

Daniel Wild:

Hello and welcome to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. I'm Daniel Wild from the Institute of Public Affairs. Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott is your voice. Each week, Tony and I discuss mainstream Australian values, the future of the Australian way of life, family, community, and Australian culture. More importantly, we want to hear from you. That is why we have the Tell Tony Abbott segment at the end of each show where you can ask Tony your questions on whatever topic you want. Phone in to the Australian Heartland Hotline on 03 9946 4307 to leave your question. You can also go to the website, [australia.ipa.org.au](http://australia.ipa.org.au) where you can join the Australian Heartland Community and sign up to receive this podcast sent to you each week along with special analysis from the Institute of Public Affairs. Thank you for supporting the Australian way of life, and now to this week's episode.

Hello, Tony. And g'day to all of our listeners. It's wonderful to be with you all again for another edition of Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. However you may be listening to this podcast on Spotify, YouTube, Apple podcasts, make sure you hit subscribe or like so that you don't miss an episode. Tony, lots to talk about as always, I'd like to begin with a small topic, which is the future of freedom of speech in Australia. And I want to get to the issue of censorship by big tech companies. But to begin with, I'd like to start by getting your assessment and your thoughts about what has happened to freedom of speech and tolerance for different opinions in Australia over say the last two or three decades.

Tony Abbott:

I think there's no doubt, Daniel, that we are not nearly as good at having a civil conversation as we were. The problem is a more divided and more polarised society tends to assume that those who disagree aren't just wrong, but they're bad as well. And that's why the whole national conversation is becoming much more ragged, much more judgmental, much worse tempered. And social media tends to be an echo chamber. We only listen to the voices that we like. We can curate the stuff that we get online to, again, only listen to that which we like, which means that we tend to think that most of the world agrees with us.

And those that don't agree with us, as I say there, they're not just people who have a different position, but they somehow inhabit a different and lesser moral universe. And I think this is a huge problem. Add to that, the fact that we don't have a shared understanding of our history anymore. We don't have a shared faith by and large anymore. The glue that holds society together is not as strong as it was. And is it any wonder under those circumstances that our national conversation is more fractious and rancorous than it was?

Daniel Wild:

Yes. That's a good observation about losing shared sense of history. And I'd add that it's also a loss of shared identity and a shared sense that we're all Australians and a loss of shared values that really has created a fracturing in our society that you mentioned. Why do you think we've lost our sense of shared values? Is it the social media and the censoring of debate itself that's causing the fracture or is it going the other way around do you think?

Tony Abbott:

Look, there's no doubt that 24/7 media, social media, the fact that people consult a curated news list on their phone rather than watching the Channel 9 news or the ABC News or reading The Australian or The Sydney Morning Herald every morning, there's no doubt that there are, if you like, technological developments that has played a part. But I think generally there's been a failure of leadership as well.

Christian churches have lost their self-confidence. The center-left has drifted further to the left. The center-right has become more confused about what it believes in, what it's prepared to fight for. I just think there's been this general weakening of belief amongst those which are the traditional social builders and a strengthening of the critique amongst those have been the long-term social critics. And I think this has all played its part.

Anyway, the bottom line as Lennon said, I think what is to be done, we can lament what is or we can resolve to make it better. And this is where, as I keep saying, sounding like a crack record, we should try to construct better arguments for the things we believe in. We should try to be more robust and more effective in articulating the things we believe in. And we should do whatever we can to nudge the institutions that matter, whether it be the church we go to, or the social club we belong to, or the political party we normally support. We've got to do everything we can to try to nudge these institutions in better directions.

Daniel Wild:

One of the institutions that matter and that's been increasing in their prevalence is of course, social media and the big tech companies. Now, I reckon they might need a bit more than a nudge given how much influence they're having on our debate. And the context for this is Paul Whittaker appeared before a Senate inquiry, into media diversity yesterday. And Sky News was in July heavily censored by YouTube, having over 20 of its videos deleted from the platform and being banned from putting up any new videos for a week. And one of the things that Paul Whittaker said was, and I quote, "Why do they," as in YouTube, "get to decide what is and isn't allowed to be news?" Tony, you have a lot of experience in public life, three decades in parliament, prime minister, member of cabinet for a long time. A lot of these issues were just emerging on the horizon at that time. Did you think that tech companies would ever exert such influence over our debate?

