



AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR  
**CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE**

WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

## **‘Christian Advocacy in Australian Society’**

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*Christians for an Ethical Society Forum*

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## ***Introduction***

Thank you for doing me the honour of inviting me to be your incoming president. I was flattered and very pleased by the invitation and I'll certainly do my best to do justice to the position. I've chosen the topic "Christian Advocacy in Australian Society" for my talk tonight with the aim of putting Christians for an Ethical Society in a broader context not only of direct advocacy by Christian organisations but also indirect advocacy by Christians whose professional life lies within secular organisations.

I'm an optimistic person by nature. That means that I am hopeful about the possibilities of building a more ethical society. Christian advocates do a good job in trying circumstances. But I am also aware of how difficult that task will always be in the face of competing visions of the good society. We should be hopeful but realistic and resilient.

I've spent my life working in public universities in which it is rare for one's church affiliation to be recognised. In preparing for tonight's talk I have pondered again what it means to be a public Christian because my public identity as a Christian of the Catholic variety has evolved slowly from the late 1980s/early 1990s onwards. In the past I have accepted membership of Christian peak bodies when invited to do so because of my expertise and experience, wishing to make a contribution towards a better society and seeing such bodies as an obvious way to do so given my background.

Over the last few weeks, drawing on my professional background as a political scientist and student of pressure groups and lobbying, I've asked myself the question "Why do Christians per se come together to advocate, lobby and give voice to our concerns?" The answer is not as simple or self-evident as you might think. There are several possible answers to that question.

Firstly, it could be just because we have a tribal affiliation to our own kind of people based on common religious tradition or even class or ethnic background. We know that historically denominations in Australia are a mix of ethnic and religious characteristics, including English-Anglicans, Scots-Presbyterians and Irish-Catholics. We may be doing just what comes most easily to us. We are among like-minded friends who enjoy coming together.

However, in doing so, we must recognise that by choosing to be a Christian organisation we are organising Christians in and organising non-believers out of our group and we need to be aware of the consequences of that in terms of how our advocacy is seen by the general community as we operate in an increasingly secular society.

Secondly, organisation and advocacy also could be seen as largely self-interested defence of our material interests and religious privileges. Churches certainly have a long history of doing this in Australian politics. The defence of religious schools is a prime example. The current debate over the Gonski 2.0 federal government funding for school education has seen Christian advocacy making the case for the maintenance or increase of public funding for Independent and Christian Schools.

Thirdly, as the CES Charter suggests, it could be to advocate for our distinctive values. But we constantly argue among ourselves about what our Christian values and priorities should be so even that motivation demands further definition. Furthermore, the major organisational principle for Christians over the long course of Australian white history has been denominational rather than ecumenical. It has been more common for denominations to operate independently and often even in conflict with each other rather than together.

The most convincing answer for me is a combination of all these possible explanations. Christians are a tribe with common values, distinctive material interests and often particular social positions and ethnic backgrounds.

We Christians all wear many hats and can choose between them, but we choose on this occasion to come together as Christians per se rather than in separate denominations. We could also come together as Canberrans, as public servants, as academics, as mothers or fathers, retirees or as many other things, including membership of mainstream secular organisations. By definition we are making a statement that it is a priority for us to gather together as Christians.

In doing so we may also be taking issue with what others calling themselves 'Christian' are advocating. Christians send mixed messages to the community about what their values and priorities in life are. It is a great weakness in Christian advocacy. Perhaps a subtext of our name is that we want to distinguish ourselves from fellow Christians who do not share our values. Is there such a thing as 'Christians against an Ethical Society'?

## ***Why am I here this evening?***

The simple answer is that I was asked to take on the position of President by someone for whom I have great admiration and whom I have known for some time, Bishop George Browning. We first came together on the Yes side during the 1999 republic referendum campaign. I was impressed then that a religious leader would speak out so strongly on such a contentious issue, one which clearly divided his flock. I was also struck then by his powerful argument that leadership is

impossible unless the leader is deeply embedded in the community which they have elected to serve.

