

JUSTACT

ACT WITH JUSTICE IN MIND

News & resources from the Justice and International Mission Cluster

SEPTEMBER 2023



NEW VICTORIAN HOMES TO GO ALL-ELECTRIC FROM 2024

On 28 July 2023, the Victorian Government announced that from 1 January 2024, new homes will no longer be able to connect to gas. All new public buildings will only connect to electricity immediately.

In the June 2023 JustAct, we requested that you write to the Victorian Government urging that it continue to take steps towards eliminating Victoria's reliance on gas. The measures we requested included prohibiting new residential and commercial gas connections to ensure that the number of properties dependent on gas as an energy source continues to decline.

Victoria has the highest use of gas in homes in Australia, with around 80% of homes connected. The gas sector contributes approximately 17% of Victoria's emissions. The move to electric systems is crucial to meeting Victoria's emission reduction targets of 75-80% by 2035 and net zero by 2045.

On making the announcement, Victorian Minister for Planning, Sonya Kilkeny, said, "All-electric homes are healthier, cleaner and cheaper to run. Going all-electric ensures Victorians building a new home are part of this exciting energy transition."

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in response to the June action.



COMMONWEALTH BANK ANNOUNCES NEW POLICIES ON FOSSIL FUELS

In April 2022, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Bank to stop investing in new fossil fuel projects. In September 2022, we issued a postcard directed to the bank. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters to the Commonwealth Bank or sent in postcards.

On 9 August 2023, the Commonwealth Bank announced it would not provide project finance to new or expanded oil or gas extractions. It was already committed not to finance new or expanded thermal coal mines or new coal-fired power stations.

It would also require fossil fuel producers who are their customers, to provide detailed plans that dis-

close their greenhouse gas emissions through their supply chains.

The Bank also stated that corporations that derive more than 15% of their revenue from selling oil, gas or metallurgical coal must produce a transition plan, audited by a third party, to get a new loan after 2025. At a minimum, the plan must be aligned with limiting average global temperature increase to “well below” 2oC.

However, the Bank’s policy contains a clause that will allow it to keep lending to fossil fuel corporations beyond 2025 if the energy source being extracted is necessary to protect the security of the energy grid. The Commonwealth Bank noted that the Australian Energy Market Operator had pointed to the ongoing need for gas-fired electricity generation to support the security and stability of Australia’s electricity grid.

The environmental organisation, Market Forces, welcomed the Bank’s new policy stating to the media that the Commonwealth Bank “has made a critical decision to end funding from 2025 for fossil fuel clients without independently verified plans to cut all emissions – including from the end use of their coal, oil and gas – in line with the Paris Agreement. ANZ, NAB, Westpac and Macquarie have been left embarrassingly behind on climate action, with CommBank’s new policy reinforcing its significant drop in lending to fossil fuels over the last two years.”

The Bank has pledged to publicly report its compliance with its fossil fuels financing-related commitments from the 2024 financial year.

With the good news above no further actions targeting the Commonwealth Bank are needed at this time. •

FROM THE JUSTICE & INTERNATIONAL MISSION CLUSTER

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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.



THE LAST REFUGEE SENT TO NAURU BY THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT LEAVES

The Uniting Church in Australia opposes the offshore processing of people who came to Australia by boat seeking asylum. Thank you to those who have taken action over the years to support that position.

Happily, in late June 2023, the last refugee sent to Nauru by the Aus-

tralian Government was evacuated to Australia.

Since July 2013, 3,127 people who sought asylum in Australia and arrived by boat were sent to Nauru and Papua New Guinea by the Australian Government. Since that year, people have been resettled in third countries like the US and Canada, hundreds were returned to the countries they had fled from, and others have ended up in Australia

after being transferred for essential healthcare needs.

Very tragically, at least 14 people subjected to offshore detention died, many due to treatable illness and some due to suicide or being murdered by guards.

There are still 80 people seeking asylum in Papua New Guinea that were sent there by the Australian Government. •

INCREASED REFUGEE INTAKE

Over 2.4 million people are identified by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in urgent need of resettlement worldwide. One-third of global needs are in the Asian region, with Afghanistan and Myanmar among those in the most acute crises.

In October 2022, we released a postcard campaign directed towards the Commonwealth Gov-

ernment to follow through on its election commitment to increase the refugee intake from 17,875 to 27,000 places, with an additional 5,000 places available for community sponsorship. Thank you to everyone who sent off postcards to the government.

