



Women, GLBT*, and the rise of the Christian right

Religions need political sponsors if they are to impose their values on society, and it is these political sponsors that are the underlying force behind the developments we call the 'religious right'. In our world of many religions, secular governments, which respect religious freedom, are needed to allow all religions and secular world-views to coexist. But when religion is used to win political power for pro-corporate economic policies, broad social rights are undermined.

Some conservative Christian views dovetail with the social, political and economic world-view of the right. In recent years, the conservative neo-liberal outlook, associated with John Howard and George Bush, has gained control of the moral debate by shifting the focus from public morals, eg social and environmental justice, to individual, private morality, eg abortion, contraception and sexuality.

The Christian Right in the USA

After the defeat of the Goldwater Republican campaign in the 1964 US presidential elections, the Christian Right developed a very well organised, well-funded power base in the Republican Party, backed up by think-tanks. In the 1980s they were called the Moral Majority noted for their pulpit-thumping religiosity. In the 1990s, they changed to a religiously neutral rhetoric, and created new organisations like Focus on the Family and the American Christian Coalition. Despite the spectacular failures of the Pat Buchanan and Pat Robinson campaigns along the way, in the end they got one of their own elected as President – George W Bush.

With the election of Pope John Paul II at the end of the 1970s, Rome launched a global political movement packaged in religious themes. The Pope moved against the broad movement of liberation theology in the Church, reasserting a rigid fundamentalism against women, against homosexuality and against democracy in the Church. This fitted well with the Christian Right in the USA, which began to impose 'family values' on US international aid programs under Reagan. This drive also had its impact in Australia with the rise of Bishop George Pell. However, the Pope was a powerful voice against the invasion of Iraq and for the poor and refugees, and Catholic teachings on workers' rights and capitalism are at odds with Kevin Andrews and the Howard government's anti-worker laws. Cardinal Pell has had to speak out against his friend John Howard.

Australian Christian Right

Australian political and social traditions have always been associated with religion, but unlike the USA, secularism and skepticism towards overt religious influence in politics are more commonly felt by Australians.

Today, a growing lobby from within the religious right in Australia has its roots in Australian and North American traditions. There are a number of small to medium sized groups whose overt mission is to exert influence over public policy making in Australia. This is not an exhaustive list, but following are some of the groupings and coalitions who lobby for the implementation of conservative social policy.

The National Civil Council (NCC) was formed in December 1957 out of the anti-communist Catholic Social Justice Movement – 'the movement' and 'the groupers'. After the split of the ALP in 1954-57, the activities of the NCC were closely linked with the breakaway Australian Labor Party (Anti-Communist), which eventually became the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). By allocating its preferences to the Liberal Coalition, the DLP helped to keep the Australian Labor Party out of office till Whitlam's victory in 1972. Such ultra-conservatives as Henry Bolte in Victoria, and Prime Minister Robert Menzies, were indebted to the DLP for their political fortunes. More recently, Jacinta Collins in the ALP, Tony Abbott in the Liberal Party, and retired Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine demonstrate the ongoing influence of the NCC.

The Australian Christian Lobby (formerly Aust Christian Coalition) was formed 1995. It is dominated by Pentecostals and therefore not supported overtly by the mainstream churches, and boasts good relationships with some federal and state politicians, particularly in the ACT.

The Christian Democrat Party, only parliamentarian is Fred Nile in the NSW state parliament, but it runs nationally at federal elections acting as an important preference deal to the major parties.

The Australian Family Association (formed 1980) is an offshoot of the National Civic Council. They have good relationships with Focus on the Family, the Salt Shakers, ACL, and Fred Nile.

* *GLBT - gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender*

The Liberal Party and Lyons Forum

The Lyons Forum is another 'pro-family' group created in the Federal Liberal Party in 1992 to promote John Howard's ambitions to win back the party leadership from John Hewson. Hewson had adopted a progressive social agenda to soften his hard right economic agenda and their first strike at him was over his greeting message to the 1994 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

The Lyons Forum has had a profound impact on Australian politics because it is a quasi faction of a major political party. Moreover, in the Liberal Party the Leader is everything, and Howard is an instinctive social conservative. However, the roots of the Christian right influence in Australia go way back in both conservative and labour politics through the NCC, DLP, the Queensland National Party, and the influence of Moral Rearmament.

A founding member of the Lyons Forum is Kevin Andrews who is now the Minister for Workplace Relations, driving the Howard government's harsh labour market agenda. The Lyons Forum didn't proclaim itself as a Christian group, but never rejected the media tags, 'the Coalition's ultra-conservative Christian faction' or 'Australia's answer to America's religious right'.

Like the US religious right and the groups listed above the Lyons Forum used 'family' as code for policies which would entrench the heterosexual nuclear family at the expense of other kinds of households and families, and to oppose abortion.

In this way they attracted Australia's minority of conservative Christians who picked up the 'code', but by not using 'god language' they also tried to avoid alienating the majority secular constituency, and win support from the Labor Right.

