

National Council  
of Churches  
in Australia

Election  
Briefing Kit  
2004



# An Introduction by the President

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) is part of the worldwide ecumenical movement. It is a movement for reconciliation between the Churches, and more importantly between God and the world. In Romans 5 and II Corinthians 5 we see how reconciliation is related to new creation in Christ. At II Corinthians 5:19, God in Christ is reconciling the world to God's self. Christ comes in solidarity with us as human beings, so that we may come back to be in solidarity with God. It is through being brought back to God, and therefore being brought back to each other, that we must be engaged in the life of the world.

Politics is the life of the "polis", that is of the community. It is the responsibility of each Christian and each Christian community to be engaged in an election. It is not just as good citizens but also as Christians that we ought to be involved in the issues that come at each election.

This resource is offered to the Churches and each Christian person by the NCCA. It is not a campaign for a particular point of view. It is values based material for resourcing, educating and supporting NCCA member Churches and their members, so that we can be active, informed participants in the election. It is taking Christian social responsibility seriously.

Christians and the Churches have particular responsibilities in a number of areas:

First, to raise issues which political parties may not wish to raise, issues which are central to our way of life as a community here in Australia and beyond. Some issues raised in this resource will be central in the debates. Others may be pushed to the side. It may well be important that we raise the issues. Scripture and our Christian traditions remind us of issues that perhaps many of us would rather forget, because they are difficult or threatening. It is hoped that this kit will remind us of those things.

Second, to approach the issues from a Christian perspective. Of course, Christians have different conclusions about issues. We see Christian commitment and discipleship in different ways. It is hoped that this material will resource us in looking at the issues from a particularly Christian point of view rather than from a sociological, economic or cultural point of view.

Third, the important thing is that we are drawn more and more towards being responsibly engaged in the important work of preparing for and participating in the election. Apathy is a major danger in a democracy. Apathy is also a failure of discipleship within Christianity. Let us remember how it was the Christian involvement in South Africa which led to the end of apartheid and the beginning of true reconciliation and democracy under Nelson Mandela.

May God bless us as we use this resource, to the Glory of God and for the good of all people, both in Australia and throughout the world.

*Reverend Professor James Haire*

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*The Visions, Reflections and Questions  
contained in this resource reflect the  
spirit and intention of a range of  
statements by the member Churches of  
the National Council of Churches in  
Australia.*

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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.

# International Order

Positive contributions to international order develop positive relationships between peoples and nations. Nations working together can find constructive alternatives to war and injustice.

## A Christian Vision

In situations of conflict and the prevention of conflict the Churches support actions that enable peace, support human rights and exercise humanitarian compassion.

## 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 modelled by the USA. This is of considerable concern, since the development of genuine internationalism is a vital requirement in the face of the pressures of globalisation. The NCCA expressed this in the build-up of war with Iraq:

‘The NCCA is currently promoting the Decade to Overcome Violence, 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.’

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Australia should act in situations such as Iraq only under UN resolution, not unilaterally. There is a need for a deeper commitment to working through international channels.

Contemporary Christian thinking about peace and reconciliation emphasises:

- unease about the coexistence of ‘humanitarian’ and ‘intervention’ as a response, as in practice humanitarian compassion is too often contradicted by the use of lethal military force – preference is for ‘the protection of endangered populations in situations of armed violence’ (WCC);

- the need for renewed commitment to multilateral action, the UN and international decision-making;
- taking of earlier preventive actions in response to early warnings of crisis;
- far greater international priority to - conflict-prevention; the rehabilitation and renewal of the physical, political and civil infrastructures of suffering nations (including the relief of poor nations debt and fair trade); peace-building, conflict-resolution and reconciliation mechanisms; 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’.

Among specific pressing international issues, Australian Christians are called to urge political backing for Australia’s full participation in:

- the Kyoto Protocol on global warming;
- the International Court of Justice (ICJ);
- the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Torture;
- the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; and
- reviewing East Timor’s claims to a fair receipt of oil and gas from the Timor Sea

## 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 parties policies for conflict prevention?
- Will you support full participation in the Kyoto Protocol, the ICJ, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Torture, the draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and a review of East Timor’s claims to oil and gas from the Timor Sea?

**For further information** on the Decade to Overcome Violence at [www.ncca.org.au/dov](http://www.ncca.org.au/dov).

# International Debt

Many millions of the poorest people in the world suffer from their countries indebtedness.

