

# Religion is just one form of bias. And we all have biases

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EVERY now and then, concerns and complaints about the mix of religion and politics bubble to the surface, like earlier this month when Dom Perrottet was appointed Premier of NSW. This concern is not new, and nor will it go away. In fact, the volume of objection to politicians having a publicly held religious worldview is rising notably.

While many from my own faith tradition decry society's gradual drift away from the "moorings of our Judeo-Christian foundations", growing numbers of people would argue that being tethered to a particular moral location is precisely the problem. This perspective identifies an evolutionary nature to humanity's moral standards - put simply, one might say we are continually and necessarily moving our moral goal posts.

At this point, we customarily point to the "conservative" viewpoints of the likes of Tony Abbott, Scott Morrison or, most recently, Dom Perrottet on issues such as abortion, LGBTIQ+ equality or voluntary assisted dying. We point out how "out of step" their views are with wider Australian society. Well might we ask, how dare such politicians bring their personal perspective to the floor when they are supposed to be representatives of the people?

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To drive home the point, some might sprinkle in obligatory ridicule denouncing anyone consulting the "imaginary sky fairy". To do so distracts from the more pertinent opposition to religious influence on political decision-making; specifically that recent history is littered with appalling and vile examples of so-called Christians in action.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse noted that while child sexual abuse occurred in a broad range of institutional contexts, it heard more allegations of child sexual abuse in relation to religious organisations than any other management type. It is utterly reasonable for questions to be raised around what ongoing place religious perspectives have at the table, especially given the gross incongruity between stated moral standards and the experience of actual behaviour.

All this said, there is a concerning oversimplification to objections around the mix of religion and politics. In fact, I would



Dominic Perrottet's rise to become NSW Premier has reignited an old discussion.

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say this isn't even about religion - it's rather about bias. The focus on religion is the red herring.

Regardless of our religious tradition - or even if we ascribe to the notion that atheism is the complete absence of dogma - no one comes to the table free of biases and, therefore, no representative decision-making is truly "cleansed" of some kind of predisposi-

tion or personal preference.

The layers to our biases are complex and numerous. Take, for instance, the notion of confirmation bias, which describes how we judge new ideas based on how easily they align or fit with our existing points of reference. If the new idea doesn't support our current framework or the voices that shape it, we are far less likely to give it consideration. Of course, this bias belongs to everyone, not merely people who are founded in a particular religious viewpoint.

To be truly representative, the political landscape needs people from a variety of backgrounds and beliefs, and it's nonsense to expect them to interact with decisions and leadership free of their influence. A more realistic expectation is that they have the ability to deeply listen to the complexities of their bias and what matters to them, while at the same time deeply listening to what matters to their constituents.

Being open and honest about the bias we hold and being genuinely tuned into what matters deeply to those around us requires a particular depth of maturity. For political leaders, such "deep listening" is foundational to building and maintaining trust with those they lead. This is the kind of leadership Australia needs. The question is, in whom will we find it?

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