

In Australia, debates arise on which party reflects church values: Call for "a different Christian voice"

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Australian opposition lawmaker Kevin Rudd has triggered a national debate by criticizing the growing influence of conservative Christian groups in Australian politics. But the nation's health minister argued that the government does not cater to a bloc of religious voters.

"God is not owned by any political party and never will be," said Labor Party legislator Rudd last month. Speaking on publicly broadcast ABC radio, Rudd criticized politicians who identify themselves as the only Christian candidate.

In a country in which Prime Minister John Howard and senior politicians from major political parties are active Christians, Rudd's comments were the first public criticism of church roles in politics by a politician in years. Analysts noted that parallel disputes have roiled U.S. politics for decades.

Calling for "a different Christian voice" in politics, Rudd urged Christians who are passionate about social justice to join the debate. He said conservative evangelical and Pentecostal churches are wrong to treat faith as a purely private matter with no relevance to issues of poverty or injustice.

"The gospel is both a spiritual gospel and a social gospel," Rudd said. "Christian ethics are a dead letter unless they are translated into real social action."

Federal health minister Tony Abbot countered Rudd in a speech October 30 in Canberra, saying: "It's precisely because Howard has never used faith as a sales pitch that people with faith often find him reassuring and trustworthy, even if they don't entirely agree with him."

Some analysts say religious conservatives were influential in the 2004 Australian elections, especially in constituencies where opposition candidates lost their seats.

The elections saw the rise of the Family First Party, which is aligned with the Assemblies of God and Pentecostal churches. It campaigned as the only party focused on family values.

Ivan Herald, executive director of Family First in New South Wales, disagreed: "It would be totally inappropriate for any party to claim to be the only party that represented Christian thought." -*Ecumenical News International*