

# SPC News

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## Australia's mixed record on human rights.

Peter Whiting

Polls conducted over recent months indicate that voters generally are approving the way governments have addressed the Covid-19 pandemic. Our political leaders are enjoying, however briefly, a period of endorsement by their constituents. Another poll of a different sort, however, presents sobering outcomes on which our leaders need to reflect.

The Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) is a global collaborative project seeking to present human rights data in a form which allows for measurement, permitting meaningful cross-national comparisons. The HRMI

analyses data from international databases, as well as surveying a large number of respondents operating in the human rights field. It reports its findings over 12 human rights (the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines 30 human rights).

As Australians might expect, we feature highly in some categories. In the field of economic and social rights, the right to health scores well, but the right to work performs badly. Of concern, though, is that, in this field, which also includes rights to food, education, and

housing, Australia is fourth from the bottom out of 25 high-income countries. In the field of civil and political rights, Australia's commitment to freedom from execution is very high, but the freedom from imprisonment and torture performs poorly.

Sadly, as we might also expect, when the groups most vulnerable to human rights abuse are identified, the stand-outs are Indigenous Australians and immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Greater than 80% of those surveyed believed these groups were at risk of having their right to health denied, and over 70% believed their rights to education and housing were not being met.

The value of quantitative tracking is that it provides data not only for cross-national comparison, but also for comparison over time. Negotiations are currently under way between Aboriginal peak bodies and the Government for agreeing new targets for Closing the Gap, with strong focus on justice and housing. The recent Australian protests on Black Lives Matter highlight the need for increasingly ambitious and funded targets. Closing the Gap has its own methodology for measurement, but other groups of concern such as asylum seekers and refugees do not.

[Sherry Balcombe](#) provides a personal reflection on the Black Lives Matter protests, and sees signs of hope for an improved outcome for the next generation of Aboriginal children.

While the HRMI focuses largely on the rights of the person, we need also to focus on the communal aspects of which climate change is a pressing example. [Bruce Duncan](#) compares Australia to the Amazon, and argues that we need to increase our efforts on the climate change issue, as well to challenge growing inequality in Australia, and the economic and political policies which justify such inequity, resulting in

poor education, healthcare, and life opportunities for many.

[Peter Sainsbury](#) challenges the Government's policy of looking to natural gas as a route to economic recovery from Covid-19-induced recession. His theme is also the subject of the article by [Bill Hare and Ursula Fuentes](#), who argue that natural gas cannot function as a transitional fuel, and that Woodside's Burrup Hub is misguided.

[Brendan Coates](#) also takes aim at Government recovery policy, arguing that social housing is the most efficient

economic stimulus for the construction industry, and that investment will produce the most socially beneficial outcomes.

As a matter of historical accuracy called into question by statements made by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, [Thalia Anthony and Stephen Gray](#) provide evidence of widespread government-sanctioned wage slavery in Australia, and the impact on Aborigines/Torres Strait Islanders and Pacific Islanders.

All these articles share a thread with the proponents of the Human Rights Measurement Initiative. Each is urging policymakers to move from the narrow focus of improving GDP per capita to the broad goal of enabling people to flourish, to live their lives in safety, dignity, and the ability to fulfil their potential.

It is my hope that quantifying human rights performance with measures like the HRMI will see governments around the world commit to improving their standing in the human rights league table. Researchers behind HRMI hope the initiative will create a 'race to the top'. Let's hope they're right!



Black Lives Matter Rally Melbourne 6 June 2020. Matt Hrkac. flickr cc.



## SPC 2020-2021 Membership renewals & donation appeal

Check our website for this year's membership appeal letter from SPC, as well as your Renewal form.



Dan Himbrechts/AAP.

## Money for social housing, not home buyers grants, is the key to construction stimulus

Brendan Coates

Building 30,000 new social housing units today would cost between A\$10 billion and A\$15 billion. Because state governments and community housing providers won't have to worry about finance, marketing, and sales, they'll be able to start work building homes much more quickly than the private sector. The boost to the economy would be pretty immediate.

