



# SPEECH NOTES

Minister for Health and Ageing  
Leader of the House of Representatives

**Tony Abbott MHR**

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**ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY DEMOCRATIC CLUB IN HONOUR OF  
JAMES MCAULEY**

**THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF A CHRISTIAN POLITICIAN  
Tuesday, 16 March 2004**

Professor James McAuley, the founding editor of *Quadrant* magazine, was one of Australia's greatest poets, most notable public intellectuals and most prominent converts to Catholicism. In the late 1960s, he helped begin the Peace with Freedom movement which was a response to the relativism, nihilism and defeatism of Vietnam War era Australian campuses. The main product of Peace with Freedom was a series of university Democratic Clubs comprising students prepared to defend and justify the West's high culture of reason suffused with faith.

McAuley's life focussed on Sydney (where he was born and grew up), Hobart (where he was professor of English) and PNG (which he visited many times in the 1940s and 50s as a lecturer in the School of Pacific Administration). As co-author of the celebrated Ern Malley hoax, he punctured the modernist pretensions of one of Adelaide's most notable identities. More than a quarter century after his death, his legacy remains contentious, with Cassandra Pybus' revisionist psycho-biography winning the Adelaide Festival prize just a few years ago. Adelaide University contains its quota of academics for whom the Berlin Wall never really fell so is a fitting place to honour his memory, defend his legacy and try to revive the Democratic Clubs he helped to found.

The Democratic Clubs had few members and little money (despite the logistical support of the National Civic Council). What they had, in abundance, was strong ideas about the rights and wrongs of campus intellectual and organisational life and a determination to campaign for the things they believed in. In 1978, the activities of the Sydney University Democratic Club included: arranging a student lecture by British morals campaigner Mary Whitehouse (and copping the putrescent missiles meant for her when she didn't turn up, on police advice); organising the occupation and counter-occupation of the Students Representative Council office after the outgoing marxist-oriented SRC tried to obstruct the incoming more conservative SRC; writing and distributing a weekly campus newsletter; and campaigning for voluntary membership of student political organisations.

The Democratic Clubs were part of a grand coalition of activist groups which eventually destroyed the far-left Australian Union of Students and which were the political nursery of future MPs such as Peter Costello, Eric Abetz, Michael Danby and Michael Yabsley. Above all, Democratic Club activists had a sense of mission. It was our duty to identify the errors of the age and to do what we could to change them. As someone who moved from anarchist/libertine, to reluctant participant in the war effort, to religious searcher and finally trenchant advocate of traditional values, McAuley was a fitting Democratic Club patron – although conservative student activists could hardly match his refinement of feeling, the subtlety of his intellectual endeavour or the depth and intensity of his youthful participation in the counter-culture.

Once fully embraced, religious faith became the bedrock and inspiration of McAuley's life. He lived a kind of lay vocation: to give glory to God through his poetry and to defend the religiously inspired traditions of western culture. Faith and culture provided armour against the torment to which great artists seem prone. One of his best known poems, written at a time of one political disaster after another, was ostensibly addressed to BA Santamaria and the other soldiers of the Industrial Groups but also to the doubt verging on despair he felt about a Church he had joined just as it was losing its way:

...Soon you must return to tasks  
That sicken and appal:  
The calumnies will never cease,  
Look only to the sign of peace,  
The Cross upon the wall...

In a famous letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, prompted by Dr Evatt's 1954 attack on an allegedly disloyal Catholic minority inside the ALP, McAuley defended both the religious inspiration and the political campaign of the Santamaria "Movement": "If Catholics, seeking to join forces with others of good will in the work of the Industrial Groups, try to avoid obtruding themselves as an organised Catholic bloc...they are accused of a secret conspiracy to capture the Labour movement for dark ends... If they are willing, not only to fight Communism but to remove the corruption and maladministration which has given the Communists their chance...they are journalistically labelled 'fanatical' and placed on the extreme 'right-wing'... On the other hand, if they do not fight Communism, do not seek to remedy corruption, betray no interest in Papal social teachings and lend themselves to the breaking up of the anti-Communist alliance, they are rewarded with the label 'devout Catholic' and are politically 'moderate'."

