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Recently two alarming issues came to my attention following email requests to sign petitions, a rapidly increasing way to alert people about matters that need to be public knowledge and elicit a public response.

The first concerned the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade agreement being negotiated in secrecy that could profoundly impact Australians without our having any knowledge of it. The second was about the food industry giant Nestlé, which is draining developing countries' groundwater to make its Pure Life bottled water, destroying countries' natural resources before forcing their people to buy their own water back.

According to [Choice Online](#), the website of the well-respected Australian Consumers' Association:

"In December Australia will be attending World Trade Organization negotiations in Bali, and we think you should know what we'll be talking about.

Over the past three years negotiations on a trade treaty called the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) have been going on in complete secrecy. These negotiations will continue in Bali.

There's a lot at stake across many key issues facing Australian consumers today. Reports have suggested that the TPP could allow overseas corporations to sue our government for making laws on behalf of the Australian people.

This could prevent its ability to make decisions on food labelling, public health, energy, copyright and more! But because the text of the agreement won't be public until the treaty is signed, consumer groups and the public are being shut out of the process."

According to Choice's report:

"Because of the secrecy, which began under the previous Labor government and has continued after the September election of the Coalition, any public knowledge about the TPP is based on leaked drafts and statements made by those involved.

The kicker? Hundreds of "cleared advisors" - a group comprising industry lobbyists from the US - have had access to the full drafts of the TPP, while public interest groups like CHOICE have been kept in the dark."

Under the TPP, the Australian Government could be sued for many actions which protect the public, such as plain cigarette packaging, food labelling, legislation to limit fracking, the cost of medicines and our PBS, and new medical procedures:

“The leaked chapters of the TPP indicate that the agreement may contain an investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) clause, which allows foreign corporations to sue Australia’s government for loss of future profits. While the previous government said that an ISDS provision would be a deal-breaker for Australia, the Coalition has previously indicated that it may consider signing the TPP with an ISDS clause (though there are indications that there may be a change in their position).”

Similar agreements have already had a significant impact in Australia.

After the introduction of tobacco plain-packaging rules in Australia, cigarette companies (unsuccessfully) challenged the new laws twice in the High Court. Philip Morris Asia (which acquired Philip Morris Australia after the introduction of the plain-packaging legislation) is challenging plain packaging again - this time under international law, by invoking a 1993 free trade agreement that included ISDS provisions between Australia and Hong Kong.

The private arbitration is being conducted under the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, and despite our highest court ruling in favour of the legislation, the Australian government has allegedly already spent millions of dollars in mounting a defence to the challenge.”

Although the concept of a corporation suing a country for restriction of trade sounds too ludicrous to be true, **the case of pesticide producer Bayer** suing Europe in response to legislation to protect bees proves that it is all too possible.

The second issue concerned international food corporation **Nestlé’s exploitation of the water resources** that local communities depend on:

“Nestlé’s aggressive water grab is already descending like a plague on parts of Pakistan. In the small village of Bhati Dilwan, villagers have watched their water table sink hundreds of feet since Nestlé moved in. Children are getting sick from the foul-smelling sludge they’re forced to choke down. Meanwhile, Nestlé spends millions marketing “Pure Life” to wealthy Americans, Europeans, and Pakistanis who can afford to watch their kids grow up healthy. This scenario is played out again and again in countries around the globe.”

“At the World Water Forum in 2000, Nestlé led the way in fighting against defining access to water a universal right. Nestlé and other big corporations won out, and government officials around the globe officially downgraded water’s classification to a “need” instead, meaning it could be captured, commoditized, and exploited by major corporations without regard for local populations.”

Nestle has denied most of the accusations made by critics of its aggressive marketing policies and its bottled water activities. But this is not the first time this massive corporation has caused controversy. As the world’s largest food company by revenue, Nestle has encountered organised resistance before, notably in the worldwide boycott of its products which began in 1977 in response to its **marketing of powdered milk formula** as preferable to breastfeeding in developing countries.

The cost of the bottled water industry is **well documented**. The lunacy of paying up to 1,000 times the cost of something freely available hasn’t stopped Australians spending over \$500 million a year on bottled water, which has to be pumped out of the ground, packaged, transported and chilled before it gets to us. This creates over 60,000 tons of greenhouse gases a year in Australia alone. The manufacture and transport of the plastic bottles for all this water requires over 460,000 barrels of oil. Less than 40% of these bottles are recycled; the balance ends up in landfill or in our waterways.

Fortunately, many Australians, like the rest of the developed world, are realising this is a ridiculous example of consumption gone mad, and are turning again to tap water. The falling sales in rich countries are why Nestle is turning its attentions to the **developing world**. Annie Leonard's "**The Story of Bottled Water**" illustrates well the irony of this industry.

Both corporate privatisation of basic essentials such as water, and attempts to disable public interest legislation in the name of profit, are antagonistic to Christian values. Throughout its history, beginning with the radical relationship of Christ to the poor, the unacceptable and the socially outcast, Christianity has maintained its commitment, however feebly, to a moral economy.

The concept of a moral economy is described by Michael Northcott, international ethicist and Scottish Episcopal priest, in his book "A Moral Climate":

"This conception of a moral economy is crucial to understanding the impact of the ministry and teaching of Jesus in the social context of Palestine under Roman occupation in the first century of the Christian era. The phrase 'moral economy' was first coined by E P Thompson in a paper on 18th century food riots in England. Thompson suggests that these riots, far from being disorderly events, were evidence of a moral economy of the poor, inasmuch as those who took part in them were responding to the attacks on common customs and social traditions associated with the enclosures of common land, which prevented the poor from growing their own food and forced them either into vagrancy or wage labouring in industrial factories. First century Palestine under Roman rule manifests a not unrelated set of circumstances. There were food riots in many places in the Roman Empire and in their efforts to sustain and extend its rule Rome's Emperors made strenuous efforts to extract agricultural surplus from the far regions of the Empire to keep the price of bread low in the imperial cities, and to provision their legionnaires. Palestine was one such marginal province; its place in the imperial agricultural economy was the provision of surplus."
(Pp248-9)

The present day situation, where large multinational corporations act with as much disdain for the wellbeing of local communities and environments as they can get away with, bears a close resemblance to both situations – 18th century England with the enclosure of the commons, and 1st century Palestine with the Roman imperial exploitation of natural resources and food production. *Laissez-faire* capitalism, with its creed of minimum governmental interference in the economic affairs of individuals and corporations, has been elevated to the status of unquestionable doctrine in the corporatized world we now inhabit. This is not compatible with a moral economy or with Christianity itself.

Consumerism is destroying our environment, but most of the damage so far has been located far away so we can let it escape our consciousness. Even so, there is an increasing realisation that the imperial pattern of exploiting and despoiling distant lands to serve the extravagant wants of a powerful elite is being re-enacted in our time. This time, imperial power is concentrating increasingly in the hands of corporations answerable only to their shareholders, whose influence has grown to challenge the power of democratically elected governments.

This insidious influence is at work in both instances described above – Nestle's in pressuring governments to downgrade water to a "need" rather than a universal "right", and the Trans-Pacific Partnership's allowing access to American industry lobbyists to influence outcomes which will affect the citizen of all participating countries, while barring journalists and public interest groups from exposing their negotiations to public scrutiny.

The Bible is replete with exhortations to distributive justice and care for the poor, from the Old Testament prophets to Jesus' Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-26 & Matthew 5:3-11). Is our consumption-driven, profit-serving, and exploitative Western culture really how we believe God wants us to live?

By **Pamela Phillips**