



A briefing paper

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Participate by...

✓ Letter writing ✓ Prayer and Worship ✓ Public Meetings and conversations

Creator God, who sees all things, we pray for our Nation at this time. We celebrate with you, your creation Australia, the beauty and ruggedness of its landscape, the giftedness and diversity of its people. Guide us, as we consider the leadership of this country. Make us wise in the questions that we ask, and vigilant in our listening to the answers. Teach us to be courageous and just, as we seek to live as followers of Christ in this place. Amen.

Purpose of this document

Taking part in the democratic process is an expression of our faith as Christians and citizens of this country. This document shares information about social policy issues that the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has identified as important for the next election. It is offered as a resource to inform congregations, groups and individuals in their thought, prayer and action.

It has been prepared in consultation with Synod and Assembly agencies in an attempt to reflect the diversity of issues in which the UCA is involved. It reflects work already undertaken by the Church in its research, life and mission.

This document is non-party political. It seeks to raise issues needing to be addressed in the election and invites conversation about the future of Australia. It is important for us to communicate our core Christian values with all politicians. We believe these Christian values are relevant to social and economic issues we face as a nation.

A theology towards action

The UCA offers comment on social issues as part of our involvement and commitment to the community. As we proclaim the Christian message in the political arena, we proclaim a vision of God's world - a world of compassion and justice founded on being a common humanity, loved by God.

Jesus preached about the love and deep commitment we are to have for each other that God expects from us. Jesus explained that acting to serve those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and imprisoned, is an action of love and respect for God (Matt. 25: 33-36). Jesus' greatest commandment to us was to love God and to love our neighbour (Matt. 22: 37-39). These verses allow us to see how strongly Jesus was committed to all of humanity in his proclamation of redemption and forgiveness, and also in his expectation of our compassionate response to our neighbour and the world.

In James 1:26-27 we are invited to put our words into practice and care for those who are orphaned and widowed. In today's context we understand these words to mean that the grace of our compassion must extend to those who are marginalised and dispossessed in our community.

We are each called to be messengers in this world. Personal transformation is essential in this process. Only with the energy and guidance of the Holy Spirit can we truly work as Christians in the world. The message of God is real in the world as well as in our hearts. The call to justice and righteousness is a fundamental message of the Bible, from Amos' declaration of the transformed community (Amos 5:24), to the requirements in Micah, to do justice, love constantly and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

Sharing our Vision for Australia

At Union in 1977, in the Church's statement to the Nation, we proclaimed our commitment to a continuing engagement in social and national affairs. Specifically the UCA committed itself to the integrity of every human being, the correction of injustices such as economic disadvantage, discrimination, poverty, racism, and the protection of the environment.

In the Bicentennial of European Settlement (1988), and at our twentieth anniversary (1997) the Church recommitted itself to such ideals with statements affirming the commitment to justice and peace, honesty and integrity, tolerance and compassion and the creation of a loving and caring community.

In this paper we as a church recommit ourselves to envisioning a just future for our community, which truly reflects the grace, compassion and abundance of the Living God. We ask that you use this document to assist you to watch, pray and participate in the community in which you are called to live.

The UCA has a vision of an Australia that upholds the rights of all Australians. We seek creative, caring and fiscally responsible leadership recognising the needs of all people and appropriately addressing issues of poverty and community care. We seek respectful political leadership which values indigenous people, migrants, and refugees, and upholds the value of creation. We wish to see a fair and equitable Australia, with leaders who have the courage to embrace these values.

This document has been prepared through the collaborative work of Synods and Assembly Agencies and reflects current work being undertaken by the Uniting Church in Australia. It is distributed with the authorisation of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia as a resource to members of the UCA and its associated communities in preparation for the 2001 Federal Election.

A Statement from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)¹

The UAICC believe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should have special rights and benefits as an identified group of people in the Australian community and expresses its concern at political parties and leaders who contradict these rights.

The UAICC believes in equality, and the equity principle that anyone who suffers disadvantage should be given special assistance based on the need or degree of disadvantage they experience. This is why we have special groups in our society receiving special benefits – groups like elderly pensioners, people who have a disability, war veterans, people who are unemployed, sole parents and so on. Farmers receive special benefits such as diesel fuel and taxation subsidies because of their special needs and disadvantage.

