

Election Briefing Kit

2007



National Council of
Churches in Australia

An Introduction by the President

I have no doubt that member Churches of NCCA will have experienced, in various ways, the gibe from politicians telling us to "keep out of politics and to stick to religion". But, of course, we won't oblige, not least prior to an election!

The view that we have no role in the political process is but another manifestation of the aggressively secular nature of Australian society.

We are those who pray, "your Kingdom come" and, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". And we know how Jesus, by word and actions, announced the coming Kingdom.

I like the definition of us Christians as being those who live God's coming Kingdom now. We are those who have seen and experienced something of what God has in store for the whole creation. As a consequence, we are impatient with the way things are in our nation and our world.

The ecumenical movement has, helpfully, referred to the task of the Christian churches as being signs, instruments and foretastes of God's coming Kingdom. And that, I believe, is a good way to look at our role in relation to the political process.

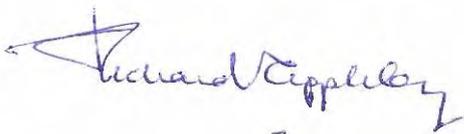
The forthcoming election will present various opportunities for us, as member Churches of NCCA, to test the policies of the parties and candidates against our Christian vision of God's coming Kingdom.

The Election Kit is not a party political document.

The Kit provides a list of key questions in a range of policy areas. In the lead up to the election there will be various opportunities to address questions to those who are standing for election. I hope that this Kit will be of assistance on such occasions.

A real value of the Kit is that it will help us to keep in focus a whole range of significant issues. This is important as, inevitably, certain fashionable issues will tend to dominate the agenda.

The Kit is offered to our member Churches in the hope that it will be of assistance as we engage in the political process for the common good of our nation of Australia.



Bishop Richard Appleby
President

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Contents

Introduction from the President	2
How to use this Election Kit	4
International Affairs	5
Work Choices	6
Indigenous Australians	7
Climate Change	8
Community Harmony	9
Housing	10
Refugees & Asylum Seekers	11

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How to use this Election Kit

How *not* to use this kit

First, a warning about the misuse of this kit. This kit will not tell you how to vote. It is not the role of the NCCA or its member Churches to instruct persons on which political party to vote for. Each person must make up his or her own mind, taking into account all the issues that matter.

Neither does this kit say that social justice is the only criterion on which to judge policies. Good government consists in many things, economic, administrative and legal. Social justice is an important criterion. The purpose of this kit is to ensure that social justice is not overlooked.

You can use this kit privately

As you consider your vote in this election you can use this material to inform yourself about relevant issues. You can use the questions directed to candidates to consider your own views. You can incorporate the material into discussions you may have about the election.

You can use this kit corporately

You may belong to church or community groups with a social justice focus. You can use this kit in your discussions. You may also set up a special discussion forum at election time.

You can use this kit with candidates

Each section has questions that might be directed towards candidates or parties. They can be used on occasions set up by the candidates or parties. Church or community groups can set up their own meetings to which candidates can be invited. It might be useful to give notice of the kinds of questions when you invite candidates. Care might need to be taken to ensure that some candidates are not targeted over others. All parties and candidates need to be placed under scrutiny.

You can use this kit to inform your church community

Church newsletters can be used to direct members to the NCCA website. The kit can be copied and distributed.

You can use this kit for prayer

We do not act alone. Our concern for social justice comes, as the sections of the kit state, from a Christian vision. Our parliamentarians need our prayers. We need to make our voting decisions prayerfully.

Foreign policy is too important to be excluded from domestic political discussion, particularly at election time. Australia's future depends on the quality of our global citizenship.

A Christian Vision

In situations of conflict, the Churches should support actions that enable peace, support human rights and exercise humanitarian compassion. Taking a moral stance has become difficult since western governments have tried to impose freedom through force and create safety through fear. In response, many nations have pursued their own self-interest, some even justifying repression as necessary to ensure security, peace and harmony. But foreign policy can never be values-free. What kind of neighbour is Australia?

A Reflection

Australia has a long history of positive contributions to international peacemaking, human rights and diplomacy through the UN and similar institutions.

