

June 2004



Presentation Society Justice Newsletter



Issue No. 3

Dear Sisters and Associates

In the May issue of the newsletter we mentioned our intention to address issues that we see as significant in the coming federal election. Specifically we have used our filters of attending to the cry of the earth and of those made poor as we choose which issues to address. We have done this on pages 2 and 3 of this newsletter as “we know not the day nor the hour” when the election will be called and we wanted to “be alert, but not alarmed” about being ready when the day comes. In the time since our April meeting other organisations, including the Church, have also published a list of priorities that need our serious consideration before we cast our vote. We were pleased to see Cardinal Pell encouraging Catholics to become politically informed and involved.

In this issue we again report on developments in West Papua and along the border between West Papua and PNG in an area very close to where our sisters are based. As well as this we raise the issues of acknowledgement of traditional owners of the land as a path to reconciliation; a better way for dealing with refugees and asylum seekers; and the connection between the Earth Charter and the Kyoto Protocol. Our direct action has been to write to the Government and Opposition re several issues: Children in Detention; concerns about threats to human rights organisations in Indonesia; and current boundary arrangements between Australia and East Timor in the Timor Sea.

Joan Power, Peta Anne Molloy, Anne Shay, Kathleen Tynan and Annette Shears (IPA Networker)
Society Justice Committee

Refugees and Asylum Seekers

The report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) into the conditions of children in immigration detention was tabled in Federal Parliament on 13 May. This damning report describes a history of systematic abuse of children within the Australian immigration detention system and clearly lays both legal and moral responsibility for these violations at the door of the Australian Government. The report presents the Australian Government with a stark and immediate choice: to continue with its present policy of detaining children, knowing that practice to be a flagrant violation of international law, or to change its policy (from Rural Australians for Refugees National Bulletin 13.05.04).

There is a Better Way! Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS) has evolved an alternative to mandatory detention. Their policy, called *The Better Way*, is a combination of three approaches:

1. Early evaluation of refugees to work out whether anyone poses a security risk and whether there is a risk of absconding if they are placed in low-security housing.
2. Case management by a social worker from a national welfare agency to work with people and families to ensure they understand Australia's refugee system and counsel people as they move through the legal process.
3. Three accommodation options that house people according to an assessment of their security risk.

The Better Way is available from dorian@melbourne.catholic.org.au or CCJDP (Melbourne) on (03) 9926 5710.

World Refugee Day

20 June



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Federal Election 2004

In the next 3-4 months a Federal Election will be called. As we sift through the issues which face Australia today the cry of those made poor and the cry of the earth call us to continue the mission of Jesus. We believe now is the time for us to bring questions about the issues to the Parties and the individuals seeking election.

In keeping with our Presentation Society Vision 2004-2006 we have chosen four issues which we believe require a critique based on our Christian tradition:

- the ever widening gap between the poor and the wealthy in Australia
- Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers;
- Australia's treatment of and policies for Indigenous people;
- Australia's lack of commitment to the global environmental issues.

We are inviting all members of Presentation Society to write to your local member and candidates of the major parties seeking their response to questions about one or more of the issues which concern you especially.

You will need to watch your local newspapers and letter box drops for the names of candidates. These may not be available until closer to the election date.



Sample Letter

Dear

As a Federal Election is to be held on I am interested in hearing your Party's position on and which I see as significant for Australia at this time.

[Insert *The Facts Speak* and *Question to Ask* according to the issues you are particularly concerned about.]

I look forward to receiving your response to these questions as they will help me make a choice on Election Day.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely

The Widening Gap Between Poor and Wealthy

The Facts Speak

- 1 million Australians are in poverty despite living in a household where at least one adult works.
- There are now over 700,000 children (1 in 6 Australian children) growing up in households where no adult works.
- 21% of households – 3.6 million Australians – live on less than \$400 a week – less than the minimum wage.
- Education, health and transport have gone up by over 100%, in excess of the CPI over the past 5 years.
- Many families are now spending over 30% of their incomes on either rent or mortgage repayments – often to the detriment of other family expenses.

Our Christian Tradition Speaks

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus—Luke 16:19 31

In his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II presents work as being integral to the life and development of the human person, who is destined to share in the making of the world. To the extent that our society allows unemployment and underemployment to continue at these levels, we are denying a significant number of our citizens their rightful dignity as human beings and withholding the means to participate in the life of the community.

The vow of poverty calls us to be in solidarity with those who are poor and marginalised and to strive with them against oppressive forces that impoverish and degrade human dignity.

(Our Constitutions #34)



Questions to Ask

- What measures does your party propose to take to link the minimum wage to adequate standards of living as recommended by the Senate Report on Poverty?
- What steps does your party propose to take to increase the availability of low-cost housing in areas accessible to public transport?

Refugees

The Facts Speak

In its comprehensive and detailed report on children in immigration detention, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) details ten years of systematic human rights abuse of children held in Australian detention centres. (Bellingen Rural Australians for Refugees Bulletin 13.05.04)

...the Inquiry found that the Commonwealth breached the Convention on the Rights of the Child by failing to take all appropriate measures to protect children from physical and mental violence. (*A Last Resort—A summary guide to the National Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention—HREOC*)

Our Christian Tradition Speaks

I was a stranger and you welcomed me—Matthew 23:35

Questions to Ask

- What means will your party take to end the detention of refugees (especially children) in remote areas of Australia and islands close by?
- What steps is your party taking to adopt a more humane refugee policy, e.g. *The Better Way* as proposed by Justice for Asylum Seekers (JAS).

