

Soundings

A forum for analysis and debate on issues of religion, ethics and public policy in Australia and internationally

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Onward Christian voters

by Rod Benson

Australian voters go to the polls in two days to re-elect their 25th [Prime Minister](#) since Federation in 1901, [John Howard](#), or to elect number 26, [Kevin Rudd](#). Or that's the impression given by the media. In fact, voters are choosing between political parties and their policy promises. The major issues that occupy Federal Parliament, and the policy platforms of the major political parties, are of central interest to *Soundings*, concerned as it is for "analysis and debate on issues of religion, ethics and public policy." It is true that Jesus is Lord, but Caesar's name is on the ballot paper, and there is nothing quite like a federal election to focus the Christian mind (and heart) on public policy.

One of the more interesting political developments since the late 1970s has been the rise of serious Christian interest in politics and the political process. In Australia, this is evident in the emergence of self-confessed Christian parties such as Fred Nile's Christian Democratic Party; in the willingness of high-profile politicians to freely acknowledge their personal Christian commitment and its influence on public policy (from Kevin Andrews to Kevin Rudd); and the growth of well-resourced and influential faith-based lobbies such as the Festival of Light, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference and the Australian Christian Lobby.

There has also been growing interest in the intersection between politics and faith by the commentariat, not all of it unremittingly hostile to evangelical Christianity or devoted to rigid secularism. This has been accompanied, in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election, by a flurry of Christian interest in surveying party policies and the stance of selected politicians on key issues. Indeed the production and distribution of these "sin surveys" could almost be considered a growth industry. The five most prominent of these surveys are discussed below (in alphabetical order).

The **Australian Christian Lobby**, based in Canberra, offers a suite of resources including a tool to [compare](#) party policies; [customize](#) your party policy search; and how MPs and Senators voted on [conscience issues](#). The ACL put 25 questions to each of the political parties on key issues it believed were of concern to Christians, notably on "pro-life" and "pro-family" issues, refugees and asylum seekers, and climate change. The [NSW Council of Churches](#) has endorsed the ACL election website.

The Sydney-based **Centre for an Ethical Society** [conducted a survey](#) of the Liberal Party/National Party coalition, the Labor Party, the Australian Democrats and the Greens on 16 quite specific policy questions, and posted official responses [on its website](#). In addition, the CES rated the four responses on a "[Good Samaritan Index](#)," with results virtually inverse to those of the conservative surveys.

The Adelaide-based **Festival of Light** sent ten questions plus background information to over 1400 federal election candidates, covering issues such as prayers in parliament, marriage and relationships registers, benefits for homosexual couples, abortion, human cloning and religious vilification. The FOL information is voluminous and listed under [political party](#) (scroll down on homepage) and under the name of each [House of Representatives](#) and [Senate](#) candidate.

The **National Council of Churches in Australia** launched an [Election Briefing Kit](#) focusing on "international affairs" (i.e. global conflict and climate change), Work Choices (the Howard government's workplace relations legislation), Indigenous Australians, climate change, and "community harmony," and housing. For each of these subjects, the NCCA presents a Christian vision, a reflection, and a series of questions for candidates/parties.

The Melbourne-based **Salt Shakers** organisation put together a 27-point "[Australian Christian Values Checklist](#)" which has the effect of portraying the Christian Democratic Party as angelic and the Greens as the devil incarnate, with other parties sliding between the two extremes. This survey differs from all others examined for this article in that, as Salt Shakers Research Director [Jenny Stokes put it](#), "We look at [party] policies and tell you how the Parties have behaved (voted) on a range of moral issues; and look behind the headline policy to the philosophy behind their worldview."

In addition to surveys, various churches and related agencies have engaged in intensive political lobbying and advocacy, supported by published resources for parishioners/members. Earlier this year, the **Australian Catholic Bishops Conference** [released a statement](#) titled "A vote for us all," emphasising the doctrine of the common good and highlighting "life" issues, family, Indigenous Australians, access to education, health funding, ecology, immigration and refugees, and international peace.

In August, the Public Affairs Commission of the General Synod of the **Anglican Church of Australia** published an [eight-page booklet](#) seeking social cohesion and focusing on indigenous rights, war and peace, and poverty and equity.

The National Assembly of the **Uniting Church in Australia** has an [election website](#) with an impressive suite of resources, supported by a strong parish education campaign titled "Growing a Nation of Hope." The emphasis is on active political citizenship, and issues addressed include justice for Indigenous people, dignity and fairness in employment, refugees and asylum seekers, multiculturalism, peace, climate change, and aid and development.

There are also various resources from groups with a particular mission, or axe to grind. Examples include **Micah Challenge**, which has a [Report Card](#) on policies to address poverty; the **Australian Prayer Network**, which has convened a [28-day prayer campaign](#) ending on November 24; the **Murrumbeena Baptist Church** in Victoria, whose members put together an astonishingly detailed [Christian Issues Checklist](#); and the **Australian Evangelical Alliance**, which offers a [valuable selection of articles and reflections](#) on politics and faith, public theology and values as they relate to the upcoming federal election.

If variety and passion are Christian virtues, the people behind these diverse resources are definitely virtuous. Together, all these surveys and publications demonstrate the vitality (some would say virility) of Australian Christian political engagement, and demolish the spurious argument that Christianity and politics, like oil and water, don't mix. On the other hand, given the enormous effort involved, it is debatable whether these attempts to educate the electorate or sway voter opinion in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election actually work. Certainly we cannot plead lack of information or advice.

More troubling is the fundamental ideological gulf that exists between certain sections of the Christian Church. If a religious "Left" and a religious "Right" are operating in Australia, there is evidence in these surveys of its shape. But, [as I have argued elsewhere](#), I think it is a mistake to impose wholesale the party and cultural distinctives of United States politics on our domestic situation. Australian public sentiment is more nuanced, less politically partisan and less prone to being duped by vacuous marketing hype.

I expect that some of this Christian commentary and analysis will either change or reinforce voter intention. Intensive Christian interest and focus on public policy is good for the democratic process, good for the churches, and – I would hope – good for the less fortunate and marginalised among us. But if you're thinking that the Christian churches and agencies have served up too much conflicting and confusing commentary and analysis in the lead-up to the 2007 federal election, and really must do better next time, I'd be inclined to say, "Me too."

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