



Catholic Social Services  
**Australia**

**SPEECH**

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**2006 ANNUAL CONFERENCE: CHURCH AND STATE: A MEETING PLACE**

***CATHOLIC VOICES IN AUSTRALIAN POLITICS***

**Introduction**

Monsignor James Francis (Frank) McCosker, a founding father of Catholic social services in Australia, is one of those monsignors who, as path-breaking priests with some church authority and some freedom to move, have played a significant role in church-state relations in Australia.

I can think of several others, both in social services (Monsignor David Cappo, formerly of the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission) and other fields like education (Monsignor Tom Doyle, chair of the National Catholic Education Commission).

Director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau, later Centacare, in Sydney by the late 1940s, McCosker built on the foundation laid in Australia by four professionally trained Catholic lay women social workers to play a leading role in moving the church into the organized provision of social welfare.

Fr John Usher's inaugural McCosker Oration in September 2002 demonstrates how recent is much of today's institutional framework for the church's involvement in the provision of welfare services.

Fr Usher spoke then of challenges. Prime among them, in Usher's view, was the fact that "Contemporary Catholic Welfare leaders must now resolve the conflict between 'Mission' and 'Money'". That means rationalising advocacy and taking government money. Each involves having good communication skills and a strong, healthy voice.

I am both an insider and an outsider. My two years on the board of Catholic Welfare Australia (2000-2002) coincided with the amalgamation of the Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission (ACSWC) and the newly formed Centacare Australia. And I have other church experience, including membership of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, relevant to my Oration this evening.

But I am really an outsider, despite being what is called an “active Catholic”. Often a life-time of church attendance doesn’t teach a Catholic much at all about the range of the work of the church. I hold no formal position. I am a political scientist, an observer of the church and an observer of Australian politics, who teaches in a secular university about the intersection between religion and politics.

## **Two Social Revolutions**

In the terms used first by the prominent public intellectual Professor Robert Manne, in the introduction to his book “The Howard Years”, there have been two social revolutions since the 1960s and 1970s that provide the long-term context for this oration. They are crucial to understanding the underlying dynamics of Australian politics. The first is a fairly well-known economic revolution in ideas and practices. As Manne describes it:

*It involved not only the overturning of many aspects of economic management Australia shared with all other Western societies during the era the historian Eric Hobsbawm has called the Keynesian ‘Golden Age’, but also the destruction of many of the older arrangements labeled by the political journalist Paul Kelly the ‘Australian Settlement’. Both the Keynesian and the Deakinite dimensions of the Australian political economy were challenged by the unleashing of the neo-liberal principle of the free market. Australians quickly christened the ideology underpinning this revolution ‘economic rationalism’. Under its influence, in the Hawke and Keating years, the dollar was floated; the financial system was deregulated; state owned businesses were progressively privatized; a national competition policy was introduced; the centralized arbitration system was weakened; and, most fundamentally of all, border protection for manufacturing industry and for agriculture was progressively abandoned, taking Australia from one of the most to one of the least protected economies of the Western world.*

Note that all this happened under Labor governments. The Howard government has since taken over this project enthusiastically. As we meet the privatization of Telstra is moving towards completion, the privatization of Medibank has been promised for 2007, and the new privatized framework for industrial relations, now introduced, promises to be the main domestic issue at the next federal election. The economic revolution has been largely successful, despite invariably being

unpopular when public opinion is measured (and, I should say, despite church opposition).

My second revolution is not the other one identified by Manne, (the dismantling of the White Australia policy and changing attitudes towards race and ethnicity), but another of my own choice. It is the revolution brought about by the changing place of Catholics in Australian politics.

Beginning with the Labor Party split in the mid-1950s the place of Australian Catholics in party politics has been transformed over just one or two generations. The change has been remarkable. Once, Catholics were identified largely with the Labor Party, for a combination of Irish-Australian ethnic, working class status and sectarian religious reasons.

Labor was the Catholic party, especially from 1917 to 1955, the years of the two big labor splits. Cardinal Pell told the story at this year's National Catholic Education Commission conference of the Catholic who always genuflected at Labor Party branch meetings because the faces were all the same as those at his parish church.

The Catholic community had no place in non-Labor politics then. The gulf was enormous. From federation until 1980 Professor Joan Rydon has calculated "the almost negligible Catholic component of the non-Labor parties". There was antipathy towards those Catholics who did make it in the Liberal Party as Sir John Cramer, a Catholic federal Liberal MP in the 1950s, has testified in his memoirs. For most the Liberal Party was not even an option as an astute Catholic commentator and Labor critic like B.A. Santamaria could confirm.

