

# **Religion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australian National Politics**

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### **Introduction**

The religious factor generally means a number of things in politics. One is the political activity of the organized face of religion, the churches and their agencies and lobby groups, and the attitude of governments towards those churches. Another is the relationship between religious affiliation and parliamentary representation. A third is the relationship between individual religious belief and the actions and voting behaviour of citizens. This lecture, largely about Christianity, discusses all these things and more, and tries to convey the overall flavour of religion and politics early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It reveals the wide range of intersections between religion and politics.

Before going any further I should make clear that religion is often a slippery variable to deal with. The religious affiliations of individual MPs, much less private citizens, are often not at all clear. One certainly needs to distinguish between religious background, such as family and schooling, religious and denominational affiliation, and religious practice and values.

Religion and politics has a long and often controversial history in Australia, most of it associated with Christianity (Hogan 1987; Thompson 1994). One resolution of the relationship came with the incorporation into the Constitution of s.116. That section reads:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth

In discussions of the religious component of 20<sup>th</sup> century Australian politics most attention has been given not to constitutional issues but to the link between denominations and parties in voting and representation, Catholics with Labor and Protestants with the Coalition, as well as the denominational character of the Labor Party Split of the 1950s that produced the Democratic Labor Party. Professor Judith Brett, for instance, begins her survey of the literature as follows:

It has long been recognized that the foundation of the Australian party system had a religious dimension, with an affinity between the main Australian nonlabour parties and Protestantism and between the Labor Party and Roman Catholicism (Brett 2002: 39)

This was the standard characterization of religion and politics that Dr Marion Maddox (2001:2-6) set out to move beyond in her 2001 parliamentary monograph. Since then she has become the major analyst of religion and politics in contemporary Australia,

concentrating on the impact of religious faith per se on politics rather than merely denominational affiliation (2005). It is also the view that Brett has set out to revise by emphasizing the positive connections between Protestantism and the Coalition parties rather than the connections between Catholics and Labor (2002 and 2003). Apart from the Defence of Government Schools constitutional case, party politics took centre stage. Little attention was paid to personal religious belief outside these parameters, perhaps because it was assumed, conscience voting apart, that party discipline was more important than individual beliefs. Political leaders rarely chose to wear their religious faith on their sleeves in an ostentatious way, reflecting not only the pitfalls of party politics in a sectarian climate, but also Australia's political style and culture.

### **Voting and Religion in the Howard Era**

Much has changed. After John Howard's first victory in 1996 one of the Liberal Party's first claims was that the government's higher vote had reversed a number of its historic electoral weaknesses, including a weakness among Catholics, by then Australia's largest Christian denomination. This was a new development (Bean 1999). Andrew Robb, then Liberal Party federal director but now an MHR, claimed that "a 9% deficit among Catholics was turned into an 11% lead" (Robb 1997, p. 40). By the 2001 election the Australian Election Survey reported that the Coalition still led Labor among Catholics by three points (45% to 42%) (Bean and McAllister 2002). In 2004, while the political scientists Dr Clive Bean and Professor Ian McAllister point out that Catholics are more still likely to vote Labor than other denominations like Anglicans and Uniting church members, the Coalition led Labor among Catholics by nine points (50% to 41%) (Bean and McAllister 2005: 323-24). The old alliance between Catholics and Labor still has some relative strength, but in absolute terms it has gone.

Throughout the Howard decade the Coalition has also enjoyed a striking electoral lead among those who attend church regularly. Research into voting in previous decades showed a similar, though not so clear pattern (Bean 1999). This phenomenon holds across all denominations. By the 2004 election the Coalition led Labor among regular churchgoers (at least once a month) by 22 points (55% to 33%), while its lead among those who never attended was just seven points (46% to 39%) (Bean and McAllister 2005: 324). This combination of strong support among church-goers and better performance among Catholics has been an important element in Howard's dominance.

### **Changing Denominational Composition of the Political Parties**

The Howard government is the first federal Coalition government in which Catholics have played a major role. While this fact has been commented on from time to time, sometimes it is submerged under the exaggerated concentration on the religious affiliation and personal religious background of just one of its senior ministers, Tony Abbott. This concentration culminated in the reportage of the February 2006 debates about the so-called 'abortion drug' RU486 (see below). The general trend is of greater significance, however, than the role of any one individual.