Just as important, building social housing would also help tackle the growing scourge of homelessness. At the most recent Census (2016), more than 116,000 people were homeless, up from 90,000 a decade earlier. Covid-19 has shown us that if we let people live in unhealthy conditions, it can help spread disease, affecting everybody's health.



Mick Tsikas/AAP.

## A single mega-project exposes the Morrison government's gas plan as staggering folly

Bill Hare & Ursula Fuentes

Amid all these gas plans, there is little talk of the damage this would wreak on the climate. We need only look to Woodside's Burrup Hub proposal in Western Australia to find evidence of the staggering potential impact.

By the end of its life in 2070, the project and the gas it produces will emit about six billion tonnes of greenhouse gas. That's about 1.5% of the 420 billion tonnes of CO2 world can emit between 2018 and 2100, if it wants to stay below 1.5°C of global warming. This project alone exposes as a furphy the claim that natural gas is a viable transition fuel.



Black Lives Matter Rally Melbourne. Matt Hrkac 2020. flickr cc.

## Why we marched for Black Lives Matter

Sherry Balcombe

As we drove up Victoria Parade toward the Exhibition Gardens, I was overcome with emotion, and I cried. Do you know how many times I have joined the NAIDOC march and been

heckled from the footpaths, how many times we have marched for our rights and been ignored? Hundreds.

And now the streets were packed; there were thousands of people there to march in solidarity with us. It was so incredibly heartening. Australia is growing.

The only time I have felt this atmosphere was in Sydney in the 1988 march on Australia Day. But this time was different from that, very different. It was predominately young people under the age of 30. They get it, they do see it.



## Was there slavery in Australia? Yes. It shouldn't even be up for debate

Thalia Anthony & Stephen Gray

Some 62,000 Melanesian people were brought to Australia and enslaved to

work in Queensland's sugar plantations between 1863 and 1904. First Nations Australians had a more enduring experience of slavery than this, originally in the pearling industry in Western Australia and the Torres Strait and then in the cattle industry.

In the pastoral industry, employers exercised a high degree of control over 'their' Aboriginal workers, who were bought and sold as chattels, particularly where they 'went with' the property upon sale. There were restrictions on their freedom of choice and movement. There was cruel treatment and abuse, control of sexuality, and forced labour.

A stock worker at Meda Station in the Kimberley, Jimmy Bird, recalled: "... whitefellas would pull their guns out and kill any Aborigines who stood up to them. And there was none of this taking your time to pull up your boots either. No fear!"



Save the Amazon. Daniel Arrhakis. flickr cc.

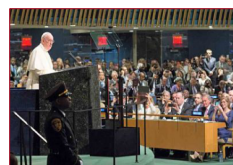
## Climate change links Australia & the Amazon

Bruce Duncan

In Australia and the Amazon, indigenous peoples have suffered dispossession and cruel treatment. In Australia, the struggle for land rights,

respect, equality, and a proper place at the table for our First Peoples is ongoing. In Amazonia, the struggle is raw and bloody, and increasingly so, with the Bolsonaro government encouraging expropriation of indigenous lands. Between 2003 and 2017, more than 1100 indigenous people were murdered while trying to protect their ancestral forests from commercial interests wanting to log the timber, clear the land to raise beef or soya beans for US markets or open massive mines.

As reported in the Amazon Synod of Bishops, which met in Rome in October 2019, the killing and displacement of indigenous and 'river' peoples are widespread, particularly following the deliberate firing of large sections of the Amazon last year, destroying 2.25 million acres (906,000 hectares), more than 17% of the rainforests.



Pope Francis at the UN General Assembly before it voted for the SDGs. UN Photo/ Evan Schneider. flickr cc.

## Action for a Fair World Yarra Theological Union study unit with Dr Bruce Duncan

Explore influences on Pope Francis, his advisers, and collaborators, including those involved in developing the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Under consideration are the roles of

religion, values, and economics in shaping a fair world. Classes 6pm Mondays from 27 July 2020 for 12 weeks. Enrolments 6-16 July 2020 (accreditation or audit).

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