

compliance-based community welfare policies that have systematically shifted the onus of accountability away from governments, increasingly placing this burden upon individual citizens;

- privilege the most vulnerable in our communities, through social policies that correct these imbalances.

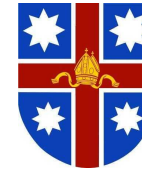
What has become of our National Government's duty of care for its most marginalised and vulnerable individuals and communities ?

Question:

What measures will the major political parties take to redress a series of reforms, systematically introduced by consecutive governments (both Labor and Liberal) since the 1980s – reforms that have created these structural imbalances ?

- * Consecutive decreases in funding (in real terms) for public health services;
- * HECS and an additional tier of full fee-paying tertiary courses;
- * Consecutive decreases in funding for the public schools system;
- * Consecutive decreases in funding (in real terms) for public housing;
- * Increasing centralisation of Federal power (including the High Court's reinterpretation of the provisions within the Constitution regarding corporations powers);
- * Privatisation of social assistance services (including Centrelink: formerly the federally-funded Commonwealth Employment Service);
- * An assault on principles of equity via increasingly punitive social security measures (such as the Welfare to Work legislation);
- * Systematic undermining of individuals' capacity to negotiate, in a collective way, their employment conditions.

Questions for the 2007 Federal Election



Anglican Church of Australia

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Background

Social cohesion based on core values is important for the wellbeing of individuals and communities, and beyond that for effective democracy. For a democracy in which many politicians espouse Christian faith and/or values, as they do in Australia, it will be a source of strength if politics and conscience informed by religion can work together in the public arena. Indeed, some leading Christian writers have argued they can and should. Some key issues and values we consider important for the relationship between politics and conscience are:

Truth in Government

There are two types of kingship at the heart of the Christian analysis of politics and the Bible. In political kingship or government, truth may be treated as relative to power; but in scripture it is not – God intends those with earthly power to exercise their rule humbly, for the good of their subjects/constituents. If a government silences dissent and stifles debate, democratic health deteriorates and good policy and truth itself will sometimes be casualties. It is imperative that members of Parliament and their staff are committed to honesty in what they say. We need politicians who would never *want*, let alone tell, staff to hide information from them in order to evade responsibility or avoid embarrassment to their government.

We need staff in our politicians' offices who acknowledge their consciences in such matters and hopefully in time will also be, like their employers, accountable to at least some legislative norms of conduct.

Listening with respect and care to diverse voices

We need political leaders who are prepared to listen to the diverse voices in the Australian community, demonstrate respect for diverse opinions, show care for all the individuals and organizations who express these opinions, and aim to develop the very best-informed policy. Some agencies have been threatened with loss of funding or had funding withdrawn because the government has disapproved of their statements. Many non-government organisations want to inform debate on behalf of those for whose welfare they work, but feel that they will lose government funding if they criticise government. We need political leaders who do not discriminate for such reasons but are committed to negotiating calmly on political issues, drawing on wisdom from those at the coalface and on careful and diverse theological reflection.

Demonstrating the will to act collaboratively on critical complex issues

The nature of politics puts a premium on clearly defined, simply explained issues, demanding a 'yes or no' stand. Some issues are deliberately chosen to provide simple wedges. But complex issues that are critical for the future of the nation and the creation cannot be reduced to simple wedges; they may not be as attractive for use in political competition, and may not receive the high priority they warrant in debate and action. Intentionally divisive politics will not go away, but we need political leaders who would rather reconcile differences and lead the way towards effective action. We need a government who will determine the truly critical issues that should be addressed for the long term national and global good and achieve progress collaboratively, not adversarially.

Some potential areas of focus in the lead-up to the Federal election are:

Unfortunately, the capacity of many Australians to fully participate in our prosperous society is under threat. Currently the most significant amongst our disadvantaged or vulnerable citizens include:

- our Indigenous brothers and sisters;
- the unemployed or underemployed;
- children (including the 15% of Australian children living in poverty);
- those from culturally- and linguistically-diverse backgrounds;
- people with disabilities; and
- individuals and families on low incomes or social security payments.

The present-day dominance of an economically-driven political paradigm has directly contributed to Australia's citizens being increasingly seen as commodities – economic units to be exchanged within a 'marketplace' that inevitably leaves our disadvantaged brothers and sisters behind: financially, politically and socially.

A call to restore the balance

The prophets of the Bible's Old Testament and the Jesus stories of the New Testament stand as witness to the hundreds of generations worldwide who have called for justice and equity for **all** human beings.

We need political leaders who can heed the biblical cry to:

- speak out on behalf of the powerless, the structurally marginalised, and the voiceless within Australian society;
- set aside short-term, expedient, partisan or politically-motivated decision-making in favour of building a long-term foundation for a society based upon inclusion, equity of access and opportunity, maximum participation and justice and fairness for all who live in this prosperous nation;
- govern Australia in ways that restore the 'mutual' dimension within the 'obligation' between governments and their constituents – in contrast to a succession of heavy-handed,

commitments of all parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (especially in taking steps towards nuclear disarmament by the nuclear weapons states). Australia's role in this global survival strategy could include joining with the strongest advocates of the Blix Commission's strategies; continuing to sustain obligations of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty; opposing the introduction of nuclear power generation in Australia and ensuring rigorous scrutiny of the uses of uranium exports.