Historically Catholic representation in the Coalition parties was minimal, almost non-existent, and there was active antipathy towards Catholic MPs such as Sir John Cramer as late as the 1950s (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1994). Professor Joan Rydon (1986: 39) notes “the almost negligible Catholic component of the non-Labor parties” in her survey of the Commonwealth parliament from 1901 to 1980. Representation of Catholics in the Fraser ministry (1975-83) was still minimal, though it did include Philip Lynch, Fraser’s deputy for a time. But it had jumped dramatically 13 years later in both the Liberal and National parties. National Party Catholics have included two Deputy Prime Ministers, Tim Fischer and Mark Vaile. Senior Liberal Party Catholics have included Abbott, Brendan Nelson, Helen Coonan, Joe Hockey and Kevin Andrews to name just some current senior ministers. Prominent Catholics earlier in the Howard era included Communications minister, Richard Alston, Resources and Energy minister, Warwick Parer, and Aboriginal Affairs minister, John Herron. By 2006, other Catholics included new minister, Senator Santo Santoro, and up and coming parliamentary secretaries such as Robb himself, Malcolm Turnbull and Christopher Pyne. One step behind were senators George Brandis and Brett Mason. Prominent in another way has been Senator Bill Heffernan, the Prime Minister’s outspoken NSW party ally and one-time parliamentary secretary. The overall change has been remarkable.

By contrast, the place of Catholics in their ‘traditional’ party, Labor, seems much diminished and less obvious, despite Kim Beazley’s family connections with the church and Kevin Rudd’s Catholic origins. Many of them appeared to be isolated in the Catholic right faction, especially the NSW Right, and the party’s culture and history did not encourage them to emphasise their religious belief, because it stirred internal party divisions and conflict. Furthermore, anti-Catholic prejudice had become endemic in the Victorian branch of the party following the Labor Party split (Strangio 2005: 242-243). As a consequence there is hardly a major federal Labor figure whose Catholic identity seems important. Most of the leading humanists in the Parliament are in the Labor Party and several of them, led by Dr Carmen Lawrence, formed a cross-factional Humanist Group in September 2000 to counter what they saw as the growing influence of religion in parliamentary debates and decisions (Australian 16-17 September 2000)

There should be no uncritical assumption that the increasing presence of Catholics among Coalition parliamentarians and growing Catholic voting support for the Howard government automatically means growing “Catholic influence” whatever that might mean. By way of comparison the evidence suggests that the Labor Party did not favour Catholic interests directly during the years of Catholic ascendancy in that party. In fact, the Catholic campaign for state aid for its schools came to fruition not through the Labor Party but with the assistance of the Liberal Party and the Democratic Labor Party. It was the Catholic Social Studies Movement, led by B. A. Santamaria, and the DLP not Labor that were seen as evidence of church intrusion into Australian politics. However, it is argued that the previous Catholic affinity to Labor has been a conservative influence in general on Labor policies, especially through its opposition to socialism (Thompson 1994).

Catholic Liberals are inclined to downplay the possibility of a particular Catholic influence on their party. The policy consequences of this shift has drawn attention mainly in relation to moral issues such as euthanasia (Andrews) and abortion (Abbott), though it has led to an uneasy relationship between these Liberal ministers and their church on the employment and industrial relations issues for which they have been responsible. The same was true of Herron's responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. The journalist and author David Marr, in his celebrated attack on religious influence in contemporary politics, is not primarily concerned with Catholic Liberals (Marr 1999). His targets are rather the Catholic bishops, former chief justice Sir Gerard Brennan and Independent Senator from Tasmania, Brian Harradine. But Marr does allege:

Conservative Catholics have joined the Liberals and have made the Coalition side of politics more conservative as a result (Marr 1999: 218).

Marr poses an interesting question. Catholic influence in the Liberal Party is probably more about social conservatism than bricks and mortar. Nevertheless, the Howard government has expanded Labor's support for private denominational schools. But one might have expected some moderating Catholic influence on social welfare policies, of the sort evident in Harradine's refusal to support the government's taxation reform package in 1999 and perhaps in Senator Barnaby Joyce's (Catholic) concerns about the 2005 industrial relations reforms. Yet it is hard to see.

