



CHRISTIANITY, THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY AND CURRENT CHALLENGES IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS

A Contribution to the
National Forum on Australia's Christian Heritage

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The debate about the impact of Christianity on Australian politics, society and culture is one small part of a much wider debate about the continuing impact of Christianity on contemporary Western civilisation.

This debate rages, most particularly, in continental Europe today. It takes a number of different forms. Sometimes this is a debate between concepts of absolute truth as opposed to moral relativism; the debate between faith and science; or the debate between revelation and empiricism.

In many respects, it is a debate as old as the European Enlightenment itself – and arguably as old as the Reformation. It was certainly a preoccupation of Pope John Paul II in his later writings. Just as it has been a preoccupation of the Cardinal Ratzinger – now Pope Benedict XVI.

Cardinal Ratzinger's book, published just prior to his elevation to the Papacy, is entitled "Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures". The book acknowledges the positive contribution of the Enlightenment to Western civilisation:

"The rationality of the Enlightenment bore prodigious and precious fruit. Without this, the great scientific, technological, economic, civil and constitutional advances that have irrevocably changed the face of Europe and of all the West are inexplicable. The chain is long, but there is no break in it: after the scientific revolution came the technological revolution, the industrial revolution and then the revolutions in politics, in the life of society and in the rights of the individual."

But the book also laments the impact of these 'advances' on the soul of our civilisation. Having recounted the contributions of the Enlightenment, the book then proceeds with equal vigour to outline what it describes as its negative impact as well:

“These advances carry a price that we are paying today above all: marginalisation, the triumph of subjectivity and the imprisonment of the divine, of the sacred, of God in the ghettos. In European culture, the price we pay is the banishment of Christianity, not only from the life of states, but also from the life of civic society. In the European Constitution, the price is the refusal even to recall that our continent was the Christian continent. In the life of Europe, the price is the confusion of people’s consciences... Europe has developed a culture that, in a manner hitherto unknown to humanity, excludes God from public awareness.”

Of course, the debate about the future of the collective West is not simply being conducted within the paradigm of the Christian tradition versus the Enlightenment tradition. It is also a debate occurring within the Enlightenment tradition itself as Western intellectuals begin to despair that the core ‘idea’ of what we have known for half a millennium or more as ‘the West’ may now be beginning to disappear.

An influential book published in the United Kingdom earlier this year by Richard Koch and Christopher Smith confrontingly entitled “Suicide of the West” argues that:

“Most Westerners no longer believe in the idea that made the West so successful. The collapse of Western self-confidence has little to do with enemies without and everything to do with the seismic shift in Western ideas and attitudes.”

Koch and Smith go on to argue that:

“The West has achieved its success very largely because of a number of fundamental ideas and the actions they inspired – to deeply ingrained and often subconscious patterns of thoughts and behaviours. A large degree of the West’s success can be traced to ‘six principle ideas’ or ‘success factors’ - Christianity, optimism, science, economic growth, liberalism and individualism.”

The interesting feature of this list, from this conference’s perspective, is the inclusion of Christianity as one of the six essential success factors. Neither Koch nor Smith are in any way engaged in Christian apologetics in their dissection of the intellectual dilemma confronting the collective West today. But what is intriguing, however, in their analysis, is that Christianity, or at least certain Christian social norms, form an important part of the overall software of our civilisation – whether people happen to be believing or not.

Another significant aspect of their analysis of the deep underpinnings of Western civilisation is their argument that so many of these underpinnings are “subconscious patterns of thought and behaviour”. This is an important point because when we are dealing with changes in the deepest substructures of our society, these changes are often occurring below the radar screen of current political consciousness, discussion and debate.

A pale image of the discussion that is now underway about these deeper, underlying changes is what we blandly refer to as the ‘culture wars’. In Australia these are usually cast aridly in terms of the classical debates between left and right, tradition and modernity, monoculture and multiculturalism. But these debates often end up as exercises in political positioning rather than a more substantive analysis of the more foundational changes that are underway in the way in which we think, the values which we hold dear and the priorities we therefore have for our families, our community and our country.

