

# What makes for good government?

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION Saturday 25 November 2006

State elections give each of us the chance to evaluate and compare the policies of the political parties and candidates vying for our vote. This is a critical moment in democratic societies, since a great deal may hinge on it. Better economic and social policies can enhance the wellbeing of many thousands of Victorians.

State governments in Australia are very significant since they are responsible for so many essential services, including education and health care, roads and railways, law and order, housing and urban planning, environment and development.

To ensure capable government vigorous and open public debate is required. This debate should lead to constant efforts to improve policies and service delivery. As circumstances change and new difficulties appear in people's lives, policies must be adapted and better responses developed.

This election leaflet indicates some areas where we think further improvements are needed. We make these suggestions in a non-partisan spirit, as an aid to the civil conversation and to help readers reflect on key issues as they evaluate the policies of the various parties.

Basic to our concerns as Christians is our belief that God is profoundly concerned about human wellbeing, and expects us to share this concern. The Church has expanded its sense of social responsibility over the centuries, and especially developed its social teaching as a guide, emphasising that the economy is meant to serve the wellbeing of all our people.

We should be particularly concerned that disadvantaged or vulnerable groups are not marginalised, but find the means to make their full contribution to society. We want to see a prosperous Victoria, but one which places a high value on social equity, and consistently works to improve equality of opportunity and social participation for everyone.

## Asylum Seekers

### Principle

People fleeing from persecution or harm have a right in international law to seek refuge in other countries. Morally and legally Australia is bound to offer them asylum and the chance to make a new life in the freedom its citizens enjoy.

### Issues

Though immigration policy is determined at federal level, the experiences of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are lived out within the states and territories.

Decisions are made at the federal level to deny certain asylum seekers (such as those holding Bridging Class E visas) the right to work and therefore access to Centrelink payments and Medicare entitlements. Such denials erode the capacity of asylum seekers to provide for themselves and their families.

In addition, the dignity of asylum seekers can be further compromised as they are not permitted to undertake voluntary work and can be denied the opportunity to study due to the high fees levied on international students.

Many asylum seekers find themselves dependent upon handouts for their most basic needs of food, shelter and clothing. This lifestyle can contribute to spiraling physical and mental health conditions. This situation often places asylum seekers in a 'Catch-22' situation: as their psychological and physical health deteriorates so do their chances of finding meaningful work.

State authorities can and do make contributions to help these people with assistance in meeting utility costs or to assist migrant resource centres to help people living on temporary protection visas. However for many asylum seekers their condition persists for an interminable amount of time. Their children continue to grow and develop, requiring an ever increasing level of resources that cannot be sustained by the welfare sector. Hindrance to accessing health care and education denies asylum seekers the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- the practical gaps in care and support provided to asylum seekers
- the action promised to address such gaps.

## Community Infrastructure

### Principle

For people to live with dignity and to maximize the opportunities for themselves and their families, community infrastructure is important.

### Issues

Community infrastructure encompasses transport, open space, provision of services such as utilities, and leisure facilities. Social exclusion and disadvantage can be exacerbated by the absence, inaccessibility, or inadequacy of community

infrastructure. This situation can be particularly evident in rural areas, outer urban areas and, in fact, within metropolitan Melbourne.

Key components of community infrastructure bring both environmental and social benefits. Land use planning should have regard not only to public transport requirements but also to the provision of other community infrastructure needs such as parks, open space and community amenities.

Similarly the construction and ongoing maintenance of schools and preschool facilities in metropolitan and outer urban areas is important particularly in meeting the needs of child and youth populations.

Investment in community infrastructure is costly. Governments are increasingly looking to public/private provider agreements as a means to fund these initiatives. However such arrangements can lead not only to reduced control by Government and therefore a reduced ability to protect the public interest but may also exclude marginalized groups if the facilities are only accessible on a 'user pays' basis.

#### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- the priority assigned to public transport and to equality of access to this transport within their transport policy
- the coordination of land use planning including rural and regional as well as urban areas
- the priority given to planning for education infrastructure particularly in rapidly growing outer urban areas
- the circumstances under which public/private provider agreements are used and the protections to be provided for marginalised groups.

