

# JUST ACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

APRIL 2021

## PROGRESS ON CLIMATE CHANGE



Photo: Shutterstock

**For the last two years, you have told us that you want to be resourced on actions addressing climate change as the issue of highest priority.**

At the Synod meeting in February 2021, the Synod adopted a JIM Cluster resolution calling for:

- Australia playing its part to keep global average temperature rise below 1.5°C;
- The Commonwealth Government to take action to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 at the latest;
- A just transition for communities impacted by the shift away from reliance on fossil fuels;
- No new coal mines;
- No new coal-fired power stations; and
- No new natural gas developments.

Movement is happening locally and globally.

The International Energy Agency released a report in November 2021 that indicated that renewable energy would overtake coal as the primary source of electricity generation

globally before 2025. The installed capacity of wind and solar power generation will overtake gas as an energy source by 2023.

In February 2021, the Victorian Government announced it would be installing Australia's largest lithium-ion battery to modernise the state's electricity grid, support new renewable power generation and improve the reliability of the power supply in the face of increasingly hot summers. The battery will be able to charge during the day when renewable energy is cheap and abundant and then release energy into the grid when needed. Batteries can respond to short-term electricity demand more rapidly and cheaply than other technologies, such as gas. Overall, the project will deliver \$2.40 of benefits for every \$1 spent setting up and running the battery. The battery will begin operating by 1 November 2021.

On 10 March 2021, EnergyAustralia announced that the Yallourn power station would be shut down mid-2028. The power station had been scheduled to be closed in 2032. The

*Continued on page 2*

*Continued from page 1*

closure of the power station will reduce EnergyAustralia's greenhouse gas emissions by 60%. The Yallourn power station is currently Australia's worst power station for greenhouse gas emissions. It released 12.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent greenhouse gases in the last year, making up 13.5% of all Victoria's greenhouse gas emissions.

EnergyAustralia has stated that it plans to reach net-zero emissions by 2050.

The company announced that it would provide \$10 million to assist the 500 employees at the power station to plan, reskill and train for work elsewhere. At the same time, they announced they would build Australia's first four-hour utility-scale battery of 350 MW capacity by 2026 in the Latrobe Valley.

The Victorian Government announced that it would also assist with the transition for workers at the Yallourn power station, delivered in consultation with the workers, unions and the local community.

Victoria has 12 projects underway that will deliver 1,700 MW of renewable energy. By 2028, it is expected that a further 5,000 MW of renewable power generation will be added to the Victorian grid, replacing the 1,480 MW generating capacity of the Yallourn power station.

Analysis was released by the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis and Green Energy Markets in February 2021. It assessed that several coal-fired power stations in Australia would be running at a loss by 2025, as they will be unable to complete on price with renewable energy.

Thank you to everyone who has been part of efforts to reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions.

The JIM Cluster will continue to provide you with opportunities to be part of campaigning and actions towards that end.

Here are two actions recommended by the Synod meeting resolution that you can consider:

- Join the Synod Climate Action Task Group by e-mailing jim@victas.uca.org.au; and
- Work with your congregation to collect information on the ways in which you are taking action on climate change and let your Presbytery know.

## THE WORLD NEEDS TO ACT FASTER TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE, INCLUDING AUSTRALIA

**While progress is being made to address greenhouse gas emissions globally, the UN has called on wealthy countries to commit to more considerable emissions reductions.**

A report released by the UN at the end of February 2021 found the emission reduction commitments announced by governments "fell far short" of the reductions needed to limit the global average temperature increase to the levels set by the Paris Agreement. The UN analysis found that the current national targets for addressing climate change would see global greenhouse gas emissions remain largely at current levels until at least 2030. The report stressed that the best scientific predictions pointed to the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 45% by 2030 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050 if the global average temperature increase was

to be limited to 1.5oC.

Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, stated, "What we need is much more radical and transformative than what we have now. We need concrete plans to phase out fossil fuels as fast as possible."