In recent years, however, there has been a tendency to hold back from widely agreed international conventions and to follow independent or unilateral paths. This is of considerable concern, since globalisation is transforming the way national governments construe and pursue their interests globally. If Australia is to enjoy a secure and prosperous future then we need to attend to the security and prosperity of others today.

Australian Churches continue to promote the Decade to Overcome Violence, as a call to transcend the 'logic' of violence and find constructive alternatives to war and injustice. The way to peace does not lie through war, but through transforming structures of injustice and the politics of exclusion.

Australia's future will be found in multilateralism, not unilateralism. There is a need for a deeper commitment to working through international channels; consider how the activities of government and business impact others.

Contemporary Christian thinking about peace and reconciliation emphasises:

- unease about how humanitarian compassion often leaves those fleeing violence destitute and isolated in camps for years while waiting for situations to improve back home;
- the need for renewed commitment to multilateral action and reform in the UN and other forums for international decision-making;
- far greater international attention given to conflict prevention;
- the rehabilitation and renewal of the physical, political and civil infrastructures of suffering nations including debt relief and fairer trade arrangements; and
- promotion of active non-violence strategies and practice at all levels as part of the UN/WCC/NCCA commitments to 'cultivating a culture of peace' particularly through peace building, conflict-resolution and reconciliation mechanisms.

Among specific pressing international issues, Australian Christians are urged to call our leaders to:

- participate fully in the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and any future agreement that sets binding targets;
- the Millennium Development Goals by committing to the agreed target of 0.7% of Gross National Income to international aid so that poverty reduction targets throughout Asia and Africa can be met;
- comply with all international treaties, including the protocols dealing with our detention centers;
- consider proactive arrangements for climate change refugees throughout the South Pacific;
- the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Torture;
- the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and
- support the proposed bans on cluster munitions and controls on the movement of small arms and light weapons through the International Arms Trade Treaty negotiations.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

- Will your party work together with the UN and similar institutions rather than involving Australia in independent actions?
- What are your party's policies for conflict prevention?
- Will you support Australia's full participation in the Kyoto Protocol, meeting our Millennium Development Goal obligations, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Torture, the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the ban on cluster bombs?

For further information go to www.ncca.org.au and follow the link to the Social Justice Sunday 2007 kit, *In Whose Interest? Australia as a Global Citizen, and the Decade to Overcome Violence under Special Projects.*

Work Choices

The person is the measure of the dignity of work. Adequate pay, fair conditions, the representation of industrially weak workers and the availability and security of work are the grounds on which the fairness of industrial relations is and will continue to be tested.¹

A Christian Vision

The Churches believe that issues surrounding human labour are more than just economic issues; they are essentially about the human dignity of each person. Moral values, as expressed in church social justice teaching, recognise the importance of dignity in employment and in the provision of just and fair wages and conditions for all workers.

A Reflection

The advent of the Work Choices legislation provided an opportunity for the Christian Churches to reflect on the fundamental values which underpin the role of work and the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees.

Industrial relations require an understanding of the laws and conventions which govern work as relational; as a balance between workers and employers that is reasonable and fair.

Economic reform and the pursuit of full employment are important in the life of a nation but these can never be at the expense of allowing wages and conditions to fall below the level that is needed to sustain a decent standard of living.

Of particular importance to the Churches is the impact of legislation on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society and on family life.

Justice Higgins in the famous Harvester Case, which was the start of our industrial relations system, said that a fair wage had to allow a worker to function as *a human being in a civilised community*. Removing the responsibility for setting the safety net wage from the Industrial Relations Commission and giving it to the Australian Fair Pay Commission changed the idea of a minimum wage and moved it from a 'living wage' based on the needs of a family to that of a single adult.

Trading away weekends and holidays, which employees now have a 'right' to do, have serious repercussions for family and community life.

Limiting the role of unions in the workplace, removing most workers from the protection of unfair dismissal laws, and reducing the minimum conditions covered by awards are aspects of the legislation which continue to concern the Churches.

All structures require regular review and periodic reform but they must be measured against the needs of people for meaningful and fulfilling work which will contribute to the good of all.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

- How does your party define a just wage?
- What are your strategies to ensure protection and support for the most vulnerable people in their search for work?

