

# **SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIA 2020 SUMMIT**

## **Catholic Social Service and Justice Agencies, Victoria**

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### **TOPIC 1: The future of the Australian economy**

Innovative proposals to modernise the Australian economy must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles drawn from reflection on the experience of our member agencies in working with the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

#### **General principles**

The purpose of government is promotion of the common good. Governments serve, within the constitutional and legal framework, to promote and ensure the wellbeing of all, including justice between sections of society.

The common good involves upholding the inherent dignity of all people, as well as effective stewardship of the natural environment that is to serve future generations as well as ourselves. The common good also entails solidarity with other groups and individuals within our society and beyond – ‘no man is an island’, and none of us can rest secure while others are suffering. As the Second Vatican Council put it in their document *Gaudium et Spes*: God intended the earth and all it contains for all peoples.

This leads to a preferential option for the poor in the framing of public policy and the use of public goods – the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised do not automatically benefit from mainstream developments.

Australian society comprises individuals, families, small groups, communities, organisations, etc. To achieve just government, there needs to be participation of individuals and groups in decisions that impact on them. The principle of subsidiarity emphasises the rights of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and effort, and that involvement of government is useful and necessary only when it can support and enable the aspirations of individuals and groups.

## **Economic directions**

Economic growth in Australia over the past two decades has resulted in our being part of the wealthiest civilisation in human history. A fundamental orientation of a just approach to the management of this wealth must be to ensure that those who have ‘fallen through the cracks’ are looked after, and that the ‘cracks’ in the system are systematically addressed. Thankfully, we can now collectively afford this. The challenge is to give it due priority, and to systematically pursue it.

A second key equity issue is that skill levels will increasingly determine personal financial outcomes. Thus, as we strive to develop and retain skills across the economy, an integral policy objective must be to ensure that the acquisition of these skills is an option across the society.

For this to be achieved, innovative approaches to educational access and retention will be needed; as will new ways of attracting highly skilled personnel from the next generation into all levels of teaching.

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## **TOPIC 2: The productivity agenda – education, skills, training, science and innovation**

Innovative proposals to enhance Australia’s productivity and skills must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of the Catholic Church and its agencies as a major employer in Australia, and as a provider of assistance to marginalised members of society.

That experience informs our understanding of some of the particular issues that arise in workplace relations. That experience also informs our application to the current situation of the principles of Catholic social teaching that have developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society. Of particular interest to the Church in the current context are the following rights–

- a just wage
- protection against unfair agreements
- participate in unions and
- job security.

Fair remuneration and job security play an important part in providing a decent life for workers and their families. Protection around these matters is particularly important for those who have limited job prospects and who are vulnerable to economic change. It is not morally acceptable to reduce unemployment by allowing wages and conditions of employment to fall below the level that is needed by workers to sustain a decent standard of living. The following features need emphasis to ensure that workers achieve in practice their entitlement to a wage that allows them to live a fulfilling life and to meet their family obligations:

- fairness in the setting of wages;
- the provision of a fair safety net by reference to the living standards generally prevailing in Australia;
- the needs of employees and their families and
- the proper assessment of the impact of taxes and welfare support payments.

Workers, especially the poor and vulnerable, should not be placed in a situation where they will be required to bargain away some of their entitlements, such as rest breaks, overtime and penalty rates. The terms of employment cannot be left wholly to the marketplace. The responsibility of government is to ensure that there is a proper balance between rights, especially when bargaining positions are not equal.

Workers should be able to co-operate to advance their mutual interests through participation in unions. The legitimate rights of unions are derived from the rights of their members. In their proper role in the workplace, they are not 'third parties' or outsiders to the employment relationship.

Workers should have appropriate redress against unfair dismissal - access to an independent and affordable arbiter is imperative to prevent abuse.

Economic growth underpins prosperity and economic security for all and is needed to provide equity and social cohesion, and to enhance social justice. The integration of economic growth and social justice is a fundamental obligation of government. They must be pursued in ways that are fair and equitable to the society as a whole.

