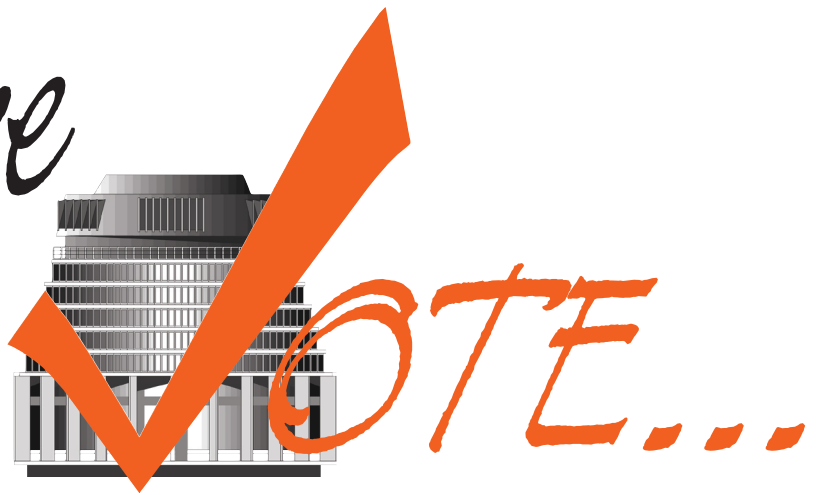


Before YOU



...think on this...

Much material is being produced about specific issues and analysis of party political promises. This election CASI has decided instead to explore some underlying principles and values which we believe reflect our Gospel beliefs and our cultural and community concerns.

A recent survey* found that it is the quality of life and quality of the environment that New Zealanders value most. In this leaflet we look briefly at three topics: economic and social justice, environmental sustainability in its widest sense, and concern for the common good and community wellbeing. We encourage you to evaluate the policies all the parties offer with these in mind.

• Growth & Innovation Advisory Board, 2004: www.giab.govt.nz



When voting for a party: How do this party's policies promote a just society? What effect will their policies have on the most vulnerable people in our community? How will they contribute to the common good?
When voting for your local MP: What personal qualities will each candidate bring to the job? Do I trust them to represent the concerns of all the people in my electorate?

Faith & community action

The world of the Bible had very different social, political and economic frameworks from today's society. So what is it in the Bible that makes Christians so certain its truth and wisdom is still relevant?

It is the way its stories, songs and instructions tell of a community constantly wrestling with the challenges of being made in the image of God. The people of Israel are full of familiar human failings, but they keep turning back to God and refocusing their community life.

It is clear in the Hebrew Scriptures that the community is to act justly, take care of the vulnerable, and be hospitable. In the Gospels Jesus repeatedly demonstrated this as he engaged with those cast to the margins of society. He ate and socialised with people the religious leaders despised.

Like our politicians, these religious leaders held responsibility to dispense justice and to ensure the vulnerable were cared for. Jesus challenged their attitudes to the people both in his parables and in his direct interactions with individuals – tax gatherers, outcast women, lepers, the sick and disabled.

Jesus focuses us on two commandments: to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength; and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves (Mark 12:28-34).

We at CASI encourage you to reflect on the political policies and promises put before us while keeping these Biblical values in mind, as you decide on the way you cast your votes this election.

Election resources and sites

A comprehensive and comparative summary of party policies can be found at www.policy.net.nz This site also has links to all party websites and contact details, or we can send you a list. CASI's own site (www.casi.org.nz) has a political section with relevant news and church links.

Produced by the Churches' Agency on Social Issues (Methodist, Presbyterian, Associated Churches of Christ, Quakers), P O Box 9049, Wellington, July 2005.



What sort of society do we want?

The paper Towards a Robust Society (July 2005)* was prepared for church members, and for the leaders of all political parties, to examine what New Zealanders value and encourage in our communities. Commissioned by leaders of the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches and the Salvation Army (which together make up the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services), the paper encourages New Zealanders to give priority to the well-being of the world and of neighbours.