I was already aware of CES when the invitation was extended and had attended some events. Nevertheless, I should be regarded as a CES newcomer; but the Charter of CES resonates so strongly with me that it is hard to see how any Christian or any other person could disagree with it.

The vision of the charter is for the followers of Christ to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God”. Its objectives are:

To strengthen social justice and ethical structures in Australia, to promote social justice as a core Christian value, and to further public education in ethics, current social justice issues and the Christian perspective on them.

These objectives are like those of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) on which I served for seven years in the 1990s. As an ACSJC past chairman, Bishop Christopher Saunders has said: “it is certainly the place of the church to speak up in defence of the least powerful and to participate in public debate where there are issues of justice at stake”.

The deeper answer to the question of ‘why I am I here this evening’ is that I do believe that Christians as Christians should focus on trying to make society more ethical through pursuit of the common good.

But Christians can still do this in many ways, including through individual participation in secular organisations. The history of the Australian Council of Social Service, for instance, provides a good example of Christians doing just that alongside secular Australians. I learnt when writing a short history of Catholic Social Services Australia in 2016 that when the Australian Council of Social Services was created in the mid-1950s many individual Christian leaders played a leading role in its formation and have continued to take leadership and support positions in state and territory councils of social services as well as on the national body. Those Christians saw it as natural that they should support both Christian and secular organisations working in partnership in the same field.

Christians still do. The national members of ACOSS currently include many Christian members, including the leading welfare agencies of the biggest churches. I’m delighted that CES as a matter of principle “seeks to join with all persons of goodwill, regardless of their religious beliefs”. We should all be in the fight for justice together regardless of whether our beliefs have a religious foundation or not.

## ***Christians Collectively in Public Life***

The Christian voice is like a vast and variegated smorgasbord. Christians are such a huge and diverse part of the Australian community (52% of Australians in the 2016 Census] that it is not surprising that Australian Christianity encompasses just about every social and political opinion you can think of from left to right and everywhere in between.

Within the Christian community organisations like Christians for an Ethical Society are relatively rare in public life. The major exception which lays claim to the term 'Christian' is the conservative lobby group, Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), which under Jim Wallace and Lyle Shelton has maintained a high profile in Australian politics for more than a decade. I have researched ACL for some time and as a political scientist I think they have much to teach other Christians with different views about how to interact with politics. Over the past decade or more, beginning with a high-profile campaign function in 2007 that attracted both John Howard and Kevin Rudd, they have been creative and energetic in their use of technology in campaigning and in their ability to interact with senior political leaders through conferences and other public events.

There are other non-official lay groups like the St Vincent de Paul Society with considerable public recognition and acceptance. The activities of Vinnies range from grass-roots delivery of practical services to the disadvantaged through their local parish and conference networks to powerful advocacy at the national level on matters such as poverty and economic inequality. Each February Vinnies conducts its annual door-knock appeal and I am always struck as a collector by how much support it attracts from the general community. Although it is a far cry from support for charity and personal generosity to general support for just economic and social structures.

Who else speaks for Christians? The major Christian voices in public debate are still church leaders and church employees speaking *ex officio*. Some of the church leaders, including the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, are relatively well organised. They speak as individuals and as a loose collective but their impact as advocates is restricted by declining public respect for their role.

Some of the church agencies in all denominations play an admirable role in the formulation of public policies in social welfare, education, aged care and health. These agencies are also advocates through their peak bodies located in Canberra as well as their main function as service deliverers.

There is definitely a place for other groups like CES representing Christians at a distance from officialdom. Perhaps it means we can say things as a non-official sub-set of the faithful that official

churches or agencies are unwilling to do or find it hard to do. But we must always be clear about our niche and how it relates to all the other Christian voices in the field.