There was good news on 11 August when the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Andrew Giles, announced the number of refugee places would be increased from 17,875 to 20,000. It is to be expected that any increase

to 27,000 places would take place in stages, as the support services will take time to put in place as the number of places is increased.

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) has welcomed the increase. RCOA chief executive officer, Paul Power, said in response to the announcement, "At a time of such great need, every additional refugee resettlement place is welcome and signifies Australia's willingness to increase its share of international responsibility for people displaced by persecution and conflict." •

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES FIRST SOBERING UP CENTRE

In April and October 2019, we requested you write letters to the Victorian Premier asking that public drunkenness no longer be 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. The Victorian Government has now removed public drunkenness as a

criminal offence, which will come into force in November 2023. Thank you to everyone who wrote letters on the issue in response to the letter-writing actions.

There was further good news on 4 August 2023, with the Victorian Government announcing the establishment of a dedicated sobering centre in Collingwood. People who are intoxicated in public will be kept safe at the centre. Specially trained staff will work alongside local health and social support services to en-

sure people using the centre can also access critical services for concerns such as alcohol and other drugs, family violence, homelessness, mental health and wellbeing, or financial difficulties.

Additional health-led outreach and sobering services for First Nations people will also be established across the state.

The Victorian Government is providing \$120 million to establish the reform and provide safer pathways to help people who are intoxicated. •



FIRST NATIONS MAN ASSAULTED BY VICTORIAN POLICE SETTLES CASE

The April 2022 issue of JustAct included an action requesting that you write to the Victorian Government seeking the establishment of an independent ombudsman to investigate claims of police misconduct.

It is expected that such an ombudsman would reduce police misconduct towards First Nations people.

The action led with the case of First Nations man, Korey Penny, who was allegedly assaulted and racially abused by Victorian police officers while riding to work in September 2020. The case was settled after police finally produced body-worn camera footage that backed Mr Penny's version of events that

he was assaulted by police.

Victoria Police reached an undisclosed financial settlement with Mr Penny and his legal team just days before the case was due to go to trial in March 2023.

Mr Penny has stated that he continued to suffer from an elbow injury sustained during the assault, which he said had further eroded his faith in the police.

There has been no serious disciplinary action against any of the officers that assaulted Mr Penny. A complaint made to the Victorian Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission resulted in a police officer receiving workplace guidance due to their body-worn camera not being turned on.

The JIM Cluster will continue to advocate and campaign for a dedicated, independent ombudsman to deal with complaints of misconduct by police. •

WORKERS GET A JUST OUTCOME IN THE VIZZARRI CASE

In the April 2023 JustAct, we requested that you write letters to Coles and Woolworths regarding the need for them to take action concerning one of their suppliers Vizzarri Farms.

People working at Vizzarri Farms alleged being exploited, including being paid in cash in envelopes and being underpaid. Vizzarri Farms supplies Broccolini® to Coles, Woolworths and ALDI.

There was good news in July that, with the assistance of public pressure, Vizzarri Farms reached a settlement with the United Workers Union to address issues of illegal and exploitative behaviour on the farms. This includes a commitment from the company that it will enable the union to investigate labour hire providers at the farm moving forward.

The United Workers Union thanked everyone who took action to obtain a just outcome for the people working at Vizzarri Farms.

No further action is needed for the case. •



GREATER PROTECTIONS FOR PEOPLE FROM THE PACIFIC ISLANDS COMING TO WORK IN AUSTRALIA

The JIM Cluster has invited you to write letters in support of improving the safeguards for people from the Pacific Islands and Timor Leste coming to work in Australia under the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme.

The most recent action was a letter-writing action in the February JustAct. Thank you to everyone who has written letters in support of reforms of the PALM scheme.

Most workers on the PALM scheme have been happy with their time in Australia and have been able to send home a decent amount of money to benefit their families and communities. The median number of work hours people get on the scheme is 40 hours per week. However, recently one large labour-hire business, Linx Employment, left the scheme after repeatedly failing to provide adequate hours to people working on the scheme. Some workers alleged they were left without any work for two months. As people in the PALM scheme are not

entitled to any social security payments and cannot work for employers off the PALM scheme, many of these people were reduced to destitution.

The number of people in the PALM scheme has increased from 24,500 in May 2022 to 38,180 in April 2023.

