

The Federal Elections: How should we then vote?

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Introduction

The 2007 Federal election campaign is the most interesting in a decade. The Liberal-National Party Coalition has been in power for just over 10 years, the typical life cycle for governments at the Federal and State levels. There is much at stake for the Howard Government, with a serious possibility of losing power. A series of radical policy reforms, most notably in the area of Industrial Relations, have caught the attention of the electorate. At the same time, the March 2007 NSW elections were a reminder that incumbents do not always win elections; rather, oppositions sometimes lose them, especially after a decade in the political wilderness. Yet in the eleventh hour the Federal Labor Party has produced a trump card: Kevin Rudd. What makes Rudd particularly interesting from a Christian perspective is that we now have a Labor leader who has publicly linked his Christian convictions with his politics.²

On the whole, Christian voters find it hard to articulate a clear, biblical response to the options placed before them. In this paper I will present a biblical perspective on the nature of the political order and of Christian political participation. I will then critique the Left-Right divide that characterises modern politics and propose an alternative approach to addressing the policy issues confronting us. I will conclude by providing some suggestions for using our vote to ensure government accountability, and some guidelines for evaluating Christian candidates. I argue that, for a Christian, voting is an act of partnership with God in providing a prophetic voice through the ballot box.

Political participation and the Christian

The question of *how* to vote - or even *whether* to vote - is part of the broader question of Christian political participation. For the purposes of this paper, I have defined political participation as any activity aimed at directly influencing the political configuration: voting, lobbying, running as a candidate for elections, and so forth. Political participation is, in reality, much broader than these formal modes of engagement suggest, and is generally understood to include modes of non-formal participation such as voluntary involvement in religious, ethnic and other civil society organizations.³ However, these forms of engagement are beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on Christian engagement with the political process through the act of voting.

What biblical principles underpin Christian involvement in the political process? I will attempt to answer this question under three headings: Christian liberty; political order; and right perspective (or humility).

Christian liberty

There has never been, nor should there ever be, a universally accepted Christian approach to the question of involvement in the political order. Throughout the history of the people of God, some have refused to exercise political power, preferring to stay at the periphery, while others have immersed themselves in political life. This diversity of viewpoints arises because the issue of political participation is similar in nature to the question of, say, women wearing head scarves during worship, keeping one day a week aside as “sacred” or eating food sacrificed to idols. According to Romans 14, whenever the Bible does not speak clearly on a given matter, we

¹ I would like to thank Ian Packer for his invaluable, detailed input into the final draft. Any shortcomings, of course, remain my own.

² Rudd’s debut piece in *The Monthly* set him apart from his agnostic or atheist predecessors – Bob Hawke, Paul Keating and Mark Latham - and even from the relatively privatised faith of Kim Beazley.

³ See Jedwab, 2002; and Sanghera, date unknown.

are at liberty to act according to our conscience, as long as we remain within the general *moral guidelines* provided by the Scriptures, and as long as we do not cause others to lose or question their faith through, for example, insistence on our political viewpoint.

The fact that there is little direct biblical teaching on the question of voting is not surprising. The New Testament was penned at a time when the political order was very different to ours. Even the concept of democracy, which had undergone centuries of development and refinement in parts of the ancient world, was markedly different to our contemporary experience of democracy. For example, in the Greek city states, voting was usually the privilege of the male citizens, thereby excluding women, slaves and foreigners. In contrast, voting in Australia is today compulsory for citizens over the age of 18, and so we are all – Christian and non-Christian alike – legally obligated to place a folded ballot paper in the relevant boxes on election day. Some Christians choose not to vote as an act of civil disobedience, in which case they face a fine. Others choose to make use of laws allowing abstention from voting on grounds of religious conviction.⁴ Civil disobedience and conscientious objection aside, if we are unable to decide who to vote for, there is the option of leaving the ballot paper blank.

The nature of the political order

The Bible does, however, provide a general framework for understanding the political order and the Christian's relationship with it. The most oft-cited passage in this regard is Romans 13, which outlines the nature of the political order, its role in ensuring order and justice, the limits of power and its implications for freedom,⁵ and the role of the Christian within that order. The passage begins with a declaration of the authority and place of government in God's economy (verses 1-2):

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”⁶

Two points of explanation are required here. Firstly, if there is no justification for rebellion by citizens,⁷ then there is equally no justification for tyranny by governments, or for blind submission to unjust laws by its citizens. We have clear examples in both the Old and New Testaments of the people of God disobeying unjust laws, choosing instead to obey the higher Law of God. Secondly, the point of the Romans 13 passage is that the institution of government is ordained by God and that Christians should not think that, because we belong to another Kingdom, we are not to be subject to the laws of the earthly government under which we live.