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### **TOPIC 3: Population, sustainability, climate change and water**

#### **Refugee Issues**

Innovative proposals to address climate change and population growth must not be at the expense of our obligations to refugees – they must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of refugees and asylum seekers who our member agencies work with on a daily basis, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

Over the last 10 years, there has been a disproportionate amount of attention applied to controlling the entry of a few thousand asylum seekers into Australia each year. The migration intake has more than doubled over recent years while the refugee and humanitarian intake has hovered at 12,000-13,000 per annum. Irrespective of unprecedented economic growth, Australia has not significantly increased its humanitarian intake over the same period.

Much legislation change is needed to rectify problems caused by recent policies. Closing the detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island is a first step, but keeping open the Christmas Island centre does not show commitment to an open and transparent refugee determination process. Instead, it maintains a system that still denies people the right to seek asylum directly from Australia. Though Australia processes their refugee claims, it still denies responsibility for offering permanent resettlement to them. Offshore detention and the excision of islands from Australia's migration zone still maintain a punitive system towards asylum seekers.

Even if all offshore detention centres were closed, onshore centres need to be seriously overhauled. Irregular arrivals should receive some form of reception for the purposes of determining identity and running health and security checks. However, it should not be in the current form of mandatory, indefinite detention. A more compassionate system should be developed that prepares asylum seekers for all possible outcomes, including failed claims and being asked to leave the country.

The introduction of temporary protection visas (TPVs) is another system designed to punish asylum seekers. Though found to be genuine refugees, all asylum seekers are issued with a TPV that denies them many of the rights and services that are essential for successful settlement - rights, such as the right of return after travelling overseas to find family members and the right to sponsor immediate family to come to Australia; and services, such as free English courses and job search assistance. TPVs prevent refugees from settling.

The Catholic Church strongly opposes any policy that denies people the right to live with their own families.

Legislative change needs to come from a more humane, compassionate perspective. Such a perspective will positively affect not only asylum seekers, but will also improve our stance towards Indigenous Australians and, more generally, the poor, disadvantaged and the marginalised.

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#### **TOPIC 4: Future directions for rural industries and rural communities**

Innovative proposals to support rural communities in Australia must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of rural communities that our member agencies work with on a daily basis, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

##### **General principles**

The purpose of government is promotion of the common good. They serve, within the constitutional and legal framework, to promote and ensure the wellbeing of all, including justice as between sections of society.

The principle of subsidiarity emphasises the rights of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and effort. The involvement of government is useful and necessary, but only when it can support and enable the aspirations of individuals and groups.

The common good involves upholding the inherent dignity of all people, as well as effective stewardship of the natural environment that is to serve future generations as well as ourselves. The common good also entails that solidarity with other groups and individuals within our society and beyond. - 'no man is an island', and none of us can rest secure while others are suffering.

## **Rural communities**

The daily experience of our agencies is that rural communities are hurting badly, caught in the grips of major economic adjustment that is itself the result of ecological, technological and other developments.

The suffering of these communities is exacerbated by their physical isolation, in some cases their precarious financial reserves, and by the long-standing ties that bind them to land or towns whose economic and social nature has changed almost beyond recognition.

Our response needs to be multi-pronged:

Short term support:

- counseling is critical to help coping with relationship, financial and related changes
- targeted education and training to enable the consideration of other options;
- transitional financial assistance.
- support to build communities – youth workers, support for sporting clubs, etc
- support for therapeutic linkages between communities is also needed, as a key underlying issue is the perception of the people involved that they are able to move towards a fuller life.

Long-term support: a key elements is education and training, with related income and other support.

Structural steps to re-build the preconditions for healthy rural communities. Steps that could be taken include:

- decentralised delivery of government services
- decentralised provision of infrastructure, to help build local communities.
- incentives to industries such as banks to maintain a regional presence would also contribute to stronger communities, by helping to build the critical mass needed for viable community.

Such steps might involve a degree of cross-subsidisation, at some cost to overall economic efficiency. But economic efficiency is not the sole aim of government, and should only be pursued in light of the broader aims outlined above.

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## **TOPIC 5: A long-term national health strategy**

You did not respond to this topic.

