

Extract from The Wisdom Interviews - Peter Thompson interviews Peter Hollingworth

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Peter Thompson: You did have—there was plenty of political friction along the way. I remember the 'Dear Bob' letter, 'A million children are living in poverty,' and he once said publicly that what you'd said was 'bloody un-Christian.'

Peter Hollingworth:

'An un-Christian bloody statement,' he called it. Yes, it was actually in the parliament itself in the presence of a lot of political leaders, and local students at schools and universities. There is an element of me which is naive I think. I've come to understand that better. I thought that it was a right thing to do, because many thousands of schoolchildren had written these cards back to us to send to the government to say 'We want something done about children in poverty', that to honour that we should go to Canberra and present all these boxes of telegrams. And I walked into it I think with a fair measure of innocence, actually. I'd just become Archbishop of Brisbane; I probably wasn't thinking straight about the political consequences, and we came along, and I thought it was going to be a nice occasion with all the heads of the various parties. And Bob gave me a dusting up. And it genuinely shocked me actually, because I think that we had a good relationship, and of course Hazel worked at the Brotherhood and he was deeply interested in what we were doing, as of course she was very committed. But it's funny how you get these moments of clarity in times of crisis, and as he was kind of attacking me on national television, radio and everything else, I thought, 'What am I to say in response?' because I was actually the host of this function. And the first thing I thought is, 'If this is an un-Christian statement, I've got to behave like a Christian'.

Peter Thompson: Turn the other cheek.

Peter Hollingworth:

Yes, that's right. And so I did. And I said, 'Prime Minister, I can understand how you feel about this, because your government's made some significant inroads in dealing with child poverty, you have reduced the numbers from under a million, but it's only down to 500,000. We know that, we've done our research, and you've still got a way to go. And I don't want to be unfairly critical about this, and I know you're trying to do a good job.' And the other part of me said I've got to put my social worker's hat on, and try and kind of say, well yes, I really do understand how you feel. And I can't let this thing get any further inflamed, I am not going to take the Prime Minister of Australia on. Nobody takes the Prime Minister of Australia on in the belief that they can get away with it. Nor indeed did I feel that was my role, I felt my role was to be an advocate for the poor and for children in poverty. And to keep as calm and as balanced about it as I could.

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