Tony Abbott:

Well, no, because this is all a recent development and this wasn't something that was really on the radar of government back in 2013 or thereabouts, although it's obviously something that government does need to think about and figure out a response to now. Look, the big tech companies have always claimed that they're platforms not publishers. And yet when the platform suddenly starts being choosy about whose allowed onto it, it's not really a platform. It's becoming a publisher and it needs to adhere to the same sorts of rules that publishers are required to operate under. Imagine if a railway company said that we're only going to carry people who we deem acceptable, you can see all of these civil liberties, human rights arguments coming into play, given that we've got the big corporates, whether it's big tech or anyone else starting to be so incredibly judgmental about people in areas which are not the sort of things that were normally their responsibility to judge.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I want to pick up a thread of this conversation that's been a part of the last few minutes, which is the role of religion and organised religion, if you like, in Australia over the last few decades, but especially during the COVID crisis. And I want to talk more generally about the role of faith in public life as the context for this. Now, after graduating from Oxford University in the 1980s, you trained for a brief period of time as a seminarian for the Catholic church.

Tony Abbott:

It wasn't that brief, Daniel. It was three years, in fact.

Daniel Wild:

Well, okay, three years. Brief for some, but long for others. Would you consider that... When you look back on that, do you think that was a long time or did it go pretty short?

Tony Abbott:

Look, it didn't go quickly at the time, I've got to say. What did they say? Time flies when you're having fun. I wasn't having all that much fun. But look, it was something that I needed to do. Back when I was a kid at school, my great mentor Emmett Costello planted the seed in my mind of the possibility of becoming a priest and being a youngster who took the holy faith seriously, I didn't instantly dismiss it, although I didn't find it particularly appealing. Over the years, the thought kept coming back to me. And I eventually thought that there was only one way to deal with it. And that was to give it a go and see how it went.

Now in the end, it didn't go that well. I discovered that I was a square peg in a round hole. And frankly, when you're in a hole, once you realise it's a hole, you probably should stop digging. So after three years, I did. But nevertheless, to this day, I take faith seriously. I don't claim to be the world's greatest Christian or Catholic, but I certainly take it seriously. And I think all of us need purpose in our lives. I think all of us need to try to make sense of the great mysteries. And I think that Christian faith is probably the best way, certainly the best way I've come across trying to make sense of the mysteries.

Daniel Wild:

You make an important point about everybody needs meaning. And I reckon what's happened in Australia over the last couple of decades. And this has been exemplified with COVID is as fewer Australians identify with a religious faith, particularly young Australians that identify more with other modes of being that give them meaning. Most recently, I think that's "The Science" where they will look at bureaucrats in white coats in the way that one might have looked to the priest in the past and think that they've got all the knowledge that's there to have, or its affinity with climate change movements, with Black Lives Matter, or other social justice causes. The point being that I don't think the quest for meaning in life ever goes away. It just takes different manifestations in how people acted out in their day-to-day life. And I think that's causing a lot of the social dislocation in our country. What would be your... Would you hold similar views to that, Tony?

Tony Abbott:

I think there's little doubt that there's a sort of a theological element to the more zealous climate change activist. I think there's no doubt about that. There's a set of beliefs that you're supposed to subscribe to. If you don't subscribe to those beliefs, you're a heretic who should be, if not quite burned at the stake, at least canceled in any public debate. And there's almost like an eschatological dimension to us. If we don't do X, Y, and Z, well, the world will end in fiery terror, which again is an apocalyptic dimension to the climate cults. So I think there's much in what you're saying, we are creatures who seek meaning. We are creatures who seek a purpose beyond ourselves. I think that's very much inherent in our humanity. And if we find something that is constructive, which encourages us to look respectfully towards others and act with love towards others, then I think we tend to be good and decent human beings. But if we find something that takes us towards looking with hatred towards others, then it's a very different matter altogether.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, I think that brings us to a nice point to discuss your excellent review of Greg Sheridan's recent book. That book is called *Christians: The Urgent Case for Jesus in Our World*. And the IPA will be holding a very special event for Greg's book next week. You wrote a very important review that was published in *The Australian* newspaper recently of Greg's book and the role of Christianity and religion more generally in Australian life. I want to quote you a part of what you said and then help me understand what you meant by that.

