

**Senator Lyn Allison, Leader Australian Democrats
Welcoming Address
Politics, religion and Other Impolite Topics Forum – November 2005**

Well, as you know, tonight we come together to discuss religion and politics, particularly the nature and type of relationship that should and does exist between these two in Australia.

While this issue has always been with us, it has become a hot potato in more recent times.

Religion is perhaps more visible now in Australian politics than for almost thirty years.

Mainstream churches are providing more and more government social services but Governments are challenging their rights to speak out on social justice issues like the treatment of refugees, IR and welfare.

Church based schools have received more subsidies than ever in the past and non-government enrolments have steadily increased particularly in Christian Schools.

There has also been a growth in attendance at 'new' style religious groups such as Hillsong, Emerge and the Pentecostal churches that have a conservative focus on family values rather than IR or welfare to work or poverty alleviation.- and which generally seem to agree with the federal Government's agenda.

Mixing religion and politics can be risky for the government.

The disastrous appointment and subsequent resignation of Archbishop Peter Hollingsworth as Governor General, at a time when abuse of children in church institutions was being hotly debated, drew attention to some of the problems of mixing church and state.

The Government appointing as chairman of the new so-called Fair Pay Commission a man who declared that God would guide him in making minimum pay conditions has come under fire – some would prefer a more transparent approach!

Our Education Minister, himself a medico and presumably well versed in scientific principles, recently gave his blessing to schools wanting to teach the theory of intelligent design as an alternative to evolution.

And of course we have an openly devout Catholic who opposes abortion as our Health Minister - a minister who just a few weeks ago announced an additional \$300,000 for pregnancy counselling services run by the Right to Life Association which will not refer women to clinics or doctors who offer terminations, even if they request it and is not upfront about this bias.

At the last Federal Election an increasing number of Liberal and Labor politicians openly extolled the virtues of Christianity and their own personal commitment.

Peter Costello made a pre election visit to Hillsong, the largest Pentecostal church in the country, a Liberal MP in Perth said that people should vote for Howard on the basis that he was a Christian, and the Prime Minister himself used his end of year address in parliament to deliver a mini sermon on Christianity.

And of course the last election saw the ascension to the Senate of the Family First party.

This is all occurring in an international context which, since 2001, has been overwhelmingly focused on religiously inspired terrorism.

Domestic reactions to these attacks and subsequent events have arguably risked the tolerance and relative tranquillity that are at the heart of a cohesive multicultural and multi-religious society.

It is clear that these developments raise many questions, including

- Are the evangelical and conservative Christian religions having a disproportionate impact on Australian law and policy? And is this impacting on Australia's democratic and egalitarian society?
- What degree of separation should exist between religion and politics - for example should politicians promote their religious beliefs in government and should religious meetings (eg National Prayer Breakfast) be allowed to be held with government's sanction?
- Under what circumstances if at all, should religious affiliations donate to political parties, receive tax deductions status, be funded by Government to deliver welfare programs, or receive Government funds to deliver education and health?

We hope to address these issues, as well as many others, during our forum tonight.