

# ‘Ticking the Faith Box’: Reinterpreting the Place of Conservative Christianity in Australian Electoral Politics

**Gareth Sobey**

School of Historical Studies

*During the Howard era, religion came to occupy an increasingly prominent place in Australian public life, and assumptions about the secularity of post-sectarian Australian political culture were challenged by developments in federal politics. While there has been a revival of discussion and debate about the role played by religion in Australian politics, the place occupied by conservative Christians on Australia’s electoral map remains largely uncharted. This article takes stock of recent debates and suggests that the ‘electoral meaning’ of religion in contemporary Australian politics may only reveal itself through a more considered engagement with the past.*

Since the decline of sectarianism in post-war Australian society, Australian political culture has become increasingly characterised by its secularity. As tensions between Catholic and Protestant Australians began to diminish in the 1960s, discussion about the role of religion in public life also receded into the background; the variety of ways in which religion continues to influence political behaviour in Australia, both within and without the walls of federal parliament, ceased to be the subject of substantive scholarly inquiry.<sup>1</sup> As Marion Maddox observed in 2001, most political scientists have assumed that in post-sectarian Australian politics there is ‘little to say about religion, and that little not very interesting’.<sup>2</sup> This consensus has slowly crumbled in the years since the election of John Howard’s Coalition government in 1996, however, and has given way to a revival of discussion about the role of religion in Australian politics.

During his eleven years as Prime Minister, John Howard fostered close relationships with a number of controversial Christian churches and invoked Judeo-Christian values in discussions about Australian identity.<sup>3</sup> This, in addition to the shadowy role played by the ‘Lyons Forum’ in shaping aspects of the Howard government’s social agenda, gave rise to fears that the Liberal Party was being taken over by religious conservatives.<sup>4</sup> During this period, debates in federal parliament over abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage also reopened public conversation about the influence that the religious beliefs of parliamentarians had upon public policy.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the Howard government’s policy of outsourcing the provision of welfare to ‘faith-based’ initiatives, and its highly controversial appointment of former Anglican archbishop Peter Hollingsworth as Governor-General in 2001, sparked new debate over the effectiveness of the separation of church and state established by Australia’s constitution.<sup>6</sup>

The emergence of the Family First Party during this period also raised new questions about the role that religion plays in shaping the voting behaviour of Australians. A new political party with ties to the Assemblies of God—a Pentecostal denomination growing rapidly in the suburbs of Australia’s capital cities—Family First has enjoyed ongoing electoral success in South Australian state politics since 2001.<sup>7</sup> At the 2004 federal election Family First’s Steve Fielding astonished both political commentators and the major parties when he won a seat in the Senate. While Fielding’s victory was secured by preferences which flowed from a deal brokered with the ALP prior to

the election rather than a groundswell of grassroots support for Family First, the new party’s emergence in federal politics has nonetheless sparked renewed interest in the electoral significance of religion in post-sectarian Australian politics.<sup>8</sup>

The man who led the ALP to victory at the 2007 federal election and brought the Howard era to a close has also contributed to this renewed interest. Prior to assuming the leadership of the ALP in 2006, Kevin Rudd established himself as its unofficial spokesperson for ‘Christian values’.<sup>9</sup> In sharp contrast to former ALP leader Mark Latham, a self-proclaimed agnostic who had proposed sizable reductions of public funding to private religious schools, Rudd reached out to Christians as a constituency of voters in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election; as his campaign office described it to Margaret Simmons, Rudd had made sure the ALP had ‘ticked the faith box’ in the lead-up to the ballot.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, polling research conducted by Australian Development Strategies at the 2007 federal election suggested that there was a statistically significant nationwide swing among Christians towards the ALP, away from the Coalition.<sup>11</sup>

As the Howard era drew to a close, the increasingly prominent place that religion had come to occupy in Australian public life became a subject of curiosity and discussion for both political scientists and political commentators alike.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies have pulled back the veil of secularity that has shrouded post-sectarian Australian political culture and exposed a more complex, dynamic relationship between faith and politics than previously imagined. There is, nevertheless, still much work to be done in reconceptualising this relationship. Scholars such as Maddox have shed new light on the ways in which the private religious beliefs of Australia’s parliamentarians can intersect with debate over public policy, yet the question of the ‘electoral meaning’ of religion continues to haunt Australian political scientists.<sup>13</sup> In a post-sectarian political culture defined by its secularity, why do Australian political leaders consider it necessary to ‘tick the faith box’ during election campaigns?