Having established the authority of government, the passage then continues by highlighting its God-given functions (verses 3-4, and 6):

“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ... This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.”

⁴ For a discussion of laws regarding abstention from voting, see Parliamentary Research Service, 1995: “religious duty to abstain from voting” is acceptable as a reason for exemption from voting, while “Christian beliefs such as a belief in creation, free will, the resurrection, justice according to the teaching of Christ etc” are not.

⁵ The understanding of the triple role of governments as ensuring order, justice and freedom has been previously discussed elsewhere. See, *inter alia*, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 1968, p.7.

⁶ All Bible references are from the Holy Bible, New International Version, as provided at www.biblegateway.com.

⁷ Rebellion is different to civil disobedience. Rebellion implies non-recognition of the political order, while civil disobedience has as its starting point the understanding that the political order is God-ordained, and that we are to submit to the law, but that there is a higher law, the law of God, which overrides that law in certain circumstances.

The functions of government outlined here are to reward good (verses 3-4); to punish evil (verse 4); and to collect taxes in order to carry out these functions (verse 6). The functions of the “sword”⁸ are crucial for ensuring order and justice in society. Inasmuch as a government is doing all these things, it is fulfilling its obligations as God’s instrument for ensuring order and justice.

This passage has three implications. Firstly, there are, or should be, limits to political power. Romans 13 implies that the role of government is limited to, or at least primarily one of, securing and maintaining the kind of social, political and economic infrastructure that will protect life and property. Of course, precisely where the line is drawn for government intervention in education, welfare and other spheres of policy is open to debate, and this question has formed the basis for much of the disagreement between Left and Right. Secondly, the Bible clearly teaches that the state – or any other authority, for that matter – should not interfere in matters of religious conscience. This principle was stated by Jesus: “Give Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21); Peter confirmed this principle when he confronted the Sanhedrin over his right to preach the gospel (see Acts 5:26-29). It is important, therefore, for Christians to be clear on where the line is drawn between submission to government and obedience to conscience, for the history of the church is replete with tragic instances of Christians submitting to unjust laws – and even condoning or participating in tyranny and genocide⁹ – based on a distorted or selective reading of Romans 13 (Hauerwas, 1989: 24-27).¹⁰ Thirdly, governments are to be the servant of its people, and not the other way around. In fact, government is described in verse 6 as “God’s servant” (or “minister” in the New King James Version) – the same word used throughout the Bible to refer to the exercise of spiritual leadership within the church.

We know that governments do not always fulfil their God-given function. We learn from Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) that the world “has been given” to Satan (verse 6). To varying degrees, governments are corrupt, and government policies do not always reward good, punish evil and ensure appropriate freedoms. Revelation 13 further highlights the degree to which the current political, economic, social and religious order is subject to the consequences of sin, working against the purposes of God, even to the point of persecuting God’s people. Nevertheless, without government, there would be anarchy.

Right perspective and Christian participation

What, then, is a Christian perspective on the political order? The institution of government must be viewed in the context of the cosmic reality of the Kingdom of God. The earthly political, economic, social and religious order is a mere shadow of what is to come. In the words of T. S. Elliot:

“... we have to remember that the Kingdom of God on earth will never be realised, and also that it is always being realised; we must remember that whatever reform or revolution we carry out, the result will always be a sordid travesty of what human society should be – though the world is never left wholly without glory.” (Elliot, 1939: 47)

The primary focus of God’s redeeming work is the church, through which His people show the world a sample of God’s perfect Kingdom. Christians are called to be an “alien people”, a “countercultural phenomenon” in an ungodly world (Hauerwas, 1989: 30), living out and proclaiming a new political, social and economic order. This being true, any Christian involvement in the political order must be firmly grounded in an ecclesiological understanding of our relationship with the earthly powers. Yet ‘being church’ has a two-fold political implication. Firstly, as theologians such as André Trocmé, John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas and others have argued, simply living out and proclaiming this new order challenges the unjust and immoral practices of the earthly political order under which we live. Secondly, as we participate in the everyday life of our society, we inevitably find ourselves engaging with the political order - sometimes from the margins, other times at the centre,¹¹ but

⁸ See discussion in Yoder, 1972, pp. 203-205, regarding the term “sword”, which he argues refers to the police and criminal justice system, and not to the military.

