



Anglican Church of Australia

Public Affairs Commission

12 June 2020

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19,
c/o Committee Secretary,
Department of the Senate,
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: covid.sen@aph.gov.au

SUBMISSION BY THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION OF THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA TO THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

Dear Committee members

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19. We thank you too for the extension of time to make this submission.

INTRODUCTION

This submission is made by the Public Affairs Commission (PAC) of the Anglican Church of Australia (ACA). The PAC is a body set up, amongst other matters, to respond to aspects of public affairs as referred by the Primate, Standing Committee or General Synod of the ACA or initiated by the PAC. The views expressed in this submission are the views of the PAC only and should not be taken to reflect the opinion of the ACA, the Primate, the Standing Committee or any of the Dioceses.

CONTEXT

The worldwide Anglican Communion has five Marks of Mission that express the Communion's common commitment to, and understanding of, God's holistic and integral mission.

Three Marks of Mission are particularly relevant to the PAC's contribution to this Committee's inquiry:

- 3 To respond to human need by loving service;
- 4 To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
- 5 To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth.¹

The fundamental teaching to care for our shared home and thus for each other is reflected in ancient wisdom and most faiths. We all need to discharge that responsibility seriously.

¹ Anglican Communion. "Marks of Mission", <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>.

OPPORTUNITY

As well as immense disruption and suffering, the COVID-19 response has shown us a glimpse of a different and better future.

We congratulate the government on finding creative and helpful ways to care for communities and boost the economy through innovations such as a national cabinet, Jobkeeper and Jobseeker payments, a moratorium on evictions and other new measures. The spirit of bi-partisanship is also a great sign of what could be when the government and opposition cooperate for the common good. We also celebrate the response of the Australian community to the need to work together to protect and support each other. We look forward to taking up the opportunity to keep and build upon the gifts that we have received during the response to COVID-19.

The recovery from the response to COVID-19 has provided us with a unique opportunity to change direction and choose a future that responds to human needs, transforms unjust societal structures, safeguards the integrity of our shared home, and sustains and renews life on earth.

Only by deliberately choosing a different path can we bounce forward to a healthier, kinder future instead of one that is worse than the path we were on before COVID-19

We set out below our submissions on some of the directions and issues that we believe should be explored and implemented.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The PAC has expressed concerns in the past about the inadequate levels of Newstart and about homelessness. We have been liaising with Anglicare Australia and understand that they will be making or have made a detailed submission that will address many similar points of concern to the PAC, so we will not need to address these in detail. Some of the vital community support measures that we would recommend include:

- A permanent increase to income support payments which the Jobseeker payment demonstrated was essential for people to survive;
- The extension of Jobseeker and Jobkeeper payments to temporary migrants, international students and asylum seekers who are all part of our community and suffering the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown;
- More support for residential renters and landlords and crisis accommodation and ensuring that the moratorium on evictions should continue right through the whole pandemic;
- The call for an Aged care rescue package and greater investment in home care;
- The need to extend Jobkeeper support or alternative similar supports to the many casual workers who do not currently qualify.

Homelessness – social housing and holistic support services

In relation to the problem of homelessness, we support calls for greater social housing. This will assist with the huge problem of homelessness, which is particularly dangerous during a pandemic. Housing is required if we are to avoid the full damage of a second wave of the virus. Federal assistance for building additional social housing, for upgrading or repairing existing degraded social housing stock and for enabling transition from gas to electric (ideally renewable) energy in such houses would have a wider benefit than the proposed assistance for residential renovations. It would provide a similar stimulus for the construction industry but

would benefit the most vulnerable in our communities, and the investment in upgrading public assets would benefit the wider community as well.

This is also an opportunity to bring about some holistic support for people who are homeless. We would urge that there be a boost to social services support to deal with the complexity of reasons why people become homeless.

Additional tax breaks to assist charities and welfare agencies

Currently charities are suffering a reduction in donations due to the economic recession but at the same time are experiencing ever-increasing demands for their services. We invite the Committee and Federal Governments to explore increased tax bonuses to encourage and boost donations to front-line welfare agencies, such as 150% tax deductibility for donations. If such charities were not able to provide the assistance, that would cause a greater burden for governments who would have to provide the services instead, so such a tax bonus could be a cost-effective measure, even more so than usual.

Grants to community groups

The community has responded well to helping each other, especially those most vulnerable. Grass-roots community groups have been vital in facilitating this goodwill in practical ways. It is vital that there should be no cuts to funding of community groups and additional grants be made available to them. Such grants may assist community groups to engage staff or contractors, especially while many of the usual volunteers relied on by such groups are elderly and thus vulnerable and unable to assist at this time.

Anti-Chinese racial outbreaks

We are pleased that members of Parliament and community leaders have spoken out to condemn racism directed at people of Chinese appearance in the light of COVID-19. We would urge the government when engaged in advertising about COVID-19 that subliminal messages should be employed to help build community solidarity and defeat any narratives of racism.

Casuals including the Arts Industry

We have already referred to the need for Jobkeeper or the equivalent to be provided for casuals in an increasingly casualised workforce.

A lack of support for casuals has also impacted in a discriminatory way on certain groups who tend to make up a larger proportion of those on short-term casual employment. This includes young people, women and First Nations people (especially in regional and remote areas). It is important that support packages be made available to alleviate some of the ongoing effects of systemic discrimination.

This should also be provided to people in the Arts Industry as the arts are a vital part of promoting community cohesion and inspiration.

SUPPORT FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE IN REMOTE COMMUNITIES

We have fortunately seen very few cases of COVID-19 in remote First Nations communities which is testament to the safety and security that such remote communities have offered at this time, as well as the great work of First Nations' Health Services in assisting people to return to their homelands and to keep those communities safe.

