
Religion in 21st 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 organised 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 twenty-first 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. One resolution of the relationship came with the incorporation into the Constitution of s. 116. That section reads:

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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 twentieth 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 recognised 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.¹

This was the standard characterisation of religion and politics that Dr Marion Maddox set out to move beyond in her 2001 parliamentary monograph.² 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. It is also the view that Brett has set out to revise by emphasising the positive connections between Protestantism and the Coalition parties rather than the connections between Catholics and Labor.³ 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. Andrew Robb, then Liberal Party federal director but now an MHR, claimed that 'a 9 per cent deficit among Catholics was turned into an 11 per cent lead.'⁴ By the 2001 election

¹ Judith Brett, 'Class, religion and the foundation of the Australian party system: a revisionist interpretation', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 31, 2002, pp. 39–56.

² Marion Maddox, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*. Canberra, Department of the Parliamentary Library, 2001, p. 39; and see *God under Howard: the Rise of the Religious Right in Australian Politics*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2005.

³ Brett, 'Class ... ' 2002, op. cit., and *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁴ Andrew Robb, 'The Liberal Party campaign', in Clive Bean et al. (eds), *The Politics of Retribution*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1997, p. 40.

the Australian Election Survey reported that the Coalition still led Labor among Catholics by three points (45 per cent to 42 per cent). In 2004, while the political scientists Dr Clive Bean and Professor Ian McAllister point out that Catholics are still more likely to vote Labor than other denominations like Anglicans and Uniting Church members, the Coalition led Labor among Catholics by nine points (50 per cent to 41 per cent).⁵ 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.⁶ 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 per cent to 33 per cent), while its lead among those who never attended was just seven points (46 per cent to 39 per cent).⁷ 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' RU-486 (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.⁸ Professor Joan Rydon notes 'the almost negligible Catholic component of the non-Labor parties' in her survey of the Commonwealth Parliament from 1901 to 1980.⁹ 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

⁵ Clive Bean and Ian McAllister, 'Voting behaviour: not an election of interest (rates)', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: the 2004 Australian Election*. Perth, API Network, 2005, pp. 323–4.

⁶ Clive Bean, 'The forgotten cleavage? Religion and politics in Australia', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2, June 1999.

⁷ Bean and McAllister, 2005, op. cit., p. 324.

⁸ See 'The Liberals', Episode 1, Australian Broadcasting Commission video, 1994.

⁹ Joan Rydon, *A Federal Legislature: the Australian Commonwealth Parliament 1901–1980*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 39.

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.¹⁰ 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.

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.¹¹

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. His targets are rather the Catholic bishops, former chief justice Sir Gerard Brennan and Independent Senator from Tasmania, Brian Harradine. But Marr does allege:

¹⁰ Paul Strangio, 'Closing the Split? Before and after federal intervention in the Victorian ALP', in Brian Costar, Peter Love and Paul Strangio, (eds), *The Great Labor Schism: a Retrospective*. Carlton North, Vic., Scribe, 2005, pp. 340–365.

¹¹ Roger Thompson, *Religion in Australia: a History*. Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1994.

Conservative Catholics have joined the Liberals and have made the Coalition side of politics more conservative as a result.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹² David Marr, *The High Price of Heaven*. St Leonards, NSW, Allen and Unwin, 1999, p. 218.

¹³ Maddox, 2001, op. cit., pp. 199–244.

¹⁴ Maddox, *God Under Howard*, 2005, op. cit., pp. 163–164.

¹⁵ H. Manning and John Warhurst, 'The Old and New Politics of Religion', in Marian Simms and John Warhurst (eds), *Mortgage Nation: the 2004 Australian Election*. Perth, API Network, 2005, pp. 263–270; Marion Maddox, 'Interlude: One Country under Howard', in Peter Browne and Julian Thomas (eds), *A Win and a Prayer: Scenes from the 2004 Australian Election*. Sydney, UNSW Press, 2005.

