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All in the Family: Women, Religion and the Australian Right

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Perverse Politics

Camilla Nelson's novel, *Perverse Acts* (1998), hypothesizes a Republic of Australia, some time in the early twenty-first century. The date is left vague, though there are various pointers: one MP, Lucretia, who, like many of her present-day counterparts, decorates her office with photos of herself, has snaps of 'a very young Lucretia' meeting the Clintons in Sydney and her adult self visiting 'a dying Germaine Greer'. The passing of time and transition to a republic have apparently left some aspects the parliamentary structure unchanged: with the best will in the world to implement its Freedom From Government Bill and the associated Get Rich Quick tax scheme, Nelson's unnamed neo-liberal party, like so many crusading governments before it, faces obstruction in the Senate. Its only hope is to secure the balance-of-power votes of a minor party called the Circle of Light. Here is how Nelson's cynical female narrator, Venus, describes the Circle:

The Circle of Light was a relatively new phenomenon but its antecedents stretched back a generation of two, back to the end of the 1990s. Some say it started with an independent on the crossbench in the Senate, others as a faction within the ruling Party. (Did I say faction? Excuse me, I meant forum.)

It all began with prayer breakfasts, a lot more prayer breakfasts and a giant circle of praise. And then, a lot more giant circles of praise and a really fashionable fad: the Christian men's weekend for strategy planning.

At first the strategies, like the events, were relatively innocuous. The advocacy of stringent new censorship laws, the banning of Shakespeare from the high-school syllabus (he was violent, sexually degenerate and morally repugnant) and the denial of government child support to women who had left their husbands.

According to the Circle of Light, there were 'people of goodwill' and then there were 'other' sorts of people. The latter were to be excluded for the purposes of government-subsidised health care, education, family benefits and tax rebates. But it was not until the government of the day caved in completely and set up

the Foundation for the Enforcement of Traditional Values that people really began to notice. (1998: 219-220)

Nelson's 'family values' dystopia has some familiar elements. The Circle of Light is not the government, nor even in formal coalition with it, but merely provides the numbers in the Senate after satisfactory horse-trading. For example, it supports the Freedom From Government Bill and the National Liquidation Program in return for the government supporting its Single Mothers Obliteration Bill.

Some members of the government declare themselves in sympathy with the Circle of Light's 'traditional values' agenda. Others, such as Venus's co-narrator, an ambitious male backbencher known only as M, who 'secretly aspired to be the first prime minister of the republic ever sacked for fornication' and wants his political biography to be called *The Story of M: The Man Who Slept with 240 Women*, gives the Circle the family values it wants in a spirit of purest electoral cynicism.

Since the rise of the religious right in the USA in the 1970s, fiction has presented us with a number of rightwing dystopias, not always readily transferable to an Australian context. For example, it is hard to imagine the religiously fanatical government of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1987) ever bearing much resemblance to Australian realities. Nelson's picture of a religious tail wagging a secular right wing dog is much more credible to Australian eyes.

Two-and-a-bit terms of Howard government have seen substantial successes for proponents of 'traditional values'. Some of those, such as tightened censorship and moves to allow the States to make marital status a criterion for access to reproductive technologies, have come directly under the heading of social policy. Others, such as the watering-down of affirmative action and changes to the tax structure in favour of families with a stay-at-home parent, have emerged at least partly as by-products of economic measures.

In this paper I want to go beyond the now-familiar catalogue to explore the relationship between religion and politics in the move to a more 'family values' agenda. On the way, we will examine the durability of this undoubted shift in Australian social policy. Is it just a detour from the path out from behind the picket fence which began with the Whitlam government's enshrining of 1960s changes in cultural attitudes? Or is it a permanent retreat? How likely, in other words, is Nelson's vision?

An Australian Religious Right?

As Nelson implies, an analysis of the Australian shift to the family-values right during the late 1990s needs to take into account the Lyons Forum, a pressure group formed within the Federal Coalition in 1992. Its program of regular dinners and addresses, as well as more direct interventions in social policy, is conducted

under a slogan borrowed from the maiden speech of Australia's first female Member of the House of Representatives, Dame Enid Lyons (who borrowed it from King George V): 'The foundation of a nation's greatness is in the homes of its people'.