¹ ACSJC, *The voice of vulnerable workers in the changing world of work*. A Pastoral Letter for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, 1 May 2006

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold a very important place within our Australian society. The Churches hope that nay government would have a special set of policies based around them.

A Christian Vision

The Churches support actions that bring about better relations between peoples and especially between Indigenous Australians and the rest of Australian society.

A Reflection

The Churches' understanding of reconciliation may not line up with what Governments profess to be its definition. Present Government policy is based on practical reconciliation. Is this our understanding of what reconciliation is about?

Reconciliation involves more than giving Indigenous peoples access to basic services such as water, education, etc. It involves policies that enable all peoples to be active, productive members of society. In reconciliation a recognition of past wrongs needs to take place and an act of sorry has to be undertaken for the process to be truly meaningful.

Policies must be about more than how much money will be spent on Indigenous affairs. The money spent must represent a bigger picture plan for Australia in the future that involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Throughout the history Treaties or Covenants have been put in place in order to seal a special relationship between groups.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to be at the bottom of all social indicators, including health. It is common knowledge that at times people do need a help-up and churches throughout the world have shown that this needs to be done to the least favoured within our midst. We need to address past mistakes and some special treatment may need to happen to fix these actions. Equality sometimes means treating everybody the same way. Sometimes it means it is fair to treat people differently where the individual's circumstances are different.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

- Does your party have a policy on Indigenous affairs?
- Do you support Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?
- How do you understand reconciliation?
- How do you or your party's policy express a vision for Indigenous people? (Is money the only answer put forward when talking about policy?)
- Do you believe that the Federal Government should apologise on behalf of Australia for past mistreatment of Indigenous people?
- Do you/your party think that there should be a Treaty (or some other form of agreement) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people?
- What are your party's policies for addressing Indigenous health issues?
- What consultations does your party use when intervening in the lives of Indigenous Australians?
- Does your party's Indigenous policy include a new national Indigenous representative voice and how will that come about?
- What are your views on equality?

WE NEED TO ADDRESS PAST MISTAKES.

Climate Change

A growing awareness calls for action.

As a nation, we are becoming more aware of the environmental impact of how we live and use the earth's resources. There have been many scientific reports confirming that carbon emission through the use of fossil fuels is contributing to climate change. But for ordinary Australians, it is through the lived experience of more ferocious storms, dry and salted rivers and land, the depletion of dams, and the changes to the normal flow of seasons that most Australians have become more aware of this environmental crisis.

The concern of ordinary Australians has finally convinced even our most reluctant politicians to acknowledge that climate change is a problem of global proportions. In this election campaign, the commitment and resources each political party is willing to commit to addressing climate change will be a central issue.

Not just economic cost

We appreciate the deeper significance of God's gift of creation. We are stewards of the planet and its resources. Our responsibility to care for creation and repair the damage we have done requires sound moral judgement now and for future generations.

We challenge the idea that economic growth should take precedence over care for the environment. It is not an optional or low priority matter. There will be an economic cost in reducing carbon emissions, but an economy at the service of the environment, for the welfare of all people, will look beyond the immediate maximisation of profits.

As Christians we are called to consider our neighbours. Have we really considered the impact of the way we consume resources and the relative opulence of our lifestyles, on the poor of the world who struggle to survive and who are most exposed to disasters of climate change? Christian Aid (UK) estimates that 1 billion people will be forced from their homes by 2050 through climate change, if too little is done too late.

Will Australia take up the challenge?

Many businesses, church community groups, schools, and individual citizens have already taken up the challenge to change in the way they use resources, produce goods and services, and consume energy. They have taken the lead.

As a nation, we need to support new industries and technologies that reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and harmful emissions. This will only happen if the Government of the day is committed to regulating to price carbon and develop safe and clean energy supplies. Our abundance of resources as well as renewable energy sources such as wind, solar and geothermal power places Australia in a unique position to show real leadership in developing alternatives to fossil fuel.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

With a national election approaching, it is well to ask the political parties and their candidates where they stand on the issue of Climate Change.