## A Christian Vision

The lives and well-being of the poorest people are more important than the repayment of debt. Members of a country's government, administration and business community should ensure the basic needs of the people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, are met.

## A Reflection

Around the world creditors have made billions of dollars of irresponsible loans to regimes for military expenditures and infrastructure projects, from which most ordinary people gained no benefit. Jubilee Australia, a project in which the NCCA has taken a lead role, sees it as particularly unjust that after dictatorships have fallen, the debt - with interest - remains and creditors insist on repayment.

Jubilee Australia supports the United Nations' eight Millennium Development Goals for 2015, which aim to (1) eradicate poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) develop a global partnership for development. Developing country indebtedness is a key obstacle to the achievement of these goals, therefore, Jubilee Australia calls for the Australian Government to:

1. Cancel the unpayable component of poor country debts - in particular to Indonesia, Philippines, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands; and
2. Develop debt sensitive guidelines for Australia's Export Credit Agency - the Export Finance and Insurance Corporation (EFIC) and for greater

levels of cooperation between AusAID, AusTrade and EFIC.

Jubilee Australia, also, calls on the Australian Government as a member of the three critical bodies which cancel sovereign debts - the IMF, the World Bank and the Paris Club - to:

## *Debt sensitive guidelines for Australia's Export Credit Agency.*

1. Support the cancellation of the unpayable component of poor country debts in Africa<sup>1</sup>, developing Asia and Latin America; and
2. Support the creation of an international sovereign bankruptcy body that involves both creditors, debtors and independent arbiters in (a) determining the necessary level of debt cancellation and (b) placing safeguards on how the money freed up by debt cancellation is used;<sup>2</sup> and
3. Ensure creditors take ethical responsibility for the loans they make.

These actions will have symbolic and practical benefit to many millions of people. Alone, however, they are just part of a process.

## Questions for Candidates/Parties

Many questions can be asked based on the Jubilee call to the Australian Government. More simply candidates could be asked:

- Do you/your party support the principles of the Jubilee campaign?
- What policies does your party have for meeting the problems of unpayable international debt?

**For further information** contact Stewart Mills, Campaign Coordinator of Jubilee Australia on (02) 9299 2215/email [smills@ncca.org.au](mailto:smills@ncca.org.au) or visit [www.jubileeaustralia.org](http://www.jubileeaustralia.org).

*... the lives and well-being of the poorest people are more important than the repayment of debt ...*

<sup>1</sup> Africa pays \$15 billion a year in debt repayments making debt the greatest economic challenge to fight HIV/AIDS which is devastating the continent.

<sup>2</sup> Iraq is a case in point.



# Refugees & Asylum Seekers

Refugees have the right “to seek and enjoy asylum in other countries” (Art. 14, Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and should not be penalised for fleeing without visas (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. Permanent protection should be given to all refugees.

## A Reflection

In 1992, Australia introduced harsh new laws to punish and deter boat people by making it mandatory for every man, woman and child seeking refuge in Australia without a visa to be held in detention for an indefinite period. Despite a 1992 High Court ruling that detaining people to deter others is inappropriate, Governments continue to scare the public by inferring that removing detention would open the flood gates to “illegals”.

90% of visa-less onshore arrivals from 1999 to 2003 were eventually deemed to be refugees, who fled as a result of a genuine fear of persecution. Under international law, refugees are not ‘illegals’ and are entitled to protection.

Children entering without a visa are subject to automatic, non-reviewable detention. Alternative detention housing schemes, usually for children and their mothers, have been applied in a limited way. They are unreasonably restrictive, separating fathers from partners and children. A workable community release scheme could be adopted by Government.

Since October 1999, visa-less refugees, after being recognised as refugees and released, have been denied permanent protection visas. They are given 3-year temporary protection visas (TPVs) that deny permanent residence, family reunion rights, English lessons, accommodation, job-search assistance, government-funded settlement services and the right to re-enter Australia after travelling overseas. 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. Churches and community groups struggle to provide minimum levels of support to TPV holders.

Australia is the only country to grant temporary status to recognized refugees. Temporary protection, in Europe and as recommended by the UNHCR, is granted only to groups of asylum seekers during emergencies or when arrivals overwhelm the processing capacity of receiving states. In all other instances refugees receive permanent visas.

