

# PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION

The functions of the Public Affairs Commission are:

- to examine social, economic and political questions which impact on life in Australia and on Australia's relations with the wider world and make recommendations on such matters to influence the life of the Church; and
- to assist people to engage with public affairs and respond, within its capacity, to aspects of public affairs which may be referred to the Commission or initiated by the Commission.

The Commission observes the Protocol for Making Public Statements which was developed by the Standing Committee in 2011.

The members of the Commission are:

- The Hon Rev'd Dr Lynn Arnold, AO, Adelaide
- The Rev'd Dr Andrew Cameron, Sydney
- The Very Rev'd Dr Peter Catt, Brisbane
- Ms Kasy Chambers, Anglicare Australia
- The Rev'd Dr Graeme Garrett, Melbourne
- Dr Beth Heyde, Canberra and Goulburn, Chair
- The Rev'd Peter Sandeman, Adelaide
- The Rt Rev'd Dr Peter Stuart, Newcastle
- Dr Carolyn Tan, Perth
- The Rt Rev'd Tom Wilmot, Perth

Professor John Langmore retired as Chair in February 2013 after more than five years of distinguished service in the role. Members who have resigned since the last General Synod are the Rev'd Heather Cetrangolo, the Rev'd John Deane, The Rev'd Canon Dr Marion Free, Professor John Langmore, Mr Theo Mackaay, Mr Greg Thompson, and the Most Rev'd Greg Thompson.

A major contribution of the Commission soon after the last General Synod was a set of essays by its members which was published in St Mark's Review, No.214, November 2010(4), under the title '*Seeking Christian responses to 'wicked' problems*'. The Editor of the Review contributed an essay on Public Theology and Public Policy, and essays by Commission members were:

- a prophetic function,
- is growth good?
- care for the creation: population and environment,
- freedom of religion in human rights legislation: some key principles and issues,
- global poverty: the challenge remains; and
- 'white man's dreaming' – the Northern Territory Emergency Response: 'the Intervention'.

The Commission has monitored a range of issues and responded from time to time, within its capacity. Issues of interest and concern have been:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders: the Constitutional Recognition campaign, native title and heritage reform.
- Refugees and Asylum: Monitoring is facilitated by having a member who chairs the Churches Refugee Taskforce of the National Council of Churches.
- Environment/climate change and population issues: Following the papers earlier prepared on these issues in 2009 and 2010 (accessible on the General Synod web site), attention has been drawn through church networks to major developments such as the release of the first part of the fifth Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in late 2013; and questions have been raised in the 2013 pre-election period with political parties. Liaison takes place with the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change and the Anglican Communion Environment Network, consistent with Resolution 15.01 of the Anglican Consultative Council.
- International developments, foreign affairs and overseas aid: Monitoring of UN developments, transparency of international financial transactions, concern about reduction in the planned level of Australia's overseas aid, and readiness to contribute in preparations for the G20 meeting of international leaders, particularly through the Civil Society (C20) working group.
- Increasing pressure on corporations to act ethically: Liaison has taken place with church groups seeking ways in which churches can exert pressure, eg through tax justice, addressing financial exclusion, and policies for church investment.

Since General Synod in 2010 the Commission has provided comments or submissions on a number of public issues:

- The Migration Amendment Bill (comments, 2011).
- The proposed consolidation of Commonwealth anti-discrimination laws (comments, 2011, and later a submission, 2012).
- The Australian Human Rights Commission's consultation into Protection from Discrimination on the basis of Sexual Orientation and Sex and/or Gender Identity (comments and later a submission, both endorsed by the Standing Committee, 2011).
- Constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples (briefing for the Primate and Standing Committee, 2011).
- The Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness (submission, 2011).
- The Commonwealth Government consultation paper on 'A sustainable population policy for Australia' (submission, 2011).
- The Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Migration's inquiry into multiculturalism (submission, 2011).
- The Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee on the Migration Amendment (Strengthening the Character Test and other Provisions) Bill (comments, 2011).
- The Joint Parliamentary Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network (submission, 2011).

- The Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition for Indigenous Australians (submission, following consultation with Social Responsibilities Committees and the Primate, 2011).
- Parliamentary Inquiry about detention of asylum seekers (letter sent to the Government urging adoption of the Inquiry's recommendations, 2012).
- Draft legislation consolidating Commonwealth anti-discrimination laws (response to the legislation, and comment to the Primate, 2012).
- The first part of the fifth Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (a message from PAC was distributed through Anglican networks, 2013).

The Commission responded to requests from the Primate for advice or briefing on a number of issues.

In November 2012 the Commission hosted a conference at Trinity College in Melbourne, attended by its members and representatives from Diocesan Social Responsibilities Committees. Leaders in the Anglican Church plus Rev'd Elenie Poulos from the Uniting Church and Fr Frank Brennan were invited speakers. The theme of the conference was 'speaking truth to power' - how to present the gospel publicly. This was seen very much as a two-way street, with each side needing to hear what the other has to say, which may well be uncomfortable for both in coming years. There was appreciation that how we say what we say can be as significant as *what* we say; transformative conversation is needed.

