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The Canberra Times

24 August 2007

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Penalties for bad mix of AFL, religion and politics

Andrew Fraser

IT'S OFFICIAL. The Coalition lost the 2007 election soon after 8.35 on Wednesday morning. Now, if you're not a football fan, you'll need a little context to understand the egregious compound blasphemy committed by the Essendon Football Club's No1 ticket-holder, Treasurer Peter Costello, on Neil Mitchell's program on Melbourne radio 3AW.

It should be enough to know that Kevin Sheedy, whose 27 years as Essendon coach ends this season, has coached four premierships teams and previously played in three premierships sides with Richmond.

By contrast, Ronald Dale Barassi was involved as player or coach in 17 grand finals for 10 premierships, six as a player and four as a coach. He coached at four clubs, winning flags at two of them, including lifting North Melbourne from the bottom of the ladder to its first flag in the space of three years. He is widely credited also as the coach who set the Sydney Swans up for their success.

Now, back to one-club Sheedy and the Treasurer.

Costello: There is no doubt about it. Sheedy will go down in legend as possibly the greatest AFL coach.

Mitchell: Barass.

Costello: Who?

Mitchell: Barass.

Costello: Sheedy will go down in history as possibly the greatest AFL coach and possibly only rivalled by, well, maybe, Jock McHale or Norm Smith.

Mitchell: What is wrong with Barass? ... Barass didn't even make the top three. We had better do calls on this.

The Canberra Times did its own call, to Barassi. His official verdict was, of course, unimpeachable in the case and broader political context this week. "You should never argue about politics, religion ... or football," he said

The religion that is Australian football mixes happily enough most of the time with national politics but not so some other sects, one of which looks set to play a pivotal part, on Prime Minister John Howard's doorstep of Bennelong, in this year's election.

"So what?" was the resounding chorus from minister after minister to the revelation that the seriously odd Exclusive Brethren visited Howard at Parliament House during the last sitting fortnight. Any Australian citizen is allowed access to their parliamentarians, including the nation's leaders, they said.

True enough, even if the Brethren's beliefs appear well out of Howard's "mainstream". Not that we know for sure, however, because, as Greens leader Bob Brown points out, Brethren chief, or "Elect Vessel", Bruce Hales has never allowed himself to be interviewed by the media.

The Brethren aims at exerting political influence to the tune of \$370,000 and a continuing police investigation at the last election yet it formally encourages adherents, estimated at 40,000, not to vote.

Brown says it is a sect that forbids its children from eating or drinking with other children at school recess. It is also against university study and military service, does not allow members' wives to work and, most harmfully, "maintains that there shall be no connection with any family member who leaves", effectively cutting off many children from grandparents and other close relatives. Do these sound like the "Australian values" that Howard shapes and endorses?

Democrat accountability spokesman Andrew Murray has already found that, when it comes to the Brethren, there is no law against hypocrisy. At a Senate estimates committee hearing in October last year, Murray sought to pin down what action could be taken by the Australian Electoral Commission against the Brethren for proclaiming themselves deliberate non-voters but then heavily financing a targeted election campaign. He suggested that Brethren members who sought to exercise the legal religious-grounds exemption from voting would have made a consciously false statement if they then turned around and worked hard to influence the votes of thousands of others.

Deputy Electoral Commissioner Paul Dacey told him, "There is certainly nothing that prevents anyone of any persuasion to participate in what they might see as an electoral process by a donation to a political party or a third party." Even if they choose not to put their votes where their money is.

Electors can reasonably demand more information about Howard's recent meeting with the Brethren, given the large sums of quickly raised

Brethren. Labor Senate leader Chris Evans said such a probe "looks a bit like a witch-hunt", the same word chosen by Government senator John Watson at estimates.

Evans told Parliament last week that the the Senate is "not responsible for investigating allegations into the activities of a particular body", and urged those with allegations of illegality or mistreatment to go to the police.

Meanwhile Labor's star candidate in Bennelong, Maxine McKew, has nothing to say, at this stage, about the potential for the Brethren to turn her opinion-poll lead around.

But Greens' candidate Lindsay Peters notes that the Brethren's power extends well beyond the financial. He is in no doubt who was behind the tearing down of Greens posters from Bennelong front yards, sometimes damaging fences, during the 2004 campaign and who turned up to cast an intimidating shadow at Greens rallies. He is certain of a flow-on effect this year.

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