### ‘TICKING THE FAITH BOX’

The most prominent example of ‘ticking the faith box’ during the 2007 federal election took place on 09 August. That evening, Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd took part

in an event called 'Make it Count 2007'. Organised by the Australian Christian Lobby, a non-denominational lobby group based in Canberra, 'Make it Count 2007' was intended to provide a bipartisan forum through which Australian Christians could discuss and assess the credentials of the two leaders in the lead-up to the federal election. As the two leaders consecutively took to the podium at the National Press Club in Canberra to deliver a prepared speech and answer questions from a select gathering of Christian leaders, a webcast of the event was broadcast live via the Internet to church congregations across the nation. The first such event of its kind in Australia, it was estimated that the event was watched by between 80,000 and 100,000 Christians, who had gathered in over 700 different church buildings across Australia.<sup>14</sup>

Both Howard and Rudd used their address to call attention to their own Christian faith, and sought to emphasise the profound influence their religious beliefs had upon the decisions they made in the public sphere. Kevin Rudd asserted that not only had his Christian faith provided a 'compass point for my life', it also 'helped to shape the view I try to bring to the public space as well'.<sup>15</sup> John Howard spoke of his own personal faith in similar terms, but went further and sought to emphasise the greater number of Coalition MPs who were 'active' Christians:

My party, and the National Party, has within its ranks a very significant number of people who are extremely active members of various Christian denominations. And on issues that go beyond what are grouped as the moral issues, the conscience issues such as stem cell research and the vote on RU486... they also bring to bear their Christian values and principles in so many other areas.<sup>16</sup>

Howard and Rudd also invoked the language and stories of Christianity in relating the policy platform of their respective parties to their audience.<sup>17</sup> In articulating their differences on matters of social and economic policy, for instance, the two leaders canvassed diverging interpretations of the social and political implications of the Christian scriptures. While he did not directly quote from the Scriptures, Kevin Rudd emphasised the message of compassion and social justice in the gospels, proposing that government should be 'mindful of giving

voice to the voiceless and to have a view that compassion is not a weakness'.<sup>18</sup> John Howard, on the other hand, drew upon the Parable of the Talents from the Gospel of Mark in order to defend his government against charges of 'indifference to the poor'. Going as far as to claim Jesus' endorsement for his government's emphasis on economic management and personal responsibility, Howard claimed the Parable of the Talents could be interpreted as 'the free-enterprise parable' and 'tells us that we have a responsibility if we are given assets to add to those assets'.<sup>19</sup>

Howard's invocation of 'moral issues' and his call to individual responsibility contrasted with the emphasis Rudd placed upon the 'social gospel', highlighting that the path from faith to politics for Australia's Christians leads those who follow it both to the left as well as to the right of the ideological spectrum. Nevertheless, both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader appeared to be convinced that there were values, fears and concerns shared by Australian Christians on both the right and the left. Kevin Rudd had earlier reviled the term 'family values' as one of the 'most used and abused terms in the Australian political lexicon', yet discussion of the family figured strongly in his address.<sup>20</sup> While Howard announced his government would fund the development of an Internet pornography filter for families, Rudd made a commitment to make family impact statements for every submission made to Cabinet. Both leaders placed themselves categorically in clear opposition to gay marriage. In addition, both Howard and Rudd lavished praise upon the contribution that Christians had made to Australian society and public life, even as they reiterated their support for the formal separation of church and state.<sup>21</sup> Rudd exercised restraint in conflating Australian culture with Christianity, however, while Howard flung such restraint aside, asserting that:

The culture of this nation, the values of this nation, have been more profoundly shaped by the spiritual influence as well as the cultural influence of Christianity than by any other force that has been brought to bear on the Australian community.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps hoping to tap into feelings of marginalisation among Christians, Howard confessed that 'I have always found it odd that you have to demonstrate your tolerance by denying your own heritage'.<sup>23</sup>

## CHRISTIANITY IN AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Appealing to religious communities as constituencies in their own right is commonplace in election campaigns in the United States. Particularly since the emergence of the so-called 'Christian Right' in the 1980s, the influence of religion on US electoral politics has been both pervasive and divisive.<sup>24</sup> In Australia, on the other hand, assumptions about the secularity of post-sectarian Australian political culture leave us at a loss as to what exactly Howard and Rudd had to gain by openly displaying their Christian credentials prior to the election. Unlike the United States, where evangelical Christians are an important constituency of voters that form a significant part of the Republican Party's electoral base, in Australia there is a much more ambiguous relationship between theological and political commitments.

