



Election Issues 1998

*Statement adopted by UnitingCare NSW.ACT
in May 1998*

Contents of this document

- Statement adopted by the Board for Social Responsibility in May 1998
- Social goals
- Tax reform
- Indigenous issues
- Employment
- Children and families
- Housing
- Aged care
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
- Environment
- Obtaining multiple copies of this document

The NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia is committed to social justice. The church assesses public policy against the requirements of civil and political rights, and of economic, social and cultural rights. The common good requires that these rights be taken into account in all policy formation. It requires that there be a strong independent monitor of human rights within the nation.

The Board for Social Responsibility believes that to deserve the support of Christians in the next federal election, political parties must demonstrate respect for the economic, social and cultural rights of the Australian people through their approach to social policy in the following areas.

Social goals

Australia needs a government committed to human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. Public policy should be based on a concept of citizenship linked with human rights. Public ownership of appropriate assets is the best way of ensuring that all citizens benefit from those assets. Services such as health, education and communication

are basic rights. ^[1] Public policy must take seriously the rights of rural and remote communities. It must reverse the trend of diminishing public and commercial services such as communications, health care and banking. It is not in the best interests of Australia to eliminate rural towns or to leave them without adequate services. ^[2] The views of people in rural and remote areas need to be taken seriously in the development of policies that affect them. There must be more adequate services for people with disabilities, including adequate protection against discrimination.

Tax reform

Australia needs tax reform that ensures a sound future financial system. This will require an adequate revenue base, fairness economic efficiency, and simplicity. Negative gearing on shares and property should be abolished. Fairness means that the system must be progressive and treat people with similar capacity to pay tax in similar ways. Any consumption tax must be low enough that it does not have a negative impact on people on low incomes. A consumption tax should not be used to fund tax cuts. Tax

reform should also pay attention to wealth taxes and taxes on financial transactions, as useful forms of revenue-raising. Fringe benefit tax should be retained and any abuses of the current exemptions should be stopped. The object of tax reform should be to increase the revenue base by taxing those who currently pay less than their equitable share of tax.^[3]

Indigenous issues

Australia needs reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians. This requires a government committed to human rights as they apply to the particular situation of Australia's Indigenous people. Reconciliation needs bipartisan support. Policies must take account of the past reports of the Social Justice Commissioner. Political parties must show themselves able to work cooperatively with Indigenous communities and their elected representatives. They must be committed to appointing a full time, Indigenous person as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. They must be committed to native title rights and understand the meaning of those rights in the context of human rights. They must be willing to make apology to Indigenous people for the stolen generations, as a step in the process of reconciliation. They must recognise the need for reparation for past wrongs.^[4]

The federal government, in full consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and state and territory governments, should develop a national policy for future development of services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and young people, with a particular emphasis on family support and community development.^[5]

Political parties will need to be willing to confront and challenge the various forms of racism that occur in Australia. Racism includes the culture within the policy process that fails to take adequate account of the experience and perspectives of Indigenous people themselves.^[6]

Employment

Australia needs a government committed to the working future of young people. There must be adequate funding for their general education and for job related training, both at entry level and later in life. Public policy must recognise that workers are human beings with rights and needs, and not merely units of production. It must provide more adequate protection for the human rights of workers. These include adequate wages, working conditions, occupational health and safety, protection from unfair dismissal, the right to belong to and be represented by unions, and the right to consideration of their family obligations.

Public policy must recognise where society is unable to provide appropriate paid employment. Government should not treat the victims of unemployment in a punitive fashion. More attention needs to be paid to the type of economy Australia is creating, to provide adequate security for individual workers, for towns and regions, and for the nation. There needs to be adequate public investment in education, infrastructure, research, and regional development. Economic development must not be at the expense of the native title rights of Indigenous Australians.^[7]

Children and families

Australia's children need a government that recognises that the whole community has a responsibility towards children. Government must take account of the needs of children, and not leave parents to cope with children without help. There needs to be adequate funding to State governments for child abuse prevention. There must be better funding for childcare to ensure that children in low-income families have access to appropriate, affordable care while their parents are at work. Preschool children should have access to education rather than simply child-minding. School age children need safe and appropriate places to stay before and after school and in the school vacations. Building on current measures toward simplification of childcare payments, the Government should work on creating a system that is more affordable, results in higher take-up of entitlements and is more user friendly.^[8]

The rights of children (and their families) should be protected through legislative implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. There should be a Children's Commissioner. The role of Commissioner would include to review legislation, policies and practices affecting children; report to the Government any areas of doubtful or non-compliance with acceptable standards of fair treatment of children by government authorities and non-government agencies; report to Parliament on any children's issues; be responsible for developing mechanisms to consult with children; be a voice for children to government and non-government agencies; initiate proceedings on behalf of children; and intervene in proceedings which involve children.^[9]