## ***The Conservative Image of Australian Christianity***

We must be clear about where we stand because the public image of Australian Christianity is overwhelmingly conservative. There are several reasons for this and the conservative image prevails despite progressive Christian advocacy on many issues, led by advocates like Rev Tim Costello and Fr Frank Brennan.

The official advocacy image is defined by Sydney church leaders from the Anglican and Catholic churches and by the largest Christian lobby group, the Australian Christian Lobby. In addition to this the most prominent political leaders who frame themselves as defenders of Christianity are conservatives like Scott Morrison, Cory Bernardi and Tony Abbott. The image is aided and abetted by sloppy mass media which is rarely informed or careful in its delineation of Christianity and by the understandable emphasis on sexual morality issues in public debate.

## ***Christians and Secular Australians***

A second problem is that, unfortunately, Christians and secular Australians are often framed in opposition to one another. Christians for our part contribute to this and are often guilty of speaking from a self-satisfied, even self-righteous, position in comparison to non-believers. We all know the defensive retort which can be resorted to when Christians are attacked by atheists for our views: 'So how many hospitals do you run then?'

Within my own church official spokespersons are inclined to speak in military terms about the battle with secularism. Just last week the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher, used the annual Red Mass to make a plea in florid language to NSW lawyers to defend religious freedom against "growing militant secularism". He said that obviously in the climate generated by the same sex marriage debate and a likely on-going debate about religious freedom in the months ahead, but the approach has a much longer history.

That type of 'circling the wagons' tone is just not helpful in building relations within the wider community. It also encourages a wider sense of a faith community which is too defensive and embattled rather than positive and outward looking. It is not a useful basis upon which to confidently enter the public square.

Furthermore, the allegedly 'militant secularism' to which the archbishop refers contains many distinct issues, such as gender equality, values education, and sexual freedom, which should be debated on their own terms rather than reduced to a single package. Many people of faith share the attitudes of secular Australians, as shown by the SSM postal survey and church leaders should engage with their own constituents about their values before purporting to represent their views in a battle against secularism.

Even inferring that Christian social engagement is always of a different (read 'better') character to secular activities is often not true in my experience. This was the case in the 1990s, for instance, during the debate over the role of church agencies in social services to the unemployed when the notion that 'we Christians do it better and more selflessly' was used by some as an argument for a greater share of government contracts.

On the contrary the annual Palm Sunday marches are a model for Christian and secular Australians working side by side. Here in Canberra I have written in the Canberra Times about Christian participation in such events, many marching under the banner of local parish churches and under the leadership of church leaders such as bishops Stephen Pickard and Pat Power as well as featuring speakers such as Dr John Falzon of Vinnies. But the general organisation is done by a secular organisation, the Refugee Action Committee.

Dr John Minns, the convener of the Refugee Action Committee, is one of my local heroes. He has reached out to Christians in order to build alliances because he recognises what Christians have to offer, although as far as I know he does not see himself as a member of the Christian community. John and the RAC are models of the type of personal sacrifice and persistence which public engagement with enduring mainstream attitudes and powerful government actions demands. They persist in the face of failure and have an inspiring hope that success will eventually come.

More generally I have the utmost respect for and personal identification with Doctors without Borders/Medecins sans Frontiers (MSF). I've spent my whole life surrounded by news of the work of church missionaries in countries such as India, Peru and the Philippines and count some of them as personal friends. I admire their personal sacrifices and I see an organisation like MSF in the same light. It is an independent organisation for medical humanitarian aid with 30,000 staff world-wide providing assistance to people devastated by economic and political crises around the world. Each year about 200 Australians and New Zealanders are sent to and supported in the field by MSF Australia. The current focus includes support for Rohingya refugees around the Myanmar/Bangladesh border and refugees from the Syrian crisis. I'm in awe of their personal sacrifices, driven by a humanist altruism that anyone must admire. There are most probably

Christians among them, but they have chosen to spend their lives working in a secular organisation.

