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Australian Journal of Political Science

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Religion and Politics in the Howard Decade

JOHN WARHURST

Australian National University

The interaction between religion and politics is varied, complex and often heated. It involves constitutional issues, voting behaviour, party composition and electoral competition, faith-based public administration, advocacy and lobbying by churches, mutual criticism by churches and the state, and the public presentation of religious values. This article is a comprehensive mapping and discussion of a range of the major religion and politics issues in Australia since the election of the Howard government in 1996. This has been a decade in which religion has had a higher political profile than at any time since the 1950s Labor Split. One feature has been the rise to prominence of Catholics in the Coalition parties, whereas they featured heavily on the other side during the Labor Split. It is a more intellectually interesting decade than the 1950s because the influence of religion has crossed denominational and faith boundaries from the mainstream Christian churches to the newer Evangelical Christian churches and to non-Christian religions such as Islam. The overall impact of religious intervention appears to have favoured the Coalition parties, but many unanswered questions remain about the motivation and impact of these developments, and there are numerous opportunities for further research.

Introduction

This article sets out to be comprehensive; therefore it discusses a number of the major aspects of religion and politics in the Howard decade. The religious factor generally means a number of things in political analysis. One is the political activity of churches, the organised face of religion, 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 voting behaviour of citizens in elections. This article covers all these aspects and more, and tries to convey the overall flavour of religion and politics during the decade. It reveals the wide range of intersections between religion and politics over the past 10 years by discussing its major elements. But the potential scope of the subject is revealed by the fact that for reasons of space the discussion

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cannot extend to other elements, such as the spiritual/religious dimension of the politics of Indigenous land rights, the leverage exercised by Independent Senator Brian Harradine until his retirement in 2005, the attacks on the Greens by the Exclusive Brethren in recent State and federal election campaigns, the growth of new Christian lobby groups and networks, and the involvement of Opus Dei figures in New South Wales Liberal Party factional politics.

Religion and politics has a long history in Australia, most of it associated with Christianity (Hogan 1987; Thompson 1994). In modern times the phrase has been used in the discussion of four themes. The first is the incorporation into s. 116 of the Constitution of a particular relationship between church and state and the subsequent interpretation of that section by the High Court (Coper 1988). 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.

The second theme is the general association between each of the major political parties and particular Christian denominations, leaders and followers. The third is the particular association between each of the major political parties and the members of particular Christian denominations in voting at elections. The fourth is the lobbying activities of the churches, often about so-called moral issues, but also about the politics of education and other economic and social policies.

In discussions of the religious component of Australian politics in modern times most attention has been given 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. 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 characterisation of religion and politics that Marion Maddox (2001, 2–6) set out to move beyond in her early work. Since then she has become the major analyst of religion and politics in contemporary Australia, concentrating on the impact of religious faith rather than denominational affiliation (Maddox 2005a). It is also the view that Brett has set out to revise by emphasising the positive connections between Protestantism and the Coalition parties (Brett 2002, 2003). Nevertheless, with church–state constitutional politics focused largely on education and the DOGS affair and pressure group politics concentrating on conservative religious lobbying, 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 overrode individual beliefs. Political leaders rarely chose to display their religious faith 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 Decade

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, claimed that 'a 9% deficit among Catholics was turned into an 11% lead' (Robb 1997, 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 Bean and 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, 323–4). The old alliance between Catholics and Labor may still have 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 churchgoers and better performance among Catholics has been an important element in Howard's dominance, and was to become the subject of political debate.

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 (Warhurst 2001; Yallop 2002), 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 (Duffy 2004). This concentration culminated in the February 2006 debates about the 'abortion drug' RU486 (see below). The general trend is of greater significance than any one individual.

Historically, Catholic representation in the Coalition parties was minimal, almost non-existent, and there was antipathy towards Catholics (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1994). 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 included two deputy prime ministers, Tim Fischer and Mark Vaile, and the McGauran brothers from Victoria. Senior Liberal Party Catholics have included Tony Abbott, Brendan Nelson, Helen Coonan, Joe Hockey and Kevin Andrews to name just some current senior ministers. Prominent earlier Catholics included Senate Leader Fred Chaney (1983–90) and Communications Minister Richard Alston, Resources and Energy Minister Warwick Parer, and Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron. By 2006, 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.

