



A VOTE FOR THE VOICELESS

A STATEMENT BY
THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS
OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE ELECTION

May 2016



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Australians are again going to the polls. We do so thankful that the electoral process will be free of the violence found elsewhere. Our political system may have its problems but we have a stable democracy, which is not to be taken for granted. Nor is the quality of those who put themselves forward for election to the Federal parliament. We are in their debt for their willingness to serve.

During the long election campaign there will be much talk about the economy and the need for good economic management at a time of some uncertainty. Both sides of politics will state their economic credentials in a bid to win power.

The economy of course is important and there does need to be sound management. But, as Pope Francis has pointed out, there is also a danger that the economy can become a kind of false god to which even human beings have to be sacrificed.

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This leads to what the Pope has called the throwaway culture - a culture of over-consumption where all kinds of things are thrown away, wasted, even human beings. The voices of the thrown-away people will not be heard in the long and rowdy campaign. Their faces will not be seen in all the advertising. Yet unless their voices are somehow heard and their faces seen, we will not have a truly human society in which economic management serves human beings rather than the other way round.

That is why we bishops want to speak a word as part of this campaign - not in order to push an ideological line or simply to defend the Church's interests but to give a voice to the voiceless and make their faces seen, however briefly in a statement such as this.

Among the people discarded in this throwaway culture are these:

- **Refugees and asylum seekers** who are often seen as a problem to be solved rather than as human beings in need of our help.
- **Indigenous peoples** whose cry for recognition has barely been heard and who suffer injustice at the hands of our justice system.
- **The survivors of sexual abuse** who have emerged from the shadows and whose voice is now being heard, crying out for redress and healing.
- **Those who suffer family violence** who are often unseen and unheard, behind closed doors with nowhere to go and no-one to turn to.
- **Those in the womb** who are among the most defenceless, at risk of being deprived of the most basic of all human rights, the right to live.
- **The elderly** who are seen at times as an economic burden now that they are unable to “produce” or consume in the way the economy demands.
- **Those suffering mental illness** who seem not to fit in with accepted patterns of social behaviour and are often presumed to contribute nothing to society, thus ending up in the too-hard basket.
- **Those suffering addiction** who can see no way out of the destructive grasp of alcohol or other drugs, gambling or pornography.
- **Those entrapped in new forms of slavery** who are the victims of sexual or workplace enslavement.
- **The desperately poor beyond our shores** who look to wealthy Australia for the help they need - often simply to survive - but find our nation less and less generous.



There are others in our community, near and far, whose voices are unheard, whose faces are unseen. They are seen as politically irrelevant. They will not decide any marginal seats or determine the result of the election. Yet any society is ultimately judged not on how well it manages the economy but on how well it treats the thrown-away people.

Who then are the people unheard and unseen? What does it mean for Australia to care for them? If we fail to ask these questions and to try to answer them, then much that goes on in this or any other election campaign will be political theatre that does not address the real issues.

But it is not just individual people who are thrown away. The same can happen to the environment, both social and natural. At the heart of a healthy social environment there is marriage and the family. Yet political decisions can end up undermining marriage and providing less and less support for families despite a rhetoric that claims otherwise.

The fact is that economic decisions have been less and less favourable to families in recent years; and it may be that political decisions in the future will undermine further the dignity and uniqueness of marriage as a lifelong union of man and woman. Support for marriage and the family does not look a big vote-winner, so that even the most basic human institution, upon which the health of a society depends, can become part of the throwaway culture or at best an optional extra.

Pope Francis has said that the earth too cries out for justice at this time. The natural environment - the land we live on, the air we breathe, the water we drink - even this can become voiceless, so that the earth's cry for justice can go unheard. Now is the time to act, so that the natural environment is able to meet human needs rather than be sacrificed to the god of the economy. We need an economy that is truly human, not falsely divinised. This does not mean divinising the natural world, but it does mean

treating it with respect and seeing it as a gift to be received gratefully rather than as a resource to be plundered at will.

Neither can we as Christians afford to be voiceless through this campaign. On all kinds of issues we need to make our voices heard. But to do that we will have to listen first - not only to the voice of the voiceless, but even to the voice of God. That is why for Christians and others prayer is an essential part of this long journey to the election. By prayer, we mean first listening to God who has a word to speak in all this - the God who is neither voiceless nor faceless. If we can listen to God's voice, then there is a chance that we might be able to speak with a voice that is not just our own.

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To listen to God and to the voiceless is in the end the same thing. In hearing their voice, we can hear the voice of God. That is where the real God is; that is how the real God communicates.

We hope that this campaign - for Christians at least and especially for Christian politicians - will be a time not of spin and bombast but a time of wise and true speaking that comes from deep and humble listening. Then our vote may be a vote in favour of a community where no-one is thrown away, where all the voices are heard and all the faces seen.



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