Two modest proposals towards doing politics differently

Doug Hynd

Introduction
I was on a visit to Timor-Leste when the leadership coup against Prime Minister Turnbull took place. The political mayhem in Canberra that week, driven by a toxic mixture of personal ambition, ideology, and an apparent inability to count accurately, looked surreal from that side of the Timor Sea and it was difficult to explain to Timorese friends what was happening. It didn’t make much sense to many Australians either, and the resulting public anger at the whole shemozzle was vented at subsequent by-elections and the Victorian state election. Since then, opinion polls have reflected the fact that the associated political processes have continued to slip a cog on an almost daily basis.

Unraveling the symptoms and causes of the political dysfunction in Australia is not easy. Social media and the 24/7 news cycle are driving a fractured public discourse into narrowcasting echo chambers. Neoliberalism, after two decades of shaping public policy in Australia, has created a lobbying industry that is out of control, a deconstruction of the public and the communal in our social imagination, and the reduction of every dimension

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of life to an economic frame of reference. Public trust in the political process and democratic institutions is now at an all-time low.

Christians are publicly venturing into this murky and muddled arena in pursuit of a better politics. Fr Rod Bower, noted for his political and theological commentary via his Gosford church noticeboard, is running as an independent for the Senate in New South Wales. Christian agencies such as World Vision, Micah Challenge, and Common Grace are active in the campaign to get refugees released from offshore detention. Lyle Shelton, formerly Director of the Australian Christian Lobby, is out door-knocking in Queensland for Cory Bernardi’s Australian Conservatives because of a deep concern for the future of liberty in Australia.

*St Mark’s Review* has responded to this shift in the *Zeitgeist* by commissioning an issue on a better politics. In my contribution I offer two modest, theologically informed proposals that gesture towards a politics different from those currently causing so much discontent.¹ I have chosen the term “different” rather than “better” to describe the politics that I am proposing because the term “different” carries a suggestion of a qualitative change, while the terminology of “better” can be confined to minor institutional improvements within the current paradigm. In using the term proposal, I gesture towards the academic convention of putting forward ideas in a summary and provocative form as proposals for both debate and action.

**But why “modest” proposals?**

Modesty is not a virtue at home in an age of ubiquitous self-publicity, as the current prevalence of the “selfie” and an out-of-control tweeting US President demonstrate. Advancing “modest” proposals for a different politics, as a response to the hegemonic ideological and sociological forces driving our dysfunctional political practices, may seem counter-intuitive, if not self-indulgently paradoxical.

In my defense of taking a “modest” approach, I offer some wisdom from the TV series *Grand Designs*. Each episode is a cautionary narrative of an ambitious building project that runs over budget, requires panicked redesign, rushed construction, and has windows that don’t fit. The program concludes with rueful reflections on crucial lessons learned—alas, too late. My take-away message is that “modest” proposals, as opposed to “grand designs”, offers the opportunity to learn as we go, ducking and weaving as we encounter a reality always more complex and shape-shifting than we
anticipated. Given the reality of ideological, legal, and institutional inertia at a societal level, a “modest” approach to changing the shape and practice of Australian politics can claim a mantle of gritty realism. My preference for proceeding modestly is supported by the failure in modernity of many, large-scale, top-down attempts at social and economic transformation.2

A modest approach towards a politics that is different requires tactical responses that take account of conditions on the ground as an expression of “the art of the weak”,3 the only option for people and organisations who are not in control. Churches and community groups are, and indeed should be, in the position of the weak in their relationship with the state. Their engagement with government requires ad hoc, flexible responses in an environment in which change may occur without any warning.

