

Is Faith a “no go area” in Modern Politics? A Case Study of Newly Elected MPs in Western Australia’s State Parliament.

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Introduction

It has been recently suggested that Parliamentarians are invoking Christian beliefs with increasing frequency within Australian public life. In particular, it has been suggested that these beliefs have been used to justify their policies and decisions. At the most recent election in Western Australia in September 2008, a number of new Members of Parliament were regarded as having strong links to Christian churches. Indeed, one newspaper article labeled these MPs as “a god squad of devout Liberals”. Given the above discussion, it is worth considering, 18 months after their election, what sort of rhetoric these members use in public life, particularly in parliament, when explaining their values and decisions. The evidence suggests that while these Parliamentarians hold strong religious views, they are careful to use more secular language when justifying their political stances.

Politicians invoking religion?

A recent article by Annabel Crabb has suggested that Australian politicians are invoking religion on a much more regular basis. Crabb’s research suggested that the use of religious language increased over the period between 2000 and 2006 (Crabb 2009: 263-264). Christian beliefs were by far the most cited. Whilst Crabb’s research revealed that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was the single politician most likely to use refer to his faith, Liberal and National MPs were overall more likely to cite Christian beliefs. Warhurst’s overall assessment of religious expression during the Howard era supported this notion (Warhurst 2007: 23-24).

A “God-squad of devout liberals”?

Following this an article appeared in the *Australian* in April 2009, arguing that a god-squad of devout Liberals preaching morality and Christian values in a parliament better known for misconduct and lewd behaviour was shaping as a new force in West

Australian politics (O'Brien 2009). The four MPs named as part of this “god squad” were Peter Abetz (the Member for Southern River), Ian Britza (Morley), Tony Krsticevic (Carine), and Albert Jacob (Ocean Reef). The four MPs concerned entered parliament at the same time, represent the same party, occupy a backbench position and all alluded to their faith in their maiden speech. Interestingly, all of the members except Mr Krsticevic can be described as marginal seat holders, as they contested and won seats that had been notionally Labor prior to the 2008 election. These parallels in parliamentary experience, party affiliation and political reality make them an ideal group to analyse.

The exact nature of these parliamentarians’ faith is not in itself the focus of this paper, nor is there attempts to draw broader conclusions about the appropriate role of faith in politics, as these questions are too broad to address adequately in this study. This paper instead focuses on the rhetoric they use to justify their faith and what language they consider appropriate for the public arena. The principle methodology employed is the use of one-on-one interviews with each member as a means of understanding the importance of their faith as an influence on their decision-making, and analyzing the context in which they refer to their beliefs in public life. Given the above similarities in their circumstances we might expect to see a degree of consensus about their approach to these issues. What emerges however, is that the differences in emphasis are just as significant as any such level of consensus. It is clear that we should be wary about prematurely drawing conclusions concerning MPs faith and their approach to public life. When exploring the circumstances in which parliamentarians choose to use faith-related references, the evidence would suggest that the instances are relatively limited.

Faith as a motivation for entering parliament

If one were to look for an obvious “god squad” member of the Western Australian parliament, Peter Abetz, the Member for Southern River, would appear to fit the bill. He was an evangelical Minister for 25 years before entering parliament and still preaches occasionally when time permits. Indeed Abetz’s background and profession meant that he found himself talking readily about his faith with potential constituents while campaigning, since he was frequently asked about what his occupation was. Indeed Abetz

pointed out that he was “half-expected” to explain his faith when describing what he stood for (Abetz 2010). Yet, like most members of parliament, Mr Abetz had worked in more than one field before entering parliament. He is an agricultural scientist by training, having completed an Honours degree at the University of Tasmania. After finishing his studies, he worked for several years as a farm advisory officer (Abetz 2010a). He is also not unfamiliar with the political process, being the brother of prominent Liberal Senator for Tasmania, Eric Abetz.

Mr Abetz was the most explicit about his faith when making his maiden speech in parliament. At the time, he attempted to explicitly address the issue of how his faith would affect his performance as a member of parliament. There he identified several notions as being intrinsic to his motivation to enter politics. He spoke about every human being as made in the image of God, and of the importance of the Judeo-Christian ethic. He also alluded to specific moral laws, handed down by God (Abetz 2008). It would be fair to say that these were the three core principles of his belief system that he felt comfortable in putting on the public record. These were the same principles that he constantly reiterated when interviewed.

The second member of parliament who made mention of Judeo-Christian values both during his maiden speech and our discussion was Ian Britza, the Member for Morley. Mr Britza likewise had nearly 30 years of experience as a pastor in evangelical churches, both in Australia and the United States prior to entering parliament. He enjoyed a degree of fame in his former occupation, hosting a weekly television program and publishing a book on the issue of disloyalty in church leadership (Britza 2004). He has also run his own business. Mr Britza referred explicitly to the importance of Judeo-Christian principles during his maiden speech (Britza 2008). In particular he argued that these principles are crucial to his understanding of what is “right” and “wrong”. Mr Britza reiterated these statements when interviewed, arguing that this sense of right and wrong is intrinsic to notions of justice, and is derived from the bible (Britza 2010).

