

## **Abbott, Abortion and Christianity in Australia**

*Social Issues briefing #002, 24/3/2004*

It's not surprising that civil institutions seeking to guarantee freedom under the law should first have been established in Christian cultures. ... Despite the debt that political institutions owe to the West's Christian heritage, there is the constant claim that Christians in politics are confused about the separation of church and state. There's also a tendency among Christians in the community to think that Christians in politics have to sell out their principles in order to survive. – *Tony Abbott*

The Federal Minister for Health and Aging, Tony Abbott, made these comments in a speech at Adelaide University on Tuesday March 16th 2004. Abbott is a thoughtful Roman Catholic, and in the speech, he describes what he thinks is the relationship between Christianity and public life.

Protestants can't agree with all of it. For example, he imagines that there is a generally happy relationship between natural human reason and divine revelation. He thinks Christianity simply draws attention to what noble "human wisdom" can see, and that this is seen in the New Testament documents. Of course in the New Testament, natural human thought is so completely ruined that people suppress the truth about God and his world, to the point where they sincerely promote and approve whatever God hates (Romans 1:18-32). God's revelation is more than the endorsement of what is 'obviously' good. Abbott's view is the Roman Catholic side of a very long-running debate.

Even so, the speech makes an excellent stab at describing the relationship between Christianity and the State. He doesn't think that we should aim for 'Christian government', but he also thinks that being Christian is an asset to his leadership, not a liability. He uses abortion as one of three examples to illustrate his point.

Of course, nearly all that the media has reported about the speech are some colourful grabs from the section on abortion. So the responses have been predictable; and as usual, Australia has proven itself incapable of having any kind of interesting debate about the underlying issues. There are at least two.

Firstly, *is* there a helpful role for the particular views of religious people in public life? In thinking that there is not, Australia is on the extreme end of the international spectrum. Australia was formed in the white-heat of the European Enlightenment, and we inherited its most radical version, which says that the only valuable aspects of any religion are the bits everyone can agree on. (So Aussie pundits will tie Islam into knots to try and fit it into their Enlightenment-shaped suitcase.) Abbott's speech asks us to think about whether Christians make a unique contribution that only they can give, although Protestants would give a different answer than Abbott does.

The second issue underlies the abortion rate. Abbott asked, "Why isn't the fact that 100,000 women choose to end their pregnancies regarded as a national tragedy ... Is it really so hard to create a culture where people understand that actions have consequences and take responsibilities seriously?" His use of the terms "easy way out" and "convenient" in reference to abortion was noticed and savaged. One woman described how she "now live[s] with twice having made this darkest of choices ... My heart is breaking today for every woman currently overwhelmed by this vast decision-making process because ... there is no such thing as 'an easy way out'." Another wrote, "Thirty years ago, I terminated my unexpected pregnancy (at two months) after the baby's father threatened to kill me if I gave birth to it. At the time, I considered it somewhat 'convenient' to continue living." A man wrote "Is it right to force a mother to have a child she does not want or cannot look after? ... The world is already full of abused and unwanted children."

Abbott was onto something when he talked about a ‘tragedy’, and about creating a new culture. But did not go far enough, because of course those women were also right: abortion is too often not about the mother’s convenience, but the convenience of those around her. There is something in the shape of our social environment that makes children ‘inconvenient’. There is something that makes it OK to say that “the world is already full of abused and unwanted children,” as if that is an unchangeable fact, like gravity. But Tony Abbot tries to imagine a new Australia, where women don’t compete against the babies they carry within. In this culture, babies can be welcome. In this culture, the route to a better society is not found by creating opportunities to kill our budding children. You have to work hard to make this idea seem insulting, and we need such Christian imagination in our government.

People in developing countries seem to know something about this. Although Westerners tout ‘access to birth control’, including abortion, as one solution to their ills, they realize that the *best* they can do is to welcome new life, and to joyfully love and care for someone who might then graciously care for them. This is not all about the ‘self-interest’ of the old: they know of a society based upon mutual care. With terrible exceptions (such as the customary Indian abortion of females), many non-Western people find the idea of ‘an unwanted child’ quite strange.

We Christians don’t have too much leverage over modern Australia—but we have enormous leverage over our churches. We need our *churches* to be the new societies that Abbott tries to imagine. Although sex belongs in marriage, our churches can become oases of welcome to children, where we celebrate the mother who decides not to abort, and celebrate her child. As people helpfully surround her with care and support (including, perhaps, the appropriate involvement of godly men as friends and mentors to her child), churches will become places where there is no such thing as a ‘single’ mother.

- It is worth us giving qualified support to Abbott in newspapers and workplaces.
- It is good to start calling the bluff of our lost, spiritually dead culture in its selfish attitudes toward the unborn.
- It is best to renovate our churches, to become places of such marvellous difference, that the lost world *wants in*.

[Tony Abbott’s speech can be viewed in full at [http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/speech/04mar16\\_ethicalresp\\_politician.pdf](http://www.tonyabbott.com.au/speech/04mar16_ethicalresp_politician.pdf) .]

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