I acknowledge an inescapable irony in choosing the term “modest”,4 given that it is in the physical and momentary spaces generated by modest actions that a radical change in political practices might arise. The early Christians, by any measure, were modest. They did not attempt to take power within the Roman Empire, though there was much in the empire of which they were critical. Yet the impact of their modest practices over time was radical. They refused to wage war for Caesar because of associated idolatrous practices and because Jesus, whose authority overrode that of the emperor, had commanded them to love their enemies. Their response to infanticide was to exercise hospitality and take discarded babies into their own homes. This stance, over time, changed the way children were valued and it brought into the culture an embodied commitment to the vulnerable.5 The Christian movement is admittedly theologically diverse and with ongoing contestation about the implications of theological traditions for political practice.6 The theological traditions of practice and reflection that have informed and inspired my discussion in this article are minority voices that include Anabaptists, Nonconformists, Dissenters both Catholic and Protestant, and Christian anarchists.7

**Moving on**

Proposals for changes in the institutional structure of electoral politics and executive government at the level of macro politics routinely receive attention in the public debate. Politics at the micro and meso levels—where important elements of the capability, character, and outlook of the *demos* are shaped—underpin the macro level. The political practices I discuss, while
they overlap with the realm of electoral politics, parties, elections, and the
operation of parliament, are not confined to that level but instead drive
social and cultural change in communities and through nongovernment
and nonmarket institutions. In presenting each proposal I begin with an
account of the political orientation that I wish to challenge, followed by an
account of an alternative political practice, along with illustrations of how
it offers a politics that is “different”.

Proposal one: that we commit to a politics of listening and voice in
respectful engagement

My first proposal is that we commit to a pattern of practices that challenge
political fundamentalism, a stance which is best understood not as a specific
set of beliefs, but rather a practice of political engagement that freezes at a
particular moment in history a specific interpretation of authoritative texts,
cultural understandings, and social judgments. The political views and prac-
tices shaped by this freezing become no longer subject to question and attract
in the eyes of its proponents, the aura of the sacred, pronounced as beyond
question. The political stance becomes a marker of partisan boundaries,
establishing who is in, who is out, who are friends and, who are enemies. It
does not provide a basis for inquiry and policy development, and limits, if
not prevents, dialogue with those outside the boundaries.

As political practice, this fundamentalism may take a variety of forms.
The most visible form is manifest in the social and economic attitudes and
policy stances promoted by a particular ideological tendency within the
Liberal and National parties that is in a state of civil war with other factions
within these parties. Despite the common use of the term “conservative” to
describe the attitudes held by this political group, I would argue that this politi-
cal practice of engagement is more accurately described as fundamentalist.

Another tendency towards a fundamentalist politics in Australia has
a secularist caste to it, manifested in a rhetoric in which “religion”(usually
not further defined) should be excluded from political debate. This surfaces
in a variety of political locations, including the Reason Party, among some
elements of the Greens, and in progressive intellectual circles that label
themselves as secular. Here, a particular account of rationality and its
development as an unconstrained expression of progress is privileged. This
stance is usually accompanied by an interpretation of the Australian political
settlement in terms of a separation of church and state understood in terms of the American context, and in which religious institutions and argument have no standing as a basis for reasoned argument about politics and public policy. Here, a particular account of history, and form of reasoning, is frozen in place and put beyond question, again serving as a principle of exclusion rather than providing an opportunity for dialogue.

My proposal for a politics of dialogue and reflective engagement, both within and across traditions, while antithetical to fundamentalism, has a conservative character because it encourages us to pay attention, to be reflective about the traditions and cultures that shape our humanity. We then bring that reflectiveness and readiness to listen to our communication with those with whom we differ, or with whom we wish to engage in some hopefully common project.

People and communities emerge from within physical, social, historical, and intellectual traditions that are subject to change, but whose influence cannot be discarded or denied and must be attended to. Being conservative involves recognising both tradition and change as opposed to liberalism’s denial of tradition and its appeal to the autonomous individual. The latter is in itself a tradition, though rarely acknowledged as such. To be conservative involves not the denial of change manifest in fundamentalism, but working reflectively with what we have inherited from the past, our traditions, and thus continuing an argument that is extended through time. Fundamental agreements are defined and redefined both by those inside a tradition and in communication and dialogue with those outside of it. This requires us to acknowledge moral failings in our past practices, as well as being conscious of intellectual and social limits to the process of change. It also involves skepticism about or questioning of large-scale and totalising forms of social organisation, with a bias towards the small-scale and the communal in human endeavours. Politics should be nurtured in small-scale local settings where the consequences of failure are most evident and can be corrected, and where there is the possibility of creative responses that can lead to radical transformation. While this is not the way the term conservative is currently used in media discussion, I have advanced it in this context as a way of provoking consideration of the distinction between it and fundamentalism.

