

## Vote of Confidence?

### Problems with the Election Process and Christian Electoral Propaganda

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Friends,

If many recent comments about the quality of the federal election campaign are accurate, there may have been an unexpected extra blessing in my being in China for 4 weeks of it. I hope, despite some technology problems, you have been able to utilise some of the excellent articles and links on our faith and politics/election site ([www.ethos.org.au](http://www.ethos.org.au)). This article will also go on the site.

As we go to the polls, here are some last reflections—personal but principled:

#### **I. Problems with the Election Process**

Like many Christians and conscientious citizens I've been trying to figure out why this election has been such a yawn and such a disillusioning, cynical exercise for so many. Here are a few ideas written from an attempted kind of small catholic or universal church perspective summed up well in Vincent of Lerins formula 'What *all* Christians have believed in *all* times and *all* places'.

##### *1. Parochialism*

Philip Adams' Late Night Live on the ABC recently had a range of eminent political heavyweights from both sides (Greg Sheridan of the Australian, Barry Jones, former ALP member and President etc) commenting about the almost complete lack of foreign affairs in this election – apart from a depressing race to the bottom on refugee policy, in itself a reflection of our parochialism as a nation. It is as if former PM and Mandarin speaker Kevin Rudd's ambition for Australia to be a player on the global stage has backfired. Rudd's inability to get the 'greatest moral challenge of our time' recognised and its admittedly minimalist Emissions Trading Scheme through the Liberal Party (by one vote) and the Senate by a few votes spelt the beginning of the end for him. It has led to a loss of any sense of our belonging to the wider world, a kind of cynical acceptance that we're at the 'ass end of the world' to use Keating's colourful language. As Keating's big picture and hubris was rejected so, it seems, has Rudd's. We have not only a small target strategy by both sides but a small or non-existent globe. And this in the age of globalization and global climate change and the Global Financial Crisis and the Millennium Development Goals! It responds to the deep sense of anxiety in relation to big problems being too big and needing to just focus on our own backyard, paying the bills, watching debt, mortgages and taxes don't get too big etc.

##### *2. Presentism*

The exclusive focus on the present and the short-term, apart from perhaps the debate about a National Broadband Network, is a kind of parochialism in time, or chronological snobbery (CS Lewis) excluding both the future and the great traditions, thinkers of the past, including, especially religious ones. This is in many ways the real secularism at work, not the pseudo-culture wars one many are focussing on. The latter is simply symptomatic of the real disease of the loss of a divine and long-term sense of time and the world's sacred anchorage in past history and future hope. 'Secular' means this age or world and as the great Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor shows in his seminal *A Secular Age*, it is a time term, representing a foreshortening of perspective, a chronological cataract on our eyes that eventually eats up any capacity for long-term or large-scale thinking (as Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* confirms).

This is exacerbated in Australia with its pathetically short three yearly electoral cycle which allows us virtually only two years of government. As the Guardian Weekly noted from something of a global perspective we take the prize for one of the most short-sighted political processes on the planet. Particularly after having just had five leaders on both major sides of politics in one parliamentary term. As Kevin Rudd warned, we'll become like NSW Labor if this continues, changing leaders at will, with no politician willing to be seen as a reformer.

### *3. Poll-icians*

Related to this is the impossibility of Reform or Leadership if momentary polls are made the end of politics not the imperfect means of political forecasting showing where there is need for persuasion. This turns politicians elected to serve the people not as mere slave of the media-induced mob or ciphers of their momentary and often ill-informed prejudices into mere poll-icians. No wonder people are lamenting the loss of leadership, as Hugh Mackay notes. No wonder that political persuasion, casting and arguing for a vision on a national and global canvas and policies to implement it, seems to be a lost art. As the great conservative Edmund Burke said, politicians are elected not as an empty cipher for the electorate but to represent them with their own considered judgement. So, for instance, while the great majority of our society favours capital punishment and voluntary euthanasia, politicians consciences have not been convinced.

