

WHITHER AUSTRALIA?

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With a federal election bearing down on us, Australians will have a fresh opportunity to choose their government and review its preferred policies. The Australian Catholic bishops have issued a general election statement, 'A vote for us all' (see www.acbc.catholic.org.au), covering human life issues, the wellbeing of families, our indigenous people, education, health care, the environment, immigration and refugees, and work for peace.

On international issues, the bishops have given more detailed thought to a range of issues in their annual social justice statement, *Who is my neighbour? Australia's role as a global citizen*. *Micah* in this issue examines this statement, but issues of domestic policy touch most of us more directly.

The long economic boom in Australia has fortunately wound back the high levels of unemployment. Australia has benefited from the strong US economy, which is financed in large part by overseas borrowings, particularly from China. The resources boom in Australia is also, oh so ironically, underpinned by unprecedented demand from communist China.

But we face major new problems domestically, including the growing dangers from climate change and the threat to farming and food production, along with the continuing acute disadvantage of many indigenous Australians.

The bubble in house prices has put enormous pressure on first-home buyers, forcing more women into the paid workforce, and resulting in turn in a low birthrate. The average price of an Aussie home has risen from about four times pre-tax annual wages to about seven times. Not surprisingly, many people on low incomes are unable to secure adequate housing, partly as a result of cuts in government spending for public housing.

Despite the economic boom, there is a growing gap between rich and poor in Australia, with top income earners significantly increasing in wealth, while poorer groups, as Tony Vinson's studies have shown, were geographically more marginalised in particular rural districts and suburbs.

Large numbers of people are still living at or below the poverty line, particularly in one-parent families. In its report, *Australia Fair: International Comparisons 2007*, the Australian Council of Social Services estimates that 9.9 per cent of Australians, nearly two million people, fell below the internal poverty line, including more than 40% of the unemployed.

Moreover, many people on low incomes face chronic health problems, particularly those in need of dental care or with mental health issues. And changes in the workplace have undermined job security and conditions for many people. Since 1980, 60% of new jobs have been part-time, and 60% of these are casual – about a quarter of the entire workforce.

Dr John Falzon, chief executive officer from the national office of the Society of St Vincent de Paul, said recently that nearly one million people in Australia were in jobs but were still below the poverty line. Child poverty was 14.7 per cent, compared with Denmark's rate of only 2.4 per cent. Clearly, with better policies Australia could greatly reduce such poverty.

As our Catholic and other social service agencies have been arguing, Australian governments need to give a higher priority to issues of social equity to ensure a better distribution of wealth and life opportunities.

Instead of pursuing the US model of economic development with its emphasis on competition and individualism, we can still choose to give greater attention to social equity and community wellbeing, as in parts of Europe. This will require inspired political leadership that can resist the manipulation of special interest groups and build a new consensus about what the common good involves at this critical time.

We are entering an entirely new era when the basic model of economic growth is being called into question by the consequences of global warming and the energy crisis.

CLIMATE CHANGE

We are still only beginning to see the implications of climate change, but undoubtedly we will need to adopt a more frugal lifestyle, living more modestly in our use of resources, especially with water, use of energy and travel.

As the leaflet on 'Reducing our ecological footprint' indicated, there is much we can do as individuals. In recent weeks, copies of this leaflet have been distributed through Catholic schools, parishes and community groups in Melbourne and more widely. If you missed out on receiving a copy of this leaflet, you can download it from the website of Catholic Social Services Victoria, at www.css.org.au.