The Lyons Forum passed its first three years with little public attention. It leapt public to prominence with its 1995 submission to the Liberal Party executive on tax. Since then, it has been credited with a formative role in the 1996 Family Tax Package (Savva, 1997; Pike, 1997), with being the driving force behind the *Euthanasia Laws Act 1996*, which overturned the Northern Territory's *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act 1995* (Windsor and Ceresa, 1997; Windsor and Shanahan, 1997; Brough, 1997; Gordon, 1996; M. Maddox, 1999), and with the Coalition's 1996 election promise to tighten film and video censorship, and the ensuing April 1997 Cabinet decision to tighten restrictions on pornographic videos by replacing the X-rating with NVE (non-violent erotica) (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1997).

In 1997, *Age* journalist Nikki Savva (1997), subsequently media officer to federal Treasurer Peter Costello, called the Forum 'a powerful force within the Howard Government'. She attributed its influence partly to its impressive rollcall of Ministers—at that time, some fifteen, 'including the Treasurer, Mr Peter Costello, and the Primary Industries Minister, Mr John Anderson' and 'all three parliamentary secretaries to the Prime Minister—Mr [Chris] Miles, Mr Tony Abbott and Senator Nick Minchin'.¹

The Forum's statements and the comments of its spokespeople are rich in language long identified with the American religious right, whose generalisations about 'the family' encode a quite specific constellation of policy prescriptions, all directed at entrenching a model of two-heterosexual-parents nuclear families at the expense of other family models, and opposing abortion (American Christian Coalition, 1995; Detweiler, 1992). Yet the Lyons Forum differs from the various American religious right organisations in some significant ways. The Forum's religious motivation is more often asserted by its critics than its members. On one hand, its promotional brochure has occasional references to God and its named members have well-known religious commitments. On the other, its spokespeople deny any 'religious' identity for the group, describing it as 'straight-out secular'. In one interview, spokesman Senator Eric Abetz went so far as to attribute the common perception of the Forum as a religious group to media 'demonisation' (M. Maddox, 2001: 202-3). The use of language closely associated with the American religious right enables the Forum to appeal to the minority of conservative Christian voters, who recognise the language of 'family' and correctly decode the associated policy agenda. At the same time, the ambiguity about the Forum's religious identity and avoidance of much explicitly religious language helps its spokespeople avoid alienating a potentially wider secular constituency.

Looking back over the mixed successes of the conservative 'family values' agenda under Howard government, its most significant achievement is surely not so much in any specific policy outcome as in changing the climate of public

debate. During the leadership battles of early 1994, an *Age* article, entitled 'The Shadow Boxers of Morality and Policy', characterised the protagonists as 'Howard (suburban man) and Hewson (product of social change)'. Howard, 'a dag', and Hewson, summed up by his 'flashy cars, ... faded jeans and beautifully tailored reefer jacket', were confined to 'shadow boxing' because, during the 1980s and early 1990s Labor ascendancy, social conservatives had lost so much ground that:

Apart from rednecks like Tim Fischer who is reflecting the views of his small and shrinking constituency, they are not prepared to articulate any sort of clear vision of just what it is they want for fear of being ridiculed ... For all his intellectual robustness, John Howard has been afflicted with timidity when it has come to articulating just what it is about John Hewson's attitudes to social issues that he finds objectionable. (Gawenda, 1994)

Such timidity is no longer a feature of the social policy debate. With the Institute of Family Studies feeling the heat to remould it in the 'family values' image (Horin, 1999), the Office of Film and Literature classification supplied with a more conservative panel of censors (Marr, 1999: 209-211), drug users encountering 'zero tolerance' and legislation on the books to enable the States to deny lesbian and single women access to IVF, to name but a few examples², social conservatives can more confidently 'articulate ... [a] clear vision of just what it is they want'.