So far, 110 countries have agreed to reach net-zero emissions by 2050. China has committed to reaching net-zero emissions by 2060. The Commonwealth Government has refused to set a date target to achieve net-zero emissions. However, all Australian state and territory governments have set targets of reaching net-zero emissions by or before 2050.

## UN SECRETARY-GENERAL CALLS FOR THE USE OF COAL TO END

**At the start of March 2021, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, pleaded, "I am calling on all governments, private companies and local authorities to take three steps.**

"First, cancel all global coal projects in the pipeline and end the deadly addiction to coal. I urge all OECD countries to commit to phasing out coal by 2030, and for non-OECD countries to do so by 2040." Secondly, he called on banks and governments to end the financing of coal-fired power stations. Finally, he called on governments and companies to develop "just transition" plans to ensure workers and their families were assisted with the move away from fossil fuels.

*Continued on page 3*

## FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

Mark Zimsak – Senior Social Justice Advocate  
Tim Molineux – Social Justice Officer

Uniting Church in Australia  
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania  
Centre for Theology and Ministry  
29 College Crescent  
Parkville, Victoria 3052

Phone - (03) 9340 8807

jim@victas.uca.org.au  
<http://www.justact.org.au>

All of the resources in this mailing can be found on the JIM website.

If you would like to subscribe (or unsubscribe) to either this hardcopy mailing (bi-monthly) or email update (weekly), contact the JIM Cluster.



Continued from page 2

“More than half of the renewable capacity added in 2019 achieved lower power costs than the cheapest new coal plants. Fossil fuels-related air pollution causes one in five of all deaths globally each year”, said Mr Guterres. “In virtually all markets, it is now cheaper to build new renewable energy capacity than new coal plants.”

## HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR LOCAL MPS?

**The JIM Cluster is keen to hear from you, our supporters, about how well you know your local Members of Parliament.**

If you have an on-going relationship with them, please let us know by mail to:

*Mark Zirnsak  
JIM Cluster  
Centre for Theology and Ministry  
29 College Crescent  
Parkville, Victoria, 3052*

Or send an e-mail [mark.zirnsak@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:mark.zirnsak@victas.uca.org.au)

In our current context, electronic communication has made it easier for people to contact their local MP or any other MP for that matter. The result has been that MPs are flooded by electronic communication. One thing we all have in common as people, that time is finite. So the reality is that an MP can only engage with a limited number of people in a meaningful way, the same as the rest of us.

So, to put forward ideas and requests to MPs that will stand out requires the need to have built meaningful and genuine relationships with the local MPs. That means there is a

need to seek to understand the local MP and what they value and see as important. Too many people in the community have adopted negative stereotypes about MPs and deny the humanity of MPs. Building a meaningful relationship with an MP helps improve understanding of the challenges that occur in political life. It also allows members of a congregation to put their views forward in a way that will be considered.

It will not be possible to build a meaningful relationship with every MP. Still, Uniting Church congregations across Australia have often been able to build surprisingly positive relationships across the political spectrum without comprising what is important to them out of their Christian faith.

We look forward to hearing from you. •



## FAREWELL TO DENISSE SANDOVAL

**The JIM Cluster has said farewell to Denisse Sandoval, Social Justice Advocate. Denisse joined the then JIM Unit in 2014. The Synod thanks Denisse for her contributions to the Synod’s social justice mission and wishes her well in her future endeavours. •**

# GOVERNMENT TAKES ACTION IN ENSURING HOUSING STANDARDS FOR WORKERS FROM THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

**In August 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking that people from the Pacific coming to work on Australian farms under the Seasonal Worker Program be given a guaranteed right to return.**

The right to return for future work placements in Australia was so the people from the Pacific would be more likely to officially report cases of exploitation and poor conditions.

While the Commonwealth Gov-

ernment has not agreed to a right of return for the people from the Pacific, it has commenced a program of inspections of accommodation for workers on the Seasonal Worker Program. Officials from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment visited 122 places where people on the Program were housed. At 37 locations, there were no problems. At the other 85 sites issues were identified. A total of 309 minor issues were identified, such as window coverings not being in order, inadequate cutlery for the number of workers living in the accommodation and broken power points.