My overall argument is that Christianity, both in its spiritual and its institutional forms, has had a profound and positive impact on what we call Western civilisation. We are all also aware of the negative impacts: the wars of religion, religious intolerance, ambiguous positions on social justice. No-one seeks lightly to brush these aside. But before people condemn Christianity with the benefit of 2000

years of hindsight, they should reflect carefully on the virtues of the civilisational alternatives on offer throughout history. Against that measure, we haven't done that badly.

Western civilisation of course is a broader compact than just Christianity itself. Yet the connection between the two is not superficial, but profound – to the extent that today a number of non-Christians have begun to sound the alarm about the cumulative civilisational impact of the collapse of the Christian faith across the collective West. Alarms as simple as a loss of common biblical and literary frames of reference as a basis for a common discourse across the civilisation. Together with more significant alarms which go to the heart of the innermost values of the civilisation itself.

There is, therefore, a legitimate, important and urgent debate to be had about the future of our civilisation – irrespective of whether the perspective we bring to that debate is religious or secular.

Australia's Christian Heritage

It is in this context that this conference is examining the historical contribution of Christianity to Australia's political, social and cultural development.

My view is that the churches overall have been a significant force for good in shaping of the Australian nation during the two centuries of European settlement.

We are, of course, conscious of all the things that the churches have done wrong: the politics of sectarianism; the institutional interference from time to time in the life of political parties themselves; allegations and revelations concerning the abuse of children; allegations of paternalism and discrimination in the church's dealings with indigenous Australians. None of these things can be swept under the carpet. And the good news is that as of 2006, it appears that very few of them any longer are.

On the positive side of the ledger, however, the combined contribution of the churches to Australia's education, health and welfare needs over the last 200 years has been incomparable. Practically all of our schools began as church-run institutions. The same with our hospitals and aged care. In fact, the church was the principal, if not exclusive, welfare agency prior to the post war development of the modern welfare state.

The churches, therefore, should cease apologising for the contributions they have made to Australia's national life. And as a consequence, the churches should continue to have confidence to engage in the great public and political debates of our time – rather than feeling that they are no longer qualified to do so.

The church, in my view, should continue to have sufficient confidence in its own continuing mission and its historical contribution to this country's development to still engage in an ethical critique of government decision-making today.

The church should always feel free to provide informed criticism of the government of the day – however unwelcome that criticism may be. The precondition, as always, is that the criticism be informed. Having said that, the churches principal contribution to Australian public life will always be ethical rather than technical.

It is unreasonable for either the Treasurer or the Foreign Minister to suggest, as they have done in recent times, that the only valid criticism from the church is if it is delivered as an economist, an intelligence analyst or else as a professional practitioner from the relevant technical field of public administration. In other words, they prefer a docile church. As have politicians for centuries before them.

Throughout this country's history, the church has been at its best when it has been both fearless and informed in its ethical critique of government and corporate behaviour. Governments and corporations respond badly to criticism. We all do. But the church, together with other institutions beyond the control of the state, have a central role to play in continuing to apply an ethical yardstick to the practical decision making processes of the state.

Christianity and the Australian Labor Party

There have been profound Christian influences in the formation and evolution of the Australian Labor movement over the last 115 years. The Labor movement itself is an amalgam of many different traditions: a combination of Wesleyan Methodists; Irish Catholics together with agnostic social democrats and socialists.

Catholic Influence

The Irish Catholic tradition within the Australian Labor Party is perhaps the most documented and here I draw extensively from remarks I made to the Thomas More society in Canberra late last year.

Irish Catholics in Australia, for more than one and a half centuries, continued to find themselves to be a minority in a country within an overwhelmingly Protestant (and primarily Anglican) majority.

Just as Christianity during its first three centuries found itself to be the *religion* of the oppressed, Irish Catholics in Australia often felt themselves to be the *denomination* of the oppressed.