By contrast, the place of Catholics in their 'traditional' party, Labor, seemed much diminished and less obvious despite the closeness of Kim Beazley, an Anglican with a background in Moral Rearmament, with the Catholic Church through marriage (Fitzsimons 1998, 6–11, 370), 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. Anti-Catholic prejudice had become endemic in the Victorian branch of the party following the Labor Party split (Strangio 2005, 242–3). As a consequence there is now hardly a major Labor figure for whom Catholic identity seems important. Most of the leading humanists in the parliament are in the Labor Party and several of them 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).

What, if any, policy impact has this 'catholicisation' had? 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 meant growing 'Catholic influence', whatever that might mean. By 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 (Hogan 1978). 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, despite comments by Abbott about 'catholicization', downplay the possibility of a particular Catholic influence on their party. The policy consequences of this shift have 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. 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 Gerard Brennan and Independent Senator Brian Harradine from Tasmania. 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 is probably more about social conservatism than bricks and mortar. Nevertheless, the Howard government has continued Labor's support for private denominational schools, including the striking by the minister, Nelson, of a very favourable deal for Catholic schools with the National Catholic Education Commission in 2003. But one might have expected greater 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.

Greater attention has been given to the apparently larger policy role 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 two Catholics, Senator John Herron and Kevin Andrews, joined conservative Protestants Chris Miles and John Bradford in leadership roles (Maddox 2001, 199–244). The Lyons Forum actively pursued family-friendly policies (based on a narrow traditional sense of family), 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, Miles Braddon, Tasmania, was defeated in 1998), left the party (Bradford defected to the Christian Democratic Party in 1998) or were 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 2005a, 163–4). 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 2005b; 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 switching. More than any other federal government, the senior members of the Howard government have been active, in word and deed, in emphasising (or at least being open about) their religious credentials and beliefs and in emphasising the positive contribution of Christian values to Australian society. One has only to compare the outwardly Christian approach of Howard–Anderson–Costello–Abbott, for instance, to the privately Christian, even secular, approach of Fraser–Anthony–Lynch to see that this is true (Mutch 2004, 15–16). Howard himself has not been the leading figure in this development, despite the attention given to his personal Methodism-cum-Anglicanism.

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 Kevin Rudd, who formed a party discussion group on religion, faith and values to educate Labor colleagues and to warn them very publicly about 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, *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 2005b, 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, firmly Christian himself, had overcome his traditional aversion to mixing religion and politics by speaking publicly 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 her major work Marion Maddox (2005a) argues that, just as in the United States, 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 2005b, 46–7). She emphasises 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 notable in public appointments. The most controversial Howard government appointment in this context was that of Archbishop Peter Hollingworth as Governor-General in June 2001 (Irving 2004, 87–90). At the time of his appointment Hollingworth was Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane. Opinions vary markedly on the constitutional propriety and/or political sense of Howard's choice (Maddox 2005a, 310–11), but it certainly drew further attention to church–state issues. Some concluded that it was contrary to the spirit of s. 116, while 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. Howard 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 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 counterbalance to the criticism the Howard government was receiving from church leaders, including other Anglicans. Howard's next appointment as Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffery, was less explicitly a religious appointment, but he has made his social conservatism clear in his public statements (Legge 2006). 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 (*Sydney Morning Herald* 12 October 2005). Harper 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 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 three 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 2005a, 50–65), the second was the stem cell research issue in 2002, while the third was the issue of the so-called ‘abortion pill’, RU486, in the fourth Howard term, 2005–06.

There are similarities between all three cases, especially the first and the third, 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 third involved a successful 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. Howard 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 the Euthanasia No! campaign and in 2006 it was Australians against RU486 (for a full-page advertisement by the latter see *Australian* 8 February 2006).

There are also differences, beyond the different outcomes. 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 other ‘life’ issues. The abortion issue, exemplified by the gender of the four movers of the bill, contained a much more explicit gender dimension, despite the evidence that female parliamentarians were also more pro-euthanasia (Broughton and Palmieri 1999). In 2006 only 3 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, while Coalition Catholics were not because they were joined by many other Coalition MPs (Warhurst 2006).

In 2006 the issue of religion surfaced to an extent rarely seen in parliament (Shanahan 2006a, b). 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 2006a). 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’ (*Herald Sun* 10 February 2006). This T-shirt became a particular focus for the debate about the intersection between religion and politics, including claims that it was offensive to Catholics (Pearson 2006; Shanahan 2006b).

