

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

Senator Barnaby Joyce

National Party Leader in the Senate

Address to the St Thomas More Forum Canberra

12 May 2010

Well, you will be happy to know that this will probably be one of the briefest speeches in the history of the St Thomas More Forum.

Thank you very much for being here and also Ursula, its great being at the podium with you. Ursula is an example of how faith and religion can have an influence on politics and I would have to say that Ursula is an absolute premier example of that. The effort she puts in around the parliament in making sure that just views and good views permeate through the building without it being offensive or over the top or intrusive into others belief structures is exceptional and Ursula is a brilliant example of that and held in immensely high respect, not only for what she does, but the way she does it.

So it is interesting to be here. I have just been to Shadow Cabinet where we're trying to work out how to put Ursula's team out of government, so after we put aside all the niceties of "you're a wonderful person", comes the reality, this is politics.

As I walk through the door, I thought this is St Thomas More Forum. What came to my head was "who will rid me of this troublesome priest?", which is often what is said about me and I know what happened about poor old Tom and I have always been rather dubious about where it might lead me.

I don't think Jesus was a great politician. He was certainly the son of God, but as far as politics goes, there are certainly a lot of lessons he could leave behind in how he acted. The reason his views permeated was because there was a belief structure that was indelibly true and an indelible truth will always win over the long term.

Politics however works in the short term and sometimes the very short term and so you have to recognise the tactics you have to use. The first thing I have to say and this sounds very peculiar. I would suggest that you have to be a member of a political party and I don't care which one it is. Doing a similar function to this at Kenmore with another good Labor Senator- Senator John Hogg, he said "you can have all the beautiful arguments in the world, but give me the numbers any day. Give me the numbers any day, because that's what wins". So you must be engaged, it is democracy – it works on the numbers of the people and if you are not in the room having the discussion and you are relying wholly and solely on the power of prayer, well even the good Lord tells you it is not just by faith alone but by acts that you are going to have to change things.

So the first thing I say is, get yourself engaged. Get really engaged. As my chief of staff says, whatever blows you hair back, that's the party you should be involved in, but get involved. If you don't want to take the step of actually being involved in a political party as an example of your faith, an extremely powerful thing is a third party political action group or committee and I can see the Christian Lobby group here tonight – ACL, being a great forum within the parliament itself.

You are going to have to learn who you are going to match up against. There is no font of wisdom or knowledge that rises up through the floorboards of Parliament House. It really is a reflection of pressure groups and people and issues that are driving all the time their agendas inside that building. Whether that is major retailers trying to drive their agenda, miners driving their agenda, other groups driving their agendas, it is just a reflection at times, at it's worst, of who has got the greatest mechanism of organisation and resources to drive the agenda and unfortunately that's what gets heard. You have to be part of that process and if you're not driving an agenda, because that's what all politics is about, then your agenda will be left out.

And never think that having the alternate agenda is enough. Atheism is an agenda. It is driven. It's absolutely driven. It's driven with fervour. It's driven with an intense fervour like a religion. That's their right, it is democracy; they are able to do that. It's your decision if you want to drive the alternate agenda. Now being here tonight means you are actually doing that in some way, shape or form and for that you are to be commended. The actions have to come next and that capacity of you wanting to be part of those actions.

For instance, Ursula's not only doing the work here, she's doing the work at Spirit Care Australia. That's a way of honest delivery of an ethos back to the people via your parliament.

Public witness to your faith is always extremely important. If you have a faith and you are in a public position, you must give some reflection of that faith in the way you conduct yourself and its when that little voice in your head says, if I say this it is really going to hurt, that's exactly the time you should say it.

Why? Because it is an acknowledgement to a wider community that you are still there. They thought you had gone, but you're still there, whether that is in a public meeting, without trying to be gooey, gushy or saccharin, saying God Bless or something like that, just to make people realise that there are people with a Christian belief and they still exist.

I think this is important. We don't have to mimic some sort of American over the top saccharin, because that's not the Australian way. However in our own way we must not completely deny our faith because if we deny our faith we are leaving a vacuum for alternate mechanisms to come into place. Nature abhors a vacuum and most specifically, it abhors it in that building up there.

Canberra is an interesting place. Canberra's a wonderful town but there's something going on in that building some times. It is a world unto itself.