Greater attention has been given to the apparently greater policy influence within the party of evangelical Christians, also with a conservative moral agenda. Here attention has been focused on the role within the party of the conservative faction, the Lyons Forum, a faction in which Catholics have played a part but appear not to have been the driving force (Maddox 2001: 199-244). The Lyons Forum actively pursued family-friendly policies and appears to have been at its height in the first and second Howard governments before some of its activists were either defeated (its chairman, Chris Miles, Braddon, Tasmania was defeated in 1998) or promoted into the ministry (Andrews in 2001).

In the third Howard government attention was focused rather more on the religiosity of leading government figures, including Treasurer Peter Costello (a Baptist) and Nationals' leader John Anderson (an Anglican). This religiosity was demonstrated in part by the apparent courting by Costello, in particular, of leading evangelical churches, such as Hillsong in Sydney (Maddox 2005: 163-164). By the time of the 2004 federal election it was this relationship, and the rise of the Family First party (see below) that attracted most attention (Maddox 2005a; Manning and Warhurst 2005).

### **Public Presentation of Religious Beliefs**

The public presentation of personal religious beliefs, now widespread in public life, is of equal interest to the denominational changes that have taken place. More than any other federal government the senior members of the Howard government have been active, in word and deed, in emphasizing (or at least being open about) its religious credentials and

beliefs and in emphasizing the positive contribution of Christian values to Australian society. One has only to compare the publicly Christian approach of the Howard-Anderson-Costello-Abbott team, for instance, to the privately Christian, even secular, approach of the Fraser-Anthony-Lynch team in the 1970s to see that this is true (Mutch 2004: 15-16).

The reason for this change might include a combination of the so-called international clash between fundamentalist Islam and Western Christian nations together with the particular personalities that just happen to have emerged in leadership positions in the Coalition. Howard himself, it should be noted, has not been the leading figure in this development, despite the attention given to his personal Methodism-cum-Anglicanism. Perhaps decreasing sectarianism has played a part.

Nevertheless, whatever its origins, this has occurred to the extent that following the 2004 federal election it drew a response from Labor in the form of Foreign Affairs shadow minister, Kevin Rudd, who formed a party discussion group on religion, faith and values to educate Labor colleagues and to warn them very publicly about the dangers of allowing the Coalition to capture the growing religious vote (Compass 2005). Rudd and other Labor figures, while revealing a typical Labor wariness of the mix of religion and politics, believed that “the Coalition is intent on exploiting religion for political purposes” (Martin Ferguson in *Weekend Australian* 27-28 November 2004). At the 2004 election the contrast with Labor had been made somewhat clearer because Labor leader, Mark Latham, was a declared agnostic (Compass 2004; Maddox 2005a: 47; see also Latham 2005: 113-14). Latham was privately dismissive of religion and these views became public on the publication of his diaries last year. This has led Anglican Bishop Tom Frame to claim that in recent years “Labor leaders have exhibited an open disdain for all things religious” (Frame 2006: 26). By 2005 the new Labor leader, Kim Beazley, a Christian himself, had overcome his traditional aversion to mixing religion and politics by speaking about his own faith at an Australian Christian Lobby conference in Canberra.

The second aspect of the public presentation of religious beliefs is more debatable in my view. In her major work Marion Maddox (2005) argues that, just as in the USA, the government has been speaking in code about matters such as values in education to attract the support not only of religious believers but also others who would not identify with a church. It does this, argues Maddox, through “ambiguously Christian rhetoric” and “a carefully pitched Christian right ‘dog whistle’ strategy” (Maddox 2005a: 46-47). She emphasizes Howard campaign strategies borrowed from the American religious right, and supported by home-grown conservative religious activists and think tanks, to attract a wider non-religious public.

