cooperation, honesty and mutual respect among opposing political and ethnic forces — a program still in operation today, although considerably modified and amended to meet changing times.

A member of MRA's Council of Management in Australia, Mike Brown, based in Adelaide, concedes that the movement does not have the same high profile it enjoyed 30 or more years ago.

"Some people among us now feel that it was perhaps too high-profile, too much associated with public figures. Since then, there has been at work a whole process of social change and political change which we have not ignored, but our un-spectacular work has been done, and continues to be done, with individuals."

The founder of MRA, Frank Buchman, died in 1961, and the leadership passed to the charismatic and spell-binding orator Peter

Howard, an Englishman. But since his death in 1965, MRA's global leadership, according to Mike Brown, has evolved into a collective-type leadership.

MRA publishes no membership figures, saying that membership is informal. Even its full-time workers, of whom there are two in Canberra, carry no membership cards.

Those who support Moral Re-arament are urged to apply absolute moral standards in both public and private life — in particular, love, honesty, purity and selflessness.

MRA carries out its work by a variety of methods, the most common one being a sort of spiritual "house party" which bears some similarity to a religious retreat in which issues are discussed in depth.

A number of international meeting places have been established, the best known at Caux in Switzerland, and a current project involves the setting up of a mediation headquarters alongside the United Nations headquarters in New York, a project in which Allan Griffith, former foreign affairs adviser to Bob Hawke, is involved.

"This is a significant step for MRA, not only because we are recognised as a major international non-government organisation by many governments as well as the United Nations, but also because the world has seen how the informal track to diplomacy can be successful," says John Bond, one of the two full-time MRA workers in Canberra.

According to Mr Bond, the UN has supported the MRA initiative, known as the Centre for Reconciliation, and its physical proximity to UN headquarters provides a facility in which diplomats and UN officials can meet in other-than-official circumstances.

The other full-time Canberra MRA worker, Andrew Lancaster, says that informal networks and alliances are central to Moral Re-arament's operations.

To illustrate, he tells of the past week in which he has been travelling throughout rural NSW with a young Taiwanese man, visiting people and talking to rural families "to give him a sense of what makes Australians tick".

The young man, a computer engineer, has just played a key role in an MRA strategy which is being hailed as a resounding success — combating entrenched corruption in the Taiwanese electoral system.

On MRA's initiative, a conference was arranged in which 70 Taiwanese non-government organisations were invited, and a pledge was drawn up in which signatories promised neither to accept nor offer a bribe.

Some 600,000 signatures were collected, and two-thirds of all candidates signed with the result that a number of the so-called "Golden Oxen" — candidates who buy votes on a large scale — did not win as



Moral Re-arament's two full-time Canberra workers, Andrew Lancaster and John Bond, walking in Curtin.

expected. So successful was the campaign that both the Japanese and Brazilian governments have asked the organisers to meet electoral officials.

Interestingly, as Mr Bond and Mr Lancaster explain, the program originated in Queensland in the wake of the Fitzgerald inquiry into corruption, and has been successfully transplanted in places where corruption has been regarded as endemic.

In recent years, MRA has hosted a series of conferences on urban problems — at one stage in 1990 flying youth gang leaders from Los Angeles to Caux, Switzerland, to discuss lawlessness, social deprivation, unemployment and poverty.

Current MRA endeavours centre on a number of international hot

spots like Africa, the Middle East, Bougainville, Cambodia and the war against drugs in northern India.

A recent diversification has involved the launch of a set of business principles attracting influential supporters from Europe, Japan and the US.

Signatories include Ryuzaburo Kaku, chairman of Japan's Canon Corporation, and John Charlton, managing director of Chase Manhattan Bank. The stated aim is to set "a world standard against which business behaviour can be measured".

Moral Re-arament, in the days before Vatican II, had a tenuous relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, even being banned by some authorities, but with the rise of the ecumenical movement, MRA

and the church have found much common ground. The official spokesmen for the church in Australia could find no objection to MRA's work, and indeed, a number of churchmen both here and abroad have been prominent in MRA activities.

MRA has always been interested in converting the influential and the rich — the "up and outs" as founder Frank Buchman called them — and its adherents are expected to donate both time and money on a voluntary basis.

As a result, MRA has acquired valuable assets in the form of real estate — its Australian headquarters are in salubrious Toorak, Melbourne — and its financial records show healthy reserves in excess of \$1 million.

## How MRA changed Beazley

**K**IM BEAZLEY, senior, now 76 and a Labor MP from 1949 to 1977, recalls his introduction to Moral Re-arament by way of a play staged by the movement, called *The Forgotten Factor* in 1951, and through it was introduced to a number of people.

Among them was an Englishman called Roland Wilson with whom Mr Beazley joked that he would never forget his name because it was on every Australian banknote (Sir Roland Wilson then being Secretary of the Treasury.) As it turned out, both Roland Wilsons had been at Oxford together and constantly had their mail confused.

In 1953, Mr Beazley was elected as one of 10 MPs to attend the Coronation in London of Queen Elizabeth II, and not knowing anyone there, he decided to look up Roland Wilson who invited him to lunch.

Over lunch, Mr Beazley was invited to a conference at Caux, Switzerland, in what he said was "an extremely fascinating time" during which efforts were being made to bring about a reconciliation between France and Germany.

At Caux, among others, were the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, and the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, who agreed to put their differences — differences that had twice led the world into the hell of world war — behind them.

To the young MP, this left a profound impression — "a far greater achievement than anything ever done by either the Australian Labor Party or the Liberals in Australia".



Kim Beazley, senior: MRA influenced his push for Aboriginal rights. On further investigation, Mr Beazley discovered how Moral Re-arament had played a decisive part in securing bloodless independence from France for

Aboriginal land rights included on the ALP platform in 1954, and in 1972 when he was in Government, saw it enacted — a process subsequently furthered by the Fraser Liberal Government and the Labor Government in South Australia "beyond anything I had ever estimated".

He says now: "So it became bipartisan, and I think it has played a part in the beginning of Aboriginal dignity."

How did MRA affect him as a politician?

"I realised I was a liar," he says with disarming frankness.

"By that, I don't mean I concocted lies but I tended to make a case; I suppressed anything inconvenient to my position."

"Such a process, I realised, detaches the mind from reality, and ultimately the same process can lead to insanity."

Mr Beazley says politics as practised in Australian and British parliaments is all about "case-making".

At a dinner in Canberra in 1988 to mark MRA's 50th anniversary, Mr Beazley said it had been little appreciated how much a role Moral Re-arament had played in the evolving relationship between Australia and Japan.

He told how he and his wife had attended a luncheon in Tokyo given by the first Japanese Ambassador to Australia after the war, Mr Suzuki, who in a speech of welcome said, "No-one can understand the new relationship between Australia and Japan who does not understand the work of MRA."

He moved immediately to have

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