Two tribes – bridging the gulf between progressives and conservatives

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One of the main reasons for Baptist Care Australia's existence is to advocate on behalf of our clients when public policy is under discussion or consideration.

As our mission statement says, "We work together to be a strong Christian advocate for the marginalised and those at risk in society".

To do this effectively we need to be truly non-partisan, credible and trusted by all sides of politics.

Trench warfare

Now this is a pretty tall order.

Has anyone read the comments on a news article or column lately? On social media or perhaps on a news site? What did you notice?

People's views are very black and white, very polarised, aren't they? Conservative people on one side, progressives on the other, all suspicious of each other's motives and moral character. It's a bit like watching trench warfare with two tribes throwing grenades into each other's trenches.

Why is that? Is it because one tribe is selfish, uneducated and evil and the other tribe is good, enlightened and true? Well, obviously no. The idea of white hats versus black hats isn't very helpful to anyone.

So what can we do about this state of affairs? How can we try to solve 'wicked problems' like homelessness together instead of sniping at each other from deeply entrenched positions?

I've been thinking about how to talk about social policy issues in a way that builds bridges and credibility in our current political and social environment. I've been on a journey of exploration of these questions over the past 8 months or so. Today I'm going to share with you some of the things I've learned on that journey, and how I've started to apply them to our advocacy work at Baptist Care Australia.

Research

A lot of the very clever stuff I'm talking about today comes from two main sources. You'll see from the titles of these books why I was drawn to them as I started wondering about those questions I just touched on.

- The first is a 2012 book by Jonathan Haidt called *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion*.
- The second is a 2013 book by Joshua Greene called *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us and Them*.

Both books explore the current science and research around what we think is right and wrong, and how we make those judgements. They also explore how our brains work, and how this helps us cooperate with our own tribes, but compete with people outside our tribe.

As I've been reading a lot of research in recent months, I'm going to conduct some research of my own right now, given I have a room of captive research subjects.

So, pull out your mobile phones. We're going to take a quick poll. Go to this session in the conference app and you'll see a button that says this is an interactive session. Press that button and go to the voting tab if you're not there already.

Here's your question. Where do you sit on the progressive-conservative spectrum on political and social issues? There two options for the progressives, two options on the conservative end, a 5th option in the centre for moderates and a separate one for libertarians. OK, go.