Minorities and Mainstream

When John Howard led the Coalition to victory in 1996, he did so under the slogan 'For all of Us', with the idea that the outgoing Labor Government had been ruled by 'them', namely, minority and special interest groups. Pamela Williams's study of the 1996 election campaign attributes to Liberal federal campaign director Andrew Robb the strategy to:

devise a campaign around the concept of 'We' and 'Them' ... with 'them' representing the many special interest groups associated with [Labor Prime Minister Paul] Keating ... Keating was about 'them', the noisy interest groups who made the majority feel left out. (Williams 1997: 159)

The campaign centred on the impression of a tide of public 'resentment' (eg Howard, 1995) and ushered in a government riding on the image of an alienated 'mainstream', who felt excluded from other groups' 'special privileges'. However, examining the Lyons Forum's role in the Liberal Party structure through the early 1990s suggests that the 'minorities versus mainstream' divide, rather than arising from the immediate political necessities of the 1996 campaign, is a longstanding flashpoint in Liberal Party policy debate. Indeed, Lyons Forum spokesperson Senator Eric Abetz cites that feeling as a major reason for the Lyons Forum's formation:

See, the Lyons Forum started because Australian politics was going along a path of you had to be a special interest group to access the government's attention. There were people in the Coalition before I arrived who were of the view that there were certain mainstream issues and, if you like, a silent majority that were being forgotten. As a result, they were of the view, and I agreed when I got here, that government does need to look at broad issues. (M. Maddox, 2001: 222)

At stake in Liberal Party debates through the early 1990s was the interpretation of what it means to 'govern for all Australians'. To Hewson, as he told listeners to Radio 2UE's John Laws Program on 3 March 1994, it meant that 'if you want to be a Party for all Australians, you have to ... start out by recognising all Australians', including those with minority sexual preferences or non-nuclear families. Moreover, recognising minority groups was the best way to uphold the Liberal principle of giving 'the individual ... control over their lives and choice' (Quoted in Kingston, 1994). The alternative he saw as to 'go back to some sort of traditional basic something, whatever words they use, I mean narrow the party back and have nothing to do with this group or that group'. Such a mentality he described, in a newspaper article at the time, as inherently exclusivist: 'It leads people to say, "Oh well, I prefer White Australians to others"'.

Significantly, in the context of the 1994 Liberal leadership debate, he judged the retreat from recognition of minority groups to be electorally damaging. It would, he argued, leave the Liberal Party 'irrelevant in about six months flat'. The Labor Party, on the other hand, 'will laugh themselves stupid that [we] have such an incredible misunderstanding of the nature and basic values of the people of Australia'.

Religion, Difference and the Earlwood Ethos

By contrast, Howard brought to the Leadership a social sensibility forged in suburban bourgeois Methodism. Its legacy was less theological than social:

Religion did play quite a role in my upbringing. I was brought up in a Methodist home, we went to a Methodist Sunday school and church ... we talked about behaviour, but we didn't talk so much about theology and the more spiritual content ... I still regard myself as having a strong Methodist deposit, I guess it's reflected in my attitude to some things like gambling. Though not drinking, I enjoy a drink. (What our leaders believe, 1998)

In contrast to those strands of Methodism associated with the genesis of the trade union movement (Thompson, 1968; Wearmouth, 1937; for discussion see G. Maddox, 1998), Wesleyan egalitarianism in the Howard household translated into a 'distrust' of 'class division' whose implications could perhaps better be described as aesthetic than political:

We were brought up to—not to be hostile to what might be regarded as the upper classes, but there was a strong view in my family that people shouldn't be too pretentious. We were perhaps an understated people, ... with the idea that pretension was something to be avoided.

Such explicitly political dimensions as his childhood Methodism had, Howard identified with the idea of 'standing on your own two feet':

They talk of the Protestant work ethic, and I was certainly brought up in the Protestant work ethic, very much. And I don't regard that as anything but an entirely positive thing, because it's the idea of working and expecting some reward, but doing it in an ethical fashion, in an honourable fashion, and not breaking the law or being greedy. And I regard that as part of the Protestant work ethic: that work has its own reward in return. (What our leaders believe, 1998)

Suspicion of those who expect something for nothing was matched by suspicion of 'minority interests', a state of mind which former Howard advisor Gerard Henderson attributes directly to the family's religious history.

