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

Response by Brendan WHYTE – Independent for Murrumbidgee

### Housing

*With an increasing gap between the richest and poorest in the ACT, we have an urgent need to ensure that everyone who lives in the ACT has access to affordable and appropriate housing in a suburb whose location suits their individual needs.*

- *The existence of charity soup kitchens and beggars in our city centre should be a source of embarrassment to us all, a reminder of our failure as a community towards the vulnerable, and a clarion call to solve the problem of homelessness, rather than it becoming a permanent part of the city's 'culture' to which we become inured.*
- *Current government policy to limit the first home buyer's grant to new developments is pushing young families to the edge of the city, far from employment opportunities.*
- *Too many cheaper, older, smaller houses in established suburbs are being bought, bulldozed, and large expensive new houses or units being built in their place.*
- *Government and industry emphasis on new multi-storey apartment complexes ignores the needs of families with children as well as the elderly or the disabled.*
- *While there is a need for a good supply of rental stock, there is currently too much industry promotion of 'investment properties' whereby the rich buy more houses than they themselves can use, and then charge the poor or needy to live in them, in order to make profit. This is unjust, consigning the poor to a lifetime of renting, and in effect to pay off the mortgages of the rich, without a quid pro quo for themselves.*

*The government needs to ensure that planning regulations encourage a mix of housing types and prices in all suburbs: not just new green-field ones, but established suburbs too, so that all classes of society have the widest choice of residence location in order to be close to the school, employment or other facilities they need. The poor should not be consigned to outer suburbs simply because that is the only place they can afford to live. Such a policy entrenches poverty and disadvantage in those areas, including their schools, their shopping centres, and their community culture. Public housing needs to be part of the mix in all suburbs, but ideally as well distributed as possible, to encourage neighbourly support for struggling residents. The large low-income apartment complexes we have at present are very poorly socially integrated into their suburbs, are often eyesores, and become places of fear for the rest of the community.*

*I want to:*

- *increase the percentage of government and private sector public housing provision in all new suburbs and major redevelopments to better reflect the real territory-wide proportions of rich and poor, so that all developments cover the full range of affordability, and don't exclude those who more desperately need housing.*

- *encourage rent-to-buy schemes for public housing tenants, so that they can more easily work towards independence and home-ownership; this would encourage their personal investment in and maintenance of the property, and a way out of the poverty and dependency cycle.*
- *Include community gardens as part of all public housing facilities, to provide environmental, social, economic, gastronomic and aesthetic benefits to residents.*
- *limit the number of properties an individual or family trust can own at one time, so that the market for and encouragement of private 'investment properties' is reduced, taking pressure off house prices and allowing more people to own their own home and therefore to feel a real part of and be invested in their community.*

### **Mental health**

*Mental health retains a stigma that needs to be addressed across society. This should begin at schools, not only to help identify and treat students with mental health issues, but to educate all students about different mental health disorders, treatments and services, so that students will have the skills and knowledge to recognise, react appropriately to, and know how and where to seek help for issues they, their friends or family might experience.*

*With respect to the criminal justice system, the disproportionate level of mental health problems among inmates compared to the general population needs to be better addressed within the health services offered at the Alexander Maconochie Centre. Mental health diagnosis, treatment and awareness should be a central part of the government's duty of care towards prisoners, as well as of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.*

### **The right to life**

*As a Christian, I do not believe the ACT's current laws on abortion and human cloning adequately respect or protect human life. Not only is abortion encouraged and funded at taxpayer expense, regardless of actual medical need, but the 'exclusion zone' imposed around the Moore Street Clinic is an affront to basic democratic freedoms and a dangerous precedent: it is politically and religiously discriminatory in its application, and no similar zone is imposed around any other health facility.*

*One of my key policy platforms is to remove the exclusion zone, so that freedom of speech and belief is not improperly curtailed in public places. The number and cost of abortions need to be made public, so that taxpayers know exactly what they are funding, rather than the current attempts at secrecy and avoidance of public debate. Expectant mothers should be informed of the full range of options, all of which should be given equal government funding, rather than the current emphasis on abortion.*