This charge of corrupting politics with religion is still being made 50 years on. The Leader of the Opposition, as he subsequently became, declared (during the 2002 human cloning debate) that it's "a bit rich for the Catholic Church to be lecturing the parliament on morality... People are living in fear of what is happening to young, innocent children at the hands of the Catholic Church", Mark Latham said, "yet the hierarchy adopts a pious sanctimonious status where they want to lecture others about family and moral issues". On another occasion, the Member for Werriwa attacked Lyons Forum MPs as "a group of fundamentalists with a Bible in the top drawer and a Hustler magazine and a box of tissues in their bottom drawer".

What Latham has missed, in his eagerness to prove guilt by association against his opponents, is the part Christianity has played in establishing the civil discourse he now says is necessary. It's not surprising that civil institutions seeking to guarantee freedom under the law should first have been established in Christian cultures. As with most religions, "love God" is the first Christian commandment but co-equal is the commandment to "love your neighbour as you love yourself". "Treat others as you would have them treat you" is the basic rule of any Christian society. From this, the principles of representative democracy, equality before the law, freedom of speech and respect for minorities naturally flow. Athenian democracy predated Christianity but Greek philosophy permeates the Epistles of the New Testament which describe the first attempts to live according to Christian principles.

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. Christian politicians are often warding off simultaneous accusations that they are zealots or fakes. The public caricature of a Christian politician is hypocrite or wuss, in denial about the ruthlessness and expediency necessary to wield power or too sanctimonious to be effective. On the other hand, as the (usually misplaced) respect shown to greens and independents suggests, there's a public hunger for leaders who don't measure success solely by the size of GDP.

A Christian politician faces the double test of not only being an effective politician but also being a credible Christian. A Christian life means constantly striving – and constantly failing – to be more like Jesus. It means giving others the benefit of the doubt; seeing the good in opponents; hiding one's own light under a bushel; forgiving people not once but seven times seventy; and being ambitious for the higher things rather than the higher office. This is not easy for anyone but is especially hard to reconcile with the hyper-partisan culture of Australian politics. Still, these are not religious values but the very best human values and those with a vocation for politics would scarcely be better Christians for shunning the challenge.

Christians in public life can't complain when others take particular delight in their moral failings. Australians have finely honed humbug detectors. Even so, does any one really think that the world would be better without the Church seeking to draw out the "better angels of our nature"? Over the centuries, Christian rulers and Christian warriors have frequently fallen short of Christian ideals but faith in a higher power and respect for enduring values remains the best inoculation against pride, arrogance, brutality and contempt for others. Christian faith has manifestly not produced perfect human beings nor solved all the problems of the world but for 2000 years it has helped to tame the beast in the heart of man. Religious faith is not necessary for a life of compassion, forbearance, forgiveness, mercy and love but the comparative lack of humanist missionaries in the most impoverished corners of the third world or rationalist hospitals in the worst war zones suggests that it certainly does help.

So, what makes a “Christian politician”: Is it writing “Christian” on the census form; going to church on Sunday; or asking the local bishop how to vote on legislation? If God really exists and religious faith really means something, there should be no such thing as “Sunday Christians”. Christian politicians cannot check their faith into the parliamentary cloakroom and be otherwise indistinguishable from everyone else. Still, modern society is not a community of believers and the parliament is not the place to make rules for one. Hilaire Belloc once said that becoming a Catholic provided the answers to a thousand questions and got them all right. This attitude might explain why the champion debater and master of Christian apologetics was such a failure in the house of commons because something justifiable by revelation alone shouldn’t be part of the political debate.

Rendering to God the things that are God’s has never prevented Christians from giving to Caesar the things that are rightfully his. A Christian politician should be notable, not for expertise in divine law which is accessible only to believers but for commitment to the natural law which should be accessible to all people of goodwill.

