

The Hon Senator Eric Abetz

Minister for Fisheries, Forestry & Conservation

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.

Biography

Born 25 January 1958, Stuttgart, Germany. Youngest of six children of an immigrant family who arrived in Australia in 1961 on an assisted passage. (Maiden speech, *Senate Hansard*, 14 March 1994)

Educated at Taroona High School, Hobart Matriculation College and holds BA (1978) LLB (1981) degrees from the University of Tasmania. (H.R. Nicholls Society conference, Melbourne, 3-5 April 1992, contributors' list) He was admitted to the Supreme Court of Tasmania in 1983 (High Court, 1986) and practised as a barrister and solicitor with the partnership of Abetz, Curtis and Docking. (http://www.abetz.com.au/pages/eric_bio.html)

Abetz joined the Liberal Party while attending university and in 1978 became the President of the Australian Liberal Students' Federation. He was Tasmanian State President of the Liberal Party between 1990 and 1994 when he was chosen to fill a casual Senate vacancy. He succeeded in holding this seat in the 1998 and 2004 elections. He has held a number of offices including Special Minister of State (2001-06) and was appointed to his current ministry in January 2006. (Richard Farmer's *Political and Legislative Review*, 2006). Widely regarded as a Howard 'hard man' although a Cabinet post has eluded him so far.

Eric Abetz is married with three children.

Connections

- 1992** Deputy Chairman of the **Association of Christian Parent Controlled Schools**. (HR Nicholls Society op cit) Abetz's children attended Calvin Christian School, Kingston, Tas. (*Senate Hansard*, 26 November 1996)
- 1996** Began developing close ties with **Salt Shakers**, a Melbourne-based fundamentalist Christian group. Abetz opened **Salt Shakers'** office in 1998, endorsing and commending their work (*New Life*, 24 December 1998) and was the featured speaker at the organisation's inaugural dinner in August 2005 (Josh Gordon 'Senator hits out at heads of church', Melbourne *Age*, 29 August 2005)
- 1997** Both **Salt Shakers** and **Focus on the Family** (American-linked 'pro-family' group) strongly supported Abetz for his work on two Senate committees, one of which examined the *Sexuality Discrimination Bill* (seen by **Focus on the Family's** Bill Muehlenberg as 'granting special rights for homosexuals') and Kevin Andrews' private member's bill seeking to overturn the Northern Territory's voluntary euthanasia legislation. Muehlenberg told his readers that Abetz had 'fought tirelessly' against the first bill, and in favour of the Andrews bill: 'Please write to or call Eric and give him your warm support and encouragement. Please pray for him as well.' (*Family Forum*, April 1997, 5)
- 1997** Succeeded Chris Miles MHR as Chair of the **Lyons Forum**, a now-defunct group of socially conservative Coalition MPs. (Lynette J. Dumble 'The New Testament according to the Lyons Forum: an Australia bereft of abortion rights?', *Political Environments* #5, Fall 1997)
- 1999** Scheduled speaker on the *Sexuality Discrimination Bill* at **Endeavour Forum** (ultra-conservative women's organisation) public meeting, 11 February (meeting chaired by Bill Muehlenberg). (*Endeavour Forum Newsletter*, February 1999, 1)
- 1999** Speaker on 'the family' at **Family Council of Victoria** (a 'front' group dominated by the **National Civic Council's Australian Family Association**) public meeting. (*Salt Shakers Newsletter*, May 1999, inserted flyer)
- 2000** Speech on Christianity and the millennium prominently reprinted in **Festival of Light Australia's** *Light* magazine (February 2000, 12), one of several times Abetz has been promoted by this long-lived 'moral reform' group.
- 2003** Abetz provides a letter of support for the **Fatherhood Foundation** (conservative pro-'fathers' rights' organisation) in its (ultimately successful) application for tax-deductibility status. He writes that, '[I]n order for the Foundation's great work to continue and grow it is imperative that funds are raised.' (*Fatherhood Foundation email newsletter*, 28 April 2003) In 2004, the **Fatherhood Foundation, Australian Christian Lobby** and **Australian Family Association** played a key role in pressing the Howard Government to amend the Marriage Act to exclude same-sex unions.
- 2004** **Australian Christian Lobby** (social conservative lobbyists) claims Abetz and fellow Tasmanian Liberal Senator Guy Barnett as 'some of our strongest supporters'. (*Australian Christian Lobby Newsletter*, September 2004, 2)
- 2005** Opening speaker at the **Right to Life Australia** (major anti-abortion group) Conference, Melbourne, 9 July. Abetz addressed the audience on the anti-voluntary euthanasia *Suicide-related Material Offences Act*. (*Right to Life Australia News*, July-August 2005, 7)