⁹ For a devastating account and theological analysis of the church, not only as bystander, but also as perpetrator in the Rwandan Genocide, see Budde, 2000, *passim*.

¹⁰ For a full treatment of the various interpretations of Romans 13, see Yoder, 1982, pp.193-211.

¹¹ Dave Andrews wisely suggests that Christians stay “close enough to the centre to be able to influence the outcome; but close enough to the periphery so as not to be influenced” (Andrews, 1996: 155).

always prophetically,¹² challenging it to fulfil its God-given functions. In this way, we are God’s co-labourers in the new creation, partnering with Him in the process of both personal spiritual regeneration and the renewal of the whole of creation (Romans 8:22, 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1-2). This is what it means to be “salt and light” in the political sphere.

It is absurd, however, for Christians to see their role as one of permanently ‘transforming’ or ‘improving’ the political system. We are not called to “underwrite” the existing order by asking it “to be a little less racist, a little less promiscuous, a little less violent” (Hauerwas, 1989: 80).¹³ If our motivation for political participation is to ‘defend’ the nation or state from imagined internal or external threats, then we have fallen into the idolatry of nationalism or statism.¹⁴ Further, if we seek to obtain control of the political system through a majority in parliament, or by any other means, in order to ‘Christianise’ the nation from the top down,¹⁵ we are deluding ourselves, and tempting ourselves with a path that Jesus clearly rejected in his 40-day sojourn in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). Our political participation must not be motivated by a desire for power.

If, on the other hand, our political participation is grounded in the desire to manifest the values of the Kingdom of God; if we are motivated by love for “the widows and the fatherless” (James 1:26-27); if our engagement in the political sphere is grounded in the biblical understanding that we are, contrary to Cain’s disclaimer, our “brother’s keeper”; if we understand that these things are primarily the responsibility of the church, but that the state has a role in providing legal support for such efforts; if we understand these things, then we are cooperating with God’s purposes for government. If the goal of our political participation is to ensure that the political order fulfils its minimal obligation of ensuring justice, equitable order and appropriate freedoms – thereby protecting the rights of the oppressed and the sanctity of human life, and promoting high standards in human relationships (sexual, economic and otherwise) – then we are simply calling on governments to act in line with their scriptural mandate.

In summary, the extent of our direct participation in the political order is a matter of Christian liberty, that is, it is a matter of individual and collective conscience. The minimal biblical requirement is for us to honour those who are in authority over us by obeying all laws that are in line with God’s law, and by paying taxes. However our participation must always be prophetic, rooted in a firm understanding of the primacy of the church as the reference point for human reality, driven by a longing for order, justice and freedom as expressed in God’s word.

The Christian at the polling booth

Much of our voting tends to be a mirror image of the voting patterns of our non-Christian peers. “How should we then vote?” (to borrow from the title of Francis Schaeffer’s classic work).¹⁶ The preceding discussion provides us with a point of departure for a critical evaluation of current Christian involvement in the electoral process, and for developing a framework for Christian political engagement. I will begin with a brief discussion of the Left-Right ideological divide and its impact on Christian political participation. I will then suggest ways in

¹² The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines prophecy as “the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose” (Merriam-Webster). For the purposes of this paper, I understand “prophetic” to mean that which highlights the deficiencies of the system in the light of God’s standards, and which calls on those in power to address these deficiencies. By implication, a prophetic approach to political participation is one that stands, as much as possible, above the allegiances, divisions and inner workings of the political system.

¹³ For a sample of scholarship that views the role of the church as ‘underwriting’ the social and political order, see Eberly, 2000, *passim*.

¹⁴ The ‘nation’, which is an ethnic entity, is not to be confused with the ‘state’, which is a political entity. ‘Nation-state’ refers to the notion that ethnic entities can have their own political entities, i.e. states.

¹⁵ The question of whether a nation can be ‘Christianised’ in any meaningful sense is an important one, but requires a separate discussion. Suffice it to say that, if it is possible or desirable to Christianise a society, then it should be considered possible primarily through a transformation of hearts and minds, rather than through legislation or coercion.

¹⁶ For this section, I am grateful for the input of numerous students, friends, members of discussion groups, and to Christopher Clark.

which our voting can be truly prophetic – that is, in line with God’s purposes for government as outlined in Romans 13:1-7.

Parties, policies, Left and Right

In modern western democracies, the task of the Christian voter is complicated by the existence of the Left-Right divide, which presents us with a set of artificial choices. In Australia, the Labor Party has historically been the party of the ‘Left’, and viewed by conservative voters as spending big, encouraging welfare dependency and high wages, and, increasingly, soft on moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and sexual preference. In contrast, those on the Left have viewed the Liberal-National Party Coalition – the party of the ‘Right’ - as morally intrusive, and more sympathetic with big business than with workers, the poor and other marginalised groups.

