

TO THE HONOURABLE THE SPEAKER AND MEMBERS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

This petition of certain citizens of Australia draws to the attention of the House our concern that donations to churches will be regulated like donations to political parties by the *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017*. Members of churches are likely to have to provide statutory declarations to prove they are Australian citizens or residents before they will be able to donate to pay for the stipend of their priest or minister.

We therefore ask the House to amend the Bill so that it only bans anonymous and foreign donations to political parties, other bodies they exercise control over and any organisation campaigning for the election or non-election of a registered political party or candidate. The House should remove any sections from the Bill that restrict or hamper churches, charities and other civil society organisations from being able to accept donations, even where such bodies publicly express views on social issues.

NAME AND SIGNATURE

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.
11.
12.
13.
14.
15.
16.
17.
18.
19.
20.

Please return to Justice and International Mission Unit, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia, 130 Little Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria, 3000 by Friday 1 June 2018.



Make Sure the Voices of Churches and Community Groups are not Stifled

The Bible teaches much about good governance. In the Old Testament this is expressed in terms of right relationships: between the ruler and the people and between the ruler and God. It also contains stories of when this relationship of trust is broken. Psalm 72 is a prayer to God to guide the rulers of Israel. It offers an ideal governance model, focused on a relationship of care for the poor and vulnerable. Good governance is shown to be based on the principles of justice, righteousness and compassion, defending the rights of the poor and marginalised and protecting the people from conflict.

Jesus similarly focuses on right relationships between people in the New Testament. The experience of Jesus and his early followers was of oppressive civil and religious authorities that failed to model good and just government.

In a Bill to address the influence of donations to political parties from foreign sources, the *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017*, the Commonwealth Government has also included provisions to curb the ability of community organisations from expressing views on any matter publicly. If they do so, their ability to accept donations for their work will be tightly regulated. Senior staff within community groups will face long prison sentences for doing things like accepting anonymous donations. If priests, ministers or lay leaders in churches speak on any social issue, from homelessness, to family violence to the role of churches in society, the Australian Electoral Commission will have discretion to declare such speech to have a “political purpose”. There are no regulations to restrict what public expression of views the Australian Election Commission may decide has a “political purpose”, except where the views are expressed by news media, academics or artists. This conflating of partisan political campaigning with community organisations commenting on public policy issues, like homelessness or the needs of people impacted by family violence, has already been carried out by governments in the UK and Canada with the desired effect from the point of view of those governments of getting community groups to shut up.

Church members wanting to donate to the stipend of their priest or minister, or donate to the work of their church that involves expressing views on any matters publicly, are likely to have to provide a statutory declaration to prove they are an Australian citizen or Australian resident. Donations from church members who are foreign citizens and not Australian residents will need to be kept in separate bank accounts and not used to pay the stipend of their priest or minister.

Our community will be poorer if churches and civil society organisations are stifled from being able to comment on ways our society and our world could be better.

Restrictions and controls on donations should be targeted at political parties, bodies they control and those organisations that campaign directly for or against registered political parties and candidates. It is important that our political parties and candidates are not captured by vested interests through secret donations and thus a law banning anonymous donations to political parties and political candidates is welcome.