The third member interviewed was Albert Jacob, the member for Ocean Reef. At just 30

years of age, he is the youngest member of parliament in Western Australia. This does not mean that he was unfamiliar with politics or public life however. From 2006-2008 he served as a ward councilor in the City of Joondalup, representing an area similar in size and location to his present electorate. In fact, he states that he has been involved in politics since 2002, and active within the Liberal party since that time (Jacob 2010). Like the other members in this study he also has a professional background. He worked as a horticulturalist before completing a Bachelor of Environmental Design at the University of Western Australia. He has worked as an architect, and has run his own business (Jacob 2008; 2010a). In his maiden speech, Mr Jacob thanked God for what he believed to be a “divine opportunity” to serve (Jacob 2008). Yet he now feels that this reference received an inordinate amount of attention after his maiden speech, arguing that his core motivation for entering parliament was to serve in the public interest (Jacob 2010).

The final member of the so-called “god squad” was Tony Krsticevic, the member for Carine. Mr Krsticevic’s background was rather different from that of both Mr Britza and Mr Abetz. Born in Croatia, he moved to Perth at the age of three. He completed a Bachelor of Business degree, majoring in computing and accounting. He subsequently spent 20 years working in the Australian Taxation Office (Krsticevic 2010a). Although he also used his maiden speech to thank god for making his election possible, Mr Krsticevic was very keen to point out during his interview that his faith could not be separated from other influences, arguing that the whole picture needs to be considered together in explaining his motivations (Krsticevic 2010). Unlike the other three members Mr Krsticevic is Catholic rather than Evangelical. Whilst the focus of this paper is on the rhetoric used by these parliamentarians rather than their actual beliefs, it was evident that his Catholic beliefs influenced the way Mr Krsticevic described the link between his faith and public life. There was a distinct focus on good deeds as a key motivating factor as he emphasized helping people as his reason for entering politics. Mr Krsticevic’s way of explaining his faith was to talk about it in terms of the moral foundation he believes is important (Krsticevic 2010). Faith was just one of several different sources for this moral foundation.

When dissecting the stated motives for these MPs entering politics it is clear that for some it was more central than others. In addition, as an influence on their political life it had to compete with a range of other influences and life experiences. Even those MPs such as Mr Abetz and Mr Britza who had lengthy periods as a pastor had professional training and experience in other areas. Unsurprisingly these professional backgrounds remain very relevant in terms of policy interest and focus, thereby providing alternative foci during their parliamentary careers.

Discussing faith in public life

Mr Abetz was the most forward of the group when it came to describing the appropriateness of using rhetoric related to his faith when in public life. In fact, he stated that he would try to bring it up as often as he could, on the proviso that it wasn't offensive. (Abetz 2010).

Mr Krsticevic as a rule believed that it was not appropriate to bring up his faith explicitly in most electorate functions, but there were instances where it was. On certain occasions he goes to a Catholic Primary School which is linked to the church he regularly attends. He is also a vicar for the youth within that church. In this instance he was already involved in interacting with young people, before becoming a member of parliament. When then visiting as their elected member of parliament at Christmas he spoke about his involvement with their school through the church, and seeing them on Sunday (Krsticevic 2010). In this instance his role as a member of parliament did intersect with his role as a member of a church on Sundays. Mr Britza had a similar experience with a group of Burmese Christians whom he originally visited when representing the Premier. After realizing that they had that they had their Christian faith in common, Mr Britza has since been invited back on his own account (Britza 2010).

Mr Krsticevic and Mr Britza's experience provides an interesting contrast with that of Mr Jacob in this instance, who maintained that he hasn't been to a single function as an elected MP where he has mentioned his faith. Even though he has a large Catholic congregation in his electorate, he said that he hasn't mentioned it there either (Jacob

2010). This contrast could be explained by Mr Krsticevic being more comfortable speaking about his Catholic faith in a Catholic context, than Mr Jacob whose background and faith is different. Mr Jacob admitted that attending Catholic functions was a rather different environment to that which he had experienced before and that he had to take advice from his wife in order to understanding aspects of their faith (Jacob 2010).

The common thread here is that most members concerned feel comfortable in referring to their faith in those audiences that have already been exposed to it, such as churches and religious schools. In these instances it was not only deemed an appropriate thing to bring up but it represented an opportunity to encourage those audiences to place greater value on their faith. Both Mr Krsticevic and Mr Britza, stated that it was an opportunity to inform that audience that their faith was important and something to be valued (Krsticevic 2010; Britza 2010). Outside of these circumstances however, they did not feel that it is appropriate.

