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Parties respond to Christian concerns

As mentioned in Jim Wallace's column (below), ACL has launched a special election website informing Christians about the different political party standpoints on key issues they care about.

The website www.australiavotes.org.au provides the responses of eight political parties, including the Coalition and Labor, to 24 questions on issues of interest to Christians ranging from homelessness and foreign aid to freedom of religion and the sexualisation of children.

Tellingly, the Australian Greens only answered six of the questions, choosing to avoid scrutiny on a variety of issues where their policy is unlikely to be well-received by most Christians.

The aim of the website is to assist Christians to make an informed vote at the upcoming election after accurately weighing up the different party policies and views on issues of concern to them.

We know that Christians don't vote as a homogenous block but they do tend to care about a broad range of moral and social justice issues which are likely to influence their vote.

The questions put to political parties are in keeping with this wide range of interest and mean the parties have had to clearly state their policies on issues which sometimes fall below the radar of day-to-day election coverage.

Responses to the questionnaire have been widely distributed among Australian churches from a broad range of



The new Australia Votes website

denominations, with 250,000 16-page summary booklets sent out last week, along with 800,000 flyers promoting the www.australiavotes.org.au website (more than one million pieces of literature in all).

If you have Internet access, we encourage you to visit www.australiavotes.org.au, where you will be able to read detailed answers to each question from each party. Please also encourage your friends and fellow church members to access the site.

The site also provides a range of short videos

from candidates – particularly in marginal seats – in which they explain where they stand on key issues of Christian concern, as well as a host of other election resources. Please also check to see if a Meet Your Candidate Forum is being held in your area.

Election times are an important opportunity in which we can influence the direction of our nation and we encourage you to be active in ensuring you make an informed vote and in highlighting with local candidates the issues of most concern to you.



Well we are now very close to an election that has plenty to interest Christians.

Clearly the personal faith of Tony Abbott, and Julia Gillard's declaration that she is an atheist, will influence the votes of many Christians from the outset of this campaign. Many will understandably feel they need look no further.

But there is more.

Firstly, we have a decision not only about the House of Representatives, but also about what the Senate is going to look

like. The Greens are tipped to hold the balance of power in the Senate, but their failure in response to our questionnaire to answer the questions they knew would not recommend them to Christians, displays a level of deception that should not be rewarded. We cannot, regardless of which side of politics it is, extend non-party partisanship to failing to expose this lack of integrity.

Doubtless some are attracted by elements of the Greens' environmental and refugee policies. But a party that feels it can answer only six of 24 questions without revealing, what has clearly also been seen in the public record as an apparent antagonism to faith, should be examined very carefully by a Christian voter. Labor, the Coalition and other minor parties such as Family First and the CDP do provide alternatives on issues the Greens otherwise seem attractive on. And, on the basis of the Greens'

evasiveness, are all more solid on support for faith and faith organisations.

Secondly, we do need to examine policies, which reflect the party as much as the leader. Both major parties are responding to the reality that this is a real Christian constituency, with real potential for political effect - especially in critical marginal seats in Queensland and Western Sydney.

Our election website www.australiavotes.org.au provides perhaps the best resource for any constituency in this election to compare policies and past voting records, as well as assisting people to understand the voting and preference systems.

Honour Christ with your vote, be informed and above all pray for the outcome.

Jim Wallace AM
 Managing Director

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Support school chaplaincy by contacting your Federal Member of Parliament

In the lead up to the election, the National School Chaplaincy Association has launched a campaign aimed at securing continued funding for school chaplaincy beyond 2011.

The Federal Government is conducting a review of the school chaplaincy program and has given no firm commitment to continue funding for it after 2011.

By contrast, the Opposition has given a commitment to the program for a further three years beyond 2011. However, at this stage they have not committed any additional funds to keep up with inflation and allow new schools to have access to a chaplain.

The lead up to the election is a vital time in which to secure commitments to future funding for school chaplaincy. There are currently around 2,000 chaplains employed in public schools throughout Australia and they are making a valuable contribution to the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of the school communities which needs to be continued.