Question:

Will the political parties honour Australia's commitment to the UN Charter and seek resolution of conflicts without the use of force? Will they express a clear and strong commitment to the principle of the international rule of law and to the implementation of those treaties ratified by Australia? Will they, for example, honour their commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and refuse to supply uranium to any country that is not abiding by its provisions?

Poverty and Equity

The UN's *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1976) establishes every human being's 'right of self-determination' (Article 1). Pursuant to this right is the obligation for every nation to ensure equity of access to the following social benefits:

- health
- education
- adequate employment
- appropriate housing
- community participation

Maximising the potential for every Australian to fully participate in their communities has immediate economic benefits as well as long-term positive social and cultural implications for the whole nation, and would simultaneously place Australia as an international paragon of a truly 'civil society'.

Indigenous Rights

In June 2006, the UN Human Rights Council sent the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* to the United Nations General Assembly for final adoption. This final step was to have been the culmination of a process that had taken more than two decades.

The Declaration set out minimum standards "for the survival, dignity and wellbeing of the Indigenous peoples of the world", providing a basic framework for addressing these needs in a manner consistent with the history, experience and values of Indigenous peoples.

In the words of Matthew Coon Come, of the Grand Council of the Crees (Canada):

The Declaration "began as a cry from the Indigenous peoples for justice, and it is drafted to confirm that the international standards which apply to all people of the world apply to Indigenous peoples. Every paragraph of the declaration is based upon known instances of the violations of the human rights of Indigenous peoples".

Clearly, the Declaration has enormous significance for the Indigenous peoples of Australia. The Australian Government, however, voted with the majority in the General Assembly to defer adoption of the Declaration to allow 'further consultation'.

Amnesty International believes that the implications of the decision to defer the adoption of the Declaration are unclear, and is concerned that new negotiations may reduce the rights enshrined in the document. Throughout the process of writing the Declaration, our Government sought ways to limit the effect of the document.

As stated by Amnesty, Australia took the same stance as the United States and New Zealand:

In every case they wanted states to retain the option of deciding for themselves when and if they would respect the rights affirmed in the declaration. In effect,

they were pursuing a declaration that would do little more than confirm the present status quo in which the rights of Indigenous peoples are ignored at the whim of the state.

Even if the government merely supported the making of the Declaration, this would not be legally enforceable. The protection of Indigenous rights, such as rights to land, culture, religion and heritage, requires positive commitments from governments to promote and enforce such rights even when these may conflict with the interests of economic development. This will be the test of any government's resolve to support reconciliation.

Question:

Would the major parties (when in government) commit themselves to:

- working towards ensuring that the Declaration is adopted at the earliest opportunity in the United Nations?
- Australia adopting the Declaration?
- incorporating the terms of the declaration in Australian law at Federal and State level?

International Security, Peace and Justice

The first paragraph of the UN Charter commits member states to respect 'the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law'. Despite this, Australia joined with the US and UK in invading Iraq without the UN Security Council's authorisation. This rejection of international law has created a momentous dilemma for the world. What principles can the international community now use to limit the use of force? Kofi Annan proposed that the global summit held at the UN in New York in September 2005 recommend the adoption of five criteria by the Security Council which should be satisfied before use of force is authorised. The five criteria are:

- Whether the threatened aggression is sufficiently serious;
- Whether the primary purpose of the proposed military action is to avert a threat;
- Whether the proposed action is the last resort;
- Whether it is the minimum necessary; and
- Whether the proposed action is likely to have less destructive consequences than inaction.

However the US and a few other countries opposed this proposal and no decision was reached at the Summit in relation to principles for disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation or limiting the use of force.

Australia could adopt a more mature strategy for contributing to global security through reaffirmation of a rules-based international order. Among the principal requirements for ending the scourge of war is for international society to express preferences for peaceful coexistence rather than violence; for negotiation rather than confrontation; and for adherence to the rule of law rather than acquiescing to domination by the US. Clarifying the enormity of the costs of war would strengthen the motivation for diplomatic negotiation in addressing conflicts and advocating stronger treaties that adhere to treaty commitments. Just peacemaking involves working with those who are attempting to resolve problems fairly.

It is not terrorism, but the existence of nuclear weapons that continues to be the major threat to global survival. The authoritative report of the Blix Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction (June 2006) argues correctly that "so long as any state has such weapons – especially nuclear arms – others will want them. So long as such weapons remain in any arsenal, there is a high risk that they will one day be used, by design or accident. Any such use would be catastrophic."

The Commission proposes incremental steps towards outlawing nuclear weapons: beginning with taking all nuclear weapons off high-alert status; making deep reductions in numbers of nuclear weapons; prohibiting the production of fissile material; urging all nuclear states to make no-first-use pledges; bringing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty into force; and reviving the