It was only in 1820 that Governor Macquarie first gave formal permission for Catholic Fathers Therry and Connolly to come to the colony. They were given a stipend of 100 pounds per annum – insultingly determined at a rate one third of that paid to the Anglican chaplains. But even the generally benevolent and enlightened Governor Macquarie feared that if Catholic masses were celebrated with the masses, they could become centres of sedition.

Macquarie issued a set of regulations for the Catholic chaplaincy. He warned the priests against acting as “itinerant, political demagogues, long practiced in the arts of faction, and right before anarchy and confusion...” which had made it necessary for the colonial government to tread in the steps of those of the mother country in enacting and enforcing certain laws against sedition.

Macquarie went on to stipulate that:

“no meeting or assemblage of the Roman Catholics, consisting of more than five persons, for the celebration of the rights or your service of your church, is to be convened or held at any other place or places than those approved...”

Irish Catholics’ legitimate sense of oppression in early colonial Australia corresponded in some ways with the sense of oppression of the nascent Labor movement.

We see this, for example, in the life and career of Cardinal Patrick Moran – Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney between 1884 and 1911.

Cardinal Moran’s episcopate coincided with the rise of the Labor Party – and the election of the first Labor candidates to the colonial and state Parliaments and then to the Commonwealth Parliament following federation.

Cardinal Moran became a great Labor interventionist. When the Holman Labor Government started to come apart in New South Wales in 1911, Moran intervened with individual Catholic Members of Parliament to ensure that none of them played ‘Judas’ by “betraying his party at such a crisis”.

At the federal level, Moran spectacularly intervened in strong public support for the ‘yes’ case in the 1911 referendum of the Fisher Labor Government. That referendum sought increased power to deal with commercial and financial corporations and specifically, the power to nationalise monopolies. The referendum failed equally spectacularly– being voted down 61 per cent to 39 per cent.

Moran’s political intervention was challenged by a number of his fellow Cardinals in the United States who warned Moran about the socialistic nature of the referendum proposal. The American Cardinals also warned Moran of their concern regarding the Australian Labor Government’s intervention in industrial relations – warning that such legislation would “*create a wide breach between this country [that is America] and your country [that is Australia]*”.

The American Catholic Cardinals appear to have spoken with a prophetic voice because until this year, the American and Australian industrial relations systems were in fact radically different for the last 100 years as a result of Fisher’s legislation – something for which the Australian people have in the main been thankful.

Of course, the historical relationship between the Australian Catholic Church and the Australian Labor Party did not remain as politically intimate as it has been during Moran’s time. The great conscription debates of World War One between Archbishop Mannix on the one hand and William Morris Hughes on the other have become the stuff of legend. They led the first of the three major splits that the Labor Party suffered during the course of the twentieth century.

And we are all familiar with the history of the third of those great splits during the 1950s. Once again, Archbishop Mannix was a key player. Together with B.A. Santamaria and what became known as The Movement. The rise of the DLP in part kept Labor out of office for more than a generation.

Nonetheless, the Catholic influence on the party remains significant – most particularly in the Church’s expanding body of teachings on Catholic social justice.

Evangelical Influence

Less well known in the evolution of the Australian Labor movement is the impact of evangelical Christians – both in the Union movement and the party itself.

And here I draw extensively on the work of Stuart Piggin who has done much important research in this area.

Kier Hardie, the founder of the British Parliamentary Labour Party, was a committed evangelical Christian. Hardie, a Scottish coalminer who, with appalling childhood experiences of working in the pit, was converted to Christianity in one of evangelist Dwight Moody's crusades in Scotland in the 1870s. He became a Sunday school teacher, a lay preacher and founded the Ayreshire Miner's Union – the same union Andrew Fischer worked for before later migrating to Australia.