¹⁶ S. Mutch, 'Religion in Australian politics: a surfacing debate', *AQ: Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, September–October 2004, pp. 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.¹⁷ 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.’¹⁸ At the 2004 election the contrast with Labor had been made somewhat clearer because Labor leader, Mark Latham, was a declared agnostic.¹⁹ Latham was privately dismissive of religion and these views became public on the publication of his diaries.²⁰ This has led Anglican Bishop Tom Frame to claim that in recent years ‘Labor leaders have exhibited an open disdain for all things religious.’²¹ 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’.²² 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. 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, but it certainly drew further attention to church-state

¹⁷ ‘Kevin Rudd and the God Factor’, Compass, Australian Broadcasting Corporation video, 2005.

¹⁸ Martin Ferguson in the *Weekend Australian* 27–28 November 2004.

¹⁹ ‘What our leaders believe’, Compass, Australian Broadcasting Commission video, 2004; Maddox, ‘Interlude ...’, 2005, op. cit.

²⁰ Mark Latham, *The Latham Diaries*. Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 2005.

²¹ Tom Frame, ‘The Labor Party and Christianity: a reflection on the Latham diaries’, *Quadrant*, Jan–Feb 2006, pp. 26–32.

²² Marion Maddox, ‘Interlude ...’, 2005, op. cit., pp. 46–47.

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.²³ 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. 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, Professor Ian Harper, to head the Fair Pay Commission. Harper, publicly presented as an active Christian economist, soon rejected criticism of the industrial relations reforms by the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen.²⁴

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, 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 RU-486 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

²³ Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard*, 2005, op. cit., pp. 310–11.

²⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald* 12 and 14 October 2005.

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 RU-486 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 RU-486 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. 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.'²⁵ Among those seeking change Senator Kerry Nettle (Greens) was photographed wearing a YWCA T-shirt with the slogan 'Mr Abbott, Get your rosaries off my ovaries.'²⁶ 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.²⁷

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

²⁵ Quoted in D. Shanahan, 'Abbott condemns "sectarian" critics', *Australian* 9 February 2006.

²⁶ *Herald Sun* 10 February 2006.

²⁷ See C. Pearson, 'Bigotry makes a rebirth', *Weekend Australian* 11–12 February 2006; and D. Shanahan, 'Morality issues can't be ducked', *Australian* 10 February 2006.

Opposition and the Democrats but also Jewish community representatives²⁸ Tony Abbott, Minister for Employment Services at the time, jumped to the defence of the agencies and charged critics with religious intolerance.²⁹

The controversy extended to the churches themselves, some insiders doubting the wisdom of such a close association with government.³⁰ 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. 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 1992.³¹ 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

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 January 2000.

²⁹ *Australian* 8–9 January 2000.

³⁰ D. Grace, 'Preaching the gospel of the Job Network', *Sydney Morning Herald* 30 December 1999; W. Brennan, 'Our quango which art in employment', *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 January 2000.

³¹ Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Common Wealth for the Common Good. A Statement on the Distribution of Wealth in Australia*. Melbourne, Collins Dove, 1992.

asylum seekers, and infringement of Aboriginal rights.³² 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.

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.³³

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.³⁴

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

³² Frank Brennan, *The Wik Debate: Its Impact on Aborigines, Pastoralists and Miners*. Sydney, UNSW Press, 1988; Frank Brennan, *Tampering with Asylum*. St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2003.

³³ *Catholic Weekly* 10 July 2005.

³⁴ *Canberra Times* 25 June 2004.

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.’³⁵

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 of 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.³⁶ 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.’

³⁵ *Herald Sun* 16 February 2004.

³⁶ Alexander Downer, ‘Australian Politics and the Christian Church.’ The Sir Thomas Playford Lecture, University of Adelaide Liberal Club, 27 August 2003.

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 minister's 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. 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 per cent 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.³⁷

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 twenty-first century Australian politics.

