

Why bother with elections?

Social Issues briefing #027, 24/09/2004.

There are several reasons why a Christian might feel that elections are not worth bothering with.

- We sometimes feel cynicism about human shortcomings in comparison to God's government of his kingdom.
- It seems pointless to vote, because a vote is so small.
- We feel unable to know where to start thinking about the issues—it's all too big.
- The community of Christians to which we belong might have a long tradition of never talking about government or politics, leading us to think our involvement is unimportant.

In Australia, the only thing that ever gets many of us to the ballot box is Australia's curious compulsory voting law; and for some of us, the only way we know what to do when we get there comes from how our parents told us to vote.

What might help us, then, to think more positively about voting?

The older we get, the more natural it is to experience a growing awareness of the good of government. Especially while we are young, and even for some older people, it is very easy to stay immersed in the strange delusion of individualism where we are so self-absorbed that we fail to notice the incredible infrastructure of the common-wealth within which our lives have flourished. But there comes a point, hopefully, where we notice something called 'society', which sets the conditions under which our lives may proceed. Good governance gives us an orderly society relatively free of crime and disorder; education; an infrastructure through which we receive the various stuff of life (such as running water!); and a welfare safety net which some of us have reason to call upon. When we begin to notice this, the high honour given in the Bible to leaders, even bad ones, starts to make sense. To have this growing awareness of the good of government means that before long, we begin to ponder what actually *constitutes* a good government. We slowly become initiated, then, into thinking about politics, political parties, and their policies.

To be sure, it remains difficult and unnerving for many of us. The basis for our assessments of the relative merits of the various parties (for we are already constrained to think in terms of parties, which is not always how governments were formed) is an unsteady mix of hearsay, random observations of what is thrown up in the media, and a little bit of our own research based on what MPs might write to us and on various of their pronouncements on the web. And so we go forth, to cast our vote, not really very sure if we're doing it much more knowledgeably than when we did what our parents told us.

Perhaps it is worth remembering our limitations at this point. It really is a tiny moment in the political process, to cast one vote among sixty-thousand, to elect one member in a house of hundreds. We can get a little too romantic about voting: our votes are just the atoms that give an oligarchy (that is, a small group of rulers) temporary warrant to rule.

To observe this fact is not to be difficult or despairing. Of course it is good to keep ourselves informed about our commonwealth, whether we enjoy it or not; and it is good to vote thoughtfully on the basis of our observations. But given the difficulty of thinking it through well, we need to be liberated from being over-responsible about the matter. If we make the wrong call—so be it. Government is finally accountable for how it governs, not voters, even if we voters should try to learn from our mistakes and work at voting more knowledgeably the next time around.

Perhaps in view of the 'smallness' and difficulty of voting, we do well to think of our more significant political engagements as taking place *beyond the election*, with whoever is in government. We do this engagement when we take notice of what government is doing, and

when we write letters of thanks or of probing concern to MPs and Senators. We also do well—and this should be the topic of another briefing—when we remind our leaders and the people around us not to fall for what Jacques Ellul calls ‘the political illusion’, which is that government has almost God-like powers to fix everything. It cannot, and it does not. Of course there are certainly matters that *do* fall within its proper remit, where we *should* expect competence, since individuals alone can’t fix all problems either. Indeed, modern individuals also foolishly imagine themselves to have God-like powers! Government and individuals alike, then, need to maintain a humble, realistic awareness of their respective responsibilities and limitations.

Also, in a country like ours, where children are often raised to think of politicians as lazy, inept, snout-in-the-trough ‘ratbags’, Christians have an important job to do. When Gandhi sought to throw off British bondage, he chose a tiny symbolic act of civil disobedience: he refused to pay the salt tax, and created a groundswell of people who did likewise.

In contrast, to say that we actually value our leaders as a gift from God, we Christians might need to engage in small symbolic acts of *honour*. We express honour when we take a little time, by reading, listening and writing, to develop a relationship with our local member. We express honour when we pray for our leaders, and when we thank God for them. (Perhaps churches need to pray for their local member with the same specificity and seriousness with which they pray for missionaries?) We express honour when we presume them to be honest. We express honour when we write to them and say that we are grieved that they should break their promises, and that we think that truth-telling is a basic element of the relationship between the leader and the led.

Of course, Christians are also very realistic about the likelihood of humans to sin, and are prepared not to be shocked when it turns out that some act of government was not done selflessly. Christians can also challenge inept or corrupt rule, something like Gandhi did, even when others are complacent or fearful.

But we are certainly being radically counter-cultural when we affirm our leaders against the overly critical cynicism of others. Symbolic acts of honour might seem naïve, even child-like; but they might just create a groundswell of new thought about governance—a new sense of shame in leaders when they lie; a new sense of purpose about what they are there for; and a new sense of gladness concerning them, and within them, when they govern well.

*Andrew Cameron & Tracy Gordon,
for the Social Issues Executive, Diocese of Sydney*

Further reading:

Ellul, Jacques. *The Political Illusion*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.
[201 ELL Moore College Library]

For two very personal reflections on the forthcoming election, by Andrew Cameron and Gordon Preece, see <http://www.case.edu.au>. These reflections in no way represent the views of the SIE or the Diocese, even though in the case of Andrew's paper, there is some overlap with this briefing.

Conditions of use:

1. You may forward this paper to others, as long as you forward it *in full*.
2. You may freely publish it (e.g. in a church newspaper) as long as it is published in full, not for profit, and including the ‘Note’ paragraph. (You don’t have to include these ‘conditions’.)
3. Media and academic publishers should cite this paper according to their professional standards. We would appreciate audiences being directed to www.sie.org.au.
4. Not-for-profit publishers may use the ideas in this paper without acknowledgement; **but** if quoting it directly, please cite title, authors, and the web link www.sie.org.au.

5. Permission may be given for use in publications for profit. Please send details of your proposal to lisa.watts@moore.edu.au.