In one sense every vote should be a conscience vote, though each party obviously exercises corporate discipline over individuals to toe the party line. The conscience comes into play then, with the exception of a narrow range of conscience votes, in the choice of imperfect party one will serve, for how long, and in arguing the case before policies are decided by parties.

### *1. Post-Ideological Politics*

The pervasive pragmatism of this election has led to it being dubbed a time of post-ideological politics. The categories of Left and Right, where you sat in the French Parliament are regarded as of no more relevance in our postmodern, post-ideological, post-convictional politics. The only thing we are not is post power – everyone seems to believe in that, and doing almost anything to get it, within or without one's political party.

The sole area where ideology reared its head in the election was concerning, for a while, the party leaders' religious or non-religious convictions. In the previous election the Christian vote was seen by some as crucial. Rudd's Bonhoefferian approach to identifying with those below, who suffered most, captured the imagination of many, including atheists like Philip Adams, challenging the claim to a Christian monopoly by the Liberals. This magnified the disillusionment when under pressure from Gillard and Swan, and the Liberals and miners, he and Tanner were forced to effectively abandon the ETS and back down on refugee policy.

The issue now was Gillard's unabashed godlessness, and marriage and child-lessness compared with the courageous convictional Captain Catholic politics of Abbott, at least when he was Health Minister, in his stance against abortion and the morning after pill. Under pressure from spin-doctors Abbott has upon promotion promptly said that religion did not shape his politics. (For more on Abbott see Robert Manne's critical review of his *Battlelines*). Gillard also promptly sought to salvage her no God gaffe by genuflecting before George Pell and offering money towards celebrating the canonisation of Mary McKillopp and giving assurances that private schools were sacred.

The vote of some Christians' changed immediately upon hearing Gillard declare her atheism. Some like Danny Nalliah claimed to have prophesied her betrayal of Rudd, allegedly telling his staff that he had a vision of her stabbing her leader in the back, conveniently not made public before the event. As Jacques Ellul once said, it would be good to see Christian make prophetic statements

before, not after, the rest of the world. This goes for the loony latte Left as well as the redneck religious Right. Although I have publicly supported Nalliah's right to freedom of speech against Victoria's ill-conceived Religious Villification laws, it is high-time the mainline churches denounced the blasphemy of using God's name to endorse one's own party politics, an act of false prophecy if ever there was one. After Peter Costello's false anointing by Nalliah and his appalling adding of religious pain to the wounds of the Victorian fire-victims, enough is enough. Such fundamentalism is not fun, nor is it true to the fundamentals of the faith.

While I can understand Christians favouring a fellow believer, all other things being equal, we need reminding of Luther's dictum that he's rather have a rational unbelieving political leader than an irrational believer who confuses the Law and the Gospel. Gillard and Abbott should both be judged by that criteria. Abbott has certainly sought to argue on rational natural law grounds against abortion and euthanasia. The knee-jerk anti-Catholicism of many in the media and wider society needs to be named for what it is, bigotry.

Nonetheless, Greg Clarke of the Centre for Public Christianity wrote perceptively recently (see election special at [www.publicchristianity.org](http://www.publicchristianity.org)) that Christians don't necessarily need a Christian PM. Or Premier for that matter, thinking back to the dark days of Joh Bjelke Petersen, who should have known better as a good Lutheran, than to think that his Queensland kingdom was God's.

## II. Evangelical/Fundamentalist Political Propaganda

I have been roused to write on this by some who have asked me to, by my own deep distress at Christians claiming a hotline to heaven on who Christians should vote for, and even that choice determining whether they are Christian or not. In an area as perilous as party politics this comes very close to what Paul called Heresy (haeresis) – i.e. party spirit or factions (Gal 5:20). For Danny Nalliah to say in a recent newsletter that Kevin Rudd is not a Christian is an appalling judgement to make about a confessing brother in Christ, sadistically rubbing salt into the wounds of his unconscionable dumping. To then say that anyone who votes Labor is not a Christian is even more damning of a massive number of fellow Christians. The same would also apply to such judgments made of Christian Liberal voters. As John Dickson wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald (election special at [www.publicchristianity.org](http://www.publicchristianity.org)) there is no such thing as a monochrome Christian vote.

