

## Quo vadis?

# “A view from the Opposition front bench” *Tony Abbott*

*The day of my interview with Tony Abbott was not the easiest day of his political career. However, I am not talking about the rigour of the interview process, rather I refer to the pressure he was under during the process of election of the new leader of the Liberal Party in Australia. Having declared himself a non runner, despite, in the media's account, significant pressure from a number of quarters to stand, he was pestered throughout the day by the media who now assumed him to be the 'kingmaker'. For me it was an interesting taste of the type of pressure on persons in the public eye, an issue which he was to talk about later in the interview.*



We commenced with a brief discussion about his early background and how he ended up in politics. Educated by the Jesuits, he retains very strong memories of the theme of “a man for others” which undoubtedly influenced him when he decided to try his vocation to the priesthood. This was to be a relatively short-termed attempt, as he found, in his own words, that he “was a square peg in a round hole”. Sydney University and Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar gave a sound education upon which he subsequently founded a strong political career.

The recent World Youth Day in Sydney, focussed us on the concept of Leadership which had arisen in the context of Pope Benedict's exhortation to all present that they should live their lives “to make a difference”. It was an exhortation which reminded him of the late Cardinal Gilroy's comment when, on returning to Australia from a visit to Rome, he was met by the media and asked to name the greatest threat to the world at that time and Cardinal Gilroy replied, “Mortal Sin”, a response which shows how far both the church and society have moved in recent years.

We continued to talk about issues concerning the nature of leadership, its demands and consequent tensions, before focussing in on his most recent period of ministerial office when he was Minister of Health in the Howard Government. During this period, he was in charge of a system which carried out about 75,000 abortions a year. This, Tony acknowledged, was a difficult brief given his Catholic beliefs. In his own words, “I confronted the issue

starkly at the start of my ministry” considering a range of options which he felt would be consistent with his faith stance. “I have never gone into Parliament thinking I was going to be a moral crusader, but sometimes you are confronted with situations you just have to grapple, so I talked about it.” The issue became headline news as the debate was reignited and the Government was persuaded to introduce and fund a pregnancy support counselling service; the official Government line became “It would be better if the abortion rate was much lower”, it was recognized as “a lamentable comment on our hardness of heart as people and as a society” and “the silent holocaust of our time”. The campaign did not get rid of abortion, but it did challenge and change the climate of political opinion as well as putting in place support for women facing unwanted pregnancies; “a remarkable achievement in the modern world”.

We moved on to consider issues of conscience for those Catholics working in areas, particularly in medicine, where the law of the land allows little or no conscientious objection. Having bluntly, and correctly, categorized such a situation as “evil stuff” which he also described as “totalitarian liberalism” and “coercive secularism”, Tony then went on to talk about Catholic engagement in debate on difficult issues. Effectively, he contrasted the frequent accusation of Catholics being brainwashed, comparing it with the expression of views by, and the treatment given to, other committed viewpoints eg environmentalists, whilst at the same time underlining the importance of engagement in public

debate. “You have to stand up and be counted..... I mean, for instance, all of the atheists and secularists in the Government would be appalled if the Government put restrictive conditions on a Muslim organisation or a Gay organisation for instance. Why are they not extending the same kind of tolerance to a Catholic organisation or a Christian organisation?”

In the final section of the interview we progressed to look at some of the challenges of political engagement which, on occasion, sometimes present the “ugly reality of much of the world” to Christians. Whilst understanding that “a lot of good Christian people can find the whole thing too confronting, too upsetting” and “...just retreat into passivity, social passivity” and also agreeing that ‘May this cup of suffering pass from my lips’ is a very understandable prayer’, Tony's conclusion was that “I don't think God wants us to be tried beyond our strength, but I also think that we should be prepared to test ourselves perhaps a little more than we often are.” In support of this work he looks for a Catenian Association which will provide him with an oasis of calm, which is not an active political organisation, which is compassionate, interested in solidarity and fosters brotherhood amongst its membership. From our church he looks for the development of natural leaders, priests who are “inspirational teachers as well as mates”, increasing inclusivity and human, intelligent “engagement between the leaders of the church and the people who are struggling for faith and guidance in a difficult world”.