For decades climate scientists and activists have been warning about climate change. The effect on small island nations is well known. Recent events – such as the unprecedented monsoon events in Townsville in February 2019 and the catastrophic bushfires in southern Australian have made it very clear that climate change is with us. While we have always had flooding and bushfires and whilst islands do sink and rise, the increasing frequency and intensity of adverse weather events points to a change in our climate. The anecdotal evidence which appears to our eyes is confirmed by the overwhelming majority of scientific experts.

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of scientific experts confirm that this particular episode of climate change is largely attributable to human activity, such as clearing of forests and the use of fossil fuels. This overwhelming evidence is accepted by all of Australia’s major political leaders, including our Prime Minister Scott Morrison and our Science Minister Karen Andrews.

We also face other environmental challenges such as the damage being done to our oceans through overfishing and contamination by plastic and by poor use of freshwater resources. As people of faith we take seriously our responsibility for looking after our environment. We know that we do not own creation, but we hold it in trust for future generations.

However we live in times where truth and deep understanding which can give rise to appropriate action is drowned out by controversialists of both hard left and right, aided by manipulation of social media and the 21st Century intolerance for anything over 280 characters long. Truth is drowned out by loud voices and short tweets. The recent bushfires give some clear examples of this.

On the one hand was the widely reported fake news that all of Australia was burning, including maps showing North Queensland in flames. Such fake news induced panic and despair rather than useful action and misdirects our energy and attention. On the other hand, there is also false news that diverted our attention from climate change. For example, some sources are spreading news that arsonists are the major cause of the bushfires: but this is simply not true. Others are stating that failure to carry out hazard reductions is to blame. Likewise, this is largely untrue as hazard reductions are but part of a far bigger picture. Clearly the new factor is Climate Change. No one has seen fires of this intensity and duration in living memory. We can all remember intense bushfires with much loss of life and property – but nothing of this duration and with so many catastrophic events happening at once in every state. Bushfires going from August to January without respite is not normal.

The lesson from this is that our country needs to deal with Climate Change and emergency management intelligently. Once we have dealt with the immediate crisis, we must start to assess all that has happened. We must also deal far more vigorously with the causes of climate change. There will be a cost to this: the longer we let this go on, the higher the cost will be. Now some people have argued that as we only contribute 1.3% of greenhouse emissions, we do not have to do anything: whatever we do has almost no impact. This argument is a fallacy on two grounds.

Joint Statement from the Anglican Bishop of North Queensland and Catholic Bishop of Townsville
Morally, it is the discredited argument that if I do nothing it does not make a big impact, so I should do nothing. Try refusing to pay your tax just because it does not make any difference to the big picture! Our community both as a nation and as a world is determined by the contributions of all both for good and bad. Pragmatically, if we do nothing we will inevitably be left behind as a nation. If we refuse to adapt to new environmentally effective and efficient technologies, then other nations will have all sorts of advantages over us. We need to start transitioning to a low emissions and environmentally friendly economy.

Having said all this, our approach must be nuanced. For example, we cannot adopt the simplistic approach that fossil fuels can be replaced tomorrow by solar and wind power. For a time, we will rely on coal and gas. However new technologies are increasingly available which enable the transition towards that time when thermal coal will no longer be required: and now this transition is increasingly being measured in years rather than decades.

All of this is not to say that people of faith prefer one approach or another. For example, Adani has been a controversial development in North Queensland. It is not up to us to comment on Adani – if the Government is convinced that it will not damage the water table or agriculture; that there will be no damage to the Great Barrier Reef; that the risk of loss of jobs in agriculture or tourism is outweighed by the 1,650 jobs (direct and indirect) that will be created; that it is a financially viable development that will not require taxpayer subsidy; and that it will not contribute to carbon dioxide emissions here or overseas in contravention of our requirement to reduce emissions: if our Governments are convinced that all of this is the case, then they should of course support Adani. That is their job. Of course, if any of their calculations are wrong and serious damage is done, then they must answer not to us but to their children and grandchildren for betraying their trust. And this applies not just to Adani but to the entire management of our economy and environment, for the two cannot be separated. Ultimately, what is good for the environment will also be good in the long run for the economy. They are two sides of the one coin.

Ultimately our governments and ourselves will be judged by history. We will all be held responsible by our children and grandchildren. The exploitation of our environment for our own wealth with no regard for the future is morally wrong. We must urgently do those things which will protect and cherish the inheritance that we are to give to our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

The Right Reverend Dr Keith Joseph
Anglican Bishop of North Queensland

Most Rev. Timothy Harris
Catholic Bishop of Townsville