A practice of listening to the voice of others and critical conversation in discerning common goals and paths towards their achievement as the
basis for approaching policy change has wide potential, though I will only have space to briefly note a few examples. Recent radical political organising directed at discerning common goals, building community through processes of listening and finding a voice, and shaping appropriate action can be found in movements inspired by both Saul Alinsky and the civil rights movement in the United States. It can also be seen in a range of movements directed at specific policy areas and tangible goals such as fair trade, minimum wages, and renewable energy, some of which have found a home in ecumenical activity as well as local congregations. These practices have engaged the attention and involvement of theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and Luke Bretherton.10

Such listening and respectful dialogue enables the building of coalitions across groups with substantial differences. Refugee Action Canberra (RAC) six years ago sought to identify communities who were likely to be sympathetic to the campaign to free asylum seekers. There was a conscious effort by the RAC leadership to break out from a narrow group of activists on the left to bring a wide range of community groups into the campaign. As a result, churches, unions, educational institutions, and professional associations along with the Greens and ALP members concerned for refugees have all been drawn into cooperation, each with their own accounts of justification, motivation, and with a large element of autonomy as to how they progress the campaign in their own community. Trust and respect have been built across these diverse groups that has facilitated cooperation around public events with a substantial increase in the number of groups and people involved in the landmark Palm Sunday march each year.

The development of the Uluru Statement is an important example of a process of engagement and dialogue among those who are concerned with an issue, the First Nations of this country. The proposals that emerged from their multi-stage consultation were very different from what the elite who had set up the process had anticipated. Sadly, a gracious offering from the indigenous community for a path towards a sustained engagement and governance founded on acknowledgement of the truth about our national past was brutally and disrespectfully dismissed.

The process of listening and respectful engagement is also relevant to the parliamentary process, though the extent to which it might be possible to find space there for its practice in our competitive, two-major and two-minor party system under current electoral dynamics, is fairly limited.
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When a government does not have a majority in one or more houses, it has to consult, argue its case, and listen to objections from those in other parties. Minority government can result in more accountable government processes and legislation and policy that potentially have stronger community support. The process leading to the marriage equality legislation points to the development of a policy that eventually demonstrated strong community support and was implemented on a basis that was separate from the electoral standing of the government. This dynamic of dialogue has been in evidence for short periods in the state parliaments where centrist independents have had the balance of power and been able to upgrade accountability processes and force more publicly engaged government policy making.

My “modest” proposal is directed at reactivating radical democratic practice primarily at the grass roots, though not to the exclusion of reform of the electoral structures. The difficulty with such reform, given the precipitous decline in trust in this area of governance within Australia, is that if change is seen simply as a project by politicians and government without clear connection to community voice and interest, it may be difficult to convince the community that the changes are really substantial. Recovering confidence in political agency at the grassroots may be a slow process, but it offers the possibility of a revived experience of voice and agency. The roundtable conversations employed in independent Cathy McGowan’s campaign that led to her winning the seat of Indi are currently being employed by the activist group GetUp in Longman, and offers an example of how such voice and agency may be exercised in the context of electoral politics.

