



## AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

### **Having Faith in our Democracy: Building a Better Australia**

Australians will soon be called upon to cast their vote in a Federal election, and the Australian Catholic Bishops offer this statement as a contribution to the democratic process.

Drawing upon a rich religious tradition and upon the Church's long experience as a major provider of health, education, and welfare services right across Australia, we identify here some of the crucial challenges now facing Australia which will be key issues in the forthcoming election.

#### **Building a Culture of Life.**

Life is God's gift and our responsibility. The making and taking of life in whatever form and in whatever circumstances must always be seen in this perspective. Human cloning and the use of human embryos for stem cell research or other purposes is a violation of human dignity. We have already expressed our grave disappointment at recent bipartisan legislative changes in this area which will be reviewed in the life of the next Parliament. Deliberately killing the unborn is never justified and laws allowing it deny the most basic human right. Assisted suicide and euthanasia, while presented and perceived as a merciful response, are actually an abandonment of those who need our care.

#### **Building a Culture of Love**

Human persons are essentially communal, and our common life is based on the God-given institutions of marriage and family. The commitment of men and women and their openness to children is the basis of every society. Marriage and family are unique relationships, and nothing may be allowed to undermine them. Family breakdown is a very grave problem today, and therefore marriage and family life need to be supported and promoted, not threatened or destabilised. Tax, workplace reforms, and welfare assistance should help families survive and thrive. The welfare and protection of children are paramount. Through the Church's own painful recent experience, we are acutely aware of the long term impact of any abuse on children. There is need to ensure that children are protected not only from direct attacks but also from the impact on them of drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, exploitative advertising and internet pornography.

#### **Building a Culture of Knowledge**

Every Australian should have access to a high quality education. Federal and State funding policies should afford every student equal opportunities for education. Church schools pre-date secular education in Australia. The Catholic education system is generally co-extensive with Catholic schools. A variety of schooling systems responds to parents' basic freedom to choose for their children an education which reflects their own values, beliefs and hopes. The public debate demands accurate information on the exact levels of educational funding from Federal and respective State sources and from parent and private contributions.

### **Building a Culture of Health**

The Catholic Church has contributed health services from earliest days in Australia. The Church has always understood healthcare as embracing all dimensions of the human person - physical, social, psychological and spiritual. A particular area of need at this time is in the provision of aged care services. Consistent with statements made by Catholic Health Australia, the largest single grouping of non-government owned health, aged and community care services in Australia, we note that the cost burden of caring for aged people has been steadily shifting to residents and their families. Commonwealth support for aged care must be set at levels which guarantee security to the frail and the sick.

### **Building a Culture of Care**

Christ's compassion was directed primarily to the poor, the sick and the downtrodden, and any society is judged by how the weakest and poorest of its members are treated. The most vulnerable are our greatest responsibility. We support and encourage Catholic agencies such as Centacare and numerous Catholic groups like the St Vincent de Paul Society, which alone assists a million Australians in need each year. There is an increasing gap between rich and poor. Australia's religious leaders last year wrote to all political leaders seeking a national forum on poverty, with the aim of developing a national strategy to tackle the problem. The Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations has advocated for a higher minimum wage so that workers and their families can live with dignity and security. We stress the particular difficulties faced by Australians living in rural and remote areas who are less well served and whose struggles go largely unnoticed.

### **Building a Culture of Reconciliation**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still suffer serious disadvantage compared with other Australians. Experience has taught that the delivery of services to Indigenous peoples is least effective when the peoples themselves play no significant part in the process. Those who have had little say in what happened in their past must be encouraged and assisted to shape their future. The quest for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the rest of the Australian community must move forward in a spirit of genuine dialogue which seeks to heal wounds both past and present.

### **Building a Culture of Hospitality**

Australia is a country of immigrants. The Church is firmly committed to the biblical value of welcoming the stranger. While we recognise the need for effective border control, we have spoken often of the need to treat migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in a way that respects their human dignity. We have stated our opposition to mandatory detention of asylum seekers, beyond the need for initial processing. We insist once again that children not be held in detention. People released into the community on bridging visas need appropriate support. The fine work of Church personnel among asylum seekers highlights the need for greater pastoral care in detention centres and better access to them.

### **Building a Culture of Peace**

The world's peoples form one human family. Yet like any family the global family has problems, and they are grave at this time. Ultimate and lasting peace is God's gift alone. However, by

striving for a better distribution of the world's resources and just resolution to international conflicts, national security will be better served and terrorism will be more effectively countered. Across the world, Australia can best contribute to peace through diplomacy, foreign aid and the provision of peace-keeping forces. This is a priority in our own now troubled Pacific region.

### **Building a Culture of Creation**

The Pope has called for ecological conversion which springs from gratitude and reverence for God's creative love, revealed in the universe. Care for the environment is intimately linked to the well-being of Australia. The effects of climatic extremes and natural disasters are seen across the continent. Policies which deal equitably and effectively with land salination, the degradation of rivers, fair distribution of water, global warming and prudent management of fragile ecosystems are part of caring for God's created world. We recognise that environmental issues often involve a conflict of values among stakeholders and that policies need to take account of different values and the requirements of justice.

In making this statement, the Australian Bishops do not wish to be politically partisan nor to compromise the freedom of Catholic voters. Within a democratic process where expediency or party politics can at times obscure key principles and issues, we want to encourage people to consider their vote in the light not only of their personal interests, but of wider concerns as well.

This will mean recognition of the need to protect life, to support families and to ensure a fair go for all Australians, especially the weakest and most vulnerable in our society. For the true advancement of the nation depends not just upon material prosperity, but upon building a Commonwealth for the common good.