

**CHRISTIANS IN POLITICS:  
AN UNKNOWN, MISUNDERSTOOD PAST  
AND A BRIGHT FUTURE**

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I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
Not a bit like daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Politicians, if you please!  
Not any likeness, could I say,  
They bore to flowers, that welcome spring  
Their clothes were blue and charcoal grey;  
It was a most depressing thing:  
So off I wandered through the hills  
In search of golden daffodils.<sup>1</sup>

Leunig's adaptation of Wordsworth reinforces the stereotype about politicians, that they muck up every beautiful day, and return every springtime moment to winter bleakness. There are lots of stereotypes about politicians. And about Christian politicians there are a whole lot more. If all politicians spoil our days, moralising Christian politicians won't even let us find solace in birds, booze or boogie.

It's a fairly ungrateful view, when you consider that Australia is one of the most successful, stable and prosperous democracies that the world has known. Christian politicians have had something to do with that. So let's review a little of the largely unknown contribution of Christian politicians to nation-building in Australia. We'll be looking mainly at Protestant Christians. It is the Protestants who have been most wary of political involvement and most likely to denigrate it as sub-Christian. The Catholics have always been involved, and they have usually done it well. Protestants need to learn that some of their own saints have been very effective in political life, and that the pure gospel fosters rather than discourages such involvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Leunig

## **1. John Newton and William Wilberforce**

It was in the winter months of 1785, under cover of darkness, that a 26-year old Nicodemus called on 'old [John] Newton', the evangelical patriarch, to learn about Jesus. When he had come to faith, William Wilberforce thought that he should forsake fashionable society, abandon politics, and enter holy orders. Newton, minister of a church in the commercial heart of the City of London, surprised the young convert, by advising him to stay put. He should bring his influence to bear in the circles of power which he already occupied.

So Wilberforce continued to have breakfast with his closest friend, William Pitt the Younger, Prime Minister of Britain. Perhaps this was the beginning of the working breakfast, for it was at one of those that the decision was made to send a chaplain, Richard Johnson, to Botany Bay with the first fleet. Wilberforce was also instrumental in sending Samuel Marsden to Australia. But his influence on Australia went way beyond that which could be exercised by clergymen.

Wilberforce was the leading light in a group of well-connected Christian politicians, governors, clergy and business men called the 'Clapham Sect'. Those from the group elected to Parliament were known as the Saints. One of their number was a barrister, James Stephen. Wilberforce had rescued him from suicidal depression, and Stephen's son, also called James, became the Permanent Under-Secretary for the Colonies from 1836 to 1847. He was possibly the greatest civil servant of the nineteenth century, and it was he who drafted the legislation outlawing the slave trade. He was so influential that he was referred to as 'Mr Over-Secretary Stephen', 'King Stephen' and 'Mr Mother Country'. In the English Colonies, he decreed that the indigenous people were to be protected and the principle of racial equality maintained. He has recently become one of the heroes of the historians whom Mr Howard likes to dismiss as black armband academics. Stephen's ideas on the protection of the Maori of New Zealand were incorporated in the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the West Indies, he put brakes on the local legislature because it was self-serving, thus violating the law of God and the rights of humanity.

It was this James Stephen who was the historian of the Clapham Sect, and best embodied the genius and passion of Wilberforce in the next generation. Stephen's strong biblical values made him clear in principle and determined in will. He clearly saw that it is the most arduous, if not the first, duty of a Government to consult for the permanent interest of a society as opposed to the immediate interests of the most active and powerful of its members, and to watch over the welfare of the many rather than the present advantage of the few, and to protect those whose only property is the power of their labour against the rapacity of the rich.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Knaplund, *James Stephen and the British Colonial System 1813-1847*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1953, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in R. Lockwood, 'British Imperial Influences in the Foundation of the White Australia Policy,' *Labour History*, 7, 1964, 23-33, 27.