The process of such engagement involves resisting the compression of time arising from instantaneous communication and the demand for efficiency as measured by a rapid response, all of which works to subvert the democratic requirement that time be available for deliberation, discussion, and reconciliation of opposing viewpoints. The processes I am suggesting are time-consuming and demand a development of selves capable of the patient engagement required. I have used the term “radical” here because the term “democracy” has been frequently used by both the state and corporations to block democratic aspirations through processes that have the form but not the spirit of democracy.
Proposal two: that we challenge the state’s sacral character

My second modest proposal is directed at challenging a politics where the aura of the sacred becomes entangled with the state and the entrenching of a militarizing civil religion proceeds apace. A helpful starting point in identifying the state’s attachment to the sacred is Alasdair MacIntyre’s provocative observation that:

the modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one’s life on its behalf.13

MacIntyre names here the dual character of the state as both bureaucratic and sacred. Both of these characteristics are manifest in its operation. Neither by itself provides a complete interpretive lens with which to view the contemporary state. While the bureaucratic nature of the state presents significant challenges to a radical democracy, I will focus here on the “nation-state as a repository of sacred value and loyalty creating liturgies of civic religion”14 that underpin and justify its singularity of power. Citizenship in “secular” countries has become tied to symbols and rituals that express and reinforce devotion to the nation-state, producing a form of religion that is uniquely powerful in its claims on citizens with its ability to strip people of citizenship and make them stateless, essentially non-persons. Under this arrangement, the soul of the individual under freedom of religion is left to the care of the church, if a person so chooses, while their body is handed over to the tender mercies of the state.

The possibility of a political practice of resistance to the state’s sacral claims involves having the courage to question that which should not be questioned, which is to say it involves voicing as well as acting out a form of civic blasphemy. Consider the response in the United States the reaction to the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ refusal to salute the flag, or, more recently in Australia, the outrage when a young schoolgirl refused to stand at school assembly for the national anthem. Resistance to the claims of the sacred will often be symbolic and essentially liturgical in character because of the
entrenchment of the sacred in symbolic forms. The sacral claims of the state become manifest particularly in ceremonies related to the founding events and myths of the state, in policy areas such as defense and foreign policy, the accrual of powers of surveillance and control, and the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The minority strand in Australia of Christian dissent from the state in its sacral character has only been documented so far in a fugitive and fragmentary way.15

The physical, temporal, and intellectual location of Anzac Day as a central site of civic religion in Australia is obvious and its domination of the history and self-understanding of Australia is occluding a range of important issues including the truth about European occupation and the frontier wars. Through becoming the “Great Wall of Anzac” that you can't get over, can't get under, and get around, you can't see what else there might be to be seen. The intellectual challenge that this presents has been taken up by a diverse group of academics and activists under the banner of Honest History. As well as exploring the truthfulness of many narratives in the state-funded hijacking of the history, it has sought to bring accountability in a public policy sense to government funding and the ties to the armament industry in the key shrine of Anzac, the Australian War Memorial.16

Beyond the critique of the sacred myths in the Australian story, an embodied challenge to the sacred has only been attempted in fragmentary ways in Australia. A liturgical challenge has been undertaken in a variety of small scale events of “presence” on the holy days of Anzac Day and Remembrance Day, gesturing at a quieter remembrance of grief for the deaths in war and the devastation of community and land that is detached from the language of sacrifice and state sponsorship. The churches need to struggle more than they have done to date with questions of theology, language, and presence on this issue, given the extent to which Christian language has been taken over to convey the presence of the sacred in these civil ceremonies.

Beyond symbolic resistance, action is needed to respond to the accrual of unreviewable executive power by the Australian Government and its agencies. Security, and most recently encryption legislation, has been waved through parliament by the Opposition on the grounds that it will keep the community safe. Providing careful, caring support to those who will become victims of the exercise and abuse of this power will also be a necessary task. In a related field, Christian groups from a variety of traditions have taken a
range of peaceful actions in protest against military training and electronic communication facilities. These have included peaceful though disruptive presence at facilities at Swan Island and Pine Gap, and the Talisman Sabre exercises at Shoalwater Bay near Rockhampton.