There are certainly a large number of Australians who profess to be Christian. In the media coverage of 'Make it Count 2007', for instance, frequent reference was made to Australia's 'twelve million Christians'.<sup>25</sup> It is important to recognise, however, that the twelve million Australians who identified themselves as Christians at the 2006 census are a highly diverse demographic group. They are divided not only by denominational affiliations and contesting theological traditions, but also by a range of other demographic factors such as ethnicity, class, education, age and gender. Many do not attend church regularly and some hold only nominal Christian beliefs. As such, there is a highly ambiguous relationship between the religious convictions of Australia's twelve million Christians and their political commitments, which throws into question the usefulness of appealing to them as a constituency.<sup>26</sup>

This has often been recognised by Christians working within the Australian political system. When Liberal senator John Herron, a devoted Christian, made his maiden speech to federal parliament in 1990, he conceded that in the Australian context it would be 'naive to believe that an appeal to moral values or adherence to the Ten Commandments will be successful'.<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, Rev Fred Nile, one of Australia's more controversial Christian politicians, lamented in 1981 that there were simply 'not enough Bible-believing Christians in Australia to single-handedly vote out of office those people who are leading this nation into depravity'.<sup>28</sup>

## THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT

Under John Howard's leadership, the Liberal-National Coalition would nonetheless make concerted efforts to present itself as the party of Judeo-Christian values. During his time in opposition through the 1980s Howard had fostered relationships with a number of conservative Christian organisations, on one occasion giving an address entitled the 'Family Under Attack' at a Festival of Light event in 1986.<sup>29</sup> During his eleven years as Prime Minister, Howard and other senior ministers in his government would frequently draw attention to their Christian beliefs and display their familiarity with Christian rhetoric when speaking before Christian audiences. In his appearance before the congregation at Hillsong in 2004, for example, Treasurer Peter Costello received rapturous applause when he declared Australia needed to 'return to the faith and values which made our country great'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the closing week of campaigning of the 2007 election, Howard took time away from the campaign trail to speak to a group of Korean churchgoers in his Sydney electorate of Bennelong. Declaring that he shared their personal faith in the 'transforming influence' of Jesus Christ, Howard told his audience that the 'influence' of Christianity had, and would continue to 'sit very comfortably with the values of my party'.<sup>31</sup> As historian John Warhurst has noted:

More than any other federal government, the senior members of the Howard government have been active, in word and deed, in emphasizing its religious credentials and beliefs and in emphasising the positive contribution of Christian values to Australian society.<sup>32</sup>

The readiness of some leading figures in the Howard government to put their religious beliefs and 'Christian values' on display was certainly in stark contrast with the lengths Australian politicians have traditionally gone to distance their public policy decisions from their personal beliefs. As Marion Maddox has suggested, such overtures to religious constituencies stand in sharp contrast to the 'unobtrusive, establishment religiosity' of former Liberal leaders such as Malcolm Fraser and Alexander Downer.<sup>33</sup>

If senior members of the Coalition government enthusiastically put their 'private' religious beliefs and 'Christian values' on display, however, they also gave mixed messages about how their religious beliefs

intersected with their public policy decisions. When John Howard declared on national radio in February 2007 that 'religion has always been important to me' he quickly qualified this by emphasising the private nature of his theological commitments. Howard asserted that:

I've always had a core Christian belief. I'm certainly far from being a perfect Christian, a long way from it, but I have found the values of Christianity and the spirituality of it important. It's something that I feel for in a private sense.<sup>34</sup>

In this instance, as in others, Howard left shrouded in ambiguity the extent to which the Judeo-Christian values he espoused played a significant role in shaping public policy. The tentative manner in which senior members of the Howard government approached discussions about religion and public policy suggests that they sought to avoid giving the impression that they were beholden to follow their religious convictions as policymakers. This much was evident in a speech given by Tony Abbott, then Minister of Health, at Sydney's Catholic Notre Dame University in June 2007. On the one hand Abbott emphasised that his government's espousal of Christian values was not simply empty rhetoric:

I believe the Howard government has done much which Christians should applaud. For instance, in our first term, we overturned the Northern Territory's euthanasia Bill, which otherwise would have legalised assisted suicide. Just recently, we opened a pregnancy support helpline, which is explicitly designed to bring down the rate of abortion in this country. In our first term, we scrapped the former government's policy which made it very difficult for new religious schools to open. In our first and second terms we put policies into place which explicitly recognised the role of the stay-at-home mum, in a way which no government had been game to do for a long time. And at the end of our last term, we passed legislation against so-called gay marriage.<sup>35</sup>

As Abbott continued, however, he sought to distance his own private faith, and the religious beliefs of others in his party, from the decisions they made in government.