From it, we have drawn the following.

Positive elements to look for in party policy:

- Policies which value and encourage the contribution of all people toward the common good.
- Policies which stress the well-being of families, especially children, while recognising and supporting the wide diversity of family structures which exist.
- A broad understanding of 'who is our neighbour' in New Zealand society – the vulnerable, poor, unborn, people with disabilities, refugees and migrants, the stigmatised.
- Support for all who personally experience the inadequacies and weaknesses in our society.
- Recognition of our obligations to our international neighbours – those enduring poverty, and suffering environmental and climatic degradation.
- A relational view of human nature and society as well as a view which recognises and identifies individual human rights and responsibilities.

Be wary of:

- Quick fix solutions which ignore long-term social causes and effects, especially in the areas of law and order, welfare, immigration.
- Descriptions of society which stress division, suspicion, stigmatization, inequality.
- Calls to 'get tough' on particular groups of people, calls which don't recognise them as fellow human beings with stresses, needs and problems of their own, or ignore their right to be treated with dignity.
- Views which imply on the one hand a correlation between success, wealth and virtue, and, on the other hand, a link between failure, poverty and sinfulness.

*For the full paper, go to www.casi.org.nz or contact casi@casi.org.nz for an email or 04 381 8295 for hard copy.



- How will your party seek the well-being of all the different family structures which exist in our society?
- How will your party value and encourage the contribution which all people can make to the common good of our society?
- Describe the elements which you think bind – or should bind – New Zealand society together. What will your party do to strengthen these cohesive elements?
- How will your party fulfil our obligations to our international neighbours, especially those enduring poverty or suffering environmental and climatic degradation?

We remember that Jesus did not say: Blessed are the comfortable, for God has favoured them. He did not say: Blessed are they who have a good retirement income, God has favoured them. Jesus did not say: The strong shall inherit the earth. Jesus did not say: Look after yourself, then if you have something left over, give to the poor.

We pray that we and all who live in this land and beyond will remember that Jesus did say: Blessed are the poor for they have the secret of the Kingdom of Heaven; blessed are those who are not proud, for they will inherit the earth; blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted unjustly for they will receive their due reward.

Is there still a rich-poor gap?



- What will your party do to overcome child poverty?
- What will your party do to remove poverty traps which often catch the weakest and most vulnerable New Zealanders?
- How will your party ensure that economic growth does not lead to a widening rich – poor gap?

You have made your dwelling among us, God, and you are present wherever people live. We pray for the day when everyone will honour your presence, and that we will build each other up into a community where all are valued and supported to live life to the full. Amen

Are the rich getting richer? Are the poor getting poorer? If we want a society of equal opportunity and fair shares of the common wealth, then significant poverty (especially child poverty), ill health, poor housing, and a lack of equitable access to quality education and health are putting this at risk.

Ignoring issues of economic and social justice lead to lack of social cohesion which results in social and economic failure. Reasons for income inequality include changes in household structure, in the tax-social security system, industry and labour market deregulation, trade liberalisation, and changing labour market returns for education.

Inequality can be assessed in many ways - income, housing, health, education, employment opportunities –and no single policy can address the issue. The tax-social security system is important in redistributing income to those who are already disadvantaged. The burden lies on voters to demand policies to assist and protect the most vulnerable in society.

Did you know?