## Electronic Gaming Machines

### Principle

The purpose of government is to promote the common good and especially to minimize harm to vulnerable people. This is true of gambling when it becomes addictive behaviour or leads to financial disaster for individuals and families.

### Issues

Since the introduction of electronic gaming machines (EGMs) in Victoria in 1992, the taxation from this form of gambling has steadily increased to the extent that in the 2006/2007 financial year it is projected to generate revenue of \$1.006 billion.

The Catholic Church's position on gambling is that it is not in itself immoral or wrong provided that certain pre-existing conditions are met. These conditions are that the gambler can afford to accept losses without financial harm to themselves or their families; no player holds an unfair advantage relative to other players; the gambling games themselves are free of fraud; the acts of each gambler are not compelled; and there are no prior claims on the stake being waged by each gambler.

However the growth in reliance upon taxes from EGM revenue to support the State budget initiatives is problematic. There is increasing evidence and awareness of the negative impact of EGMs, both at an individual and on a community basis, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The concentration of EGMs in the lower socio-economic areas is significantly greater than in the more affluent areas of Victoria. Consequently financial losses are being disproportionately borne by gamblers from lower socio-economic areas.

Hence there needs to be a more rigorous EGM regulatory system to ensure the protection of vulnerable individuals and groups.

### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- strategies to address the detrimental impact of electronic gaming machines on problem gamblers and the wider community
- strategies to phase down the state's reliance on this form of taxation revenue.

## Global Warming

### Principle

The Earth is God's gift and all species have a rightful place in it. Humans share this habitat with other creatures and have a special duty to be stewards and trustees of the Earth.

### Issues

According to the overwhelming weight of scientific opinion, the threat of global warming is extremely serious. Within the lifetime of children today, the temperature of the earth could rise by 3-4 degrees or more, with dramatic effects on climate, water supplies and agriculture. Large areas of Australia would no longer be farmed. Many of our forests would burn.

Australia is one of the worst polluters per head of population in the world as a result of our heavy reliance on fossil fuels for electricity and transport, our extensive land-clearing and agricultural methods. Our huge reserves of coal have now become a major threat to the environment unless we can find new technologies to eliminate the pollution they cause.

Sea levels could rise by as much as 20 feet during the next century, flooding many coastal regions, and displacing hundreds of millions of people from some of the world's most fertile zones, like the Nile and Ganges deltas.

Even more seriously, rising sea levels and desertification will make it much more difficult to increase food supplies for the world's population, which is expected to increase by another 50 per cent to nine billion people.

#### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- how our greenhouse gases can be reduced, especially from power plants
- how should buildings and cities be adapted or redesigned
- how emissions from cars might be reduced
- how renewable energy sources could be rapidly developed
- how parties are encouraging us to adopt a more modest lifestyle.

## Homelessness

### Principle

Reliable and safe accommodation is crucial to living a fulfilling life. It is the responsibility of government to provide housing and related services to those without them.

### Issues

Over the last two censuses, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has collected data on homelessness. The ABS defines homelessness in the following way:

- Primary homelessness – this includes all people without conventional accommodation, such as people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings, or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter.
- Secondary homelessness – this includes all people staying in emergency or transitional accommodation provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and under Victoria's Transitional Housing Manager scheme. This also includes people residing temporarily in other households because they have no accommodation of their own.
- Tertiary homelessness – this refers to people who live in boarding houses (and rooming houses) on a medium to long-term basis. These residents do not have self-contained accommodation and they do not have security of tenure provided by a lease.

In the 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census 23,713 people were recorded as being homeless in Victoria in 2001 with this number being 19 percent of the of the 122,768 people recorded as being homeless in Australia.

The causes of homelessness are many, including a shortage of affordable housing stock, but there are also other economic and social factors. These include unemployment and inadequate income levels, gentrification of inner urban housing stock, conversion of housing stock into commercial outlets such as backpackers' hostels, inadequate discharge planning processes, family breakdown, illnesses and problems arising from substance abuse.

### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- improving access to affordable housing
- reshaping homelessness services to better meet needs
- improving access to employment, education and training opportunities for homeless people.

## Indigenous Issues

### Principle

Australia's Indigenous people have suffered greatly since white settlement. Justice requires vigorous efforts to remedy Indigenous disadvantage, especially to restore equality of opportunity so that indigenous people can enjoy the rights and freedoms that all Australians expect.

