



## CATHOLICISM, PROTESTANTISM, AND TONY ABBOTT

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**T**here is nothing like travel to cleanse the doors of perception about one's native soil. This article was written after weeks spent in Europe last year, during which time the normally calm waters of Australian politics have been ruffled greatly. On 3 December New South Wales acquired its fourth Premier in four years (and its first female Premier ever): the Las Vegas-born Kristina Keneally, who presides over a State Labour Party government so inept — and so widely acknowledged to be so, even or especially by Labour supporters — that it might well be crushingly defeated at the next election (due in 2011) if the Liberal Opposition were not more inept still. Two days before Mrs Keneally's elevation, Malcolm Turnbull — previously boss of the Australian Republican Movement — was deposed as Australia's Federal Liberal leader by former Health Minister Tony Abbott, who thus became his party's fourth leader in two years.

Abbott won by one vote. Unlike Turnbull, who was generally despised rather than hated (as was his predecessor in the Liberal leadership, the bland Brendan Nelson), Abbott inspires not only genuine hate but genuine fear. This fear has nothing to do with his much-advertised scepticism about anthropogenic global warming. Other prominent Federal Liberal parliamentarians, notably Western Australia's veteran Wilson Tuckey and South Australia's comparative newcomer Nick Minchin, have been equally sceptical about climate change without attracting comparable invective. Abbott is a marked man for one reason: he is a Roman Catholic, who seems genuine in his faith and who has a clear notion of what Catholic moral teachings are. Any discussion about Abbott involves discussing Australian Catholicism, a topic indispensable to any understanding of Australian politics.

The most obvious difference between the position of Catholics in Australia and that of Catholics in post-1688 England rests on this fact: in Australia, Sir Richard Bourke — New South Wales's eighth governor — brought about formal Anglican disestablishment in 1831. Bourke, himself Anglican, might have preferred to retain the Church's privileges; but what was practicable in Tunbridge Wells could not be enforced in the infant colony, which had too few Anglicans to go around, and too many non-Anglicans (Dissenters and Jews as well as Catholics). Accordingly, Bourke declared all religions equal before the law.

Irish migration to Australia, though great, never reached (even after the Famine) the levels of Irish migration to America. Hence, the whole tone of Australian Irish politics nowhere achieved the intensity and radicalism of American Irish politics. Australia had no Molly Maguires, few genuine Fenians, and no sadistic official strike-breaking goon-squads of the kind notorious from nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American labour struggles. No Ku Klux Klan either. Trade union leaders in Australia, unless they were outright Communists, were somewhat stolid, unglamorous men, usually with an Irish Catholic (occasionally with a Methodist) background even if they had themselves abandoned churchgoing, and with no more enthusiasm for revolution than had the typical German Social Democrat.

In America in 1929, shortly after American public life had been convulsed by the hope or the dread that a Catholic, Alfred E. Smith, would enter the White House, Australia calmly elected its first Catholic Prime Minister: James Scullin. When the Depression-battered Scullin lost office in a landslide two years later, he lost to yet another Catholic, Joseph Lyons. As the eminent Protestant historian Geoffrey Blainey observed: 'Between 1929 and 1949 Irish Australians, three of whom were Catholics and one [*John Curtin during the Second World War*] a lapsed Catholic, held the post of prime minister in every year but two ... perhaps in no other Protestant part of the world had Catholics enjoyed such political success.' This record of solid administrative experience had a parallel in the Catholic Labour domination of New South Wales's, Tasmania's, and Queensland's legislatures for decades on end. It also prevented Australian Catholics from succumbing to the messianic delusions which made their American co-religionists, in 1960, so naively vulnerable to John F. Kennedy and his mendacious propaganda.

No overt legal discrimination against Catholics existed in Australia after the 1830s. Unofficially, Catholics could be employed in some bureaucratic departments, but not others. Until the 1980s they found it more difficult to enter the professions than their per capita numbers would suggest (and this despite the fact that no Australian Catholic hierarch followed the lead of Cardinal Manning by putting an interdict on Catholic attendance at particular colleges). Plenty of Ian-Paisley-style venom against 'the Whore of Babylon' found its way into such ultra-Protestant Australian magazines as *The Rock*, which in the 1950s sold 30,000 copies per issue. Even so, and crucially, there was no equivalent of the USA's anti-Catholic coalition between ultra-Protestantism and the Jewish Left (a coalition which guaranteed that whilst a genuine Catholic in 1960 could never have hoped for the American Presidency, an ersatz-Catholic like JFK brought out the Jewish vote in record numbers).

