

Abbott needs to learn about his religion before attacking Rudd

Tony Abbott must be a big believer in the primacy of conscience. His ability to ignore Catholic Social Teaching, and in particular formal statements from the Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, on questions of social ethics and social policy suggest he and Cardinal Pell would have some interesting conversations on the authority of the church.

In a recent [speech](#) to the Young Liberals federal convention, Mr Abbott attacked Kevin Rudd for trying to appropriate the Christian vote and "shame Christians into voting Labor". Fair enough.

But then comes the truly breathtaking part of the speech. "there is not a single, authoritative Christian position on the Iraq War, climate change or border protection."

This statement will surprise the churches, whose public statements on each of these issues have been consistent and damning of the Australian Government. So consistently opposed that Mr Abbott will find it difficult to name a single Australian church leader or organisational statement in his own defence.

Prior to the Iraq War, the churches were almost unanimously opposed to a pre-emptive strike. Only one prominent church figure, Anglican Bishop Tom Frame (then head of the Anglican chaplaincy team for the Australian Defence Forces), argued it satisfied just war criteria. Two months after the invasion, Bishop Frame recanted in the strongest possible terms, asking God's forgiveness on the opinion pages of [The Age](#) newspaper.

On climate change, while there has not yet been an official consensus statement from the National Council of Churches in Australia, the recent document [Common Belief](#) provides authoritative statements on the urgency of serious action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from no less than nine churches and church organisations, including all of the five largest denominations (as well as every other major faith tradition). These statements are entirely consistent with each other in theology and public policy.

That Abbott would claim disagreement on asylum seeker policy is truly farcical. Perhaps Mr Abbott should ask Philip Ruddock and Amanda Vanstone about church advocacy on this issue. Australian churches have been criticising mandatory detention and the "Pacific Solution" since they were introduced. No less than 70 church leaders (covering all major churches) signed a [statement](#) condemning the subsequently withdrawn Migration Amendment (Designated Unauthorised Arrivals) Bill 2006.

Not satisfied, Tony Abbott then decides he is qualified to make judgements about what churches can and cannot criticise on the basis of faith, suggesting the churches should have evaluated *WorkChoices* on "whether they produce more jobs, higher pay and fewer strikes". It is not clear which Biblical references Mr Abbott has in mind, but clearly he missed his lesson on "the preferential option for the poor" in seminary. Considering the Roman Catholic Church has been campaigning for the dignity of the individual over capital since the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* was released in 1891, one suspects he must have skipped the entire course on Catholic Social Teaching.

Just to be clear, *WorkChoices* was more loudly opposed by Australian churches than any piece of legislation in living memory. Ostensibly friendly faces like Peter Jensen and George Pell lined up to attack the Bill, while the Uniting Church in Australia labelled the Bill "immoral".

Christian churches around the world advocate on behalf of the poor and excluded because this is what they must do if they are to follow Jesus of Nazareth, who came "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." We believe that when

we care for “the least of these”, we care for Christ himself, and we know we cannot keep patching them up after governments and greedy corporations conspire to throw them off the cliffs.

Standing up for the poor, the marginalised, the abused and the nobodies is core Christian discipleship and engagement in public policy advocacy an essential part of Christian mission.

Christians are not bound by the statements of their respective church authorities, but they should consider them carefully. ‘Christian politicians’ are not bound to follow church positions either, but they should treat them with respect. But declaring there is “no single authoritative Christian position” on issues on which there is a clear consensus of the churches is simply disingenuous. If there can ever be such a thing as an ‘authoritative Christian position’, an alignment of official doctrine of all the major churches is surely the place to find it.

Perhaps Mr Abbott should do a refresher course on Christian social ethics at his old seminary. Or simply listen to what his own church is telling him about the Iraq War and the reality of poverty and marginalisation in this country.

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