

The Hon Tony Abbott MP

Minister for Health and Ageing

Where are our politicians coming from? What are their beliefs, motivations, agendas and allegiances? It is impossible to know the whole truth about politicians' interests, but much can be gleaned from the public record. Researcher Chloe Martin presents a series of information sheets on the religio-political affiliations of Australian politicians.

As far as possible, all information has been derived from the original sources specified in the text. Various collections of documentary and online information have been consulted.

Biography

Born 4 November 1957, London, UK to Australian expatriate parents who returned to Sydney in 1960. (Michael Duffy (2004) *Latham and Abbott* [Random House Australia], 8-10)

Educated at (Jesuit) St Ignatius College, Riverview where he became School Vice-Captain. (Duffy, 21, 28-9) He holds BEc, LLB degrees from the University of Sydney (SRC President 1979) (Duffy, 50) and an MA from Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. (House of Representatives official biography)

Studied to become a priest at St Patrick's Seminary at Manly from February 1984 until March 1987. (Duffy, 62, 71) He subsequently worked as a journalist at *The Bulletin* and later *The Australian*. From 1990-93 he was Press Secretary to the then Leader of the Federal Opposition, Dr John Hewson, after which he became Executive Director, Australians for Constitutional Monarchy (1993-94). In 1994 he was elected Liberal MHR for Warringah and has since held a number of ministerial portfolios, including Employment and Workplace Relations (2001-03) and currently Health and Ageing.

Tony Abbott is married with three daughters.

Connections

Abbott is closely associated with the National Civic Council (NCC), one of the most effective and influential conservative Christian organisations in Australia. It actively opposes abortion, embryonic stem-cell research and equal civil rights for non-heterosexuals, and favours heavy censorship of films, video games and the Internet. According to his biographer, Michael Duffy:

- Abbott attended an NCC camp over the 1975-76 summer holidays at which young people were urged to participate in campus politics. (32)
- Soon afterwards, Abbott joined Sydney University's Democratic Club, the NCC's campus organisation, quickly becoming an official. (32-3)
- Abbott first met NCC leader B.A. Santamaria in 1977 while attending a Melbourne conference of delegates from Democratic Clubs around the nation. 'Santamaria's effect on him was immediate and profound ... Tony ... decided that here was a man worth following.' (41-2)
- Abbott 'was to meet Santamaria twice a year for the rest of his time at university, and whenever he could afterwards'. (42)
- While at St Patrick's Seminary in Manly, Abbott arranged for Santamaria to give a talk there, the first time that the NCC leader had been invited to a seminary since 1957. (65-6)
- Santamaria died in February 1998. In a eulogy in Federal Parliament, Abbott described him as a 'philosophical star by which you could always steer ... [I]o me he was the greatest living Australian, and there are not a few in this House who will, in their own way, try to keep the faith'. (168)
- Abbott met with Santamaria 'several times a year since the mid-1970s' and since his death has continued to think of him 'several times a week'. According to Duffy, Santamaria's main legacies for Abbott were 'an anti-individualism ... and the concept of a political career as something akin to a religious vocation.' (168) Abbott said in 2003 that Santamaria 'saw politics as a way of giving glory to God in the human world.' (358)
- Shortly after Santamaria's death, Abbott described himself as one of the NCC leader's 'proteges'. (Shane Green 'Christians flex muscles in censorship debate', Melbourne *Age*, 7 March 1998)
- Abbott was a publicly-known member of the **Lyons Forum**, a now-defunct Coalition ginger group founded in 1992 to steer the Liberal and National Parties down the path of social conservatism. (Green op cit; Duffy 214). He has also been a scheduled speaker for groups such as **Endeavour Forum** (see *Endeavour Forum Newsletter*, March 2002, 1) and the **Australian Christian Lobby** (see *ACL National Newsletter*, September 2003, 1). Endeavour Forum, led by Babette Francis, agitates against the rights of single mothers, any availability of abortion, and regards homosexual behaviour as 'a manifestation of a psychiatric disorder'. The Australian Christian Lobby, led by Brigadier Jim Wallace, favours heavier censorship and strongly opposes abortion and equal civil rights for non-heterosexuals.

In his own words

[Abbott's stated ambition on being elected in 1994]: *[I'll be] a junkyard dog savaging the other side.* (Duffy, 132)

[Regarding B. A. Santamaria's view of the Coalition parties as the domain of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment]: *People like me would tell him that that wasn't true, that the DLP [Democratic Labour Party – an NCC front organisation] was alive and well and living inside the Liberal Party and the National Party.* (Green op cit.)