Henderson (1995) recounts how Howard's mother, Mona, was the daughter of a Catholic mother, who died young, and an Anglican father, whose family raised Mona in the ways of Protestantism so effectively that she rejected her own early education to become vehemently anti-Catholic. Marrying Lyall Howard, she found herself in the heart of suburban Methodism, and became enthusiastically Methodist herself. Henderson reports Howard's brothers regaling him with a series of family anecdotes about the strong sectarian feeling in their home, leading Henderson to ask Howard about his own noticeable lack of sectarian sentiment. This seemed to be the one aspect of maternal influence against which the young John Howard had rebelled: 'I just thought it was stupid that people who were professedly Christian should be fighting each other as to who was the superior Christian', he told Henderson. But Henderson attributes this sentiment less to ecumenical conviction than to 'the psychological process of denial'. According to *A Howard Government?* (Henderson, 1995), Mona's son could not bring himself to acknowledge that 'difference (as in Protestant-Catholic) was a fact of post-1788 Australian life', and so concluded that 'no discussion was better than arguing with his friends and family about the meaning of (Christian) life'. Consequently, 'unity, however artificial, was preferable to plurality if the latter led to emphasis on difference'. Henderson finds in 'this subliminal attitude' the origins of the adult Howard's distrust of those whom the Howard-led Liberal Party has consistently placed under the headings of minority and special interest groups (Henderson, 1995: 26).

In that suspicion of difference, what I have called the aesthetic and political dimensions of his suburban bourgeois Methodism come together to produce an enduring theme in Howard's thought. At the time of the 1996 election, another childhood memory was widely quoted. Howard recalled, wistfully, that at Earlwood Primary School:

Everybody was about the same. You had a few kids who obviously came from fairly poor families. You had one or two whose fathers had been very successful in small business. And the rest were sort of in the middle ... You had that feeling that everybody was about the same ... Some homes didn't have telephones, although most did. Some didn't have cars, although most did. But they all seemed to have a house and a backyard that you went and played in. It's different now. (Henderson, 1995: 28)

Sameness was not a tyranny, but a virtue that should extend from the backyards of Earlwood to the politics of the nation. The Earlwood ethos—everyone much the same—has been evident in successive Howard policies. During Howard's first spell as leader, in 1988, the Howard-led Coalition, then in opposition, produced a joint Liberal/National statement called *Future Directions*, famously adorned with a two-parents-and-children family and an iconic white picket fence. In a decisive rebuttal of Fraser's multiculturalism, the new slogan was One Australia. Difference came to be synonymous with disadvantage, sameness with equality; a more equal society meant assimilating those who did not fit the mainstream (Liberal Party of Australia, 1988: 89-90).

The *Future Directions* for the late 1990s was called *The Australia I Believe In*. In its pages, difference had become more dangerous than ever. Where in 1988 difference was synonymous with disadvantage, by 1995 difference meant privilege. The 'broad Australian mainstream' was now held hostage to "'insider" interest groups' who, two paragraphs later, had become 'powerful vested interests' (Liberal Party of Australia, 1995: 17-18). The Earlwood ethos would now mean stripping such groups of their 'special privileges'. Once the preserve of the left, claims for 'equal rights' have here been transformed into the language of rightwing backlash.

Now you need them, now you don't: mysterious vanishing fathers

Under Howard, the ambiguous religiosity of Lyons Forum social conservatism and the curious equality discourse that I've nicknamed the Earlwood ethos come together. Predictably, their intersections are particularly apparent in issues relating to women. A telling instance is the High Court case *McBain vs Commonwealth* concerning the right of the States to restrict IVF treatment to heterosexual married or de facto partnered women and the federal government's consequent *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill No 2 2000* and *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill 2002*, to amend the *Sex Discrimination Act* (1984) to allow States and Territories to restrict access to assisted reproductive technology to women in heterosexual married or de facto relationships.

In *McBain vs Victoria* (2000), Melbourne gynecologist John McBain sought clarification in the Federal Court of whether the Victorian *Infertility Treatment Act*, restricting IVF services to heterosexual married or de facto couples, was inconsistent with the *Sex Discrimination Act* (SDA) 1984. The State of Victoria did

not appear in the case. In those circumstances, Justice Sundberg allowed the Catholic Bishops' Conference to appear as *amici curiae*, so that there would be an effective opposition. The Bishops argued that the Victorian legislation was not inconsistent with the *SDA*, but they failed to convince Justice Sundberg, who found that, in view of the inconsistency with federal Law, the Victorian restrictions were invalid.