There have, apparently, been public statements by the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) and Cardinal Pell of Sydney that a Christian could not vote for the Greens. I understand the concerns voiced regarding Greens policies on gay marriage and bioethical issues such as abortion and euthanasia. These were highlighted by *The Australian's* Catholic columnist Angela Shanahan's 'The Lure of the Greens' in ACL's recent *Viewpoint* ([australianchristianlobby.org.au/tag/angela-shanahan](http://australianchristianlobby.org.au/tag/angela-shanahan)). Shanahan raised legitimate concerns regarding the influence of Peter Singer's radical consequentialist and animal liberationist ethics on Greens policies from a pamphlet from when he was a Greens candidate about a decade ago. Having edited *Rethinking Peter Singer*, the only book-length critique of Singer, I share her concerns, though admiring his and the Greens concern for the poor and the planet.

Though the Greens apparently declined to answer ACL's questions re gay marriage, euthanasia, abortion, cloning, religious freedom and religious security (see [australiavotes.org.au](http://australiavotes.org.au)) that many Evangelical Christians (including myself) would have concerns about, they have a range of other policies on poverty, refugees, climate change that many, particularly younger socially and environmentally activist Christians, find biblically convincing and deeply appealing in the context of disillusionment with the two major parties.

Well-known and conscientious Christians like Lin Hatfield-Dodds, former head of Uniting Care and ACOSS, and Jim Reiher of UNOH, are Greens candidates (Lin for the ACT Senate and Jim for the Victorian parliament) following earlier ones like WA senator Christabel Chamarette. Frank Brennan recently wrote convincingly ('Why a conscientious Christian could vote greens' [www.eurekastreet.com.au](http://www.eurekastreet.com.au)) in response to ACL and Pell that a Christian could conscientiously vote Green, despite his own concerns about their bioethical and sexual ethics. The Greens are likely to have the balance of power in the Senate but are unlikely to be able to bring in gay marriage given the major parties bipartisan opposition to it. Voluntary euthanasia, however, might be a different kettle of fish. These human life issues will obviously have to be weighed up with environmental life issues (including human life). Some Catholic ethicists advocate doing this through comparative body count.

### III. Some Principles for Voting Ethically

#### 1. *Balancing and Prioritising Personal, Social and Ecological Ethics*

As always Christians will have to make judgements concerning the priorities they give to, for want of better words, personal (e.g. sexual and bioethical), social (e.g. workplace, indigenous and refugees) and environmental ethics (e.g. climate change). Broadly speaking it could be said that for many Evangelical Christians the Liberals, and particularly Tony Abbott's (in contrast to Malcolm Turnbull's more small l liberal views) more conservative beliefs regarding bioethics and sexuality appeal. However, the Liberal Party is more diverse on these issues than some Christians think as recent Victorian legislation for effective abortion on demand showed. Still, on personal ethical issues, at Federal level the Liberals are probably safer than Labor, particularly with the Greens holding the balance of power.

On social ethical issues Labor's workplace policies repealing WorkChoices appealed to many at the last election as fairer and more family-friendly. There are legitimate questions to be asked whether leader Tony Abbott has really abandoned his previous support for WorkChoices, a support that was contrary to the Catholic Social Tradition with its concern for fair pay, freedom of association (unions etc) and time for family in relation to work. This question was surprisingly not raised by Australian Marketplace Connections' (AMC) newsletter's On Watch, August 2010 Liberal endorsement which should surely be interested in such an issue for workers, not just highlighting fatherhood, as much as I believe in it, as the primary issue of the election. The Rudd and now Gillard government's retreat from its previously more humane refugee policy in a race to the bottom with the Liberals, led by the openly Christian Scott Morrison and Abbott, is deeply disappointing. On indigenous issues the Rudd government scored points for the apology and have slightly modified the Howard government's policies in the Northern Territory, but there appears to be broad consensus.