The Australian Government should repeal legislation excising parts of Australia from Australia’s migration zone and stop the practice of naval interception and forced transfer to Pacific Islands.

Complementary Protection should be considered for those who do not fit the strict definition of ‘refugee’ but still have protection needs.

Every year people arrive in Australia with valid visas, clear immigration, and then claim asylum. During processing, most are allowed to live in the community and can apply for permanent protection visas. If, however, they do not lodge their applications within 45 days of arrival or appeal to the Federal or High Court or the Minister for Immigration (under discretionary powers), they are given a Bridging Visa E (BVEs). This visa denies them income support and work rights, and Medicare cover. Up to 1,000 BVEs live in the community. 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 BVEs?
- Will you support a community release scheme?
- What policies does your party have that will support refugees and assist them to settle in Australia.

## For further information visit:

*The Better Way* model at [www.ncca.org.au](http://www.ncca.org.au) (under cws/at work with refugees); or [www.refugeecouncil.org.au](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au).

# Community Harmony

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. Branding people who arrive by boat to seek asylum in Australia as ‘illegals’, for instance, questions their legitimacy as human beings, and prepares the way for harsh and inhumane policies that make their desperate situation worse.

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:

- What policies do you/your party have to reduce disadvantage in Australian communities? or do the policies disregard vulnerable people, playing mainly to self-interest?
- Does the candidate/party use a language of fear, or a language of fairness, empowerment and hope?

Some personal questions may be:

- Am I willing to make sacrifices in my own life so that others may benefit?
- Am I satisfied to be a passive observer in the community, or will I actively work for community harmony by knowing my neighbours and caring about them?

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# Indigenous Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hold a very important place within our Australian society. The Churches hope that any 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 more than how much money will be spent on Indigenous affairs. The monies 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 so as to seal a special relationship between groups. It is very much of church history should it also be part of the mainstream.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are 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 parties 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 parties policies for addressing Indigenous health issues?
- What are your views on equality?

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# Environment

The protection and sustainable development of the environment is an urgent moral issue, demanding the commitment of governments, and action at national, regional and local levels.

## A Christian Vision

We challenge the idea that economic growth should take precedence over care for the environment. It is not an optional or low priority matter. It is inter-related with every other policy issue likely to be raised in the election campaign.

## A Reflection

The human community today and in the future depends on the earth and its natural systems – atmosphere, waters, soils and living things – for its wellbeing and survival. Human activity in recent years has destroyed or damaged many of the planet's natural resources. That activity has contributed to global warming, air pollution, water degradation, the destruction of forests, the loss of bio-diversity and the extinction of many species. People are becoming more conscious of the crisis, but a more widespread change of spirit and attitude is needed.

Australians and their political leaders should reflect on the extent to which consumerism and economic policies have adversely affected the environment. Huge natural resources like the Murray-Darling river system, the Great Barrier Reef and the great artesian basin continue to be degraded. Massive land-clearing has removed trees and vegetation from vast areas. Scarce water resources have been used for unsustainable purposes. Salinity problems are increasing. The air has been polluted by ill-considered industrial development and by the over-use of environmentally harmful fuels. Questionable experiments with genetically modified organisms have been permitted. We have been slow to heed

the grave potential threat to the ecology in other parts of our region. The Kyoto Protocol on global warming has not been ratified by Australia. And, the need for more research into such fields as alternative energy for transport has not been well recognised.

In caring for the marginalised, the voiceless and the homeless, we should remember that it is the poor who suffer most from environmental degradation.

*The protection and sustainable development of the environment . . . is inter-related with every other policy issue likely to be raised in the election campaign.*

## Questions for Candidates/Parties

With a national election approaching, it is well to ask the political parties and their candidates where they stand on any or all of these issues.

It may be helpful to begin by asking:

- What policies does your party have that will care for the environment?
- What do you see as the important issues for our environment?