In view of the finding, the federal government introduced the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill No. 2, 2000* to change the *SDA* to allow States and Territories to restrict IVF services to heterosexual couples. The argument of the Prime Minister, reiterated on several occasions by Federal Attorney-General Daryl Williams, was that the changes were necessary to protect 'the right of children to have a reasonable expectation, other things being equal, of the care and affection of both a mother and a father' (see eg Williams, 2000).

Meanwhile, the story continued in the courts. The State of Victoria did not seek to appeal the decision. However, the Bishops sought standing to take the case to the High Court to have the Sundberg finding quashed. Not having been parties to the original case, despite having been given the opportunity by the Federal Court to become parties, the Bishops would normally have had to demonstrate 'standing'—a sufficient interest to justify their being allowed to bring the case. They were spared the necessity by the intervention of Attorney-General Daryl Williams to grant them a fiat to make part of their proposed case, that the Victorian act is not inconsistent with the *SDA*.³ In the event, the High Court found that various circumstances, including the long period between the Sundberg finding and the Bishops' decision to appeal and the fact that they had refused the opportunity to become parties to the Federal Court case, told against any responsibility on the part of the High Court to grant them relief, so it effectively tossed out their concerns without actually considering the question of the inconsistency between the Victorian *Infertility Treatment Act* and the *SDA*.

In the meantime, the nation had gone to the polls, re-electing the Howard government. With the end of the Thirty-Ninth Parliament, the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill* lapsed. So, on 27 June 2002, the Attorney-General introduced a slightly amended version, the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill 2002*. And that is the story to the time of writing.

There are two aspects of this story that I particularly want to draw attention to. The first is to do with content. The government justified the Bill by arguing that restricting the rights of some women is justified in order to pursue the greater good of ensuring that children have access, other things being equal, to the care and affection of both a mother and a father. The aim is, allegedly, to target equally the evils of children being raised by single mothers and of children being raised by same-sex couples.

No sooner had the Bill been introduced than the Attorney-General was forced to issue an Explanatory Memorandum because careless drafting had made it possible for the States also to discriminate against heterosexual *de facto* couples. In

the press release announcing the revisions, Williams also responded to another criticism of the Bill, namely, that it denigrated the childrearing efforts of other kinds of families. Although reiterating the government's view that their situation was less than ideal, he nevertheless paid tribute to the efforts of single parents, raising children in difficult circumstances. All the more striking, then, that he made no parallel recognition of those raising children in same-sex couples. Although single parents and same-sex couples are equally targeted by the legislation, it is hard to avoid the impression, both from the Attorney-General's repeated statements and from the tenor of the government's contributions to the Senate inquiry, that same-sex couples pose the greater danger to social stability.

Critics of the legislation, including some Liberal members of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee which considered the Bill's 2000 manifestation, shared skepticism about its ability to deliver on its claimed purpose of ensuring children receive a father's 'care and affection'. The inquiry concluded that the most it could hope to ensure was that a child conceived by assisted reproductive technologies in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia or the Northern Territory had a mother and father at the moment of conception; it is hard to see this as a big advance in children's rights. The proposed legislation, the Committee concluded, would restrict the rights of some women without creating any rights for children.

Another public debate about children and parenthood which took place at the same time as the Bill's 2002 resurrection raises still more questions about the government's preoccupation with fatherly affection. Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward's proposal to introduce universal paid maternity leave prompted considerable media discussion about the best form of early childhood education. Should young children be cared for at home by their mothers, or do they gain comparable educational and social benefits from childcare? Mothers, or childcare? Skeptics about paid maternity leave, including from within the government, tended toward the view that children are best cared for by their mothers. If they were not cared for by their mothers, the only alternative was childcare. The Prime Minister, impressed by the work of British sociologist Catherine Hakim (2001), announced himself prepared to countenance both possibilities. But where were those fathers whose 'care and affection' assumed the status of a basic human right when the issue was access to fertility treatment?

