

Politics for (saved) sinners 101

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I think it is very hard for Christians to maintain a position that we should remain aloof from politics. If Jesus is the Lord of all of areas of our lives, this must include bringing to Him the particular web of power relationships – the political dimension - within which we each find ourselves. Sometimes we wield power within our individual relationships or within broader communities. Inevitably we are also subject to power. As saved sinners in a fallen world, why do we shy away from the fact that each of us has some small measure of power - for good or otherwise - within not only our personal relationships, but within the broader communities where we are placed?

The Biblical position to me is quite clear. God calls us to a personal relationship with Him. Every Christian's first responsibilities are the pursuit of this relationship, and the spread of the Good News. This relationship should have definite consequences for our personal relationships. Just as clearly however, we live in broader communities, and are intended to be 'salt and light' within them, seeking Kingdom values such as justice and compassion for all, especially today's lepers and outcasts. This surely does not mean just within our immediate personal relationships, but with our neighbours across town or around the globe?

Yes, it is a problem that from our various vantage points along our particular faith and life journeys, it can be difficult to pinpoint a single 'Christian' position on every issue, even starting from a solid Evangelical commitment to what the Bible says. The answer is not to abandon the debate, but to ensure that a range of Christian views are vigorously and graciously represented, even if occasionally Christians don't find really specific guidance in scripture, such that they may draw differing conclusions.

If first century Christians were to '...render to Caesar...' I think we are obliged to at least vote, and to vote thoughtfully. About 15 percent of Australians don't vote at all, or vote informally, in elections. Are you one of them? This is surely step one. It means investing a little effort into knowing what our candidates actually stand for, and understanding the basics of how the voting system works. Beyond carefully exercising our vote, however, I would argue that there are at least six different ways saved sinners can attempt to impact their broader communities for Kingdom values. What are these ways, and what are some pros and cons of each?

1. *Mainstream political party involvement* can range from party membership, branch involvement, including participation in policy formation processes at local branch or broader levels, working for the election of others or, rarely, standing for public office.

The 'pros' here are that you are involved with a stakeholder in the political process that can actually send representatives to parliament, and form government. If people of faith abandon the major parties, Christian voices are silent in the key policy forums, and indeed in parliament. I am one who argues that this has effectively happened in Australia for decades, with 'religious' concerns usually rarely mentioned except in association with bio-ethical issues such as abortion, and then, with only the most severely conservative voices within Christendom being audible. 9/11, the growth of the megachurches and related developments have brought religion

very much into the spotlight, and the right wing end of the Christian political spectrum in particular is now receiving much attention. Nevertheless, our Parliaments, especially at State levels, clearly do not reflect anything like the religious makeup of Australian society, despite belated efforts by both major parties to cosy up to active and growing Pentecostal and related constituencies.

Even handing out voting cards on election day is a contribution - if you believe your candidate represents at least in some way the views you would like to see put into the mix. This suggests one of the 'cons' of mainstream party involvement. Inevitably it involves compromise, as a party *always* represents a coalition of various interests and views. Also, as a party worker, paid or unpaid, you will spend the bulk of your time on matters *other than* policy, and even when 'on task' with policy matters, much of your time will be devoted to policy areas other than those forming part of your own 'core' of priorities for attention. As in all organisations, much of the activity is simply concerned with self maintenance. That won't worry many folk, of course.

'Christian' party involvement offers another alternative. It would be great to report as a 'pro' that this reduces the level of compromise which may be necessary with your particular 'core' beliefs/policy positions and priorities. However, most such parties seem to collect not only around the 'right' end of the political spectrum, but also around the highly conservative end of the Christian spectrum of belief. For this reason they also involve considerable compromise for 'moderate' Christians, and appear unlikely to ever gain really strong backing – even from believers - across the board. Of course all minor parties operate on a shoestring and the efforts of the hyper committed. Until someone is actually elected, there are usually no or very few electorate offices, with copy machines, postage budgets, and staff.