The bond between Catholics and Labor has now been broken. Catholics overall are just as likely to vote for the Coalition parties (in some recent federal elections, including 1996, a majority of Catholics have done so).

A clear majority of regular "practising" Catholics actually do support the coalition. Furthermore, there are now a great many Catholics in senior positions in federal and state non-Labor politics. They have undertaken a revolutionary long march through the Liberal and National parties. However, it is not often remarked that the Howard government is the first federal Coalition government in which Catholics have played a major role.

Their emergence has been overshadowed by discussion of the rise of evangelical Christianity and the so-called Religious Right in both Australia and the United States of America. Hillsong church and the Family First Party have grabbed more attention.

But it is a social revolution equal in many ways to the growing impact of women in politics over the past thirty or forty years. The impact of the denominational revolution is still to be fully understood, though the social commentator David Marr has alleged that “Conservative Catholics have joined the Liberals and made the Coalition side of politics more conservative as a result”.

That would be a common perception, based on the popular identification of Catholics as being, above all else, identified with social conservatism and right-wing politics. Crude as it may seem the anti-Catholic slogan “Get your rosaries off my ovaries” resonates with many in the community as being the way Catholics do their politics.

### **The Church as an Opposition Voice**

One distinguishing feature of the voice of the church over the past two decades, despite the presence of many Catholics in the federal government, has been that it has been a voice crying in the semi-wilderness. During what social commentator George Megalogenis describes as “the longest decade” (the fifteen years of Keating and Howard) it has been opposed this first economic revolution.

From the time of the major statement by the Catholic Bishops on wealth distribution “Commonwealth for the Common Good” in 1992, Keating’s first year in office, the church has been firmly opposed to market-dominated economic rationalism as an approach to policy-making. It has opposed particular policies, such as taxation reform, on the grounds that they fail to protect the most vulnerable in society.

While generally unsuccessful and often unacknowledged, the church has been one of the last traditional institutions to resist the allure of the economic nostrums of the New Right (others have included that odd couple, the National Party and the Labor Left). The Catholic Lobby broadly defined (bishops, agencies and prominent individual priests and lay people) has loudly criticized many social, economic and foreign policies to which the Government and the (to a large extent) Opposition have been committed.

During federal election campaigns the church has often been active, from the time that it was critical of John Hewson’s Fightback! policies in 1992. The ACSWC successfully led the campaign against the plan to introduce a GST on food and essential services and Fightback! was altered as a consequence. The current example is church opposition to the government’s proposed industrial relations reforms in 2006. There have been plenty of other examples in the years in between.

The position adopted by the churches, including the Catholic Church, has greatly annoyed the Howard government. The relationship between the Howard

government and most major Christian leaders has been strained almost to breaking point. The government has argued that church leaders should stick to their spiritual roles, stressing also the internal opposition within the churches to what their leaders have to say about public affairs.

The most extensive elaboration of the Coalition government's position has come from Alexander Downer. His Sir Thomas Playford Memorial Lecture (2003) is damning, disdainful and very personal in its critique of church leaders. Downer accused church leaders of many things, including grand-standing and of lacking sufficient expertise to intervene in public policy debates. He also condemned the priorities of church leaders: "Those clergy who have lost sight of the fundamentals have filled the vacuum with all manner of diversions. For some, social work has become the be-all and the end-all (emphasis added). Environmental issues, feminist and gay agendas and Indigenous rights provide constant grandstanding opportunities".

Downer's statement remains representative. There has been no defence of church leaders from within the government, despite the numbers of Christians and Catholics in its ranks. Rather, government ministers and backbenchers have attempted to bypass church leaders in favour of direct communications with church members on issues like Native Title for instance, a style which echoes the prime minister's own preference for talk-back media and the tabloid press.

Has any of the church's opposition actually been partisan, that is, driven by party political preferences rather than Catholic social principles? This is an important question. Certainly some Catholic politicians have thought so and said so loudly. Fred Chaney, once Liberal Senate leader felt betrayed in 1993 by church criticism during the campaign of government policies. Tim Fischer, National Party leader and Deputy Prime Minister, later spoke out publicly with other Catholic Coalition MPs against the Pope's words being introduced into domestic politics.

The media can report politics in a partisan fashion whatever the nuances of a church statement, especially in the climate of an election campaign. Some Catholic lobbyists have become persona non grata with the Coalition because they have been perceived as unduly critical. I think there is a residual Catholic-Labor link in some church circles based on traditional loyalties but I don't see it as the major driver of church criticism of the federal government. Catholic principles are more important. The real test of bipartisanship may come the next time there is a federal Labor government holding the levers of power.

