



28 February 2017

The Hon Malcolm Turnbull, Bill Shorten and Richard Di Natale  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Messrs Turnbull, Shorten and Di Natale,

**RE: OPENING OF PARLIAMENTARY YEAR**

As the parliamentary year begins, we, as Catholic Religious, wish to acknowledge your leadership of our country, and pledge our support for every effort you will make this year to promote a just, prosperous and compassionate society for all.

We know that a society is ultimately judged by its treatment of the most vulnerable members of its society. We believe that in a number of areas, these will be major concerns for all of us in 2017.

**Widening gap between rich and poor**

One in eight Australians currently lives below the poverty line. Most at risk are the unemployed, single people over 65, single-parent families, and households reliant on social security. Growing concerns about economic inequality, problematic issues around housing and homelessness, and a tax system which benefits those who are wealthy, are all of serious concern, with the top 20 per cent of households receiving half the country's income, while the bottom 20 per cent gets just four per cent. At this critical watershed in our history, we can continue to walk away from those who are most vulnerable and most disadvantaged among us, or we can commit now to ensuring 'a fair go' for all.

- With other Church and community leaders, we ask that the current preferential treatment of wealthy Australians, large corporations and foreign investors be minimised.
- We urge Government to introduce policies to arrest the realities of growing inequality.
- We call on all lawmakers to revise tax laws and negative gearing to increase housing affordability

**Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

Asylum seekers in both onshore and offshore detention, and those on TPVs continue to suffer, and the evidence is clear. Irreparable harm is being perpetrated in our name. Australia's present policy regarding the global issue of people seeking safety is unsustainable, unsafe and unjust. We strongly believe that there are credible and innovative international law-compliant alternatives to current policy, and continuing insecure agreements.

As religious, we urge Parliament

- To legislate for a one-off amnesty for those on Nauru and Manus Island, so that they will be accorded their rights as refugees.
- To authorise the immediate release of all children from detention centres
- To review the policy of TPVs, so that justice can be achieved in this area.

### **Care of Earth**

According to the Australian Climate Council, 2016 globally was the hottest year on record for the third year in a row. The planet has already passed safe levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, disproportionately affecting those who are poor and most vulnerable. Recent suggestions that the moratorium on coal-powered stations be lifted is both disturbing and misleading.

The loss of manufacturing jobs, an ageing fossil fuel infrastructure, juxtaposed by a favourable climate, places Australia in an ideal situation to move decisively towards a low-carbon, climate resilient transformation of the Australian environment and the economy. For the sake of future generations and survival of earth, we believe it is critically important

- to minimise our footprint on the earth
- to place a moratorium on coal mining
- to promote renewable energy as the preferred way of moving forward
- to provide training in renewable industries to build employment opportunities.

By demanding a stronger stance on climate, Australia can fulfill its responsibilities in the region, secure a better, safer future and assert itself as a world leader.

### **Indigenous Justice**

We believe that current policies have further exacerbated the health, educational, and social privation being suffered by Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal communities are experiencing high rates of incarceration, inadequate infrastructure, experiences of racism, abuse and growing social problems. We urge leadership to:

- promote a more unified and reconciled nation
- nurture ongoing positive discussion around Treaty and Constitutional Recognition
- deal with the sections in the Constitutions that allow for racial discrimination
- acknowledge the need for a Treaty in this, the only Commonwealth country that not yet has one
- work positively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples towards an accord that respects their wishes.
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### **Conclusion**

We are keenly aware that all of you, as leaders, have pledged your belief in a fair go for all, a support for the underdog, a preparedness to stand up for principle against the odds. We strongly affirm your belief in these values and your endeavours to ensure that they are the hallmarks of our character as a nation.

At the same time, we are aware of the challenges facing you as leaders, as members of your Parties, as Australians. It can't be easy to balance all of these, even on a good day. The rise of populist politicians and the age-old challenges to truth which we still face is, we know, only exacerbating the challenges facing you.

It seems to us however, that political point scoring, and a focus on party politics and self-interest is only increasing the cynicism and scepticism of the electorate. The rise of populist parties in this country and across the world is a clear indication of the failures of mainstream parties to win the hearts and minds of citizens.

### **Call for Unity**

We dare to imagine, that if you were to come together as the major Parties in this country, to speak with a collaborative (if not always unified) voice, naming and professing a common commitment, you would counter much of the populist 'alternative facts'. We believe that a common vision and positive ideals, rather than tedious arguments along ideological lines (which seem to characterise much of the political discourse), would indeed do a great deal to win 'the hearts and minds of Australians'.

It is our belief that now is the time when leaders are called to rise above party lines, to consider broad national interests, and to collaborate to achieve what is best for the country.

We need leaders who will give accurate information and then challenge us to aim for our better selves – to be people of honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, tolerance and acceptance. As leaders of the major political Parties at this critical time, you have such an opportunity.

The significant responses to recent events to some of the injustices across our planet are proof that our shared values are far greater than any differences that divide us. We hope that your leadership this year will call us to a collective responsibility far more powerful than the recklessness and greed of the few.

We wish you all the best and pledge our support of all efforts, which call us to greater justice and compassion.

Yours in hope,

**Sr Barbara Bolster rsm: President CLRI NSW**

**Mrs Kate Anderson: Jesuit Fathers**

**Sr Jan Barnett: Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart**

**Fr Jim Carty: Marist Fathers of Australia**

**Sr Lynne Crilley: Presentation Sisters of Wagga**

**Fr Kevin Dance: Passionist Fathers**

**Mrs Jill Finnane: Edmund Rice**

**Mrs Kim Hill: Aboriginal Catholic Ministry**

**Sr Margaret Hinchey: Sisters of Mercy Parramatta**

**Sr Geraldine Kearney: Sisters of the Good Samaritan**

**Sr Anne Lane: Presentation Sisters of Wagga**

**Mrs Sue Martin: Jesuit Fathers**

**Fr Claude Mostowik: Missionaries of the Sacred Heart**

**Sr Sharon Price: Sisters of Mercy of Australia**

**Sr Libby Rogerson: Loreto Sisters**

**Mrs Jane Sulis: Dominican Sisters**