Following the lead of many of their secular fellow citizens, Left-leaning Christians have tended to vote for the Labor party (or for a range of other Left-leaning parties), whom they view as defending order by ensuring justice, while Right-leaning, or conservative, Christians have tended to cast their vote for the Liberal-National Party Coalition (or for a range of other Right-leaning parties), whom they view as defending justice by ensuring order.

It must be stated emphatically that this Left-Right dichotomy is an artificial one and, as such, thoroughly unbiblical. Its main problem is that it results in a ‘selective’ adoption of the principles of order, justice and freedom by each end of the ideological spectrum. Let me explain by providing two examples.

In the current election campaign, the Labor Opposition is emphasising the need for greater environmental protection and planning in order to ensure that sufficient resources remain for future generations. The Coalition Government, on the other hand, prides itself in its strong record of ‘responsible economic management’, arguing that a strong economy is the greatest heritage it can leave to our children. Yet a biblical view of stewardship – that is, the orderly use of resources in a way that ensures a just and fair outcome - would emphasise the careful management and use of both environmental and economic resources, including water resources, urban space, transport and so forth.

Similarly, while a majority of members of the Liberal-National Party Coalition have a ‘pro-life’ stance on abortion and euthanasia, they do not see questions of justice traditionally championed by the Left - such as the treatment of asylum seekers and the Iraq War - as ‘pro-life’ issues. The Labor Party’s pro-life agenda is equally selective.¹⁷ Yet abortion, euthanasia, war, mental health services and our treatment of the disabled, the elderly and asylum seekers are – or should be - part of a single ethic of justice, premised on the value of every human life as created in the image of God.¹⁸ A visionary, prophetic approach to policy-making would embrace the best of the Left and the Right.

Recent decades have seen some a blurring of the Left-Right ideological divide. The floating of the Australian dollar in the late 1980s, the end of free tertiary education and a range of other neo-liberal reforms that would traditionally be expected of the Right were in fact initiated by the Hawke-Keating Labor Government. On the other hand, immigration has mushroomed under the Howard Government, though much of this has been in the form of skilled migration, with a winding down of the family reunion scheme. The apparent blurring of the ideological boundaries was summarised by former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser in 2005, when he

¹⁷ Tony Abbott’s critique of Rudd’s debut article in *The Monthly* highlighted the opposition leader’s one-sidedness, who argued that stem cell research and abortion were “matters of...individual conscience”, while stating that war, poverty and the environment are black and white issues. Abbott’s article, of course, also inadvertently highlighted his own one-sidedness. See Abbott, 2007a.

¹⁸ We have, however, seen several ‘conscience votes’ in Parliament that have produced some unlikely alliances. For example, the February 2006 ‘conscience vote’ on the ‘abortion pill’ RU486 saw Treasurer Peter Costello on the same side as Opposition Leader Kim Beazley. There was a similar ‘crossing of the floor’ during the debate over the stem cell bill in December 2006, with John Howard and Kevin Rudd arguing against Liberal senator Kay Patterson’s private member’s bill to overturn the ban on embryonic stem cell research (SMH, 2006).

commented that there was not one issue on which [former Labor leader] Kim Beazley was “on the Left of me” (quoted in McKnight, 2005: 1).¹⁹

While this blurring has its positive aspects, it is far from signalling the emergence of a holistic view of policy-making. On the contrary, the blurring has been selective and pragmatic, prompted in large part by the growing prosperity of Australian society, rising education levels, the impact of technology and globalisation and the end of the Cold War. As a result, much of the blurring has been in the area of economic policy, with both major parties pursuing economic rationalist policies that have increasingly resulted in the commodification of social, political and cultural life. Commodification refers to the process whereby a human activity is seen in terms of tangible outcomes, most frequently measured in monetary terms. Commodification runs contrary to the biblical picture of humans made in the image of God, of human relations as sacred and spiritually significant, and of the rightful place of Mammon (Matthew 24 *et al*). While the stated communitarian principles of Labor leader Kevin Rudd offer some hope (Rudd, 2006b), commodification has become so entrenched in public policy that a Labor Government would, at best, be able only to tinker at the edges.