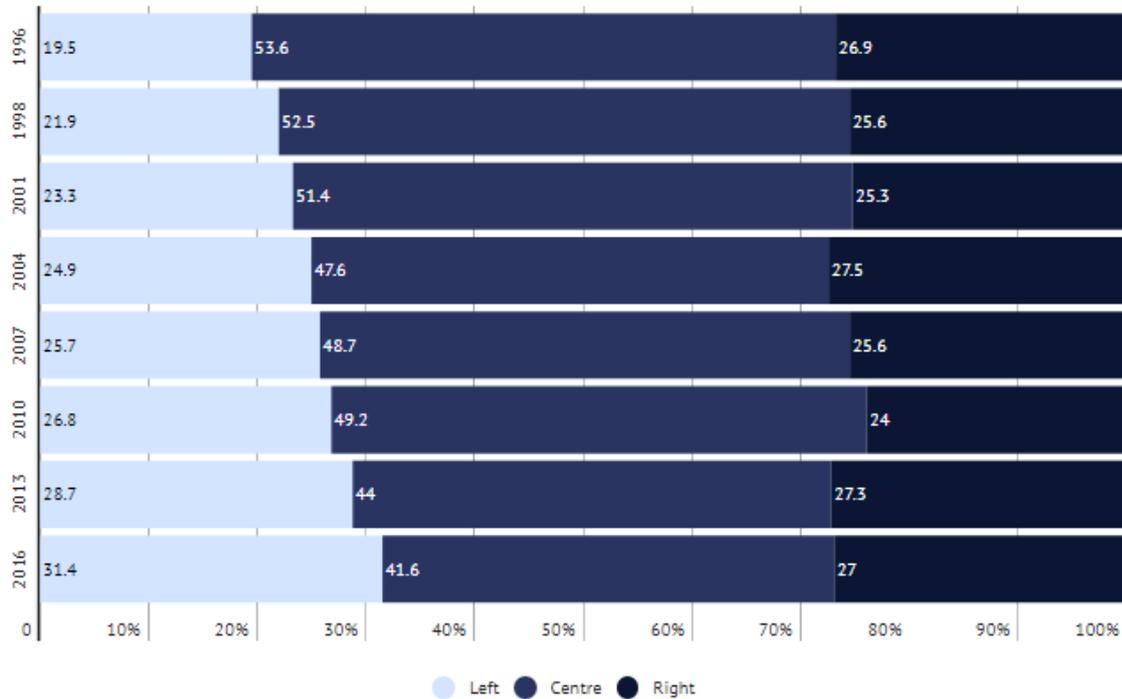**Where do you sit on the progressive-conservative spectrum on political and social issues?**
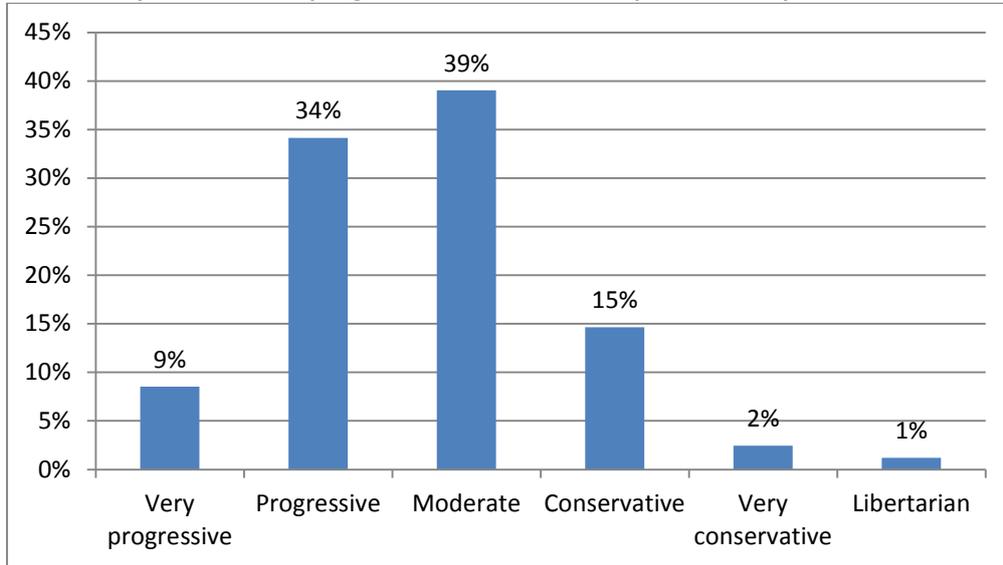
Is this what you expected to see? All of us in this room are a good example of the different political views in any group of people. Whether it's your family, your work colleagues, Christians or even the tribe of Christians called Baptists, there'll be a mix of political perspectives represented.

In federal politics we have everyone from the Greens to the Nationals, to Pauline Hanson and the new Christian Conservative Party, even a few independents. Baptist Care Australia needs to be able to understand and communicate well with them all if we're going to advocate effectively on our issues.

If we look at Australian voters at the last federal election, the proportions are **31.4**% on the left, **41.6**% in the middle and **27**% on the right. So this group is a little under-represented on the conservative side, but not by a large margin.

Australian voters are polarising

Percentage of voters describing themselves 'left', 'right' or 'centre'

Year	Left	Centre	Right
1996	19.5	53.6	26.9
1998	21.9	52.5	25.6
2001	23.3	51.4	25.3
2004	24.9	47.6	27.5
2007	25.7	48.7	25.6
2010	26.8	49.2	24
2013	28.7	44	27.3
2016	31.4	41.6	27

● Left ● Centre ● Right

AES question: 'In politics, people sometimes talk about the 'left' and the 'right'. Where would you place yourself?'

