

POST-FEDERAL ELECTION 2019: WHAT NOW?

This introductory issue of Just Now explores current social justice issues in post-election Australia. The Liberal National Party, Labor and the Greens all offer policies that can be improved to bring about a society geared toward achieving stronger social justice outcomes.

It is imperative that we ask whether the way we voted at the last election is in line with Catholic Social Teaching (CST). As Catholics, we can reflect on our participation and vote at the May 18 election and consider what actions need to be taken in order to bring about a more compassionate society.

Which values are reflected in our conversations addressing social justice issues? How can faith communities exert pressure on civil and political leaders to address key social justice concerns? The lens of the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching will always illuminate the direction and provide action goals that inform the advocacy of the Catholic Religious Australia Justice Committee as it looks to the future.

How can homelessness be prevented?

Mission Australia (2015) cites five key areas of reform for homelessness in Australia to be addressed effectively:

1. Income Support and rental assistance should be sufficient for people on low incomes [and pensions] to avoid rental stress.
2. Tenancy support services need to be expanded to support those at risk of homelessness.
3. Early intervention models need to be provided to young people experiencing family conflict.
4. Efforts to reduce domestic and family violence need to be improved. This includes education initiatives, perpetrator programs and policy reform.
5. Those exiting government care (i.e.: leaving hospitals, incarceration or detention centres) require help in establishing financial independence and finding accommodation.



WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?



Affordable Housing

Offshore Detention



Climate Change

Indigenous Rights



WHAT DOES CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING SAY?

Catholic Social Teaching is central to our practice as Catholics and deals with current issues which must be addressed in light of human wisdom and the teachings of the Gospels. The following key teachings shed light on ways key post-election issues can be addressed.

Human Dignity

CST is founded on the belief that human beings are created in God's image and therefore possess a fundamental dignity that stamps human existence as good regardless of gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality. This dignity finds expression in a set of inalienable rights and responsibilities that ought to be enshrined in every aspect of social policy.

Common Good and Participation in Civil Society

From the perspective of CST the good of each person is connected to the good of others. The common good is not the sum of individual goods, rather there are goods that are only experienced in common, as shared, or they are not experienced at all. The common good is not compatible with tolerating hunger, homelessness, unemployment or other injustices.

Citizens have a right to be engaged in the civil, political, economic and social life of the nation and governments have the duty to enable participation and to meet their needs in these spheres.

Ecological Responsibility

The natural and non-natural human world has inherent rights that must be respected. As the stewards of creation, it is crucial that humankind cares for the earth's resources by implementing practices that are moderate and sustainable. This care of the earth involves not only ensuring that there are resources for everyone but that ecological concerns remain at the forefront of social justice conversations.

KEY ACCELERATORS OF THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

Homelessness in Australia is caused by a very large number of factors and affects people from every corner of our society. Certain groups are particularly affected, such as women, young people, elderly Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as well as people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some of the key contributors are outlined below.

Domestic and Family Violence (DFV)

Family breakup and insufficient support for victims of domestic violence mean that many victims lack financial independence. Homelessness and family violence are intrinsically connected with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare finding that 36% of the demand for homelessness services was made up of women and children forced to leave their homes because of domestic violence.

Inadequate Old Age Pension

The number of Australians experiencing homelessness over the age of 55 is increasing rapidly with a 28% rise in 2016. Research undertaken by Anglicare found that only 1.62% of available rental stock is accessible to a single person on the age pension. This means that elderly Australians on the pension and renting privately are exposed to a very serious risk of homelessness.

Lack of Affordable Housing

Funding for Affordable Housing has steadily declined since 1996 and the average waiting time for a family sized public housing unit is 3 to 5 years. An unaffordable rental market means that only six per cent of public housing tenants leave each year. Addressing this issue requires a coordinated policy reform across the areas of both social housing and rental tenure.



WHAT CAN AUSTRALIANS DO TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE?

In his 2015 encyclical 'Laudato Si,' Pope Francis called for all Christians to come together to care for our earth. "Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years" he states. He highlights the contribution of consumerism, apathy and relentless exploitation to climate change as a human-induced phenomenon.

In much of the developed world, the devastating effects of climate change are largely yet to be seen. However, a rise in sea levels caused by climate change could displace millions of people in vulnerable regions within two generations. The resulting effects include increased natural disasters such as flooding, hurricanes, fires and heat waves.