There were 51 moderate issues

identified, such as washing machines that were not connected to plumbing and smoke alarms not working.

In four cases, the problems identified were so severe, workers were moved out of the accommodation to other accommodation within three days.

The advocacy by churches, unions and other community groups has seen continual improvements to the Seasonal Worker Program for the well-being of the people coming from the Pacific.

Thank you to everyone who has written letters in support of improving the Program. •

## THE ACT LEADS IN RAISING THE AGE OF CRIMINAL RESPONSIBILITY

**Children do not possess the standard of intellectual and moral development to differentiate between right and wrong to the same extent as adults.**

Physiologically, children under the age of 14 are still developing their frontal cortex and are unlikely to understand the impact of their actions fully. Psychologically, adolescence is an age of rapid development where the capacity for decision-making and impulse control is impacted. Thus, there is a global movement to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years old. In Australia, between 65-70% of children aged 10 to 14 who are imprisoned are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Responses other than prison are seen to be more effective at correcting a child's behaviour when they have committed a serious crime before the age of 14.

In August 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian and Tasmanian Governments to increase the age of criminal responsibility to 14. While these state governments are yet to act on the request, the



ACT Government increased the age of criminal responsibility to 14 in November 2020.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of increasing the age of criminal responsibility. •

# VICTORIAN ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VICTORIA'S MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM HANDS DOWN ITS FINDINGS

**In September 2018, we requested that you write to the Victorian Government to support reforms to protect people with disabilities and mental health needs from abuse and neglect.**

In February 2021, the Victorian Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System handed down its findings. It made 65 recommendations. The Victorian Government has promised to implement all the recommendations. Among the recommendations were:

- The Victorian Government should introduce a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Act, one of the goals of which will be to provide a diverse range of comprehensive, safe and high-quality mental health and well-being services;
- Establish a new Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission to hold the government to account for the performance, quality and safety of the mental health and well-being system;
- In 2021, establish a Mental Health Improvement Unit within

Safer Care Victoria to provide a multidisciplinary approach to improving the quality and safety of mental health and well-being services; and

- Act immediately to reduce the use of seclusion and restraint in mental health and well-being service delivery, to eliminate these practices within ten years.

Thank you to everyone who wrote to the Victorian Government about the need to provide safer environments and services for people with disabilities and mental health needs. •

## MORE SUPPORT FOR WOMEN LEAVING PRISON IN VICTORIA

**In November 2015, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government seeking that they place greater efforts into preventing crime by addressing the social causes of crime and the rehabilitation of people sent to prison.**

The call included the need to provide support for people who are released from prison so that they can get their lives back on track. Our Christian belief is that each person is loved by God and worthy of dignity. God desires wholeness for all our lives, including the opportunity to put right the wrongs we have done.

On 18 February 2021, the Victorian Government announced \$2.8 million to assist women leaving prison to find housing and referrals to services such as legal assistance. The Government had already put in place Women's Employment Specialists to work with women in prison to improve their prospects to find a job after their release.

The State Government also has plans to put in place two Vocational Education and Training Centres of Excellence at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, where women are imprisoned, to meet the education and training needs of women in the Centre. The Vocational Education and Training Centre will include a 12-week intensive hospitality and

catering program and an intensive civil construction program.

"Helping women leaving prison turn their lives around with suitable housing, employment and training provides future security and will help reduce their chances of re-offending", said Natalie Hutchins, Minister for Corrections.

Three additional Aboriginal women's support workers have also been employed to expand legal and transitional support services for First Peoples in prison.

