

The Catholic Influence in Politics
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in a Joint Forum with Patrick Morgan
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There can be several answers to this question. Given that I am a typical academic I think the answer depends on how you interpret the question.

The key term in the title is Catholic. What exactly does it mean?

I am going to consider three possible answers. The first interprets the question as meaning the influence of leading Catholics in politics. These Catholics are drawn from the quarter of the population who answer to that name, as confirmed recently by the results of the 2006 Census.

But 'Catholic' is an ambiguous term in this context because it can be used strictly or loosely. More on that later.

The leading Catholics might be politicians, especially, but also judges, business leaders, NGO leaders (like B.A. Santamaria in his time), trade union leaders, journalists, and so on: anyone who can influence politics.

The second interpretation refers to Catholic material interests as represented by Catholic institutions: Catholic bishops, Catholic educational institutions, Catholic hospitals and aged care homes and Catholic welfare agencies.

The third interpretation refers to Catholic ideas, particularly Catholic ideas of individual ethical behaviour and of the common good, such as how society and economy ought to be organized.

Leading Catholics

Leading Catholics may be more influential than ever before as the Catholic community has been upwardly mobile since the 1950s. Catholics were not particularly influential during the Menzies years. There were hardly any in the Menzies government itself. However, during the 1950s there were Catholics in leading positions in politics, especially in State Labor politics, but also in federal Labor politics. Even after the Labor Split, when Arthur Calwell became federal Labor leader in 1960 three of Labor's four parliamentary leaders were Catholics (the other being Gough Whitlam).

There are certainly many Catholics at the top end of the Liberal Party now, which was certainly not the case in the 1950s. Tony Abbott, the Minister for Health, tells us there are now ten Catholics in the Howard ministry, a remarkable development. That number includes Mark Vaile, the Deputy Prime Minister and Leader of the National Party, and

some other Nationals. It also includes several serious contenders for the Liberal leadership and deputy leadership after John Howard, including Malcolm Turnbull, Brendan Nelson and Abbott himself, as well as the senior woman in the Cabinet, Senator Helen Coonan.

In NSW the Premier, Morris Iemma, the Deputy Premier John Watkins and the Leader of the Opposition, Barry O'Farrell are practicing Catholics. Five of the last six leaders of the NSW Liberal Party have been Catholics. In historical perspective that is an amazing transformation of the Liberal Party from one in which Catholics played little part.

The Labor Premiers of NSW (as mentioned), Victoria (Steve Bracks) and Tasmania (Paul Lennon) as well as the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory (Clare Martin) are Catholics, at least broadly defined. In Victoria recently the leaders of the three major political parties, Labor (Bracks), Liberal (Denis Napthine) and National (Peter Ryan) were Catholics.

The Chief Justice of the High Court, Murray Gleeson is a Catholic. I attended school with the South Australian Chief Justice, John Doyle, also a Catholic. In fact there are Catholic lawyers in high office everywhere; at one stage Catholics were deemed to be a majority of the High Court in Sir Gerard Brennan's time as Chief Justice.

Not long ago Sir William Deane was Governor-General. Joe de Bruyn, national secretary of the Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association, is Senior Vice-President of the ACTU. Some leading businessmen are Catholics (John Ralph, Allen Myers). Michael L'Estrange heads the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Mick Keelty heads the Australian Federal Police. Dennis Shanahan is the senior political writer for The Australian newspaper. Leading Catholic military figures of the present and recent past include the former Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Major-General Peter Cosgrove.

Many more examples could be given. What more could Catholics ask for?

The obvious caveat to this triumphal progression is that, as I said, the term Catholic is an ambiguous notion. For instance, I am currently engaged on a research project about Catholics in the federal parliament. I think that there are about 55 Catholics in the parliament, about what one would expect given the Australian community, but they are a diverse group and I can't be sure. They include Catholics by practice, inclination, education and/or upbringing. I've learnt from my interviews that some are card-carrying Catholics, some Christmas and Easter Catholics, and some call themselves tribal or cultural Catholics. Some would not want to be included in such a list at all because they have definitely moved away from the church.

The same variety probably applies to many so-called Catholics in those other occupations that I have mentioned. So the answer to this approach to the question of influence depends on who you are willing to count and who is willing to be counted. The key question to ask might be: do these leaders identify and act as Catholics?

As for the future I would expect generational trends eventually to shorten this list somewhat and thus diminish the Catholic influence, defined in this way. But it may take several decades.

Catholic bishops, institutions and material interests

Australia's Catholic bishops are as prominent in public life now as they have ever been. Cardinal Pell, for instance, is probably as well known to the general public as any Australian bishop at any time. But the bishops may be less influential in politics than they once were, because their flock is dwindling and because the likelihood of those that remain taking their political advice is probably less than it once was. They have also been notably disunited during several recent federal election campaigns, in part because the diocesan organization of the church does not encourage nation-wide unity of views among bishops. There is no "Catholic vote" to speak of if there ever was, at least not one open to direction from above.