There has been a great outcome that was announced on 5 June 2023. The Commonwealth Government is requiring employers on the PALM scheme to sign new contracts that include more significant safeguards for people working on the scheme. Key safeguard improvements in the new contracts include:

- Requiring employers to ensure they provide at least 30 hours of work every week for the people working on the scheme so they have enough income to live on and send funds home to their families. Currently, one in ten workers on the scheme has received less than 30 hours a week;
- If an employer provides less than 20 hours of work in a week, then the employer must cover the costs of the worker's accom-

modation and vehicle hire rather than deducting the cost from the worker's wages;

- People on the scheme will be able to require employers to demonstrate that deductions for things like accommodation and vehicle hire match what the employer has paid to obtain them. The measure protects people on the scheme from having employers claw back wages by overcharging on deductions;
- People on the scheme must clear a minimum of \$200 per week after paying for deductions and tax;
- People in the PALM scheme must be paid at the same level as Australian workers doing the same job for the same employer;
- Employers must have a Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person within 200 km of locations where people on the scheme have been placed. There needs to be a Support Person for every 120 workers; and,
- Employers will be required to undertake cultural awareness training related to the Pacific Islands countries they are recruiting workers from. •

MEASURES TO CURB ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE HAVE AN IMPACT IN THE PHILIPPINES

In February 2023, we issued a postcard campaign calling for the Australian Government to take further actions to make the online world a safe place, especially for children. We have previously asked you to write letters in support of many reforms to that end.

Australians have been identified as one of the largest groups perpetrating the online sexual abuse of children in the Philippines.

There was good news on 5 July 2023, with the Australian Federal Police stating that information they had provided to the Philippine Na-

tional Police had led to the rescue of 16 children. It was believed to be the most child abuse victims rescued at one time. The youngest child rescued was aged 10.

The information that led to the rescue of the children came from when Australian Border Force officers investigated the baggage of a 56-year-old man from Queensland at Sydney Airport. He had just returned from the Philippines. The Australian Border Force officers found child sexual abuse material on the man's phone. There were also messages detailing his intent to pay a facilitator who would enable him to sexually abuse children in the Philippines. He was later charged with three offences.

The Philippines Government es-

tablished the Philippine Internet Crimes Against Children Centre in 2019, which includes the Philippines police, the Australian Federal Police and the UK National Crime Agency. As of the end of June 2023, the Centre has conducted operations that have rescued 611 victims of child sexual abuse and arrested 127 alleged facilitators of the abuse in the Philippines. Information provided by the Australian Federal Police to the Centre assisted in the rescue of 218 of the victims and the arrest of 49 of the alleged facilitators.

Thank you to all those who have supported the actions to make the online world a safer place for children. •

INCREASED FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE ON TEMPORARY VISAS EXPERIENCING FAMILY VIOLENCE

In May 2020, we requested that you write letters to the Commonwealth Government asking for reforms to assist people on temporary visas that experience family violence in Australia.

A person on certain temporary visas who suffer family violence is at risk of visa cancellation or visa refusal if they separate from a perpetrator or report the abuse to the police.

There was good news on 3 July

2023, with the Commonwealth Government announcing that it would boost financial assistance to people on temporary visas that experience family and domestic violence from \$3,000 to \$5,000. The measure is expected to assist 2,000 people over the next two years.

Minister for Social Services, Amanda Rishworth, said on announcing the increased payment, "The status of your visa should not determine the payment you receive to support you in leaving a violent situation. Whether you are an Australian citizen or living here on a tem-

porary visa, we want to support you as you take steps to safety. No one should have to choose between their safety or their financial safety."

A 2021 study by Monash University indicated that one in three migrant and refugee women had experienced some form of family or domestic violence. Those on temporary visas consistently reported higher levels of family and domestic violence than those with permanent visas.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters back in May 2020. •

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCES POKIES REFORMS

In November 2017, September 2018 and February 2019, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government asking for reforms to reduce the harms from pokies.

On 16 July 2023, the Victorian Government announced several reforms. All pokies in Victoria will require people to use a card with an enforceable limit. The person gambling will set the limit. The measure will also ensure that money is tracked – making it less attractive to launder cash through pokie venues.

The Government also announced that the money an individual can put into a pokie at any one time will be capped at \$100, down from the current limit of \$1,000. The measure will help people make informed decisions about their losses, change their behaviour and reduce the amount that is lost. It will

further reduce the attractiveness of pokies for money laundering, as it will greatly slow the rate at which money can be put into and withdrawn from a pokie. However, the Government has said the measures will only be introduced after consultation with the pokies businesses, which means there is a risk they will be watered down.