[Interviewed by Tony Jones on the ABC's Four Corners, 10 August 1998, about whether he had offered financial assistance for a court action against One Nation]:

JONES: *So there was never any question of any party funds –*
 ABBOTT: *Absolutely not.*

JONES: *– or other funds from any other source –*

ABBOTT: *Absolutely not.*

JONES: *– being offered to Terry Sharples?*

ABBOTT: *Absolutely not.*

[When it later became apparent that he had indeed made financial undertakings to Sharples, Abbott said he had been answering only the first part of the interviewer's question, relating to Liberal Party funds, rather than the second part, relating to funds from other sources.] (Duffy, 176)

If we're honest, most of us would accept that a bad boss is a little bit like a bad father or a bad husband – notwithstanding all of his faults, you find he tends to do more good than harm. (Sarah Maddison 'A rare insight to what Abbott really thinks', *Age*, 3 July 2002)

The problem with the contemporary Australian practice of abortion is that an objectively grave matter has been reduced to a question of the mother's convenience. Aborting a first trimester foetus is not morally identical to deliberately killing a living human being but it's not just removing a wart or a cyst either ... When it comes to lobbying

local politicians, there seems to be far more interest in the treatment of boat people, which is not morally black and white, than in the question of abortion, which is. (Speech to Adelaide University Democratic Club, 16 March 2004, as reported in *Festival of Light Australia Light* magazine, May 2004, 6)

Parents should be able to have access to their children's medical records ... We are setting these kids up for failure in their later lives if we in any way [concede that 15 and 16-year-olds are sexually active] ... (Phillip Hudson 'New push to give parents right to know', *Age*, 4 April 2004)

As a matter of course, doctors would advise their patients about, for instance, safe sex. But how many doctors would be prepared to advise 14 or 15-year-olds that it might be better not to have sex at all? ... [W]hen parents and children are at odds, the responsibility of government – and doctors – is to support parental authority ... The Government's responsibility is to let children know that, in almost every instance, parents and doctors are worthy of trust. (Tony Abbott 'Mind your own medicine', *Sunday Age*, 13 June 2004)

[Citing media reports of 13-year-old girls requesting the Postinor-2 'morning-after pill', Abbott said he wanted to ensure that emergency contraception was] *not just something that people go and take like they might take a vitamin tablet if they think they are getting sick.* (Lucy Beaumont 'Abbott's morning after pill backflip', *Sunday Age*, 13 June 2004)

[A few hours after then NSW Liberal leader John Brogden attempted suicide]: *If we [put a particular proposal into effect] we would be as dead as the former Liberal leader's political prospects.* [When asked about this and similar comments, he replied]: *Look ... I have never claimed to be the world's most sensitive person.* (David Wroe 'Abbott forced to apologise for jokes about Brogden', *Age*, 5 September 2005)

Tony Abbott • FACT FILE

- In 1977, he was led to believe he had fathered a child, later proven untrue. The same year, Abbott first met B.A. Santamaria and was immediately inspired.
- While Duffy and others assert that Abbott and the woman carrying his putative child 'agreed to have him adopted' (Duffy, 47), Michelle Grattan puts it rather differently: 'Since he was a young man, Abbott has carried the emotional baggage of walking away from fatherhood and refusing to marry the mother of his child.' ('Suddenly the baggage gets heavier on Abbott's roller-coaster ride', *Age*, 22 March 2005)
- Charged in 1978 with assaulting a female student leader by 'groping her buttocks'. Abbott claimed he merely 'tapped her on the lower back'. Magistrate dismissed the charge owing to 'enormous conflict' between prosecution and defence evidence. (Duffy, 46-7)
- Charged, after passing his final-year Economics examination, with bending a street sign while under the influence of alcohol. Found guilty but no conviction recorded 'due to his good character'. (Duffy, 51)
- Admits having smoked marijuana 'without inhaling' and to have tried a hallucinogenic drug, 'not knowing what it was.' ('I didn't inhale Part 2', *Age*, 26 July 2004; Peter Wilmoth 'Fasten your seatbelt', *Sunday Age*, 23 October 2005)
- He told a journalist that while studying for the priesthood, 'he had not been as celibate as he should have been'. (Duffy, 70)
- While working at *The Bulletin*, he joined the Australian Journalists' Association i.e. Abbott is a former unionist. 'When management sacked all the magazine's staff photographers, replacing them with freelancers, he proposed a two-day protest strike.' (Duffy, 82)
- David Oldfield worked for Abbott before joining Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. He received a glowing reference on leaving Abbott's office, but Abbott later commented that 'even Jesus had his Judas'. (Duffy, 160)
- Abbott is on record as holding that 'we don't really know what God's standards are.' (ABC Online, 29 May 2005) But the Catholic Church claims the authority to teach humanity exactly what God's standards are. One of Abbott's teachers at St Patrick's Seminary 'found that theology did not seem to capture Abbott's imagination.' (Duffy, 64) Abbott has noted that he is 'a very imperfect Catholic.' ('The minister and the cardinal', *Age*, 1 October 2004)
- Abbott has repeatedly denied making political decisions on religious grounds: 'I am happy to take the Pope's advice on religious matters, but I have never been accustomed to taking the Pope's advice in political matters ...' The reporter noted that when making this comment in Parliamentary question-time, Abbott did 'attempt to cover his bases by crossing himself as he reached the dispatch box.' (Annabel Crabb 'Pope on the ropes', *Age*, 27 August 2002)