



# Election Issues New South Wales 1999

*This submission was adopted by  
UnitingCare NSW.ACT, Uniting Church in Australia,  
at its meeting on 14 April 1999 and forwarded to the Prime Minister.*

NSW.ACT

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## Preamble

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As Christian people, we are called to seek the common good. Our Christian faith drives us to consider public issues. We look out for other people's interests as well as our own. The Uniting church in Australia has expressed this in its various statements and resolutions about social justice. The church assesses public policy against the requirements of internationally recognised human rights. The common good requires that these human rights be taken into account in all policy formation. While expressed as human rights, they involve responsibilities for governments and those who elect them. Any political party putting itself forward at the next election (March 27, 1999) should clearly indicate its social objectives and show how it will monitor progress.

*This document seeks to inform you of some of the social policy issues that Board for Social Responsibility sees as important for the next election. It is offered as a resource to inform your own thinking, praying and action around election time.*

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## Responding to people's needs

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### Children

Children are among the most vulnerable members of our community. Often their voice is not heard when government decisions are made. There should be an independent Children's

Commission with statutory authority. It should have a wide brief including monitoring compliance with the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, monitoring the impact of legislation on children's lives, protecting the rights of children and providing policy advice to government.

Research evidence suggests that home visiting services and respite care services are among the most effective ways to support families, to prevent child abuse and promote health family life. These services should be provided to disadvantaged families with children aged 5 and under as a first priority. The Department of Community Services (DOCS) must work in partnership with other Government departments and agencies to provide an effective welfare service within a wider web of services in NSW. DOCS must be adequately funded to fulfil its statutory responsibilities to protect children and investigate allegations of child abuse. Additional funding should be made available to support and strengthen disadvantaged and vulnerable families.

### **Young people**

Youth is a difficult time in life: high suicide rates, high unemployment, punitive legislation and inadequate services. The Parental Responsibility Act, which gives police the power to remove juveniles from public places, should be repealed. Young people need more youth workers and out of school hours support services, alternative, safe meeting places and effective programs to deal with youth unemployment. There should be early intervention through family support services that strengthen families, rather than punishing families for making mistakes.

Many vulnerable young people are unable to be maintained in mainstream schools because of emotional, behavioural, and learning difficulties. They require alternative educational settings staffed by appropriately qualified and experienced teachers to address their difficulties. Existing alternative services need to be extended to meet the needs of these young people if equality of educational opportunity is to be realised. The Government cannot continue to rely on non-government services to continue to fund many of these services. Public education needs to provide and maintain the full range of mainstream, special and alternative educational settings. Existing alternative educational services need to be extended.

### **Aged people**

NSW should, like other states, use a flexible approach to funding alternatives to hospital for older people and work more closely with community services to explore and develop alternatives such as early discharge support programs and crisis care programs to prevent admissions to hospital. Coordination of services and funding flexibility have cost benefits at both state and commonwealth levels as well as providing more appropriate and less traumatic care for older people.

The Healthy Ageing Framework released in 1998 should be implemented effectively. Government departments should be held accountable for clearly identified outcomes. There need to be strategies that ensure that services funded by the Home and Community Care Program are equitably distributed between the three target groups of frail older people, younger people with disabilities and their carers. There needs to be a planning and funding policy that takes a holistic approach and can accommodate ongoing and changing needs over a lifetime. The NSW government needs to actively practice and promote 'cost sharing' (in contrast to cost shifting) between various levels of government. The outcomes would provide older people with more access to a full range of services without 'falling through the gaps'.

### **People with disabilities**

There needs to be an injection of funds to enable the establishment of a range of alternative accommodation and support options for people currently living in licensed boarding houses. The government should cooperate with community organisations in the provision of housing and provide recurrent support funding. Funding of support services announced in 1998 for people in boarding houses should be maintained.

The human rights of people with disabilities should be recognised and facilitated. This requires funding toward programs and services that enable people with disabilities to achieve independence and live the lifestyles of their choice. More funds need to be directed into support and accommodation options that provide the opportunity for people with disabilities to enjoy lifestyles similar to other people in Australia, and to achieve whatever level of independence they aspire to.

### **People with mental illness**

Community mental health services are still under-funded. Funding of community based mental health services should be increased to levels equal to best practice in other states. Local mental health centres need to be adequately staffed to allow case managers time to work with the spouse and children of the mentally ill consumer also. There needs to be a greater emphasis placed on housing those who have a mental illness, through public housing and supported accommodation. There is a need for better accountability for mental health. This requires clearer reporting of mental health spending, and the proportions of funding that go to institutional and community mental health services.