Now these are all things which I think people of Christian values could readily applaud. But I want to stress that the government did none of them because it believed it was following some kind of a biblical or faith-based mandate, it did all of them because it thought that they were a decent response to the circumstances in which we found ourselves.<sup>36</sup>

'Ticking the faith box' for the Howard government had, therefore, meant emphasising the importance of faith and Christian values 'in a private sense' while simultaneously dressing up aspects of the Coalition's socially conservative policy in theological garb. For many Australian Christians, however, the welfare of marginalised groups within Australian society remained a more pressing concern; others were deeply troubled by the Howard government's defiance of human rights and international law both at home and abroad. Indeed, the Coalition's relationship with the leadership of the major Christian denominations became increasingly fraught with hostility over its eleven years in government; it publicly crossed swords with church leaders and organisations over issues ranging from the introduction of welfare reform, the GST and Workchoices, to the mandatory detention of asylum seekers and Australia's involvement in the Iraq war.<sup>37</sup> On these occasions the 'influence of Christianity' which John Howard spoke so fondly of to his constituents in Bennelong did not sit at all comfortably with the agenda of his government.

#### A PENTECOSTAL REVIVAL?

Some Australian Christians, however, were convinced that their beliefs and values were best represented by John Howard's Coalition government. One Christian leader who was openly partisan in his support for the Howard government was Assemblies of God pastor Danny Nalliah. Several weeks before the 2007 election, Nalliah publicly endorsed John Howard at a prayer meeting held at Parliament House. Calling on Christians to 'support the party that will give us the best Judeo-Christian values', Nalliah urged them to 'throw their weight' behind the Coalition.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Nalliah expressed scepticism at the sincerity of Kevin Rudd's declaration of his Christian beliefs and has been overtly critical of the newly elected Labor government since the election.<sup>39</sup>

Nalliah is on the radical fringe of a rapidly growing Pentecostal denomination, which some commentators suggest represents a new constituency in Australian politics. While the traditional churches have experienced a gradual and protracted decline in attendance since the post-war period, the Pentecostal denominations have undergone a period of rapid growth in the last twenty years, their congregations swelling with large numbers of youth and young families.<sup>40</sup> This revival has been epitomised by Hillsong, an Assemblies of God ‘mega-church’ in the suburb of Baulkham Hills in Sydney, New South Wales. Hillsong has grown rapidly since first opening its doors in 1983; today it attracts a congregation of over 20,000 to numerous weekly services. Fusing trendy modern music with charismatic, motivational preaching, Hillsong’s laid-back, entertaining approach to worship contrasts sharply with its conservative theological positions on issues relating to the family and sexuality.<sup>41</sup>

While the theological conservatism of Pentecostal churches such as Hillsong does not necessarily incline their congregations to political conservatism, it has nonetheless given rise to staunch opposition to abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality.<sup>42</sup> A survey conducted by the National Church Life Survey in 1996 found that, in contrast to Australian Christians of other denominations, those Christians attending Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal congregations were the most likely to agree with the statement ‘abortion should never be permitted’. They were also the least likely to agree with the statements ‘the terminally ill should be able to choose to die’ and ‘environmental protection is more important than economic growth’.<sup>43</sup> In addition, media commentators have drawn attention to a number of Liberal Party MPs who have been connected to Hillsong.<sup>44</sup> Margaret Simons has also suggested that the ‘prosperity doctrine’ of churches such as Hillsong—the belief that material wealth is a sign of God’s blessing—sat relatively comfortably with the economic agenda of the Howard government.<sup>45</sup>

While the political implications of the Pentecostal revival have yet to be explored in great depth, the rise of the Family First Party can certainly be attributed to the growth of the Assemblies of God movement. Family First was founded in South Australia by Andrew Evans, an Assemblies of God pastor who had previously campaigned against the legalisation of marijuana, euthanasia and same-sex partnerships. Evans did not establish Family First as an explicitly Christian party,

however, and has rarely mentioned religion since he was elected to the South Australian Legislative Council in 2002.<sup>46</sup> In an interview with Margaret Simons, Evans asserted that past efforts by Australian Christians to organise themselves politically had been ‘too religious, and too churchy’ to be successful at a federal level, and he had sought to shed that image when founding Family First by focusing instead on ‘values’.<sup>47</sup> Support from the Assemblies of God movement has remained, nonetheless, very important to the party; as Evans has acknowledged, ‘my history was with the church and, given my commitment to traditional values, I received a lot of support from Christians’.<sup>48</sup> While Steve Fielding’s leadership in the Senate has moved the party away from overt emphasis on traditional family values and championed populist politics on issues such as petrol prices, it is worth noting that at the 2004 Federal Election Danny Nalliah’s name appeared on Family First’s Victorian Senate Ticket directly beneath Steve Fielding’s.<sup>49</sup>

Peter Costello’s rousing appearance at the Hillsong Conference in 2004 hints that the Liberals have noticed the growth amongst the Pentecostal churches, and have recognised they may be capable of providing the electoral swing necessary to deliver a number of suburban marginal seats to a party which appeals to their values and concerns. Kevin Rudd also seems to have been watching the Pentecostals closely; when he was elevated to the leadership of the ALP in 2006, the party subsequently ceased its investigations of allegations that Hillsong had misused public grants. Consequentially, a number of commentators have interpreted the so-called ‘religious revival’ in Australian politics during the Howard era as a response to the emergence of a new Pentecostal ‘Bible belt’ in the suburbs of Australia’s capital cities.

