

A VOTE FOR JUSTICE
CANDIDATES' SURVEY RESPONSES FOR ACT ELECTION 2016

Response by Liberal Democrats per Mr Roman Gowor

Housing

Public Housing

The ACT has one of the costliest public housing systems in Australia. We have one of the highest homelessness rates in the country. Around 23,000 Canberrans live in public housing. This housing is worth about \$4.5 bn. Put simply: the system is not targeted enough to help those in desperate need. There are already more than sufficient resources to help those who should be helped. The Liberal Democrats firmly believe that long-term community housing should be reserved for those in real need. We should have a generous system that focuses on the elderly, infirm, and the disabled. Community housing should also provision emergency short and medium term accommodation for those temporarily requiring assistance. Welfare should be reserved for those in need, not a lifestyle choice for those who could stand on their own feet.

With respect to the development or expansion of the public housing system, the question ought to be asked: if the ACT government already has the costliest and most ineffective housing system in Australia, will more money fix the problem? The Liberal Democrats do not believe this is the case. The public housing system needs urgent reform, not increased government funding.

To read our full policy on the public housing system, please see: http://act-ldp.org.au/Policy_Public_housing.html.

Home ownership in the ACT

Problems around home ownership in Canberra have been caused by too much government involvement, not too little. The fact of the matter is that the ACT government has consistently been incapable of balancing its own books. It has limited revenue streams because its uncompetitive level of indirect business taxes means that the Territory has a narrow economic base. As a consequence, the ACT government—of Liberal, Labor and Labor-Green varieties—have become addicted to revenues arising from land.

The ACT government's strategy regarding land use has, quite clearly, been to artificially restrict the supply of land, driving up prices in the face of increased demand, and deliver windfall gains to government through rates and stamp duties. To keep the peace in the electorate, governments have toyed with entirely ineffectual subsidies and rebates, such as the first home owners' grant. The underlying economics of the housing market means that most of the benefit of these subsidies tend to accrue to sellers rather than buyers.

These are issues that our candidates understand very well. Quite a number of our candidates are aged in their 20s and 30s and do not own their own property. Rather, they rent. The intergenerational unfairness and punitive impact of the ACT government's policy setting on low income earners is acutely understood the Liberal Democrats – perhaps uniquely as amongst all parties contesting the election.

The only meaningful way of addressing housing issues in the ACT is to reduce red tape, reduce the cost of regulations around the release of land, and, of course, to release more land for residential purposes. However, as a practical matter, the only way we can make this a political reality is to reduce the ACT government's reliance on revenues on interests in land. We have a plan to address this by diversifying the local economy: http://act-ldp.org.au/Policy_Local_economy_and_business.html.

Other proposals

You may read about proposals from other political parties about the manner in which they might "invest" more into public housing. The Liberal Democrats encourage the reader to critical assess whether welfare is better than legitimate ownership. Does the proposal encourage dependency or does it give dignity to home dwellers? Does the proposal create perverse incentives for private sector participants? Has this proposal been tried before? And, of course, if it is just a matter of pouring more money into the obviously broken system, why should it work this time?

Mental health

There are some complex issues around the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions. Further complicating the matter, health services are provided by the Territory but are significantly affected by the prevailing level of Federal government funding. Suffice it to say, there are no simple answers.

The ACT Liberal Democrats strongly believe in the role of civil sector organisations—such as community groups, not-for-profits, mutuals, and the Church—in providing a social safety net outside of the formal role of the state. Mental health is one area that these civil sector organisations can play a pivotal role in reducing the cost of disease on the taxpayer, and most importantly, improving the health outcomes of those suffering from mental illness. The President of the ACT Liberal Democrats, candidate for Murrumbidgee, Roman Gowor, sits on the board of SHOUT, a community not-for-profit that provides services and advocacy for a range of disability and chronic disease organisations. The benefit of this organisation—along with the Church and other community groups—is well understood and very much appreciated by the ACT Liberal Democrats. Wherever possible the Liberal Democrats will be support maintained funding for not-for-profit organisations that demonstrate savings compared to an in-government solution.

On the question of how we, as a community, might develop a better understanding and a strong cohesion on issues around mental health, the Liberal Democrats acknowledge that there is a compelling argument for better education in the schooling system. Early intervention is always better than allowing any chronic condition—mental or otherwise—from becoming worse. These patterns also appear in the justice system. The humane and dignified treatment of prisoners is not just a rights issue: there is also a compelling economic argument. As such, the Liberal Democrats would look favourably upon proposals to provide better mental health services within AMC—especially if those services were provided by the community sector or the Church rather

than directly by government—where there is a compelling rights-based, evidence-based rationale.