### **Government Appointments**

Religion and politics is also more prominent, though not widespread, in public appointments. The most controversial Howard government appointment in this context has been that of Archbishop Peter Hollingworth as Governor-General in June 2001 (Irving 2004:87-90). Hollingworth at the time of his appointment was Anglican

Archbishop of Brisbane. Opinions vary markedly on the constitutional propriety and/or political sense of Howard's choice (Maddox 2005: 310-11), but it certainly drew further attention to church-state issues. Some argued that it was contrary to the spirit of s. 116, though Maddox convincingly argued that it was absolutely in accord with the "no religious test" segment of that section. Hollingworth was the first member of the clergy to be appointed Governor-General, though such appointments had been made in other countries and as Governor by Australian states. The Prime Minister defended the appointment by reference to the diverse religious affiliation of previous Governors-General, such as the well-known Catholicism of his predecessor, Sir William Deane, and the Jewish faith of Sir Zelman Cowen. But he had taken a further step by his appointment of Dr Hollingworth.

The Hollingworth appointment should be seen partly as an attempt to counter the outspoken Sir William Deane, whose social comment on Indigenous rights had a clear Catholic inspiration (Stephens 2002). Furthermore, it was a public counter-balance to the criticism the Howard government was receiving from church leaders, including other Anglicans. Later, in 2005, at a time of considerable church criticism of the government's industrial relations package, Howard appointed a prominent conservative Anglican layman, Prof. Ian Harper, to head the Fair Pay Commission (Sydney Morning Herald 12 October 2005). Harper, publicly presented as an active Christian economist, soon rejected criticism of the industrial relations reforms by the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen (Sydney Morning Herald 14 October 2005).

### **Public Policy Debates and Conscience Votes in Parliament**

The Christian churches have played a significant public role in numerous policy debates, including taxation reform, the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, and industrial relations reform. These partisan issues are discussed in the sections that follow.

Before addressing these issues, attention should be drawn to the role of the churches in issues that were resolved by the parliament in the traditional non-partisan way, by use of the free or conscience vote. The first was the euthanasia issue in the first Howard term, 1996-97 (Maddox: 2005: 50-65), and the second was the issue of the so-called "abortion pill", RU-486, in the fourth Howard term, 2005-06 (there was a third conscience vote in 2002 on stem cell research).

There are similarities between the two cases beyond the use of the conscience vote and the party divisions that inevitably followed. The first involved a successful private members' bill moved in the House of Representatives by Kevin Andrews to overturn euthanasia legislation introduced by the Northern Territory parliament. The second involved a cross-party private members bill introduced into the Senate by four women, Lyn Allison (Democrats), Claire Moore (Labor), Fiona Nash (Nationals) and Judith Troeth (Liberal) to overturn the ministerial control over RU486 exercised at the time by Tony Abbott, the Minister for Health. The Prime Minister personally supported the first and opposed the second (while the Opposition Leader on each occasion, Kim Beazley,

supported both). The parliamentary debates each had strong religious-secular overtones, though this was only part of the story and many other themes also featured. Notably each generated enormous religious (primarily but not solely Catholic) pressure group activity closely associated with Catholic parliamentarians in both parties, Labor as well as Liberal, and Catholic church leaders. In 1996 it was called the Euthanasia No! campaign and in 2005 it was Australians against RU-486.

There are also differences. The euthanasia issue contained an important states-rights element. It also had less far-reaching connections to related issues, while RU486 was linked to attitudes to 'life' issues such as stem cell research, access to IVF, and cloning. The abortion issue, exemplified by the gender of the four movers of the bill, contained a much more explicit gender dimension. In 2006 only three women senators out of 25 voted against the private members bill.

An analysis of parliamentary voting patterns on the RU486 legislation shows that Catholic MPs voted overwhelmingly against the bill, though with some notable exceptions, such as Coonan, Nelson, Hockey and Turnbull. Among the bill's opponents Catholic Labor MPs were almost totally isolated from their party colleagues, while Coalition Catholics could see that they were not.

At the time the issue of religion surfaced to an extent rarely seen in Parliament (Shanahan 2006; 2006a). Abbott accused his opponents of a "new sectarianism" because they were implying that a Catholic could not be Minister for Health: "The last time this kind of sectarianism and alleged inability of a minister to carry out their duty in the national interest was in 1916 at the time of the conscription debate. I thought we had moved on from there" (quoted in Shanahan 2006). Among those seeking change Senator Kerry Nettle (Greens) was photographed wearing a YMCA T-shirt with the slogan "Mr Abbott, Get your rosaries off my ovaries" (Herald Sun 10 February 2006). This T-shirt became a particular focus for the debate about the intersection between religion and politics, including numerous claims that it was offensive to Catholics (Pearson 2006; Shanahan 2006a).