When Catholic electoral patterns became a live issue in Australia between 1954 and the early 1970s, the warfare occurred overwhelmingly not between Catholics and Protestants, but within Catholicism itself. It sprang from the activities of Australia's most prominent and gifted twentieth-century layman, B. A. Santamaria. No praise can be too high for Santamaria's original campaigns, to eliminate Communist control of Australia's trade unions. Unfortunately, once he proceeded to turn his fire upon his fellow Catholics, particularly on those Catholic hierarchs of impeccable anti-Communist credentials who happened to displease him, he undid the benefits of his own fine work. The outcome, illustrating perfectly the law of unintended consequences, was to marginalise *pur sang* Catholicism in Australian political life, for a long time and perhaps forever.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, all this changed. Paisleyite pastors who once had bellowed

from the pulpit about Pius XII's grand plot to invade Sydney Harbour in a submarine now found themselves hard-pressed to find a pulpit. Australian Catholics, on their side, lost their old certitudes. To some extent this loss merely reflected what overtook Catholicism in other countries; but in Australia, three strong Archbishops who had upheld doctrinal standards – and would probably have protected local Catholicism from the worst of Vatican II's dire legacy – died or retired within ten years of each other. From 1970 the Latin Mass disappeared from Australian churches, thus breaking many hearts, particularly when it grew apparent that anybody who pined for the centuries-old liturgy would be treated by the church establishment as a common criminal. (Most Australian dioceses have remained scandalously indifferent to Benedict XVI's freeing-up of the Latin Mass in 2007.)

Large-scale university education became available to millions of Australian Catholics (and non-Catholics) from 1973; by 1980 Australian Catholics had penetrated the higher reaches of that last WASP Establishment hold-out, the Liberal Party. Later the Liberals produced their first Catholic State Premier: the Budapest-born Nick Greiner, who ran New South Wales from 1988 to 1992. Even Turnbull presented himself as a Catholic convert, though his apparently endless enthusiasm for taxpayer-funded abortion would probably have brought about his excommunication if he lived in the States. Now we have an aspiring Prime Minister, who is a devout if flawed Catholic.

His chances of defeating Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at the next Federal election, which must take place before November 2010, are minimal. So far, Rudd (ever since his 2007 electoral triumph over John Howard, who lost his own parliamentary seat) has enjoyed opinion poll approval ratings unmatched by any of his predecessors except, briefly in the mid-1980s, Bob Hawke. Rudd is a polished media performer who speaks skilfully in the House of Representatives as well as on the hustings or in the more choreographed location of a press conference. Mercifully, he has not adopted the self-destructive idiocy of intellectual slumming. Hawke, in spite of being an Oxford graduate born to upper-middle-class privilege, affected a yob persona as repellent as it was fraudulent. Rudd, born to genuine indigence, has never looked or acted like anything other than what he is: a former scholarship winner, who can construct grammatical if convoluted sentences, and has read some serious thinkers. The general esteem he continues to attract is for him rather than for his party. No-one among his cabinet ministers looks like an obvious heir, should he resign or perish. Few among his cabinet ministers – the exception is Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard — would be known even by name, let alone by sight, to the average voter. Cartoonists in the daily Australian newspapers toil vainly to make them identifiable. Miss Gillard, however, is a cartoonist's delight, with her shock of straight red hair and beaky nose. So are Abbott and his precursors, less through their facial features than through their sheer unpopularity.

Abbott is confronted with the problem which faces any intelligent Australian Catholic for whom religion means something: the complete lack, in the Australia of 2010, not so much of a Catholic culture as of a Catholic infrastructure. Fifty-odd or sixty-odd years ago Abbott could well have been a Catholic Premier of his native New South Wales, but the reason the actual holders of that office in the 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s tended to be unpretentious, nuts-and-bolts folk, lay in the sanctions which their own church would have imposed on them for spectacular villainy. Australia was fortunate, back then, in the calibre of its Catholic clerical leadership. Had John Joseph Cahill, New South Wales's Catholic Premier from 1952 till his death in 1959, been a kleptocrat, a drunkard or a drug-user, he would never have received from any Australian Catholic cleric the automatic benison that Boston and New York Cardinals lavished on the more odious Kennedy

scions. Cahill would have been politically annihilated within a week.

Today Australian Catholicism is, but for the flamboyant Sydney-based Cardinal George Pell, bereft of diocesan leaders respected (or even known) outside their own communion. The country's other Catholic bishops seldom rise above tolerable mediocrity, but overall they are free from personal malevolence and are chaste in thought, word and deed. To them, the wilder shores of 'love', as notoriously explored by episcopal priapists in Ireland, are unfamiliar. Nor are Australian bishops heretical. A generation ago, many of their predecessors engaged in nudge-nudge defiance of the Vatican on sexual subjects, and ignored the Vatican on almost everything else. These days such defiance has grown rare, if only because lay Catholics too young to remember any pope before John Paul II tend to be orthodox upholders of Catholic sexual policy, and could well make life uncomfortable for any bishop who openly challenged that policy.