The right to life

The ACT Liberal Democrats are an avowedly secular party. We promote individual rights and believe that—in the words of JS Mill—over themselves, over their own mind and body, the individual is sovereign. There is a clear difference in the role of the Church promoting certain values and that of the state in promoting others. In our view, the Church is perfectly entitled to advocate for the values it chooses to promote. The state, however, should be very wary of limiting the autonomy of individuals because of the views of one segment of society. The fact is that Canberra is a secular community, composed of a huge variety of worldviews. Put simply, we will not legislate for the views of the Catholic community because these views might not be acceptable to other members of our society.

Significantly, however, the Church would find a considerable ally in the Liberal Democrats on account of our firm and principles-based views around the rights of assembly, protest and speech. We deplore the restrictions on the right to protest outside abortion clinics, and fines imposed on members of the clergy for silent vigils are, in our view, an outrageous restriction our civic rights. Put differently: people should be able to do what they like provided it doesn't hurt others. While the Church would disagree with the use of this characterisation on the topic of abortion, the Liberal Democrats will certainly fight against restrictions on the rights of the Church and its flock to make their views known.

The Liberal Democrats believe in the rights of gay and lesbian members of the community to marry. This is because we believe that the state ought not to have any kind of role, perhaps beyond maintaining a register, in regulating private, domestic relationships. While the Church and this readership might find this view troubling, it is precisely because the Liberal Democrats value the ethnic, religious and socio-cultural dimensions of marriage that we advocate for government not to regulate it in any meaningful way. In his Freedom to Marry Bill introduced to the Senate in 2014 and 2016, Senator David Leyonhjelm (Liberal Democrats NSW) has explicitly addressed this tension. While the Liberal Democrats support the rights of gay and lesbian couples to enter solemn, lifelong bonds, we support the rights of religious orders to refuse to consecrate the bonds. The legislation also provided for specific exemptions to those looking to provide ancillary services—such as floristry and wedding cake baking—from being obliged to cater for unions that are inconsistent with their legitimately-held moral views.

On the question of euthanasia, the Liberal Democrats believe that people ought to have the right to choose their manner of passing. Again, we appreciate that this is an acutely personal ethical issue, however, people ought to have the right to choose to end their lives. We would support legislation that carefully addresses the very real issues around the design of a scheme: who is eligible?; must the condition be terminal?; who verifies the condition?; what are the risks of undue influence?; how is capacity and consent to be determined?; and what are the risks of euthanasia in the context of a socialised medical system? The mere existence of these difficult issues does not mean, however, that an arrangement cannot be created that simply provides the rights to members of the community to choose the manner of their passing.

The ACT Liberal Democrats do not have an established position on human cloning. Upon quick reflection, however, it seems highly unlikely that any elected Liberal Democrats MLA would support any proposal to lift restrictions in the coming term of government simply on account of a lack of public discussion around the issue. It is difficult to foresee any circumstances where the Liberal Democrats would support human cloning research.

Our support for additional punishments for those who assault a pregnant mother, carrying a child that meets the threshold of being a legal person, would depend on the proposal. On the issue of support services for unexpectedly pregnant women, we support the ongoing involvement of community sector organisations to provide those services, provided there are a range of religious and non-religious options available to the pregnant woman.

[This additional response is written directly by Roman Gowor, Candidate for Murrumbidgee]

Issues around reproduction, sexuality and euthanasia are inherently complex and open to reasonable disagreement. I was raised a Catholic and am, by most reasonable standards, a lapsed but theistic Catholic today. My personal values are distinctly more conservative than the platform I represent. However, this apparent inconsistency is addressed by the fact that I know that I do not have the formula for what it means to live the good life. What is sensible and meaningful to me might be considered nonsense by others. I have no better right to assert that my ethical system is superior to that of any other constituent. This is not post-modernist moral relativism: there are certain behaviours that are normatively wrong. There are, however, a whole range of activities that go to individual choice, and I do not consider it the role of legislators to restrict the rights of activities where there are no obvious victims beyond those partaking in them. This is the essence of liberalism: I may personally feel entirely uncomfortable with issues around abortion and share some of the Church's views, but I would not want to be a resident in a non-Christian-majority country and have my rights restricted by the majority view of that country. The libertarian tradition and the Catholic tradition are not inconsistent, I will advocate for the rights of all to live as they so choose.