### **Faith-Based Delivery of Government Services**

Another controversial element of religion and politics is the role of the churches in the delivery of some government services. Privatization of the delivery of government services has enabled some churches and charity groups, such as Mission Australia, Wesley Mission, the Salvation Army and Anglicare, to successfully tender to participate in the delivery of government programs in several fields, including relationship counselling. As far as services to the unemployed were concerned this opportunity arose with the privatization of the Commonwealth Employment Service and its eventual replacement by the Job Network program. Various church agencies were involved such as the Salvation Army's "Employment Plus" program.

Controversy followed in December 1999-January 2000 over allegations that both the staff employment practices and the client practices of these Christian agencies might breach the separation of church and state and infringe the non-discriminatory nature of the delivery of secular government services. The critics included not only the Labor Opposition and the Democrats but also Jewish community representatives (Sydney Morning Herald 21 January 2000). Tony Abbott, Minister for Employment Services at the time, jumped to the defence of the agencies and charged critics with religious intolerance (Australian 8-9 January 2000).

The controversy extended to the churches themselves, some insiders doubting the wisdom of such a close association with government (Grace 1999; W.Brennan 2000). Insiders were worried that the churches' critique of the government might be compromised. In the case of the Catholic Church for instance, its agency Catholic Welfare Australia was responsible both for the management of Centacare's Job Network contracts and for critique of government welfare policies.

### **Church Leaders' Criticisms of the Howard Government**

The next theme of this lecture is the interaction between church leaders and the Howard government. The main Christian churches, Catholic, Anglican and Uniting, represented by the statements of their leaders and leading agencies, have become a consistent element of the opposition to the Howard government on some of the major issues of the decade.

This statement needs qualification as it does not apply to all church leaders, some of whom, such as the Salvation Army's Major Brian Watters, have accepted government appointments and some of whom have been most supportive of particular public policies. Catholic Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, for instance, offered timely support for the government's taxation and education policies respectively just before the 1998 and 2004 federal elections (Warhurst, Brown and Higgins 2000; Warhurst and Manning 2005). At the time of the 2004 federal election he was joined by the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne and the Anglican Archbishops of Sydney and Melbourne. It does not apply to all policy areas either. In the traditional areas of personal morality the churches have generally supported government attempts to maintain the status quo, or at least to resist moves in alternative directions. This included not only opposition to euthanasia and abortion (above), but also to same sex marriages. The federal parliament, led by the government but with Labor support, made clear its opposition to same sex marriages just before the 2004 election.

But overall the assessment is correct and it predates the Howard government. There has been considerable church criticism of federal government economic policies from the time of the major statement, *Common Wealth for the Common Good*, by the Catholic bishops in 1992 (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 1992). The churches have been consistent critics of the attachment of both major parties to market-dominated economic rationalism as an approach to policy-making, as well as to particular economic and financial policies, such as taxation reform. While generally unsuccessful and often

unacknowledged, the churches have been one of the last of the traditional institutions to resist the allure of the economic nostrums of the so-called New Right. There has been considerable church criticism of social policies, such as mandatory detention of refugees and asylum seekers, and infringement of Aboriginal rights (F. Brennan 1998 and 2003). In foreign policies the churches have questioned Australian military commitments to the Gulf and Iraq wars.

Some of this church criticism has been central to election debates and to the campaign contest between the government and the Opposition. In the lead up to the Howard era the churches were leading critics in 1992-93 of the then Opposition leader, John Hewson's, Fightback! policies, especially the introduction of a GST on food and essential services. The tenor of church opposition continued when Howard moved to introduce a GST in 1998. Only then-Archbishop Pell demurred from the unified Catholic opposition on that occasion by arguing that there was no single Catholic position (Warhurst, Brown and Higgins 2000).

The most recent example occurred with industrial relations reform in 2005. The Catholic bishops, joined by many other Christian leaders such as the new Anglican Primate, Archbishop Philip Aspinall of Brisbane, were united in their concerns. Bishop Kevin Manning of Parramatta expressed the wish that "in the new legislation, our cherished tradition of solidarity, mateship and fairness would not be dealt a blow in the name of productivity and profits". Cardinal Pell was concerned that the reforms would effectively reduce minimum wages and urged much wider consultation before the legislation was passed (Catholic Weekly 10 July 2005).

