

RESPONSE TO AMANDA LOHREY

* Max Wallace

Amanda Lohrey's *Quarterly Review* essay is a significant contribution to our understanding of the current intersection between religion and politics in Australia. She gets to the heart of the matter in her analysis of Cardinal George Pell and her comment that 'to be secular is not to be anti-religion, but to be anti-theocracy.' She is exactly right when she writes that beneath all the artillery-like exchange of words between government and religion 'the real deal is who gets what from the public purse'; it is also a useful corrective to point out that Hillsong has got so far and no further and that it is likely it has reached the limits of what could be called its effective demand.

Amanda also runs the received interpretation that the Coalition, John Howard in particular, is using US-style embrace of politically motivated Christian fundamentalists, both Catholic and Protestant, trading on the 'moral conservatism' of the electorate to sideline Labor and win elections. 'Howard sucks up the moral conservatism and spits out the rest.' Marion Maddox runs a similar line in her *God Under Howard*¹. He's Machiavellian. While he affects a Christian attitude, it's just part of the show. It's dog-whistling to get a result.

While none of us can peer into his mind, if we look at what John Howard has done since becoming Prime Minister in 1996 one could equally argue that when he came to power he found himself in the situation where he could realise a long held commitment to his version of the Christian cause.

It's worth remembering a fundamental change in Liberal Party policy that occurred in the Menzies era and was still contentious when John Gorton was Prime Minister in 1970 before Howard entered Parliament in 1974. It finally reached its climax in 1981 when John Howard was Treasurer and Deputy Leader. This was the Defence of Government Schools (DOGS) High Court case concerning religious school funding. As Treasurer, John Howard was one of the three ministerial Respondents in the case.

The case took twenty five years to get to Court. It was a watershed in Australian political history. Where Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, saw the policy of no government funding to religious schools as the *sine qua non* of Australia's secularism, John Howard's predecessors, blind to the need for neutrality, saw government funding of mainly Catholic schools as a political window of opportunity in terms of the Catholic vote.

There is no mention of this in Maddox's book or Amanda's essay. I think it's likely that Howard saw the result of the DOGS case as the end of an era of what might be perceived as low level sectarianism in Australia rather than the actual death of constitutional separation of church and state which it was.² I suggest it would have informed his views. Also, in 1982 he did something very *moral* which angered many of his contemporaries and which is an insight into his thinking: he brought in the *Unpaid Company Tax Act* of 1982 to stop the Bottom of the Harbour tax avoidance rorts that had flourished under the same Barwick High Court.

From the time he became Prime Minister in 1996 this is what has happened:

1. Bible study meetings begin to occur in Parliamentary offices;
2. the John Stuart Mill group in Parliament disappears;

3. the Commonwealth Employment Service was abolished and multi-hundred million dollar annual contracts to deal with unemployment are given mostly to church organisations scaling up their wealth considerably;
4. Catholic Kevin Andrews' private member's bill is introduced in the Federal Parliament to override the Northern Territory's euthanasia legislation;
5. a reference to 'God' is included in a verse of the National Anthem;
6. The 1998 Constitutional Convention is set up at a time when Republicans were divided increasing the probability that the 1999 Referendum would fail. The Republicans, led by Malcolm Turnbull, agree to the proposal that the proceedings in Old Parliament House should be commenced with prayers. Later in 2002 Turnbull converts to Catholicism prior to his standing for preselection for the safe seat of Wentworth;
7. the 2000 Charities Definition Inquiry's recommendation that there should be a Charities Commission to regulate charities, opposed by the Catholic Church, is ignored and the government will not answer questions about it; silent nuns who pray for us are, however, given charitable status;
8. \$5M funding is given towards the construction of the Anglican/Uniting Church Centre for *Christianity* and Culture, not *Religion* and Culture, located symbolically near Parliament;
9. 2001 Archbishop Peter Hollingworth is made Governor-General;
10. Radio Australia's Cox Peninsular transmitter is sold to the fundamentalist British Christian Voice and is now broadcasting their version of the Christian message to the Pacific and South Asia in a range of languages including Indonesian bahasa. When I rang the station I was told their signal is transmitted from their state of the art studios on the Sunshine Coast to a satellite which beams the signal to the Cox Peninsular transmitter from where it is broadcast shortwave to Asia. I am told it's hard to pick up in Australia as 99 per cent of the signal is broadcast north; Carmen Lawrence's questions in Parliament about this reveal the Government is not the slightest bit interested in what they're saying to our Muslim neighbours including of course, any extremists who might be listening;
11. Ministers of religion are excluded from the \$30,000 Fringe Benefits Tax cap following reform of FBT legislation meaning that they could continue to take the whole of their income as fringe benefits completely avoiding personal income tax³;
12. a Federal power is invoked to allow the Catholic Church to proceed with a High Court challenge to a Federal court ruling allowing single and lesbian women access to IVF;
13. Howard leaps to Cardinal Pell's defence when he is accused of a sexual offence before evidence is heard which exonerates Pell;
14. calls for a Royal Commission into child sex abuse are ignored;
15. Howard open's Hillsong's church in Sydney in 2002;
16. in 2004 the First National Day of Thanksgiving 'acknowledging our Christian heritage and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our nation' receive endorsement from the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the Governor-General;
17. prior to the 2004 election a preference deal is struck with the Assemblies of God inspired Family First Party; Family First goes quiet on its demand for a Royal Commission into child sex abuse;
18. in 2004 the government votes for a total ban on human embryo cloning at the United Nations;
19. Howard votes against RU-486;
20. multi-hundred million dollar contracts will be given to mostly church groups for counselling divorcing couples with custody disputes in 'Family Relationship Centres' ignoring a secular alternative recommended by the government's own committee;
21. \$20M is to be given to church organisations for 'abortion counselling';