## For more information visit:

Australian Conservation Foundation  
[www.acfonline.org.au](http://www.acfonline.org.au)

Australian Environmental Education Network  
[www.deh.gov.au/education/](http://www.deh.gov.au/education/)

Catholic Earthcare Australia  
[www.catholicearthcareoz.net.au](http://www.catholicearthcareoz.net.au)

Earth Bible [www.webofcreation.org/earthbible/earthbible.html](http://www.webofcreation.org/earthbible/earthbible.html)

The European Christian Environmental Network  
[www.ecen.org/ecenhome.shtml](http://www.ecen.org/ecenhome.shtml)

JPIC (Justice, Peace & the Integrity of Creation)  
[www.ofm-jpic.org/globalwarming/](http://www.ofm-jpic.org/globalwarming/)

US Bishops' Environmental Justice Program  
[www.nccbuscc.org/lsdwplejpl](http://www.nccbuscc.org/lsdwplejpl)

Web of Creation [www.webofcreation.org](http://www.webofcreation.org)

The Wilderness Society [www.wilderness.org.au](http://www.wilderness.org.au)

# Poverty

Poverty is having insufficient resources to meet one's basic needs as well as to participate in the community in which one lives.

## A Christian Vision

All people are entitled to a decent life, in which they have access to work, education, housing, food, healthcare and recreation.

The churches consider the world is a community in which all members are responsible for each other.

## A Reflection

'Poverty wears you down and can make you sicker than you already are – both physically and mentally, it's about stress, isolation, fear and constant struggle. Poverty equals pain.'<sup>1</sup>

The effects of poverty can last for generations.

An Australia in which there are substantial inequalities is bad for *all* Australians. A healthy society is one guided by concern for the human rights of the most disadvantaged and marginalised, striving for participation of all people. It emerges as people identify with the pain of people in poverty, recognise that our future is bound up in one another and act together to bring about change.

The Federal Government is responsible for exercising leadership in governing for the benefit of all Australians and building a just and compassionate society in which all Australians have access to the social opportunities and basic goods required to participate fully in everyday life.

This includes the development, as a matter of high priority, of a strategy that addresses both the causes and the symptoms of poverty. This strategy must attend to the experiences of those living in poverty and be built on partnerships between all levels of

government, local communities, business and the community and research sectors.

Such a strategy needs to include an integrated approach to employment, particularly to the long-term unemployed, to industrial relations, to education and training; and to our income support system which must be appropriately resourced and underpinned by compassion and understanding. It must strive to understand and address the causes of poverty among Indigenous Australians and the poverty that is being increasingly concentrated in some neighbourhoods and in regional Australia. Affordable access to appropriate housing, health care, childcare, aged care and services for disabled people are also critical.

## Questions for Candidates/Parties

- How will your party's policies improve the situation for those whose lives are less rich and more troubled than they need to be?
- How will your party's policies enhance people's opportunity to participate as fully as they wish in society or improve their life chances?
- How will your party's policies help transform struggling communities? or place more pressure on them?
- How will you and your party work to build a less divided Australia?

**Further information** about the Churches' response to poverty may be found on the NCCA website, <http://www.ncca.org.au> or by viewing the Churches' submissions to the Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship, [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/poverty/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/poverty/submissions/sublist.htm)

<sup>1</sup> abridged version of a submission received by a QCOSS Task Group, November 1999, quoted in Tasmanian Catholic Justice and Peace Commission submission to Senate Inquiry into Poverty and Financial Hardship; [http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac\\_ctte/poverty/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/poverty/submissions/sublist.htm).

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# Unemployment

“Unemployment wreaks havoc, directly and indirectly, on the lives and emotions of all people affected. These are people with whom we, as a community, share a common human bond and we have a moral obligation in human solidarity to assist them.”<sup>1</sup>

## A Christian Vision

The Churches consider that it is vitally important to ensure a fair distribution of work with adequate remuneration under fair conditions, and recognises that the value of work goes beyond economic rewards.

## A Reflection

Long-term unemployment is a known precursor to poverty and erodes the dignity of the person and long-term unemployment is a serious issue that must be addressed at a political level so that its structural causes can be eliminated.

The impact of long-term unemployment on individuals, families and communities produces devastating results. Food, housing, education, health and general wellbeing cannot be achieved without appropriate financial resources. In today's society paid remuneration for work is the primary means of achieving these necessary financial resources. In terms of breaking cycles of disadvantage that lead to poverty, ensuring that all people have the opportunity to work in humane conditions that provide a liveable wage is one of the foremost goals.

But unemployment also produces devastating psychological and social results. Self-esteem and a sense of contributing to the community are just some of the psychological rewards of being able to participate in the workforce. These rewards flow back into communities, strengthening them by constantly building bonds of trust, cooperation and care among members of communities. In short, a fair distribution of work and just remuneration also contributes to the building of social capital.