Tony Abbott:

Sure.

Daniel Wild:

You said, and I quote, "A country that closes its churches in the middle of a pandemic doesn't think much of religion." Tony, what did you mean by that?

Tony Abbott:

Well, the tougher the time, the more important the solace that religion at its best can give. If we are dealing with something, which is a serious threat to health and life itself, surely something which encourages us to think that death is not the end, it is merely a transition is to be welcomed rather than shut down. And this is one of the curious features of the way we've handled this pandemic. Supermarkets are open. Pharmacies are open. Health workers can go about their business. But perhaps the most important health workers of all, namely ministers of religion, whether they're priests or rabbis or even mullahs, they're subject to all the usual restrictions. So yeah, as I say, a country that closes churches in pandemics is not a country that takes religion seriously. And a country that doesn't take religion seriously, particularly a religion which has been the animating spirit of our culture for the best part of 2000 years is a country and a society which is becoming seriously unmoored, seriously adrift. And is it any wonder that we have so many problems under those circumstances?

Daniel Wild:

Well, I want to put to you another quote on that in the context of Australia becoming unmoored from its founding principles that go back to our Judeo-Christian heritage. And from again your review, I quote, "Our democracy is unimaginable without St. Paul's ringing declaration: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Now, this basic way of thinking whether you're Christian or not clearly is the foundation of an egalitarian liberal democracy where it's one person, one vote, and where we are all equal before the law. Can you explain just how foundational that assessment is to our country?

Tony Abbott:

Well, it's interesting, isn't it, that if you compare that view of St. Paul from the epistles, how different it is to the previous world view? I mean, the pre-Christian worldview was essentially there's them and us. Okay. The Greeks have moved in a poor line direction. But what we're talking about here is a radical eruption into human consciousness, which began the spark, maybe began in Athens. But it was brought to fruition by St. Paul and the Christian thinkers that followed him because instinctively we are clannish. Instinctively, we defend ours against everyone and everything.

And yet what we're being told by the Greeks and then by St. Paul is, no, it's your common humanity which transcends all of these other things and which means that you have got to treat every

other human being with a certain basic respect. And I think this was an incredibly radical idea. There's a sense in which it was always radical. It slowly person by person, if you like, extended itself for 1900 years. My fear today is that under the hammer blows of identity politics, this fragrant insight which has been so important in the development of a better world is now gone into reverse.

Daniel Wild:

And the way you've just put it there is not what you'd hear in the pews on a Sunday morning. I mean, I think that's a part of the challenge and what I was thinking about -

Tony Abbott:

And this is why, Daniel, Greg's book is such a wonderful book because he tackles these difficult issues in a way that even your average minister of religion or bishop would rather not. I mean, most of us do not want to be too challenging. Most of us would prefer to go with the flow. And yet sometimes we can't go with the flow. We've got to stand up and say, "Stop, this is wrong." We've got to point in a different direction and say, "Hang on a minute. You're going that way. No, we've got to go this way." And it is telling that a journalist, admittedly a particularly courageous journalist, a journalist who has a rather better stocked mind than most to do this. Why haven't bishops and archbishops been doing this for the last couple of generations? Well, with a few wonderful exceptions like George Pell, they haven't. But look at the crucifixion that George Pell had to endure because he was a churchman who didn't just conform to the zeitgeist.

Daniel Wild:

Tony, thank you for that assessment. And I think that's a good spot to leave our discussion for today and move on to our favorite segment of every podcast, which is the Tell Tony Abbott segment, which is your chance, our listeners to ask Tony Abbott your questions, which you can do so on the Australian Heartland Hotline by dialing into 03 9946 4307, or you can leave your question on the IPA's Facebook page. We've got a stack of very interesting and important questions. But before we get to them, I just want to remind all of our listeners if you're listening on Spotify, YouTube, Apple podcasts, make sure you hit subscribe or like so that you don't miss an episode. Tony, I'd like to go to our first question, which is from the Australian Heartland Hotline. And it comes from Katherine from the Gold Coast.

