

Election 2014

A statement by the Catholic Bishops of New Zealand

“The goal of economics and politics is to serve humanity, beginning with the poorest and most vulnerable wherever they may be, even in their mothers’ wombs.”

Pope Francis

Election year debates are an opportunity for taking our faith into the public arena; for discussing and debating our deepest hopes and values for a better society; for challenging complacency in the face of injustice; for deepening our understanding of issues that affect our neighbours and for forming our consciences. Our deepest and most important values are reflected in the way we participate in elections.

Elections do not begin with the tick we make on a ballot paper, but with the way we engage with the political process.

Even people stirred in different ways by the world’s injustices sometimes see elections as a purely cynical exercise, and feel their participation is insignificant to the final outcome. Some commentators dismiss these attitudes as apathy; but they may also be seen as a sign of disengagement and a loss of faith in political leaders and the political process. This election year we urge all New Zealanders to see election year debates not as marketing exercises, but as an urgent opportunity to argue for and build a society based on the good of each and the good of all.

In many parts of the world, voting is not a free or fair process, or it is not safe to express a political opinion or to participate in political debates. We should rejoice in our right to participate in a fair election process and in free political discussion.

The Catholic Church does not tell people who to vote for. Your bishops will not tell you how to vote.

Catholic teaching advises us on how to think about who to vote for. This takes a bit more work, and a lot more thinking and talking.

No political party or political platform represents the totality of the Church’s teaching, which values human life from conception to natural death; strongly defends and champions the needs of the poor and vulnerable; promotes development which is good for people; demands that we care for the outcast and stranger; and calls us to protect the natural gifts of the environment.

Pope Francis has renewed with vigour and his own personal example the Church’s mission to the poor, with a call for an end to an economy of exclusion, in which people are not just exploited, but discarded and cast aside. In New Zealand disparities between rich and poor have become entrenched in a society that once regarded itself as egalitarian. Struggling families with empty cupboards sometimes live only a few streets away from others for whom the provision of food and other basics is no problem. It is particularly concerning when people live in ignorance, and even indifference, to how their neighbours are faring.

Protecting the most vulnerable members of society is the responsibility of every one of us.

Sometimes there is a tension between issues in an election year. We may feel that we have to choose between important issues – for example, prioritising a politician’s or a party’s position on euthanasia or poverty. Catholic teaching does not trade off the wellbeing of vulnerable groups of people against one another. We seek political outcomes that protect the lives and wellbeing of all vulnerable people.

We have a special responsibility to engage with the political party that we intend to support in an election, and to speak up for the poor and the vulnerable through the whole political cycle. This means challenging all politicians and political parties, especially the one for whom you decide to vote.

Sometimes election year concerns are presented as a list of issues detached from the lives of the real people affected by them. The issues are someone's reality. We are all challenged as voters to place first in heart and conscience those whose lives are potentially affected by decisions we make as voters. Our fellow New Zealanders matter, and in a world of complex relationships and interdependence, our obligations also extend beyond our own shores.

People living in poverty: It is a matter of shame that many people live in situations of material deprivation in a country like New Zealand which has the resources for all its citizens to live in dignity. We also have a responsibility to reach out to our neighbours in the rest of the world who do not have what they need to survive.

People living with pain, illness or approaching the end of their lives: Each person is precious and valuable at every stage of his or her life. Everyone should receive the healthcare they need, including palliative care at the end of their lives. A life unnaturally cut short through euthanasia or assisted suicide is not death with dignity.

Unborn children: Every child is welcome, no matter the circumstances into which he or she is born. Abortion is not the answer to poverty, disability, or disruption of lifestyle. Deprivation of life is never a solution.

Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants: Rejection of some groups of new New Zealanders because of their ethnic origins is unacceptable, whether in our own parishes and communities, or as political rhetoric. Millions of people around the world are fleeing violence and conflict. They are simply people seeking help and sanctuary. They have the same right to safety and security as we all have. In a global world, our responsibilities do not end at our own shores.

People in prison: Too many offenders experience New Zealand's justice system only as punitive and dehumanising, rather than as an opportunity for repentance and restoration. Too many people are in prisons because of unmet mental health needs. No crime is without a victim, and victims of crime deserve the care and support of the community.

People without a vote: Decisions made in the New Zealand election and New Zealand political process affect many others, including those who do not have the ability to take part. Even though they cannot vote, the opinions and experiences of children and young people under the age of 18 are just as important as the views of older people. Prisoners cannot vote, and their needs should be taken into account. Future generations of New Zealanders are also important, as their well-being will depend upon the decisions we make today about the use of the earth's resources.

Election years are times of significant political choices. Question, discuss, debate, pray, be involved, and speak out for the poor and vulnerable among us as you decide how to cast your vote.

✠ John Dew, Archbishop of Wellington

✠ Denis Browne, Bishop of Hamilton

✠ Colin Campbell, Bishop of Dunedin

✠ Peter Cullinane, Emeritus Bishop of Palmerston North

✠ Patrick Dunn, Bishop of Auckland

✠ Barry Jones, Bishop of Christchurch

✠ Charles Drennan, Bishop of Palmerston North