Pell, Brown in Unholy Strife

Canberra Times, Page: 19

By John Warhurst

Thursday, 12 August 2010

Badblood has been brewing between the Greens and certain Christian leaders for some time. Now it has boiled over. The Leader of the Greens, Senator Bob Brown, and the senior Catholic leader, Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, have engaged in a vitriolic slanging match.

If Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott are considered too disciplined and careful, and if voters really want our leaders to speak their minds openly, then Brown and Pell are alternative models. But in fact their exchange leaves a lot to be desired.

Cardinal Pell made an extremely strong attack on the Greens in Sydney’s Sunday Telegraph last Sunday, describing them, in extravagant language, as "thoroughly anti-Christian". He concluded that "for those who value our present way of life, the Greens are sweet camouflaged poison". Not surprisingly, Senator Brown responded in kind that Cardinal Pell’s opinions "do not represent mainstream Christian thinking" and that "the good archbishop has forgotten the ninth commandment, which is thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbour".

The Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney then retorted with a stinging rebuke claiming that Senator Brown wanted to "redefine Catholic beliefs" and that "it is a pity he is better at spin than checking his facts." This aggressive statement concluded that "Australians thinking of voting Green as a kind of protest against the major parties, especially in the Senate where the Greens could hold the balance of power, owe it to themselves and their families at least to study the Greens’ policies." This controversy produced heated online conversation among Catholics on sites such as Cath News and Eureka Street magazine.

The Jesuit priest Frank Brennan, entered the fray in an article in Eureka Street article headlined "Why a conscientious Christian could vote for the Greens". He defined his own differences with the Greens, including over abortion, stem cell research, same-sex marriage and funding for church schools, but concluded that on some other policy issues, like overseas aid, refugees and income management, "I daresay the Greens have a more Christian message than the major parties".

He also described the language of the Cardinal as "unbecoming and unhelpful in the cause of church credibility in the public square".

The stakes are high because 13 per cent of Australians reportedly support the Greens (Newspoll, August 6-8) and the party is poised to hold the balance of power in the Senate from July 2011. Furthermore, Greens preferences might decide the next government. This is not just a satellite circuit bout but mainstream politics. About 5-8 per cent of Australians are regular churchgoing Catholics.

There is no real engagement.
Both sides are using megaphone diplomacy and exaggeration. As the jibes become more and more personal, each side becomes more and more entrenched in their positions and the prospects of dialogue become even more unlikely. The quality of Australian political discourse suffers as a consequence.

Pell, close to Tony Abbott, and Brown, in a preference deal with Labor, are miles apart politically. Their core constituencies overlap slightly but mostly have little in common. Greens poll relatively poorly among regular churchgoers and have disproportionately high support among secular Australians.

Pell exercises greatest authority among regular church-attending Catholics at the conservative end of the spectrum. Some Catholics listen equally attentively and respectfully to what both men have to say but they are a minority.

Those who are anti-Brown and pro-Pell or vice versa will be reinforced in their prejudices.

What matters is how swinging Christian voters, relatively few but important, react. These are the voters that both Pell and Brown should be trying to reach if they can rise above their antagonisms.

Whether church-going Christians support the Greens depends on their priorities. Some will be enthusiastic devotees, but most middle of the road Christians will conscientiously try to balance what they like and dislike about them.

This is especially important in an election when many voters, not all of them already declared for the Greens, are disenchanted with the major parties. In the absence in most jurisdictions of an effective centrist minor party, like the Democrats, an unfortunate aspect of Cardinal Pell’s intervention is that he is effectively reinforcing the two-party system.

One consequence intended or otherwise, is that this exchange sinks more moderate, collective attempts by church leaders to enter the election debate. For instance, was it just coincidence that Cardinal Pell’s article appeared the day before the official statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference? They would be collectively wringing their hands, as their contribution has been totally overshadowed, including their view that “the church does not take sides in party politics”.

Yet, committed to unity, there is little they can do publicly, despite being gazumped by Cardinal Pell for the third time in the last five elections.

Both Pell and Brown have lessons to learn. Cardinal Pell’s long held views are reinforced by NSW state politics, where he has been pursued by Lee Rhiannon and John Kaye, as well as national Green politics. The NSW Greens have a distinctively assertive character and Rhiannon, the No. 1 Senate candidate, has a radical background. Furthermore, despite disagreements over family values and life and death issues, it is education policy, notably the first topic mentioned in the church rejoinder, that is most important to the church and this self-interested issue, that has defined Australian Catholic history, unites many moderate and conservative Catholics like no other.
Senator Brown, for his part, should learn from the moderate tone and careful analysis in Brennan’s article. Brown was goaded into over-reacting, making claims that even Catholics sceptical of Pell’s views but still somewhat deferential to his position would not accept as reasonable.

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