Katherine Simpson:

Katherine Simpson, Gold Coast, Queensland. My question for Tony is, under what powers can the Victorian government suspend parliament? And does the governor or governor general have any role in any of this? Thank you. Bye.

Tony Abbott:

Look, many countries and I think just about all of the Australian states have been operating under different forms of emergency rule since March of last year, where all sorts of ordinary freedoms have been suspended and all sorts of emergency measures have been put in place by decree. I agree that this is most undesirable. And I think one of the reasons why we have been living under such harsh lockdown measures is because there has been much less accountability and much less transparency than usual. I mean, it's absolutely right that for much of the last 18 months, we haven't been living in a democracy, we've been living in what I call a doctocracy, where health ministers, and premiers have said well, we're doing this on the basis of the health advice. The health advice is never published.

They impose things like mask mandates outdoors when there's no evidence for outdoors transmission in any significant way, or they impose things like curfews when again there's really no published health advice to say that curfews are necessary. Even the police it seems think that curfews are more trouble than they're worth when it comes to actually administering the law in this instance. So there is absolutely no doubt that our normal freedoms and our normal democracies have been subject to arbitrary withdrawal. And I think it would have been a hell of a lot better and a lot more comforting for people if there'd been more parliamentary scrutiny over this.

Daniel Wild:

Great. Thank you, Tony. And thank you, Katherine, for your question. And we'll move now to our final question from Kieran from New South Wales.

Kieran Mulhall:

Kieran Mulhall speaking from Gloucester, New South Wales. Tony, exalts not to vote for other parties because it will result in a life of victory. However, no matter how much we tell our members of our concerns, nothing ever changes. And many of us are now getting to the stage we will consider voting for another party because it seems the only way to send the message. Even though we may have to put up with the agony of a Labor government for four years.

Tony Abbott:

Things are never so bad that they can't get worse, Daniel. And you might think that current governments, current Coalition governments are pretty poor representatives of the values and principles that you thought the Coalition was dedicated to upholding. You might think that, but please do not underestimate just how bad the next Labor government will be. I mean, the next labor government is not going to be led by Joel Fitzgibbon. The next labor government is going to be led by Anthony Albanese. And Anthony Albanese is going to be very much a subject to a green fringe. So when it comes to spending, when it comes to regulating, when it comes to restricting our freedoms, do not underestimate how much worse things would be if we were under a Labor government. That's all I can really say to people. Remember, I've often said this, government regrettably is rarely a choice, politics is rarely a choice between good and great, or even between good and bad. Politics so often is a choice between bad and worse.

Daniel Wild:

Well, Tony, thank you for that. And thank you to our listeners for those questions. And Tony, we were just talking before about going into a final thought to end off our discussion, but I've got to say that your statement that politics is often a choice between bad and worse is a very nice summation of how a lot of people feel. Did you want to say anything in addition to that or should we leave it there?

Tony Abbott:

Daniel, look, these are very dispiriting times. I've never lived through such dispiriting times. I wasn't alive during the Second World War. But I'm trying to remember the Churchill phrase. Someone put to him these are daunting times. And I think he said, "Yes, but they're great times too because we have great causes that we're fighting for," or something to that effect. And the worst thing about these times is that we are told not to be active in meeting our challenges, but to be passive in meeting our challenges. That the way to improve things is not to do something, but to do nothing. And I just think this is contrary

to our nature. And I think this is why so many people are finding this current period so crushing to their spirits.

Now having said all of that, we have to accept what we can change. We can change the government this side of an election. And the only alternative government that's on offer, at least in New South Wales and nationally, is likely to be worse. So we just have to accept that it is what it is, do what we can to nudge the powers that be in a better direction, and resolve to make the most of our freedom once we have it back, and to be stronger and more resolute in standing up to the things that we believe in all the times to come. I think that's all we can do.

Daniel Wild:

Well, Tony, well said. And on that note, I think we'll end our discussion. So thank you again, Tony, for a very interesting discussion. And thank you to all of our listeners. Lovely to be with you.

Tony Abbott:

Thank you, Daniel.

Daniel Wild:

Thank you for listening to Australia's Heartland with Tony Abbott. And thank you for your support of the Australian way of life. This has been a production of the Institute of Public Affairs. To find out more and to become a member, head to [ipa.org.au](http://ipa.org.au).