It is important to recognise, though, that the Pentecostals remain a relatively small denomination. In the 2006 census the number of Australians who identified themselves with the Assemblies of God and the other Pentecostal denominations was a meagre 219,689. This was certainly a significant increase from the 1996 census when only 174,720 Australians identified as Pentecostal.<sup>50</sup> With such small numbers of votes at stake, it seems unlikely that the Howard government, committed as it was to speaking ‘for all of us’, would have risked alienating secular Australians simply to win the votes of a few Pentecostals.

## CHRISTIAN CONSERVATISM IN POST-SECTARIAN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

The eagerness with which commentators have looked to new developments to explain the 'religious revival' in Australian politics highlights the dearth of serious scholarly discussion about religious conservatism in post-sectarian Australia. Since the 1950s, studies of political history and religious history in Australia have travelled along separate trajectories, rarely intersecting or converging; the dominant reading of the history of the relationship between religion and politics in post-sectarian Australia remains one of a progression towards secularity. As such, commentators have taken for granted that the appeals to 'Christian values' made by Australian politicians during the Howard era must reflect the growth of a new constituency or a nascent theological movement within the Christian community. In contrast, developments within the traditional churches, which have been characterised as being in a state of decline, have been largely ignored.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the ongoing political activism of older conservative Christian leaders, such as Rev Fred Nile, is often dismissed as the noisy reminder of a bygone era.<sup>52</sup>

These preconceptions might be challenged, however, if historians and political scientists revisited the history of religion and politics in Australia and began to explore in greater depth the numerous ways in which Christianity and conservative politics have intersected since the decline of sectarianism. As political scientist Michael Hogan has shown, Australian Christians were profoundly affected by the period of social upheaval which transformed Australian society during the 1960s.<sup>53</sup> The perceived challenge to 'the family' posed by the declining influence of 'Christian values' in education and public life, and by the increasing acceptance of abortion, homosexuality and pornography, deeply troubled Australian Christians, many of whom already felt marginalised within a post-sectarian political culture defined by secularity and pluralism.<sup>54</sup>

These concerns boiled over at the start of the 1970s, when a groundswell of social and political activism swept through the Christian community in Australia. Outraged at the growing tolerance of sexually explicit material on television and in the theatre, and affronted by the increasing proliferation of pornography in local newsagencies, church leaders in Adelaide and Sydney founded the Festival of Light in 1973. A Christian organisation that sought to 'promote the Judeo-Christian

ethic as the basis of our society', the Festival of Light modelled itself on the protest movements of the left, holding rallies and demonstrations across Australia in protest of 'moral pollution' and 'permissiveness'. Declaring that 'the family as a unit deserves to be preserved', the Festival of Light's campaigns also took aim at feminists, abortion rights campaigners, and the gay liberation movement.<sup>55</sup> Large crowds flocked to the Festival of Light's early rallies; one demonstration held in Sydney on Sunday 07 April 1974 drew an attendance of over 30,000 in what the Festival of Light described as a 'positive stand for Purity, Love and Family Life'.<sup>56</sup> In particular, the organisation's campaigns drew thousands of Australian evangelical Christians, many of whom had never engaged in social and political activism before.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the Festival of Light's campaigns failed to convince the major political parties of the case which they made for the legislative protection of the traditional moral order.<sup>58</sup> The organisation's leaders also found themselves incapable of translating the initial surge of grassroots support for their campaigns into a lasting social and political movement. While Rev Fred Nile's Call to Australia Party—which emerged out of the Festival of Light—continues to receive support in state elections in NSW, it remained unable to expand its reach into federal politics or to build a broader consensus around its agenda.<sup>59</sup> Unlike in the United States, where conservative Christian organisations have been successful in establishing, legitimising and entrenching their place in the US political system 'as a major element of the Republican governing coalition', groups such as the Festival of Light found themselves isolated within Australia's deeply secular political culture.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to recognise that conservative Christian organisations such as the Festival of Light have remained on the margins of mainstream politics in Australia precisely because they have articulated the interests, values and concerns of a constituency of Australian Christians who found themselves in opposition to the secular, pluralistic values of the mainstream political system.<sup>61</sup> While this constituency has not played a highly observable role in electoral contests in Australia, neither has it shown signs of disappearing entirely from view.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the electoral significance of the ongoing discontent felt by many Australian Christians about social issues such as abortion and euthanasia has rarely been afforded attention by Australian political scientists, convinced that there is 'little to say about religion, and that little not very interesting'.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In an essay entitled 'Faith and politics' published in 2006, Kevin Rudd observed that in Western society Christianity was 'returning to the minority position it occupied in the earliest centuries of its existence'. As the public affirmation of Judeo-Christian traditions and policing of sexual morality had ceased, Rudd argued that Christianity had become 'a counterculture operating within what some have called a post-Christian world'. Rudd expressed the hope that a return to a minority position would lead the Christian churches to Jesus' 'identification with those below' and 'take the side of the marginalised, the vulnerable and the oppressed'.<sup>64</sup>

