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Crusader, not just a God botherer

Phillip Adams | October 23, 2007

THE word election derives from religion, not politics. Long before we voted for secular leaders, or cardinals voted for popes, elections had a limited franchise. There was only one voter: God. Thus election is defined by theologians as "God's free choice of a certain group, or of certain individuals, for an unmerited glorious destiny".

Certain group. Certain individuals. Unmerited glorious destiny. That much can be applied to the very earthly election we're enduring, particularly the unmerited bit. Like sinners entering the confessional we'll soon be required to enter little booths and, using the pencil on the string that is sacred to Australian democracy, vote for the lesser of evils. And religion will play an unusually significant role.

You'll have noticed the baptism of fire suffered by Kevin Rudd from Baptist Costello, our living national Treasurer, loudly lampooning the Opposition Leader's attachment to German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Peter Costello ridiculed what he saw as Rudd's attempts to identify himself as saintly, though one might have thought that redundant after a certain visit to a strip club.

Our PM is more cautious than his second-in-command on religious issues. Thus he has not followed George W. Bush's example by insisting on his cabinet attending prayer breakfasts.

Where Bush will name and claim the Almighty a dozen times in a single speech, Howard avoids such religious ostentation. More than that, early in his prime ministerial career Howard quietly distanced himself from the Lyons Forum, a parliamentary coven of Christians attended by an almost embarrassing number of senior colleagues.

While Howard has made common cause with Christian leaders on some issues - most famously with his opposition to the Northern Territory's voluntary euthanasia legislation and in his stern disapproval of gay marriage - he found himself out of favour with the papacy on the issue of Iraq.

Overall, the Catholic and Anglican churches were unconvinced by the argument that the invasion would meet the theological definition of a just war, so Howard changed the subject. Similarly, he has ignored a papal statement on the important role of the trade union movement; it doesn't sit well with Australian Workplace Agreements. Howard has also been cautious on stem cell research, a hot-button issue that has the Bush administration at war with US science.

But Howard doesn't have to yield to a powerful Pentecostalist movement pushing an anti-evolutionary, anti-abortion, anti-science agenda. And far from being in his political pocket, the local Pentecostals who formed Family First have used the Senate to criticise him on industrial relations. So he throws them some bones on issues such as internet porn.

It has been Abbott and Costello who've made the religious running: Tony opposing the abortion pill and Peter telling the churches and their charitable wings to butt out of social policy, to leave politics to the politicians. Yet this didn't stop Costello's obligatory appearances at Hillsong. It seems the churches can butt in when they're on his side. And Abbott's activities remind us that the Libs have been successful in embracing Catholics, who used to tribally support the ALP. It wasn't so long ago that Costello's predecessor as treasurer, Phillip Lynch, was the only Catholic who'd cracked it for a Liberal ministry.

Howard's worst blunders on matters religious were his recent tetes-a-tete with that thoroughly unpleasant cult the Exclusive Brethren. The Brethren's enthusiasms for ultra-conservative social values have led to secretive and generous interventions in Australian and New Zealand election campaigns. But Howard's cordiality towards the cult has cost him. Its extremism is unattractive to the wider community, and its theological zeal alienates the mainstream churches.

More recently, Costello has been over-cordial to an equally unpleasant cult while demonising trade unionists.

Back in the ALP, the comrades and brothers had to overcome their hostility to God-bothering and elect a leader who takes his religion seriously. Apart from tribal Catholicism, the ALP is defiantly secular and it has been a long time since a leader has declared, even emphasised, his faith.

For years I've argued that Kev's Christianity is a plus in that it confirms his conservatism for nervous voters and gives Labor a chance of undermining the Libs' "done deal" with people of faith, particularly among the Pentecostals.

Rudd can help prevent the religious gridlock we've seen in the US that has given Bush so much traction.

Moreover, I'm convinced that Rudd's admiration for Bonhoeffer will kick in whenever the nation faces a substantial moral issue. I cannot believe that Rudd would manipulate bigotry, exploit fears of refugees or toss kids overboard. And when social justice issues arrive, as they do on a daily basis, the Rudd I know is likelier to take an ethical stand than the incumbent. Thus Rudd's religion is a two-edged sword. It makes him conservative on many issues. It should make him a crusader on others.

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