

OPINION

Time to end spiritual pork-barrelling

BRIAN MORRIS



AUTHORITARIAN religion throughout history has had a seamless simpatico relationship with authoritarian governments. Think the Middle Ages, the conquistadors, and Catholic pogroms against heretics.

Recently it's become a triumvirate of conservative clerics, politicians and right-wing media trying to stamp out rationalism.

The 2021 census is a classic example of how fundamentalist religion, politics and media have come together. The way it will collect data on religion is fatally flawed - and it will have serious consequences.

The census question "What is the person's religion?" is biased, as it implicitly assumes every citizen has one.

To see the results of this bias, just look at the 2016 census, which saw 30 per cent of Australians declare "no religion", and 60 per cent some kind of religion. That's hopelessly wrong, and the government knows it.

It simply has no qualms collecting childhood faiths from people who long ago abandoned a family religion. Other ABS data shows these people don't practise it, and feel that religion is not important to them.

A July Essential Poll commission by the National Secular Lobby reflects the current reality of the "no religion v religion" split. It's not the 2016 result of 30-60 - it is in fact 52-41. A two-thirds "rise" in no religion and a one-third drop in religion. Also, around 10 per cent of Australians belong to non-Christian religions, so Christianity right now is sitting at around just 30 per cent.

Also keep in mind that when expressly asked if they "belong" to a religious organisation, 62 per cent of Australian say they don't.

In truth, Christians of full-on devout faith - mostly Pentecostals (like the Prime Minis-



The percentage of Australia's population that could truly be considered Christian now sits at about 30 per cent. Picture: Shutterstock

ter, Scott Morrison) and other evangelicals - number just 10 per cent. A small base, with too much power to sway politicians.

So why is this all important? It's more than important - it's critical. A primary objective of the census is to collect accurate data which will allow the government to provide "better services and infrastructure planning - and to responsibly allocate funding and resources".

To be clear - this is not an attack on people having a faith; it's about religious political influence and dishonesty. Undeniably, religious political influence has steadily increased. In 2014 a full 40 per cent of kids attended private religious schools, up from

near zero when Menzies first started to fund Catholic schools. In 2016, Catholic school funding was \$12 billion, and public schools struggle for functional funding.

Add to this the billions the government gifts to a variety of private religious businesses in aged care and other public services - not including genuine charities. Concurrently, public schools and higher education, public hospitals and other support services are almost viewed as welfare programs.

Just like sports rorts and car park rorts, the billions of dollars going to private religious businesses - all of which pay no tax - amount to spiritual pork-barrelling.

Secular Australians aren't "anti-religion". People can believe whatever wish - whether it's alien invasions, a flat Earth, or homeopathy. But please don't weaponise your religion to rort billions in taxpayer funds based on shonky census data, starving vital funds from public education and other services. It's dishonest and un-Australian.

The secular majority - now armed with indisputable evidence of the ongoing rort, caused by a loaded religious question - will launch its new campaign in 2022, when the ABS calls for submissions for the 2026 census. The question must finally be changed.

■ Brian Morris is director of Plain Reason.

Victoria's Secret angels on list of things we can do without

DEBORAH RICHARDS



I THINK enough time has passed for me to discuss the demise of something that has been hanging by a piece of frayed elastic for years.

[Trigger warning: don't read on if you are not coping well with the loss of the Victoria's Secret "traditional" lingerie parade.]

I've never seen a full VS undies parade, but I've caught glimpses of it on the TV news. It usually appeared as the quirky story at the end of the bulletin.

Over the years, viewing it became increasingly awkward as newsreaders were left glancing embarrassingly at each other after copping an eyeful of what can only be described as the tail end of a pageant for pervy gents (as in those who patronise traditional gentlemen's clubs).

The VS angels have been put in the boiler with Playboy bunnies. No doubt there are a few Playboy bunnies to be found in dark corners of the US (and the odd suburban Australian bedroom and swingers' spa), but I'd suggest that this century's general public would file them under "ye olde sleaze".

The bunnies would probably share a ratty file with photos of women in G-strings springing from grubby giant styrofoam birthday cakes.

Clearly there is a market for cheesy images of women in different stages of undress. Let's just call it a niche market specialising in the needs of adolescent boys.

I'm sure the demise of the overpriced VS undies show has prompted many online comments from uptight gents who are sick and tired of mouthy women spoiling everything for them. At this rate, there will be a law stopping them from telling random women in the street to smile.

But not all is lost, as the bulging number of followers on self-appointed Instagram models' accounts attest.

Clearly there is a market for cheesy images of women in different stages of undress. Let's just call it a niche market specialising in the needs of adolescent boys.

But I think the general public mentally sent this gear to the archives years ago (filed variously under Trump Beauty Pageants/ Page 3 Girls/Benny Hill/*Playboy* and *Pix-People* magazines).



Victoria's Secret angels have been put in the same bin as Playboy bunnies.

In other news, getting my first Covid vaccine has had a curious side effect: a new appreciation for Bon Jovi.

Even though I have publicly declared my admiration for big hair, '80s stadium bands, unnecessarily earnest song lyrics and other over-theatrical antics, I've never been a massive Bon Jovi fan. But I found myself humming a particular Bon Jovi tune about an hour after I got my first shot in the arm.

After the jab, and the required wait, I checked with the supervisor if I could go. She gave the nod and said I would be notified when the second shot was due.

"You're halfway there," she said.

Naturally, I replied in song: "Whoahh! Livin' on a prayer."

Her eyes narrowed like she was weighing up if I was having a turn.

A few weeks later, I'm still humming *Livin' on a Prayer*, that rocking ode to young lovers Tommy and Gina who are down on their luck. But they know they have to hold on, even though it's so tough.

But is it tough for us? Not really.

In the lead-up to the great Australian vaccine rollout there appeared to be a lot of pandering to the big babies among us. I lost count of how many times a high-profile person got the jab, and then commented with a scripted: "Gee, that was quick. Golly, it didn't hurt a bit."

Who cares if it hurts? I guarantee that the minimal, transient pain from a jab or two is preferable to the unpleasant symptoms of a mutant virus infecting your body.

If I was Queen of Australia, I'd rule that any fully functioning adult who carried on while getting a jab should get a punch in the arm to see them on their way. I'd also decree that Nurse Ratched administer the injections. Too much?

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