In his own words

I believe in an Australia where we have a set of values which would have Mother Teresa in place of Madonna on the magazine covers. (Maiden speech, 1994 op cit)

*It is not possible by personal decision to alter one's race or sex. Yet the facts ... indicate that a person's homosexual or transsexual behaviour is a learned behaviour and not a characteristic such as sex or race. ('Christian schools under attack', *Light* magazine, February 1998, 6)*

*Suicides and some of the social problems that our nation faces often have their roots in a lack of spiritual dimension in the lives of the people concerned. People see no hope or purpose beyond the immediate problem. They often see themselves as an accident, as some would have us believe this whole world is, that is, it just happened as a result of some big bang theory - they are here as the result of an accident and if the ride is not too good, they might as well put an end to the accident ... ('Reflections on the Millennium', *Senate Hansard*, 8 Dec. 1999, reprinted in *Light*, Feb. 2000, 12)* This line of reasoning is generally employed by creationists.

*I think the only logical scientific construct that you can perpetuate is that life begins at conception. (SBS *Insight*, 'Stem Cell Divide', 8 March 2005)*

Jenny Brockie (SBS *Insight* moderator): *Eric Abetz ... I know [stem-cell research] is a debate in the Liberal Party and there are a number of your colleagues who take a very different view to your own. Now we approached several Liberal MPs to come on tonight. One of them who agreed to appear suddenly withdrew, we were told because of a directive from the top, whatever that means, and you yourself said you would only come on tonight if there wasn't a Liberal here who disagreed [with] you. Why?*

Abetz: *I'm a member of the Liberal Party, I'm very proud of that. I don't think it's a good look when you and your colleague in a public forum [debate] each other and out of respect for colleagues I don't do that. (SBS *Insight*, op cit)*

Can I salute Right to Life Australia for the important educative role that it plays and the support it provides within the community for promoting the sanctity of life. (http://www.abetz.com.au/pages/news_views.php, 9 July 2005)

*And so, when you hear Christian politicians being asked in interviews, 'so how does your Christian belief or views influence your thinking on this particular topic?' ... ask [yourself] the question: 'when will we hear a journalist ask the same question of the atheist politician: 'How does your status as a member of the Godless left impact your decision-making in public life?'' (Speech to the inaugural annual dinner of *Salt Shakers*, 27 August 2005)*

[Supporting the Government's workplace relations laws] *Recently I became aware of a case in my home state of ... a worker in a west coast mine (who) was dismissed after fellow workers complained ... I am not quite sure how to say this, (he was) putting a piece of his anatomy that was not his index finger in a sandwich of a fellow employee - utterly depraved and utterly unacceptable. ('Strange goings-on down in Tassie', *Age*, 9 September 2005)*

[Regarding clandestine pro-Howard Government political activity by the secretive cult, the Exclusive Brethren] *[I deplore] ridiculous assertions about people who are genuinely Christian Australian citizens. (Linda Doherty 'Brethren linked to Howard campaign', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 2005)*

Of note

According to Lynette Dumble (op cit):

'Back in 1994, when Justice Michael Kirby, now on the High Court bench, visited Tasmania to explode some of [the] myths around homosexuality ... [Chris] Miles [MHR] accompanied Kirby's opponents who included Senator Eric Abetz and other Coalition cronies who opposed Kirby at the public meeting with a variety of fundamentalisms and homophobic vitriol.'

In 1998, Abetz called for Australia to denounce the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Australia in 1991, and to later re-ratify it with explicit reservations 'protecting the traditional role of the family'. (Richard Egan 'UN's unwelcome interest in local affairs', *News Weekly*, 8 April 2000)

In 2002, Abetz, then Special Minister of State, announced he would use federal funds to sponsor a leaflet attacking the Phillip Noyce 'stolen generation' film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Abetz demanded an apology for the allegation appearing in the film's American advertisement: 'What if the government kidnapped your daughter? It happened every week in Australia from 1905 to 1971.' (David Fickling 'The stolen ones', *Guardian*, 25 October 2002)

In 2004, Abetz (while a Minister) announced that he supported ending Medicare funding for most abortions. Admitting that his view was out of step with government policy, he said that he would definitely vote in favour of ending Medicare funding for abortions other than when a woman's life was in danger, if the question came before parliament. ('Abetz supports ending abortion funding', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 2004)

“
...ask [yourself] the question: 'when will we hear a journalist ask the same question of the atheist politician: 'How does your status as a member of the Godless left impact your decision-making in public life?''
”

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.