

# *How the Church should engage with the Parliament and Public Opinion?*

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Acknowledgement of country

Distinguished guests, colleagues; Parliamentary Chaplain Rev Peter Rose,

Thank you for inviting me to share the podium this evening with Barnaby, and consider the enduring questions you have posed for us about the influence of the church in Australian politics. It's an issue that is often debated, and I find that for most, it raises questions about the 'big ticket' issues, like abortion, same sex marriage, euthanasia, - the polarising ethical debates that get so much attention in the media and are always in the forefront when the relationship between religion and politics raises its head.

I think as a nation we are very fortunate that we have as our Prime Minister, our Leader of the Opposition, and our Leader of the National Party as men who are active in their faith and who are unapologetic about being so. And I know that during the very long nights as he witnessed the collapse of Lehman brothers and the ensuing financial crisis that Kevin Rudd and Wayne Swan drew on the strength of their convictions to help steer the Australian economy through a course that has saved us from the impacts that we are all witnessing overseas on the evening news – strikes, riots, bailouts, whole suburbs and neighbourhoods as ghost towns, unemployment in double digits, pension funds pillaged and continuing fragility of financial systems.

Of course, dealing with these issues is key part of a politician's job. It's what we're elected to do!

I clearly recall how, just after I arrived in federal parliament the legislation on research using embryonic stem cells was debated. You will remember, this bill proposed that human embryos harvested to help infertile women to conceive, and which were superfluous to that woman's needs, should be used to provide stem cells for research purposes.

As the new kid on the block, this was my first extended debate, my first conscience vote, my first exposure to the intrigues of parliamentary horse trading on issues of policy and principle—across parties, across factions, and in this particular circumstance, all through the night.

There were lobbyists from the scientific community, arguing on both sides of the fence. The big drug companies regaled us with information and statistics; representatives from Christian organisations and churches pointed out the ethical and moral implications; academics explained new biotechnology procedures in fine detail; and we heard moving pleas from people suffering incurable diseases to give them hope.

It was fascinating, and challenging, and exciting. And while my mind was whirling with the complexity of the arguments I was trying to keep my head and think clearly: trying to focus on the key aspects of the debate, absorb new ideas and perspectives, and at the same time give serious consideration to ideas I'd just touched on before.

The issues were debated by very articulate people with very different views and agendas. Serious ideas were sometimes trivialised and dismissed – we're used to that, but what threw me in those early days was the experience of seeing gifted, intelligent people presenting distorted and dishonest arguments in the guise of truth.

I've started with this tale because it was such a learning experience for me - a kind of baptism of fire!

And it was a process that has stood me in good stead in the past six and a half years, for no sooner was that debate over, than we embarked on another controversial Senate Inquiry and extended debate, this time on changes to the ASIO bill. Now you might assume that my faith was brought into play much more in the stem cell debate than in the ASIO debate. But that's not the case.

The point I want to make is the fact that politics and religion intersect all the time, and not just when those “moral majority” issues crop up.

When politicians deliberate about the right way to deal with a perceived threat to our national security, when we consider how best to cope with drug dealers or uranium mining, asylum seekers or private equity consortiums or drought relief or aged care, or what organisations should have tax deductibility status ... in every one of these deliberations, our fundamental values as Christians inform our decision making.

Aristotle pointed out, a long time ago, that human compassion is based on three thoughts: first, that a serious, bad thing has happened to someone else; second, that this bad event was not, or not entirely, the person's own fault; and third, that we ourselves are vulnerable in similar ways.

So compassion is a morally valuable emotion, as it links our own self-interest and the reality of another person's good or ill. But sometimes that link is very selective. While we're brought up to believe that all human beings have equal worth, we need to acknowledge that for many of us, some are more equal than others: we value most those human beings whose lives are familiarly like our own, those with whom we can identify. We'll fight tooth and nail for our families; We form our strong attachments to the local first, and only gradually learn to have compassion for people who are outside our immediate circle. We mourn for those we know, much less for those we don't know.

And this has implications for the political decisions we make, both in how we look after our own population in Australia, and how we see our role as global citizens.

Aristotle pointed out that the citizens in Plato's ideal city, asked to care for all citizens equally, would actually care for none, since care is learned in small groups with their more intense attachments. Without families and their intense loyalties, we will have, he says, a "watery" kind of care all round.

And a watery kind of care isn't what Jesus meant, either for the people in somewhere distant like Darfur, or for those closer to home, in remote indigenous communities or our Pacific neighbours.

Australians are very generous, giving of their time and skills as well as being prepared to put their hand in their pocket when tragedy occurs. But we need to do more than react to crises: we need a government with an ongoing commitment to substantially reducing poverty and suffering.

The experience of the GFC highlighted the fact that the gap between the haves and the have-nots is very wide, both at home and across the world. We are still witnessing how the powerful define their humanity in terms of possessions, rather than goods of the soul.

And, we are seeing the churches increasing their influence in shaping a different and more compassionate global future.