The Australia Labor movement was effectively formed following the great maritime strike of 1890 and the shearers strike of 1891. One of the leaders of the maritime strike, WG Spence, was an elder in the Presbyterian Church and Spence saw in the brotherhood of the emerging trade union movement the hallmarks of his spiritual search for the primitive Christianity of the New Testament. In a speech in June 1892, Spence said:

“New unionism was simply the teachings of that greatest of all social movements, he of Nazareth whom we must all revere... In taking up this new unionism, we must see if we cannot get back to the level of the founder of Christianity, imbibe some of his spirit and get rid of musty theology, for some of it is very musty.”

Spence became General Secretary of the Australian Workers' Union between 1894 and 1917, a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly between 1898 and 1901 and a Member of the House of Representatives between 1901 and 1919.

Among Labor's 35 new members of the NSW Colonial Parliament elected in 1891, JST McGowen, who later was to become the first Labor Premier of New South Wales, was an Anglican lay preacher and a Sunday school Superintendent at St Paul's Redfern. He was elected with John Fegen, a Wesleyan Methodist lay preacher; Alfred Eddin another Methodist lay preacher; Frank Coffin, another Methodist (who mediated in the shearers strike of 1891) who is reported to have drafted Labor's first NSW manifesto and who stated at the time:

“his inspiration was derived from the ‘Sea of Galilee’, 1900 years ago, when the greatest of all social reformers had spoken”.

These men were elected together with Bannister, Clarke and Hendel – all evangelical Christians and the latter becoming the founder of the Christian Endeavour movement in Australia. Three years later they were joined in the Parliament by Reverend GW Smails, a primitive Methodist Minister who became the Member for Granville.

Of the 24 Australian Labor Party members elected to the first Commonwealth Parliament in 1901, there were six Presbyterians, five Anglicans, three Methodists and two Congregationalists, including Andrew Fischer from Queensland (the Methodist Sunday School Superintendent); Josiah Thomas from New South Wales (a miner and lay preacher who protested vociferously when the Parliament, then meeting in Melbourne, adjourned for the running of the Melbourne Cup); James Ronald, a Presbyterian clergyman and the controversial King O'Malley, an American evangelical preacher and temperance campaigner. The evangelical influence in general and the Wesleyan impact in particular on the early evolution of the Labor movement was pronounced and strong.

John Wesley himself who, together with Whitfield, were the fathers of the English revival and what became English Methodism, had a practical approach to Christian social responsibility. In 1764, Wesley wrote:

“...after providing for one’s own household things and needs for life and godliness, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, relieve the sick, the prisoner, the stranger, with all thou hast”.

It was in this tradition that Wesley, in 1746, established the People’s Dispensary at the Foundry in London, to “give physick to the sick”, that is, to provide for those who could not afford the doctors or medicines of the time. It was also in this tradition that George Whitfield built a school at Kingswood to educate the son’s of coalminers.

Wesley and Whitfield prayed together at Oxford as members of Oxford’s Holy Club. But practical social action was an equal and automatic consequence of their personal spiritual awakening. This is the tradition of Wesleyan Christianity and has been alive in Australian Methodism for more than a century. It was this social action or social gospel tradition that intersected also with the rise of the Australian Labor movement.

W.G. Taylor, who was Superintendent of the Central Methodist Mission in Sydney in 1890, convened a conference of unionists with the object of reducing working hours to reasonable limits stating “the remedy of social misery was agitation for laws which would make sweating impossible”. George Martin, a President of the Methodist Conference argued in 1894 that “if the church neglected the great social issues of the day it was no better than the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan”. In 1897 a miner’s strike broke out in Locknow, west of Sydney. Routhledge, of the Central Methodist Mission, attacked the low levels of wages in a variety of trades and as retiring president of the 1903 Methodist Conference declared himself to be a Christian Socialist.

These Christian influences on the formation and evolution of the Australian Labor movement, both Catholic and Protestant, have been profound. They were by no means the only influences at work in the shaping of the Australian Labor movement. But they were significant and this is a matter of historical record.

