

Labor has to choose between believers and true believers



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In 2004, Parliament legislated a formal definition of marriage as "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life" with the bipartisan support of the Coalition and the Labor Party. The Greens opposed it. Back then, as they do now, they wanted to legalise gay marriage. The Australian Democrats took the same view. When the Greens tried to amend the bill to define marriage as including the union of two people of the same sex, they got short shrift from Labor. Senator

Joe Ludwig, the son of the Labor powerbroker Bill, vowed that: "Labor... will not support a change to the existing legal status of marriage".

And that was Labor's position at the 2007 and the 2010 elections. Now, as we all know, Labor has declared support for gay marriage in its party platform. It's a big turnaround in a short space of time. How did all those people who voted against gay marriage in 2004 get converted on the road to Damascus?

One person left behind in this 180-degree turnaround is Julia Gillard. The Prime Minister pledged at the last election that Labor would not change the definition of marriage. She says she believes that marriage is something that only occurs between a man and a woman.

Most people who have a strong objection to gay marriage have religious reasons for doing so. They believe marriage is more than a

supercharged personal relationship; they think it is an institution founded by God for a moral purpose. Marriage was around long before the state ever got involved in it. Although the state can solemnise whatever relationship it likes, traditionalists think it should not take the name of an existing institution and re-badge it on to quite different relationships.

As a self-proclaimed atheist, Gillard's objection can hardly be religious. She says marriage must be between a man and a woman but we never hear her explain why.

She looks like someone who has cornered herself. She is on the record against gay marriage but finds she has been deserted by most of her colleagues. But she knows that when she broke her promise not to introduce a carbon tax, she suffered a huge blow to her credibility. She cannot afford another one.

So we have a Prime Minister at

odds with her own party and probably at odds with herself. She is not going to fight to preserve the traditional view of marriage. That role will be taken up by the Australian Christian Lobby. It has vowed to draw a line

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in the sand on the issue. It will have the support of the churches, with varying levels of enthusiasm.

The ACL was quite instrumental in getting Labor elected in 2007. Its constituency, which is strongly conservative, voted in surprising numbers for Labor, according to analysis by the former Labor senator John Black. The ACL did not urge a Labor vote but it

did portray Labor (then under the leadership of Kevin Rudd) as a safe alternative on "Christian" issues. It was wishful thinking. That role will be taken up by the Australian Christian Lobby once the caucus rolled Rudd and decided to allow foreign aid to fund abortion.

So, before the 2010 election the ACL sought and obtained an assurance from Gillard that the Labor Party would not try to change the definition of marriage. As we know it was not worth the video it was taped on. The ACL now feels betrayed. Its membership realises Labor is not as "safe" on the issues it cares about as it was led to believe.

Which brings us to the question of why Labor has radically changed its position. I doubt it is a change of heart. Back in 2004, most of its members would have held views similar to those they hold today. But it was fighting the Coalition back then and wanted to appeal to conservative

voters. Now it has discovered an even more lethal political threat.

Labor is getting eaten up in its inner city heartland by the Greens. The Greens have won Melbourne and they gave Anthony Albanese a fright in Grayndler. This is where the gay activists and their supporters are strongest. These supporters will not vote for the Coalition but they will punish Labor if they feel it is not progressive enough.

The mums and dads who live in heterosexual relationships in the outer suburbs that swing between Labor and the Coalition and decide elections have a different view on this issue. So Labor had to choose whether to woo them or hold on to its inner-city base.

Nowadays these party operatives in the once-safe city seats are much more focused on their own survival than they were back in 2004.

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