It was he who drafted the bill for the government of the Australian colonies. In 1847 he encouraged Earl Grey, then Secretary of State, to propose that the Australian colonies should be granted a centralised federal assembly, empowered to make inter-colonial legislation, headed by a governor-general. Stephen was 54 years ahead of his time, ensuring that Wilberforce's influence extended into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Wilberforce's influence also extended to the foundation of Victoria and to the emergence of Dame Nellie Melba. This unlikely influence was exercised through Charles Joseph La Trobe (1801-1875). In the strange providence of God, he was to become superintendent of the Colony of Victoria from 1839 and Lt Governor from 1851 to 1854. So he covered both the age of aggressive settlement and the even more tumultuous early years of the gold rushes. The go-getter settlers of Port Phillip wanted an energetic entrepreneur at the helm, or at least someone who would not interfere with their self-serving energy which was chiefly devoted to land acquisition. La Trobe was one perhaps whom the settlers needed rather than wanted. He was the son and grandson respectively of two Moravian clergymen in London who were both close personal friends of Wilberforce and John Newton. La Trobe, too, had trained for the Moravian ministry and was something of a poet, artist and musician. Unlike the people he governed in Port Phillip he was quiet and unambitious. But, like all those trained in the school of Clapham Christian politics, his clear biblical values put iron in his timid soul, and the settlers were bewildered to hear him express himself thus in his first speech in Melbourne:

It is not by individual aggrandisement, by the possession of numerous flocks or herds, or by costly acres, that the people shall secure for the country enduring prosperity and happiness, but by the acquisition of maintenance of sound religious and moral institutions without which no country can become truly great.<sup>4</sup>

This 'cultural virtuoso'<sup>5</sup> insisted on the provision of parkland in the plan of Melbourne, and gave every encouragement at considerable personal expense to the development of churches, and charitable, cultural and educational institutions. On 24 December 1853 the Philharmonic choral society gave its first performance, 'The Messiah'. Among its choir members was David Mitchell, a Richmond builder and contractor, the father of Dame Nellie Melba, who was to sing at the opening of Parliament House in Canberra in 1927. So extraordinary is the line of causation in history that we might never have heard of Dame Nellie Melba were it not for John Newton's prophetic call to Wilberforce, 140 years earlier, to stay in politics.

## **2. Thomas Chalmers and John Dunmore Lang**

While Wilberforce proved a weapon of mass construction for Australia, Scotland was at work producing one on whom the verdict is still out as to whether he was a WMC or a WMD, namely John Dunmore Lang. He was Australia's first Presbyterian minister. His mother always wanted him to be a minister. He, himself, wanted to be a politician. So

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<sup>4</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography*

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Serle, *From Deserts the Prophets Come: The Creative Spirit in Australia, 1788-1972*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1973, 2.

close to Mother's Day, it seems heretical to say it, but at least one mother got it wrong. In his political ambitions, unlike his ecclesiastical ones, Lang was stunningly successful. He stood for election seven times, and was elected seven times. The common people heard him gladly: in the country, the small-time farmers, miners and itinerant bush workers, and in the city, shopkeepers, tradesmen and unskilled workers. They returned Lang to the colonial legislature time after time, often with striking majorities. And apart from republicanism, his political agenda was largely achieved: 'the cessation of transportation, the separation from NSW of Victoria and of Queensland, the introduction of responsible and democratic government, radical land reform, National education and the abolition of state aid to religion'<sup>6</sup>.

In spite of his debated reputation, then, every Christian interested in the relationship between Christianity and politics in Australia should study Dunmore Lang. Such research, true, would reveal many things not to do – eg., do not undo with your own vituperative rhetoric what you have achieved with your energy and commitment; do not shoot your own troops, that is, do not criticise your own friends. But what even that mistake demonstrates is the absolute necessity of passion in politics. Politicians who do not believe in something are as appalling as ministers of religion who believe nothing. Among the lessons Lang teaches the budding Christian politician are:

1. Choose the minister who most shapes you vocationally very carefully. At Glasgow University, Lang sat at the feet of Thomas Chalmers, leader of the evangelical party in the Church of Scotland, imbibing not only the magnificent oratory, but also the optimism and activism, and the understanding of the relevance to the gospel of politics and economics. Indeed Chalmers lectured on political economy and moral philosophy in the Universities of St Andrews and Glasgow. He produced a generation of engaged Christians, including Lang

2. Lang also demonstrates that political success is all about maintaining the pressure. The sheer volume of his strongly-held convictions with which he deluged the colony in sermons, books (over 100 of them) and newspapers, did much to galvanise the colony along the democratic, populist lines which he championed. The Christian politician is to shape the culture as well as respond to it.

