

**AUSTRALIAN STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT (WA)  
AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS RESPONSE  
ISSUES FOR THE FEDERAL ELECTION OCTOBER 2007**

1. *What is your vision for how government can best benefit the poor?*

We believe that the level of poverty in Australia is unacceptable. Our experiences of advocating for disadvantaged people across Australia have shown us that poverty is all too real and despite what successive federal and state governments claim, it is all too measurable, and the wealth gap between the rich and poor in Australia has grown over the past decade.

We are urging the major parties to commit to the recommendations of the Senate Community Affairs Committee inquiry, *A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty, Report on poverty and financial hardship* (March 2004) particularly Recommendation 94 for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy to be developed at the national level, and Recommendation 95 that a statutory authority or unit reporting directly to the Prime Minister be established with responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring a national anti-poverty strategy.

See [http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty\\_in\\_australia/](http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty_in_australia/) for more details on our policy and actions.

2. *How do you intend to address global poverty?*

This year is the halfway mark for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Australian Democrats have used this occasion to renew our call for the Australian aid budget to be increased to 0.7 percent of GNI. This level was first agreed to in principle by wealthy countries, including Australia, in 1970 and reiterated at the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey.

Given we have experienced a long run of economic prosperity, the Democrats feel it is well time for the Australian Government to honour that commitment and increase aid to 0.7 percent of GNI.

We support the Millennium Development Goals not just as a worthy set of goals in themselves but also as a template for future action. Poverty and other global challenges will require international cooperation to be effectively addressed and if we allow the MDG's to become just another empty set of promises, we weaken our capacity for that kind of multinational action.

The Democrats believe that the MDGs should be a guiding principle for aid deployment and priorities.

3. *Humanitarian entrants to Australia*

The Australian Democrats have been very vocal and active for more than 30 years in the Parliament and the community advocating on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees. We have relentlessly held to our core principles of social justice and human rights and campaigned on many levels including working on individual asylum seeker cases, opposing cutbacks to the rights of asylum seekers and refugees, opposing mandatory

detention and the odious 'Pacific solution', regularly visiting detainees at all detention centres, including Nauru, and fighting for legislation which would ensure a fair outcome.

For more details on our policy and actions see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration\\_Refugees\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration_Refugees_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration\\_MandatoryDetention\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration_MandatoryDetention_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration\\_BetterSettlementServices\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Immigration_BetterSettlementServices_2007.pdf)

#### 4. *Crisis in accommodation for homeless and low-income Australians?*

The Australian Democrats propose that a federal portfolio for housing be developed to provide a whole-of-government approach to housing to increase fairness, reduce poverty and financial disadvantage, and provide national leadership and an integrated and consistent affordable housing strategy for what is an integral part of the nation's economic infrastructure.

Development of a national affordable housing strategy involving all levels of government, along with stakeholders at community level, to address the serious and ongoing crisis in housing affordability. Also, tackle the big issues of negative gearing and capital gains tax reform, provide substantial funding for affordable rental housing including public and community housing; spend on the chronically under funded area of indigenous housing and implement a National Indigenous Housing Strategy; adopt a wide range of initiatives to build more affordable housing; focus on national planning and design standards for sustainable as well as affordable housing.

The Australian Democrats has been the only party to continue to raise housing affordability issues in the Senate. We have asked questions of Ministers and initiated urgency debates on housing affordability. In 2003 we made a submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into First Home Ownership and included housing in our pre-budget announcements. After the election, we will continue to push for the major parties to be accountable on housing.

See also [http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Housing\\_Housing\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Housing_Housing_2007.pdf) and Making Housing Affordable webpage at [www.andrewbartlett.com/faq.php?id=28&category=9](http://www.andrewbartlett.com/faq.php?id=28&category=9)

#### 5. *What is your national anti-poverty strategy?*

For details of our national anti-poverty strategy see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty\\_in\\_australia/](http://www.democrats.org.au/campaigns/poverty_in_australia/)

#### 6. *How will you ensure low-income earners are supported through the tax and welfare system? Will you be introducing a less punitive welfare system?*

The Australian Democrats support an increase the tax-free threshold so that the lowest earners are not taxed. See our income tax action plan for further details on a fairer income tax system [http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Taxation\\_IncomeTax\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Taxation_IncomeTax_2007.pdf)

The Australian Democrats did not support the Howard government's 'welfare to work' reforms in 2005 as the vast majority of people affected by these changes would not move from welfare to a job but simply from one welfare payment to a lower welfare payment. It particularly affects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community and adds

additional pressure because their ability to bargain effectively and achieve fair conditions of employment have been further eroded.