These influences continue today to shape the modern Labor movement which remains a classically broad church – incorporating tens of thousands of people from both the religious and secular traditions of the party. And that is as it should be in a secular, pluralist political party competing in a secular, pluralist, parliamentary democracy.

Forms of Christian Engagement today

That brings us to the present where I would like to reflect briefly on the various models of political engagement adopted by Christian politicians today – and in doing so, I draw extensively on remarks I made last year in my New College lecture on Christianity and Politics. In that lecture, I outlined five models of Christian engagement in our national political life.

Model number one is what I call the “vote for me because I’m a Christian”. This is the model that I find to be most repugnant. It is the model that says that simply on the basis of my external profession of the Christian faith, that those of similar persuasions should vote for me.

This is about as persuasive as saying that because I am a Sydney Swans supporter, that all other Sydney Swans supporters should vote for me as well because we ostensibly adhere to the same belief system.

This model is alive and well in the United States. Thankfully it is much less alive and much less well here in Australia. Although there are some dangerous signs that for certain Christian constituencies within our country, this represents an increasingly appealing message.

It is a model for which I can find no underpinning scriptural, doctrinal or theological authority.

Model number two says “vote for me because I’m Christian and because I have a defined set of views on a narrowly defined set of questions concerning sexual morality”.

Regrettably this model has an increasing number of supporters within the broader Christian community.

It is a community which tends to read down rather than read up the ethical teachings of the New Testament – producing a narrow “tick the box” approach to passing so-called Christian “morals” tests.

I see very little evidence of that approach in the Gospels.

I see much more evidence of it in 17th and 18th century European pietism.

Once again it will come as no surprise to you here that I am not attracted to model number two either.

Model number three says something like this: take models number one and two above and add to them the additional tag of “family values”. That is “vote for me because I am a Christian; vote for me because I have a defined set of views on questions of private sexual morality; and vote for me also because I wrap myself in the garments of something called ‘family values’”. Regrettably it is my view that the term “family values” has become one of the most used and abused terms in the Australian political lexicon. Once again, I beg to part company because this concept of “family values” is invariably a narrow one and invariably leaves to one side the ability of working families economically to survive.

Model number four is along the following lines: tick models one, two and three above but then add the following offensive play. Unleash a political fusillade against anyone who dares suggest that Christianity might have something concrete to say about the broader political, economic and social questions in life. And justify this fusillade with that hardy perennial: “religion should be kept out of politics”.

This is a view which says anyone who seeks to articulate from a Christian perspective a view on Iraq, a view on poverty in the world, a view on foreign policy more generally, a view on refugees and asylum seekers, a view on indigenous Australians, or a view, dare I say it, on workplace relations, then a pox on your houses, and may judgement be rained down upon you from the heavens above.

That’s what I’d describe in a somewhat partisan note as the Gospel according to St. Peter – particularly if you were to look at what the Treasurer, Peter Costello had to say last year about Phillip Aspinall, the Primate of Australia, and head of the Anglican Church. When Aspinall raised some questions about the workplace relations debate, Mr Costello responded by saying the Archbishop hasn’t studied industrial relations, he’s only studied theology. Of course that’s code language for saying Christian leaders cannot have an informed and legitimate Christian view of matters beyond ‘I’m a Christian, I have a defined set of views on the life issues and I talk about family values’. That’s model number four. And I don’t like this model either.

Model number five is along these lines: it says that the Gospel is both a spiritual Gospel and a social Gospel. And if it is a social Gospel then it is in part a political Gospel because politics is the means by which society chooses to exercise its collective power. In other words the Gospel is as much about the decisions I make about my own life as it is about how I act in society and how in turn I should act, and react, in relation to the exercise of the coordinated power of society through the State.

This view derives from the simple principle that the Gospel which tells human kind that they must be born-again, is the same Gospel that says that at the time of the Great Judgement that Christians will be

asked not how pious they have been but instead if they helped feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the lonely. In this respect, the Gospel is an exhortation for social action.