The recent use by Prime Minister Morrison of the language of “doing everything it takes” to prevent the passing of legislation that would embed the role of medical assessment in justifying the removal of asylum seekers from Manus Island and Nauru carries the message that government policy is not to be challenged on this issue. The emotional tone and resonance of this declaration takes us beyond an assertion of political, hardheaded realism. The activities of “Love Makes a Way” on behalf of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island, that involved conducting prayer and worship in parliamentary offices and Parliament House, can be understood as a challenge to the sacralising claims of the government in justifying its mistreatment of the asylum seekers. To take up the claims for humane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers is to challenge both the policy and the sacred character of the claims by which it is justified. The same challenge is made when asylum seekers who the government cuts off support are fed, housed, and treated with the respect and dignity due to them as humans, bearers of the image of God. The human and the creation in which we live, not the state, is sacred. Affirming the claim of the human to sacredness is political critique of the state’s claim to the sacred.

Envisioning and relating to the state in a way that challenges its sacral tendencies, points toward the possibility of understanding the state as having a character that is post-secular. Rowan Williams helps us unpack this conundrum when he argues that Christians should embrace the state but not its sacral character for theological reasons.

Christians are good members of society in completely secular terms: they keep the law and pray for good order but they do not see their obedience to the law as based on any conviction about the sacredness of the legal system or the lawgiver.17

Similarly, the Mennonite theologian Gerard Biesecker-Mast argues that the Christian is positioned in “a space that acknowledges the political legitimacy of the civil authority without accepting its spiritual validity or foundation.”18 Government for the Christian is not sacred. Refusal by
Christians to swear the oath when sitting in parliament or participating in court processes takes on a new significance in this light. It would be a declaration of the secular, or at least a denial of the sacral character of the state and its activity.

These activities, apart from their intrinsic political character, can also be understood at a systemic level as keeping political activity open to pluralism of motivation and to orientation of divergent ways of being in the world, enabling maintenance of an uneasy secularity that can helpfully be termed the post-secular. This is a space and a time in which there are multiple modernities, each with its own relationship to religious belief and practice, each overlapping and interacting with the others. It is not the return of religion, or a re-enchantment, but a more complex relationship. Post-secularity can be thought of as secularity in reflexive mode.19 "It is recognition . . . that there is no neutral sphere in which to negotiate the common good without influence from religious or theological thought forms."20 The “post-secular” is a space in which people with motivations grounded in multiple specific traditions, cultures, or communities, engage in dialogue and common action in seeking to contribute to public wellbeing. It is the tension that: constitutes the unprecedented and paradoxical coexistence of two supposedly contradictory social, religious, and cultural trends: on the one hand, the persistence of secular objections to public religion and on the other, the novel re-emergence of religious actors in the global body politic.21

The wording and judicial interpretation of section 116 of the Australian Constitution is certainly amenable to enacting a post-secular approach to the state, in that “religion” of whatever form has a recognised place in public life with the focus on the equitable character of treatment of it in its different versions.

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.22

Under this provision, the Commonwealth Government cannot give preference to any religion, or recognise any denomination as the official religion of
the Commonwealth. The institutional expressions of Christian, Jewish and, more recently, Muslim faith in Australia, have a significant, if understated, and not well understood place in public life in the light of these provisions.

**Challenges for the Christian churches**

Though I have had the wider political context in view in reaching for a politics that is different, both of my modest proposals, being theologically informed, are of immediate import for the Christian churches in Australia. Each proposal presents a somewhat different challenge depending on each tradition’s governance.

The first proposal challenges the way the churches undertake moral discernment, decision-making and teaching in their congregations and institutions. The findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Sexual Abuse raised profound questions about the extent to which churches and their welfare and educational institutions were equipped and able to undertake the process of critical reflection on the issues and the contemporary significance of their traditions for these issues. Institutional self-preservation seems to have frequently overridden all other considerations. Though written in a different context, Bonhoeffer’s observation that the German churches’ obsession with self-preservation as an end in itself ensured that the church’s preaching of reconciliation would lose any force and power seems relevant to this situation. Given this circumstance, Bonhoeffer recommended that the church should attend to prayer, social action, and otherwise keep quiet, advice that seems applicable to the Christian churches in Australia.