I am glad to be here talking to a group of fellow travellers -people with a shared understanding that the soul comes first, and that material possessions so often cause conflict, especially when the goal is limitless accumulation, not merely sustenance.

As I talk to many baby boomers I hear more and more that we are the generation who has had the best of all worlds, and who need to acknowledge that our ambitions have very real consequences for future generations.

And that in fact is what much of the government's social inclusion agenda is all about.

So, let me return now to the questions that you've posed for us:

**Firstly – do the Churches have more or less influence in the public square, and has the Church got it right in engaging in the debates of the day?**

I think my answer is as much or more influence rather than less, and yes, that is has it right!

The 2007 Census data indicates that 64% of Australians identify as Christians, and we know that in times of stress and crisis we all hark back to the principles and values we know. So, the churches represent the values of the majority of the population.

As Peter Rose tells us, there are very few soldiers on the front line who don't believe in God.

But, in very practical terms I would like to comment on the real influence of many faith based organisations in public debate – I work closely with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and Peter McArdle and Fr Brian Lucas are often called upon to provide advice on all kinds of issues.

Let me acknowledge too that Catholic Social Services, Uniting Care, Anglicare and the Salvation Army are very influential in both policy development, shaping new initiatives and again giving some frank and fearless advice about what may or may not adversely impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged Australians. Frank Quinlan the CEO of Catholic Social Services has been a key adviser in my own portfolio areas – providing expertise around the National Compact between the government and the not for profit sector, and leading key discussions about a reform agenda for the third sector. And the recent release of the Social Inclusion Document, by CSS and St Vincent de Paul is a good example of these organisations – church based organisations – shaping and influencing governments and oppositions, and in part providing a moral compass for governments of all persuasions.

And, on that note, we can't discount the influence of Catholic Health Australia, led by Martin Laverty, as the largest non-profit health and hospital provider in shaping the Rudd Government's transformational health reform agenda.

Faith-based providers have played an equally important role in our changes to aged care services, Jobs Services Australia, Disability and refugee support services, and homelessness support services.

The Prime Minister's commitment to addressing the issue of homelessness has seen Tony Nicholson, from the Brotherhood of St Laurence heading up the Homelessness Taskforce.

Monsignor David Cappo and John Falzon, CEO of St Vincent de Paul are both influential members of the Australian Social Inclusion Board, and vocal in their criticisms of government when they need to do so.

Fr Frank Brennan has made a very significant contribution to the national debate on human rights and continues to be influential in international public policy.

The National Council of Churches is a signatory to the National Compact – agreeing to work with the government in very new ways to delivery better policy outcomes for Australia.

A few weeks ago I met with the Rev Elenie Poulos, the National Director of Uniting Australia. We talked about growing a nation of hope – of what makes a healthy democracy. Not surprisingly, she talked of education and health, and about caring for the vulnerable and marginalised in society. But she also raised issues of peace and reconciliation, of work justice, of cherishing all God's creation (including the implications of climate change), and raised particular concerns about the vast distances between communities in Australia and the importance of ensuring that people living in remote areas have access to services and infrastructure. Peacemaking and caring for our neighbours were also on her agenda.

That was a lot to cover in a half hour meeting! She was persuasive, informed, and left me with a briefing package that was not big enough to be daunting but detailed enough to inform and educate all those she visited that day.

So these are very practical examples of how churches are influencing political decision-making.

The Prime Minister ( and I'm sure Mr Abbott) regularly meets with Church leaders – I know that Archbishop Mark, Bishop Stuart Robinson and James Haire are often in direct conversation with him when he is in Canberra. And Mr Abbott, as a Sydney-based MP is closely connected to the Archdiocese and Cardinal Pell.

So, when you ask "What influence can and should the Church have in Australian politics?" I hope you are heartened to hear not only about the possibility and the obligation – the 'can' and the 'should'—but also the actuality: the influence that faith DOES have in Australian politic debate. And, while I've focussed this evening on the federal parliament, I know that the churches exert their influence with state and territory governments in similar ways.

And of course I am only one member of parliament whose approach to our work is informed by their faith.

As President of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship I see this first hand. Despite what you read in the media, despite the common cliché of power-hungry apparatchiks out of touch with ordinary people's lives, I can assure you that there are, in fact members of parliament who daily challenge entrenched complacency and greed, and keep plugging away at the effort to make compassionate citizenship not just an ideal but a reality.

But, where we sit on the political spectrum obviously colours our approach:

I can't imagine anyone on my side of politics suggesting that anyone under 30 should be made to up stakes and head to Western Australia or lose their income support. Up stakes and lose their social networks, their informal childcare, disrupt their children's schooling, pay through the nose for unaffordable housing....

Or insisting that low incomes families support the private health insurance of middle and high income Australians;

Or, suggesting that "There's got to be emergency accommodation for people or systems to provide emergency accommodation for people who've got big problems '..but we just can't stop people from being homeless if that's their choice or if their situation is such that it is just impossible to look after them under certain circumstances.