For many Australian Christians, however, marginalisation within a secular, pluralistic culture has engendered a very different, far more reactionary and conservative, response. Since the 1970s a committed minority of Australian Christians have continued to advance a socially conservative 'pro-family' agenda in state and federal politics through protest, lobbying and direct electoral involvement. While historians and political scientists have afforded these efforts scant attention, there appears to be a new recognition among political leaders on both sides of Australian politics that conservative Christians represent a constituency in their own right. As Marion Maddox has argued, the efforts of the Howard government to identify itself with 'Christian values' should be interpreted as an attempt to mobilise conservative Christians as part of a broader coalition of conservative voters. Similarly, Kevin Rudd's efforts to 'tick the faith box' during the 2007 federal election suggest a newfound sensitivity amongst Australia's politicians to the crucial role of religion—and what Judith Brett has described as the 'religious imagination'—in shaping the values, beliefs and emotions of a significant number of Australians.<sup>65</sup>

The question remains: do conservative Christians represent a constituency which merits the attention lavished upon it in recent years by political leaders such as Howard and Rudd? The emergence of the Family First Party can certainly be seen to be a response to the values and concerns of this constituency, even though the party's platform has since sought to encompass the more practical concerns of working class Australian families struggling to make ends meet. As Australia moves beyond John Howard's prime ministership, the place occupied by conservative Christians on Australia's electoral map remains largely uncharted. It is unclear exactly how many of Australia's twelve

million Christians could be identified with this constituency, and the role that theological beliefs play in shaping the political behaviour of Australian Christians remains poorly understood. The 'electoral meaning' of conservative Christianity for contemporary Australian politics will only begin to reveal itself when the history of Christianity in post-sectarian Australian society has become the subject of further and more substantive scholarly inquiry. ❖

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Sectarianism has played an important role in Australian party politics since Federation, while religious beliefs played a significant role in shaping the political commitments of a national community deeply divided along sectarian lines. As sectarian tensions between Catholics and Protestants have diminished, however, the institutional links between Church denominations and the party political system also unravelled, and denominational affiliation ceased to play an observable role in Australian party politics. For a discussion of the role sectarianism played in 20th-century Australian political history, refer to: R Murray, *The Split: Australian Labour in the Fifties*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1970; J Warhurst, 'Catholics, Communism and the Australian party system: A study of the Menzies years', *Politics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1979.
- 2 Marion Maddox, *For God And Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*, Dept. of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2001, 2.
- 3 For a discussion of normative values and social policy under the Howard government, refer to Carol Johnson, 'John Howard's "values" and Australian identity', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2007, 195–209. The Howard government's relationships with a number of controversial church groups, including the Exclusive Brethren, are well documented; 'Sect gave Howard a few tips', *The Age*, 18 January 2007. In addition, a number of Liberal MPs were outspoken about fundamentalist Christian beliefs during this period. David Clarke, a prominent Liberal MP in NSW state politics, openly professed to being an active member of the Catholic sect Opus Dei; 'Sunday Profile', ABC Radio National, 18 September 2005. Meanwhile, at the 2007 election the Liberal candidate for the seat of Lalor in Victoria was an evangelical pastor who advocated teaching 'intelligent design' in schools and publicly declared that homosexuality was a 'perversion'; 'Homosexuality a perversion, says Lib candidate', *The Sunday Age*, 28 October 2007, 11.
- 4 The Lyons Forum has been studied by Marion Maddox in *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*; and also in *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2005.
- 5 In 1997, Liberal MP Kevin Andrews, a committed Catholic and one of the founding members of the Lyons Forum, successfully passed a motion in federal parliament to prevent the Australian Capital Territory from

