

Jesuit Influence Overplayed

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The number of Australian leaders with a Jesuit education is remarkable, its impact on their politics less so.

It has been a big year for the Jesuit Order around the world with the election of one of their own, Jorge Bergoglio from Argentina, as Pope Francis. It has also been a big year for the Jesuits in Australian politics, culminating in the election of Jesuit-educated Bill Shorten as leader of the opposition Labor Party. Shorten was a student at the Jesuit GPS institution in Melbourne, Xavier College.

Never before have there been so many Jesuit-educated men at the heart of Australian politics. The Liberal leader and Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, and the Nationals' deputy leader and Minister for Agriculture, Barnaby Joyce, were students at St Ignatius College, Riverview, in Sydney.

In addition, Treasurer Joe Hockey was educated at the Jesuits' other Sydney school, St Aloysius, Milson's Point, and the Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, was a student at the Jesuits' Adelaide school, St Ignatius College, Athelstone.

Particularly in the case of Abbott, this predominance of Jesuit education is much commented on. Sometimes it seems to be just a throwaway line, a curiosity, while at other times it is used as code for Catholic.

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But on some occasions it is used against him by those who think that he is failing to stand up for Jesuit ideals and/or the example set by Pope Francis' on matters such as asylum-seeker policy. They call on him to return to his education roots. In all these cases the Jesuit references are greatly overdone.

The rise of Jesuit-educated politicians in Australia is a remarkable conjunction in political leadership: a situation so rare that it may even be a first in the Western world. The Jesuits educate a lot of students in Australia but there has been only one other precedent that I know of at the state level. Former NSW Liberal premier Nick Greiner is also an old boy of St Ignatius, Riverview.

The rise of students from these schools is not a fluke but a consequence of the history and sociology of Australian political parties, especially the Liberal and National parties.

In their case, since many Catholics left Labor in the split of the 1950s, it is a logical consequence of the growth of certain strands of Australian Catholicism in the conservative parties. The current crop won't be the last conservative leaders from the Catholic GPS system.

However, in the case of Shorten it is more likely that he is a one-off. Some Labor leaders do emerge from the GPS system, including Gough Whitlam who spent some time at Canberra Grammar School, and the late Don Dunstan, who went to St Peter's College in Adelaide and became premier of South Australia. However, Labor leaders with a Catholic background, like Anthony Albanese, are likely to come from less socially exclusive Catholic schools. Albanese was educated by the Christian Brothers.

Given that, what difference, if any, does their schooling make to the values and style of political leaders?

The level of attention given to this educational background is surprising. The same attention is not given to other types of educational experience other than in a very general sense as code for socio-economic background. It is common to point out whether a leader comes from a private or public school as some sort of a guide to their attitude to school funding issues and support or otherwise for public education.

Even then it is not much of a guide. But attention is rarely given to the particular educational ethos and values of GPS institutions of an Anglican or Presbyterian kind. Nor is much attention at all given to the schooling background of other Catholics in the Abbott ministry, like Andrew Robb who was also educated by the Christian Brothers.

The same is true of Catholics in the Shorten shadow ministry, like Stephen Conroy who attended Daramalan College in Canberra, run by the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. The relatively higher profile of the Jesuits may be part of the explanation. But the greater part of the explanation lies in the prominence given to Pope Francis and his Jesuit background. Some have attributed his leadership emphasis on simplicity, poverty and inclusiveness and his particular concern for refugees and asylum seekers to the fact that he is a Jesuit.

The master of this line of thinking is an American, the former J. P. Morgan executive and also former Jesuit seminarian, Chris Lowney, who has been in Australia recently. He identifies a particular Jesuit style of leadership, focusing on personal reflection, spirituality and a hands-on approach.

Not only has Lowney written *Heroic Leadership* about the Jesuit approach to management and leadership, but he has just released a new book, *Pope Francis: Why he leads the way he leads: Lessons from the first Jesuit Pope*.

Nevertheless, no matter how convincing Lowney is, it is a huge distance from Francis to Tony, Bill, Barnaby, Joe and Christopher. A leader's secondary schooling, no matter how good it may have been, is just one factor among many that will influence their values and their approach to leadership. Leaders are also a product of their family values, gender, class, religious beliefs, university education, profession and political party, among other factors.

We know more about Abbott than Shorten. The Prime Minister has made it perfectly clear that the main influences on his thinking are not Jesuit. He gives credit to two mentors, the lay Catholic, B.A. Santamaria, who founded the National Civic Council, and the Anglican former prime minister, John Howard. His spiritual adviser is the Cardinal Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, who was also not educated at a Jesuit school.

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