The church needs to be at the forefront of a fresh, prophetic agenda that challenges the Left-Right divide and that is based, as Gordon Preece argues (2006: 14), on consistent (as opposed to selective) pro-life principles – *for* the embryo, *for* refugees, *against* war, etc – and social values that go to the heart of human existence, highlighting both personal responsibility (discipline and justice) *and* our responsibility to the weak (tolerance and mercy). This is not a call for a ‘balancing act’ any more than the Old Testament prophets’ dual message of (social and personal) justice and (personal and communal) righteousness was a ‘balancing act’. Rather, it is a call to embrace the whole gospel, speaking prophetically to both the Left and the Right. Anything short of this, and any allegiance to either end of the political spectrum, is nothing short of idolatry.

Beyond Left and Right: God’s Purposes for Government

For whom, then, should we vote? I have argued that the Left-Right divide has nothing to do with the ethics of the Kingdom of God. As members of the Universal Church, our political loyalties are overshadowed by the fact that we are now part of the family of Christ - a family that incorporates members from diverse political persuasions. Therefore voting for one party over another is not an earth-shattering choice of discipleship: to view it as such is to underestimate our liberty as Christians, the diversity of the people of God and the unity we enjoy not despite, but because of, this diversity.

The logical corollary of a Kingdom perspective is a posture of realism and humility as we go to the polling booth. Crucial to this attitude is an acknowledgement that our political worldview is a product of our personal preferences, which in turn are shaped by our upbringing, educational and life experience, personal prejudices and peer group influences. We each cast our vote according to the issues that are most important to us as individuals - war, abortion, poverty, sexual morality, immigration, religious freedom, etcetera.

A Kingdom perspective also provides an important reality-check: from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, the difference between Labor and Liberal, and between Left and Right – at least in twenty-first century Australia – is minimal compared to the difference between our political system and God’s perfect order. Our decision at the ballot box certainly has its consequences, however in most cases neither the fate of the church nor that of society is dependant on this choice.²⁰ To hold to the view that the solution to society’s problems lies in this or that political party is not only misguided; it is idolatrous.

¹⁹ Lindsay Tanner adds: “When our leading left-wing intellectual is former Quadrant editor Robert Manne, and one of the most powerful proponents of left-wing causes is former Liberal prime minister Malcolm Fraser, something funny is happening.” (Tanner, 2005)

²⁰ It is important to clarify here that tyranny, injustice and disorder are prevalent in every society; however there is both a qualitative and quantitative difference between, say, Nazi Germany and twenty-first century Australia. Having said that, it could be argued that many German voters in 1933 were not aware of the consequences of their choices at the time. This begs the question: what choices are we making today – for example, about asylum seekers, or abortion or stem cell research – that have serious consequences for human life and dignity? We need wisdom and courage to discern the times.

This perspective will drive us to prayerfully engage with the issues, searching the Scriptures for teachings that shed light on our questions, asking what the prophets have to say about social equity and sexual relations, or what the Sermon on the Mount has to say about war, industrial relations, sexual morality and marriage. In doing so, we will be at the forefront of dissent against the artificial choice between Left and Right. For example, if we vote for the Coalition because of its conservative policy on euthanasia, we should then lobby the same Government to adopt a consistent ‘pro-life’ ethic, by loosening the laws requiring asylum seekers. In accordance with the biblical injunction to protect all resources, to hold to a consistent sanctity of life, to ensure justice and to seek mercy (Micah 6:8 *et al*), Christians must make it clear – through their voting, lobbying and above all their life as a church – that the Left-Right divide does not, and cannot, define the voting patterns of the people of God. At the same time, as the people of God we must express our dissent against the commodification of public life that has been championed, to varying degrees, by both major parties.

All of this must be done in the context of prayerful Christian community. We must develop the practice of discussing our political preferences, prejudices and concerns in a prayerful, intelligent, open and humble manner with fellow believers, including with those of the opposite political persuasion. As we engage together with the principles of government and citizenship laid out in Romans 13 and elsewhere in the Bible, we can help one another arrive at a point of humility, deepening our understanding of the issues and seeing each other as a child of God, whether or not we agree with their political views. Only then will we be in a position to cast our vote, not as Liberal, Labor, Greens or Christian Democrats supporters, but as Christians with strong core convictions yet humble enough to change our thinking.

Before all else, then, we must assume the posture of a swinging voter; in other words, since strict adherence to a political candidate or party is idolatry, we must as much as possible shed any bias or prior allegiance when making our decision. This will allow us to assess the policies and integrity of each party and candidate objectively and prayerfully.