Sometimes you encounter in the broader Christian community the view that a Christian view on policy should always prevail no matter what. I respond by saying that's terrific, but we don't live in a theocracy. We live in a democracy which by definition is secular. If you want a theocratic form of government then you're several centuries too late. But if you want to live in a secular democracy you are in a contestable polity where views will be distilled through the ballot box. And if Christians are of the view that their views are not being reflected sufficiently through the ballot box, then I would suggest that has more to do with the changing shape and architecture of Australian society than it does with the representativeness of Australia's political processes. That is, you end up electing the people that the society itself ultimately reflects.

If you look at the census data, the number of people who profess an active belief in God has gone down over time. The most recent census data says that about 69 per cent of Australia. It's somewhat less than that in Western Europe. Somewhat greater than that in the United States. But the trend line in recent times has been in one direction. So the secularity of the views reflected into the political process directly express what's happening in mainstream Australian society.

Whereas a Christian perspective on contemporary policy debates may not, therefore, prevail, it must nonetheless be argued. And if argued it must therefore be heard by those in authority. It should not be rejected contemptuously by secular politicians as if these views are an unwelcome intrusion into the political sphere.

If the churches are not allowed to participate in the great debates about the values that ultimately underpin our society and our polity, then we have reached a very strange place indeed. Both here in Australia and in Western Civilisation of which we remain a part.

Conclusion

Three questions deserving of Christian reflection right now in contemporary Australia are industrial relations, asylum seekers and global climate change. There are of course many others. But none can dispute that these three are significant.

On industrial relations, the changes to the workplace laws which have been passed by the Government will have a profound effect over time not just on wages, salaries and working conditions but also on the amount of time that families have to spend with one another. If employers now have a virtually untrammelled right to require any employee to work at any time on a Saturday or a Sunday, further pressures are placed on Australian family life. The key to family life is relationships and the key to relationships is the time to nurture them. These industrial relations changes have a capacity to make our family life increasingly time-poor and therefore relationship-poor. We believe the family remains the building block on which our society is built. And if we are going to have a debate about family values at the next election, we would regard these industrial relations laws as a fundamental assault on the value of the family itself.

Second is the question of asylum seekers. The biblical injunction to care for the stranger in our midst is clear. The parable of the Good Samaritan is but one of many which deal with how we should respond to the stranger who is vulnerable. That is why the Government's current proposal to excise the entire Australian mainland from the entire Australian migration zone and to rely almost exclusively on the so-called Pacific Solution should be the cause of great ethical concern across the Christian churches. We should never forget that the reason we have a United Nations convention on the protection of refugees is in large part because of the horror of the Holocaust when the collective West (including Australia) turned its back on the Jewish people of Germany (and the other occupied countries of

Europe) during the late-1930s when they sought asylum elsewhere. And we resolved back then: never again.

Finally, there is the challenge of global climate change. It is a fundamental ethical challenge of our age to protect the planet – or, in the language of the bible, to be proper stewards of creation. The scientific evidence is now clear. The ice caps are melting. The oceans are warming. The corals are bleaching. The summers are getting hotter and hotter. And the dams are drying up. The time for global, national and local action has well and truly come. In fact we fear that the time to act in some cases may have already passed. So is it ethical to engage in the deliberate sabotage of global cooperative efforts under the Kyoto Protocol to roll back global climate change? Or is it ethical instead to become an active, constructive part of the global solution? For me it is ethically indefensible for this Government to have spent the last decade not only refusing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, but actively working with the Government of the United States to marginalise it.

These are just some of the great ethical challenges of our age – ethical challenges in which the Australian Labor Party has a firm view on the program of action that is needed to meet them. That is why we refuse to accept the implied proposition from our political opponents that God has somehow become the wholly-owned subsidiary of the political conservatives – Liberal, National or Family First. No political party owns God. Our challenge is to respond to the great ethical challenges of our age – consistent with the dictates of a properly informed human and Christian conscience.