### Issues

True and active partnerships with indigenous people, which respect cultural beliefs and identity, are imperative for our common wellbeing.

On the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul's visit to Alice Springs, it is timely to remind ourselves of his message to the Indigenous people in 1986: "...the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others."

There is still much work to be done to improve the situation for the Indigenous community and, as an integral part of such efforts, to build sustainable relationships.

The resolution of Indigenous issues presents challenges, which require multi-faceted strategies including the pursuit of 'whole-of-government' approaches. Indigenous issues cannot be reduced to a single or limited number of overriding concerns. Access to education, housing, and health together with real opportunities for employment and participation in community activities that we take for granted are but part of the solution.

At the same time the broader Victorian community needs to be open to learning about and respecting Victoria's Indigenous cultural heritage as part of developing a greater awareness and appreciation of Indigenous people.

#### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- how they would engage with the Indigenous community to identify the priority issues
- how the general social, economic and cultural development of Victoria's Indigenous communities will be promoted
- how the cultural heritage of the Indigenous peoples will be protected and sustained.

## Justice System

#### Principle

While the dignity of the human person is affirmed, individuals live in common with others and the rights of individuals must be balanced with the wider common good of all. The rights and needs of others must always be respected.

#### Issues

Justice systems comprise a number of elements, including the actual law and its periodic reform; the ongoing adaptation of the court system to changing community expectations and needs; the means by which human rights and community disadvantage are appropriately identified and addressed within the justice system; and sensitive attention to the needs of victims of crime.

An effective justice system must be the sum of all its elements and not just a reduction to those parts that might have broadest community appeal.

Whilst the justice system must measure out penalties and sentences commensurate with the crimes that have been committed, there is also a responsibility for the system to aim for longer-term outcomes that benefit the whole community in a restorative rather than a punitive manner.

In this regard the justice system ought respond to particular circumstances in ways that seek more lasting solutions to those factors that give rise, for example, to the over-representation of people from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. The system must identify and seek to overcome those factors that contribute to people offending in the first instance or re-offending at a future time. Circumstances which amount to little more than a 'revolving door' add to economic and social costs within the community.

#### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- the key principles that underpin their visions for the justice system
- their specific policies addressing the various elements of the justice system
- how community expectations concerning the justice system will be acknowledged.

## Mental Health

#### Principle

People who suffer from mental health illnesses are particularly vulnerable, but this in no way diminishes their immense dignity as human beings created in the image of God.

#### Issues

One in five of us in our lifetime, whether as a child, an adult or an aged person, will experience some form of mental illness. Yet despite the relative widespread prevalence of this illness, fear rather than compassion drives the responses that we, as a broader community, demonstrate. People with mental illness are all too frequently stigmatised and discriminated against rather than being understood and supported in their times of need.

Mentally ill people belong in our society. They are entitled to the same rights of comfort and safety that we take for granted. However Australia spends only 7 percent of its health budget on mental health whilst, at the same time, mental health accounts for at least 20 percent of total health care costs.

Over 60 percent of people with mental disorders do not access mental health services, for reasons ranging from fear, stigma, poor distribution of services and the costs of accessing specialist support.

Research is indicating that practical support for people with mental illness requires interventions at a number of levels. Two of the more critical elements are the provision of adequate housing and drop-in centres or support groups, which help provide a sense of stability and the services that support people in dealing with the trauma in their lives.

#### Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- raising of real level of funding provided to better meet the health care, housing and support needs of those with mental illness
- the provision of employment and retraining opportunities
- actions to raise community awareness and education about mental health issues.

# NGO funding

## Principle

One of the purposes of government is the promotion of the common good especially by ensuring social justice and equity. This includes the adequate provision of funding to meet the resourcing requirements of those non-government organisations (NGO) whom it contracts to provide services on its behalf.

## Issues

Non-government organisations provide extensive and valuable services in responding to the needs of the marginalised and disadvantaged in our communities. This work stretches across many areas of social welfare, including homelessness, child, youth and family services, disability services, and indigenous support.

As demand for these services increases along with the complex regulatory environment that surrounds this work, it is vital that the funding provided by governments matches the economic realities within which non-government organisations operate.