Cardinal Newman once said that if Catholicism and truth appear to be at odds, it’s not really Catholicism, it’s not really true, or there’s no real conflict. He was making the point that religious faith does not require people to reject human reason. The truths revealed by faith complement the truths revealed by reason. They don’t contradict them. There is much that Christians have to accept on faith but nothing to stop them accepting with equal assurance the truths of science and human wisdom. The doctrine of the virgin birth, for instance, requires Catholics to believe that Jesus was conceived without sin – not to doubt the ordinary rules of biology. Christians are not required to believe in religious magic just that there are reasons which reason cannot know.

Although it was clearly transcendental truth to which the Gospel writer was referring when Jesus said “know the truth and the truth will set you free”, there’s no sense in the Gospels of compelling people to believe or forcing people to be free. Jesus drove the traders from the temple because they were profaning a sacred place, not because they’d argued over theology. The only instance of anything resembling coercion in the Gospels is when one of the party arresting Jesus has his ear sliced off – and the perpetrator was the impulsive Peter not Jesus. Between Constantine and the counter-reformation, Catholicism was frequently compulsory but, these days, the Vatican supports the right to religious freedom as ferociously as it affirms the truths of the faith.

A “Doctrinal Note on the Participation of Catholics in Political Life”, which the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in late 2002, states that the “autonomy of the political or civil sphere from that of religion and the Church – but not from that of morality – is a value which has been attained and recognised by the Catholic Church and belongs to the inheritance of contemporary civilisation”. Although the document notes that Catholics cannot lead parallel private and public lives, one governed by the rules of the Church and the other ruled by the spirit of the age, it also states that the Pope has warned many times against the confusion of the religious and political spheres. “Extremely sensitive situations arise when a specifically religious norm...becomes the law of a state”, the documents says. “In practice, the identification of religious law with civil law can stifle

religious freedom even going so far as to restrict or deny inalienable human rights". Catholic politicians, in other words, should live in accordance with faith, hope and charity but try to ensure that the civic order reflects prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice – the universal virtues first elaborated by Aristotle.

The problem with laws allowing doctors to kill the terminally ill is not that they offend Church teaching but that they are contrary to human wisdom. There is a fundamental difference between relieving pain (which is simple humanity) and ending life (which is contrary to the pre-Christian Hippocratic injunction to do no harm). Withdrawing treatment from people who would otherwise be dead is fundamentally different from killing people who would otherwise be alive. Christian revelation was not necessary to form the view that the Northern Territory euthanasia law converted human beings into disposable commodities to be put down when old, useless or in pain. It seems that a strong majority of MPs, of whom many were not Catholic and some not Christian, wondered whether the point of these laws was not so much to ease the pain of the dying (for whom anaesthesia is available) but to ease the pain of their relatives who can't be anaesthetised against the mystery and terror of death.

The problem with laws allowing experimentation with embryos is not that they are contrary to Church teaching but that they don't show the ordinary respect due to human life. An embryo may not literally be a human being but it certainly has the potential to become one and therefore deserves a better fate than to expire in a beaker or be experimented upon like a laboratory animal. The fact that most test-tube embryos will eventually be allowed to "succumb", persuaded, it seems, a parliamentary majority that they might as well be put to some good use. Confronted with two unpalatable and unavoidable options, it's morally permissible to choose the lesser evil but not to choose the lesser evil when no choice is necessary. Christian faith is not an essential pre-condition for serious worry about where this type of utilitarianism might lead.

The problem with the contemporary Australian practice of abortion is that an objectively grave matter has been reduced to a question of the mother's convenience. Aborting a first trimester foetus is not morally identical to deliberately killing a living human being but it's not just removing a wart or a cyst either. Even those who think that abortion is a woman's right should be troubled by the fact that 100,000 Australian women choose to destroy their unborn babies every year. What does it say about the state of our relationships and our values that so many women (and their husbands, lovers and families) feel incapable of coping with a pregnancy or a child?