- In 1988 14.6% of NZ children were living below the poverty line (defined as households with less than 60% of the median income net of housing costs)
- Between 1989 and 1992 the real median equivalised disposable incomes of the poorest 20% of the population fell by 23%. Since then the income of the bottom 20% has remained almost constant, with a 1% increase between 2001 and 2004. Over the period 1989-2001, real median incomes for the richest 20% of the population rose by 23%, increasing by almost 4% between 2001 and 2004.
- Tax cuts in 1988, 1996 and 1998 mostly benefited the already well off. Households in the poorest 20% of the population received only 7% of the total gains from the 1996 and 1998 tax cuts. In contrast, 36% of the gains went to the 20% of households with the highest incomes.
- There are major 'poverty traps' associated with NZ's tightly targeted welfare benefits and tax credits. When benefit abatement rates are added to statutory tax rates, the result is often very high taxes for many low and middle-income families - often double or more the highest statutory tax rate of 39 cents in the dollar, so that all additional income earned is taxed and abated away.

Resources:

1. Ministry of Social Development www.msd.govt.nz/
2. Motu Economic Research www.motu.org.nz
3. Brian Easton www.eastonbh.ac.nz/
4. NZ Treasury www.treasury.govt.nz/
5. Child Poverty Action Group: www.cpag.org.nz/
6. Every Child Counts : www.everychildcounts.org.nz/

Sustainability - A challenge for Churches and voters

Religious thinking in the past frequently focused on articulating faith against a background of war, injustice, hopelessness and unbelief. For a long time the earth itself was hardly considered, except as a kind of backdrop to a drama of salvation.

But now we are starting to see more clearly the interconnectedness of the earth, humanity and all living things, and we can no longer keep separate the areas of economics, politics, environmental concerns and religious thinking.

Economic theory has also rarely taken into account the true cost to the earth of economic activities. However, in recent years some economists have started to count the 'costs' of industrial development in terms of environmental degradation. The earth itself is increasingly at the centre, rather than the periphery, of economic, political and religious theory.

Sustainability is a common term and concept. Some people believe that human beings are inevitably destructive of their environment. A Christian view focuses more on ways in which human communities can do as little damage as possible.

A spirituality for our time must be compassionate and imaginative. This type of spirituality is emerging not just from within religious thinking but also from people of different backgrounds, such as science and technology, as well as poets, preachers and song-writers. During an election, the campaigning and voting tends to focus on the short-term, to emphasise personal and societal economic issues.

Care of the earth, in contrast requires a longer view; it demands that we look ahead two or three generations. In our own life-time we may not know whether accelerated climate change and global warming have been averted. However, people born in 2050 **will** know; it is for them that we have to act now.

In an election year voters need to identify and support environmental policies that are faithful to earlier agreements and whose vision extends to the world for new generations of children.

To think about

- Climate change is a more serious threat to Earth than global terrorism.
- Twenty percent of the world's population consume 86 percent of the world's resources.
- Three more planets like Earth would be needed if everyone lived like most New Zealanders currently do.
- While governments exhort their citizens to 'reduce, re-use, recycle', a huge advertising industry persuades people to 'increase, discard, dump'.
- Forty percent of the world's fresh water is allocated for human use; by 2025 this will be 80 percent.
- In less than twenty years, two-thirds of the world's population will be facing water shortages or pollution.
- Forty percent of New Zealand's export income comes from farming, and food production is totally dependent on fresh water.
- Global warming results in extreme weather – frequent and violent storms, floods and droughts, rise in sea level, possible disruptions to ocean currents. Events such as the recent floods are likely to occur more frequently in the future – can we afford the soil losses?
- Environmental mitigation = activism to protect nature from the ravages of human activity, such as pollution.
- Sustainability = a movement towards new actions and behaviours; living on the planet's 'interest' not 'capital' and getting more from less.



- How will your party deal with the environmental costs of future economic development?
- How will your party ensure that our children and grand children live in a sustainable and healthy physical environment?
- What is your party's policy on waste (or water, or climate change, etc)? How will it help to ensure that New Zealand's environment is sustainable?

As we vote, help us to remember that in this world there are some who are rich and some who are extremely poor, and that sometimes the rich live in comfort at the expense of the poor. Let us remember that we are part of creation, and that, decisions made now will either preserve the earth or give people the power to destroy the earth and poison it for those yet to come. Amen