In the same way Indigenous people, who probably suffer the greatest level of disadvantage in our community, deserve special benefits designed to address their particular needs. Some of those needs, such as regaining of land, cultural recognition, and overcoming the legacy of colonialism and dispossession, are specific to Aboriginal and Islander people. Provision of such social and economic support is affirming and promotes equity in our society.

Issues and Concerns

This election should address the following issues:

Commitment to Reconciliation and Treaty

It is the deep desire of the UCA that the next leader of Australia should offer an apology, without prejudice, for the pain and sorrow of the stolen generations. The UCA has expressed such an apology nationally and in every synod.

Policy we seek:

Relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia have been scarred by two hundred years of injustice and cultural misunderstanding. Disadvantage and powerlessness in Indigenous communities are built on the mistakes of the past. One of the foundational mistakes in our nation's history has been the failure to recognise the humanity and laws of Indigenous peoples in Australia. It is this failure which prevents us from moving forward as a Nation, thus requiring a treaty. After ten years of promoting and encouraging the process of reconciliation the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has suggested a treaty process is the next step in true reconciliation. This process would look at issues such as the status in the constitution of the Indigenous peoples of Australia as the original custodians of the land and constitutional protection of Indigenous peoples' rights, including land and sea rights, and cultural rights. The UCA at the Ninth Assembly affirmed a treaty was paramount for reconciliation to go beyond mere cross-cultural understanding and symbolic statements.

Issues we face:

Restitution is a right for the stolen generations. Protection of native title rights in line with the *Racial Discrimination Act* and the repealing of mandatory sentencing laws, are also part of the church's call on our next government to acknowledge past and current injustice and create a national framework for real reconciliation.

Commitment to regional, rural and remote Australia

Policy we seek:

The UCA is aware of entrenched and acute social disadvantage in many regional, rural and remote communities where economic reforms and associated structural economic changes have contributed to disadvantages such as low incomes, poor health, poorer education and higher unemployment.

Reversing this locational disadvantage requires:

- governments proactively assisting the survival of rural Australia by ensuring basic services are provided and people are encouraged to live in these areas;
- ensuring provision of appropriate and adequate infrastructure such as schools, hospitals and medical services, communication networks, and subsidies for basic service delivery; and
- deliberate policies to enhance regional development and resources to assist this development.

¹ The UAICC is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agency of the Uniting Church in Australia. This is an autonomous and independent agency.

Issues we face:

While the UCA has attempted to maintain its commitment and its services to people in the isolated regions of the continent our ministry there makes us very aware of the ongoing challenges. Innovative policy is needed in the critical areas of tax and welfare systems, employment services and programs, indigenous affairs, education, industry policy, research and development, and telecommunications and physical infrastructure. Good policy must be converted into effective programs by investing sufficient resources and ensuring program design takes the specific characteristics of rural, regional and remote areas into account. There needs to be recognition that service delivery to rural and remote Australia is a cost to be born by the all Australians.

Vision for refugees and a multicultural society

Policy we seek:

Australia's bipartisan policy of multiculturalism has affirmed our nation's commitment to diversity. It confronts entrenched racism and works to ensure the contribution of all ethnic communities. It values and celebrates the many religious and cultural traditions within the life of Australia. For this to continue we seek policies which ensure:

1. humane and just treatment of refugees and asylum seekers;
2. affirmation of cultural diversity in community life; and
3. a comprehensive community education program aimed at counteracting xenophobia and nurturing respect for ethnic diversity.

We are seeking a government who will end mandatory detention of asylum seekers and refugees. Our next government should initiate compassionate and humanitarian community based alternatives to detention for the Australian context.

Issues we face:

For Australia to embrace inclusiveness we must address heightening trends of xenophobia; find creative options to mandatory detention of asylum seekers; be proactive in provision of anti-racism programs; and find ways to honour cultural diversity and religious traditions.

Vision for a fair and equitable community – that values all people

Commitment to employment

Policy we seek:

The UCA envisages a strategy enabling all levels of government, business, unions, workers, churches and community to work co-operatively to reduce unemployment in an ethical and just way. This national strategy should include a political commitment to the vision of full employment, within a framework set by human rights obligations. Employment, as well as periods of unemployment, must be supported within a policy framework of creating a fair, cohesive and caring society.

