

What the bishops chose not to say

John Warhurst Eureka Street 10 April 2025

Those Catholics and other 'people of good will' who notice the Bishops' federal election statement for May 2025 will be puzzled and exasperated: puzzled by its modest aspirations and exasperated by its narrow contents and lack of energy and engagement.

Issued under the title "Called to Bring Hope in the Year of Jubilee" the statement references the coincidence of the election with the Holy Year of Jubilee, themed 'Pilgrims of Hope'. It was produced under the banner of the Bishops Commission for Life, Family and Public Engagement, chaired by the Archbishop of Melbourne.

It has some strengths. For instance, the theme of 'hope', though underdeveloped in this document, is promising at a time of local and international uncertainty. The statement points out growing polarisation, distrust and the erosion of social cohesion in society and encourages participation. Wisely it plays down unrealistic expectations that politicians and political parties 'can ever solve every issue'.

But its strengths are greatly outweighed by its weaknesses. It is neither timely, nor a balanced representation of the breadth of Catholic values and interests (even a relatively short statement can do this) nor engaging in its style. It conveys no sense of Australia's place in the world in an election overshadowed by the threatening presence and policies of US President Donald Trump. There is no mention of the great international issues of the day, such as Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza. Domestically there is no mention of immigration and refugees nor of Indigenous Australians.

It is fair to say that most of it fails to engage specifically with this particular Australian election. Most of it could have been written by any episcopal conference for any election anytime anywhere. As such it is excessively general. The only specific reference is when it condemns 'the anti-Semitism that has arisen in our society'. It could easily have been issued for any Australian state election. The consequence is a missed opportunity for national public engagement.

The statement identifies four key issues. In doing so it betrays its origins in the narrow remit of the commission for life and family. The topics identified are: (1) the dignity and value of every human being; (2) fairness, justice and the common good; (3) religious freedom and conscience rights; and (briefly) (4) responsible stewardship of God's creation.

Leading with life and family issues is unexceptional, but its focus on abortion, euthanasia, marriage and family fails to connect with federal politics. The second section on fairness, justice and the common good deserves a place in any statement, but of all the possible examples it chooses gaps in services, such as palliative care, and respect for 'the conscience of providers'. What of the housing crisis? The third section on religious freedom moves quickly to parental freedom of choice to send their children to faith-based schools with 'equitable funding'. This has been a long-standing church interest, consuming the attention of the bishops in recent times. The final section on responsible stewardship of god's creation is disproportionately short, lifeless and has no sense of the urgency conveyed by Pope Francis and taken up energetically by many lay Catholics.

More could be said about improving its style, drawing on the lessons of those who successfully inform their members and guide public discussion through clear and bold language. Many other Church bodies and groups have already issued their own statements. They will provide more enlightenment for the Catholic community. The Bishops collectively really must do better if the church is to impact positively on Australian society during this federal election campaign.

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