Now to the practical question: as Christians, how can we challenge the Left-Right divide, and the two-party system that accompanies it, at the ballot box? Firstly, we can start by asking big picture questions about the real and potential impact of the policies of each party and candidate on broad areas of national life. What kind of social relations, economy, standing in the world community, etcetera is a party or candidate proposing? How would the policies of a party or candidate impact the marginalised? - keeping in mind that our treatment of “the least of them” is the litmus test of our spiritual condition (Matthew 25, *et al.*). How would our society look in 10 years’ time under the leadership of this or that party or candidate?

Secondly, we can ask questions about the integrity, competence and commitment of parties and candidates. Without integrity, even the most considered, balanced, prophetic policies are doomed to failure. A candidate or party that lacks integrity will inevitably lack the will to carry out its policies, and it will be unable to win the trust and co-operation of its citizens in implementing those policies. While policies are important, the personal integrity of a candidate, and the collective integrity of a party, can make or break a government.

Thirdly, we can do our best to make an informed choice when voting. One way to do this is to make a list of the issues we consider the most important. By engaging with the Scriptures, Christian literature and Christian friends over these issues, we can arrive at a position that is, to the best of our knowledge, consistent with God’s heart and purpose. The next step is to monitor what the parties and candidates are saying on these issues, by checking their full policy statements and not just relying on their ‘motherhood’ statements made in campaign slogans and brochures. In the case of incumbents, it is obviously important to check their track record. It is impossible to expect any political party to not have policies that clearly contravene scripture; it is therefore up to us, the voter, to prayerfully consider the policies of each party, make our decision and vote accordingly. It is then up to us to hold the winning party or candidates accountable for their promises.

Finally, we can consider the alternatives to the major parties. Minor parties and independents are often willing to cut across the Left-Right divide, more flexible in their response to policy debates, and more amenable to input and suggestions. For example, Senator Steve Fielding of Families First, while clearly on the Right of political spectrum, has used a ‘family impact test’ to support or oppose legislation proposed by both major parties. Senator Brian Harradine, an independent from Tasmania and similarly conservative, opposed amendments to the Coalition’s asylum seekers’ bill and aspects of the new Industrial Relations laws. In state

politics, Greens MPs have often voted with Coalition MPs, against conservative MPs, on issues of urban development. Before we dismiss minor parties and independents as inconsequential, let us remember that the votes of Senator Harradine, Senator Fielding and others, as well as of the Greens and Democrats, have played a crucial role in the success or failure of important legislative initiatives.

Limiting power: voting strategically

Romans 13 makes it clear that governments have a God-given brief, and that there are, or should be, limits to the exercise of power. It is proper for governments to have a sufficiently healthy majority and adequate powers with which to govern effectively and for long enough to be able to undertake significant reform. However a government must always be reminded that they are the servants of their citizens.²¹

Extended incumbency can often lead to complacency and arrogance, and increase the temptation for ethical compromise. A similar temptation arises when a party finds itself with an overwhelming majority in one house of parliament or a majority in both houses. In 1996, for example, the Keating-led Labor Government was wiped out in a landslide victory by the Coalition, who gained an overwhelming majority in the House of Representatives (also gaining a majority in the Senate in 2005). From its very first day in power, the Howard Government interpreted its win as a “mandate” for a range of sweeping reforms. Yet in making this claim the Coalition overlooked an important lesson of history: in that same election, the electorate had punished the incumbent Labor Government’s similarly arrogant claim to a mandate.

There are a number of ways voters can impose limits on the power of governments and help those in authority maintain both humility and integrity. The first strategy is, of course, to remember that the heart of the king is in God’s hands (Proverbs 21:1 *et al*), and to pray accordingly:

“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior ...” (1 Timothy 2:1-3)

If our political participation is not undergirded by prayer, then our voting strategy will differ little from that of the non-Christian.

Secondly, we can employ strategies known as ‘protest voting’ - though I prefer to think of them as the electorate’s ‘checks and balances’. For instance, if we would like a government to stay in power, but with a reduced majority, we can cast our vote for the opposition. There is, of course, an obvious risk in this strategy: the incumbent might in fact lose, and we are then stuck with a new government that we did not want! But voting is always a calculated risk.

Thirdly, as discussed earlier, we can vote for a minor party or independent. At both the State and Federal levels, it has become the norm for minor parties and independents to hold the balance of power in the upper house, giving them the ability to make or break any legislation that makes its way to that chamber. It is important that the Christian voter be conscious of who are the independents and minor parties in the upper chamber, and vote accordingly.