Issues we face:

The changing nature of work means increasing numbers of people in employment are in casual and part-time employment without any of the benefits associated with stable, full employment, such as sick leave, parental leave and superannuation. Such a system is geared towards employers rather than job seekers. Many individuals and families live below the poverty line making access to opportunities for training and work entry difficult. Entrenched unemployment impacts on all society as well as the individual. Long term unemployment rates have remained static; we require business, community and government working cooperatively to find creative solutions.

Commitment to addressing structural causes of disadvantage and poverty

Policies we seek:

The UCA seeks policies recognising and addressing the structural causes of disadvantage and poverty in Australian society which have expanded to include many working people and families, known as the working poor. Addressing structural inequalities must be the first step in redressing poverty and disadvantage. Policies need to recognise structural problems and that the individual is not to blame for entrenched disadvantage.

Issues we face:

We are concerned primarily with the growing rift between the rich and the poor and economic management maintaining the structure that leads to disadvantage and poverty. We are concerned reform has focused on constricting access to support, crucial in enabling people to move beyond poverty.

Commitment to equitable welfare reform

Policies we seek:

Policies in this area must recognise the intrinsic value of all people. Policies reflecting this value will consider the human dignity of people ahead of our economic systems; allowing all to participate fully in society. All people must have the right to adequate and secure income and to opportunities to enhance their life chances. The welfare support system should be underpinned by values of justice, compassion, and understanding, and be adequately resourced to fulfil the government's human rights obligations. Policies must target opportunities for children to overcome social, health and educational disadvantage.

Issues we face:

The reform of the welfare system must not be based on value judgements attaching blame to the individual rather than to the structural causes. This is reflected in 'mutual obligation' schemes which do not impose obligations on government or business, but only on the individual in need. Australia does not spend heavily on welfare and social security transfers, in comparison to similar funding allocations in Northern Europe during the 1990's.

Commitment to community service delivery

Policies we seek:

Government must ensure that community services reach everyone. This means making a commitment to the community service sector through policy, financial support and community consultation. It is important to address both the current problems in community service delivery and to expand this system to include the needs of all Australians.

Issues we face:

The primary issue is the recent reduction in the range of services and government funding for community services. Elderly Australians, and those with special needs such as people with disabilities require appropriate and tailored residential care. Reforms in aged care have decreased the amount of funding available including funds for staffing and for maintaining the building stock. Government needs to further develop its policies to appropriately address homelessness, childcare and family support, youth suicide and illicit drugs. Policies must enhance early intervention so reduce negative health, educational, and social outcomes arising from disadvantage.

Commitment to Taxation Reform

Policy we seek:

Taxation should provide the means to create a just and equitable society. Taxation should be broadly based across all forms of income and wealth. Tax relief should benefit low and middle income earners, particularly during times of surplus.

Issues we must face:

The UCA has been a strong advocate for fair and equitable reform as stated in the position paper, *Taxation Reform for a Fair and Equitable Society* (1998). The GST can place unreasonable demands on disadvantaged persons, small business, the church and charitable sector. The church and charitable sector should be excluded from the GST process. The high cost of compliance is reducing the capacity of the agencies to provide services. Inclusion brings no financial gain to government but imposes a huge costly burden on charities. We remain concerned about GST on books, literature and other core items, such as health and educational services. If a roll back on GST were to occur these fundamental items should be addressed.

Our natural environment

Policy we seek:

We seek government policies which recognise the need to care and respect for all God's creation. The UCA is committed to the development of environmentally benign, renewable energy sources, and practices that protect and manage our natural resources. We recognise the need for individuals, churches, industry and government to work together for a sustainable future.

We seek strong and practical policies reflecting the values of good stewardship of creation, reflected both in proactive participation in international agreements and forums eg. Kyoto protocol; and local innovative environmental initiatives.

Issues we face:

The UCA has been a strong advocate for sound environmental policy. Among the approved policies are the 1988

Statement to the Nation, the *Rights of Nature and Future Generations* made in 1991, policy on Nuclear Fuel Cycle, Mining, Rural and Remote Australian Sustainability and commitments to eco-theology. Australia is confronted by a number of critical issues including: logging and management of native forest, commitment to natural heritage trust, use of nuclear fuels, commitment to sustainable and renewable energy sources, and import of foodstuffs.