Source: Australian Election Study, AlphaBeta

You can see that polarising effect I was talking about in this diagram showing how Australian voters describe themselves. In the last 20 years the political centre has been shrinking while the left has been growing. The right has been largely static as far as proportions goes according to this graph. You can see why one interpretation is that we are becoming more 'polarised' politically.

Moral machinery

Whether you're more progressive or more conservative is not about just your preferences. It's not just that you prefer icecream rather than chocolate croissants, or a red shirt over a brown shirt, or small government rather than big government.

Your political perspective is all about the things you believe are fundamentally right or wrong, and the relative strength of those beliefs. Or to put it more simply, **Politics = morality.**

This very close connection between our morality and our political views is why it's so hard to understand the other point of view. How can we get along with the other tribe when what they want feels so wrong to us? We're very strongly bound to the perspective of our own tribe, and blind to the perspective of other tribes. And it's our tribe's morality that largely creates our political viewpoint.
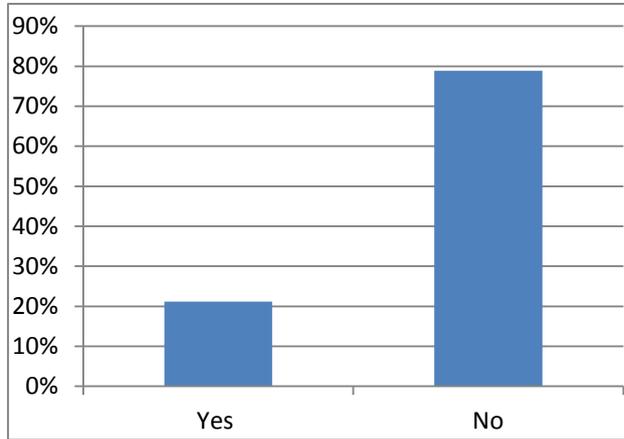
Politics = morality

So we're going on a little journey now into how we make decisions about what's right and wrong, and how this connects to political views.

Let's do another poll now, and put our moral decision-making into action. Imagine there's an out of control tram heading for
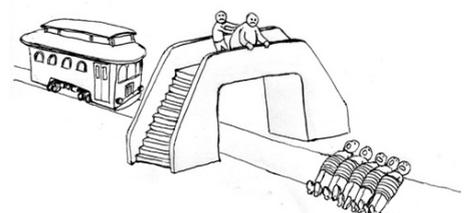
five workmen who will be killed if the tram continues its current course. You're standing on a footbridge spanning the tracks, with another workman wearing a large backpack. The only way to save the five people is to push the man off the footbridge and onto the tracks below (you don't have a backpack so you can't jump yourself).
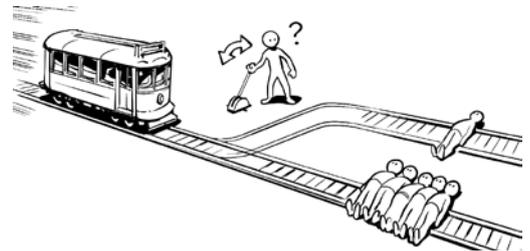
Is it morally acceptable to save five people by pushing the stranger to his death?

Bar chart showing responses. Yes: approximately 21%. No: approximately 79%. Y-axis ranges from 0% to 90% in 10% increments.
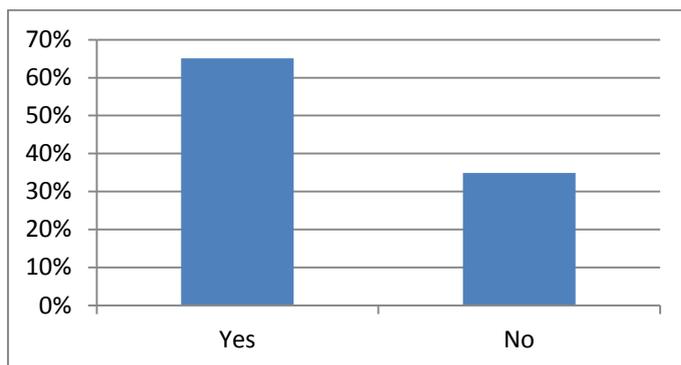
When this question is asked under experimental conditions, most people say no: it's morally **unacceptable** to push the man to his death.