Thanks to everyone who wrote letters in support of measures for the rehabilitation of people in prison and for help to assist them in rebuilding their lives after they are released. •



# THE DEFICIT MYTH

## BOOK REVIEW

**‘The Deficit Myth’ by US economist Stephanie Kelton was published last year and raised several beneficial observations for those of us concerned about the well-being of all people. Kelton comes from a school of economic thought known as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT). However, many of the ideas of MMT are far from new.**

The most helpful observation is that governments that can issue their own currency do not have to play by the rules of a household budget. Currency is an exchange medium between the real things that make up an economy – goods, labour and technology. So, a currency-issuing government spends money first and can then decide how much currency to retrieve

in the form of taxes or by selling bonds. If a government only spent money it created, without taking any back, then an economy would end up with more currency than it needs for the goods, labour and technology that are available in that economy. Inflation results, as people have more currency and can bid against each other for the limited supply of goods and services, which drives up the price. Through taxes or selling bonds, the government can take back currency out of the economy to control inflation.

Further, depending on who gets taxed, the government can also use taxes to reduce inequality by taking more tax from people who are accumulating more wealth. Taxes can also be used to deter people from spending on things that causes them harm (such as gambling or fast food). They can also encourage people to spend in certain areas, such as providing tax breaks for

things to reduce greenhouse emissions.

Kelton argues for currency-issuing governments, the aim should not be to create surpluses for government. Instead, the government should structure the budget to control inflation and unemployment. Thus, government spending to provide benefits to the community such as hospitals, health clinics, mental health services, schools, universities and aged care is not constrained by the level of taxes that can be raised. Instead, it is constrained by the amount of currency placed into the economy before inflation becomes a problem.

Kelton provides evidence in the US, every time the Federal Government has run at a budget surplus for an extended period, a recession has followed. She argues that when the government collects more money out of the economy than it spends, it reduces the number of

jobs and the amount of currency available to spend to stimulate the economy. She does not argue that a surplus is always wrong; it can be necessary when inflation needs to be reduced.

She points out that governments currently allow central banks to control inflation, in part by maintaining unemployment at a certain level. That means that to control inflation millions of people must be prevented from having paid employment. She argues that it does not have to be that way, and the budget can be managed to control inflation without having to force a certain proportion of the population into unemployment. Clearly, there is a social justice issue if a central government ensures a certain part of the population is forced into unemployment and punishes them for being unemployed.

Kelton points out the above rules only apply to a government that can issue its own currency, like the Commonwealth Government. It does not apply to state governments that are unable to create currency. They need to manage their budgets like a household budget.

Further, developing country governments are often not able to control inflation by controlling the supply of currency. Their economies are more vulnerable to wealthy governments' actions in the developed world who are trading partners.

Economist Lawrence Summers has critiqued Kelton's views, arguing that the currency in circulation cannot be controlled by government, as those who hold it can always deposit it in a bank. He also contends that Kelton's views threaten the exchange rate of a currency on international markets. That risks capital fleeing the country and an

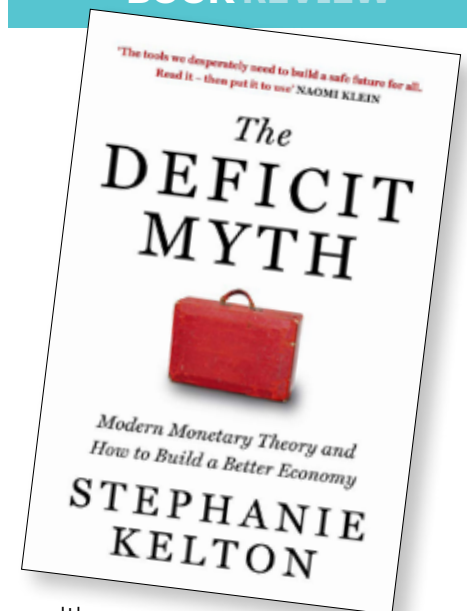
increase in the cost of imports. He has argued that when governments have attempted to manage inflation by controlling the amount of currency in the economy, inflation has gotten away from them. He gives examples of the United Kingdom and Italy in the 1970s.

Economist Paul Krugman has argued in response to MMT that when interest rates are greater than the economy's sustainable growth rate, it is easy for government debt to snowball and the government to lose control over the debt level. In part, Krugman argues there will be political resistance to governments increasing taxes to bring inflation back under control and reduce government debt.