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## **TOPIC 6: Strengthening communities and supporting working families**

Innovative proposals to strengthen Australian communities must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised who our member agencies work with on a daily basis, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

### **General principles**

Australian society comprises individuals, families, small groups, communities, etc. The principle of subsidiarity emphasises the rights of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and effort, but that involvement of government is useful and necessary when it can support and enable the aspirations of individuals and groups.

The purpose of government is promotion of the common good. This involves upholding the inherent dignity of all people, and supporting the family structure as it works to the same end. The common good also entails that solidarity with other groups and individuals within our society and beyond - 'no man is an island', and none of us can rest secure while others are suffering.

In this analysis, families are central to our wellbeing. As a fundamental unit of society, they are the providers of a significant part of the support that is needed for our wellbeing. The protection of human life is another of the most basic of human rights, so a government commitment to upholding this right is a necessary part of a commitment to overall community wellbeing.

### **Practical support for families**

Fundamental to community wellbeing is the practical availability to all members of the income and services needed to enable them to achieve their human potential. Basic levels of income support; education; health; housing etc are thus needed, and in each of these areas a new commitment from governments at all levels is needed. A broad-based government commitment to minimum levels of social and economic services and support is called for.

Such services need to support those families that are providing the front-line services and the broader enabling environment for human development. Such support needs to be direct, but also via agencies that are closer to the needs of the marginalised, and also in tax and benefit structures, and in legal frameworks that give long term strength and support for the family.

### **Homelessness**

The homeless are among the most marginalised in our society, and their needs are complex. Affordable and appropriate shelter is a starting point. Money is the main constraint here, and the role of government is to ensure its availability. But money alone is not enough. The homeless need personal support; access to relevant services; and acceptance into a broader community within which they can achieve their full human potential.

Government leadership must also contribute to reinforcing our community understanding that our taxes and our personal efforts are working to re-integrate these fellow citizens into our society.

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## **TOPIC 7: Options for the future of Indigenous Australia**

### **General principles**

Innovative proposals to build a better future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of these communities that our agencies work with on a daily basis, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

The term ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities’ is preferable to ‘Indigenous Australia’. Among other things, this is to take into account the different needs of remote, rural and urban Aboriginal communities – government funding should be allocated on a ‘needs’ basis, not geographical.

How we forge a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia to overcome disadvantage and provide practical pathways to the future:

- Partnerships should be based on respect, trust and a mutual understanding of objectives
- Indigenous Australians should have a national, democratically, elected representative voice to provide advice to government on issues facing the Indigenous community
- Experience has shown us that no single channel of cooperation and assistance can be relied on; and that the way forward for Indigenous wellbeing depends on Indigenous leadership and ownership of development. Partnerships at all levels of Australian society are needed - partnerships between equal parties; and partnerships at the level of businesses, families, community organisations, and governments. We call on each institution in Australia to play its own part in this, as well as to contribute to broader efforts.

The role of targeted programs and interventions such as the Northern Territory Intervention and the Cape York Welfare Reform Trials in achieving change in remote communities:

- The results and benefits of programs such as the NTER and the CYWRT remains to be seen – ongoing, independent monitoring and analysis of these programs is necessary
- Consultation at all levels of affected Aboriginal communities is necessary; from ‘grass roots’ community members, to elected leaders, tribal or clan leaders, women’s groups, academics and others

How we might promote economic development in remote Australia to provide Indigenous community members with the opportunity to be economically independent:

- Establish national guidelines to promote culturally sensitive and economically viable partnerships between Traditional Land Owners and business investors
- Further develop business training opportunities

Improving access to mainstream programs by Indigenous Australians:

- Enhance existing Indigenous Studies programs and units across schools and universities – enabling the wider Australian community to appreciate and understand the historical and cultural factors facing Indigenous communities today
- Introduce compulsory cross-cultural education and training for non-Indigenous people in mainstream professions, regardless of perceived levels of interaction with Indigenous Australian individuals and communities

Promoting and preserving Indigenous culture, languages and traditions:

- Further support programs such as the Indigenous Languages Revival and Reclamation Program and Indigenous Language Culture Program across Indigenous Australian communities
- Introduce a nationwide program: in collaboration with local Indigenous communities, develop and enhance on-line teaching resources and materials for use in schools – oral histories, dreamtime stories, significant local sites

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## **TOPIC 8: Towards a creative Australia: the future of the arts, film and design**

You did not respond to this topic.