Here's another one.

We have the same scenario of the out of control tram, heading towards five people. This time, you have access to a switch that will divert the tram onto a track where there's one unsuspecting workman who will be killed when he stops the trolley.

Is it morally acceptable to save five people by diverting the tram and killing the stranger?

Bar chart showing responses. Yes: approximately 65%. No: approximately 35%. Y-axis ranges from 0% to 70% in 10% increments.

When this question is asked in experiments, the majority of people think that it's **OK** to divert the tram. So there's an interesting contrast between the two scenarios that result in quite different moral judgements.

In those three polls we just did, did it take you long to make those decision? Think back to the first one – did you have to think deeply about your answer? Most people can categorise themselves quite quickly into a particular tribe, even if you don't think about politics very much.

Thinking about those two moral dilemmas, did it take you very long to decide whether they were morally wrong or not?

There's a whole body of research that suggests that deciding what's right or wrong is generally an **automatic process**, and not something that we **reason** through logically.

This automatic quality of our moral decision-making processes is why very similar scenarios about killing a stranger to save five strangers result in very different moral judgements. There's some stuff going on behind the scenes that isn't altogether obvious or consistent.

Has anyone read the book *Thinking Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahnemann? What about any behavioural science books like *Nudge* by Richard Thaler? You might guess what I'm going to say next. But for everyone else I'll talk it through.

What do these three pictures have in common?

They're all ways that different authors have described the two ways our brains work. System 1 and System 2 is the terminology of Kahneman in *Thinking Fast and Slow*. System one is an intuitive, emotional process, while system 2 is a process used for reasoning.

Joshua Greene talks about a camera with **automatic** and **manual** settings. The automatic setting (or System 1) is very fast and efficient, but it's not very flexible.

The **automatic** setting is where our instincts and our emotions live. When you accidentally stick your finger in a rotten tomato, it's your automatic settings that make you recoil, screw up your face, feel a sense of disgust and go yuck. You don't think about it, it just happens.

The **manual** setting (or system 2) is very slow and inefficient, but it helps us think through complex problems and situations that we haven't encountered before. If I said I'd give you $10,000 if you meet me at the Town Hall in Brisbane on Friday at noon, you'll have to use your manual settings to work out how to pick up your $10,000. For example you'll need to consider how you'll get there, your available resources, any other important commitments you might have between now and Friday at noon and a range of other things.

Jonathan Haidt talks about our minds as an **elephant with a rider**.

The elephant is the **automatic** mode. It's big and powerful but it's not under the control of the rider – it's automatic in the camera metaphor. Haidt uses this image specifically in relation to moral decision-making to say that when you have a moral reaction to something, he refers to it as feeling your elephant moving in a particular direction. That movement is outside of the rider's control. But the rider can and does rationalise the movement after the fact. There's sound scientific evidence that that's how the moral judgement process works. It works automatically, very fast, by the intuitive or emotional machinery in our brains, not the logical rational machinery.

So as Haidt says "If you want to change people's minds, you've got to talk to their elephants" or their intuitions and emotions. Working in the rational zone isn't going to cut it. If you've ever tried to

change someone's political, moral or religious views by reasoning with them, this will be very obvious to you. It's close to impossible.

Why are we wired this way?

We need both the fast, intuitive and the slow, reasoned way of thinking.

Scientists have found that people who have lost their emotional input to decision-making tend to make very bad decisions. People with brain injuries to the relevant part of their brain have been tested to be cognitively normal in relation to IQs and other measures. But they make disastrous decisions about what's right and wrong, or what's best or worst to do in any given situation (such as the mythical tram dilemma we explored earlier). Think about psychopaths who don't respond emotionally to others, and the harm and destruction they can cause because of that lack of empathy.

Emotions and intuitions aren't dumb, we've got them because we need them. And there are good reasons that emotions and intuitions are so powerful. We need both reason and emotion to make good decisions.