Catholic institutions and Catholic material interests are strong/influential and probably growing. They successfully defend their interests in the political market-place. This is despite religious leadership giving way to lay leadership in most cases in these institutions.

In education there is now bipartisan support for state aid in a way that was not the case in the 1950s. Catholic schools educate 20% of Australian students. While the church has not yet achieved its aim of federal funding to its schools of 60% of the average cost of educating a student in a government school, there have been significant increases in federal and state funding of Catholic schools over the last 40 years. The current arrangement with the federal government, last negotiated in 2004, is very advantageous. In some states and territories, however, the church does better than others.

There are now also two Catholic universities and a Catholic tertiary college, founded since the 1950s. The leaders of these institutions, too, are among the list of prominent Catholics in public life.

Catholic Health Australia represents 20 public hospitals, 36 private hospitals and 130 nursing homes and hostels. In Canberra the Catholic health community is growing through the acquisition of some other facilities to the consternation of some critics.

Catholic Social Services Australia represents more than seventy welfare agencies run by dioceses and religious orders. It has a significant presence in public debates about welfare issues, though it is not one of the largest welfare organisations.

Business Review Weekly magazine calculated in 2005 that four of the five top charities and 22 of the top fifty charities are Catholic. BRW concluded that the church as a whole is the wealthiest NGO in Australia, and that, if it were a corporation it would be one of the top ten. Taken together this means that the church as a whole is probably one of the top ten interest groups in Australian politics, and the strongest of the church lobbies.

Catholic Ideas

It is harder to discern great Catholic influence in the world of political ideas. In saying that I realize that we could be here all night debating among ourselves just what is the distinctive character of Catholic ideas (or whether they are distinctive at all from secular ideologies like social democracy, liberalism and conservatism).

Nevertheless, let me examine two sets of ideas. One is often regarded as on the right and the other often regarded as on the left in contemporary politics. Tony Abbott's recent comments to the Australian Catholic Students Association ("Church takes wrong turn opposing Work Choices", The Australian 12 July 2007) frame them in this light.

The first set is made up of Catholic ideas on life and death: euthanasia, abortion and embryonic stem cell research have been the subject of conscience votes in the federal parliament since 1996. None of these were political issues in the 1950s so comparisons are not very useful.

The latter was the object of Cardinal Pell's controversial intervention in NSW politics earlier last month against a bill allowing embryonic stem cell research. Addressing his remarks to Catholic MPs ("What it means to be Catholic", reported in the Catholic Weekly on 17 June 2007) he said: "Certainly every Catholic politician who voted for this bill should think twice and examine his or her conscience before next receiving Communion".

The bill passed clearly in both Houses of the NSW Parliament and many Catholic MPs voted for it including the three aforementioned leaders, Iemma, Watkins and O'Farrell. Generally the influence of these Catholic ideas has become weaker since, with church backing, the federal parliament overturned the Northern Territory's euthanasia legislation in 1996-97. Ministerial control of RU486 was removed in 2006 and embryonic stem cell research was supported this year, despite church opposition.

The second set is made up of Catholic ideas on economic rationalism and industrial relations. In my view they are equally Catholic ideas but they have never been expressed with the same authority by the hierarchy despite many public episcopal statements.

Generally, from the time of opposition to economic rationalism in the Episcopal statement called Commonwealth for the Common Good in 1992 to the current opposition to the Work Choices legislation by many bishops and by the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations the Catholic ideas have not proved persuasive with the federal government. Furthermore, while some may see these ideas as pro-Labor and anti-Coalition they are in fact against the mainstream direction of political thinking on both sides of modern politics.

These Catholic ideas, too, have not been very influential. And it is difficult to see them becoming very much more influential in the future whatever the result of the next federal election.

Conclusion

In conclusion (to address directly some of the questions posed by the organizers of this forum), in my view the Catholic influence in politics remains very real and not on the point of disappearing at all, though how it is defined and the way in which it operates needs to be carefully considered. The church remains large and relatively influential though there are long-term demographic trends working against it to lessen its influence.

Within the political parties Catholic influence is more dispersed than it once was and the Labor Split of the 1950s is the reason for some, but not all, of this dispersal because it shook some traditional Labor loyalties. But, there is no equivalent of the Democratic Labor Party of that time in today's politics. That era has passed. Some individuals in both the major parties might see themselves and/or their parties as inheriting some of these DLP ideas, but they are not really an equivalent. Rather it was the recently retired Independent Senator Brian Harradine whose political ideas may have come closest to the DLP tradition.