My general point is that the aim of Christians should always be to work alongside secular Australians and to make allies, share sacrifices and build bridges between secular and faith-based individuals and organisations. I know already many do this and their joint advocacy is consequently stronger and more effective.

## ***Christians for Ethical Churches***

It is also important that Christian advocates demand the highest ethical standards from their own churches. Christians must lead by example both individually and collectively. We should never neglect exercising influence within our own churches even if we are tempted to give up on them. This is not just so as to keep our own houses in order to avoid the charge of hypocrisy, but also to utilise the existing powerful official channels to influence society and government.

That is what Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn (CC), which I chair, has been attempting to do since its formation last April. CC believes that cultural, governance and structural change must take place within that church to adequately respond to the crimes and weaknesses, actions and inactions, revealed by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. It stands for values and aspirations which should appeal to the wider Christian community, including new models of church and more effective lay participation, internal democracy, responsibility and transparency, and equal participation of women in key decision-making. It advocates these aspirations at the local, diocesan, national and even international level with particular reference to a national synod of the Australian Catholic Church which is to be held in 2020-2021. CC believes that only once such changes are undertaken can this church act more justly and speak with greater conviction in the public arena.

Our experience in CC so far has been interesting. We have been buoyed by the local response to our public events and encouraged that many people in our own church communities go out of their way to thank us for our efforts. There is a lot of good will but also bemusement, fatigue, resistance and hostility. We are often told we are unrepresentative because we don't represent either newer immigrant church communities or the younger generation, which is true. Cultural and structural change threatens the status quo, those who benefit from it and those who know no other way of doing things. The charge of being unrepresentative also hurts Christians for an Ethical Society and other progressive advocacy. Our efforts are undermined if political and church elites believe they can disregard us because we don't represent the majority of Christians.



CC is especially supportive of the efforts over the past five years by another Canberra hero, Francis Sullivan, CEO of the Truth Justice and Healing Council, which is the church's vehicle to coordinate its response to the Royal Commission. Just last week as his gruelling five-year term nears its end Sullivan called again for cultural reform, renewal and refreshment in the church because it had been demonstrated that "child sex abuse is about the abuse of power and the Catholic church unfortunately has a very bad history about the abuse of power-and not just in regard to the abuse of children".

Sullivan's time in office brought strong resistance within his church and for his grace and persistence under pressure he deserves the respect of all Christians concerned with building a more ethical society. His demonstrable skills combined public advocacy with dogged private negotiations with his own church leaders about the proper way to proceed.

He is another model for CES. If he proves to be successful as a lay person he will have built a stronger church with a better chance of influencing public debate. Advocacy must be built on strong foundations.

## ***Christians in International Aid and Development***

So how are we in faith-based communities doing in the advocacy business on international and domestic policies? I addressed some of these questions last February at Parliament House in a talk called "Government, Leaders and Faith in Australian Politics" to the Parliamentary Friends of Multiculturalism in Partnership with the Canberra Interfaith Forum and Religions for Peace Australia".

In that talk I made the point that the progressive voice of faith communities, though often flying under the radar unrecognised by the media, is remarkably loud and constant. Outside sexual morality issues the churches are more progressive than society at large. The CES Charter shows this.

In contemporary society there are many issues, including defending asylum seekers and refugees, opposition to human trafficking and slavery, advocating for social protection of the most vulnerable, supporting community housing for the homeless and acting responsibly in international aid and development, on which faith communities work strongly together and speak out loudly in unison. These campaigns are often not given the credit they deserve.

My involvement on the National Council of Caritas Australia for the past three years has drawn some of these campaigns to my attention, emphasising further how difficult it is to bring about positive change in government attitudes. Along with many other Christian and secular agencies

Caritas is a member of the peak body for NGOs in International development and humanitarian action, the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), and its CEO, Paul O'Callaghan, is an elected board member. ACFID's CEO Marc Purcell's background includes considerable experience working with Christian NGOs as does that of Susan Pascoe, previously the Charities Commissioner, who was elected President of ACFID late last year.