Indigenous Issues

The Facts Speak

Life expectancy for Indigenous Australians is 20 years less than that of non-Indigenous Australians.

‘Experience has taught that the delivery of services to Indigenous peoples is least effective when the peoples themselves play no significant part in the process. Those who have had little say in what happened in their past must be encouraged and assisted to shape their future. The quest for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and the rest of the Australian community must move forward in a spirit of genuine dialogue which seeks to heal wounds both past and present.’ (*The Catholic Leader* 06.06.04 pg 9)

Our Christian Tradition Speaks

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for Yahweh has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison—Isaiah 61:1-2

Questions to Ask

- How will your party ensure that Indigenous Australians participate in the selection of members for and the establishment of the national body to replace ATSIC?
- How does your party propose to address the issue of Indigenous health?

Environment Issues

The Facts Speak

- Within 50 years the island state of Tuvalu (in the Pacific) with a population of 11,000 is expected to be completely flooded by rising ocean levels which are occurring because of global warming.
- In a recent ABC News Bulletin (07.06.04) it was reported that only one Australian capital city, Brisbane, has more than 50% of the water storage capacity filled. At present Perth only has around 25% of its present capacity filled.
- Monsanto, the global corporation that produces the majority of the world’s GM seeds has argued that GM food is safe because they have not proven unsafe.

Our Christian Tradition Speaks

The vow of poverty acknowledges that all of creation is sacred and a gift from God. We recognise our need to celebrate and form a covenant with the earth and the universe, fostering an interdependence that supports the well-being of the entire earth community. At a time when

over-consumption and degradation threaten the earth's resources ... The vow of poverty commits us to a responsible, just and non-possessive relationship with all creation, expressed through our simple living, our sharing in community, our hospitality and generosity in mission. We are challenged to speak and act when the earth's resources are used in destructive and unjust ways. [Our Constitutions #33]

Oceania is a part of the world of great natural beauty... The Synod Fathers called upon the governments and peoples of Oceania to protect this precious environment for present and future generations. It is their special responsibility to assume on behalf of all humanity stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, containing over one half of the earth's total supply of water. [Ecclesia In Oceania #32]

Questions to Ask

- Will your party sign the Kyoto protocol if you win the election?
- What is your policy in relation to the introduction of genetically engineered foods/seeds into Australia?

The Earth Charter and the Kyoto Protocol

The Earth Charter urges us - *Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life*, the firm resolution to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

The Kyoto Protocol is one of the international conventions that sets standards for protecting our environment and achieving sustainability.

In recent weeks it has been reported that Russia has now signed the Kyoto Protocol. While this is in itself significant it is even more so, in that, by the addition of

that one more signature there are now sufficient signatories for the Protocol to become internationally binding.

Meanwhile the Australian government is showing no sign of changing its current position. So we remain on the outside of this significant environmental moment for the planet. On pages 2 and 3 of this newsletter you are invited to ask candidates for the next Federal Election where their Party stands in relation to the Kyoto Protocol.



Pathways to RECONCILIATION – Respecting the Traditional Owners

N AIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week – 4-11 July – provides an opportunity to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land. This acknowledgement can be seen as a way of recognising native title and of honouring the fact that this land was occupied for thousands of years before we came here and that it had and continues to have great spiritual significance. In doing this, we acknowledge the fallacy of *terra nullius* and publicly admit that our ownership of the land has come at the cost of the dispossession of the traditional owners. We also show respect to the descendants of the traditional owners who continue to be custodians of the land.

Recognition could be given to the traditional owners of the land by having a ceremony at which a plaque, a memorial stone, a mural, or a painting is placed on a building, on a wall, in the grounds or somewhere else. Recognition can also be made at every gathering by a simple statement acknowledging the traditional owners, e.g.

*Today we gather on the traditional lands of the Aboriginal people.
We give thanks for the elders who have cared for this land for thousands of years.*

We acknowledge with respect the many Aboriginal groups who live in this area.



West Papua—Papua New Guinea – Border Schools

“Imagine a Papua New Guinea teacher getting up early each morning every week day, driving to Indonesia, teaching Indonesian students, and returning home in the evening. Wishful thinking? Certainly not, this could be the normal routine for some PNG teachers within the next two years when an exciting, innovative educational project between Indonesia’s Papua province and the West Sepik (Sandaun) province of PNG takes shape. It takes the shape of four international schools of trade to be built at Skow, about one hour’s drive from the PNG border post of Wutung on the international highway that links Vanimo in PNG and Jayapura, Papua’s provincial capital (Vanimo is about 20 minutes by plane from Aitape).

And it’s not all one way traffic to Indonesia. West Sepik education authorities are also keen to lure their Indonesian counterparts to teach in the province’s vocational centres around Vanimo. West Sepik educational planners have accepted the fact that their children cannot compete in the limited formal employment sector of the urban centres of Port Moresby and Lae.” (*The National*, 30 May 2004)

Over our past issues we have been describing some of the violence, oppression and persecution which the West Papuan people have been experiencing and continue to experience at the hands of the Indonesian authorities. So, in the light of these realities, the plan to establish border schools raises many questions. Among them we ask:

- What is the motivation of each of the governments – Indonesia in participating and PNG in accepting the scheme?
- What are the cultural implications for both the West Papuan and PNG students when many families who live in West Papua are not of Melanesian background?
- What are the implications if the Indonesian government utilises military power and the PNG government is unstable?
- What are the implications for the Christian people on the border areas of PNG in the face of fundamentalist religious persecution of Christians in Indonesia?
- What are the implications when the two languages to be used are Bahasa Indonesian and English?