We do not believe that reducing people's payments helps them to get a job. Many people currently out of the paid workforce want to work but need more skills, advice and support. We would develop strategies that invests more in programmes that support people who face special barriers when it comes to looking for and staying in work, e.g. more education and individualised training, personal counselling, transport and child care assistance. We would also support employers to take on people with disabilities and encourage flexible working arrangements that better accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.

The Democrats also believe that the current breaching penalties need to be re-assessed and reduced. The current 8 week non-payment periods are too long and the impact of such legislation on already vulnerable people can have devastating effects on the basic necessities of living such as food and shelter.

*7. How does your industrial relations policy protect the powerless, support family life and ensure adequate income for all?*

The Australian Democrats are committed to a fair and balanced system that delivers fair and just pay and conditions and treatment. The Democrats would bring back fairness and balance, while not jeopardising productivity competition and growth, based on the following principles which includes a unitary single national IR System; strong and independent AIRC; a national regulator; genuine safety net; a mix of industrial agreements; fair and balanced minimum wage; protection from unfair dismissals; fairer balance between work and family; reasonable hours; work of equal value; non-discriminatory skills based wage system.

We have a long and proud record of arguing for family friendly work practices. We have opposed the obscenity of 24/7 commercial activity. We would provide disincentives to non-essential weekend employment through reintroducing penalty rates, legislating for reasonable hours, and requiring employment contracts to contain key family-friendly provisions such as carers leave, maternity and paternity leave, maternity pay and proper rostering practices.

For further detail on our policy and actions see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Workplace\\_BalancedandFair\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Workplace_BalancedandFair_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/WorkFamily\\_WorkFamily\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/WorkFamily_WorkFamily_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/WorkFamily\\_PaidMaternityLeave\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/WorkFamily_PaidMaternityLeave_2007.pdf)

*8. What policies do you have to support the development of indigenous Australians, including closing the gap between indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia's' health and well-being?*

The extent of Indigenous inequality and disadvantage in Australia at a time of record prosperity is a national disgrace. The Democrats are committed to playing our part in closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and between Indigenous and 'mainstream' communities. Only a significant and sustained investment by governments to improve the quality of life and the safety, education and health care available to Indigenous people will bring the life expectancy and levels of opportunity closer to those of the non-Indigenous population.

The key points that must be given top priority if we are serious about closing the gap are:

- co-ordinated service delivery and regional autonomy
- community safety and development
- recognition and respect for cultural heritage
- education and economic development
- and unfinished business – reconciliation; 'Bringing them Home' report; formal agreement or treaty; amending the Constitution; legal system reform; deaths in custody; native title; stolen wages.

All political parties must seriously commit to giving top priority to addressing the inequality and challenges faced by Indigenous Australians, and to develop genuine long-term solutions in consultation with Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people.

For further details on our policy and our plans for better health and education for Indigenous Australians see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Indigenous\\_Indigenous\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Indigenous_Indigenous_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education\\_Indigenous\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education_Indigenous_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath\\_Indigenous\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath_Indigenous_2007.pdf)

9. *What is your party's policy response to student poverty and high levels of debt?*

The Australian Democrats are strong advocates of increased student income support measures, particularly in light of rapid rises in university fees and the increasing costs of groceries, fuel and rent. The Democrats established the first and only Senate Inquiry into student income support in 2004-05 – an inquiry to which the Government still has not responded more than two years after the inquiry report was tabled in Parliament.

The Democrats welcomed the student income support measures contained in the last Budget, particularly the extension of rent assistance to Austudy recipients – something for which the Democrats have long called. These measures are not enough though. We believe the Government should go much further and lower the age of independence to 18 and peg student income support to the Henderson Poverty Line. Both of these reforms could make a tangible difference to student finances.

And see also [http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education\\_TertiaryFees\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education_TertiaryFees_2007.pdf)

10. *How will you ensure universal access to high-quality education and health care?*

Education: The Democrats would boost base funding to universities, primarily by revising the formula that the Government uses to index grants to universities to account for inflation. The current formula is inadequate and has led to an estimated \$1.5 billion shortfall in university funding. We change this formula to more accurately account for inflation, and we would provide a one-off grant to universities to make up for the years of lost funding.

