

When Christian Nationalism Becomes Governance Training:

What It Means for Women and for Australia's Future

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Tony Abbott has described JD Vance as “very smart” and praised his capacity for strong, effective governance, suggesting that leadership in Vance’s mould would keep the United States stable and resilient. Those comments deserve attention not because they are unusual among Australian conservatives, but because they illuminate a deeper ideological alignment. When Australian political figures express admiration for leaders shaped by American Christian nationalist thinking, they are endorsing a specific governing model: one that begins in the household and extends outward to the state, normalising hierarchy, obedience, and coercion while framing them as morally righteous. The question worth asking is what that model would mean if its assumptions about authority, family, and gender were normalised here.

Christian nationalism is often discussed as a set of cultural beliefs, or as a culture war. A closer examination shows it operating in a more systematic way: a template that begins in the household and extends outward to the state. In the household this takes the form of strict obedience to paternal authority: the father leads, the mother submits, and the children obey. This is not merely theoretical. It is observable in how American MAGA-aligned leaders articulate policy priorities, legislate family life, and frame civic authority.

The most observable expression of this model is the treatment of marriage as a civic institution rather than a personal relationship. In Vance’s public commentary, marriage carries obligations to social order; it is not primarily private. In a 2021 speech he criticised what he called America’s “divorce culture” and argued that people should remain in marriages “even violent ones” for the sake of stability, a comment that revealed how marital endurance is framed as a public good rather than a personal choice.^{1,20} His opposition to the US Respect for Marriage Act, which federally protected same-sex and interracial marriage, further demonstrates how the state is used to privilege a specific family model.² Hierarchy within the home becomes a rehearsal for hierarchy in public life. The domestic and the political are not separate spheres; they are continuous.

The child-welfare argument Vance uses to justify marital endurance does not merely lack support in the neurological literature; it is actively refuted by it. Research using MRI has shown that parental verbal violence, with no physical contact, is associated with measurable changes in brain structure;¹⁸ and that on symptom measures its psychiatric impact is comparable in severity to non-familial sexual abuse and to witnessing domestic violence.¹⁹

Only in combination with witnessing domestic violence does that impact reach or exceed familial sexual abuse, and then on some measures only.¹⁹

“Combined exposure to verbal abuse and witnessing domestic violence had a greater negative effect on some measures than exposure to familial sexual abuse.”

The affected regions include those governing language, memory, emotional regulation, and stress response. These changes are not fully reversible on entering adulthood, and carry documented consequences for mental health, employment, and social functioning across the life course. A policy that removes the legal exit from a violent or abusive marriage, on the grounds that intact families benefit children, keeps children in the precise environment that produces the psychological harms that the policy claims to protect them from.

Where the domestic policy enforces endurance, the reproductive policy enforces compliance, and in both cases the coercion is disguised as righteousness. Vance has consistently opposed abortion rights, including rejecting rape and incest exceptions on the grounds that “two wrongs don’t make a right.”³ This moral framing elevates abstract principle above women’s autonomy in concrete circumstances. Legislatively, Vance co-signed a Senate letter opposing an HHS proposed rule, the ‘HIPAA Privacy Rule to Support Reproductive Health Care Privacy’ (88 Fed. Reg. 23506, April 2023), that would have limited law enforcement access to women’s medical records in states with abortion restrictions. Opposing the rule meant preserving and politically defending law-enforcement access pathways to reproductive-health records in abortion investigations.⁴ State power enforces compliance; moral language obscures the coercive effect. Submission is praised; refusal is punished.

The logic that rewards compliance with those who enforce it extends further: in this political style, ruthlessness itself becomes a credential. Vance has aligned himself with a mode of leadership in which toughness and the willingness to override institutional restraint are presented as virtues, while negotiation and procedural caution are reframed as weakness. In a 2021 podcast appearance, Vance stated that if he could give Trump one piece of advice it would be to “fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state” and “replace them with our people.” He added that if courts blocked such action, Trump should stand before the country, like Andrew Jackson did and invoke the apocryphal formulation: ‘The chief justice has made his ruling. Now let him enforce it.’⁵ This echoes Trump administration initiatives such as Schedule F, which sought to reclassify many policy-related career civil servants, reduce ordinary civil-service protections, and make them easier to remove, thereby consolidating presidential control over the federal bureaucracy.⁶ In this model, institutional restraint is not a safeguard but an obstacle.