It may be helpful to begin by asking:

- What policies does your party have to address the Climate Change crisis?
- How will you reduce the wasteful use of fossil fuels and resulting carbon emissions?
- How will you promote the development of clean renewable energy sources?

For more information visit: Australian Conservation Foundation: www.acfonline.org.au; Australian Environmental Education Network: www.deh.gov.au/education/; Catholic Earthcare Australia: <http://catholicearthcareoz.net/>; or 2007 NCCA Social Justice Statement: www.ncca.org.au/departments/social_justice_network; and The Wilderness Society: www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/climate/

Community harmony means valuing the integrity of every person as a human being. It does not happen by chance, but by the deliberate and thoughtful choice to listen and dialogue across differences in background, race, age, gender, religion, education, interests, wealth and status.

A Christian Vision

The Hebrew Scriptures require fair treatment for everyone (e.g. Lev 19:33-34; Zech 7:9-10). The New Testament agrees, e.g. Gal 5:14,

“For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’”.

Jesus said,

“... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” (Matt 5:43-45).

The gospel counters the usual social order and insists that those who are rejected are worthy of special favour.

A Reflection

Vilification, name calling and blaming, threats, denial of services and basic human rights, an ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality, and other acts of exclusion all threaten community harmony. People who are fleeing violence and death often come to Australia as refugees, from Africa and elsewhere. When we accept them, we also have the privilege of helping them rebuild their lives in peaceful and meaningful ways. This is a special challenge for our sense of community harmony and what it takes to build a successful society.

How we behave toward one another, the cliques or exclusion zones that we establish both deliberately and accidentally, subtly change the shape of our society and affect the welfare of others. We become adept at not noticing those whom we exclude and discounting those who are ‘different’. We use various ways of demonstrating who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’. All these things disrupt community harmony.

It is a great privilege to participate in a democracy. We should avoid policies that use ‘put downs’ of others, blame ‘scapegoats’ for national failings, or disregard human rights by typecasting or ‘demonising’. We must avoid the language of disadvantage or paternalism that diminishes and dehumanises some sectors of the community. We cannot act solely out of self interest but have a responsibility for the marginalised and disadvantaged.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

As you listen to those who seek public office, you can test what they say with some simple questions:

- How does this candidate intend to reduce disadvantage in the community, and protect the vulnerable?
- If this candidate is successful, will they support a balanced and compassionate society that cares for its weakest or most needy members?
- Does the candidate/party use a language of fear, or a language of fairness, empowerment and hope?

**COMMUNITY HARMONY DOES NOT HAPPEN BY CHANCE,
BUT BY DELIBERATE AND THOUGHTFUL CHOICE**

Despite the current housing boom, Australia is facing a housing crisis.

A Christian Vision

A basic component for health and human dignity is the availability of affordable, secure and well located housing. It is essential not only to the health, physically and economically, of the individual but also that of the community and the nation.

A Reflection

At the end of the 1950s, the house price to income ratio was around 3.5 or 4 to 1.ⁱ Today the median house price to median income ratio is 6.6 to 1 and Australia features some of the least affordable cities for housing in the world.ⁱⁱ

This means that most disadvantaged Australians are unable to buy housing and instead rent in low cost areas which tend to have fewer jobs, services and other opportunities. A recent report from the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) looked at households in housing stress, defined as those earning the lowest 40% of incomes and facing housing costs of more than 30% of their income. AHURI indicated an estimated 1.4 million low income households have insufficient income to maintain a 'frugal standard of living' after paying for housing (see Figure 37).ⁱⁱⁱ

The high cost of housing is a major, if not the main factor, in the emergence in Australia of postcodes of wealth and opportunity and postcodes of poverty and disadvantage. The impact of housing on fairness is such that new research is increasingly able to predict a child's chances for good health, work opportunities, educational attainment and economic assets based on where they live.