³⁷ Mutch, 2004, op. cit., p. 16.

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Question — Will the Labor Party, with interest to win back church-goers, through what I see as more social initiatives that are attractive to the Christian community, be successful, or will the Coalition's weighting towards identifiable moral Christian issues continue to keep it with the church-going majority? What would Labor have to do to win back more of the church-going community?

John Warhurst — Well I suppose that's a question that Kevin Rudd and his colleagues are ruminating about. I think there will be a swing of the pendulum. As Kevin Rudd has said, it's not that Labor doesn't have a great many policies attractive to church-goers, it is rather that in the current climate the balance between what I might call very roughly 'left church policies' and 'right church policies' tends to have focused very much on the right church policies—the right in political right terms. Kevin Rudd's position, as I understand it, is that the Labor Party ought to be more open and more concerned about making contact with the church community, and I suspect it will do that. There are many individuals within the Labor Party who are already doing that. I think the time will come when the balance between the social justice issues and the so-called moral issues may swing in the community in a way which benefits the Labor Party. There is a legacy in the Labor Party of not being willing to speak openly about religion and matters of faith, and it relates to the sort of political history that I was speaking about. I think that Kim Beazley and Kevin Rudd, and NSW Labor senator Ursula Stephens, and there are plenty of others, are probably focused on the issue more than they were. I think Family First was probably a bit of a wake-up call to many in politics, even though it was only a very small party and remains only a very small party. In general terms, despite all the emphasis in talking about churches and politics, church attendance is going through the floor. Churches have had terrific public problems with their profile, with issues like child abuse for instance, and therefore might be thought to be not politically salient. I think events of the last few years have shown that they are politically salient, and Labor as a major party if it ever lost sight of that, will realise it pretty quickly.

Question — My question is about the boundaries of morality. First of all, in the rather quaint notion of a conscience vote, because what are the others which are not conscience votes; what's happening to the politician's conscience at that time? And

the second one is the restriction of the notion of morality when politicians say that church leaders may not speak about politics, but they speak about morality as if there is some boundary between morality and politics. Whereas I would have thought that morality affects even political behaviour.

John Warhurst — I think on both those questions I'd be pretty close to your point of view. Clearly, the notion of perhaps a 'free vote' is a better way to describe those votes than a conscience vote, because many people have rightly said does this mean that MPs are not exercising their conscience on other occasions; and many people have also argued, and I would agree with them, that there are a whole lot of other issues to do with war and peace for instance, and other issues which are equally as moral, equally as concerned about ethics, and yet the parties don't see their way clear to allow a free vote. I think the issue is that our political party system is a very disciplined one. The free votes are not offered out of the goodness of the hearts of the party leaders. They are offered because they believe that on these few issues they really will have a revolt on their hands if they don't allow a free vote, and that people would leave parties, they would cross the floor, they would do a whole lot of other things. And maybe also they see these issues, although they are terrifically important public policy issues, as in the end, not election-determining issues for most voters, but as a set of so-called moral issues. That would be my answer to your first question.

On the question of the boundary between morality and politics, I have friends who have argued to me that the absolute separation of church and state ought to be taken so seriously that they would dispense with the support of the church leaders on issues like asylum seekers and refugees and issues of mandatory detention and aboriginal rights. I don't hold that view. My view is that an injection of religious values into public debate is absolutely to the benefit of Australian public discourse and public life but that there are times when you can overstep the mark. I think the mark is overstepped if there is an implication that religious values are superior to other values. That in a sense the religious opinion is being delivered from on high. I think that is crossing the line. There is a very interesting situation going on in South Australia at the moment where the second most senior Catholic Prelate has been a member of the Labor Cabinet for the last three years, and has just been appointed Commissioner for Social Inclusion. That appointment has been criticised by the Liberal Party as bringing the church too close to the government, and I'm inclined to agree with that. I think churches would be wise to not get sucked in to too close a relationship, for their own benefit as well as the benefit of the wider community.