As with economic markets, labour markets, left unrestrained produce injustices in the *distribution of work, a living wage*, and work that is *meaningful in accordance with our shared human dignity*. A continued push for labour market deregulation for its own sake without adequate reflection on the human consequences endangers the

wellbeing of many and places them at risk of continued poverty.

*Facts and figures* should not continue to be used to hide the truth of Australia's long-term unemployment situation for political gain. *Short-term* and *casual* employment opportunities are not an appropriate replacement for the security and dignity of valued and justly remunerated ongoing work.

A returning or incoming Government should assure the people of Australia that it is committed to producing a lucky country for *all* of its citizens, not just those who are fortunate enough to find work. In terms of creating

jobs for all Australians, we should let our politicians know that '*near enough is NOT good enough.*'

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## Questions for Candidates/Parties

- Does your party have a long-term strategy that aims to achieve full, secure, ongoing employment?
- Does your party have strategies to produce better job-seeker services and further training opportunities to those seeking work?
- What are your views regarding labour market deregulation?

<sup>1</sup> Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, *A Moral Accord With People Who Are Long-Term Unemployed*, Vol 2 No 3, September 1993, p.1.



# Housing

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

We have experienced a continuing decline in the stock of affordable (low-cost) housing. There is an estimated shortage of 150,000 units.<sup>1</sup>

Access to affordable, secure and well-located housing provides protection from poverty:

- ❑ People who have a place to live can take advantage of employment opportunities;
- ❑ Affordable and secure housing mitigates the impact of unemployment and ill health; and
- ❑ Children benefit from a stable environment that enhances opportunities to develop friendships and minimises interruptions to their schooling.<sup>2</sup>

In Australia, the lack of affordable housing impacts most heavily on private tenants. Housing-related poverty is strongly concentrated in this group and many households are permanent renters. Young people, in particular, find it difficult to become home-owners, in spite of the Commonwealth Government's First Home Owners Grant and low interest rates.

Lack of affordable housing undermines the economy and poses a threat to the cohesion of the broader community.

Households are considered to be in financial housing stress if they pay more than 30% of income on housing and are in the lowest 40 per cent of the income distribution range (National Housing Strategy 1991). There are approximately 250,000

people experiencing housing stress. If trends continue the number will reach one million by 2020, even without including people in regional Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Commonwealth Rent Assistance (RA) is failing to keep recipients of Centrelink payments from housing stress. Of almost one million individuals and families in receipt of RA in 2001, 88,846 were spending more than 50% of their income on rent.<sup>4</sup>

During 2001-02, an estimated 95,600 people - of which young people 15-24 were the majority - were supported by agencies providing services to people experiencing homelessness.<sup>5</sup> There are varying degrees of homelessness ranging from people living in insecure, unsafe or unaffordable housing to people living in cars, on the street, parks or in squats who are in a state of outright homelessness.<sup>6</sup>

The primary funding vehicle to assist low-income earners into public and community housing is the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement (CSHA). Funding has declined since 1991-2.<sup>7</sup> Many households are unable to access public housing because it only houses the most disadvantaged.

## 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?
- Will you support the expansion of rent and housing assistance through the income support system to assist low-income households?
- Will you support the development of financial instruments regulated by public policy that direct private sector investment into affordable housing?
- Does your party have a strategy for involving participation of all levels of government in response to this crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Yates, J & Wulfe, M 2000, 'Wither low cost private rental housing?' Urban Policy and Research, vol. 18, no 1, pp 45-64.

<sup>2</sup> Talyor, J 2003 unpublished results from the fourth stage of Life Chances. Brotherhood of St Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

<sup>3</sup> Berry, M & Hall, J 2001, policy options for stimulating private sector investment in affordable housing across Australia: Stage 1 report: Outlining the need for action, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) Melbourne.

<sup>4</sup> ACOSS 2002 Public and Community Housing: A rescue package needed. ACOSS Info 323. ACOSS, Strawberry Hills, NSW.

<sup>5</sup> AIHW. 2003. Homeless People in SAAP: SAAP NDC Annual Report 2001-02 Australia-SAAP National Data Collection Agency (NDCA) Report Series 7 (<http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/hou/saapndcar01-02-c04.pdf> viewed 15/05/03)

<sup>6</sup> Australian Council of Homeless Persons. 2003. General overview of homelessness (<http://www.chpa.org.au/general.html> viewed 15/05/03)

<sup>7</sup> ACOSS 2002 Public and Community Housing