3. The Christian politician must apply biblical principles to all sections of the population, and not just peddle prejudices to powerful sections of the electorate. In his book *FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE FOR THE GOLDEN LANDS OF AUSTRALIA* (London, 1852) Lang revealed that the principle source of his political ideals was the Bible. He explained: "My views on the three fundamental principles of government--universal male suffrage, perfect political equality and popular election, so generally referred to by the political writers as 'chartism, communism and socialism'--have stemmed from that word of God which endureth forever." He even argued for his republican beliefs on the basis of the Bible. Christian Monarchists should study his arguments. It will confirm you in your support of the Monarchy!

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, *ADB*, 2, 83.

4. A Christian politician must be interested in what works, as well as in what is true. Lang wanted Australia to be built on godly foundations, so he did more than anyone to encourage skilled and godly migrants to come to the new colonies. He made the migration system work, thus procuring a population which made the economy work.

5. From the way he was treated by his enemies, we stand to learn much about what a Christian politician who is worth his salt should expect: not only lots of criticism, but a particular type of criticism: Lang was castigated as ' a humbug . . . a byword for trickery'<sup>7</sup>. He 'traded in bigotry to disguise his dishonesty'.<sup>8</sup> [He used] 'his position as a clergyman to cloak his hypocrisy'.<sup>9</sup> These are easy charges to make, but too often the way people avoid being hypocrites is by not having any standards.

Lang died 8 August 1878, and it was estimated that his funeral was easily the largest ever seen in the colony, watched by 70,000 people. His statue in Wynyard Square says nothing about his church activities, just 'Patriot and Statesman'.

### **3. John West and Thomas Holt (1811-1888)**

Arguably one of the most statesmanlike of Christians who have influenced Australian public life was John West, Congregationalist minister of Launceston, and later editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. A magnificent biography on him by Patricia Ratcliff has just been published. Politically, West was neither a conservative like James Stephen, nor a republican like Lang. He was a moderate and a liberal. He could see all sides of an argument and he believed in putting all sides on the grounds that the truth will win out without any help from biased presentations. He was also quite fearless. The combination of impartiality plus courage made him a superb newspaper editor. *The Launceston Examiner* which he founded and edited was a magnificent newspaper. West explained that it was 'not to be a religious newspaper, but what is more necessary, the paper of a religious man'.<sup>10</sup> John Fairfax did well when, against West's first inclination, he persuaded him to take over as editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1854.

Born in 1808, his father was a Methodist minister, and both his parents may have known John Wesley. He went to Van Diemen's Land in 1838 and soon found his way to that Dissenting haven of the north, Launceston. It was a critical time, when the quest for representative government became intertwined with the demand to end transportation and begin federalism. West represented the anti-transportation movement as a 'moral' cause and therefore attracted Christians to its flag like bees to a honey pot. West's Australasian League, created to end transportation, reads like an updated anti-slavery society. Its

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<sup>7</sup> Baker, *Days of Wrath*, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, *Days of Wrath*, 284.

<sup>9</sup> Baker, *Days of Wrath*, 305.