Discussing faith in parliament

Despite the fact that all four participants readily referred to their faith during their maiden speeches in November 2008, not one of this “god squad of devout Liberals” has mentioned it in parliament since that time. There is a temptation to see this nonappearance as coincidental, simply due to a lack of opportunity or relevance. But in fact, each Member when interviewed specifically rejected the notion of raising it in parliament outside the maiden-speech context. Mr Krsticevic specifically rejected using his faith as an argument during parliamentary debate, arguing that it would be inappropriate (Krsticevic 2010). Albert Jacob said that it would not be wise, and Ian Britza said that he was extremely unlikely to mention it. Mr Abetz has only once mentioned his former role as a pastor in parliament, during a conscience vote on surrogacy. In this instance he spoke about the role only in terms of his responsibilities in counseling parents, rather than suggesting that the role of being a pastor in itself influenced his views (Abetz 2008a).

Using more inclusive language to justify decision-making

Writing on the Drum, ABC's online opinion site, reporter Chris Uhlmann recently argued "in Australia's marketplace of ideas a politician who makes a case for God risks ridicule.

It is particularly dangerous if the politician is also a conservative." (Uhlmann 2010).

There was a virtual consensus amongst the participants that mounting arguments in the public domain based directly on the bible or their faith was not their preferred course of action. Mr Britza said that it would be "dangerous" for him to do that, whilst Mr Abetz said that he would be considered a "dork"! (Britza 2010; Abetz 2010) Instead all four participants said that they had broad sets of values and beliefs which they used to justify their decision making. There were similarities in the language used between Mr Abetz and Mr Britza when it came to the term "Judeo-Christian values" (Abetz 2010; Britza 2010). Both used this term frequently during the interview and both stated that they were comfortable in referring to the term at public functions. Mr Britza also expressed his liking for the term "common Christian heritage" (Britza 2010). Mr Krsticevic argued that his faith was part of a collective set of principles upon which he operated (Krsticevic 2010). Mr Jacob took a different approach, saying that if he felt obliged to mention his faith he would do so by describing it as his personal experience rather than that of others, so that it was clear he was not pushing it onto the broader community.

The employment of such terminology is hardly surprising given the need to communicate their message to a broad audience. Brennan argues that even though many Australians think that religion is a private affair and should be kept out of politics, they "are not troubled by the occasional public claim that Australia's laws and policies are informed by values imbedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Brennan 2007: 17). Maddox also describes a tendency to avoid using explicitly religious language so as to not alienate secular voters (Maddox 2005: 68). More inclusive language enables parliamentarians to share their beliefs in the public arena, whilst at the same time avoiding offense to non-believers.

Conclusions

It is evident that whilst all of the members who participated in this study openly

mentioned their faith in their maiden speeches, they have rarely referred to it directly since that time. Indeed they singled out their maiden speeches as special circumstances which required them to state who they were and what had influenced them. All of the members concerned were acutely aware that simple citation of the bible or church doctrines in public debate would not be an effective means of getting their message across in a modern secular society. There were also varying levels to which their faith influenced their decision-making, but even when it did, alternative more inclusive terminology was employed, such as “Judeo-Christian values”, “our cultural heritage” and personal “life experiences”. Whilst this study is very limited in scope, it does suggest that our parliamentarians, even those inspired by faith, are firmly grounded in the political realities of the day which dictate that their positions be justified in language which most people can relate to. Ultimately reaching a broad demographic in the community is more important than securing the “religious” vote. The fact that three of the four members hold marginal seats is especially relevant here, as they have an extra incentive to win and retain broad community approval. The reality though, is that the vast majority of elected representatives are loathe to antagonize their electorate, whatever their margin is. I would suggest that a wider study would reveal similar traits.

The study also highlighted many differences between the Members who participated. As former pastors Mr Abetz and Mr Britza were more expansive when referring to the relevance of their faith, and more likely to raise it in circumstances where they felt it appropriate. Because of his background, Mr Abetz in particular was questioned about it in a range of different contexts.

Both Mr Jacob and Mr Krsticevic were more reserved when discussing their faith, and more inclined to emphasise other influences on their political life. These two MPs are younger and would be expecting longer careers in parliament, perhaps with an eye toward leadership roles in the future. Whilst careful not to dismiss their faith as irrelevant, they were particularly keen to dispel any suggestion that it would compromise their ability to make impartial judgements or prevent them from representing the community more broadly.

All of the MPs concerned are well aware of the dangers of being stereotyped as one-issue activists. The fact that none of them have referred to their faith in parliament (and rarely in the community) and are generally wary of doing so in the future would further indicate that they are unlikely to be found regularly lecturing the public on the importance of Christian teachings. The secularization of our broader society would suggest that this would be an inappropriate path for them to venture down, and they seem well aware of this themselves.

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