In May 2013 the Environment Working Group of General Synod was dissolved and responsibility for environmental matters was transferred to the Public Affairs Commission, in accord with the view of the active members of the Environment Working Group, who considered that the situation had changed significantly since the Group was established. Much had been done and there was less need for technical focus on environmental issues but a greater need to integrate them into wider public issues - frameworks of changing social values and perceptions, economic issues and changing government policies. The Public Affairs Commission membership was enhanced by the appointment of Bishop Tom Wilmot, the Australian Representative on the Anglican Communion Environment Network, who was previously a member of the Environment Working Group, as was the Commission Chair. The Commission is placing major emphasis on environmental issues, which we recognise as some of the most challenging to be faced in the modern world if we are to address the fifth mark of mission, caring for the creation and emphasising intergenerational equity.

During the pre-election period in 2013 the Commission prepared a set of briefing notes on public issues, with associated questions for the political parties. These were distributed to the Bishops, social responsibilities committee members known to the Commission from its 2012 conference, diocesan environment contacts known to the Environment Working Group, Anglican Diocesan newspapers, and directly to leaders of political parties. The document is publicly accessible on the General Synod web site. Issues addressed were: Respect for all in parliamentary life; Refugees and asylum; Aboriginal and Torres Strait islanders – constitutional recognition and native title and heritage reform; Responsibility to reduce greenhouse gas emissions urgently; Care for the environment – several specific issues; Food security – risks and challenges; and Responding to population issues.

In February 2014 the Commission added another topic - Millennium Development Goals and Overseas Aid, which were addressed by the last General Synod – and, based on these eight topics, using our pre-election expressed concerns, requested meetings with a number of Parliamentarians. These took place at the time of our approximately annual face to face meeting, this time held in Canberra. Constructive and informative discussions were held with six Parliamentarians of varied political persuasions. There was respect for our faith based values, and some expressed interest in receiving more material from us and in talking with us again.

Preparation for our February 2014 business meeting about future directions for the Commission had begun with the following, from 'Faith in the Public Square' by Archbishop Rowan Williams:

*"Every archbishop, whether he likes it or not, faces the expectation that he will be some kind of commentator on the public issues of the day. He is, of course, doomed to fail in the eyes of most people. If he restricts himself to reflections heavily based on Bible or tradition, what he says will be greeted as platitudinous or irrelevant. If he ventures into more obviously secular territory, he will be told that he has no particular expertise in sociology or economics or international affairs that would justify giving him a hearing. Anything that looks like close academic analysis is, of course, incomprehensible and self-indulgent elitism. A focus on what many think are the traditional moral concerns of the church reinforces the myth that Christians are in the narrowest range of moral matters."*

The Public Affairs Commission resonates with this passage in relation to its own role. So the opening address for our meeting by the R't Rev Stephen Pickard was helpful in reminding us of the fundamental connectivity between God, the world and all living things including human life: our roots are deep in creation, and theologies of redemption and of creation need to be strongly linked. He proposed that the Church is that body of Christ which displays through its life and action what the renewal of place, economics, politics, communication and interpersonal life might actually look like. The search for wisdom to do that softens our contests – wisdom stands at the cross-roads, where we undertake respectful dialogue. The Commission will be seeking to act through and encourage respectful dialogue, inside and outside the church.

In the coming year the Commission will continue to monitor the issues already noted, and will pay particular attention to:

- the proposed referendum regarding constitutional recognition for indigenous peoples,
- developments in policy and practice with respect to refugees and asylum,
- overseas development aid as a means to construct the broad national interest of Australia, with focus on being a just, empathetic and generous national citizen,
- outcomes for the Millennium Development Goals and shaping of the post 2015 phase, noting the importance of rural-urban migration, ending extreme poverty, financial inclusion, and the likelihood that, in the next phase, more emphasis will be placed on environmental issues alongside human issues,
- climate change, which is of theological urgency as well as political and economic significance, and the imperative to encourage each other to respond,
- input for the meeting in November 2014 of the Group of 20 (G20) leading economies, for which Australia assumed the Presidency in December 2013.

Consideration will also be given, where appropriate in collaboration with other organisations, to food security, income management, electoral reform as a justice issue, and the potential for churches to divest from fossil fuel companies as a means to convey concern about continued heavy dependence on fossil fuels, with consequent continuing increases in greenhouse gas emissions and climate change.

A number of motions will be put to the 2014 General Synod, consistent with the concerns of the Commission.

We note with pleasure that SharePoint is now available through the General Synod Office. It is anticipated that the Public Affairs Commission will make good use of this facility for communication; we expect it will enable us to share information more readily amongst our members and to cooperate more effectively with other bodies such as Diocesan Social Responsibility Committees. This is seen as very important because there are very few resources available for research and preparation of input of a professional standard on public issues that are of concern to the church. We will be doing what we can to foster cooperation and collaboration, sharing what is being worked on in dioceses where there is capacity to contribute, and aiming for maximum impact in the name of our church, to honour Christ.

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