Question — You have made the point very strongly that church and state is not what it was. They are in a sense, moving very close together. My question, or observation I'd like your reaction to is, the inability it would seem in public dialogue on matters where religion is raised, to actually argue a point on religious things. I mean the Bible, or in church as it were, historical teaching doesn't mention anything about RU-486 or industrial relations or things like this. But what we have is a situation where people are lobbing hand grenades at each other from firm positions that they have established before they entered into the public sphere. There is also another particularly worrying aspect, that there is still some embarrassment about talking about religion. So people have their own views which are formulated on a religious or other moral basis as you mention, but the actual reasons for their belief is subterranean and below the level of political discourse, which is to me dangerous. Your reaction to that?

John Warhurst — Well you raised quite a number of points there. Perhaps I would start with the last one, that religious values are in some sense subterranean. While I can see what you are getting at, I think it is very hard. Who are we to know where anyone's values on a political issue really come from deep down? I think church agencies, church lobbies, church leaders should be treated like every other lobby group in the community, and that is in any intervention in public debate, the public should clearly know where it is coming from. They should know the credentials of the person who is giving it. When churches intervene in public life they should not expect to be treated as anything special. If there is a sense in which church leaders feel they might be protected from public debate, then I reject that notion as well. If you put your oar in you can expect to be belted over the head, and I don't think the community would want any less than that as far as any contribution to public debate. One of the points that the foreign minister made in a speech, with which I quite strongly disagree, was the notion of some sort of ex-Cathedra statement, and you do see that from time to time as if, you know, the poor old MPs running around making legislation should all stop work and listen to the pronouncements of a religious leader. I don't think that for one minute. But I do think Australian public debate would be the worse if religious leaders were bullied from making public announcements. Political party members and supporters will be disappointed because those public announcements are going to threaten their party 50 per cent of the time, probably, and I think party members and parliamentarians just have to get used to that. There is no going back. I don't think there is any sense in putting the genie back in the bottle as far as religious interjection in politics is concerned. There are occasions when it maybe threatens section 116 and they have to be examined carefully on a case by case basis.

Another thing that is often forgotten is that there are a lot of organisations in the community at the moment that suffer declining attendance rates. Wherever you are, declining attendance rates are the thing. Trade unions are down at a level not much higher than the number of people who attend a church, a mosque or a synagogue on a Sunday, so that overwhelming view that it's such a small section of the community that it can be neglected is false.

Question — I want to refer to the Australian Constitution mentioned earlier in that it requires that its laws regarding office be secular. It's quite right that when swearing an MP into the federal parliament, they can either take an oath or they can make an affirmation. However, each session starts off with prayers, it mentions God. It should be secular, and my question is this: people say 'oh, they never call a quorum' but a quorum has been called in the House of Representatives and it refers to the period when the office of a minister was questioned because he wasn't religious, so it's relevant. And maybe this is unconstitutional that we have those prayers, and attempts have been made to change it. Should those prayers not be read unless they eliminate God and just refer to serving the people, or removed completely, or should there be a standing order that says that a quorum shall not be called during those prayers? At the moment, it's open to the religious factions to force it.

John Warhurst — I take your point. I think whether or not it breaches section 116, the question of prayers in parliament is something that needs rethinking. It is being rethought in a whole lot of other organisations and many of them are dropping

explicitly religious prayers to open their proceedings, and I think parliament ought to go down that track as well. Now, I wouldn't want to impose any solution, but, other institutions have various approaches. Some of them mix up the prayers by having invocations to non-Christian religions as well as Christian religions, and I've seen that work very well, for instance, in places like university colleges on campus which used to always have a Christian flavour which, in a multi-cultural environment, won't work. Is a minute's silence appropriate, or is all of this just something to be put to one side? I think Peter Baume is someone who has written about his experiences as a Jewish MP and tended, I think, not to make too much of it and just mentally signed off and, you know, spent the time reflecting, meditating perhaps, on the work, but went forward. I'm reminded of the debate of the Constitutional Convention over the preamble which has a similar character to debate about prayers in parliament. The surprising outcome then was that a whole lot of people were saying: 'Well, I'm an atheist, but I rather like the idea' or 'I have no objection to the idea of a religious preamble to our Constitution because it has a spiritual character which can perhaps appeal to a range of people.' So that's how I would answer that.