To a pregnant 14 year old struggling to grasp what's happening, a senior student with a whole life mapped out or a mother already failing to cope under difficult circumstances, abortion is the easy way out. It's hardly surprising that people should choose the most convenient exit from awkward situations. What seems to be considered far less often is avoiding situations where difficult choices might arise. Our society has rightly terrified primary school children about the horrors of smoking but seems to take it for granted that adolescents will have sex despite the grim social consequences of teenage single parenthood. If half the effort were put into discouraging teenage promiscuity as into preventing teenage speeding, there might be fewer abortions, fewer traumatised young women and fewer dysfunctional families.

Why isn't the fact that 100,000 women choose to end their pregnancies regarded as a national tragedy approaching the scale (say) of Aboriginal life expectancy being 20 years less than that of the general community? No one wants to recreate the backyard abortion clinic (or to stigmatise the millions of Australians who have had abortions or encouraged others to do so) but is it really so hard to create a culture where people understand that actions have consequences and take responsibilities seriously?

As a local MP, I am regularly challenged over the Government's policy on the detention of boat people. "How can you live with yourself as a Catholic", the argument runs, "when your government treats women and children with such cruelty?" When it comes to lobbying local politicians, there seems to be far more interest in the treatment of boat people, which is not morally black and white, than in the question of abortion which is. Oddly enough, no local Christian has ever asked me how, as a Catholic, I can preside over a Medicare system which funds 75,000 abortions a year.

I fear there is no satisfactory answer to this question. Christians are not required to right every wrong. Christian politicians are not required to promote policies for which there is no constituency. As it happens, the Government gives nearly \$1 million a year to "pro-life" family planning groups (but \$13 million to "pro-choice" groups) and provides a quarter of a million dollars to the Federation of Pregnancy Support Services. Still, as a gesture of support for traditional values, this lacks even the drama of King Baudoin of Belgium's abdication for a day rather than sign an abortion bill into law.

In numerous important ways, the Howard Government has not been a creature of the zeitgeist. The Government has facilitated the parliamentary overthrow of the Northern Territory's assisted suicide law, banned human cloning, stopped the ACT heroin trial, backed the Catholic bishops' challenge to lesbian IVF, singled out stay-at-home mums for extra financial assistance, generously helped religious schools and, most recently, sought to allow Catholic schools to offer scholarships to male teachers. Even so, as a measure of the moral health of our society, 100,000 terminated babies is a statistic which offers no comfort at all.

These days, there are two broad types of "Christian in politics". There's the Christian MP who seeks to reinforce ethical values and the Christian MP who's keen to promote the "social Gospel". The latter tends to be far less concerned about criminal behaviour, for instance, than the poor social conditions which allegedly cause it. This type of Christian is more interested in what governments can do for people than in what people might do for each other. In essence, the social Gospel seems to mean that Christians' charitable obligations should largely be taken over by government. In the hands of some Christian activists, Jesus' admonition to the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give the money to the poor has become a political imperative for governments.

Paradoxically, Christians of this sort are less likely to be labelled religious bigots than those who stress the Ten Commandments, even though they are attempting to apply in public life the theological virtue of charity rather than the natural virtue of justice. Individuals giving away their fortunes inspire others to lead more selfless lives. Governments increasing social

security benefits can easily discourage people from thrift and responsibility. Heroic virtue in an individual can be monumental folly in a government. Perhaps this is what Napoleon meant when he said he'd rather be governed by a wise Muslim than a foolish Christian.

It's easy to confuse the Christian calling of individuals with the public duty of governments. Love is a fine guide for individuals but folly for governments. It's a niggardly individual who only gives others their due but an unfair government which does otherwise. Still, confused thinking about how to help the vulnerable is better than none at all. The sense that things aren't right and that every person has a duty to make a difference is at the heart of the Christian calling and helps to explain the relative strength and solidarity of countries like ours.

For Christian politicians, McAuley offers a final consoling insight:

...It is not said we shall succeed,  
Save as his Cross prevails:  
The good we choose and mean to do  
Prosper if he wills it to,  
And if not, then it fails.

Nor is failure our disgrace:  
By ways we cannot know  
He keeps the merit in his hand,  
And suddenly as no-one planned,  
Behold the kingdom grow!