



Catholic Social Justice Commission
Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn

CANDIDATES SURVEY FOR ACT ELECTION 2016

A VOTE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

This survey aims to inform readers about some issues that will be decided in the Australian Capital Territory's election on 15 October 2016.

As Christians, we need to be active and informed participants in our society. The Catholic Church does not tell us how to vote and does not endorse any political party, but it does ask us to consider our vote in the light of candidates' and parties' attitudes to issues of social justice.

CONSIDER THESE PRIORITIES

On matters of public policy, the fundamental principle of the Catholic Social Justice Commission (CSJC) is that government decisions should be guided by a 'preferential option for the poor'. Applying this principle is rarely straightforward, and CSJC members lay no claim to special expertise on the wide spectrum of issues that confront public authorities.

In the context of the ACT election, however, the CSJC has identified a number of concerns that it sees as central to the well-being of the most disadvantaged members of the ACT community. In doing so, the CSJC is not seeking to direct Catholic voters. It simply wishes to inform the decisions electors will make. The Church does not tell Catholics how to vote.

The CSJC's survey to candidates consists of a brief statement of the issues followed by a series of questions seeking candidates' views on how the incoming government might address them. The full survey is posted on the CSJC website along with the responses received.

The CSJC has identified these nine areas as needing special attention over the life of the next government:

- Housing
- Mental health
- The right to life
- The justice system
- Education
- Gambling
- Climate change
- Empowering Indigenous communities
- Equity in the economy.

This survey is framed around these headings.

Housing. Renters, home-buyers and people seeking emergency shelter face increasing pressures.

- Low-income families and individuals are particularly affected.
- Rents in the ACT are among the highest in Australia.
- Emergency accommodation and public housing are in short supply.

Questions for candidates

1. *What role do you think that the ACT Government can play in this area?*
2. *Is accelerating the rate of construction or acquisition of public housing a viable and appropriate part of the solution?*
3. *If so, what level of commitment will you give in this area?*
4. *What other measures are you prepared to take?*
5. *What incentives are being provided by the ACT Government to encourage the private sector to invest in new developments of social housing in partnership with the ACT government?*

Mental health. The incidence and prevalence of people in our community who have a mental illness is high.

- Mental illness has serious consequences for people experiencing it, their families, those around them, and the community as a whole.
- Governments have become more responsive in recent years.
- It is vital that adequate services for mental health be available at the Alexander Maconochie Centre (the ACT prison).
- The CSJC welcomes the improved facilities for the treatment of people with a mental illness at The Canberra Hospital.

Questions for candidates

1. *What steps do you think that the incoming government can take to improve mental health services for people experiencing mental illness?*
2. *How might the community become more engaged in issues of mental health?*
3. *Do you support the allocation of extra resources to ensure that prisoners of the Alexander Maconochie Centre receive the mental health services they need and that, as far as possible, the prison environment protects mental health?*
4. *What strategies are in place to meet the growing demand from members of the community with mental health issues who are not eligible for the NDIS?*

The right to life. The Catholic Church's position on the right to life is unequivocal.

- Human life is sacred from conception to natural death.
- The Church opposes abortion and human cloning.
- We believe women who face an unintended pregnancy should be offered support for their wellbeing and options besides termination of pregnancy.
- The Church also opposes euthanasia while recognising the right of a terminally ill person to refuse medical intervention when the treatment is futile or overly burdensome compared to the likely benefits.
- Governments have a grave moral responsibility to ensure that their laws and practices protect and promote human life at all times.

Questions for candidates

1. *Do you consider that the ACT's current laws on abortion and human cloning adequately protect human life?*
2. *If not, how would you like to see them changed?*
3. *How would you protect children in utero when their mother is assaulted?*
4. *Do you think that existing services give sufficient support to women who have an unexpected pregnancy, especially under difficult circumstances?*
5. *Do you support existing legislation to prevent euthanasia and, if not, what changes would you like to see?*
6. *What do you propose to improve palliative care services?*

The justice system. Rehabilitation of offenders and meeting the needs of crime victims are vital.

- The reintegration of offenders into the social and economic life of the community should be a central aim.
- So also should be a generous response to the needs of crime victims.
- Restorative justice may help to achieve such outcomes in many instances.
- ACT has the highest percentage of repeat offenders of any state or territory (ABS 4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia, 2015).
- ACT has an Indigenous imprisonment rate more than 9 times the non-Indigenous rate (ABS 4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia, 2015).

Questions for candidates

1. *Do you think that the penalties currently prescribed in ACT law are too severe, too lenient or about right?*
2. *Are the needs of crime victims receiving enough attention and, if not, what might be done to address them?*
3. *Is rehabilitation given sufficiently high priority at the Alexander Maconochie Centre?*
4. *Do you see a place for restorative justice in the penal system?*
5. *If so, would you support allocating resources for this purpose?*
6. *What do you propose to reduce the disproportionate rate of Indigenous imprisonment?*

7. *As employment is a key determinant of recovery and reduced recidivism, what strategy will you support to increase employment outcomes and options for people leaving incarceration?*

Education. Meeting the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a priority.

