

# Let's talk about the Catholic bishops

- [John Warhurst](#)

- 16 July 2018  
11 Comments

The Catholic bishops are by institutional design the centrepiece of the Australian Catholic community. This means a lot is happening in the name of ordinary Catholics whether they like it or not because the perception of the wider community is that the bishops represent all Catholics.



The future of the Australian church may have been put in the hands of the Plenary Council 2020, but any outcome of this process is half a decade away. Till then it is business as usual.

Prime among the bishops now in the news is the recently convicted Archbishop Wilson of Adelaide, who is being called by the Prime Minister, the South Australian Premier and the new Archbishop of Melbourne to resign his position. The Australian community, represented especially by child abuse survivors and media commentators, interpret his resistance as an indication of the church's failure to learn the lessons of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Most bishops are actively resisting new legislation by some state and territory governments to remove the seal of the confessional as it relates to child sexual abuse. Many have also backed calls for new legislative or constitutional protections for religious freedom. The former of these issues has emerged from the Royal Commission while the latter has followed the new same sex marriage legislation. Both take the bishops into new territory.

At the same time the two most senior bishops, Archbishops Coleridge and Fisher, President and Deputy President of the Bishops Conference, are putting considerable energy into the traditional politics of education funding by seeking urgent meetings with the Prime Minister. No issue more defines the identity of the Catholic community in its own eyes and those of fellow Australians than Catholic schools. Education funding is for bishops their core practical business, to be safeguarded above all else.

In this context, Australian Catholics need a framework to help them comprehend the dynamics of church-state relations. While knowledge of individual bishops is helpful, what is more useful is a sense of how they operate and where they stand collectively.

The constitutional position of bishops is best illustrated by the Wilson case. The relevant media releases of the hierarchy revealed their impotence. They explained their inaction by pointing out that only the Pope could force a bishop to resign and were reduced to conveying the impression of working belatedly behind the scenes to influence Wilson's decision.

"A regrettable example of the hard-line position was the decision by Archbishop Porteous of Hobart to ban Fr Frank Brennan SJ from speaking in his archdiocese."

Collectively the bishops come together in the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, which meets twice a year for a week in May and November. It has a permanent committee, somewhat like a cabinet, and elects a president and deputy president as well as office-bearers to head its various commissions, responsible for agencies and portfolio areas.

This may seem to centralise church decision-making power, but in practice central power is weak and individual bishops retain considerable independence. The office of president is powerful only if the archbishop occupying the position is confident that the bulk of the conference stands firmly behind him and wants him to act as a strong leader. That appears not to be the case at the present in a seriously divided conference.

Within this framework what stands out about most of the bishops is their philosophical and organisational conservatism.

Not surprisingly they generally hold socially conservative views, in line with orthodox church doctrine on traditional sexual morality issues, including same sex marriage, euthanasia and abortion. But as the same sex marriage campaign showed there are differences in strategic thinking among the bishops as to how Catholics should think about these issues.

Some emphasise church discipline and brook no argument while others see room for freedom of conscience for Catholics in the public arena. A regrettable example of the hard-line position was the decision by Archbishop Porteous of Hobart to ban Fr Frank Brennan SJ from speaking in his archdiocese.

The majority also act conservatively on social issues even when their position is contrary to orthodox doctrine. For example, the recent rejection by the ACBC of ethical investment guidelines, covering a wide range of themes including fossil fuels and tobacco, seems quite at odds with Pope Francis' social and environmental agenda.

Collectively the bishops are also conservative in the more general sense of being unadventurous as far as church renewal is concerned. Even in the face of apparent crisis in the church they are mostly wedded to the clerical and hierarchical status quo. This too seems at odds with Francis' agenda for a synodal, flexible and humble church. The inflexibility of their position must be challenged by lay Catholics throughout the Plenary Council 2020 process.



John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and chairs Concerned Catholics Canberra-Goulburn.