Question — You commented that there seem to be a surprisingly high portion of practicing Christians supporting the coalition. Then you referred to the increasing outspokenness of church leaders of the major Christian denominations, against a number of Howard Government policies. Do you think there is hope that either in the short term or long term, the influence of the leaders will seep through down to their congregations and have some impact on what are pivotal, moral/Christian issues on which the government is taking very non-moral stands?

John Warhurst — The short answer is probably not, and it opens, I think, a whole bigger question about the extent to which MPs from a particular denomination or religious background would find their primary advice or formation of their consciences, to use a religious term, in their religious leaders. I made the point right at the beginning about religion being a slippery concept in that it is very hard to say of any MP, well that person is a religious person, because they could take it seriously, not so seriously, just happen to have gone to a particular school. There would be a few religious MPs, I would think, and the extent to which religious leaders are public figures of some consequence, then I think those MPs will take notice of them, and I don't think it will be just their own religious leaders often.

Question — I meant people like us who cast a vote on polling day, not so much the MPs.

John Warhurst — I think there is a sense in which some of that will sink through too, and it won't just be to church goers, it will be more broadly. I can think of a few figures who have clearly been important parts of the debate on asylum seekers and refugees or indigenous rights. They may not be church leaders; they could be someone like Father Frank Brennan, who I think probably has fairly wide respect across the community, and I think his views, and others, are likely to seep through. But I wouldn't be waiting for earth-shattering change, and I think that is perhaps one of the differences between the fifties and the two thousands, the fifty year gap has meant that church leaders can no longer rely on the authority of their words, they have to rely on the persuasion of their words—in most cases, not in all cases. You will get people who will accept it, but in most cases, and this would certainly apply to

articulate voters and members of parliament, they will say, 'well, show us your arguments' and they would be persuasive, and that's how it will stand, I think.

Question — My question loosely follows on from the previous question and it is about your thoughts on actual church power. When we've discussed the last ten years, the Howard years, the use and the influence of Christian thinking on moral issues, what's loosely called, family-friendly politics: same sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, what have you; these issues have been supported by the coalition, and have been used to great success. But I see that more of a taking on a neo-conservative view, you know, like America. Do you think that in the last ten years the churches have influenced the coalition on issues which do not relate to the neo-conservative agenda?

John Warhurst — That is a very good question. I think there would be church victories on traditional bricks and mortar issues, which I know are not quite what you were thinking of, but I think that on debates about health, welfare, aged care, there would be church victories on a regular basis in terms of government grants to churches, that sort of self-interested projection of church interests. I think there are plenty of victories there, and those institutions are so deep in our everyday life, education, politics, health politics, and so on, that perhaps we don't think of them a lot. Has the church had victories in other areas? I think the church agencies would say that they have had victories around the edges. I think that's what they would say, that on issues like Job Network and quite technical issues perhaps about breaching requirements and the way the unemployed are treated, that the church agencies would, having got into the business of delivering so-called 'faith based programs', many of them would be trying to take the rough edges off those programs in a way which made a difference to their unemployed clients. I think in some of the issues to do with native title, the churches have been influential—one among a number of power voices. I wouldn't use the word 'power' so much but I think they still do have clout, they are very well organised, and in reference to an earlier question, there is still a sense, I think, in which the churches are one of the best organised social institutions. So if an MP is to take notice of anything in terms of the ability to stage a rally or make a persuasive statement, or even threaten their electoral future, then the churches are as well placed as most organisations.