There is also a fear that MMT, taken in its pure form, would remove central banks' independence. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing if the bankers running the central bank are not acting in the general community's interests. However, it can also result in governments interfering in the economy in line with election cycles, to maximise the likelihood of being re-elected rather than for the community's benefit.

So, what is useful to us as Christians concerned about the well-being of people and the planet, is that we can challenge the idea that the Australian Commonwealth Government needs to run its budget like a household budget. The Common-



wealth

Government has more flexibility to make decisions about managing the economy for the community's benefit. Budget surpluses are not necessarily desirable. The Commonwealth Government spending more than it takes back out of the economy in taxes can make sense depending on current inflation and unemployment levels. For example, at the moment, inflation and interest rates are

at extremely low levels, allowing the Commonwealth Government more flexibility to spend without being concerned that such spending will lead to run-away inflation levels. Currently, we need Commonwealth Government spending to help drive up employment.

Further, we should focus the vital role progressive taxation can play in reducing inequality in our society.

However, the caution is that there is no such thing as a free lunch. The Commonwealth Government cannot simply print money without limit. To do so will ultimately result in excessive inflation that will be hard to bring back under control. •

# REFUGEES BEING RELEASED FROM HOTEL AND COMMUNITY DETENTION

**Since late last year and into the current year, there has been good news with the Commonwealth Government releasing people who have applied for asylum from community detention and detention in hotels.**

Many of those that were detained in hotels have been assessed to be refugees. A total of 115 refugees were released from detention in hotels between the start of January to the middle of March. Around 100 remained in hotel detention at the time of writing. Still, the Commonwealth Government has refused to grant them permanent resettlement in Australia as they arrived by boat.

Those held in hotels were people transferred to Australia from Papua New Guinea and Nauru for medical treatment they could not access in those places.

Those being released from hotel and community detention are being placed on temporary visas, which allow them to work and access Medi-

care. However, they are not entitled to access social security payments. The government has indicated that those released from hotel detention will be returned to PNG or Nauru as soon as their medical treatment in Australia is completed. However, the ability to conduct such removals is under legal challenge in the High Court at the time of writing.

The Commonwealth Government will allow people released from community detention to remain in Australia on temporary visas indefinitely.

Both those released from community detention and hotel detention are free to resettle in third countries. Currently, over 200 have been granted a refugee place in the US through the deal between Prime Minister Turnbull and President Obama. Unfortunately, due to conditions placed on which refugees the US is willing to accept by the US Administration, not all the places agreed to through the US-Australia deal are likely to be filled.

It is expected that all those with

asylum claims and who are assessed as posing no risk to the Australia community will be released from hotel detention over the next two months.

The Commonwealth Government has agreed to requests from community support groups that people being released from hotel and community detention are released as a steady stream, rather than in large groups all at the same time. A steady stream of people allows community support groups to assist those released to find housing and employment.

You can make a donation to assist the work of Uniting Vic.Tas in supporting people seeking asylum and refugees by going to <https://www.unitingvictas.org.au/fundraising/seeking-asylum-is-a-human-right/>

Thank you to all of those who have campaigned tirelessly for the Australian Government to respond with greater compassion and empathy to those seeking asylum and refugees. •

## VICTORIA ENDS PUBLIC DRUNKENNESS BEING A CRIMINAL OFFENCE

**In April and October 2019, we requested you write letters to the Victorian Government asking that they end public drunkenness being a criminal offence.**

Removing public drunkenness as an offence was a recommendation of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Only Victoria and Queensland had not implemented the recommendation.

On 19 February 2021, the Victorian Parliament passed legislation to decriminalise public drunkenness. The Victorian Government stated on the passage of the law that it “will save lives by ensuring no one can be

locked in a police cell just for being drunk. It paves the way for public drunkenness to be treated as a health issue, not a crime.”

The Government stated that First Peoples communities and health experts had informed the new law.

The Government has stated that it will put a new ‘sobering-up service’ in place, making sure people are transported to a safe place where they can receive the support they need.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of the reform. •