Faith-based organisations have been prominent in community opposition to the drastic cuts instigated by the present federal government to the budget expenditure on Australian aid. They also campaigned for a balanced treatment of foreign aid in the latest federal government Foreign Policy White Paper.

Many international development faith-based agencies have collaborated in campaigns such as the Stop the Clock initiative and Micah's Draw the Line campaign. Organisations involved included the Church Agencies Network (CAN) and Micah Australia.

CAN is a consortium of eleven Australian church-based aid and development agencies which are members of ACFID. It works with its constituencies to "inspire and empower people, providing avenues for them to engage in overcoming poverty and injustice". In its December 2016 Pre-Budget submission it called on the Australian government to

Redefine the core objective of Australia's official aid program so that it focusses principally on reducing poverty and 'achieving measurable sustainable development goals' rather than focussing principally on pursuing national interest.

Micah is a coalition of 15 churches and Christian organisations, together with nine associates, speaking up for justice and a world free from poverty. As well as the bigger churches Micah's membership includes the Churches of Christ and the Baptists, and the associates include Hillsong, the Lutherans and the Salvation Army.

Unfortunately, these faith-based organisations are 'swimming against the tide' in trying to make an impression on a foreign policy dominated by trade and security concerns. The recent Foreign Policy White Paper showed that they are not taken seriously enough.

A similar story can be told about advocacy for asylum seekers and refugees where the major peak NGO is the Refugee Council of Australia, which itself has a history of Christian leadership since its foundation meeting in 1981 in the boardroom of the Australian Council of Churches under its Jewish President, Major General Paul Cullen. Its current President, Phil Glendenning from the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Organisation, and its CEO, Paul Power, are both long-term Christian activists.

On February 3 2017 more than 70 organisations led by the Refugee Council called for an immediate evacuation to Australia of all those people held in detention centres. This included a dozen faith-based groups, some of them quite small but others broadly representative of big Christian churches and communities, including the Uniting Church in Australia, the largest Catholic lay organisation, the Vincent de Paul Society National Council and World Vision Australia led by Rev. Tim Costello. Other participating organisations, like the Refugee Action Committee include an active faith-based committee to plan campaigns such as Palm Sunday rallies with faith community involvement.

In the international sphere other notable faith-based collaborations have taken place around opposition to human trafficking and slavery through the Just Work network and Australian Catholic Religious against Trafficking in Humans.

## ***Christians in Domestic Politics***

My recent experience in the domestic sphere has been with a national advocacy body, Catholic Social Services Australia, and with a faith-based service delivery agency, Marist 180 (formerly Marist Youth Care), which delivers out of home care, foster care and school education, and also has worked with the Australian Red Cross on providing asylum seeker and refugee settlement services.

In social services, including economic policy, housing, poverty and inequality, the collaboration known as Major Church Providers (MCP) includes the Salvation Army, Anglicare, Unitingcare and Catholic Social Services working together. In a largely untold story it was this faith-based collaboration which did most to ensure that during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008-2009 the government response to potential economic crisis did not neglect the impact on social services. As a consequence of Christian advocacy and lobbying the government stimulus package included housing stimulus and other welfare measures.

Since then the MCP has been a constant, though admittedly unsuccessful voice urging the federal government to raise Newstart unemployment benefits to a living wage equivalent. Fr Frank Brennan, CEO of CSSA, spoke to CES about such poverty alleviation measures last year. The progressive faith-based organisations have often been located to the left of the major party consensus on this and other matters, taking up causes as the 'unofficial opposition' which Labor chooses to avoid. This often means common cause with the Greens, the most secular of the major Australian political parties. This political relationship with a minor party, derided by some church leaders, is often extremely helpful to Christian advocates. This is another example, like the Palm Sunday rallies, of fruitful collaboration with secular Australia.