All of this demonstrates the need to support remote communities with improved infrastructure and basic services to reverse the effects of government neglect and closures. This of course requires governments and agencies to work in partnership with First Nations communities to design infrastructure that is culturally appropriate. There is also the immediate need to ensure safe water and sanitation to stave off disease in such communities.

It is also essential that messaging about COVID-19 restrictions including the reasons behind these be specifically directed at rural and remote areas and provided in different languages and expressions so that these messages can be accessible to people in these more remote areas. We note that this has been a problem where COVID-19 restrictions have prevented cultural obligations, such as attending funerals, from being performed. The same needs of communication apply to ensure that people in such areas are given adequate information about resources and assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have already referred in the previous section in relation to the impact of casual employment amongst First Nations People. There is a need to be vigilant to ensure measures to close the gap are effective.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The lockdown has seen a reduction in pollution and emissions and an improvement in the quality of the environment. Places in Australia suffering the drastic effects of climate change, such as in Torres Strait, have reported that the colour of the sea has come back and grass is growing in dry patches. This is a great opportunity to build on industries that are ecologically sustainable and to move away from the major greenhouse gas emitting industries such as coal and gas which further damage our environment.

It has been reported² that there is a push for a gas-led recovery in the wake of COVID-19. This is a major concern due to the severe consequences of climate change. We are aware that the suggested purpose for new gas is to make manufacturing more competitive in Australia yet gas is the wrong technology to do that and its extraction and transport adds damage and destruction to our climate, health, water and other resources, local environments and community cohesion. Numerous reports have shown that manufacturing in Australia can reduce costs and increase efficiency by electrifying and powering themselves with clean renewable energy, which is where Australia has competitive advantage. A report by Ernst and Young suggests that money directed to this will fund many more jobs than the equivalent money directed to fossil fuel developments.³ Furthermore, industry representatives in Queensland have been promoting manufacturing as a way to use the abundant supply of renewable energy that cannot currently get out of Northern and Central Queensland because of a lack of transmission lines. In other words, more manufacturing should mean more renewable energy, not more gas.

Any stimulus package should be required to mitigate climate change and its consequences or at the very least not exacerbate it. We would encourage the government to channel any stimulus packages into producing renewable energy and jobs that go with such renewable industries.

² Such as in the article in the Guardian on 21 May 20, "Leaked COVID -19 Commission report calls for Australian taxpayers to underwrite gas industry expansion"

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/21/leaked-covid-19-commission-report-calls-for-australian-taxpayers-to-underwrite-gas-industry-expansion>

³ See ABC report on 7 June 2020, "More jobs in renewable-led COVID-19 economic recovery, EY report finds", <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-07/renewable-led-covid-19-recovery-will-create-more-jobs-ey-report/12322104>

The PAC has recently made a submission to the Review of the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth). It is important that decision-making processes for development proposals should not be fast-tracked during the COVID-19 recovery time and that the Review should be encouraged to find ways of enhancing the protections that can be established under that Act.

HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTIONS NOT TO BE DIMINISHED

Proper reviews of legislation and regulations

There are concerns that legislation and regulation made during the COVID-19 lockdown was not able to be properly examined through the usual parliamentary or human rights scrutiny processes. It is vital that these and any emergency measures be subject to a review to ensure that human rights are not and have not been diminished any more than absolutely necessary and be time-limited.

We understand, for example, that the Minister for Families and Social Services has been given power to extend Cashless debit card trials for a further six months without the need for new legislation and proper debate about such extensions.⁴ It is essential that no further extensions to such trials be allowed without the opportunity to hear from the people whose human rights are being curtailed by the forced use of such cards.

There have also been concerns expressed by the Law Council of Australia and other bodies about the amendments to the ASIO Bill introduced in May which allows questioning of children as young as 14 and the use of tracking and surveillance devices.⁵ We urge that such Bills introduced at this time be able to be fully scrutinised and that opportunity for public submissions be made available.

DETENTION CENTRES

It is obvious that detention centres where people are held in large numbers in close proximity are areas of unacceptable health risks and there is an urgent need to ensure sufficient space and safe housing for all detainees, from prisoners to people in immigration detention centres. We have seen the spike in COVID-19 cases in Singapore caused by spread in dormitories of migrant workers. The public health risks of places of detention are likely to be much worse.

NATIONAL COVID-19 COORDINATION COMMISSION (NCCC)

Given the wide remit of the NCCC to advise on economic and social impacts, it is essential that the membership of the NCCC be expanded to include people with expertise in a wider range of areas such as those who:

- come from sectors that are most affected by job losses, increased inequality and marginalisation, and other impacts arising from the COVID-19 response,
- have experience in stimulating development and integrating manufacturing with new local renewable energy sources, particularly in rural and remote area;

⁴ See NITV report on 6 May 2020, “Changes made to cashless debit welfare card as current trials extended”, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/05/06/changes-made-cashless-welfare-debit-card-current-trials-extended>

⁵ Such as at Law Council of Australia on 14 May 2020, “Opinion Piece: Australians’ personal freedom could be under serious threat with the new ASIO bill”, <https://www.lawcouncil.asn.au/media/news/opinion-piece-australians-personal-freedoms-could-be-under-serious-threat-with-the-new-asio-bill>

- know about creating lots of jobs and reducing inequity and marginalisation, and
- come from sectors where there are the most jobs.

A wider membership is also required to balance out the disproportionate number of Commission members with links to the fossil fuel industry.

CONCLUSION

Our key recommendations have been summarised above. We would be pleased to address any further questions.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Carolyn Tan,
Chairperson of the Public Affairs Commission