Any of Abbott's plans for long-term political survival will depend largely though not exclusively on whether 'John Paul II Catholics' (as well as those belonging to the traditional Lutheran and Presbyterian parishes) will support him. Would their support be enough to counteract the militant fury of those atheists who occupy the Australian media's commanding heights? These atheists' mission is to drive Abbott out of public life, as they have themselves admitted. The Atheist Nomenclatura in its anti-Abbott campaign includes plenty of ex-Catholics. Convent-school product Germaine Greer represents the ex-Catholic breed, notable more for the personal quality of her spite than for any fundamental differences between her and her less clever brethren. The Australian Communist Party, in its glory days before, during, and after World War II, consisted largely of erstwhile Catholic altar-servers with Hibernian surnames. Present-day Australia, like present-day Ireland, is awash with the 'misery memoirs' of ex-Catholics who, in the grand tradition of the late liar-in-chief Frank McCourt, have equipped themselves with fictional (but often extremely lucrative) backgrounds as childhood victims of cane-wielding Christian Brothers.

The Australian Atheist Nomenclatura's other ally against Abbott is the ordinary Catholic in the pews, or rather, usually away from the pews. Mass attendance is as low (around 15 per cent) among Australian Catholics as among British and Canadian Catholics. In 2010 the lay Australian Catholic is well fed, well housed, and endowed with much greater disposable income than his grandfather. He is likelier to have an Italian, Maltese, Lebanese, East Timorese, Chinese, or Filipino heritage than an Irish one. While his grandfather probably left school at thirteen, he will usually have a degree. Nevertheless he is more ignorant of his own faith than his grandfather would ever have thought feasible for anyone neither a Marxist nor half-witted. Theology usually means nothing to him. Nor do Catholic history and most Catholic Anglophone literature. Entirely vanished is the noble tradition of Australian Catholic blue-collar autodidacticism, by which farm-hands, boilermakers and apprentice bricklayers spent their few leisure hours in the nearest library.

It is an alarming experience to meet Catholics who, notwithstanding their first-class honours degrees in business studies or accountancy, have failed to discover that any Catholic ever wrote any English-language book except *Lord of the Rings*. They are unlikely to cheer on someone whose own Catholic learning (like Abbott's) far surpasses their own. Their ignorance makes them easy prey for any atheist with a TV slot or a newspaper column. It also makes them the despair of their priests, who in Australia are usually pious and worthwhile men. Priests might well vote for Abbott. Will their flocks do so?

Even if Abbott could somehow subdue his atheist tormentors, he suffers from being, in a sense, a leader without a party. He would never have attained the Liberal leadership in the first place, except for his fellow Liberals' unwilling admission that they are staring down the barrel of the same gun which finished off a previous anti-Labour group, the United Australia Party (UAP), during the 1940s.

Sir Robert Menzies started a new right-wing movement from scratch, and — freed from the UAP incubus — went on to serve as Prime Minister for nearly seventeen years (1949-66). Tragically, Menzies failed to groom a fitting successor. Would that he had been followed as Liberal leader by someone with his own administrative courage. As it was, the Liberals between 1966 and 1975 groaned under four of the most risible lightweights ever to sully a First World nation. The ethical fibre of one such lightweight, Sir John Gorton — Prime Minister, after a fashion, from 1968 to 1971 — can be summarised in one solitary jibe by subsequent PM Gough Whitlam: 'Before this [1969] campaign began we had a distinct understanding — that he wouldn't tell any lies about me if I didn't tell the truth about him.' With leaders instead of time-servers at the Liberal helm, we would probably have been spared the reigns of Whitlam, Hawke, and Paul Keating.

Abbott enjoys personality in abundance. Perhaps that is a clue to his ultimate political fate. If he were to embrace his inner Barry Goldwater, he would almost certainly still lose the next election; but he would lose it with decorum, and what is more, with a sense of setting his opponents' subsequent agenda, as Senator Goldwater himself did. Rudd knows that (given the inability of the quite personable former Tourism Minister Joe Hockey to survive even the first round of December's Liberal leadership ballot) Abbott is the sole possible opposition leader who is not merely a joke. He might be able to give Labour a salutary scare in 2010. Nobody else now in parliament can. Remove Abbott from the political equation, and Rudd — unless he does something incredibly reckless — will be tempted to echo the ugly boast of Louisiana's four-term Governor Edwin Edwards. About one gubernatorial contest, Edwards bragged: 'The only way I can lose this election is if I'm caught in bed with either a dead girl or a live boy.'

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