

## **Climate Change**

*This is the text of a press release made by Bishop Browning in early November. I believe the issues he raises are as relevant to the behaviour of the church, and of each of us as individuals, as they are to government. Barry Richardson*

The following is the text of a letter which I have sent to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition:

“I do not believe an Australian citizen can morally vote for a party at the forthcoming Federal election which does not have a comprehensive Climate Change Policy.

This is the most serious issue facing global humanity. The debate is over. Serious science is no longer in dispute. The only matter that can be debated is the seriousness and the speed of the consequences.

The debate is not about left or right. It is not really about who is to blame. The real business is about life and living sustainably - and the next 50 years are earth shatteringly vital. We desperately need leaders who can act on this imperative with courage, vision, and passion. It is morally unacceptable for our national leadership to ignore what is at stake and fail to accept its present responsibilities. Lost time must be made up.

May I be bold enough to suggest a simple test? Sit face to face with a child - any child, anywhere - and looking them in the eye, say plainly: “I am doing everything in my power to safeguard your future and life with this earth.” May I be doubly bold to say that at this moment, you cannot truthfully speak this way to any person, let alone to the child.

I write out of my deep Christian conviction. The universe is biased for life; our belief is that God the Creator sustains all that is; all that we have is a gift. We now know that what we are doing is harming the earth; our living is tilting the balance against life with catastrophic and immediate consequences. We have no mandate to ruin what does not belong to us and our actions are nothing short of apocalyptic.

The current drought is a wonderful opportunity to harness a fresh imagination. Droughts are a part of our country’s natural cycle, but now more than ever the present heat and dryness helps us see what the future could be like. Money must rightly be spent now on helping farmers. But more importantly, money must be spent on the fundamentals that make it possible to live with less water, more heat, less energy and clean energy. We expect of our national leaders to have vision and passion. It is easy to create policies around what we want. It takes real leadership to direct us into what we need.

It is totally unacceptable for a senior politician to trot out the tired information that our contribution to global emission is less than 2%. True, but irrelevant. A more relevant statistic is that per capita we are in the top three polluters in the world. This is disgraceful! The reality is we are prosperous, we have the technical knowledge, we claim to be a leader in the world community; we should be pushing the bar higher not dragging it down. Financially and intellectually Australia is well placed to be a leader and to help other less fortunate countries. We are squandering this opportunity.

Your climate change policy will be scrutinised thoroughly and critically . There is much rhetoric about the cost of acting to combat climate change, much pontificating about the complexity of externalities. The cost and complexity of extreme climate change and its impacts on civilisation are what should be occupying our minds. Some commentators have been heard to say that clean energy is so much more expensive than continuing to supply coal to fuel power stations. It is time for the costs of mounting damage be tallied; it is time for the costs of inaction to be weighed; it is time to invest rationally in our future. Spending money is not a policy. As commendable as recent project announcements have been, please do not think the wider community will be fooled into accepting them as a policy.

A policy must include:

- A signing of the Kyoto Protocol. Of course Kyoto is not the answer and we need to go far beyond it. But it is currently what we have and it is an immense stepping stone - already the Clean Development Mechanism is engaging developing countries in far-reaching projects to curb greenhouse gas emissions while pulling their citizens out of poverty. As an Australian citizen I feel ashamed that I am not numbered with the international community in a common endeavour. Instead I am numbered with the largest industrialised country, the single greatest polluter as well as the worst polluter per head of population. It is simply not enough to say we are meeting our obligations anyway. The moral responsibility of standing with the rest of the world is overwhelming.
- Carbon must be priced. I am invited to speak in the company of scientists, economists and business leaders. I know the business community is expecting and indeed wanting the announcement of a price. Business will then invest and get on with its work. Pricing will obviously make renewables far more competitive. Let the market do its work.
- Renewables must be mandated on an increasing scale. Of course no renewable business will invest without some sort of guarantee. At present their leadership and their technologies are undermined by polluters who reap a profit from the collateral damage they create .
- There must be a comprehensive and detailed water policy. There is no reason why cities cannot be given a timeframe in which they are required to collect and recycle their water. It remains a scandal that private citizens can put down a bore to draw from an aquifer as if it is their right simply because they have freehold title to a few square metres above it. Water below the ground has perhaps less right to be privatised than water above the ground.
- Nuclear energy will be part of a comprehensive policy. The detail will be extremely carefully read. It is simply not true that renewables cannot bear some of the base load. If nuclear energy is given the go-ahead in Australia it must be carefully argued that it is the least of several evils. Let the argument be transparent and very persuasive.
- There must be a detailed account of how it is planned to invest in research in the immediate, medium and long-term futures.

I look forward to the release of your comprehensive policy. I will be using whatever influence I have to encourage voters, from moral persuasion, that a vote should not be cast for a party that lacks such a policy.

With warmest good wishes for your responsibility in leadership.”

**Bishop George Browning**  
**Bishop of Canberra & Goulburn**