The Victorian Government has also announced that by mid-2024, the pokies areas in pubs and clubs will be shut between 4am and 10am. The measure addresses evidence that some venues are implementing staggered opening hours to allow people being harmed by gambling to move between venues in one area to continue gambling. The closure period will not apply to the pokies area in Crown Casino.

The Endeavour pokies corporation has announced it will voluntarily comply with the new closing period from the end of August 2023.

The Government will also require all new pokies to have a spin rate of three seconds per button push, slowing the pace at which money can be lost.

There was negative news that the Victorian Government will shut down the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation by 1 July 2024. The Foundation has assisted in building the case for gambling reforms. Most of the functions of the Foundation will be transferred to other parts of government.

Crown Casino was sold to US private equity investor Blackstone for \$8.9 billion in 2022. Crown Casino has been subjected to \$700 million in fines so far for its past behaviour in facilitating gambling harm, money laundering, and tax evasion. It has now announced that it will spend \$13 million on gambling reforms.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters in support of pokies reforms over the years. •

SUPPORT FOR VICTORIAN ELECTORAL REFORMS

In the February 2023 JustAct, we requested that you write letters to the Victorian Government to express concern that the current Victorian electoral system allows preference manipulation that gets people elected to the Legislative Council who would not get elected if the voters could direct their preferences.

We requested that you ask that Victorians be able to direct their preferences when voting for parties above the line rather than their vote

being directed through secret back-room preference deals.

Victoria is the only state with a system where parties allocate the preferences of voters who vote above the line. More than 90% of Victorians voted above the line for the Legislative Council in the 2022 election.

Appearing before a Victorian Parliamentary Committee on 10 August, the Labor Party, the Greens, the National Party, the Animal Justice Party and the Victorian Socialists supported reforming the system before the 2026 state election. The Liberal Party has also supported the change.

ABC election analyst Anthony Green also appeared before the Committee and supported the reform we are calling for, describing the current system for the Legislative Council election as undemocratic and easily manipulated.

Half of the 104 submissions to the Parliamentary Committee criticised the current election system for the Legislative Council.

Thank you to everyone who wrote letters asking for the reform. We will continue campaigning for reforms to improve our democracy at the Commonwealth and state levels. •

SUPPORTER PROFILE

JOHN BALL

My Christian faith, ideas and experience were shaped by my high school years at the Cessnock, Hunter Valley, St John's Anglican Church and my time at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra.

I was involved in the Victorian Area Council, the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) and the National Executive, Chair and Senior Friend of ASCM. I did post-graduate diplomas in management and later education. I worked in an ecumenical church environment for two years as an ASCM staff member.

I have worked on Indigenous justice, peace-building, banning nuclear weapons, seeking justice for refugees and people seeking asylum and overseas development areas. I worked in the National Council of Churches aid and development commissions (under various names) and the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), which later became ACFID. I have been particularly involved in work for peace and human rights in Sri Lanka.

I have been a supporter of the JIM Cluster for a long time, with periods of varying intensity, through petitions and letter-writing campaigns. I have supported shared opportuni-



ties, such as promoting the energy retailer, Co-operative Power, and attending the annual JIM Conventions. I very much appreciated the recent Convention on building a welcoming and inclusive church community and broader society for people with disabilities of any form. The approach of the JIM Cluster, linking faith with practical action for social justice and human dignity, resonates with my understanding and attempted practice of my Christian faith. I am encouraged to be part of a network of concerned Christians, as reflected in the JIM Cluster with its Tasmanian and Victorian network.

Presently, my main community activities are:

- active membership of Sophias Spring Uniting Church, with a strong eco-feminist focus, based at the CERES Environment Park in East Brunswick;
- linking the congregation with the broader presbytery Climate champions network;

- volunteering at Brunswick Uniting Church's Olive Way drop in-centre and free lunch program;
- the Brunswick Save the Children Op Shop; and,
- serving on the management committees of two groups, Pax Christi (an ecumenical peace movement) and Conversations at the Crossroads.

Pax Christi is presently considering how to grow the church's awareness and debate on alternative human security and peace-building approaches in matters of national defence, development and foreign policies.

Conversations at the Crossroads (<https://crossroadsconversation.com.au/>) aims to promote dialogue, understanding and action on the challenging issues we as a human community face locally and globally.

I feel there are clear links between the above activities with the mission and challenges of the JIM Cluster. •