<sup>10</sup> John West to F. Haller, 10 March 1842, quoted in Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff, *The Usefulness of John West: Dissent and Difference in the Australian Colonies* (Launceston: The Albarnian Press, 2003), 150; see also Patricia Fitzgerald Ratcliff (ed), *John West's Union of the Colonies: Essays on Federation*, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston, 2000, 102.

members sought the blessing of God on its 'high and holy mission'<sup>11</sup> and prayed that 'He permit us to add another of those bloodless victories which teach the oppressed to confide in the armour of truth while they warn all men that against weapons of such heavenly temper the shields of the mighty are lifted in vain.'<sup>12</sup> The flag they adopted was very similar to our Australian flag today. West sought to win over those who thought their interests were better served by the retention of transportation because it gave them cheap labour. He argued his case on the grounds of principle and practice. If something is right it is not only true, but it also works. The principle? governments are to 'guard – not the rights or prejudices of a caste – but the order and morality of society'. The practice? Everybody is better off, including the landowner, when labour is remunerated well. It is private enterprise with morality and representative government which is the route to prosperity. Transportation ended to Van Diemen's Land on the colony's jubilee, 10 August 1853 and, eager to be rid itself of the convict stain, renamed itself Tasmania. Appropriately, the end of transportation was rung in by church bells, not the roar of cannon, for it was a moral victory.

Dunmore Lang was one who castigated West for neglecting the eternal welfare of his congregation in Launceston, while he attended to the temporal affairs of the nation. But West would have none of it, arguing that the campaign to bring Australia to nationhood was a moral crusade. It is interesting to reflect on the power of moral arguments. Research needs to be done on precisely why moral arguments were so effective politically then and what has to happen to make them potent now.

When West became editor of the SMH in 1854 he joined a coterie of well-connected business men and politicians, most of whom were Congregationalists. David Jones and John Fairfax were among them. Another of them was Thomas Holt (1811-1888) A wool merchant, he arrived in NSW in 1842. Here he prospered, proving that godliness is the key to making the best<sup>13</sup> of both worlds: 1 Timothy 4.8 ' . . . godliness is unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.'

Holt co-founded the Australian Mutual Providence Society, a life assurance company. The AMP was a new form of self-help, and it is not surprising that its founders and early directors were commonly evangelical Christians. Its historian, Geoffrey Blainey, has said that its Australia-wide impact has been 'matched only by the major religious denominations'<sup>14</sup>, one of those throw away lines which recognises what has not been chronicled elsewhere, the strength of religious influence on Australian social history. The AMP was a very evangelical Australian organisation. It sold life 'assurance', a popular word in evangelical circles, where the craving for it in the spiritual realm reinforced a due regard for it in this world. Holt gave the Society its early direction, serving as a director for 13 years and chairman for five, and it was he who drew up the first mortality tables on which insurance rates were calculated.

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<sup>11</sup> John West, *History of Tasmania*, 1852, I, 304.

<sup>12</sup> John West, *History of Tasmania*, 1852, I, 309.

<sup>13</sup> Henry E Holt, *An Energetic Colonist: A Biographical Account of the Activities of the late Hon. Thomas Holt, MLC*, The Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1972, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *A History of the AMP, 1848-1998*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1999, p.vii.

He was elected to the Legislative Council and served as colonial treasurer, consistently moving to have sessions commence with prayer.<sup>15</sup> He was not a particularly successful parliamentary performer, but he was stubborn and persevering. He had a reputation for long and boring speeches, accentuated by a speech impediment, all of which made him the stenographer's nightmare.<sup>16</sup> But an insight into the practical implications of his Christianity for his public career is illustrated by his relationship with Sir Henry Parkes, the most prominent of NSW's nineteenth-century statesman. Parkes asked his advice about an electoral rebuff he suffered, observing disingenuously that he was really indifferent to office. Holt pounced:

You say you are 'in reality indifferent to office'. My opinion is that you should make up your mind to one of two things – either to be in office, or striving to be in office, or give up politics entirely. I believe that God has gifted you with talents that better fit you for office than any other man in the colony, and that you will have to answer for it, if you bury them in a napkin.