Or suggesting on overseas aid funding “let's stop throwing money to the hungry brown people”

Or indeed that the government is “a philosophical brothel of ideas where any virtue is for sale – purchased for popularity but never loved beyond the dirty, grimy bed, where these ideals have been laid down to be abused and deflowered by the Labor Party and by their cohort of senior ministers....

I question the values that these kinds of policy positions are based upon.

How can you meet seriously marginalised people, with no sense of themselves, deeply and complexly disadvantaged and not be challenged to change the policy environment and structural arrangements that keep them in this state?

I sincerely believe is that we have to enable people to be the principle agents of change in their own lives - to have greater power and control in their own hands, and underpinned by clear reciprocal obligations. This too is what the National Compact seeks to advance.

Your final question is

**What can the churches do better, especially in the lead up to the election?**

Thinking about the influence the Church can and should have in Australian politics raises questions about how Christians in the community can assert their influence on policy and legislation—practical questions about how you can and should use your commitment to help make the world a better place for all of us.

Parish renewal is important – broadening the vocations within churches, the opportunities to engage on the issues that are important, and investing in the future of Australia’s most enduring institutions.

To my mind there is a close link between following Christ and being an active citizen. To help our neighbour, we need to get involved. To be able to be involved, we need to have a sense of belonging. To have a sense of belonging, we need to be part of community.

In western Sydney a Catholic parish has brought together all the indigenous organisations and providers and been successful in securing Jobs Funds money for a local social enterprise.

In Brisbane last month I visited a community centre supported by Spiritus, where those whose lives are completely on the margins – homeless, or almost homeless, living with mental illness or disability, ex prisoners have a place to connect, and a place to belong – on their own terms, and their whole community is better for it.

This week is National Volunteer Week and the Senate today acknowledged the contribution of our 5million plus volunteers. Throughout the week I’ve been challenging people around the country to consider how they might get involved and exert some influence on what is happening around them.

In the context of church influence, I would say – **No! Don’t leave it to the Bishops!**



I'd like to encourage you as men and women, rather than as academics, service providers or clergy, to stay informed and connected.

- Consider how the Christian churches engage at the local community level –with each other and with community, and not at a service-delivery level, but at the spirit level.
- Where is the capacity for interfaith dialogue at local level? We are a culturally and faith-diverse nation – we need to build bridges - it's important for us to understand each other's approach to the common good as well as understanding points of difference. "Building bridges – creating a culture of diversity" is a great resource.
- Be prepared to do careful research and hard thinking. and articulate thought leadership in new areas of policy challenges as well as those we most clearly identify with the church's mandates.
- Leverage off each other's work – a great example of that is Spirit Care Australia, where chaplains in schools, prisons, palliative care, family services, disability, mental health services, hospitals, army, military and indeed parliamentary chaplains have come together to support each other in a new organisation.
- Present your ideas concisely and professionally. Put the time into preparation - clarify and share your thoughts and then speak with a united voice. The Social Inclusion Statement is a great example of that, as is the Annual Social Justice Statement. Recently Paul Smyth from BSL with the Australian Collaboration produced a feisty document " "In or Out? Building an Inclusive Nation".

There are many ways of exerting your influence, besides lobbying parliamentarians during a busy sitting week. Start by engaging with your local member. Make him or her aware of you, your activities and your priorities.

Join forces with like-minded groups: pooling resources is very effective and strengthens your voice. The Make Poverty History campaign is a great example of that, targeting bi-partisan support of the Millennium Development Goals. Use new networking technologies to bring people together in virtual communities of interest. And, in terms of technologies - make yourself familiar with the predatory behaviour we are trying to address through the proposed internet filter.

Remember that being an advocate for change means that there are many failures before you may achieve success. But the process of advocacy – giving voice to issues and those who don't have a voice is very important to a healthy democracy. That's why one of the first actions of the Rudd government was to remove gagging clauses from funding agreements across every portfolio and encourage robust and informed public debate.. Social Justice is contested across political parties – hard nosed political decisions are made for those reasons – - ultimately its about the politics of re-election.

So, be focused, choose the issues carefully on which you want to engage. Advocate respectfully and expect to be treated respectfully in return. My mother used to remind me often that it's not what you say to people that they remember, its how you make them feel that endures.

Finally - Be aware that in an election campaign bulk emails are not very effective- think about what happens on the receiving end. On the parliamentary network we have a very ruthless spam filter – anything that is not personally addressed to me goes to a quarantine folder – and every morning we come in to about 500 messages in our quarantine folder.

Bear in mind the reality that the choices that political parties make are influenced by how much we can, or will, spend on them – and that figure depends on what we consider the benefits to be gained.

Be realistic about the current economic environment – especially in the wake of the global financial crisis.

In conclusion:

Jesus taught us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, to honour the old , to protect the young, to care for the imprisoned and the sick ... to love our neighbour as ourself.

Politics is one way of loving our neighbour. The verse that often comes to mind for me is from Micah:

"Hear then what Yahweh asks of you – to live justly, to love tenderly, and to go humbly with your God.'

I know that many of you keep the Parliamentarians in your prayers – thank you, please keep it up- we need them more than you might ever know!