## **Partnership with Government**

At the same time the Church has played its historic role as a partner of government. Not only has it continued its partnership in traditional fields such as education and health where it is such a large provider, even if at times under

duress to accommodate new government frameworks and methodologies, but it has taken on new partnerships in social services. Government always desires such church participation but increasingly drives a hard bargain for such participation.

These new church-state partnerships have been entered into only after considerable soul-searching. But they have been entered into all the same, even if the soul-searching has meant some relationship breakdown. In Fr John Usher's terms the choices have been made between mission and money. The tensions have been reconciled in the hope of doing both, because the dichotomy is a false one: missions need money to achieve their goals. The church has had to balance the roles of advocate of social justice and deliverer of government services.

The privatization of the Commonwealth Employment Service and its eventual replacement by the Job Network Program led to the so-called faith-based delivery of formerly government services.

Controversy reached a peak in December 1999-January 2000 with allegations that both the staff employment practices and the client practices of Christian agencies, including Centacare, might breach the separation of church and state and infringe the non-discriminatory spirit of the delivery of secular government services. Tony Abbott, then Minister for Employment Services (and in the eyes of the media and the public at large the quintessential Catholic politician), jumped to the defence of the agencies and charged critics with religious intolerance.

The most recent evidence of such breakdown has been the decision by Catholic Social Services Australia not to participate in the Financial Case Management measures under the new Welfare to Work legislation on the grounds that these measures "are unduly harsh measures and we don't want to be confused as administrators and policemen of poor government policy". Concerns of this type have been the subject of internal discussion in one form or another since the church agencies first began to participate in Job Network.

Remarkably, one consequence of the revolution in Catholic participation in party politics has been that the church and its agencies have more often than not been dealing with ministers who are Catholics in good standing.

Recently it has been Joe Hockey and Kevin Andrews. Previously it has been Tony Abbott. Earlier still it was Dr John Herron in Aboriginal Affairs. So, one part of the Catholic community has been dealing with another. The two revolutions, economic and religious, have merged. This is just one example of the church speaking with more than one voice.

## **To Speak with One Voice**

Every social movement and interest group worth its salt, whether it is wheat farmers, trade unionists or the environmental movement, tries to speak with one voice. It is a sine qua non of political lobbying. Government takes most heed of those who can claim to represent all the interests in their own sector. Furthermore, the voice of the sector is purest, loudest and most persuasive when it is unified. Public relations spin just won't do. The sector really has to be unified to get away with it.

Speaking with one voice is difficult for the Catholic Church for several reasons. It has not managed to do so in contemporary Australian politics. And such division is not new; the church was even more divided in the 1950s.

Some of the reasons for this have already been canvassed: Catholics are now politically divided between supporters of the two major political parties, Labor and Coalition.

Catholics are also organizationally divided. The organization of the church is not made for unity. It is an unwieldy beast. This is ironic given the reputation of the church in the world at large for conformity and hierarchy and military discipline. Many Australians still think there is a "Catholic vote" as if Catholics just have to be instructed by their bishops how to vote. Of course, the history of the split among the bishops in the 1950s should have shown this was not the case. We Catholics don't all march in step by any means.

The diocesan organization of the church creates many official Catholic voices: starting with each of the archbishops and bishops. Each bishop is the Catholic voice in his own diocese. Multiple Catholic agencies at the state level complicate the picture. The unified voice of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) sometimes only papers over these natural diocesan divisions.

The coordination efforts of the central church bureaucracies have only limited impact. The chairman of the ACBC is not necessarily recognized by the Australian community (and perhaps not by the Vatican either) as the preeminent Catholic voice. In any Australia-wide poll the Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney would emerge as the voice of Australian Catholicism with daylight second. The media can be totally confused about the origin and status of any Catholic voice. To them it is all just "the Catholic Church says".

I know that CSSA grapples with this issue of who speaks for the church in social services. The federal government, too, wants the church to speak with one voice in operational matters just as it imposes the same demand on other sectors. The trend for all interest groups in Australia is towards centralization under government insistence, even when it is contrary to the culture of the organisation.

The church divisions were obvious to all when on two quite recent occasions Catholics were divided on the issues of the day: taxation reform and education policy. At the time of the 1998 federal election the Central Commission of ACBC tried to centrally coordinate the Catholic interventions in the policy process by forging and agreed statement of principles.

It failed in practice despite success in theory. During the election campaign the then Archbishop of Melbourne said that, despite the Central Commission's earlier statement, "there is no one Catholic position on an issue as complex as taxation". At the time of the 2004 federal election, six years later, the Catholic Archbishops of Sydney and Melbourne repudiated the earlier judgment of the National Catholic Education Commission that the church could deal with both sides of politics by criticizing the education policies of Mark Latham's Labor Party. So the best known voice was an outlier from the consensus view.