- legislating to allow the terminally ill to end their own lives; Maddox, *God Under Howard*, 52–5. In 2005, the refusal of the Minister of Health Tony Abbott, a committed Catholic, to approve the ‘abortion drug’ RU486 provoked heated debate both within and without the walls of federal parliament.
- 6 Tom Frame, *Church and State: Australia’s Imaginary Wall*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2006.
- 7 Margaret Simons, *Faith, Money and Power: What the Religious Revival Means for Politics*, Pluto Press, North Melbourne, Vic., 2007, 65–67. Interestingly, Rudd had earlier expressed his own frustration with ‘tick-the-box’ approach; Kevin Rudd, ‘Faith and Politics’, *The Monthly*, October 2006.
- 8 Nick Economou, ‘A right-of-centre triumph: The 2004 Australian half-senate election’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40, no. 2, 189–205.
- 9 Rudd.
- 10 Simons, 63.
- 11 ‘The Religion Report’, ABC Radio National, 19 March 2008.
- 12 John Warhurst, ‘Religion and politics in the Howard decade’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2007, 19–32; Darryn Jensen, ‘Faith and politics: Separation or synergy?’, *Policy*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2005, 21–6; Morag Fraser, ‘The politics of faith’, *Meanjin*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2006, 240–5.
- 13 Rodney Smith, ‘Religion and electoral behaviour in Australia: The search for meaning’, *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1998, 34.
- 14 ‘Make it count 2007’ transcript, *National Press Club*, Media Monitors, 2007, 2.
- 15 ‘Make it count’, 39.
- 16 ‘Make it count’, 6.
- 17 Judith Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, 40.
- 18 ‘Make it count’, 56.
- 19 ‘Make it count’, 7.
- 20 Rudd.
- 21 ‘Make it count’, 38.
- 22 ‘Make it count’, 20.
- 23 ‘Make it count’, 30.
- 24 For a discussion of the role the Christian Right plays in US electoral politics, refer to Clyde Wilcox and Carin Larson, *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*. third ed., Westview Press, Boulder, Col., 2006.
- 25 ‘Howard, Rudd woo Christians online’, ABC News, 10 August, 2007, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/08/10/2001287.htm>.
- 26 Peter Kaldor et al. (eds), *Taking Stock: A Profile of Australian Church Attenders*, National Church Life Survey, Adelaide, 1999.
- 27 Maddox, 37.
- 28 Fred Nile, ‘The moral majority’s four-fold platform’, *Australian Christian Solidarity*, December 1981, 8.
- 29 *Australian Christian Solidarity*, December 1986, 4.
- 30 ‘The 7:30 Report’, ABC Television, 17 April 2004, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2004/s1154131.htm>.
- 31 *The Age*, Monday 19 November 2007, 7.
- 32 John Warhurst, ‘Religion in 21st Century Australian national politics’, *Australian Senate Occasional Lecture Series*, 5 May 2006, 6.
- 33 Maddox, 11.
- 34 ‘The Sunday Profile’, ABC Radio National, 13 February 2007.
- 35 ‘The Religion Report’, ABC Radio National, 6 June 2007.
- 36 ‘The Religion Report’, 6 June 2007.
- 37 Roger C Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2002, 151–8.
- 38 *The Age*, Tuesday 23 October 2007, 9.
- 39 Danny Nalliah, ‘Christians deceived’, 27 March 2008, published online by Catch the Fire Ministries, <http://catchthefire.com.au/blog/2008/03/27/christians-deceived-ruddnelson/>.
- 40 Between 1996 and 2006 attendance at Pentecostal churches grew by roughly 25 percent while during the same period the overall numbers of Australians who identified as Christian dropped from 71 percent to 64 percent; Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Cat. No. 2068.0: 2006 Census Tables’, 2006 *Census of Population and Housing*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007.
- 41 For an extended discussion of Hillsong, refer to Amanda Lohrey, ‘Voting for Jesus: Christianity and politics in Australia’, *Quarterly Essay*, no. 22, 2006; for an autobiographical account of life inside Hillsong, refer to Tanya Levin, *People in Glass Houses*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2007.
- 42 Socially conservative views have frequently been articulated by the leadership of Assemblies of God congregations, particularly on issues relating to sexuality. In the 1990s, for example, Rev Danny Guglielmucci of Southside Christian Centre, a large Assemblies of God church in South Australia, was vocal about his opposition to homosexuality as an ‘unnatural lifestyle’; ‘A pastor speaks on homosexuality’, *Focus*, May 1990, 4. See also; ‘God’s cure for gays lost in sin’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 March 2008; ‘The Lord’s Profits’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 2003.
- 43 Kaldor et al.
- 44 During the Howard era a number of Liberal Party members were identified as members of Hillsong. Former minister Danna Vale frequently attended the church, while former New South Wales Liberal Party state director Scott Morrison was a member. At the 2004 federal election Louise Markus, a prominent member of the church, stood for the Liberal Party in the seat of Greenway, which includes the area around Baulkham Hills, and won with a wide margin; ‘Onward Christian soldiers, marching to poll’, *The Australian*, 30 July 2007, 8.
- 45 Simons, 86–90.
- 46 Andrew Evans would rarely mention religion in the context of public policy debate. During a debate about the legalisation of euthanasia, however, Evans placed his religious beliefs in the foreground when he declared in a speech to the Legislative Council that ‘the loving compassionate Father has put boundaries there for the protection of mankind. If you believe in God, you must accept the boundaries that he has put in place. I say to members today that the moral law of the world is opposed to this decision’; Speech by Andrew Evans on ‘Dignity in dying bill’, Legislative Council of South Australia, *Hansard*, 29 May 2002.
- 47 Simons, 86–90.
- 48 Speech by Andrew Evans, Legislative Council of South Australia, *Hansard*, 3 July 2008, 3507.