The justice system

The ACT Liberal Democrats believe that a key role of the justice system is to provide rehabilitation for prisoners. We do not have a definitive position on the question of whether laws are too lenient or too severe: we strongly support the role of a well-funded and independent judiciary to consider community standards in sentencing, as per the existing criminal sentencing legislation. The ACT Liberal Democrats, have, however, watched on in despair as the underfunded ACT Director of Public Prosecutions has struggled to fulfil its mandate for the robust protection of the public interest in pursuing and securing convictions. The state of the ACT courts system is also poor. While an avowedly small government party, the judicial system is one of the areas where the ACT Liberal Democrats would support increased funding.

Involvement of victims' groups, and an emphasis on restorative justice has a strong conceptual and empirical basis. A justice system should provide meaningful closure and comfort to victims. For this reason we support the involvement of victims of crime groups.

Whether or not rehabilitation is a significant enough priority at AMC is a difficult question. We, as a community, need to acknowledge that there are significant socio-cultural and economic dimensions to crime. More often than not, criminals have low educational attainment, and have led troubled lives. We are certainly very positive—perhaps the most positive political party—on the belief that the criminal justice system should focus on rehabilitation. It is for this reason too, that the ACT Liberal Democrats are opposed to mandatory minimum sentences, as too often these laws punitively affect lower socioeconomic residents, and are prone to misuse by elected officials keen to be seen as “tough on crime”. One group certainly affected uniquely by our criminal law system are Indigenous Territorians. It would be folly to suggest that there is any simple solution to this problem. Early intervention, the imposition of non-custodial sentences, the provision of a support network for releasees of the justice system, and a strong emphasis on civil society and community are important mechanisms that will go some way to addressing the issue of overrepresentation of Indigenous people—particularly young men—in our criminal system.

Education

Our public education system is failing our children.

There is considerable independently collected and analysed data that suggests that the longer a student stays within the ACT public schools system, the worse the relative performance of those students compared to other states and territories. This is unacceptable. Further evidence of the poor performance of public schools is the fact that we in the ACT have the highest rates of enrolment in the non-government school sector. In the secondary schooling system, more children are educated privately than publicly. This is important as parents are clearly giving a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the public system and voting with their feet and their wallets. This further exacerbates the difference between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in our community as generally wealthier people can afford to educate their children privately.

However, the ACT Liberal Democrats are also opposed to significant increases to the ACT public education system absent considerable reform. We are the only party—to our knowledge—that is calling for a systematic, evidence-based reform of the ACT public schooling system. Your community can read more about it here: http://act-ldp.org.au/Policy_Education.html. In brief, there is considerable evidence that by increasing the autonomy of school principals and by strengthening the influence of parents in the management of schools, considerable improvements can be made, especially on the quality of schooling.

The ACT Liberal Democrats acknowledge that mental health issues are becoming a significant area of policy failure of state and territory governments. We would support proposals to increase early intervention by making resources—such as school counsellors—available to students at schools. We also point out that our education reform proposal will make this task easier: empowered principals who know their schools’ and their students’ requirements are much better placed to address mental health resourcing than unelected bureaucrats operating from the city centre. Principals ought to be able to manage their own budgets, and be highly responsive to the needs of the school students.

The Catholic school system is a key player in the provision of education in the ACT. The ACT Liberal Democrats are very positively disposed to the provision of education services by the non-

government sector and would advocate for the Catholic school's sector involvement into the future.

Gambling

The ACT Liberal Democrats acknowledge the considerable harm that problem gambling imposes on individuals, their families, and the broader community.

At its core, however, gambling is a personal choice. We are neither pro- nor anti- gambling. The data across jurisdictions demonstrates that the vast majority of those who choose to gamble do so within their own pre-chosen limits. These people ought not to have their freedoms restricted on account of a small percentage of the community that develops gambling problems.

We believe that those proposing limits on bets and the reduction of physical poker machines in the community should also consider the interchangeability of gaming services that exists due to the increasing prominence of online gaming. While \$1 limits or the reduction of machines may cause a reduction in aggregate gaming rates in the short term, we consider it highly likely that many problem gamblers will move away from the usual environment of problem gambling—that is, licensed venues—to online forms with little social connection with other people who might be in a position to intervene or help the gambler make themselves aware of their problem.

The ACT Liberal Democrats do support measures to assist people at risk from problem gambling. We support voluntary exclusion and will seek to increase penalties on licensees that fail to remove persons that have elected to exclude themselves. We also support the funding of treatment programs for problem gamblers and those affected by the gambling of others. We also would like to strengthen requirements that ensure that minors are not exposed to gambling, specifically poker machines.