Faith-based Delivery of Government Services

Another element of religion and politics is the growing role of the churches in the delivery of some government services. Privatisation 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 privatisation 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; Brennan 2000). Insiders were worried that the churches' critique of the government might be compromised. In the case of the Catholic Church, its agency Catholic Welfare Australia was responsible both for the management of Centacare's Job Network contracts and for critique of government welfare policies. Furthermore, the national tendering process demanded by the government forced church agencies to centralise their own activities. In 2006 the relationship publicly faltered when Catholic Welfare Australia (by then called Catholic Social Services Australia) chose not to participate in the Financial Case Management measures under the new Welfare to Work legislation on the grounds that they were unduly harsh (Quinlan 2006).

Church Leaders and the Howard Government

The next theme is the growing tension 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 critical and timely support for the governments taxation and education policies, respectively, just before the 1998 and 2004 federal elections (Warhurst, Brown and Higgins 2000; Manning and Warhurst 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 pre-dates 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 (Warhurst 2003), 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 (Brennan 1998, 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 between the government and the Opposition. In the lead-up to the Howard decade the churches were leading critics in 1992–93 of 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'. 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. This call was repeated by Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome, on behalf of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, in May 2004. Saunders argued that 'We cannot be content with our nation's economic performance while so many are unemployed or underemployed' (Australian Catholic Social Justice Council 2004). 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 and Church Leaders

Paradoxically perhaps, given the generally 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 been strained to breaking point. According to the government, they have been speaking out of turn. This attitude is entirely consistent with what Judith Brett (2006) has described as one of the major legacies of the Howard era, the determination of the government to consolidate its authority 'by weakening the autonomy of institutions which provide a basis for opposition to state power'. The churches are one such institution. The government has pigeon-holed church leaders as members of an allegedly unrepresentative elite out of touch with popular opinion (Sawer and Hindess 2004).

As regards the churches, Howard has argued on principle 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 backbenchers 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 improvement in the relationship during the decade, and it was still being fought out ferociously on both domestic and international issues as the 2007 federal election approached.

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; Maddox 2003). 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 damning, disdainful and 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.

Downer 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?'

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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 issue, feminist and gay agendas and Indigenous rights provide constant grandstanding opportunities.'

Downer 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 scepticism and doubt.' He concluded: 'The greatest challenge today for leaders of all religions is to forgo 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.'

Downer's statement remains representative. There has been no defence of the church leaders or rebuttal of Downer's position from within the government, 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 has been the emergence of the Christian-oriented Family First Party (FFP). The emergence of the new FFP at the 2004 federal election was just one aspect of the larger relationship between the Howard government and evangelical Christians (Stewart 2005). Despite the success of the FFP it remains a less significant phenomenon than the direct influence of evangelical Christians within the Coalition. Evangelical lobby groups, like the Australian Christian Lobby, are another 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 the FFP and Howard personally encouraged the link. The 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 the FFP won a Senate seat in Victoria on the basis of a 1.9% primary vote and lucky preference deals with Labor and the Democrats among others, who were taken by surprise.

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 the 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

The politics of Islam in Australia does not receive the attention in this article that it deserves, in part because religion per se is only one element along with race and ethnicity. The significance of the small and fragmented Islamic community in Australian politics has largely followed 11 September 2001. During the last four or five years the emphasis in government pronouncements about Judaeo-Christianity as the centrepiece of Australian values and identity may have served to increase the isolation and alienation of that community from other Australians. At times, government leaders such as Peter Costello have drawn implicit negative comparisons between Islam and Christianity (Mutch 2004, 16).

Apart from contributions to the domestic and international security and anti-terrorism policy debates, Muslim community leaders have made few interventions in public policy. 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 has religion had a heightened profile in Australian politics during the Howard decade. Just as in the 1950s Labor Split (Costar, Love and Strangio 2005), the overall impact of religious intervention appears to have favoured 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 have been much more public. A wider cultural change has occurred.

Yet for all this, religion and politics remains an under-researched field in Australia. Numerous uncertainties and unanswered questions remain, both very general ones such as why, at this particular time of declining religiosity, religion should have such a heightened political profile, and specific ones such as what the impact of the growing number of Catholics will have on the Liberal and National Parties and whether the Family First Party will grow or wither away. There are extensive possibilities for future research.

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