Priest castigates the public for complicity in kickbacks

Linda Morris
Religious Affairs Writer

The public, not just the Government, turned a blind eye to the Australian wheat exporter AWB’s kickbacks to the discredited regime of Saddam Hussein, a Catholic priest said.

A Jesuit lawyer, Frank Brennan, yesterday condemned the emergence of a tough pragmatic ethic where the end justified the means and public morality turned on political and social consequences.

It was the same “collective moral torpor and national irresponsibility” that led to the public’s “nonchalant acceptance” of the Government’s assurances that strict sanctions were being observed as the nation prepared for war against Iraq. It had allowed the rights of asylum seekers, like those from Indonesia’s Papua province, to be trampled by a Government “implementing a popular policy driven by fear”.

Delivering the Manning Clark Lecture in Canberra last night—entitled “Race, Religion, Respect, Rights and the Republic”—Father Brennan said it was one thing to pursue ministers “asleep at the wheel of the ship of state”.

“Let’s also castigate ourselves and remind ourselves that it is only a materialistic, utilitarian people which is collectively able to work the public conscience into such a state of submission so that the nation is able to trade successfully with a despot while convincing itself that necessary and justified sanctions are honoured and all is in readiness for war.”

Commercial reality meant there was some level of payments but Father Brennan said, “this was not just any regime in receipt of kickbacks”.

“Our disjunction between political and commercial reality on the one hand and public morality on the other ultimately reveals a great disrespect of ourselves,” he said. “We forfeit the civic virtues when we embrace the credo ‘whatever it takes’. Our pragmatism finally starts to work violence on us, as well as others.”

The same indifference, he said, had turned against parents of one of the Bali nine, sentenced to life for his role in a heroin smuggling operation. They had gone to the Australian Federal Police as a last resort, asking them to warn their son off.

Father Brennan said legalism had gone too far when the federal police commissioner could say that such a warning would amount to corruption.

Father Brennan is professor of human rights and social justice at the Australian Catholic University’s Institute of Legal Studies. During the 1990s Wilk debate on native title, the then prime minister, Paul Keating, labelled him a “meddling priest”.

Frank Brennan ... “A materialistic, utilitarian people”. Photo: Peter Mathew