



# Growing influence of the Catholic view

## POLITICS

By Michael Moore



THE first female premier of NSW, Kristina Keneally, is described as a “staunch Catholic”.

“Staunch” is probably not a strong enough description for ex-seminarian Tony Abbott and some of his strident supporters. One pertinent example is Kevin Andrews whose zeal drove the nail into the coffin of Australia’s Voluntary Active Euthanasia legislation in the NT and the ACT.

In the ACT, Opposition Leader Zed Seselja and the majority of his team are practicing Catholics. But why should it matter if someone is a Catholic, I hear you ask – and especially if you are a Catholic yourself? It shouldn’t if the Catholic belief was not used to inflict a religious view on the rest of society. It should not matter at all.

However, take the issue of abortion. Surveys over the last few decades constantly show that the overwhelming majority of people believe that a woman should be able to choose for herself whether to continue with a pregnancy or to seek a termination. But legislatures seem to be completely out of step with community attitudes.

The feminist-leaning Queensland Premier, Anna Bligh, is unsure of the influence of Catholicism within the parliament to make her reluctant to wrestle with abortion after the RU486 issue in her State. It is also interesting that Premier Katrina Keneally, not only describes herself as a “staunch Catholic” but also as a “staunch feminist”. On the abortion issue, surely these two staunch concepts are in direct conflict?

The difficulty for a staunch Catholic is that should they support such an issue there is the danger of being tainted with mortal sin – with catastrophic consequences for their immortal soul. Of course, not all Catholics or all Catholic representatives are “staunch”. On the other hand, there are liberal or relaxed Catholics who may well practise their own religion, but are careful not to inflict the tenets on others.

So there are a few Catholics in our legislatures, where is the problem?

The ascendancy of the conservative Catholic

faction in NSW, under the careful guidance of Upper House Member Dave Clarke, has added a new dimension. Like the Catholic prelate in Australia, Cardinal George Pell, these people are openly militant in their views and are, of course, closely associated with his Eminence. It is not just the NSW Labor Premier: the influence is right through the legislature. And the web is spreading. The new Federal Opposition Leader, the aptly named Tony Abbot, is also closely associated with this fundamentalist wing of the NSW parliament.

Growing up as a Catholic in SA, I can easily recall the faithful support of my parents for the Democratic Labour Party. They would never miss an episode of Bob Santamaria’s “Point of View”. They believed that such support would defeat the atheism of the Communist Party and the infiltration that it had achieved into the Australian Labour Party of the time.

When the Catholic Bishop of Canberra and Goulburn said he believed that Calvary hospital should not be sold to the government and received support from Cardinal Pell, the pressure was on for the ACT Liberals to support the approach.

The non-Catholic health spokesman Jeremy Hanson has successfully carried the Opposition position with the perception that this resistance was not generated by conservative Catholic elements. Perhaps it is true – there are some good arguments against the sale – but the perception is clear that the local Liberal Party is dancing to the tune of the sons of the papacy.

Canberra journalist Jack Waterford has neatly described the phenomenon as moralism. It is not about the views people hold in private – it is about the role the Catholic Church plays in setting the standards for the rest of the community. There is a good reason why modern democracies have been built on the principle of the separation between church and state. The danger is that this principle is being whittled away.

*Michael Moore is a former member of the ACT Legislative Assembly and an independent minister for health in the Carnell Government.*



**Tony Abbott... "Staunch" is probably not a strong enough description.**