

A Vote for Us All



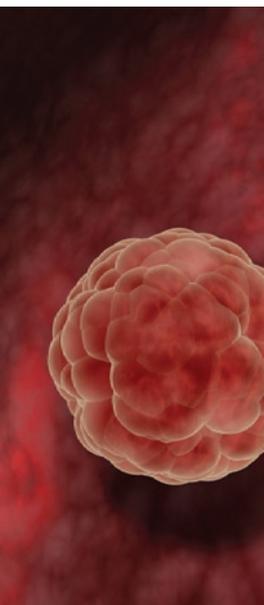
A Federal election will be called in the coming months, and the Australian Catholic Bishops offer this statement in order to focus on some key issues of vital concern to the entire Australian community.

In making this contribution, we draw upon a rich religious tradition and upon the Church's long experience as a major provider of healthcare, education and social services in Australia. We encourage Catholics to look beyond their own individual needs and apply a different test at the ballot box – the test of the common good.

Catholic tradition holds that the common good is underpinned by the promotion and protection of human dignity. Implicit in seeking the common good is the desire to serve the poor, the marginalised, the sick and the forgotten in our society.

At a time when some argue that religious faith should be removed from politics altogether, we urge Catholics to take their democratic freedoms seriously and become involved in the political process. For some, this will also mean making informed ethical choices at the ballot box. For others, it might mean standing for election. We acknowledge and encourage the many Catholic people who are already engaged in political life at various levels.





✓ Life

RESPECT FOR LIFE AND THE FOSTERING OF THE INHERENT DIGNITY OF THE PERSON UNDERPINS WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN. All human life is to be respected, particularly the most vulnerable, including the unborn, the sick and elderly, people with disability, and communities ravaged by poverty, abuse, famine or war. In Australia, we welcome the growing consensus that the level of abortion is deeply disturbing. We continue to commit ourselves to working with all sides of politics to offer practical support and alternatives to women facing an unexpected pregnancy.

Respect for human life also requires constant vigilance to ensure that euthanasia and assisted suicide are never legalised in Australia. These acts, which are presented as acts of mercy, are in fact an abandonment of those who need our care and protection most. Recognising the incidence of suicide in the Australian community, we encourage every initiative, especially in the field of mental health, to alleviate the pressures that can lead people to take their own lives.

The deepest questions are raised by the creation and deliberate destruction of human embryos for stem cell research. The Catholic Church is not opposed to stem cell research. On the contrary, we strongly support research based on adult stem cells, as well as those which are derived from umbilical cord blood. The Church supports ethical stem cell research through its research institutes, healthcare services, teaching hospitals and health professionals.



✓ Family

FAMILIES ARE THE BASIC CELL OF SOCIETY. At a time when family life is subject to unprecedented pressure, families must be supported in every possible way. There must be legal recognition of the unique nature of marriage between a man and a woman, and proper protection for the rights of children. Tax arrangements and social service support nets should be aimed at strengthening families and reducing the pressures on them.

Industrial laws must also support family life by ensuring a fair wage fixing system, an adequate minimum wage, proper protections for workers' conditions and fair compensation for the working of unsociable and un-family friendly hours. The proper balance between the rights of the employer and the rights of the employee always needs to be maintained. We call for a 'fair go' for all and an industrial relations system which supports the nation's greatest asset – its families.



✓ Indigenous Australians

A SUSTAINED EFFORT FROM ALL AUSTRALIANS AND ALL POLITICAL PARTIES IS NEEDED TO ACHIEVE LASTING DIGNITY AND JUSTICE FOR OUR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES. Recent government initiatives in this area are welcome and necessary, but much more needs to be done. This must involve adequate indigenous representation in the process of government so that Australia's first peoples may be heard and their hopes and aspirations pursued as a national priority.

Appalling standards of housing and health, alarming levels of imprisonment and great educational disadvantage and poverty are some key indicators of the problems which weigh heavily upon indigenous peoples throughout the country. All Australians are now keenly aware that when the common good is being considered at the ballot box this election we cannot fail to consider the needs of our Indigenous brothers and sisters.



✓ Education

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IS A MAJOR PROVIDER OF EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA AND HAS BEEN SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT. The diversity of the Australian system of co-extensive schooling – public, Catholic and private – is a great strength and should be supported in every way. Funding policies should assist parents in choosing the education that they want for their children, reflecting their own circumstances, values and beliefs. Funding models must be fair, open and transparent, reflecting accurately contributions from the Commonwealth, states, and parent and private contributions. There should be no barrier to education because of an incapacity to pay.





✓ Health

AUSTRALIA HAS A FINE HEALTH SYSTEM BUT IT IS UNDER GREAT STRAIN. The Catholic Church insists that every person has the right to essential health care. Catholic Health Australia has been warning of an increasing cost burden to families and to patients who are heavily reliant on health services. Significant reform is needed to ensure that households maintain their capacity to obtain basic health care. Without such reform, involving both the Commonwealth and states, Medicare will not be able to keep pace with the steady increase in user charges and fees. Aged care and dental health must also receive adequate Commonwealth funding to ensure appropriate support for the frail and the sick.

Mental health is an area of particular need. Not infrequently, mental health is related to the drug culture and its consequences. The entire community needs to be aware of the problem, its scope and complexity; the young need to be educated in this area; and government needs to fund mental health care appropriately.



✓ Environment

DESPITE RECENT LIFE-GIVING RAINS, AUSTRALIA REMAINS IN THE GRIP OF DROUGHT. We stand in solidarity with those suffering the effects of the drought and, in our churches around the nation, we will continue to pray for regular, sustaining rain. More than ever we need cooperation at all levels of government to implement policies which will safeguard our water resources and distribute them in the fairest possible way. Support for drought-stricken communities must also be a priority, both in practical help and in providing professional support and counselling for those who need it. Catholic social service agencies are involved in this work and we know how much it is needed from our own contact with the people in the drought-affected communities we serve.

Australia's future prosperity is closely linked with how well we care for our environment. The effects of global warming, land degradation, poor land use practices and exploitation of the natural environment all require urgent and ongoing attention.



✓ Immigration and refugees

THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE ACROSS THE GLOBE IS AT UNPRECEDENTED LEVELS AND WILL ONLY CONTINUE. Many people migrate because they are seeking to find a better life in a new country and Australia has benefited from successive waves of immigration. However, there are also millions of people who are forced to flee their homeland for fear of persecution or through displacement because of war or famine. We believe that all asylum seekers, regardless of how they arrive in Australia, should have their claim processed in Australia, according to international convention. Claims should be processed as speedily as possible, ensuring that people do not spend long periods in detention. People who are found to be refugees should receive permanent visas which allow them to access government services and employment, giving them the security they need to build a new life in Australia. Church bodies are engaged in working with migrants and refugees, both in Australia and overseas. Through these bodies, we are committed to serving those in need and also seeking to address the causes of poverty and dislocation.



✓ Peace

AROUND THE WORLD, AND EVEN IN OUR OWN REGION, PEACE CAN SEEM AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK. We can feel helpless in the face of such violence and seemingly intractable political problems, but our faith tells us that it is not God's way to oppose violence with greater violence. We are grateful for our defence service personnel. We pray for their safety. We pray as well for a speedy end to all conflicts in which our forces are involved. We support efforts to build a culture of peace by promoting overseas aid policies which provide access to proper nourishment, health, housing and education.

Our thoughts and prayers are with political leaders as they prepare for the election and our hope is that what we offer here will help not only Catholics, but all Australians to make a choice which serves the good of the whole nation.