If you think about the rotten tomato, your reaction is because rotten tomatoes (or things that are squishy and smelly) are generally not very good for humans. Your reaction prompts you to throw it away as quickly as possible. Rotten tomatoes are bad.

You need a strong emotional bond of self-sacrificing love to put the needs of your vulnerable child ahead of your own – over and over again over many years.

Emotions and intuitions are important and have a crucial role to play in being a successful human being.

Moral foundations theory

Take your mind back to the tram dilemmas. Deciding something is right or wrong happens very quickly and almost exclusively at the level of intuition rather than reason.

A whole lot of researchers have asked questions like those tram dilemmas to try to work out how we decide something is right or wrong. Jonathan Haidt used this research to build a model that helps us understand the different considerations that come into play when people make moral decisions. It's called Moral Foundations Theory, and I've found it very helpful as I've been thinking about how to bridge the divide between the various political tribes.

Haidt and his colleagues started by looking across a whole lot of disciplines to look for parallels. What are the common themes or values that people talk about when they make decisions about what's right and wrong? Eventually after much research, they came up with six foundations of morality that seem to transcend culture, race, and nationality.

When any of our moral foundations are activated, we immediately experience strong emotions in response. And it's these emotions that decide for us what's right and wrong.

The images I've used in explaining some of these moral foundations might elicit a strong, instant emotional response from you. If you do experience a response, that's just the kind of response the researchers identified in their research subjects as they developed Moral Foundations Theory.

So what are the six foundations of moral judgement?

1. The **Care/harm** foundation is about those feelings and intuitions that make us bond with others, that make us feel compassion and protective of the weak and vulnerable, and care for others. It gives us very strong feelings about those who harm others, and prompts us to want to see them stopped or punished.

2. The second foundation is **Fairness/cheating** which is about the Golden Rule, treating others as you'd like to be treated. It's also about proportionality – getting what you deserve, and getting together with others to collectively punish slackers or wrongdoers.


3. **Loyalty/betrayal** is about how we're compelled to join together in groups in the ancient tradition of tribalism to achieve a common purpose – mostly to fight another group. We like doing this so much that when we don't have tribes to join or fight, we create them by becoming sports fans. Betrayal of the group or someone we should be loyal to can provoke very strong, immediate, moral condemnation.

4. **Authority/subversion** is about who should be submitted to, and it's often not about who is dominant because of brute force, but can be about voluntary deference. So we care deeply about whose authority we should respect, and how undermining that authority is considered morally wrong – or subversive.

5. **Sanctity/degradation** is about any kind of ideology or idea that says you can be virtuous by controlling what you do with your body or what you're willing to touch or put into your body. It's not just about sex, it might be about food or cleanliness or anything else. I've chosen images here relating to food and cleanliness rather than sexuality.
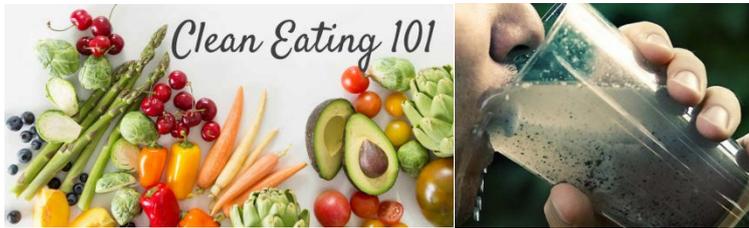
6. Finally, **Liberty/oppression** is the moral foundation that gives rise to rebels and freedom fighters like Mandela who want to band together to overturn oppression. It's our urge to defend the weak and oppressed. It also includes our urge to defend incursions on our tribe's freedoms.