With all minor parties or independents, the hope is that control of a balance of power can be achieved, usually in an upper house. This has tended to involve religious minded independents such as Brian Harradine in trading off their vote on broader issues for acquiescence to very conservative social views which represent the views of only a tiny fraction of most Christians. Some see an enhanced ability to raise issues and attempt some agenda setting from the cross benches as a key plus for minor party/independent members. For example, Family First recently raised a set of issues, and proposed legislation, associated with Australia's savagely alcohol damaged culture, basically daring to go where no major party would dare. This is exciting and well overdue. Far and away the most successful minor grouping in this regard has been the Greens, whose environmental agenda has largely been taken on board now by the major parties. By and large however, it is difficult to think of many actual legislative outcomes achieved directly by minor parties, Christian or otherwise.

2. *Other minor party involvement.* The options for work through these parties, as in major and 'Christian' party involvement, apply here. You will need to compromise, you will spend most time on non-policy related 'stuff'. As per 'Christian' parties, you can only ever look towards a minor role within Parliament, but you sometimes can achieve influence through tradeoffs on a close vote or through agenda setting.

3. *General purpose Christian lobby groups* provide another option for participation. These groups range in size and professionalism, but in general occupy positions similar to the Christian parties. They congregate around the right end of the political spectrum and the most socially conservative end of the Christian belief spectrum. The major pros which attract folk to groups such as these are that they aspire to being non-partisan (not favouring either major

party), and that, if a truly broad supporter base can be established, with vigorous participation of a very 'broad church' in policy formation, they can operate as a kind of 'peak body' to represent Christian views. If significant funding can be attracted, the possibility is that such a grouping can operate in a truly professional manner, employing full time professionals, establishing offices and developing real expertise, a well developed political and media network, longevity, and a long term influence. This appeals to folk who are disillusioned with major parties but realise the limited nature of the contribution possible for minor parties, Christian or otherwise.

I need to declare an interest here. For a period of about 16 months until a few months ago I was heavily involved (as Victorian State Director) within the highest profile and most professional of these groups, the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL). In this honorary but extremely full on role I worked to build up capacity for Christian advocacy on a range of issues – religious freedom and free speech, protection of marriage and family, fairness in industrial relations, and moderate Biblically based positions on a range of bioethical issues.

Regretfully, I now believe that any truly broad based, non-partisan 'Christian' lobby, able to represent more than a very narrow band of Christian policy positions and truly representing anything like a majority of Biblically based Christians, will remain only a dream. My personal experience was that an appealing, moderate 'shop window' is opened around election times. The ACL Meet Your Candidate Forums for example (which I ran across Victoria during the last Victorian election) are a wonderful service; impartial, professional, and recognised as such by the many candidates from all persuasions. I became involved after observing this view of the Lobby during the last federal election. In my experience however, the period between elections, and the very considerable resources attracted, are actually spent lobbying on a very small range of issues. Also, the positions adopted on these few issues are often marginal, often going well beyond any clear Biblical directives, and would not be supported by Christians on the moderate or left sides of the political spectrum, nor beyond a very specific and narrow theological perspective.

I am not talking about the release of media statements on issues such as refugee policy, poverty alleviation or global warming, which would suggest a more moderate, broad based positioning. I refer to months at a time of all out personal lobbying of parliamentarians, all human and other resources focussed full time towards a very narrow band of issues, such as the prevention of therapeutic stem cell research, or changes to the regulation of drugs such as RU456. On these, and many other issues, there will be a wide range of Christian opinion, yet this is seldom acknowledged. For an aspiring peak body within politics, the appearance of representing a unified position for a broad constituency is everything. I think the Lobby's finest hour was in 2004, when work by the various Christian pressure groups, with church leaders and critically, masses of ordinary folk across the nation, resulted in *marriage* being clearly defined *in law* as a permanent, exclusive voluntary union of a man and a woman. Virtually all Christians can agree on that. However 2000 years of history suggests they will seldom agree on much else, such that a single grouping could ever be a true peak body.

