



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

One political bright spot

Toni Hassan

Canberra Times

12 December, 2018

There was at least one bright spot on Capital Hill before parliamentarians flew out of Canberra last week.

It was the passing of Australia's first federal law to address modern slavery in the things we buy.

It was the passing of Australia's first federal law to address modern slavery in the things we buy.

The passage of the law was an exercise in genuine bipartisanship, with the most active Liberals being Western Australia's Senator Linda Reynolds and Victorian member of parliament Chris Crewther, and the most active Labor members being Tasmania's Senator Lisa Singh and Victoria's Clare O'Neil. O'Neil and Reynolds, representing the major parties, collaborated primarily with Greens Senator Nick McKim, independents Tim Storer and Derryn Hinch, and members of the Centre Alliance.

It wasn't just the senate doing its job, but a strong and collaborative civil society too.

We might be disgusted with the near-toxic levels of tribalism in the parliament and despair at its capacity to do good, but there is room for optimism.

The Senate committee system generally works well. It was at its best producing a report 'Hidden in Plain Sight' that led to Australia's Modern Slavery Act.

At the heart of the new law is a recognition that without really well-documented supply chains, the clothes we buy and the food we eat can be tainted by slavery.

It encourages business to look for slavery and report on what they find and their efforts to stamp it out. Better informed consumers can encourage a "race to the top".

The bill was improved as it went through the Senate (as many bills are), with both Coalition and Labor senators working to make it better.

It isn't perfect. Labor asked for an independent modern slavery commissioner and civil penalties for companies that failed to report. The act provides for a review after three years, with a view to establishing penalties if it is found necessary.

Labor has promised penalties and an independent commissioner should it win office.

The law applies to 3000 businesses, including large Australian companies and household names. It provides for an annual public listing of companies that do report.

With a parliament labelled chaotic and a conflict-driven media cycle, we can too easily focus on the problems, not the possibilities and solutions.

We can be so dissatisfied with politics, we forget to ask what does effective look like and move to action that. Everything can feel so big, so intractable.

But it needn't be so. A common-good policy change is possible. It often takes many years. It puts people first and recognises that half a cake is better than no cake at all.

Tenacious operators learn to tackle the edge, understanding their sphere of influence and working with it, rather than only seeing spheres of concern. Securing a Modern Slavery Act was textbook.

Further, senators who spoke to the bill were gracious. There was little or no adversary rhetoric. It was democracy at work, but almost unrecognisable to too many of us. Hands were shaken and the work of other parties and members recognised across the usual divides.

The new law sends a ray of hope in this season heralded as one of hope. It is well timed as it nudges us this Christmas to consider if the gifts we buy are slave-free.

Why not ask retailers what they know about the manufacture of a product you're thinking of buying? Choose to purchase a gift that is made without slave labour and in doing so, give a gift that beckons a better world.