It is very important for you to know how I see it from an outsider. If you were explaining it to someone you would say it's like this. It is very much like a boarding school only this time it's co-ed with grog thrown in. What happens within that boarding school is that there are nuances, there are conceits, there are groupings. You know how sometimes you can put people in a group and they can tell a joke and it is absolutely hilarious, then they tell someone outside the school and they just don't get it. And the reason they don't get it is because it just doesn't make sense. So there is a certain culture that works on itself. It works because people are put together in that place for long periods of time. It allows the ritual of political jousting and political attacks and all the things that diminish the person. Where people look for allies and therefore there are groupings that are formed and those groupings become impervious to inputs from the outside and that is where you have to work very hard to crack that shell.

You should demand results, not ask, demand. Demand results. Have your key performance indicators of what you want. You have got to make sure that you get what you want on to an agenda and have the diligence to follow it through to a policy document and say that is what I want and that is what it is going to be.

What Ursula said about bulk emails is so true. I woke up one day and had 8,000 personally written emails. I can assure you I didn't read them. You try; you take a sample of them. You read a few of them. If you think, well, I've sent them an email they will know what I want, it's not enough.

You have to be more diligent than that and you have to pursue it in a number of courses and ways and events. You should always be part of the public discussion; letters to the editors and you think, well, who would read them. Well the editor, that's one and so they therefore start to garner an opinion because they can see they have a big pile here that say this is so, and they will run down and say I think this is the way the story should run. So make sure you are part of that process. Be active and participatory citizens in everything you do.

I will give you an example of what works as a very powerful metaphor in my work. I always say there are two types of issues in this world. There are St George issues and there are other issues and people say what do you mean by that. I say well there are issues that are so important you need to come out to St George to talk to me about and there are other issues. So which issue is yours? So what that means is, know where your local member's house is. No, don't visit his or her house, you'll get a visit from the police; but know where his or her office is. Don't be beyond just walking in the door and saying giddyay. For some of them it's probably the first person they have met all year.

This is a classic one; I have a bet with people. They want to be engaged, they really want to be engaged. I'm not going to do it for the good people of Canberra because it's dead set easy. Let's pretend we're in NSW now. If you can give me the names of the twelve Senators from NSW, I will give you a case of beer as you walk out the door. This is engagement. These people are powerful people. They really are. If one of them changes their vote they actually have to change policy because the votes are so tight. You might get kicked out of a party or you might lose your ministry, but if you have the capacity to influence it in such a way that it changes a persons vote, then that has real effect.

Be part of a process of a change of culture in Canberra. If there is one thing I would love, it would be to do away with this self defeating process of one-in, all-in approach in politics. I can't stand it, never could. I don't like it. This idea that you all have to vote this way and if you don't then you lose your job. That's in all parties. It happens in the Labor Party, it happens in the Greens. They say they're purer than the driven snow, but find one of them who has ever crossed the floor. It's never happened while I've been there.

We should be able to change the culture of this nation that says my Senator has a head on his shoulders or her shoulders and I've given them the benefit of the doubt. I know this person and I know that if I engage them in a certain way, that if my argument is strong enough and if it makes sense, that they will do what normal rational people do and say, you are right and now I am going to vote accordingly. If we could bring that into our nation, what an incredible place it would be. What an absolutely marvellously powerful place it would be.

I don't think it would be pandemonium, I think it would work well because you would have exactly the same number of people on the other side and it would turn the Senate into an area of real debate.

I'm no saint. If you want to talk to a saint you're talking to the wrong bloke. For me, the Christ that I relate to and now we are talking about politics, this is the one I relate to. They were stoning the adulterer and the crowd was carrying on like peanuts and Christ was kneeling on the ground drawing in the dirt with his finger and he is trying to work out how to get round people's heads and how to deal with them, because this is real politics. Mass hysteria - all often in a logical vent, this is what the papers say, this is what we will do. If it was today, it would be on talk back radio and everyone would say yes we're going to kill her and everyone would be calling in to say they agree.

Jesus is here saying "Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone" and then what is very powerful is, he looks at the person and he doesn't denigrate them, he just says I don't accuse you either. He says go away and sin no more. For me that is the Christ in politics I relate to, because that is the way you have to rise above it.

The other thing I always look at is Matthew 22:21 “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s.” Even Christ acknowledged that there is a political environment and you have to render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s. He did not say, what is Caesar’s you must revolt against and tear down and destroy. There is a real process and you have to be part of it. He says you should be part of it. He is not telling you to run away from Caesar. He’s telling you, you’ve got to deal in this environment.

I leave that with you - you are here to try to be a part of that mechanism of rendering unto Caesar. When you want to render unto God you will pray, but when you want to render unto Caesar you must have fervent, considered and definitive actions.