Its members were variously Catholic, Anglican, Baptists, and included John Cadman of the Hillsong Church in Sydney. It has 60 members, including Peter Costello, Tony Abbott and Nick Minchin. Along with Kevin Andrews, they are all very prominent in the Howard Cabinet.

With Howard's win in 1996, the Lyons Forum agenda has gone from strength to strength. There were the many wedge skirmishes over film and video censorship, the opposition to safe injection rooms, the move against IVF services to single women and lesbians. A major concern has been the role of women in the workforce and the role of women in the home. Tax policy has been the main vehicle. Another abiding concern has been to criminalise abortion.

Family First and the Pentecostal / Evangelical movements

The founder of Family First, Andrew Evans, the former pastor of Adelaide's Paradise Church, was elected to the South Australian Upper House in 2002, with 4% of the primary vote. He went on to organise a national election campaign in 2004, which saw Steve Fielding become a Senator for Victoria, with just 1.88% of the vote, but with Labor Party preferences.

Family First is very closely associated with the Assemblies of God church, which has its origins in the USA. In Australia it was built up by women leaders and women play a much stronger role in it than in other churches. Assemblies of God is strong on song and prayer and community bonding, and weak on theology and intellectual effort. This means that there is only a vague linkage between the biblical scriptures it proclaims and the activities of its more flamboyant churches such as Hillsong, and the Family First initiative. These churches have switched from the Gospels of Jesus about caring for the poor, to a "prosperity gospel" that says if you get rich it is god's blessing, and you're only poor by choice – very suited to the dominance of neo-liberalism.

"Hillsong is the Howard government at prayer," said Phillip Powell, a former general secretary of the Assemblies of God and pastor of Christian Witness Ministries, to the Business Review Weekly May 26, 2005. "They are both individualistic in their approach; they don't believe in the deserving poor, and the charitable model is to go to poor people and show them how to become rich. It is a potent mix when money, religion and politics join forces". The article investigated the business activities of the churches and their leaders pointing to the tax loopholes being exploited by the leaders for their personal benefit.

In the 2004 elections an employee of the Sydney Hillsong Church, Louise Markus, won the former Labor seat of Greenway for the Liberal Party.

Mr Nabih Saleh is an elder of Hillsong church and a 50% owner of Gloria Jeans Coffee franchise, which now has annual sales of over \$100 million. His partner in Gloria Jeans, Peter Irvine, is also a member of Hillsong.

Brian Houston is the pastor of Hillsong and president of the Assemblies of God. He a significant Sydney property owner, gets income from international speaking and publishing. Hillsong made \$40 million in 2004, and as a church, this is tax free.

Pastors of a range of other Pentecostal churches are generating tax-free incomes for themselves and their churches in the tens of millions through selling paraphernalia, books and paid speaking engagements. Phil Pringle is the pastor of Christian City Church at Oxford Falls, Sydney, with a revenue of \$38 million in 2004.

He makes money selling books and speaking around the world. His church is not part of the Assemblies of God.

Phil Baker is pastor of Riverview Church in Perth and President of Australian Christian Churches. He broadcasts to 50 countries each week, and gives motivational talks around the world. His church earned \$3.5 million in 2004. Neil Miers is president of the Christian Outreach Centre, which generates \$48 million per year in Australia. Miers too travels the world giving talks. He has branches in New Zealand, South Africa, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Germany, South America, Tonga, Western Samoa and Spain.

Ashely Evans is pastor of Paradise Community Church in Adelaide, which earned \$5.3 million in 2004. He is an executive director of the Assemblies of God, and earns income as a guest speaker at other churches. His father is founder of Family First, Andrew Evans, now in the South Australian Legislative Council. His brother Russel is senior pastor of the Pentecostal Planetshakers City Church in Melbourne.

Assemblies of God also runs AOG Smartsaver, a not-for-profit fund unregulated by the Australian Securities and Investment Commission.

Members of these churches pay a tithe of 10% of their gross income, and the prosperity churches are strongly oriented to business networking to strengthen the finances of church members.

In contrast to the low-key Lyons Forum inside the Liberal Party, these new prosperity churches are aggressive about the need for their kind of Christian to run the government. Australia's electoral system does not hold out a lot of hope for explicitly religious parties like Family First to win significant seats. Their one Senator does not hold or share the balance of power, and may not make a major impact in the new federal parliament. However, the same cannot be said about the Howard government itself, which has outright parliamentary power for the first time, and is glad to use religious right 'code' to divide its opposition and to pursue its social conservatism.

Gay rights activist Rodney Croome notes that, "Like its counterpart in America, Australia's religious right has been successfully infiltrating mainstream conservative parties for almost a generation. Key young evangelical neo-cons like Guy Barnett (Liberal Tasmanian Senator) and Michael Ferguson (Liberal Tasmanian MP) have rocketed into Parliament, their paths smoothed by conservative Christian networks within the Coalition like the Lyons Forum." ("Love ain't in the air"
http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other_more?id=1709_0_2_0_M5)

The general shift to the right in Australian politics and the emergence of outspoken appeals to conservative Christian moral values has had its effect on the ALP. The party's position on issues such as gay marriage has shifted to the right, and ALP politicians have felt the push to take notice of the growing bible belt vote.

