Church and Politics

Teacher Background

Religion generates political passion among both proponents and opponents and its impact on party and group politics is unpredictable as it appears on both the right and left of politics. Churches are themselves internally divided over political issues and over the appropriate relationship between church and state. Churches are also significant actors in public administration as deliverers of educational, health and welfare services. Political issues include the regulation of life and death, educational politics, social justice, censorship and pornography, immigration and ethnic affairs, gender and equal employment opportunity and economic policy.

A quick glance at any of the major newspapers will reveal that the relationship between “Church” and State is current in the hearts and minds of many Australians. Often a rather tumultuous relationship, it is never the less very topical and still turbulent. As one letter to the editor of the Townsville Bulletin recently put it, “The conflict between church and state did not end in the 17th century, it is on-going”. The appointment of Archbishop Peter Hollingworth to the position of Governor-General, the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference involvement in the IVF issue and the opening of Australia’s first legal heroin injecting room by the Uniting Church, are all relatively recent hot issues.

Whether the Church should exercise the right to influence areas that are considered secular not sacred, is often debated. For those who accept that the church has legitimate stance in the community, the debate centres on the amount of influence that the church has on both the political agenda and the fabric of society today. The use of the word Church in relation to politics has a variety of references. One could mean the official Church positions on an issue or official statements by Church hierarchy. Other references could be to particular to statements by particular local statements by Church communities or groups of Christians. Further references could be particular agencies of the Church such as welfare agencies and justice organisations and educational institutions.