Alarming, there is no actual mechanism for influence or even formal input on policy formation for the denominations, nor for the ordinary 'supporters' who provide the very significant financial base for the Lobby. For these and other reasons I conclude that truly broad based, moderate, Biblically based, professional Christian advocacy by a single peak body is sadly, a failed experiment.

4. *Single issue lobby groups*, specifically Christian or not, provide another avenue. An attractive feature of such groups is that you will quite likely get to spend much of your time 'on task' with an issue which really engages you. It is a huge virtue of the single issue lobby group that it seems more likely than any broad grouping, party or church leader claiming to speak on behalf of his or her constituency, to be *honest* - to actually be what it claims to be. For me this is non-negotiable.

Unlike minor parties, these groups tend to remain active between elections, providing an ongoing critique and seeking allies where they can be found. There is a huge range to choose from - anything from Make Poverty History and its Christian counterparts, to groupings around virtually any 'good cause' you can name. This strength of focussing on a single or very narrow range of issues is also a weakness of course, meaning that you are choosing basically one issue to fight on. Such groups have had enormous success from time to time - the environmental and anti-tobacco lobbies come to mind. Often however, they are volunteer based, generally quite unprofessional in approach, and sadly are themselves riven with intra-group politics. While this latter point applies to all the above options as well, it is a particularly deadly factor when linked with the chronic under funding and consequent personal burnout often associated with people who put such intense effort into such single issue groupings.

5. *Denomination based advocacy* is a further option. Currently my own denomination, The Salvation Army, has a very active campaign running against human trafficking (for sexual exploitation etc.). The Army has a long history of such campaigns, and a genuine track record of impact. As a very young man I argued often for such denominational involvement in a number of causes. I would now sound a word of caution. Anti-slavery is an incontestable 'good cause'. From time to time there are such causes, and thank God, the Churches do stand up in a corporate way, *occasionally*. There is danger however when Church leaders attempt to speak *on behalf of their members* while at the same time having no particular mandate from those on whose behalf they will be seen as speaking. As organisations we are prone, along with everyone else, to taking this year or this decade's received wisdom of what is socially desirable as being non-negotiable, only to be left in a few short decades with yesterday's stolen generation or institutional child abuse consequence. This is a trap regardless of whether the position being advocated derives from an agenda of the left or the right - and various denominations have fallen into it. Denominations vary widely in terms of their policy making processes and structures. Many have some kind of 'social issues' or 'church and state' committee. These all have a role. However, in general I see the cases where it is appropriate for denominational leadership to lobby publicly as representing their particular branch of the Church itself as quite rare.

This is a big gun. I know from conversation with senior politicians that such statements are taken seriously, and have at times been decisive. They need to be rare and carefully considered. They should never be party political, as has happened in the 2007 Federal election campaign. Probably the appropriate level for specific denominational political involvement is at the level of the individual congregation. Search out the issues, the facts, what scripture has to say, and what individuals can actually *do*.

6. *Individual action* is always an option. Writing to and visits with your local MPs, participation through 'letters to the editor' and talk back radio are all valid and worthwhile forms of

involvement for both individuals and congregation based groups. Does your local member know about your core concerns? Lone letter writing and other advocacy can be a very isolating and frustrating experience however. Sadly, this is not just on the 'consumer' side. I hear often that the most vehement criticism of Christians in politics comes from other Christians. Prayer, individual and corporate, and whatever is possible by way of personal encouragement and support for all our polities is much needed.

I have found that politics is often a tough, compromising and even brutal environment in which to work. In my experience this is evident even amongst some Christians who participate, beyond simply voting, in the exercise of worldly power and influence. Power does corrupt. The answer to this is not to be aloof, but to pray much, much more.

For me, tightly focussed, professionally executed advocacy through single issue lobbies, and major party involvement, are probably the options of choice. You may feel otherwise – fine. But do *something*. I love that image of even a single candle lighting up the darkness. Light a candle today, and spread a little salt as well.