Funding increases for these organisations must reflect the true cost of meeting service demands and ideally permit some graduated increase to meet service growth demands. In this vein government funding processes ought to be based on regular reviews of the elements that comprise the funding base and of the specific realities that exist for particular welfare groups. Governments must also continue to work with the social welfare sector on those factors which affect the viability of the sector.

Funding systems provided by government ought also to provide for a capacity to respond to exceptional events as these will inevitably impact on non-government organisations' operational circumstances.

## Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- how they will strengthen the non-government organisation sector
- the type of relationship they would seek to develop with the sector
- the manner and the extent to which they would address the current funding concerns of the non-government organisation sector.

# Disability

## Principle

All people living within Victoria ought to enjoy a sense of inclusiveness and not be denied the opportunity to participate actively in the community due to personal physical or intellectual disabilities or the need to care for someone who lives with these challenges.

## Issues

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003 information, approximately one in every five Victorians has some form of disability. On a daily basis there are 277,500 people who require assistance with self-care, mobility, communication or coping with everyday life. Therefore most Victorians encounter disability either because they have a disability themselves, they have a relative or a friend with a disability, or they are involved directly or indirectly in the provision of disability services.

Access to support is not always easy with these situations requiring significant time, effort and finance on the part of families and of friends to provide essential care until the disability service system can meet the needs of individuals. Research indicates that in Victoria around 17% of disabled people waiting for access to supported accommodation are cared for by family members aged 75 years or more. This research also reveals that people in urgent need of supported accommodation can wait an average of nearly three years. It is not surprising that so many primary carers are fearful of what the future holds should they die before the disabled person for whom they care.

The provision of regular respite support for families and friends either by way of a few hours at a time, or overnight and weekend arrangements is essential to personal carers to maintain their own sense of well being.

## Recommendations

That voters determine the position of their preferred political candidate or political party with respect to:

- the provision of accommodation options for people with disabilities
- the provision of a range of respite options tailored to the needs of the various disability groups.

# Political Parties

## registered with the Victorian Electoral Commission

Australian Democrats (Victorian Division)  
PO Box 135 East Melbourne 8002, Tel: (03) 9419 5808  
[www.vic.democrats.org.au](http://www.vic.democrats.org.au)

Australian Labor Party – Victorian Branch  
360 King St West Melbourne 3003, Tel: (03) 9933 8500  
Freecall 1800 638 003  
[www.vic.alp.org.au](http://www.vic.alp.org.au)

Christian Democratic Party (Fred Nile Group)  
PO Box 9, Doveton 3177, (03) 9887 9350

Citizens Electoral Council (Victorian Division)  
595 Sydney Rd Coburg 3058, Tel: (03) 9354 0544  
[www.cecaust.com.au](http://www.cecaust.com.au)

Country Alliance  
PO Box 253 Mitcham 3132, Tel: (03) 9876 9902  
[www.countryalliance.org](http://www.countryalliance.org)

Democratic Labor Party (DLP) of Australia  
PO Box 8118 Monash University Clayton 3168,  
Tel: (03) 9568 5241  
[www.dlp.org.au](http://www.dlp.org.au)

Family First Party Victoria Inc.  
PO Box 4631 Knox City Wantima South 3152,  
Tel: (03) 9800 5393  
[www.familyfirst.org.au](http://www.familyfirst.org.au)

Liberal Party of Australia – Victorian Branch  
104 Exhibition St Melbourne 3000, Tel: (03) 9654 2255  
Local Call 1300 363 038  
[www.vic.liberal.org.au](http://www.vic.liberal.org.au)

National Party of Australia – Victoria  
24 Collins St Melbourne 3000, Tel: (03) 9654 6588  
[www.vic.nationals.org.au](http://www.vic.nationals.org.au)

Socialist Alliance (Victoria)  
PO Box 12427 A'Beckett St Post Office Melbourne 3001,  
Tel: (03) 9639 8622  
[www.socialist-alliance.org](http://www.socialist-alliance.org)

The Australian Greens – Victoria  
Lvl 1/ 377 Little Bourke St Melbourne 3000, Tel: (03) 9602 1141  
[www.vic.greens.org.au](http://www.vic.greens.org.au)

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