To start with, the researchers only used the first 5 of these moral foundations, and they analysed the moral values of people with progressive and conservative viewpoints. Here's what they found.
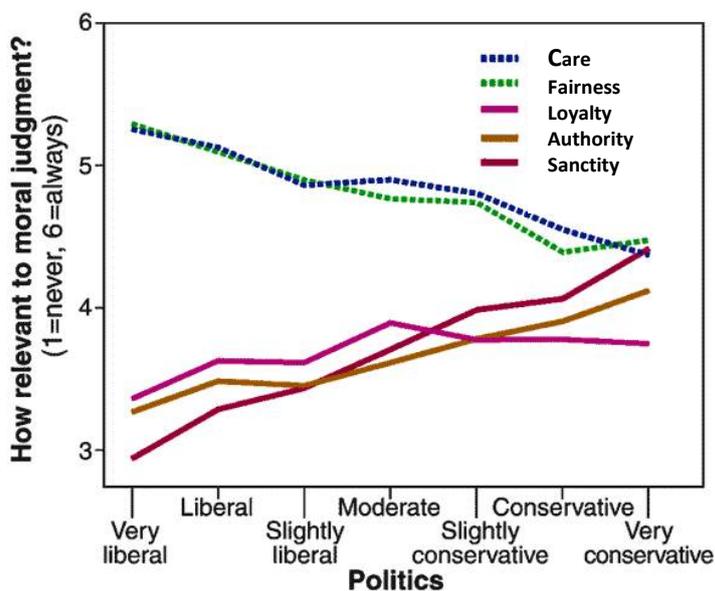
They discovered that progressives and conservatives alike place a high value on the care and fairness moral foundations. Take a look at the blue and green dotted lines. You can see Conservatives tend to think care and fairness are a little less important than progressives, but there's not a huge gap – about one point in a six-point scale.

The really big difference between the two groups is that progressives generally don't think the loyalty, authority or sanctity foundations are very important in deciding what's right and what's

wrong. Looking at the solid lines, the more progressive groups are politically, the lower importance they place on the values described by the other three moral foundations.

It's intriguing that the researchers have found this pattern across respondents from every part of the world. The graphs might look a little different, but there's always this similar large difference in how conservatives and progressives value these three moral foundations. There've been more than 250,000 respondents to this survey now, and those results haven't changed.

The sixth foundation, liberty/oppression, was added later when they were investigating the moral foundations of libertarians.

Both progressives and conservatives scored highly on the liberty/oppression foundation but for different reasons. Progressives are very concerned about oppression, while conservatives give a high priority to individual liberty.

So in summary, you could say that more conservative people use all six of their moral foundations to make judgements about right and wrong, while progressives only really rely on three foundations.

So what?

Why is all of this helpful for me and Baptist Care Australia? Well the conclusions the researchers draw from this are as follows, and I think they are very helpful as I reflect on how we advocate in the political and public debate.

1. Firstly, everyone thinks they're right. You might not agree with the reasons, but there will be reasons. And the person holding the opposite view to you also thinks they're right for good reasons. The trick is to become aware of those reasons – because as we've discovered, they're coming from automatic and not rational thinking.
2. Secondly, there are important strengths in both progressive and conservative approaches that we need for the benefit of humankind. A progressive standpoint understands that preserving the status quo is often harmful to people on the fringes, for women, people of other races or abilities, and the oppressed. However a conservative viewpoint fully appreciates that cooperation and order are complex and difficult things to maintain. But order and cooperation are incredibly important for the wellbeing of humans. Everything, including societies, tend towards entropy, or the dissolution of order, and the value conservatives place on this order makes them seek to preserve it, even if some people get left behind. So the two approaches are both important and are interdependent for healthy communities – like the concept of yin and yang.
3. Thirdly, the main way you get an elephant to listen to reason is through relationships and interactions with other people. Intuitions can be shaped by reasoning, especially when reasons are embedded in a friendly conversation or an emotionally compelling story.

Having arrived at that point, my challenge was how to use all that information in relation to the social issues Baptist Care Australia speaks about in the public debate.

My first thought was to look at the public debate to see if I could observe these concepts in action. The repeated outrage elicited by media 'exposes' of residential aged care seemed like the best example that I could identify.

Residential aged care horror stories provoke such outrage because they activate at least three or four of the six moral foundations that I could identify, including ones important to both conservatives and progressives.