- 49 'Family First close to gaining pivotal Senate role', 'Lateline', ABC Television, 11 October 2004.
- 50 Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- 51 Muriel Porter's study of the theological conservatism of the Anglican Archdiocese of Sydney is an exception to this trend, and remains one of the few recent scholarly attempts to discuss the theological and cultural basis of conservative Christian activism; Muriel Porter, *The New Puritans: The Rise of Fundamentalism in the Anglican Church*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2006.
- 52 Lohrey, 47.
- 53 Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strain: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Vic., 1987, 269–70.
- 54 John Warhurst, 'Politics and moral issues: The 1973 South Australian elections', *Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 4, 1974, 1–13.
- 55 Printed speech, 'Dr John Court from Adelaide, speaking at the Hyde Park Rally, 7th April, 1974', [NLA 1931310 (Meredith Collection) / Box 1 / Folder – Rally, Hyde Park, Sydney, 7/4/1974]; 'The Australian Festival of Light Background Sheet', published in 1974 by F.O.L./C.S.O., P.O. Box A87, Sydney South, 2000.
- 56 *Youth Bulletin*, The Australian Festival of Light, February 1974. (State Library of New South Wales, ML 269.05/10)
- 57 David Hilliard and John Warhurst, 'The festival of light', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol. 50, no. 9, 1974, 13–9.
- 58 Despite sparking heated public conversation about moral values, the Festival of Light found itself few supporters on either side of politics. It received little favourable press coverage, and was openly ridiculed by high profile figures in the Whitlam government. See, for example, 'Festival of Light attacked over "obscene" material', *The Australian*, 7 February 1975; *News Bulletin*, December 1974, published by the Australian Festival of Light, 379 Kent St, Sydney, 2.
- 59 Rev Fred Nile's Call to Australia Party was renamed the Christian Democratic Party in 1999 and continues to field candidates in many state and federal electoral contests. It continues to attract a small percentage of the vote in NSW state politics, but has met with little success elsewhere; Fred Nile, *Fred Nile: An Autobiography*, Sydney, Strand Publishing, 2001.
- 60 Wilcox and Larson, 5.
- 61 Other organisations that drew on conservative Christian support faced similar problems to the Festival of Light. The Right to Life Association of Australia, for instance, drew extensively on conservative Christian, and particular Catholic, support in its campaigns against abortion law reform. It briefly captured the limelight in the late 1970s, engaging in aggressive and divisive campaigns in state and federal electoral contests; Judy McVey, 'The Right to Life offensive since 1969', *Hecate*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1983. By 1986, however, its support and contributions had dried up over the course of a decade of unsuccessful campaigning, leaving a number of its state branches facing bankruptcy; flyer '1987 fight back for life appeal', Published by Right to Life Victoria Inc., 233 Brunswick Road, Brunswick, Vic. 3056. (State Library of Victoria, Riley Collection, File: Right to Life Victoria).
- 62 For example, Dennis Hood, one of Family First's two sitting members of the Legislative Council in South Australia, articulated the same concerns

voiced by the Festival of Light in the 1970s in a speech he delivered before parliament in 2007. He asserted that: 'since the 1960s, the marriage rate has reduced by a third in Australia, divorce has doubled, the birth rate has halved, single parent families have trebled and abortion rates, drug dependence, gambling addiction and suicide have all skyrocketed'; Speech by Dennis Hood on 'Family issues', Legislative Council of South Australia, *Hansard*, 30 May 2007. In recent years a number of mainstream Australian church leaders have also become increasingly vocal participants in recent debates over abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage, in which they have articulated deeply conservative positions; see for example, 'Archbishop condemns cloning bill', *The Age*, 14 March 2007, 1.

63 Maddox, 2.

64 Rudd.

65 Brett, 40.