As the religious right is taking a firmer grip of the public agenda the government is making moves to stifle dissent in the non-government organisation sector. The Australian Taxation Office has drafted rule changes for organisations that undertake any political lobbying. Groups, including mainstream church-based charities, who speak out on any issue will face the threat of losing their charity status and so risk losing their funding.

Undermining access to abortion services

With the euphoria of the 2004 election win, Tony Abbott and Qld National Senator Ron Boswell led the charge against abortion services. State laws regulate termination of pregnancy, but Medicare can help pay for termination services. Barnaby Joyce, Queensland National Senator, elected in 2004 has made reducing the number of abortions in Australia one of his aims in parliament.

As of June 14, 2005, a number of NSW abortion providers resolved to no longer bulk bill for an abortion operation. Their motivation is a combination of action to avoid the attention of the federal Health Insurance Commission (HIC), and concern about ongoing targeting of abortion providers by the HIC.

Abortion providers feel the continual scrutiny of them by the HIC is driven by anti-abortion sentiment from the Minister, Tony Abbott.

In NSW, the cost of a termination up to 12 weeks of pregnancy will rise from \$190 to either \$480 or \$520. Abortion advice services in Sydney have been approached by 'working poor' women and their partners, by single mothers and others on other Centrelink payments because they can't raise the \$190. How are women going to raise as much as \$480 or \$520?

Some providers are still bulk billing and charging an upfront fee of \$160-\$190 either for counselling or for one part of the medical service provided. However, this recent development in Sydney shows how choice can be restricted for the poor, without any formal change of law or policy.

Work - Family balance?

Howard proclaimed the work – family balance as a major focus after his 2001 election win, but he blocked the drive for universal paid maternity leave and entrenched the Family Tax Benefit system to reward mothers who stayed at home and punish those who returned to paid work. In fact, by 2004, Howard could brag that he had effectively achieved his goal of allowing single income families to split the income for tax purposes. This is a boost for high-income households at the expense of all others.

At the same time, the Government has pursued votes by being 'tough on welfare cheats', making it harder for single parent families to get the family support allowance, and forcing them back into the workforce. For those parents who chose or are pushed back into the workforce, they will also face unaffordable and inaccessible childcare as the Government refuses to properly fund childcare places across Australia.

Gay marriage ban

The success of the religious right in Australia was felt keenly by the GLBT community in 2003 when the government amended the marriage act to explicitly ban same-sex couples from marrying or from the same rights that are allowed to heterosexual de-facto relationships.

Australian gay rights activist Rodney Croome analyses the political momentum behind this legislation and points to the infiltration of the religious right into mainstream conservative parties. He notes Howard's avoidance of 'God language' but that 'He' was indeed central to the grass-roots opponents and Liberal politicians campaigning for the homophobic vote.

Parenting

Rodney Croome writes on the Governments campaign against gay parenting:

"The Federal Government has made it clear that attacks on gay parenting are at the top of its anti-gay hit list. As well as re-introducing its ban on lesbian access to reproductive technology, and possibly re-visiting its proposal to over ride the ACT's new gay adoption laws, the Government is keen to ban overseas adoption by same-sex couples.

Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, will argue that the ban simply re-enforces the status quo. It's true that none of countries with which Australia has an adoption agreement currently allows gay couples to adopt their children.

But the symbolism is profound. In the Government's eyes gay parenting is so dysfunctional that abandoned children in developing countries are better off starving on the streets or wasting away in orphanages than grow-up in the care of same-sex couples.

The other half of the Government's anti-gay parenting agenda is an elimination of positive portrayals of families headed by same-sex couples.

Last year's attack on *Playschool* for featuring a child in a two-mum family has been followed this year with calls by NSW National Party leader, Andrew Stoner, to remove books about gay families from schools.

In the US, such attacks have seen major publicly funded institutions quietly drop gay family-friendly policies and programs rather than risk the ire of conservative leaders and their media cheer squads." ('Love ain't in the air' http://www.rodneycroome.id.au/other_more?id=1709_0_2_0_M5)

For more information – campaigns and readings

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State based gay and lesbian rights lobby groups - NSW www.glr.org.au Ph (02) 9360 6650; WA www.galewa.asn.au Ph (08) 9487 0862; Vic www.vglr.org.au Ph 0417 484 438 (Pete Dillon) E: info@vglr.org.au; Tasmania www.tased.edu.au/tasonline/tasqueer/tasqueer.html E: tglrg@hotmail.com

Community Action Against Homophobia - www.caah.org

Australian Marriage Equality national campaign - www.australianmarriageequality.com

Rainbow Sash movement - www.rainbowsash.com Ph 0412 073 081 (Geoffrey Baird)

National Pay Equity Coalition - Email fhayes@ozemail.com.au (Fran Hayes)

Reproductive Choice Australia and the National Pro-choice Coalition - www.reproductivechoiceaustralia.org.au. Ph 0418 968 810 (Carol Berry)

Womens Health Victoria - www.whv.org.au/topical/updates.htm

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