Your community should also be aware of the significant appreciation we have for the civil society sector, particularly churches and religious orders, in helping the less fortunate (such as problem gamblers). We strongly believe in the role of civil society. We especially value religious or lay people—Catholic or from other faiths—dedicate themselves to a vocation of helping others in need. Unlike other political parties, we are not suspicious of the religious community. People ought to be able to follow their calling—whether a secular one or one from God—freely and their contribution to society ought to be valued on the basis of their works, rather than their associations.

Climate change

The Liberal Democrats are formally agnostic on the question of anthropogenic climate change. I quote the federal party's position:

“...atmospheric carbon dioxide is increasing but considers the consequences of this, whether it is due to human influence and if anything can or should be done about it, as too uncertain to warrant government action.”

Consequently, the Liberal Democrats believe that governments shouldn't set out to tax certain forms of energy to change consumption patterns. We also note that the government attempts to raise taxes on energy disproportionately affect lower income people. We consider that the

economic case for schemes like the household assistance program introduced concurrently with the carbon tax legislation actually negates the underlying policy intention to reduce carbon emissions.

Attempts to reduce carbon emissions in the ACT are also misguided insofar as the Territory's contribution to global emissions is negligible. Rather, attempts to reduce emissions that punitively impact on the cost of energy will only reduce the level of business activity in the ACT, further punishing those outside of the job market. The ACT already has the highest levels of incidental business taxes and the highest rate of business failure in Australia: government should be taking steps to reduce the cost of doing business here, not increasing it.

Should a private citizen choose to take steps to reduce their private consumption, they ought to be applauded. However, those citizens—usually higher income earners—should not be cross-subsidised by those living pay check to pay check.

Here in the Territory, an elected MLA for the Liberal Democrats would vote accordingly: we do not support any solar rebates or feed-in tariffs; we do not support plans to arbitrarily and expensively curb carbon emissions; and we do not support wind farms in surrounding regions that we consider to have deleterious impacts on the property rights of nearby owners.

Empowering Indigenous communities

We strongly support the role of civil sector organisations—such as the Catholic Church—in championing the rights of Indigenous Australians. We do not have a position on specific after school programs, but are generally positive to any initiative that addresses Indigenous disadvantage.

The ACT Liberal Democrats are generally opposed to the imposition of different criminal standards for subgroups of the community. This is because—at the core of our philosophy—we believe that all people should be equal before the law. While the Circle Sentencing initiative appears to have some support from the community engaged in the program, there is mixed evidence as to whether the data supports an assertion that the initiative reduces recidivism. In some respects, the Circle Sentencing initiative has the quality of greater community involvement in sentencing practice. This is a laudable aspect of the scheme.

We strongly support the ongoing role of the Church in attempts to preserve Indigenous culture.

Equity in the economy

The role of the state in ensuring equality of opportunity is a well-established norm in western liberal democracies. However, the ACT Liberal Democrats are opposed to the view that the state has a role in providing for equal outcomes. This is an important philosophical distinction.

Prosperous societies can in some respects be judged by how they treat their less fortunate. However, it is important to note that free-market societies, with liberal values—rights of the individual, a working system of property rights, and equality before the law—have the greatest track record of any social organisations in providing for the poor. Socialist regimes have a very poor track record and are synonymous with the most egregious abuses of rights.

The ACT Liberal Democrats also specifically note the key role that the Federal, rather than state or territory, government has in managing the national welfare system. We are cautious about the ACT government providing welfare-type benefits where there are already federal schemes aimed at the same objectives. One area that the Territory government does have a role in the provision of welfare-type benefits is through the public housing system. Our system is expensive and failing, with the ACT holding \$4.5bn worth of real estate in public hands while concurrently having the second highest rate of homelessness in Australia. Urgent reform of the public housing system is required (http://act-ldp.org.au/Policy_Public_housing.html).

Conceptually, the Liberal Democrats believe that welfare ought not to be a lifestyle choice. The infirm, the elderly and the disabled have a legitimate claim to life-long welfare. Others might need temporary assistance on account of domestic violence, injury or unemployment. However, it is important to note that where a scheme is too untargeted, those really needing assistance end up getting less crucial support than others who might nominally qualify but are normatively less deserving. The ACT public housing system suffers from this deficiency.

It is a matter, then, of social justice that our welfare system is reformed to provide just outcomes for the truly needy, rather than those who might need transitory assistance staying within the welfare system as a matter of preference, rather than need.

On the broader question of equity in the economy, we firmly believe that employment has significant personal health, community and non-economic dimensions. The ACT government should be adopting a policy framework where employment is widely available, rather than the current approach that punishes small and medium sized businesses, and exacerbates the formation of "haves" and "have nots" in our community.