Other notable faith-based collaborations in the domestic sphere have taken place around the struggle for gambling reform through the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce, and the battle for affordable community housing, through many church programs, including the Australian Catholic Housing Alliance.

## **Lessons**

There are lessons which CES can learn from these forays into Christian advocacy.

Firstly, priorities and Focus are essential. We must be clear about our goals and probably should not try to cover too wide a range of issues.

Secondly, projection of our message must utilise modern trends in media and communications management. We must be aware of how best to enter public debate. One of the lessons I've learned from Concerned Catholics is that effective advocacy requires professional media relations and communications advice. We've been fortunate to have it.

Thirdly, we should work within the existing political system as well as outside of it. That means relating to political parties, governments, public servants and courts. It means not only acting as an external ginger group but also taking up opportunities for insider influence through influential Christian and secular MPs.

Fourthly, collaboration among people of faith is essential. Going it alone often leads to weakness and division. "In unity is strength" is a motto that does not just apply to the labour movement but also to Christians. "United we stand, divided we fall" is not just a cliché but this lesson has been slowly learnt.

Fifthly, division rather than opposition is the greatest danger to any movement or organisation. Yet division is endemic. It follows that division among Christians is a greater obstacle to successful advocacy than the recently re-formed Australian Secular Lobby to the achievement of Christian goals. Christian division dilutes our message.

Sixthly, collaboration with like-minded people of no religious belief makes sense. It can be done both formally and informally. Simple-minded dichotomies between the religious and secular worlds should be rejected.

Faith-based organisations have almost always worked alongside secular NGOs and within secular peak organisations, like the Australian Council for International Development, the Refugee Council of Australia and the Australian Council of Social Service, through leadership roles as well as

through institutional and personal membership. Churches and individuals of faith have often played a leading role in setting up and maintaining these peak organisations. Long may this continue.

## **Conclusion**

In a pluralist society like Australia Christians bring a powerful and distinctive voice with a long and respected history of advocacy for the most vulnerable. We should be thankful of that.

But the weaknesses are clear too. The impact of that voice is often muddled through uncertainty about just who is speaking for Christians and just what Christian priorities are.

The shrinking size of the Christian community means that legitimate questions can be posed about just where it stands in the pecking-order of influence. It should surprise no-one that Christian influence has also shrunk.

Respect for what Christianity stands for, the Christian brand, has deservedly been shaken by the crimes and faults in the responses of the institutional churches to institutional child sexual abuse as revealed by the Royal Commission. The Gruen Project would be in no doubt that the Christian brand has been damaged.

Christians for an Ethical Society should be in no doubt that the task is big.

We are certainly not alone, including many Christian and secular allies, but we are outsiders to the mainstream political elite and prevailing conventional economic and political wisdom.

We should have high aspirations nevertheless, and there are examples in the world around us of how 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' (the song by singer song-writers, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody)

I'd like to finish by remembering the story of Ikea founder, Ingvar Kamprad, who died recently at the age of 91. Both his personal life, although not without its major flaws of judgement (he has apologised for an association 50 years ago with a pro-Nazi group), and his commercial success from very small beginnings struck me as offering hope and counsel to Christian advocates like those of us in CES.

His tiny boyhood business of selling pencils and seeds from his bicycle in Sweden eventually grew into the massive Ikea furniture chain.

The newspaper report of his death, written by Niklas Magnusson of Bloomberg ([SMH](#) January 30 2018) noted the following personal characteristics. “He drove an old Volvo, recycled tea bags and took home little bags of salt and pepper from restaurant visits”;

“He avoided wearing suits and ties and travelled economy when flying”. He was almost certainly mocked as an eccentric despite his commercial success.

The writer continued: “Ikea’s corporate culture mirrors Kamprad’s celebration of frugality. Executives of the company travel on low-cost airlines and lodge in budget hotels”

The two final lessons from this story are, firstly, that we must live in a style congruent with what we are advocating and, secondly, that even when the prospects of success appear small there are examples in all walks of life of success against the odds.