We would also abolish full-fee degrees for domestic undergraduates; move to abolish financial barriers to higher education such as HECS, and immediately increase the HECS repayment threshold to average male earnings; increase the number of funded places to the postgraduate sector with the aim of abolishing postgraduate up-front fees, particularly in disciplines with little or no private benefit but considerable public benefit, such as teaching, nursing, science and agriculture. The Democrats would also introduce additional student income support measures.

More detailed information on our extensive higher education policy can be found here [http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education\\_HigherEducation\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Education_HigherEducation_2007.pdf)

Health – The Australian Democrats are committed to improving and protecting Medicare's fundamental principles of access and affordability for all, and return to a pact between government and doctors wherein doctors agree to charge fees that are close to the schedule fee and governments agree to an indexation system for the schedule fee (and therefore the rebate) that is transparent and fair; lower the eligibility threshold for the Medicare safety net for low and middle income earners and raise the threshold for higher income earners; support medicine availability for all Australians and at affordable prices.

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/ElectionPlatform\\_OurHealthSystem\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/ElectionPlatform_OurHealthSystem_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath\\_Medicare\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath_Medicare_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath\\_MedicareSafetyNets\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath_MedicareSafetyNets_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath\\_Pharmaceuticals\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Heath_Pharmaceuticals_2007.pdf)

*11. What is your plan to reduce Australia's negative environmental impacts?*

The Australian Democrats have a very extensive platform of action on environmental issues, including to reduce greenhouse emissions, develop clean and renewable sources of energy, encourage efficient use of resources, and safeguard the environment.

Climate change alone is a serious economic, environmental and social issue for Australia. The Australian Democrats will work to ensure the challenge of climate change is taken seriously without unfairly burdening our community's most disadvantaged people. Emissions targets must be set as soon as possible at 20-30% by 2020 and 60-90% by 2050, depending on the science. The Democrats have now become the first political party to announce the call for a renewable energy target of 50% by 2030. The Howard Government's so-called clean energy target is 15% by 2020.

We support the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and other international agreements and continue to press Australia and the USA and other nations to do likewise. We will also take a lead role in post-Kyoto negotiations to achieve international cooperation in science and technology exchange, adaptation efforts, and decisive responses to avoid dangerous climate change.

We have an extensive platform on water management. It includes reform of rural and agricultural water pricing to reward reduced consumption and fund high efficiency irrigation infrastructure to achieve a better balance of river water extraction and environmental flows. Work with state and local governments to overcome the jurisdictional barriers to having a nationally-consistent planning, regulation and practices in water use.

Our comprehensive urban water plan includes development of an integrated, strategic national urban Water Policy, underpinned by agreed targets to deliver short and long-term water sustainability, taking into account climate change, population and environment needs; reform water pricing to fund major public investment in water infrastructure; develop standards and guidelines for water saving measures; fund more generous rebate programs for retrofit plumbing; extend the Democrats-initiated water efficiency and labelling scheme; and tighten standards of industrial discharge.

See our '25 steps to healthy environment' for more on our policy and actions [http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/ElectionPlatform\\_ClimateLandWater\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/ElectionPlatform_ClimateLandWater_2007.pdf)

12. *What is your position regarding the loss of civil rights brought about by recent anti-terrorism legislation?*

The Australian Democrats have consistently opposed the Howard Government's anti-terrorism legislation as bad law which undermines some fundamental human rights and civil liberties.

During debate in the Senate on the 2005 legislation we said that it would erode many rights including the right to liberty; to a fair trial; freedom from, and protection by the law from, unlawful interference with privacy, family, home or correspondence; and, not least of all, the right to be treated with humanity and dignity. The legislation is unprecedented in its powers and in its potentially damaging impact on the lives of Australians. Another fundamental concern was about the treatment of minors; and the sedition offences.

In August this year, we moved in the Senate to set-up a committee inquiry to urgently examine Australia's anti-terrorism laws and examine its controversial powers. The ALP joined with the Coalition to vote down our initiative

For more detail on our policy and actions see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Attorney\\_DomesticHumanRights\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Attorney_DomesticHumanRights_2007.pdf)

13. *How do you intend to work for peace, especially in Iraq and in our region?*

For our policy and actions in this area see

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Foreign\\_Peace\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/Foreign_Peace_2007.pdf)

[http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/DefenceVeterans\\_Iraq\\_2007.pdf](http://www.democrats.org.au/docs/ActionPlans/DefenceVeterans_Iraq_2007.pdf)