For example, the UNHCR reports that in 2018, extreme weather events linked to climate change include severe drought in Afghanistan, flooding in the Philippines, and cyclones in Samoa.

While we may not always feel these effects, Australians have an obligation to call for action on behalf of our neighbours in the Pacific as well as many others across the globe. Climate change can be resolved, but only when we cease to deny that it exists and that the consequences it creates are only going to worsen over time. Faith communities have an important role to play in encouraging local and national political leaders to engage with realistic and pragmatic solutions and initiatives to combat climate change.



What can we do to ensure that Indigenous Australians are recognised in the Constitution?

The Constitution is the founding document of Australian law. It was created in a time when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not considered citizens or afforded basic rights. The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* calls for a 'First Nation's Voice' in the Constitution and the establishment of a Commission to supervise treaty making, and truth telling between Indigenous Australians and the Government. These goals are yet to be achieved.

Both Constitutional recognition and treaty can be achieved simultaneously. It is important that Indigenous groups are involved in the drafting of Constitutional recognition as the changes made must be done in a way that are not merely symbolic but elicit a real effect on Indigenous rights and sovereignty. The establishment of a Makarrata Commission, as proposed by the Statement from the Heart, would foster reconciliation and truth-telling about aspects of Australian history as well as promoting understanding between governments and Indigenous groups.

"What we're talking about with constitutional recognition is really the next and great part of truth telling in our Australian Constitution." - Linda Burney MP

OFFSHORE DETENTION; HOW AND WHY IT NEEDS TO END

Australia is currently the only State in the world that processes refugee claims by detaining refugees and asylum seekers indefinitely in offshore facilities. By doing this, the responsibility to manage the issue is delegated to less well-equipped countries (Papua New Guinea and Nauru). Despite opposition, the current immigration policy is centred on continuing offshore detention managed by a private contractor. There are no plans to resettle children in Australia. The prime minister's claim that there is no detention centre on Manus Island is manifestly untrue.

Detention Centres are grossly inadequate with increasing reports of abuse, ill health and squalid conditions. A Doctors Without Borders report issued in December 2018 described the state of mental health in Offshore Detention centres as the worst of any camp in the world, with 124 out of 208 people treated being suicidal. UNHCR noted that Australia continues to fail to meet its obligations to provide basic assistance such as the provision of vital trauma and torture counselling services.

What other options are there?

1. Working with our neighbours to find practical solutions

Australia can use our diplomacy and aid to address the causes of displacement as well as engaging with other States to find solutions to the current refugee crisis. Engaging with countries such as New Zealand and Canada to resettle asylum seekers and refugees, rather than continuing to neglect them in Offshore Detention Centres provides a humanitarian and effective solution to long-term incarceration.

2. Treating people seeking asylum with dignity

Australia is a party to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention, which states unequivocally that everyone has a right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. Australia is in breach of this agreement. People seeking asylum must be treated with dignity and in accordance with basic human rights principles. This includes equal treatment of claims regardless of how people came to Australia. It also demands access to basic necessities, legal advice and support services.

3. Ending Offshore Processing

The policy of mandatory indefinite detention must be retired with limits set for the amount of time for a claim to be processed and a person resettled. Detention should occur only as a last resort, with an absolute ban on children in detention. This is not a responsibility that can be delegated to a less-equipped country and can be dealt with effectively and humanely by the Australian Government.

Pope John XXIII stated that a well-ordered human society "demands that each contribute generously to the establishment of a civic order in which rights and duties are more sincerely and effectively acknowledged and fulfilled." – Pacem in Terris

WHERE TO FROM HERE?



Write to, visit or telephone your local MP about why the policies on climate change, offshore detention and affordable housing need to be addressed urgently. Share your views about how these policies can change.



Stay connected and informed. Follow current affairs, stay up to date on social justice issues and think critically.



Don't lose interest just because the election is over! Think about how you voted and what you can do to encourage policy reform on social justice issues that matter to you most.



Encourage others in your local community to insist on the urgency of a referendum on the recognition of Indigenous Australian history and identity in the Constitution.



Remember those affected by adverse climate change conditions, homelessness and offshore detention in our daily prayer.