International citizenship

Policy we seek:

The federal government as an international citizen must be committed to the international human rights treaties Australia has ratified, and to fulfilling their reporting requirements. These provide the minimum standards of government responsibility towards its citizens in fundamental matters such as the rights to peaceful assembly, freedom of speech, trade unions, legal justice, rights of Indigenous peoples, and protection of asylum seekers. They also provide protection for children and protect people against discrimination. We seek an ongoing commitment to the funding and role of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and a commitment from governments to be accountable to our human rights requirements in all government portfolios. This would include active and creative leadership in other international forums eg. APEC, CHOGM.

Issues we face:

Any federal government must accept its responsibility to act on behalf of the people, providing appropriate and accessible services, and not give up these responsibilities through privatisation, deregulation or international regulation limiting the role of governments for the sake of free trade. The federal government, not state governments, is accountable in international law for Australia's human rights record and it should therefore use its powers where necessary to override state and territory laws failing to fulfil human rights obligations, for example, mandatory sentencing laws.

Vision of Foreign Affairs and Trade

The UCA fully supports international trade but believes such trade takes place within the context of social, political and economic environments. Therefore international trade should not simply be a matter of what a free market will sustain. We believe healthy trade takes account of significant regional, cultural and social diversity. International trade should not be a matter of unbridged 'free trade', enabling exploitation of people who are poor and marginalised through low wages, poor conditions or environmental irresponsibility. Socially just international trade takes account of political oppression, sustainable environmental issues and labour conditions. Good international trade takes seriously the notion of 'fair treatment' for all, especially those in underdeveloped nations.

We seek from our next government policies to add to the dignity of humanity through positive participation in international trade bodies, regional trade organisations and strong bilateral relationships. The government should work to ensure that the World Trade Organisation takes into account human rights, labour standards, environmental and quarantine issues.

Issues we must face:

Timor Gap

There is a concern that during talks between the United Nations, Timor and Australia that Australia may accept a greater share of royalties from the oil and gas reserves. We believe the next government should renegotiate the seabed boundary between East Timor and Australia to the half way line which is normative in international law.

Indonesia

The relationship between Australia and Indonesia is strained; we believe it is in both nations' interest to give high priority to normalisation of relations. Australia must clearly indicate its willingness to rebuilding our friendship with our closest neighbour.

Foreign Aid

Australia's contribution to international development aid has fallen to an abysmal 0.25% of GDP. Foreign aid helps real need in our world, shows our intention to be good international neighbours, creates stability and sows the seed for future prosperity. We call on our next government to commit to the UN aim of 0.7% of GDP to foreign aid, laying out clear and realistic targets of incremental increase over the next five years. Australia is a wealthy country and it behoves us to be generous and caring neighbours through our foreign aid budget.

Commitment to equitable education for all

The policy we seek will address three issues: access and proximity, private sponsorship and public accountability, and funding.

Access and proximity: increasingly, federal governments have shifted the funding provision for education from institutions to students. In particular, this policy shift raises issues about equity and disadvantage for example, in access to additional funding for rural, remote, indigenous, migrant and disabled students.

- What additional funding is proposed to enable these students to receive their education as close as possible to their homes?

Private sponsorship and public accountability raises questions about who delivers education. Educational institutions, the corporate sector and various governments have moved towards the development of privately sponsored education facilities and services. To maintain a just and equitable society, we believe such arrangements must be open to public scrutiny and be held accountable to the Australian public, irrespective of the status of the education service provider.

- What can sponsorship offer education that is good for both Australian society and Australian students, and how are these benefits to be held accountable to the Australian public?

Funding: the federal government provides funds for each student's education, in all sectors, at all levels through the States Grants Act, passed annually. State governments provide funds for infrastructure, special programs, curriculum development and so on. With this knowledge, it is important that federal policies:

- ensure realistic funds to secure top quality, flexible education for all Australian students, irrespective of the educational institution in which the student is enrolled; and
- ensure equity and justice in the distribution of funds, to secure the best possible educational outcome for Australian society and Australian students

A chance for each of us to act

Identifying local issues of concern

While this paper identifies a range of Federal issues we are aware that often there are important local issues to be raised with federal candidates. As this is a national response we were unable to address all concerns, however it is important they are part of the conversation in the lead up to the election. Sometimes broader topics will address this, for example, while we have not specifically identified deregulation of the milk industry we have identified policy impacting on rural and regional Australia as a key election issue. We hope that as local communities use this document, local examples will be provided to candidates. The Assembly and Synods are able to provide further resources for conversation upon request.