- There is a strong correlation between the outcomes achieved by schools and the socio-economic status of the area from which the students are drawn.
- In both the government and non-government sectors, education resources flow disproportionately to schools in higher-income locations.
- Schools in low-income areas, however, need a greater share of education resources if they are to give their students a better chance in life.
- Clearly there are question marks over whether the existing system gives enough weight to the education needs of students from low-income families.
- Catholic Education seeks priority allocation of suitable land to allow choice in education for new communities and for Catholic Education to continue to play its significant role in meeting the Territory's need for school age education.

Questions for candidates

1. *Are you satisfied with the evidence base on the distribution of education resources by geographic area?*
2. *Do you think that school students from low-income families are receiving a fair share of the ACT Government's education dollar?*
3. *If not, where do you think that the biggest shortfalls are occurring?*
4. *How might the incoming government address these issues?*
5. *How will you respond to the recent review's recommendation that more funds be provided to ensure that every school has enough counsellors to support early intervention in relation to students' mental wellbeing?*
6. *As the second highest provider of school education in the ACT, do you agree that Catholic Education should be included in the planning of land release and accorded priority in the allocation of land for schools in new growth areas?*

Gambling. The ACT government has become heavily reliant on gambling revenue, especially from poker machines.

- Excessive gambling is dangerous and addictive, and poker machines are particularly problematic in this respect.
- An immediate end to poker machines is not practical.
- The steady reduction that the ACT has initiated in their numbers is, however, a good start.
- The ACT Government has invited the Canberra Casino to acquire 200 poker machine licences from ACT community clubs.
- The CSJC notes that the Commonwealth has become more active in moves to curb the growth of poker machines, and urges the incoming ACT government to work with the Commonwealth in this area.

Questions for candidates

1. *Do you support a steady reduction in the number of poker machines in the ACT?*
2. *If so, do you think that the current rate of reduction is adequate?*
3. *How do you propose to deal with the revenue losses involved for the ACT Government and with the impact on community and sporting organisations?*
4. *How do you expect trading of poker machine licences from clubs to the Casino to impact the ACT?*
5. *Do you consider that the ACT Government should support Commonwealth initiatives to reduce the extent of problem gambling on poker machines?*
6. *How do you expect employment levels in the ACT will be affected by a reduction in poker machines?*

Climate change. If consensus opinion among climate scientists is accurate, climate change in the form of global warming caused by human activity represents a major threat to life on the planet.

- The ACT has legislated to achieve a reduction of 40 per cent (of 1990 levels) in carbon [dioxide] emissions by 2020.
- This by itself will have only minimal impact on global warming.
- It will, however, complement Commonwealth measures for the same purpose and can be regarded as an example for other jurisdictions to emulate.

Questions for candidates

1. *What is your position on the reality or otherwise of human-induced global warming?*
2. *How do you view the ACT's target of a 40 per cent reduction (of 1990 levels) in carbon [dioxide] emissions by 2020?*
3. *How might the incoming ACT Government encourage households and businesses to take greater responsibility for their own emissions?*

Empowering Indigenous communities. We promote dignity and justice for all.

- We are challenged to ensure the preservation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures and to keep working for an inclusive multicultural Australia.
- The first Australian peoples have set an example in the way they have cared for the land and challenge us to learn together how to preserve our fragile environment and strengthen our community.
- By naming past hurts and continuing injustices, the Church confronts us as with the need to move towards true reconciliation.
- The Church has been writing, speaking in support of and working alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to assist them in their efforts to preserve language, history and culture.

Questions for candidates

1. *How would you support the Indigenous initiative after-school program, Solid Sista's and Brotha's?*
2. *What is your position on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages in our education system?*
3. *How would you support restorative justice initiatives in the ACT, particularly the Circle Sentencing initiatives in NSW? Does this have application in the ACT?*

Equity in the economy. The Catholic Church is far from alone in calling for equity in the economy. However, a distinctly Catholic perspective on the world maintains that we can measure the quality of any society by the way its most vulnerable are treated. Catholic Social Teaching demands a 'preferential option for the poor'. A basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between the wealthy and the disadvantaged, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the vulnerable first.

- The obligation to provide justice for all means that the vulnerable have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of society.
- Economic equity is a distribution of assets, resources, and tax liability among the people in a nation or society that is considered fair and just. While some believe that economic equity requires that all citizens pay the same amount, others believe that the amount paid should depend on the amount that each citizen can afford to pay without undue hardship.
- The 'preferential option for the poor' refers to a trend, throughout the Judeo-Christian Bible, of preference being given to the well-being of the disadvantaged and powerless.

Questions for candidates

1. *How would you apply the 'preferential option for the poor' to the vulnerable, those who are marginalized in society, including unborn children, persons with disabilities, the elderly and terminally ill, and victims of injustice and oppression, in public policy?*
2. *How would you enhance equity through the distribution of capital, goods, and access to services throughout the Territory's economy?*
3. *What will you do to increase fairness in the ACT economy, particularly in regard to taxation or welfare, to afford equal life chances regardless of identity, to provide all citizens with a basic and equal minimum of income, goods, and services or to increase funds and commitment for redistribution?*

Final observations

Members of the CSJC carry no brief for any individual candidate or political party contesting the ACT election. We understand that there are many issues on which people of integrity and goodwill will differ.

Our purpose in seeking the views of candidates is to highlight some issues likely to be vital for the future well-being of disadvantaged people in our community. We also wish to encourage debate on how an incoming government might approach these issues.