But, if you are indifferent, you can never hope long to succeed. Do not halt between two opinions. If you are determined to be a statesman you may be one and you ought to be one.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Francis Bertie Boyce (1844-1931) and Jim McGowen (1855-1922)**

Let's move to the other side of politics. J.S.T. McGowen, the first Labour Party Premier of New South Wales, was born in 1855. He was apprenticed in 1870 as a boilermaker in Sydney and he joined the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron Shipbuilders of New South Wales on its formation in 1873, and was its secretary intermittently from 1874 to 1890. He won a Redfern seat in the 1891 election and held it until 1917--thanks, in part to the help of his minister, Francis Bertie Boyce, rector of Redfern for 46 years. Apparently, in what passed in those days for the pre-selection process, McGowen had been snubbed by those involved in the process. Therefore, Boyce went on one of his famous letter writing campaigns - both personal and to the newspapers - and convinced key Labor leaders to reconsider McGowen's candidacy. They did, and eventually nominated him for the Redfern seat, which he held for the next 26 years.

McGowen became Labor Party leader in 1894. During the next twenty years, he led a novel and complex party with a detailed program for radical social and political reform, and full of ambitious and restless young political cannibals. He strained to convince his often restive colleagues that they were on public probation, and that they must come to terms with a cautious electorate. It was under his steady hand, in the early twentieth century that Labor gradually became the official Opposition in the New South Wales Parliament.

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<sup>15</sup> Henry E Holt, *An Energetic Colonist: A Biographical Account of the Activities of the late Hon. Thomas Holt, MLC*, The Hawthorn Press, Melbourne, 1972, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Holt, *An Energetic Colonist*, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Holt, *An Energetic Colonist*, 178.

For 32 years, before and during his long political career, he remained superintendent of the Sunday School at St Paul's Redfern. According to Boyce, his rector, "Jim McGowen was a man who loved Jesus Christ . . . It is a tribute to the strictness of his principles and to his loyalty to his Church to be able to state that, throughout the long years, he never allowed his public duties to interfere with his Church attendance or his work in the Sunday-school.' Boyce, himself a committed social activist and reformer, had occasion to work with McGowen on legislation of common concern to the church and the state: Sunday Closing, six o'clock closing (McGowen was a teetotaler), slum clearance, the old age pension, female suffrage.

They called him "Honest Jim". H.V. Evatt said that McGowen's only known vice was Saturday afternoon bowls. In other words it was not McGowen who was the sinner whose vices were sufficient to necessitate the formation of the Festival of Light. Which brings us to Alan Walker and Fred Nile.

### **5. Alan Walker and Fred Nile**

In this brief overview of some Christians who have made a significant contribution to Australian public life, you will notice that I am suggesting that a creative synergy always exists between such a figure and his minister: Newton and Wilberforce; Chalmers and Lang; West and Holt; Boyce and McGowen. The nature of this synergy varies from case to case, but is always positive. Fred Nile was already formed in his faith and in his sense of calling to the ministry before Alan Walker became significant in his life. Indeed, Fred had already notched up some major achievements. He had been appointed national director of Christian Endeavour and organising director for the 1968 Billy Graham Crusade. No doubt his success in those positions is why Alan Walker approached him in the first place to be the campaign director for his evangelistic mission 'Newness NSW' in 1970 and 1971.

Alan Walker was probably Australia's best-known Christian in the second half of the twentieth century, and it is interesting to speculate on what the synergy between him and Fred Nile produced in practice. They were not natural comrades in arms. Fred suspected that Alan was a bit too wobbly theologically for him, and Alan was the nation's best-known pacifist, whereas Fred was a company commander in the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal NSW Regiment. But Fred and Elaine, after prayer, concluded that God thought otherwise, and, as Fred explains in his autobiography, 'I shared my evangelical convictions with him and he shared his invaluable wisdom and experience with me'.<sup>18</sup> And Fred witnessed Alan Walker's dynamism as in a year of meetings, he addressed almost a quarter of a million people. When it was over, Walker invited Fred to be his Director of Evangelism and Outreach at the Wesley Central Mission. That ministry had been characterised already by much innovation, but Walker encouraged Fred to be more innovative still.