Overall, as Eva Cox's recent article [www.crikey.com.au/.../the-social-welfare-scorecard-how-the-parties-stack-up](http://www.crikey.com.au/.../the-social-welfare-scorecard-how-the-parties-stack-up) showed using a recent survey, though neither major party was great on social welfare issues, Labor had a clear advantage. This is contrary to a throwaway line dismissing such issues by the AMC newsletter. This used a specious 'scriptural' prioritising of personal righteousness over social justice also used by ACL. However, as Stephen Mott shows in *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, wherever righteousness is used in social context in Scripture, as it invariably is used, it can and should be translated 'justice'. This does not mean, however, that personal and bioethical issues are less important than social issues. Amos 4:1 castigates personal and social sins: Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, "Bring something to drink!" How unlike the South African preaching on Amos during the days of apartheid who lambasted his church for smoking and sleeping in! Yet such selective repentance is like what many Evangelical election manuals advocate.

I include economics as part of the social and here it is simplistic to say as AMC did, that the Liberals are widely recognised as having better economic credentials. The days of Gough Whitlam and Jim Cairns are clearly still remembered. Yet the Howard governments presiding over a golden era for the Australian economy had the way prepared by the Hawke-Keating government opening us up to the global economy. Their squandering of much of the surplus on middle-class welfare like baby bonuses can be compared with some of the Rudd government's more reckless and understandably rushed implementation of its GFC stimulus strategy. Australian voters' attention deficit disorder and parochialism means we've forgotten what the GFC was like and is still like for many in the world. Australia's debt to GDP ratio compared to the rest of the world's is miniscule. The real debate should be about who is best equipped to lead our economy and society in a way that translates our windfall mineral profits into long-term sustainable infrastructure and investment in our population and environment like Norway's future fund from its North Sea Oil has done.

The Greens, addressed above, have a clear lead in environmental ethics for those who feel the heat of them most strongly. They also have the most left-leaning social policies (leading to some radical union support) but their bioethical and sexual ethics alarm many conservative Evangelicals and Catholics.

Sadly many of the Christian polemics and propagandistic tracts are highly selective in their use of Scripture and ethics, emphasizing either personal, social or environmental ethics to the exclusion of the others. They cherry pick in their use of the Catholic and Evangelical ethical traditions, favouring again the social over the personal/bioethical or vice versa among the Catholics of both political parties. One of the more helpful Christian approaches to the elections was the Roman Catholic Bishops evaluation of policies according to human rights (see Andrew Hamilton 'Bishops' voting advice' in [www.eurekastreet.com.au](http://www.eurekastreet.com.au) and Ethos' human rights link - [isaiahone.org](http://isaiahone.org)). Would that Evangelicals would take seriously the breadth of biblical concern in the Law and the prophets (not just the Right appealing to law and the Left to the prophets) and also of the political concerns of Wilberforce's Clapham Sect (despite some blinkers) and the originally Christian based human rights tradition.

### *2. Politics as Compromise*

Politics is the art of compromise and so is the very act of voting. Compromise however is not necessarily evil; it is a necessary part of living with different people in a democracy and balancing diverse issues, principles and viewpoints (see R. Higginson, *Questions of Business Ethics*). Party politics will not bring in the Kingdom of God and Christians who get overheated about them, playing the man or woman, not the ball, implicitly identifying a party or pet issue with that Kingdom, often add more heat than light to our body politic and the body of Christ.

### *3. Democracy as the least worst political system*

Having just returned from China where they do not have the mixed blessing of voting in a democratic system, for all my disillusionment with the most vision-less election on record, I'm still glad I live in a democracy. It is the least worst of all political systems as Churchill described it. Our vote, whatever it is, may only make a little difference. This leads some, like my old Urban Seed friends Dave Fagg and Simon Moyle, concerned particularly with bipartisan militarisation and support of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to advocate not voting as a form of protest. I respect their position and courage. I notice it getting growing support from some younger Christians. But for me, little differences are better than no difference. It is up to you to decide where the differences lie.