Reflecting on the mysterious vanishing fathers of Australian conservatism set me pondering my own experiences of childbearing. I would have welcomed the opportunity to take paid maternity leave. In fact, both my children were born while I was employed on short contracts which denied me any paid maternity leave but required me to take twelve weeks unpaid maternity leave. As the main breadwinner for our family, with my husband taking on the role of home-based carer, that meant that we were effectively without income for the time I was obliged to be off work. When our first child was born, this proved an irritation but, as we owned our own house, was not too serious. The second pregnancy coincided with a one-year

contract was in a different city, meaning that we were renting. Facing weeks with no income, we resolved to go 'home' for the birth, not least of the attractions being that we could then live in our own house. But that meant incurring the costs of moving, so we also decided to explore what social security options we had to supplement our income. The Department of Social Security (DSS) told us regretfully that there had once been a payment for just such situations, but that it had recently been abolished. But, because I was employed (even though not allowed either to work or to get paid), I could not apply for unemployment benefits. The obvious solution was for my husband to apply for unemployment benefits. But, because he had been working from home rather than as an employee, he would have to wait out the six week waiting period from the time of applying before he could receive any benefits I had successfully negotiated with my employer to reduce the official twelve weeks unpaid maternity leave to six, so that meant that he would qualify for the benefit just as we no longer needed it. Simple mathematics suggested that he should therefore apply, and begin the waiting period, before I finished work, so that the benefit could start as soon as my salary stopped. Not so fast: as it happened, the city in which I was employed at the time had one of the lowest unemployment rates in Australia, whereas our home was in an area of relatively higher unemployment, and moving from an area of low unemployment to an area of higher unemployment was, in DSS terms, a 'breachable' offence. In other words, we were told, the move would disqualify him from the dole.

As home owners, recently enjoying a professional salary and anticipating its resumption for at least few months after the birth, we found these successive coils of red tape frustrating but they did not throw us over any real financial precipice. What they did do was bring home to me that, for all the talk of equal opportunity, the notion of mothers breadwinners has not really penetrated far into the ways work is organized. Being cared for by a father may be delightful, and may even (if the government is to be believed) be a fundamental right; but as far as the day-to-day arrangements of work, leave and contracts are concerned the desire to have one's children enjoy the hands-on care of their father might better be described as an awkward idiosyncrasy. So when does a child need the care of a father? It is tempting to answer, only when requiring it offers a means to restrict the rights of single mothers and lesbian couples. Once ensconced in heterosexual couples, fathers vanish from the policy landscape as suddenly as they entered it.

Harnessing the mainstream

Although the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill* only saw the light of day in the wake of *McBain vs Victoria*, that was not the first time that such a move had been mooted. In 1997 the Lyons Forum pushed a proposal to modify the *Sex Discrimination Act* to exclude single women and lesbians from access to fertility services (Brough, 1997a). The suggestion did not make it into legislation at that

time, and was scarcely taken seriously in media commentary, most of which dismissed it as empty posturing. When the proposal resurfaced in August 2000 as the *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill (No. 1)*, the Lyons Forum was not mentioned in connection with it: its parentage, like the victoriously quiescent Forum itself, had been largely forgotten. On its rocky path through the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the Bill's most vocal supporters (apart from the ever-reliable Harradine) were not the signed-up Lyons Forum members on the committee such as Senators Abetz, Calvert, Gibson, Ferguson and Chapman, but, on the contrary, two Labor Senators, Jacinta Collins and Bob Hogg. They advocated not only much greater government intervention in reproductive technologies (their minority report raises the specters of embryo cloning, male pregnancy and ectogenesis) but also for a rethink of such comparatively long-established practices as legal abortion.

