

Faith taps herd instinct, Lobby groups use nostalgia

5 Most powerful people

On the second day of the *Herald's* series on Australia's 50 most powerful people, we explore who pulls the strings in the worlds of religion and the arts.

Leesha McKenny

AS ELECTION day in NSW drew near and polls showed the Greens might hold the balance of power in the upper house, the Catholic Church issued a statewide warning.

Signed by 10 bishops, the two-page statement on "The Green Agenda" said a vote for the Greens was for a party that "conflicts directly with the beliefs and values of virtually all religious people".

It was described by the Greens as "profoundly misleading" but its leading signatory, Cardinal George Pell, said the document could have kept voters informed of the Greens' "extreme" policies.

The power of religion in politics has changed since warring Christian factions split the Labor Party in 1955. But as its social power wanes, religion has again assumed a more assertive role in politics, where its power seems to be on the rise.

Christianity does not seem to resonate in society as powerfully as it once did. Although almost two-thirds of Australians (64 per cent) identified themselves as Christian in the latest census, a 2009 survey found that only 39 per cent of respondents said Christianity was the philosophy that had the most influence on how they lived – just 7 per cent more than those who said no philosophy influenced their lives or they did not know.

Sydney's Anglican Archbishop, Peter Jensen, says the position of the church in society has changed – and some of that loss of influence was a good thing. "It came, I think, out of

1 George Pell
Current roles: Catholic Archbishop of Sydney; presidential committee, Pontifical Council for the Family.

2 Peter Jensen
Current roles: Archbishop of Sydney, Metropolitan of NSW; president, Anglicare Council.

3 Samier Dandan
Current roles: President, Lebanese Muslim Association; executive member, Supreme Islamic Council of NSW.

4 Jim Wallace
Current roles: MD, Australian Christian Lobby; Council of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

5 Yair Miller
Current roles: President, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies; vice-president, Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

5 Most powerful people in Religion



Peter Jensen.



Samier Dandan.



Jim Wallace.



Yair Miller.



George Pell.

tribalism and people had their tribes and therefore lined up behind leaders," he says.

New waves of migration have stalled encroaching secularism, and ethnic congregations have reinvigorated some parts of Christian churches but diversity has also led to more religious groups vying for the same areas of influence.

Muslims emerged as a political force in this year's state election. Courted by the Liberal Party, the Lebanese Muslim Association endorsed many of its candidates and warned Labor it could no longer take the community's support for granted.

Outgoing Bankstown Labor MP Tony Stewart criticised the association for using "religious background as a political focus", before he became one of several retiring ministers to take up a job with a Christian charity. The Liberals fielded Muslim candidates in both his former seats, Lakemba and Bankstown.

An Anglican priest and academic, Reverend Professor Gary Bouma, said some groups still traded on their reputation of having once been powerful in Australia.

"There's a kind of residual echo or halo effect around certain religious groups that gives them more traction with politicians than is perhaps justified by their membership base," he says.

The loudest and biggest is the Australian Christian Lobby, which has grown beyond its Pentecostal base

“Religion is gaining in political power as a result of its loss of power elsewhere.”

to encompass an evangelical, Catholic and Orthodox coalition that aims to ensure "Christian values" are heard in politics.

Even so, the lobby's unified and coherent message, such as its opposition to gay rights, belies the diversity of opinion in Australia's churches – let alone among politicians.

The former NSW premier, Kristina Keneally, a devout Catholic who opposes church directives on homosexuality and its uncompromising position on abortion, has rebuffed Cardinal Pell for criticising politicians of faith who defy church teachings in policy making.

But when the competition is tight, it can help to have God on your side. As prime minister, Kevin Rudd secured key marginal seats after well-publicised pronouncements about his faith helped mobilise evangelicals in Queensland and NSW. This vote vanished with Rudd's leadership, an analysis of the 2010 poll found. These evangelical Christians represented only one in 10 voters on the faith spectrum but they lived in key marginal seats.

Julia Gillard, unmarried and an avowed atheist, also began to court the Christian vote on the eve of last year's election, supporting traditional marriage and announcing a surprise \$222 million in funding to extend the school chaplaincy program. The overwhelming majority of funded places (98.5 per cent) were for Christian chaplains.



iPad

Explore the connections of the powerful on the Herald iPad app. Video: Peter Jensen talks about the power of the church.

Yet Macquarie University academic Marion Maddox argues the religiously inflected language that has emerged since 2004 is not aimed at the Christian vote. Politicians in the past decade have tapped into the concern of those raised in religious traditions, but who have since cast them off, about the potential vacuum left by the waning of a Christian value system.

So religion is gaining in political power as a result of its loss of power elsewhere. Which leads to the spectacle of a godless Gillard almost arm-wrestling Tony Abbott for the Christian vote on the floor of Parliament. "One day we will go head-to-head on our ability to recite slabs of the Bible by rote," Ms Gillard said earlier this year.