Participate in pre-election discussions by

Letter writing (sample letters can be found on the Victorian synod website <http://vic.uca.org.au/>)

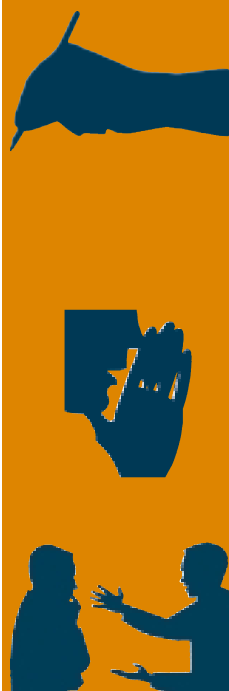
- Write a letter to your current local member expressing your opinion of their performance over the last term. Affirm what you have valued, raise issues you would like addressed in future, seek clarity about their position on these issues.
- Write to other local candidates in your area indicating both local and national issues you would like to see addressed by the government and community.
- Write to the leaders of all major parties expressing your desire and values for the future of Australia.

Prayer and worship

Pray for the leadership of Australia, for those who make decisions, for those who are affected by those decisions and for our nation. An excellent resource for prayer on social justice issues is on the NSW Synod Website <http://nsw.uca.org.au/bsr/papers/praying.html>. You may also like to focus on issues in Sunday worship as we prepare for the election. Theological reflection on social issues will help contribute to this conversation.

Public meetings and conversations

- As a congregation, arrange a local forum for candidates in your area to talk about issues concerning your community. It is wise to provide clear parameters for such a meeting. This could be a meeting for members of the Church, or wider community.
- Write an article for your local paper about the things you are looking for in political leadership and the issues you think need to be addressed.
- Contact your local media on relevant issues;
- Write letters to the editor of local, regional and national papers.



Where to find more information

General information about UCA policy and research can be found on the website at <http://uca.org.au>, or by contacting the Assembly office, or your local synod office.

Reconciliation

Covenanting and Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress Website links at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/agencies/>

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation <http://www.reconciliation.org.au/>

Rural Remote Australia

Resolutions of the 9th Assembly on Rural and Remote concerns and policy;

Frontier Services Webpage <http://assembly.uca.org.au/agencies/>

House of Reps Standing Committee on Primary Industries and Regional Services, 2000.

"Time Running Out: Shaping Regional Australia's Future – report of the Inquiry into Infrastructure and the Development of Australia's Regional Areas";

Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, "Country Australia – Influences on Employment and Population Growth". January 2001;

Productivity Commission, Impact of Competition Policy Reforms on Rural and Regional Australia, Draft report, May 1999;

Senate Employment, Workplace relations, Small Business and Education references Committee, "Jobs for the Regions: a Report on the inquiry into Regional Employment and Unemployment", September 1999;

Multiculturalism

See material on the Assembly webpage <http://assembly.uca.org.au/nsrj/>. Material is also available from most community health centres, libraries and Ethnic Communities Councils.

See also resource "Welcoming the Stranger who is Different" from synods and Assembly.

Environment

UCA environmental commitments can be found on the Social Justice website <http://assembly.uca.org.au/nsrj/>

Good material is also available on the federal government website at <http://www.environment.gov.au/>

You may also like to look at the material on the Earth Charter website <http://eca.anu.edu.au/>

Foreign Affairs and Trade

On overseas aid from www.forceten.org.au and www.acfoa.asn.au.

On East Timor from <http://www.pcug.org.au/~wildwood> or Action in Solidarity with Indonesia and East Timor (ASJET) at asiet@asiet.org.au.

More information from La'o Hamutuk: East Timor Institute for Reconstruction and Monitoring Analysis <http://www.etan.org/lh>

Education

For more information see Uniting Education at www.unitinged.org.au.

Other resources are also available at <http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/education/>, <http://www.auseducation.com.au/> and <http://www.peo.gov.au>.

Uniting Care

For information on welfare and community service issues, contact the following websites: www.unitingcare.org.au which has links to all the Synod Uniting Care sites;

The Australian Council of Social Service at www.acoss.org.au with links to the state and territory COSS websites.

Queensland Synod Tax Reform Forum website <http://taxforum.ucaQld.com.au>.



Uniting Church National Assembly

PO Box A2266, Sydney South NSW 1235

t: (02) 8267 4204 f: (02) 8267 4222 w: <http://nat.uca.org.au>