Currently, the strength and unity of the Catholic voice is being tested on the issue of industrial relations reform. The public voice of the church has been relatively unified in opposition to these reforms and several agencies and bishops have been vocal. The bishop most ardent in his criticisms has been Bishop Kevin Manning of Parramatta. The Prime Minister told Parliament:

*I respect his right to do that, but I would point out that even a Catholic bishop does not speak for all Catholics in this country. I know many devout Mass-going Catholics who are very strong supporters of this legislation.*

*I think it is very important to make the obvious statement that there is no such thing as a Catholic position on industrial relations.*

Of course, the Prime Minister knows "many devout Mass-going Catholics who are very strong supporters of this [WorkChoices] legislation". He only has to look around the Cabinet table, not just at Kevin Andrews, Joe Hockey and Tony Abbott, but also presumably at Mark Vaile, Helen Coonan, Brendan Nelson, Peter McGauran and several others.

Never has the Catholic contingent been so strong, certainly not in a Coalition Cabinet. The Catholic bishops and the Catholic agencies have not carried the Catholic Coalition politicians that count with them on industrial relations despite their united efforts.

There has been hardly any sign of a Catholic split on social and economic policy (only Senator Barnaby Joyce of the Queensland Nationals has stood out among Catholic Coalition MPs; though Independent Senator Harradine did refuse to sign off on the GST because of his Catholic social principles). With a few exceptions,

such as Adelaide's Trish Worth who spoke out against Pauline Hanson, and apart from an issue like the republic where many Catholic republicans have been prominent, there seem to be more Catholics on the Liberal Party Right than the Liberal Party Left.

The dissident small Liberal "faction" this year has included very few Catholics on issues dear to the heart of the church, like support for asylum seekers and refugees, either. Rather, other Liberals like Petro Georgiou, Bruce Baird, Senator Marise Payne, Senator Judith Troeth, and Russell Broadbent have led the way by crossing the floor or abstaining. Of these some, like Baird, have expressed a Christian position publicly but none to my knowledge have been Catholics.

So in one sense, an empirical sense, the Prime Minister is right. There is no one Catholic position on industrial relations or any thing else. Just as there is no one Liberal position on refugees, asylum seekers and detention policies. But in another, more important, sense the Prime Minister is wrong. He must not be allowed to trivialize this question of Catholic unity. There is a Catholic position on industrial relations articulated by official church spokespersons; it is just that many significant Catholics in politics on the non-Labor side do not accept it. Almost certainly many Catholic voters don't either. That is a problem for the church and an opportunity for the Prime Minister. He has not been slow to exploit it.

By the way this is not meant primarily to be a party political point. Labor shares much of the commitment of the political class to economic rationalism. Nevertheless, Labor's remaining, though diminished, commitment to collectivist ideals and public sector ownership does sit more comfortably with the Australian church (however one might interpret the papal encyclicals of John Paul II on economic matters).

## **Conclusion**

There are many Catholic voices in Australian politics, but there is also one Catholic voice. To speak with one voice, and to be seen to be speaking with one voice, remains a desirable goal for the church in politics, though difficult to achieve. Diversity can be healthy but it can also limit the effectiveness of what Catholics want to say in the public sphere.

The tension between the two is one consequence of the loose organization of the Catholic community. This loose organization is at odds with the popular view of the church. But the loose organization won't change so we had better get used to it.

It is also a consequence of two social big revolutions. The way they have evolved has left an un-repaired gulf between the Catholic tradition of collective social justice and the Catholic participation in Australian party politics. Within

governments economic rationalist approaches to policy reigns supreme and the church must deal with that.

The Catholic collectivist tradition is still evident within the Labor Party but much diminished numerically. Those remaining Catholics are more and more isolated in their own party given Labor's general view on conscience issues such as embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia and abortion. Nor do the Democrats and the Greens offer much comfort to traditional Catholics. Within the Liberal Party the Catholic voice is increasingly loud. It plays a leading role in that party's social conservatism, but Liberal Catholics seem to have not brought with them any enthusiasm for collectivist social justice.

Catholic voices face a new environment. Catholic philosophy doesn't easily fit any of the political parties at the moment. There is a lot of truth in the judgement of American writer Jim Wallis that God has been "Co-opted by the Right, Dismissed by the Left". As he says:

*The religious and political Right gets public meaning of religion mostly wrong-preferring to focus only on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier matters of justice. And the secular Left doesn't seem to get the meaning and promise of faith for politics at all-mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change.*

Catholics, therefore face many challenges to make their views fully heard in public affairs today. Monsignor McCosker, from what I know of his life and works, would be among the first to face up to these new challenges if he was still with us.

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