Christian voters are called to challenge the Left-Right divide, proposing a prophetic ‘third way’ that protects all resources, ensures justice and promotes a consistent sanctity of life. We have a duty to challenge the commodification of economic, social and political life. Through prayerful, strategic voting practices we can play our role in checking the power of incumbent governments. Yet we must do all of this with the humility that comes from acknowledging our personal biases, keeping our preferences in perspective in the light of the Kingdom of God, and prayerfully engaging with fellow believers around issues of concern.

Voting for God? Christian politicians

²¹ Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 1968, p.3.

I will conclude with an attempt to answer that vexed question: should we vote for a candidate simply because he or she claims to be a Christian? To put it differently: should we vote for an “incompetent Christian” over a “competent atheist” (Payne, 2007)?

Before addressing this question, it is worth making an observation about the current Federal election campaign. Beginning with his debut article entitled ‘Faith in Politics’ that appeared in *The Monthly* (Rudd, 2006a), in which he described German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer as his hero, Kevin Rudd has been articulating a clear alternative to the Christian Right. As the first Labor leader in recent memory to make a direct appeal to Christian voters, Rudd has overturned the secular Labor / religious Coalition dichotomy.

The process whereby political parties traditionally seen as secular are now articulating an alternative vision of public Christianity is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon. In the United States, Jim Wallis has urged the Democrats to rediscover their Christian roots, calling on them to prove that God is “neither a Republican nor a Democrat” (Wallis, 2005: *passim*). It seems that, during the 2004 presidential elections, the Democrats took up Wallis’ challenge, with their presidential candidate John Kerry referring to the Bible several times in his campaign speeches (though in one instance he confused the Old Testament with the New, highlighting the superficiality of his knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith). John Kerry’s discourse is no match, of course, for the intellectual sophistication and deeply reflective theology of Kevin Rudd. However, Kerry’s campaign does seem to have set an important precedent in western politics.

While this development is commendable, it must be welcomed with caution. Firstly, Rudd’s theological framework for policy does nothing to traverse the Left-Right divide. On the contrary, his selectivity in embracing aspects of the gospel traditionally championed by the Left – namely, those relating to social justice – and his relative de-emphasis on issues traditionally championed by the Right – namely, issues such as abortion, euthanasia and sexuality – have reinforced this dichotomy, with God being seconded to an ideological viewpoint in the same way that He has been seconded by members of the Coalition.²²

Secondly, we must be wary when Christianity becomes a tool for winning votes or scoring political points.²³ Politics has no loyalties, and Jim Wallis’ call for the Democrats to ‘reclaim the spiritual ground’ from the Republicans, while important and beneficial, is open to abuse, encouraging tokenism and an instrumental view of Christian faith. This view is supportive of a public role for Christianity as long as it works in favour of one’s political agenda, with the church being told to stay out of politics when it is seen as overstepping an imaginary boundary. This was evidenced in a speech delivered by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in August 2003, when he admonished churches opposing the war in Iraq to stop spreading their “one-sided moral message”, and called on them to devote themselves to “spiritual matters” (Downer, 2003).²⁴ More recently, Health Minister Tony Abbott has argued that Kevin Rudd, who has accused others of using religion for political purposes, “is blatantly doing so himself” (Abbott, 2007a).

While individual politicians may be sincere in their Christian convictions, they are bound by the policies and political machinations of their parties. This restricts their capacity to act in full accordance with their own stated Christian principles. Christian candidates running as independents or as members of ‘Christian parties’ are more likely to be able to act in full accordance with their Christian principles, rise above the Left-Right dichotomy and better manage their own integrity. The Rev. Fred Nile, who has for 25 years held his seat in the upper house of NSW, is an example of a Christian politician who has not always adhered to a predictable ‘Right’ agenda (despite being clearly Right-leaning), who has been unwavering in his principles (whether we agree with them or not), and whose integrity has been recognized even by those who disagree with his policies. Despite the disproportionate attention paid by the media and other detractors to Christian Democrats’ policies on homosexuality and abortion, the bulk of their policy statements in fact offer practical alternatives on a wide set of issues, ranging from water resources to education and, increasingly, the environment.

²² See Rudd, 2006a. This criticism was made by Abbott, 2007a.

²³ Boice, 1996, writes that “if we think that we have to vote only for Christian candidates, we subject ourselves to base manipulation by whatever candidate is willing to use the proper evangelical terms when speaking to us.” (pp. 234-235).

²⁴ For a discussion of this speech, see Connolly, 2004; and Poulos, 2005. For a groundbreaking analysis of the instrumentalist and selective use of Christianity in the Howard era, see Maddox, 2005.