The theological scaffolding beneath these positions is complementarianism: the doctrine that men and women are equal in worth but assigned distinct and hierarchical roles, men as leaders and providers, women as supporters and homemakers. In its religious form this is explicit; in its political form it operates more subtly, through arguments that appear reasonable while importing the same assumptions about gender and authority. Vance has

disparaged Democratic leaders without children as "childless cat ladies" and argued that parents should carry greater political weight than non-parents, including by proposing that parents cast votes on behalf of their children.^{7,8} While framed as common sense, this logic implicitly devalues women without children and reduces civic worth to reproductive status. It mirrors religious complementarian arguments that assign purpose and authority based on gendered roles, but extends them into the political sphere, where they can be enacted through law rather than merely preached through doctrine.

The "stay for the children" rationale reinforces this logic by making family dissolution appear irresponsible. When that rationale is translated into law, when legal exit from a marriage is removed or constrained, the neurological evidence on parental verbal violence becomes directly consequential: children kept inside coercively controlled marriages are exposed to precisely the environment that produces the neurological injury the policy claims to prevent.¹⁷ The harm is not incidental to the governance model; it is its predictable outcome.

None of these positions floats free in the air; each is sustained by institutional infrastructure designed to move ideas from theology into law. In the United States, conservative religious and Christian nationalist politics are supported by a wider ecosystem of home-schooling networks, religious publishing, think tanks, activist legal organisations, and policy pipelines. One prominent example is the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership, a transition project involving more than 100 organisations and designed to prepare policy, personnel, and training for a future conservative administration.⁹ It outlines a comprehensive plan to reshape federal governance along socially conservative and executive-centric lines.¹⁰ Australia does not have an equivalent apparatus on the same scale, but it has its own conservative Christian advocacy ecosystem. The Australian Christian Lobby remains the clearest contemporary example, having sought to influence public debate on school chaplaincy, religious discrimination legislation, and marriage law. The National Civic Council is better understood as a historically significant, now-diminished Catholic-conservative network whose legacy and continuing niche advocacy link family-values politics to questions of religious freedom, education, sexuality, and parental authority.

Abbott's participation in international conservative forums reinforces how these networks transmit ideas across borders. His use of "civilisation" rhetoric at the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship^{11,12,21} his praise for Vance's leadership,¹³ his longstanding opposition to same-sex marriage,¹⁴ and his return to Liberal Party organisational leadership¹⁵ together position him as a working bridge between Australian conservatism and American-style Christian nationalist politics. Both Vance and Trump-aligned figures routinely frame social change in apocalyptic terms: civilisational collapse driven by feminism, immigration, secularism, and changing gender norms.¹¹ This crisis framing heightens fear and urgency, narrows the space for deliberation, and makes authoritarian solutions appear necessary rather than extreme.

What sustains allegiance to a model built on constraint and fear is a consistent promise. Vance's memoir and public speeches hold out the assurance that repairing family breakdown, restoring personal responsibility, and renewing traditional social obligations can restore

national strength and moral clarity.^{1,16} Trump's broader movement promises order, safety, and restored greatness in exchange for loyalty and compliance. When lived experience fails to match these ideals, followers are encouraged to blame themselves rather than question the system. That mechanism, internalising the failure of the promised order as personal deficiency, is precisely how people endure, sometimes for years, conditions that would otherwise be recognised as unjust or harmful. It is the domestic dynamic of coercive control extended to the political scale.

Conclusion

Australia's context matters because these dynamics are not isolated. When Australian political figures endorse governance models shaped by Christian nationalist thinking, debates about gender and family shift from questions of personal freedom to tests of civic loyalty. Hierarchical models begin to look like governance templates rather than private preferences.

It would be a mistake to dismiss these developments as niche or foreign. Ideas about gender, authority, and family determine who exercises power and on what terms. When those ideas move from belief into law and public rhetoric, they affect legal rights, social norms, and civic culture. Where those laws compel women and children to remain in abusive environments, the harm is not merely social or political: it is neurological, measurable, and documented in the peer-reviewed literature on brain development.¹⁷ That chain (from governance mandate, to legal compulsion, to neurological injury) is the most concrete expression of this paper's central argument: the household is not a metaphor for governance. Under this model, it is its first and most consequential site.

What counter-vision Australian civil society is prepared to articulate in response to that model is not a secondary question. It determines whether we inherit a future designed by others or define one grounded in democratic restraint and human equality.

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