*With regard to euthanasia: suicide is the greatest cause of death among young people, and one we are rightly trying to minimise, if not eradicate. In the face of that, if we then not only permit the aged or terminally ill to commit suicide, but allow or even encourage someone else to assist them to do so, it would not only be hypocritical, but would also send completely the wrong signal to vulnerable young people who may be contemplating suicide. Human life is the most precious gift we have, and all people are precious: the young, the depressed, the elderly and the ill, just as much as the hale and hearty. All have something to contribute to society and to the lives of others, if only as an example of character, attitude and fortitude in the face of adversity.*

### **The justice system**

*Our justice system, and consequently our prisons are becoming increasingly strained. Partly this is because we impose penalties for victimless offences. As but one example, current laws allow the jailing of those who do not vote. We need to continually reassess our laws to ensure minor and irrelevant infringements are removed from the statute books or dealt with more appropriately, so that our finite resources are focussed on real crimes, and used as effectively as possible to protect the public, rehabilitate offenders and assist victims as quickly and efficiently as possible.*

*The needs of crime victims have been given increased emphasis in recent years, but the often long-lasting mental impact of crime on victims is still not adequately recognised and acknowledged. We need to provide greater access to counselling, and provision of social workers to ensure victims are not afraid to reengage with their communities. We also need to help criminals understand the full effect of their crimes on victims, so that when the criminal comes to repentance, he can better acknowledge what he has done, and appropriately seek to make amends if desired. Repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation should be the ultimate aim.*

*Rates of Indigenous incarceration are unacceptably high Australia-wide. We need to better understand the causes of this: are the courts or juries more likely to imprison a criminal simply because he is Indigenous? Are Indigenous people more likely to commit certain crimes (and if so why: due to cultural issues or to social disadvantage)? Is the problem identical across all Indigenous peoples, or does it affect various peoples in different ways? Identifying the root causes of the problem, and the characteristics of the groups most at risk, is necessary in order to properly address the issue.*

*In the longer term the problem can also be addressed by ensuring adequate access to mental health, housing, education and employment services, and encouraging greater familial cohesion and social integration both within Indigenous communities, as well as between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous.*

## **Education**

*Leading on from my comments above on housing, geographic disparities in education can be addressed in part by encouraging greater housing diversity and income-level mixes within each suburb. Thus instead of having rich suburbs with good schools and low-income suburbs with poor-quality schools, each suburb's schools would have a more diverse range of students better reflecting the overall diversity of the territory. This will better ensure that all students have access to the same opportunities, resources and encouragement to attainment, irrespective of household income, and that teachers are willing and happy to work and teach in any school, rather than gravitating to the better schools, to the detriment of the students elsewhere. This requires a whole of government attitude, covering not just education policy, but housing, health, planning, etc. Unless we try to ensure a more even mix of incomes, ages, races, etc, across the city, we will inevitably end up with poor suburbs with the underfunded schools and troubled students at one end of the city, and rich schools with the brightest and best students at the other, and increase, rather than decrease, social stratification, disparity and problems.*

*Private schools, whether Catholic, Anglican or any other denomination, are an important part of the overall educational mix, and should be allocated land and funding alongside public schools as needed to ensure all parents have a range of education options for their children. Parents who*

want their children educated under a Christian ethos should not be excluded from such schools simply because of cost.

### **Gambling**

*I support a steady reduction in the number of poker machines in the ACT leading to their eventual eradication from the territory. The transferral of licences from clubs to the casino helps towards this in a mild way, but is not a solution in itself, as it merely relocates the problem. Clubs have, of their own choice, come to rely too heavily on gamblers for their revenue base, and now need to diversify their activities. A slow phase-out of poker machines will provide the incentive to do so. Ultimately it is up to the club membership to decide what activities they wish to run and how they will fund them. Government's role is to ensure clubs are run honestly and openly and without exploiting the vulnerable.*

### **Climate change**

*'Climate change' is mix of many, often cyclical, processes occurring over many different time-scales, such as the multi-year El Niño oscillation, the centuries long Little Ice Age of the 1500-1800s, and the much longer term geomagnetic reversals. Man can have very little effect on such processes except to try to predict and prepare for them. However, the ever-increasing world population, concomitant urbanisation, and industrial and other pollution, such as that produced by fossil fuel consumption, certainly have an effect, and also at varied scales, from localised heat-island effects within cities, up to the global scale.*