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## **TOPIC 9: The future of Australian governance**

Innovative proposals to strengthen Australian governance must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised who our member agencies work with on a daily basis, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for the building of a just society.

### **General principles**

The purpose of government is promotion of the common good. They serve, within the constitutional and legal framework, to promote and ensure the wellbeing of all, including justice between sections of society.

Australian society comprises individuals, families, small groups, communities, organisations, etc. To achieve just government, there needs to be participation of individuals and groups in decisions that impact on them. The principle of subsidiarity emphasises the rights of individuals and social groups to make their own decisions and accomplish what they can by their own initiative and effort, and that involvement of higher levels of society, including government, is useful and necessary only when it can support and enable the aspirations of individuals and groups.

### **Openness**

A commitment to openness by governments at all levels serves the common good. It ensures that there is an informed constituency, and that decisions are made with maximum transparency. There are, of course, good reasons why confidentiality is required in government dealings, but the need for this should be established in each case or class of cases, lest the presumption of confidentiality develop.

In practice, it sometimes seems that governments err on the side of restricting access to information that might be embarrassing or controversial. In this context, we commend to the Summit the wording and the spirit of section 3 of the *Freedom of Information Act* 1982 (Vic). That section sets out the object of that Act as “to extend as far as possible the right of the community to access to information in the possession of the Government of Victoria...” and then adds that “It is the intention of the Parliament that ... any discretions conferred by this Act shall be exercised as far as possible so as to facilitate and promote, promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost, the disclosure of information.”

### **Engagement of the community**

The actual commitment to engagement is an important step. For effective government, which seeks to support and enable the aspirations of all members of the society, this means understanding and standing with the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised in order to effectively serve them. Protection of the right to life of the most vulnerable is a primary step.

Governments need to work with faith-based and other groups whose mission it is to provide a voice for the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. For without dedication and commitment over time, it is difficult to hear the voice of the poor. Those who hear best are those who make the most effort to listen.

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## **TOPIC 10: Australia's future in the region and the world**

Innovative proposals to strengthen Australia's future security and prosperity must be based on principles that underpin the wellbeing of all. This submission builds on principles that are drawn from reflection on the experience of our member agencies, and on Catholic social teaching that has developed over time as a basis for a just society.

## **General Principles**

The common good involves upholding the inherent dignity of all people, as well as effective stewardship of the natural environment that is to serve future generations as well as ourselves. Poverty is an assault on human dignity. The common good also entails that solidarity with other groups and individuals within our society and beyond – ‘no man is an island’, and none of us can rest secure while others are suffering.

This leads to a preferential option for the poor in the framing of public policy and the use of public goods – the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised do not automatically benefit from mainstream developments.

All societies comprise individuals, families, small groups, communities, organisations, etc. To achieve just government, there needs to be participation of individuals and groups in decisions that impact on them.

## **Refugee issues**

Australia’s border security needs to be managed in light of other interests: the human rights of those who are interdicted have been abused, and Australia’s international reputation has been diminished, seriously compromising our ability to deal fairly with other countries. Australia’s future security depends on it re-engaging with other countries to build relationships of mutual respect with agreed shared goals.

## **Skill levels and immigration**

The increasing use of temporary workers in Australia has resulted in increased exploitation, the most disturbing of which is the trafficking of women and children into the sex trade. There needs to be more serious prosecution of agents and employers who violate people’s human rights.

Migrant workers are people with hearts and souls and minds, with dreams and aspirations for a better life, and they should be treated as such. Australia should lead the way in ratifying the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

## **Poverty and security**

Australia has an obligation to the world’s poor, and has a moral imperative to achieve our commitment of 0.7% of GDP as overseas aid by 2015.

The peace and security of all nations rests in the ability of all nations to adequately provide for the social and economic wellbeing of all its citizens. Where extreme poverty exists, terrorism and terrorist organisations thrive. We must support efforts to build a culture of peace by promoting overseas aid policies, which provide access to proper nourishment, health, housing and education, and by promoting a just order of society in our region. As part of this, overseas aid should assist other countries that take more than their fair share of refugees.