On Census night 2001, 100,000 Australians were estimated to be homeless, many of them children. Nationally 1 in every 51 children aged under 5 walked through the doors of a homeless service in 2004-05.^{iv}

There are 80,000-100,000 evictions from rental accommodation each year, which indicates severe financial stress. Most of these are for rent unpaid and most involving people living alone, young people, single parents, older men, people with substance abuse problems, and women escaping domestic violence.^v

This is leading to increased pressure on housing services – all of which are critically under-funded. For instance, 12,000 adults and children each day are turned away from emergency accommodation services because these services can not meet demand.^{vi} There are 186,934 families on waiting lists for public housing, 11,224 of which were classified by the authorities as in 'greatest need'.^{vii}

Questions for Candidates/Parties

To improve housing affordability, a large increase in the supply of low-cost housing is necessary.

- What are your party's policies regarding the provision of affordable, secure and well located housing?
- What is your party's policy to reduce homelessness?
- What will your party do to increase the supply of affordable housing for low income Australians?
- Will your party increase investment to public and community housing?
- Will you support the development of incentives for private investors to direct investment into affordable housing for low income Australians?
- Does your party have a national strategy for involving participation of all levels of government in response to this crisis?

ⁱ Judith Yates, AHURI, Paper prepared for the ACOSS Congress, November 2006.

ⁱⁱ Demographia, 3rd Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey:2007 Ratings for Major Urban Markets.

ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Housing Affordability in Australia, Feb 2006. p. viii.

^{iv} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Homeless Children in SAAP 2004-5, Bulletin Issue 48, August 2006 p. 3-4.

^v Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin, Issue 73, June 2006.

^{vi} Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations, Factsheets, 2006.

^{vii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Public rental housing 2005-06: Commonwealth State Housing Agreement national data reports, p. viii-ix.

Refugees have the right “to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries”
(Article 14, Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

and should not be penalized for fleeing without visas.
(Article 31, 1951 Refugee Convention)

A Christian Vision

Detention for asylum seekers must be limited in time and for a good reason such as basic health, security and identity checks. All asylum seekers should be able to work or receive income support. Children and their parents should be released from detention into areas where they can access the support of their respective communities while their protection claims are processed. Permanent protection should be given to all refugees. All countries should work co-operatively to prevent dangerous situations that displace people and work to protect such ‘uprooted people’ – asylum seekers, such as refugees and the internally displaced.

A Reflection

To deter asylum seekers coming by boat to Australia, the Howard Government in 2001 introduced the “Pacific Solution”, which has since also seen the excision of Australia’s outlying islands from our migration zone. The Government insists those found to be refugees must be resettled in a third country and not Australia. Problems with this approach, such as deteriorating mental health with prolonged detention and uncertainty, have been widely documented. Both the Coalition and the ALP remain committed to use of the recently-constructed large detention centre on Christmas Island off the North-West Australian coast.

Australia can set a positive international example by pursuing humane policies and actively supporting the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other countries in working for creative, lasting solutions for refugees and other displaced people. This should extend from the Asia-Pacific to the huge needs faced in conflicts such as Iraq and Darfur.

Since October 1999 visa-less refugees, after being recognized as refugees and released from detention, have been initially eligible for 3-year temporary protection visas (TPVs), which do not allow for a range of assistance provided for with permanent protection visas. Permanent residence would remove the threat of being forcibly sent home and establishes a basis on which to settle, integrate and recover from torture, trauma and the effects of long-term detention. Every year people arrive in Australia with valid visas, clear immigration, and then claim asylum. If, however, they do not lodge their applications within 45 days of arrival, they are given a Bridging Visa E (BVEs). This visa denies them income support, work rights and Medicare cover. Most are destitute and are forced to rely on charity.

Questions for Candidates/Parties

- Will your party propose legislation to discontinue the use of TPVs and Bridging Visa Es?
- Will you support an end to off-shore processing of asylum seekers, bringing asylum seekers to mainland Australia and introducing a community release scheme?
- What policies does your party have that will support refugees and assist them to settle in Australia?
- Will your party work with, and financially support, the UNHCR and other countries for co-operative, humane treatment and lasting solutions for refugees and others displaced by conflict?

For election specific issues and advocacy information visit:

“10 Points to Clean Up Australia’s (Migration) Act” at: www.ajustaustralia.com and follow the links.

This website also rates political parties on specific areas of refugee and asylum seeker policies.

For further general information visit:

www.ncca.org.au/cws/refugees and www.refugeecouncil.org.au.



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