So that the above comments are not interpreted as a plug for the Christian Democrats, it is important to state categorically that no candidate or party has a monopoly on integrity: there are many Christian (and non-Christian) independents, members of minor parties and even major party backbenchers whose dedication, integrity and hard work make them exemplary parliamentarians.

Nor does any candidate or party have a monopoly on 'right policy', and in this respect let me raise a few objections to the Christian Democrats' policy framework. The purpose here is not to single out this party for criticism, but rather to use the Christian Democrats' party platform to highlight a number of broader issues within the world of Christian politics.

Firstly, the Christian Democrats' notion of a 'Christian Australia' (Christian Democratic Party, 1997) is misguided. While the concept of an Australian 'Christian heritage', however controversial, can be supported by historical evidence, to regard a nation as 'Christian' is to repeat the folly of Constantinism and to fall into the idolatry of Christendom.²⁵ If we are not called to 'underwrite' the political order, then we are certainly not called to 'Christianise' it by gaining power or through other top-down or coercive means. Nor is it appropriate for a Christian to equate patriotism and taking up arms with Christian duty. Secondly, and following on from the above, the notion of 'defending' Australia from the non-Christian 'other' is unbiblical. Even in theocratic Israel the foreigner was to be welcomed. To be sure, the Israelites were warned not to adopt the ungodly customs of their guests; however they were still to extend hospitality to the outsider.²⁶ Thirdly, the Christian Democratic Party, and indeed other parties on the Right, fetishize the family. There is no question that the family is the epicentre of God's created order. However, it is the *church* that is the epicentre of God's *new* order in Jesus Christ, and family loyalty is to be understood in the light of our membership in our spiritual family, the Body of Christ.²⁷

We are now in a position to answer the question posed at the start of this section: should we vote for a Christian candidate simply because he or she claims to be a Christian? The answer is no, not necessarily. Christians have policy blind spots, and they are, like all other human beings, vulnerable to the corrupting influence of power. Therefore each Christian candidate must be assessed on the basis of his or her integrity and policies. Obviously we rejoice when a Christian politician with integrity and balanced, sensible and prophetic policies enters parliament. And if we vote for a Christian, we must commit ourselves to supporting them spiritually through prayer, encouragement and where necessary rebuke. However we must never allow ourselves to be spiritually blackmailed into thinking that, by voting for a Christian candidate, we are voting for God.

Conclusion

The starting point for any discussion of Christian participation in the political order must be an acceptance of diversity of preference and liberty of practice within the church. The minimum requirement of the Christian is to obey all just laws and pay taxes (Romans 13), and to dissent where the law of God and human law are in conflict. Beyond this, whether or not we choose to participate in the political system, how we do so and who we vote for are all matters of individual and collective conscience.

It is important to keep our political participation in general, and our voting in particular, in perspective in the light of the Kingdom of God and His purposes for His church. Our task is not to underwrite the political order, nor to 'Christianise' it. Rather, our primary task is to first and foremost *be* the church. We then express our individual and collective character as the people of God through our love for the oppressed and marginalised, and our concern for the sanctity of life and human and sexual relations, engaging in political participation if it serves these ends. In so doing, we partner with God as He fulfils His purposes for His creation. By providing a consistent, prophetic challenge to governments, we help them fulfil their God-given function, which is to reward good and punish evil (the functions of order and justice), and use taxes for this purpose. Through political

²⁵ Note that the Christian Left, and Liberation Theology in particular, fall into a similar trap when they seek to bring about God's Kingdom on earth through socio-political reform.

²⁶ See for example Exodus 22-23, Leviticus 18-19 *et al.*

²⁷ See for example, Mark 3:30-32 and Luke 14:26-33

participation, we also help to ensure that appropriate limits to political power are maintained, by calling on the government to serve its citizens with humility and integrity (the functions of freedom and order).

Voting is an opportunity for the Christian to participate in God's purposes for human government. With this opportunity comes the responsibility to be an informed, prayerful voter, operating from a Kingdom perspective. We must vote realistically, intelligently and strategically as we seek to challenge the Left-Right divide, confronting the artificial dichotomies placed before us, avoiding the idolatry of worldly political allegiances and prayerfully seeking to keep governments accountable. We need to objectively assess the policies and integrity even of Christian candidates and, if we choose to vote for them, we must support them through prayer and spiritual counsel. Most crucially, as a church we must engage in open, honest, prayerful discussion of the political options, undergirded by a commitment to engage with, and learn from, diverse viewpoints.

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