For example, these stories appeal very strongly to the care/harm foundation beloved of we progressives, and also of concern to conservatives. We care deeply about caring for the vulnerable (especially our loved family members) and protecting them from harm.

They also activate the liberty/oppression foundation in the respect that progressives care about in relation to someone in power oppressing someone who's vulnerable.

From a more conservative perspective, these stories provoke the moral value of proportionality from the fairness/cheating foundation – in that older people deserve high levels of care because of what they've contributed throughout their lives. And there's also a strong appeal to the authority/subversion foundation if you strongly believe that older people should be respected.

I found that Moral Foundations Theory does a pretty good job of explaining why these aged care horror stories provoke such strong moral outrage across the great divide between the tribes.

I also realised that aged care is close to the only remaining bi-partisan public policy issue left in federal politics.

Both major parties generally agree to work together on aged care policy and not get too caught up in political point scoring. For example, recent coalition governments have continued to support the ALP's *Living Longer, Living Better* aged care reform agenda. That suggests there are some moral judgements in common across the political spectrum in relation to aged care.

So far so good. Moral Foundations Theory seems to hold some kind of water in our particular circumstances.

The challenge

So then came the trickier part of the challenge.

I was working on the basis that everyone thinks they're right. So I set myself a challenge to think about how our communication might resonate with people of all political views.

The people and politicians who are more engaged with the social services sector and the issues we care about such as homelessness, social security or domestic violence tend to be on the more progressive end of the spectrum. This doesn't mean others don't care about our issues, so I wanted to see how to use these ideas about moral foundations to communicate more convincingly with people who have a more conservative perspective.

So I put my brain on the job about how this might happen. What I came up with was the Federal Budget, and how we might work with other church-based provider groups to set a different tone in relation to the policy issues we needed to talk about.

Back in early April I met with reps from UnitingCare Australia, Anglicare Australia, The Salvation Army and Catholic Social Services Australia. I knew we were all thinking about how to speak meaningfully to the public and politicians about the issues we care about in the current political environment, so we got together to talk about it.

This was an interesting collaboration, and our goal was to try to reflect a consciously different tone of communication to the standard progressive voices in the public debate around the Budget. In the end we agreed that we would all write opinion pieces on the same topic and submit them to the media for publication in the weeks leading up to the Federal Budget. Here are the two pieces that were published – mine with [Pro Bono Australia](#) and Frank Brennan's with [Eureka Street](#). We had agreed that we would all take our own perspective on establishing an independent commission to

set social security payments. For my effort, I was particularly careful about avoiding loaded language that reflected a progressive moral perspective.

While our collaborative efforts didn't so much as ripple the political discourse, I was determined to have another bash and this time I think I did a better job at framing our policy considerations to appeal to diverse political views.

I wrote an opinion piece on the Budget that expanded the concept of infrastructure to include some concerns around building a strong and cohesive society. I tried to frame my piece in a way that would resonate with readers across the political divide. We unsuccessfully tried to get this piece published in a mainstream media outlet, but you can read it on the [Baptist Care Australia website](#). I was both mildly annoyed and also a bit encouraged to see that the CEO of Vinnies had had a similar idea, but expressed it in much more standard progressive terms in his piece in [The Guardian](#).

The emphasis in my piece is around a strong society, cohesion and the trust that is needed to make economies work. As you can see, John Falzon from Vinnies talks instead about the 'dying neoliberal framework', a 'social protection system' and a 'social infrastructure budget'.

We're not going to go into a detailed textual analysis here, but you can certainly look up these two pieces for yourself if you want to compare and contrast.

Conclusion

So what have I learned from all this?

Firstly, everyone thinks they're right, including me. I've started to understand some of the perspectives of political tribes other than my own. I've come to grasp at a much deeper level that our advocacy work must not be about 'us versus them'. We need to be able to speak all the different political and moral languages if Baptist Care Australia is to be an effective non-partisan advocacy organisation.

I think the ideas I've been discovering can help us advocate for our social issues in a more polarised world. We haven't managed to bridge the gulf between progressives and conservatives yet, but I'm definitely going to keep trying!

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