The criticism was not solely of the Howard government, though this did little to mollify Coalition members. Opposition to economic rationalism pre-dated the Howard decade and applied also to the Labor Party. In 2003 Australian Christian leaders, joined by Jewish and Muslim leaders, called on all state and territory leaders (all of them Labor) as well as the prime minister to develop a national strategy to reduce poverty. In June 2004 an interfaith coalition of mainstream Christian churches also launched an anti-poverty election campaign (Canberra Times 25 June 2004).

### **The Howard Government's Criticisms of Church Leaders**

Paradoxically, perhaps, given the general positive stance of Government leaders towards personal religious belief and towards the place of Christianity in the formation of Australian national identity, the relationship between the Howard government and most major Christian leaders has often been very strained. According to the government they have been speaking out of turn.

The Prime Minister has argued on principle of the churches that: "Their primary role is spiritual leadership, which I respect and support". He added; I think church leaders should speak out on moral issues, but there is a problem with that justification being actively translated into sounding very partisan". At the same time, February 2004, he said: "It's a difficult area. I don't deny the right of any church leader to talk about

anything. But I think from the point of view of stresses and strains when the only time they hear from their leaders is when they are talking about issues that are bound to divide their congregations". He implied that Coalition supporters would be particularly offended by such criticism of the government: "Some of the church leaders have been particularly critical of our side of politics [and] they end up offending a large number of their patrons" (Herald Sun 16 February 2004).

Such reflections by Howard followed numerous flare ups in the relationship since 1996, including suggestions by back benchers that, because of church support for Aboriginal native title, rural churchgoers punish their churches by withdrawing financial support. They also followed some attempts to mend the relationship by some closed-door meetings between church leaders and their co-religionists in the ministry. But there is little evidence in any major improvement in the relationship.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture, "Australian Politics and the Christian Church", in 2003 is the most considered and extensive elaboration of the Coalition government's position and can thus be used as an exemplar (Downer 2003; reprinted in Sullivan and Leppert 2004: 13-20). Downer's lecture, delivered with obvious feeling, brings together many criticisms, some by prominent conservative journalists, of church social justice statements over several decades. The lecture was very personal in its critique of church leaders who have spoken out against the government's Iraq military commitment. His targets included Archbishop Peter Carnley of Perth, then Primate of the Anglican Church, Downer's own denomination, and the then president of the Uniting Church, Professor James Haire.

The Foreign Minister argued that the church leaders had misplaced priorities, caused perhaps by their unhealthy attraction for personal publicity. He perceived "the tendency of some church leaders to ignore their primary pastoral obligations in favour of hogging the limelight on complex political issues". It seemed to him that too often "the churches seek popular political causes or cheap headlines. And this tends to cut across the central role they have in providing spiritual comfort and moral guidance to the community". And again, "Apart from disdain for traditional pastoral duties and pontificating self-regard, how best to explain the clerics who issue press releases at the drop of a hat on issues where the mind of the church itself is unresolved or not yet engaged?"

The priorities of the church leaders were not to Downer's liking: "Those clergy who have lost sight of the fundamentals have filled the vacuum with all manner of diversions. For some, social work has become the be-all and the end-all. Environmental issues, feminist and gay agendas and Indigenous rights provide constant grandstanding opportunities".

The Foreign Minister regarded the tone of the criticism of church criticism as intemperate. Here he was referring particularly to comments by James Haire. "I find the accusation of political depravity-not just misguidedness in particular policies, mind you, but depravity-profoundly personally offensive as well as foolish. That he was attacking both the major parties is no comfort".

He accused church leaders of having an anti-government agenda and of playing party politics: “Most intoxicating of all, and most divisive for their congregations, is overtly partisan politicking”.

Finally, Downer accused his church opponents of misplaced certainty and ignorance. He complained that “political and social judgements are delivered with magisterial certainty, while utterances on fundamental Christian doctrines are characterized by skepticism and doubt”. He concluded: “The greatest challenge today for leaders of all religions is to forego the opportunity to be amateur commentators on all manner of secular issues on which they inevitably lack expertise, and instead to find the spark of inspiration to give our lives greater moral and spiritual meaning”.