One aspect of the Lyons Forum's success has been its ability to harness the language of 'mainstream' to its concerns. Indeed, garnering support from the ALP right and thus creating an impression of bipartisanship for socially conservative policy shifts has, in the past, proved a key Lyons Forum strategy. In a chapter of my 2001 book, *For God and Country: Religious Dynamics in Australian Federal Politics*, I argued that Howard owes his 1995 leadership resurrection partly to the Lyons Forum's support. A crucial part of the strategy which got him, and the 'conservative family values' agenda, into the Liberal driver's seat involved recasting concerns which had seemed fringe and unpopular during the Hawke-Keating period as 'mainstream' concerns of a 'silent majority' (M. Maddox, 2001: 199-244). One key moment in that transition was the controversy surrounding then Leader John Hewson's decision to send a message of support to the 1994 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The controversy erupted just as Hewson was claiming the socially-progressive ground and support for 'minority groups' in an attempt to reclaim small-l liberals whom the party felt it had lost to the ALP. Its significance was not so much in hastening the demise of the already mortally-wounded Hewson leadership; rather, by involving Labor as well as Coalition Members and Senators in the furore, soliciting signatures from both sides of the chambers in a parliamentarians' 'petition' to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) over its annual Mardi Gras broadcast and invoking the aura of the bipartisan Parliamentary Christian Fellowship in support of the cause, the Lyons Forum's move against Hewson raised in the public mind the idea that the picket fence did not necessarily spell electoral irrelevance; that, in fact, there might be at least as many Labor souls sick of Keating cosmopolitanism to be won as small-l Liberals to be lost by such a change.

Interpreting the controversy this way helps explain an aspect of the story which still perplexes some of the players. Mary Easson, then Member for Lowe, was the ALP representative invited to take charge of gathering Labor signatures on the petition to the ABC. She was approached by Chris Miles and Alan Cadman, two Liberals she had got to know through the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship

(and, incidentally, members of the Lyons Forum). Only some time after the petition was circulated and sent to the ABC did the suggestion arise that it might have actually been part of a tactic aimed as much at shifting the internal balance of power in the Liberal Party as at ABC programming policy.

MM: So, when the story blew up afterwards, and people were talking about this Hewson leadership agenda, did you feel—did you think maybe you'd been set up?

MRS EASSON: No, no, I don't think I was set up. I don't know whether the Hewson leadership agenda was there all the time, whether the petition was always part of a strategy, or whether it just grew out of it afterwards ... I thought about it at the time, once the story was running, and people were putting all these machiavellian theories about Chris Miles. But, if the theories were right, I couldn't see how our [Labor] signatures helped. If it was an agenda to do with Hewson, they only needed the signatures from their side, they didn't need ours. (M. Maddox, 2001: 223-224)

If, on the other hand, the agenda was less getting rid of Hewson (he was on the way out anyway) than establishing the social conservative agenda as a benchmark in the inevitable ballot for his successor, then the ALP signatures performed a useful function. The Lyons Forum early established the practice of emphasising the popular appeal of social conservatism, identifying it with the 'mainstream' which flows beyond 'special interests'(Davidson, 1997:2-7)⁴. The Forum's bid for involvement in party policy, such emphasis implied, should not be dismissed as just backbench grumbling, but bore the imprimatur of the Australian 'mainstream'. Similarly, the bipartisan collection of signatures on the letter to the ABC might have indicated to potential leadership voters that a 'family values' stance did not automatically damn the party to a conservative electoral ghetto as Hewson implied.

Camilla Nelson's fictional religious right achieves similar effects:

The key to the rise, and rise, of the Circle of Light was the development of a revolutionary new lobbying agency: the Poltergeist Lobbying Agency. Poltergeist facilitated the lobbying of members of parliament without face-to-face contact. The thing about Poltergeist was that you never knew who, or what, was lobbying you. Community groups, neighbourhood groups, nominal groups, nameless groups. They operated through post, telephone, fax and modem. They operated through the assiduous use of well-placed, high-level contacts. Your own mother could have been a conduit for Poltergeist and you wouldn't have known it. Poltergeist operated by virtue of its ability to move

others to move you [which produced] the erroneous information that the mainstream consisted, almost entirely, of right wing Christians and ultra Catholics. (Nelson, 1998:165)

The Lyons Forum does better, dispensing with the need for an agency. Instead, it has successfully changed the climate of public debate and harnessed the image of the 'mainstream' to the point where political opponents do much of its campaigning for it.

We don't hear a lot about the Lyons Forum these days. In its early life, according to members, the Lyons Forum met at least once a month when Parliament was sitting, giving eight meetings a year. Sometimes meetings would be more frequent, even weekly during sitting periods. It boasted a membership of around half of the Coalition's parliamentary parties, including some fifteen front-benchers.