Australian families need a government that will take an active lead in developing a national strategy for strengthening families. There is need to fund a new National Families Support Program. The aim should be to reach a multi-lateral agreement on a national strategy for strengthening families and supporting communities. Such a strategy would serve to:

- enhance the provision of all services which support families at every point in the life cycle;
- expand the provision of services which prevent stress in low income families, and where parents experience a high level of stress related to their parenting;
- prevent abuse, neglect and violence in families;
- improve access to services and facilities;
- establish a national approach to child protection and substitute care; and
- build on community networks and supports, and strengthen these.^[10]

Housing

Australians need a government committed to adequate, affordable, secure housing for all Australians. In practical terms, this requires that the five-year Commonwealth Housing Agreement be renegotiated with

adequate funding for the period 1999-2000 to 2004-2005. The agreement should have scope to allow for national housing reform to ensure positive housing outcomes for tenants and to build a viable social housing sector.

There should be a commitment to return funding to the 1996-7 levels of \$1.06 billion. This will involve an increase of \$200 million, reversing the cuts made in the two most recent budgets. Thereafter funding levels should be indexed.^[11]

Aged care

Australians need a government committed to the human rights of the aged, especially their right to adequate, appropriate, affordable and accessible care. There is a need for strategic planning now to ensure adequate resourcing of care in the future. There must be adequate provision of services in rural areas. Public policy must provide more adequate funding for all levels of care, based on a realistic assessment of the cost of providing suitable care. This includes more adequate financial support for those who care for the frail aged at home, and adequate funding for dementia care, which should not be at the expense of other types of care.

Public policy must recognise that nursing homes are an alternative form of health care, not a form of housing. The matters raised by Prof. Bob Gregory's 1994 report on the nursing home stock must be adequately addressed. Moves to more adequate community based care must not obscure the need for adequate nursing home care for those who need it. There must be adequate provision of capital as well as recurrent funding. Residents of nursing homes dependent on pensions must be allowed to retain enough pension for their personal needs. Aged care is labour intensive and its clientele is increasing. Both these factors mean that funding must be increased rather than reduced.^[12]

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Australians need a government committed to human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. They need the

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to effectively monitor the government's human rights performance. This requires a reversal of the cuts imposed on HREOC in the 1997 budget, and the restitution of specialist commissioners. [\[13\]](#)

Human rights and environmental responsibility should provide the basic framework of public policy, including Australia's international agreements on matters such as trade. Australia should not become a party to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, for example, unless it contains provisions that make it subordinate to international human rights and environmental agreements. [\[14\]](#)

Environment

Australians need a government committed to ecologically sustainable development. Australia must also act responsibly in its effect on the global biosphere and international environmental agreements. This requires funding to repair past environmental damage, effective regulation of activities that have the potential to damage the environment, charges on activities which damage the environment to pay for repairs, and incentives for environmentally-friendly industries rather than those that cause damage. Environmental Defenders' Offices [\[15\]](#) should be funded for litigation that challenges unlawful acts that damage to the environment.

Footnotes

[\[1\]](#) Resolution 82.16 (3) (b) in *Minutes of the third assembly 1982*

[\[2\]](#) Synod 1987.

[\[3\]](#) Based on resolution of 1988 assembly. Proposals are based on Uniting Community Services Australia draft paper on Tax Reform April 1998

[\[4\]](#) Based on 1996 and 1997 synod resolutions, inter alia.

[\[5\]](#) Based on CSA submission to government, April 1998

[\[6\]](#) Based on assembly 1977 and 1988 statements to the nation, and synod resolutions in 1993, 96 and 97.

[\[7\]](#) Based on synod 92, assembly 94 resolutions and more recent work by CSA and BSR/Burnside/Youth Unit.

[\[8\]](#) Based on material from CSA and

Children's Services Forum.

[\[9\]](#) Synod 1997

[\[10\]](#) CSA submission to parliamentary inquiry, April 1998. Synod 1997 Family Ministry Policy and Council of Synod March 1997 agreement that policy be evaluated in terms of the National Council for the International Year of the Family statement of national responsibility to families.

[\[11\]](#) ECUMENICAL HOUSING INC *National housing policy: reform and social justice - an alternative approach to the housing assistance debate - finding the balance between demand and supply*. Melbourne, 1997 (Researched and written by Rob Hudson). Issues of housing policy reform were addressed in a public statement by the Executive of the National Council of Churches in November 1997.

[\[12\]](#) Based on submissions and statements of Uniting Ministry with the Aging.

[\[13\]](#) BSR 1997

[\[14\]](#) BSR March 1998

[\[15\]](#) BSR advocated this in 1997

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