Chronologically, this was the immediate precursor to Fred's involvement with the Festival of Light, the tour of Mary Whitehouse in 1973 which put FOL on the map, and

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<sup>18</sup> *Fred Nile: An Autobiography*, Strand Publishing, Sydney, 2001, p.79.

the invitation to Fred to become its State Director. Alan was not happy about losing his man, and twice refused to grant Fred leave to organise the FOL. So Fred had to resign, thus making Alan unhappier still. Both were strong-willed, clear-thinking strategists and indefatigable activists. Fred did not learn those things from Alan – Fred already had them – but God allowed them to work together for a season and a reason: it is hard to conceive of a more practical apprenticeship for a life so committed to unpopular causes and exposed to media hostility, a life in which Fred has not only survived but thrived. Wilberforce would have been proud of him. Alan Walker certainly was.

## **Conclusion**

What are the morals of this brief overview?

Behind every great Christian politician, has been a great Christian minister. Not any old minister, but a politically aware, socially compassionate, and spiritually passionate minister. There will and should always be a nexus between the church and the party. The party cannot rise higher than the church. Australia's problem has been that in the Protestant churches there have been too few politically aware, socially active ministers, particularly in the last two generations. This is partly because of the sacred/secular divide, the view that religion and society live in two watertight, self-contained areas, and that the one must not speak to the other, and the view that the gospel is concerned exclusively with the religious, spiritual sphere. Perhaps one of the most useful things that the Christian Democrats might do is to educate Christians in the electorate to realise that Christians have been major contributors through the political process in the past, and that any disparagement of political involvement in the name of the gospel is a recent aberration which earlier generations of evangelical Christians did not countenance.

Christian politicians have been on the right and on the left, pro-monarchy and pro-Republican. They have always had a capacity to redraw the lines of political engagement. This is because they all stand for another way of doing things, a way which Tony Blair and his Australian Anglican minister mentor, Peter Thompson, called the Third Way. By the Third Way, Thompson and Blair meant a values-driven ethical communitarianism, aimed at modernisation without dehumanisation and alienation, where a truly participatory democracy would make political decisions according to their capacity to promote quality of life and well-being. The third way is concerned with bridging opposing forces, and discerning constructive outcomes. Phil Lamb's ambition is that the Christian Democrats become the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest party in the NSW Parliament behind Labor and Liberal. The Third Party of the Third Way may be the way for the Christian Democrats to go. What that Third Way might be in practice in any social context will have to be determined by the sort of wide-ranging professional research which Phillip Lamb believes the party now needs to conduct. But it will always be a distinctive, different way because it represents not the personal interests of those engaged in the power struggles in our society, but the values of the Bible which are always in the best interests of everybody, the biblical values of order, justice and freedom.

Towards the end of last year, in Bourke, Western NSW, Yarmin who comes from Western Papua, wrote his final church history essay for Cornerstone, the Christian

community that works among young people in rural NSW, training them for service and ministry. Yarmin's grandparents were raised in a Stone Age culture. His grandmother has most of her fingers missing for she followed the age-old custom of removing a joint in a finger whenever a relative died. They were among the Dani people of West Papua who were converted en masse to Christianity in the 1950s and 1960s.

Cornerstone requires that its students not only write academic essays, but that they have them marked by another member of the wider local community so that they get training in the art of communication. Yarmin decided that he would read his essay to the Back Lane Boys, the aboriginal car-burning, shop-looting gang from Bourke. For an hour they sat there spell-bound, listening to Yarmin's presentation of the life and achievements of William Wilberforce. It took just this one hour for Wilberforce to become the hero of the aboriginal people of Bourke. When Yarmin had finished reading his essay, one of his aboriginal hearers said, 'I never heard of any white Christian who has done anything like that for other people before'.

Let's help Fred and Gordon<sup>19</sup> and the other Christian politicians continue do things like that for other people. Then the achievements of Christian politicians will shine as brightly in the future as they have been largely unknown in the past.

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<sup>19</sup> This paper was given as a lecture to the Christian Democratic Party Annual Dinner, 10 May 2004. The reference here is to CDP candidates Fred Nile and Gordon Moyes.