The second proposal directed at resisting the slide of the state into the sacred poses a challenge to the way the Christian churches are positioning themselves in respect to current controversies over religious freedom, how it is to be envisaged, and what form it should take. Much of the argument by Christian organisations is based upon an implicit reading of the state as “secular” and as having an ideological anti-Christian stance. This is to misread the complexity of what is going on. Much that is causing anxiety in some churches is a de-Christianisation of the state and Australian society. What is required is a repositioning by the churches so as not to focus on resisting that process, but rather to seek a post-secular pluralism in engagement with the state in policy areas such as education and health, in which secularism may be one of the “religious” options that needs to be recognised and acknowledged. That approach would clear the ground for a resistance
to the state when it is operating in its sacred mode so that the interpretation that that this resistance is simply an attempt by Christians to retain a privileged position can be rebutted.\textsuperscript{25}

Having unpacked these proposals, they may now not seem quite so “modest”. Opening up issues of political engagement that go well beyond electoral politics raises the prospect that there might be something disturbingly radical about a patient approach to reviving democracy and challenging the state.

\textbf{Postscript}

Listening and receiving the voice of the other in developing a political practice that is different can arise in circumstances that we don’t think of as necessarily political: a film or a concert, for example. The film \textit{The Song Keepers} provides an example of indigenous voice, which, if we listen carefully, provides a new starting point for conversation about the impact of colonialism and missions, and shows us that indigenous people have appropriated some of the heritage of the colonists while maintaining their cultural bearings. The film is an account of the formation of the Central Aboriginal Women’s Choir, the moving stories of some of its members, and a trip to Germany singing traditional Lutheran hymns in their Arrente and Pitanjatjara languages in stately Lutheran churches. The journalist, Paul Daley, movingly articulates the political significance of these voices and the possible meaning of their reception by us as invaders and latecomers, after hearing the choir live in concert at the Sydney Opera House. His reflections on this soul-shifting experience of listening comes at the end of his critical exploration of patriotism and its deformation in Australia in the sacred of Anzac.

The performance is a celebration of transcultural wonder, of different Australia’s earthed in the same ancient continent coming together. . . . The conductor the enigmatic Guyana-born Morris Stuart, implores the audience to consider the endurance of the languages we are hearing, holding as they do the history and integrity of the oldest human civilization. . . . “We should be whooping and hollering and throwing cartwheels that we are in the place where our ancestors have preserved this for us” . . . The hall is overwhelmed. Many around us are sobbing at the dawning—or reaffirmation—of
consciousness that this land, all of the country around us hosts an ancient human and spiritual mystery.\textsuperscript{26}

What Daley describes is an experience of an act of voice and listening that enacts, without naming it, a post-secular space in which a variety of ways of engaging and celebrating the world is joyfully embodied across some of the deepest and most painful divisions in Australian society.

Endnotes

1 On the issue of difference as that which is “otherwise”, see Phil Fountain, Douglas Hynd, and Tobias Tan, “Theology, Anthropology and the Invocation to be Otherwise,” \textit{St Mark’s Review} 244, (2018): 9–20.


4 I have a poster on my wall that reads: “A modest proposal for peace: Let all the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other.”

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12 On the implications of a more engaging practice of political communication see the discussion in *The Minefield*, “America after the mid-terms: Just how divided can a democracy become, and survive?”, accessed November 14, 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/theminefield/americafter-the-mid-terms:-just-how-divided-can-a-democracy-b/10492864.


15 As an example of what needs to be done in Australia by way of documenting this strand of witness see the reports on contemporary peace witness in New Zealand collected by Geoffrey Troughton and Philip Fountain, eds., *Pursuing Peace in Godszone: Christianity and the Peace Tradition in New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2018).

16 The website contains a substantial collection of research and critique on the myth of Anzac: http://honesthistory.net.au/.


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23  For a discussion of religion and the Australian Constitution see Tom Frame, *Church and State: Australia’s Imaginary Wall* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006).


25  Thanks to Phil Fountain for reading an earlier version of this paper, asking questions, making helpful suggestions and providing encouragement on a tight deadline.