*While climate change is an issue that ultimately needs addressing at an international level, it is also one that can be led locally. The ACT's current carbon emissions reduction target is a good start. Encouragement of public transport use, better urban design and planning to reduce the need for and use of motor vehicles, increased tree planting and vegetation, and investment in research and education are also important. Are we replacing eco-friendly local manufactured goods with foreign imports, simply because the imports are 'cheaper', regardless of the increased pollution resulting from lower foreign environmental standards and the increased transportation requirements for the goods? Or should we only import goods that meet the same environmental standards in production as they would if manufactured here? Such a question is, however, one for the federal government more than the ACT government.*

*On the local level:*

- *we can encourage housing developments, particularly those above or adjacent to shopping centres, to market themselves specifically at carless families. This will also reduce housing costs, and have less impact on the surrounds in terms of noise, pollution and congestion.*
- *even small things can make a difference, if only to attitudes. For example, petrol-powered leaf blowers. Besides emitting greenhouse gases, leaf blowers (all imported) create air, noise and dust pollution, when the same work can be done cleanly, quietly, cheaply and with less disruption to neighbours with a locally-made broom or rake. The City of Los Angeles prohibits the use of petrol-powered leaf blowers within 500 feet (150m) of residences. If a car-dependent sprawling city like LA can ban them, for health and environmental reasons, why don't we? I would institute a similar ban: less noise, less dust, less exhaust emissions, a more pleasant neighbourhood in which to walk and live, all the while giving support to local manufacturers (and increasing the tax base) rather than importing fossil fuel-dependent goods.*

## **Empowering Indigenous communities**

*The Solid Sistas & Brothas programme, and similar initiatives (e.g Indigenous boy scout troops) need greater government encouragement and funding to improve the educational and social engagement and attainment of Indigenous youth.*

*I would encourage the teaching of Indigenous languages in schools, if only as a locally-relevant comparator to instil a better understanding of the grammar and structure and cultural underpinnings all languages have. This would offer non-Indigenous students useful insight not only into Indigenous cultures, but also into English and their own culture.*

*The Circle Sentencing initiatives in NSW, and restorative justice more generally, have potential in the ACT, and not only for Indigenous offenders. Under appropriate circumstances, greater community involvement in sentencing would help relieve pressure on the prison system, and assist rehabilitate low-level offenders more efficiently and effectively. New Zealand has also implemented similar initiatives with respect to Maori and Pacific Islander offenders, which may also offer ideas to improve on those of NSW.*

## **Equity in the economy**

*We need a whole-of-government, and indeed, whole-of-society approach to social and economic equity. We need to ensure marginalised groups are not ghettoised in remote suburbs far from services, infrastructure and economic opportunities. I have mentioned in the education and housing sections above how policies in these two areas might help to ensure a better mixing of society for more equitable outcomes both geographically and socially. The increasing income gap needs addressing across Australian society.*

*It is easy to expect government to solve the problem, and ignore it in our own personal lives and attitudes, particularly if we are personally well insulated from issues of poverty or disenfranchisement or social exclusion. Equity imbalances are a result of the collectivity of individual attitudes. To fix the problem we need a culture-shift in personal attitudes, with the community taking responsibility, under government guidance. A closer engagement between each citizen and the government is required.*

*A politician, paid well above the average salary, cannot possibly understand the problems faced by the vulnerable and marginalised, and thus cannot properly represent such constituents and their needs in the Legislative Assembly. MLAs should be in the Assembly because they want to serve the people, and not because of the salary (currently twice the average ACT salary) and perks.*

- *I propose cutting the salaries of MLAs to the level of the ACT's average fulltime salary, and remove luxuries like business class official air travel and the \$25,000 car allowance. In the meantime, I will personally fly economy class only, refuse the car allowance, and donate all income above the ACT average fulltime salary level to charity, and challenge the other MLAs to do likewise.*