We urge you to join in this campaign by going to <http://support.schoolchaplaincy.org.au/> and sending off an email to your local federal MP to inform them of your support of the school chaplaincy program and your wish to see it extended beyond 2011. If you don't have internet access please consider ringing or visiting your MP.



Call for ongoing funding for school chaplaincy. Photo courtesy of Scripture Union Qld

Increase in children sexually abusing children sparks call for review of classification system

In the face of new evidence of the increasing levels of children sexually abusing other children the ACL has called for both major political parties to commit to a comprehensive review of the classification system across all media.

ACL believes that the classification system is broken and that the lack of effective regulation of what is being viewed and read in the community must be acknowledged as at least part of the reason behind the appalling growth in

sexualised and sexually abusive behaviour in children.

Recent revelations by the Australian Crime Commission's National Indigenous Task Force that between 40 and 90 per cent of sexual offending against children was committed by other children – and that the problem is not confined to indigenous communities – should deeply concern all Australians and demand an urgent response from our political leaders.

There has been widespread acknowledgement of the role of the media environment in sexualising children but despite inquiries and talkfests, nothing gets done. There needs to be a comprehensive review of Australia's classification system which has not kept pace with technology and is effectively a toothless tiger even when standards are breached – with no real penalties for those involved.

The Coalition has given a very clear acknowledgement that the system is broken and that it will do something about it, as have Family First and the Christian Democratic Party.

Remember the homeless during the election campaign

While the battle heats up over the upcoming election, a recently released report serves as a stark reminder of the enormous task ahead to find stable long-term accommodation for the many tens of thousands of Australians left out in the cold every night.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported that two in every three homeless people are being turned away from crisis accommodation each night. It found that 62 percent of homeless people were unable to find a bed on any given day during 2008-09.

An average of 80 per cent of couples with children who requested new and immediate accommodation were turned away each day.

Responding to the report, Mission Australia chief executive Toby Hall labeled the dire circumstances of Australia's homeless "shameful". He is calling on Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott to make a fresh commitment to tackling homelessness.

Battle over protecting kids online heats up

The battle to provide greater protection for children from harmful material on the internet has intensified in recent weeks as 'internet civil libertarians' and those with vested commercial interests again demand that the internet be free of any safeguards – even when it comes to the most horrific material.

Recently three of Australia's leading ISPs said they would begin to voluntarily block

child porn, proving that ISP level filtering is practical and achievable.

That announcement came at the same time as the federal government said the proposed filter will be delayed by a review of what material should be filtered.

Federal Communications Minister Stephen Conroy revealed that Prime Minister Julia Gillard ordered the review, which is aimed at making sure there is nothing in 'Refused Classification' which should not be there and which might amount to unjustified censorship.

While the ACL is disappointed at the delay we are realistic enough to realise that ISP filtering was not going to get through Parliament before the federal election anyway, given the lack of time and the need to ensure it was implemented in the most transparent way possible.

We welcome the federal government's clear statements of commitment to the initiative and urge the Coalition and the Greens to follow suit.

Canberra Declaration launched

A group of over 20 Christian leaders have worked together to draft The Canberra Declaration – a document which was officially launched on the lawns of Parliament House on Friday July 23.

The Canberra Declaration follows on from the 2009 Manhattan Declaration and the 2010 Westminster Declaration. It declares that when Christian values are respected and allowed freedom of expression, not just confined to so-called sacred spaces but in the public arena as well, society is richer and healthier.

The Declaration emphasises three areas viewed as demanding particular attention in our contemporary Australian society, namely religious freedom, marriage and the family, and the sanctity of human life.

It states that the undermining of any one of these values would seriously weaken the social fabric of our nation, to our personal and collective detriment. The full Declaration can be read at: www.canberradeclaration.org.au.

Already thousands of Christians and Christian organisations – including the ACL – have signed the Canberra Declaration and we encourage you to consider signing it too.

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