The Foreign Minister’s statement remains representative. There has been no defence of the church leaders or rebuttal of Downer’s position from within the government that I know of, despite the number of Christians in its ranks. Government ministers have attempted to bypass church leaders in favour of direct communications with church members, a style which echoes the prime ministers own preference for talk-back media and the tabloid press.

### **Family First Party**

The most recent development in religion and politics has been the emergence of the Family First Party. The emergence of this new party at the 2004 federal election was just one aspect of the larger relationship between the Howard government and evangelical Christians. Despite the success of FFP it remains a less significant phenomenon than the direct influence of evangelical Christians within the Coalition. Evangelical lobby groups, like the emerging Australian Christian Lobby, are another notable element of this evangelical story.

Leading ministers in the Howard government have clearly felt more at home with the individualist aspirations and traditional family values contained in the messages of the newer evangelical churches than with those of the more critical mainstream church leaders. Moreover these churches have been growing quickly, though from a small base, and could offer visiting political speakers large, and often youthful, audiences. For these reasons, the Treasurer agreed to speak in 2004 and 2005 at the annual Hillsong conferences in Sydney. As the 2004 election approached, considerable attention was focused by the media on the growing alignment between the newer Christian denominations, generally referred to as Pentecostal Christians, and the Howard government. In particular, confirmation of the link was found in the suburban Sydney seat of Greenway, where the Liberal Party’s candidate Louise Markus was a Hillsong staff member. Markus was to win the seat from the Labor Party, whose candidate happened to be a secular Muslim.

Family First had no national profile until shortly before that federal election, but had held a seat in the South Australian state parliament since its formation in 2002 (Manning and Warhurst 2005). It boasted a strong supporter base among Pentecostal Christians,

especially the Assemblies of God churches. During the election campaign the Coalition agreed to exchange preferences with FFP and Howard personally encouraged the link. FFP refused to give preferences to a lesbian Liberal candidate in Brisbane and to one or two sitting Liberal MPs who supported same sex marriages. The exchange of preferences assisted the Coalition, while FFP won a Senate seat in Victoria on the basis of a 1.9% primary vote and shrewd preference deals with Labor and the Democrats among others, who were taken by surprise by the outcome.

The subsequent relationship between FFP Senator Fielding and the government has been fraught. Fielding, while providing the decisive vote to overturn compulsory student unionism, has become a critic of the government on a number of issues including family-unfriendly industrial relations reforms. It remains to be seen whether FFP is a party with growth potential or a flash-in-the-pan. But for the time being its growth and the Democrats' decline alters the minor party balance between left and right parties in the Coalition's favour.

### **Islam and Politics**

The politics of Islam in Australia cannot receive the attention in this lecture that it deserves. It is a story in itself. The significance of the small and fragmented Islamic community in Australian politics has largely followed September 11 2001. During the last four or five years the emphasis in government pronouncements about the place of Judaeo-Christianity as the centre-piece of Australian values and identity has served to increase the isolation and alienation of that community from other Australians. At times, government leaders such as Peter Costello drew implicit negative comparisons between Islam and Christianity (Mutch 2004: 16).

Apart from matters of security and terror the Muslim community has made few interventions in public policy at the national level. Nevertheless, they share common conservative social values with Christians. They also share common interests with low-fee Christian schools and welcomed Labor's education funding plan in 2004. These common interests and values may become more significant in the longer term.

### **Conclusion**

Not for the first time religion has had a heightened profile in Australian politics during the Howard era. Just as in the 1950s Labor Split the overall impact of religious intervention appears to have benefited the Coalition parties. In fact, some elements of the story, such as the growing presence of Catholics in the Liberal Party and the diminished contribution of Catholics in the Labor Party, are actually a long-term consequence of the Labor Split. The cultural receptivity of the parties towards religion has altered.

Nevertheless, although the ultimate impact of religion on the parties may not yet be equivalent, the last decade is a more interesting story. During the Howard decade the influence of religion has been markedly more varied and has crossed denominational boundaries from the mainstream to the newer evangelical churches. Furthermore, religion

and personal religious belief has been much more public. A wider cultural change has occurred in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australian politics.

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