Dear Parents/Caregivers

Many of you may have seen the recent weekly column by Cardinal Pell (www.sydney.catholic.org.au) highlighting some of his concerns around the policies of The Greens at the Federal election on 21 August. Of particular concern is The Greens’ education policy. They argue for the reduction in “the total level of Commonwealth funding for private schools [to] 2003-04 levels”. They have also stated that they will place limits on the number of new private schools, and that anti-discrimination laws will be used to prevent religious schools from giving priority to committed practising Catholics when employing teachers. They will also move to stop private schools having control over their own enrolments.

A reduction in funding to Catholic schools of the magnitude proposed by The Greens would harm our schools. For a number of years now, there has been a strong focus on keeping Sydney Catholic systemic schools affordable for parents. This is despite significant cost pressures in essential services such as electricity and water, and the purchase of expensive technology that has become essential for the classroom of the 21st century.

Catholic schools already receive less government funding per student (when Federal and State funds are combined) than State schools. Any policy that would see a dramatic reduction in funds to a sector that educates one in five students across the country would make it very difficult for Catholic schools to provide the high-quality education for which they have become known. Should this happen, family finances would be placed under additional pressure to make up this shortfall. The Archdiocese of Sydney would need to raise school fees by around 20 per cent if The Greens’ policy of reducing Federal funding to 2003/04 levels was implemented.

While respecting The Greens’ advocacy for a healthy, sustainable environment, it must also be remembered that as a now-mainstream political party, its position on issues such as education and social policy should be open to careful scrutiny. With this in mind, a policy that would see an additional financial burden placed on families who have chosen a Catholic school for their child is simply unfair (in contrast, both Labor and the Coalition have committed to maintain funding levels, in real terms, for at least the next three years). The other proposals that form part of The Greens’ education policy would result in Catholic schools not being able to carry out the Mission for which they were established in the first place.

The leader of The Greens, Senator Bob Brown, has also stated that the Cardinal opposed the BER and opposed compassion being shown to asylum seekers. Both of these claims are without foundation and contrary to the many public statements made by the Cardinal.
In a recent communication, the Australian Bishops’ Conference identified six essential criteria by which the Bishops believed all political parties and campaigns should be judged. These are:

- the right of every person to human dignity
- the right of every person to adequate food, shelter and protection
- the right of every person to equality of access to education, health, employment and basic services
- the right of every person...to live in a safe, healthy and secure environment
- the right (and the duty) of every person to contribute to society to the extent that they are able
- the right of every person to live according to their own beliefs, to the extent that those beliefs do not impact upon the rights of others.

I believe these criteria provide a valuable decision-making framework for each of us as the election draws near.

It is heartening to see education issues high on the agenda during this election campaign. But I believe it is important to draw to your attention the concerns about the policies of the Greens, including their education policy, so that you can consider their impact on our schools and society.

With warmest wishes

Dr Dan White
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