Compared to those heady days, the Lyons Forum of today is quiet. 'I think we might have met once or twice this year', members told me doubtfully. Senator Chapman reflected:

It's been fairly dormant for the last couple of years. Actually, they had a dinner meeting a couple of weeks ago, but I couldn't go because I had something else on. It was quite active for the latter days that we were in opposition and in the early days of government ... I can't remember, I think we might have had one or two meetings last year ... the last one I can remember attending would have been a couple of years ago at least. (M. Maddox, 2001: 229)

In 1997, in response to Senator Woodley's imputation that cuts to the common youth allowance had 'the stamp of the Lyons Forum all over them', Senator Herron expostulated, 'On a point of order, Madam President: I am a member of the Lyons Forum, and it has not even had a meeting this year' (*Senate Hansard* 18 June 1997: 4483). Reflecting on the Forum's achievements, he summed up: 'We got our policy in—we've gone quiet since we won' (M. Maddox 2001: 229). Senator Alan Ferguson was similarly candid:

The Forum has served its purpose. It was formed in opposition to make sure that all policy was assessed for its impact on families. But once we're in government, the party doesn't have as much input into policy, the executive does. But we keep the structure alive, in case we ever need to revive it. (M. Maddox, 2001: 229)

With an executive in place likely to pursue its agenda, the Lyons Forum could relax back into an occasional dining club.

Penny Magee and the study of women and Australian religion

When I wrote the AASR obituary for Penny, I phoned her friends, colleagues and former students to check dates, fill in details and make sure I had not left any

important gaps. I rang for facts, but what I got was stories. There were stories of Penny as a teacher, a mentor, a theoretician and an acute observer of religion and, when the occasion demanded, a fighter. 'I don't think she had an enemy; her enemy was the system', her ex-husband John told me. That phrase encapsulated what many people said: Penny stood up for people against the often dehumanizing and increasingly commercializing tendencies of university institutions. In particular, she fought for women, through her scholarship, as a teacher and mentor of younger women scholars and (as I have reason personally to remember and be grateful for) against bureaucracies that tend to trivialize women's concerns and treat our safety lightly.

It has been a very great honour to deliver the 2002 Penny Magee Lecture. When the women's caucus of the AASR decided to take up Trevor Jordan's suggestion of instituting a lecture series in Penny's memory, we discussed appropriate scope and guidelines for the lecturers. To what extent should Penny Magee lecturers be scholars whose work reflects Penny's academic interests? In this lecture, I have not tried to follow Penny's excursions into the finer points of French feminism; we have not entered the field of comparative religion in which her great passion, generosity and empathy made her so inspiring a scholar; so far from following her interests to India, we have not left Australian soil. Instead, I have revisited some recent history, probably familiar to most of us but retold, I hope, in a way that brings out religious dynamics and historical patterns which are easily lost in the flurry of daily news bulletins. We have seen how the ambiguous use of religion to endorse a socially conservative vision of 'family' and the curious discourse of 'equality' in which difference equals danger intersect in some current government thinking about women, children and families. In doing so, I hope to have picked up the strand of Penny's legacy which challenges us to be alert to the ways in which women's freedoms can seem one minute rock-solid, the next minute utterly precarious.

Endnotes

¹ Hon. Chris Miles was defeated as Member for Braddon in 1998. At the time of writing, Mr Abbott is Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations and Senator Minchin is Minister for Finance and Administration.

² For a more extensive list of examples of Howard's intervention to ensure appointment of those who support a conservative social agenda, see Seccombe (1999) and Totaro (2001).

³ The fiat did not apply to another part of the bishops' argument, namely, that the Sex Discrimination Act, although it was passed expressly to give effect to the CEDAW Convention, does not in fact implement the convention successfully. The bishops therefore hoped to show that the Sex Discrimination Act was invalid legislation. If that argument had been successful, the matter of the Sex Discrimination Act's inconsistency with the Victorian Infertility Treatment Act would of course have evaporated.

⁴ Davidson draws attention to the pattern in the Forum's 1995 manifesto *Empowering Australian families* to present socially conservative policy prescriptions as arising from the Forum's public hearings, rather than as its own views.

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