### **Rural people**

Public policy must take seriously the human rights of people in rural communities and the views of rural people in developing the policies that affect them. It must ensure adequate services and support in rural areas for those people whose human rights are most at risk: Aborigines, homeless young people, young people in the juvenile justice system and people with mental illness. It must provide adequate access to doctors, hospitals and other health services. It must guarantee adequate, affordable and accessible public and human services, which have the effect of reducing the growth in poverty and inequality as rural market incomes fail to keep pace with the cost of living. There must be public and community housing options for older people and people on low incomes. There must be action to reduce unemployment, e.g. regional development strategies.

### **Aborigines**

The problems of inadequate services for rural Aboriginal communities, which were exposed in the *Toomelah Report* (1988) still continue. The state government must take initiatives to solve the administrative problems and ensure that Aboriginal communities have the services and utilities that other citizens of NSW take for granted. There must be more adequate implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, with focus on effective outcomes for Aboriginal people. There must be community-based programs for dealing with juvenile offenders, with prison used only as a last resort for both juvenile and adult offenders. Government has a responsibility to provide effective action to improve health of Aboriginal people, including action to reduce infant mortality. There must be positive action for national reconciliation.

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## **Providing adequate services**

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### **Housing**

All citizens should have access to housing that is both secure and affordable. Public and community housing is important in ensuring this. At present, there are 100,000 households on the Department of Housing waiting list. There should be a commitment not to reduce public housing in NSW. Residential tenancy legislation in New South Wales requires reform. Tenants face the real possibility of retaliation if they seek to enforce their rights. Governments should legislate for eviction only for just-cause. The law must address the many problems that arise in share housing. It should also reflect the changes in community attitudes to domestic violence that are now enshrined in other legislation. "Bad tenant" listing agencies should be regulated so that their operations are both transparent and accountable. Residents of boarding houses should be given tenancy rights similar to other tenants.

For some people, boarding houses are their preferred form of housing and they could not cope with other forms of housing. Government should ensure that boarding houses meet adequate standards of repair and facilities. Government should provide adequate low income

housing in accessible locations so that people in boarding houses who would prefer other forms of housing do not have to remain. Extra resources should be provided for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program for better provision of people to move from refuges to permanent accommodation.

### **Law and Order**

Issues of policing and criminal justice should not be used for political ends. Politically or racially motivated hysteria in these matters undermines human rights of all citizens and is counterproductive. Sound policies in these areas are based on the overall incidence and seriousness of various types of crime, not on individual incidents. Policies in these areas need to be balanced with social policy that reduces the inequality and disadvantage that is often the underlying cause of crime. The State should make more adequate provision for legal aid in criminal matters. State legal aid should be proportional to the police and criminal justice budgets.

### **Privatisation**

Privatisation of utilities (i.e. universally required services such as water and electricity) should only be undertaken where the proposed plan of privatisation meets the following conditions: if there will be an improvement in productive efficiency that is not outweighed by increased environmental and social costs; if quality, reliability and universal access to the privatised services are guaranteed by adequate legislation and contracting procedures; and if the proceeds of sales will be used for new capital expenditure to provide essential physical, social and service infrastructure so that this generation passes on to the next generation the full value of those assets that it received from the past.

### **Transport**

Public transport priorities should be developed in consultation with those who use it and those who need it. Private bus operators should be required to meet specific standards of service (performance benchmarks) before their contracts are renewed. Pre-feasibility studies on a number of new fixed rail public transport routes, particularly in Western Sydney, which is massively public transport deprived, need to be commenced. There must be a public mechanism for monitoring progress by Government in meeting air-quality targets related to the reduction of vehicle-kilometres in private cars.

### **Environment**

Regional Forest Agreements should be consistent with the scientifically determined benchmarks. There need to be effective mechanisms for reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, including road transport and electricity generation emissions. Policy must be responsive to the NSW Environmental Protection Authority's *State of the Environment Report 1997*, especially with regard to integration of social, economic and environmental decision-making, and the issues of consumption, energy production and use, waste generation and disposal, urban environmental issues, and reduction in private road transport.

### **Gambling Policy**

Decisions on gambling should not be made in an *ad hoc* way. The State should have a gambling policy framework and should make provision for dealing with the overall social impact of gambling. The State should provide adequate resources to organisations to provide counselling and help for individuals who are addicted to gambling. There should be no increase in the overall number of poker machines.

### **Access to accurate information**

Government websites which are incomplete and out of date are misleading and obstructive. There should be a legislated requirement that *all* government information made available to the public should be made available on the relevant websites at the same time as they are made available in print or in media releases.

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## **Social justice and human rights**

Future governments should replace the Social Justice Reference Group with a Social Justice Council with statutory authority and adequate funding to set social justice benchmarks, monitor the performance of all government departments, make recommendations as to how departments can overcome shortfalls in social justice performance, and take initiatives to ensure a whole of government response in meeting benchmarks.

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