22. Exclusive Brethren are exempted from the Workplace legislation. The Brethren campaigned against the Greens in the Tasmanian election;
23. conservative Christians are appointed to the Fair Pay Commission and the Board of the ABC;
24. the Governor-General is told he should reject the ACT's civil unions legislation;
25. \$20M is given to the Catholic Church for the Pope's World Youth Day in Sydney 2008. On 29 June 2006 *BRW* reported that 'If the Catholic Church were a corporation, it would be in the top five in the country.'
26. the Queensland Government is threatened with funding withdrawal and obliged to drop legislation changing religious education from 'opt out' to 'opt in' with humanists, for the first time, being allowed to give classes if requested; shortly afterwards, a decision is made that Federal money is to be given to public schools for religious chaplains if requested;
27. Hillsong given more money to counsel workplace defaulters despite having an earlier grant stripped from them.

Given all of this I think it would be fair to say that Howard's government is the most religious government Australia has ever seen. A witness has Howard attending the North Sydney Anglican Church regularly when he's in Sydney; on 21/22 May 2005 *The Australian* reported that he often attends the 8am Mass at St Paul's Catholic Church near Parliament in sitting weeks.

If you look at the cabinet, it's hard to find a secular representative among them. Even Joe Hockey, who stood up for neutrality in government in 2002, as Amanda noted, voted for a variation of the legislation that would have killed off RU-486⁴. Brendan Nelson, a medical doctor, when Minister for Education, was moved to say that intelligent design could be taught in schools. The takeover of the NSW Liberal Party by the hard core religious right led by a member of the Catholic sect Opus Dei, as detailed by *Four Corners* on 17 June 2006, has been allowed to happen by Howard.

I suggest the only difference between the Bush Administration and the Howard Administration is that the secular nature of Australian society causes Howard to be circumspect about what he really thinks. However, on the rising of Parliament for Christmas 2004 he let down his guard a little when he said with false modesty: 'I have endeavoured, completely inadequately, to live as best as I can according to the basic tenets of the Christian religion ... there is no force which is greater for the enhancement of individuals and the liberation of the human spirit.'

I suggest it's likely he really believes that. As for the instances when he opposes the churches: refugee children behind barbed wire, the Iraq war etc etc, that is just normal *realpolitik*. He would take the view, I suggest, that he is working for the greater good and that politicians have to take hard decisions. That sounds banal - but banality is Howard's defining public characteristic. It is the essence of his negative charisma to which the apolitical electorate responds. He also knows it's easy for the churches to play to the gallery but they will still be there when their interests are at stake.

Did the Catholic Church reject the \$20M for the World Youth Day because the government was unfair to aborigines in the Hindmarsh Island dispute, or any other matter, where they've opposed the government? He would also know the churches themselves are hardly paradigms of virtue as the many paedophile cases demonstrate. They can be less than 'Christian' when it suits them - for example the sacking of the Reverend Knowles, chaplain of Bathurst gaol, just before his retirement, causing him a significant financial loss. The Anglican Church went to the Industrial

Commission and argued that they didn't owe him anything because he was not their employee – he 'served God.'⁵

I suggest it's drawing a long bow to suggest all of the actions listed above are just the result of Machiavellian politics. Rather, I suggest, it's possible Howard is trying to Christianise Australian society by considerably enriching the churches through the multi-hundred million contracts they receive for various projects, thereby further entrenching them in various aspects of society as a way to counterbalance their failing church attendances. The centrepiece of this strategy is the demolition of public education through under-funding to bring the decision in the DOGS case to its logical conclusion.⁶ He has done all he can to set the churches up for the future. He wants us to become like America. That, I suggest, could be his personal agenda and would be his personal legacy.

On the Margaret Throsby radio interview following the publication of the *Quarterly Essay* Amanda was asked: 'Are you worried about this?' With qualification, she replied 'No, I'm not'.

Well, of course we should be worried. The *Four Corners* program demonstrated that the hard core Liberal Party right are not sitting on their hands. What has happened is not an abuse of true Christian values, or some kind of one-off aberration. These people are serious and should their power increase, progressive state legislation will steadily be wound back. The number one issue of abortion is always in their sights. Amanda's Essay, while very welcome and valuable, is undercooked.

The central issue that there is no constitutional separation of church and state in Australia, which was the subject of our conference at the University of Melbourne 17/18 June, is only touched on as if it was incidental. But it's critical to understanding how Australian politics works.

* Max Wallace is the Founding Director of the Australian National Secular Association. Together with the Council of Australian Humanists and the Rationalists Association, ANSA had its first conference in Melbourne this year. His book *The Purple Economy: religion, tax and culture* is yet to be published.

¹ Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2004.

² See my 'Separation of church and state in Australia and New Zealand?' in *Separating Church and State: keeping God out of government*, Rationalist Association and Council of Australian Humanists, Melbourne, 2006, forthcoming.

³ See my Letter to *Business Review Weekly*, 13 July 2006.

⁴ See A. Ramsay *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 18/19 2006 for the House of Representative votes.

⁵ *Reverend Howard Knowles and the Anglican Property Trust, Diocese of Bathurst [1999] NSWIRComm 157* (22 April 1999).

⁶ See Jane Caro, 'How God is killing public education - indoctrination v education', in *Separating Church and State*, Op. Cit.