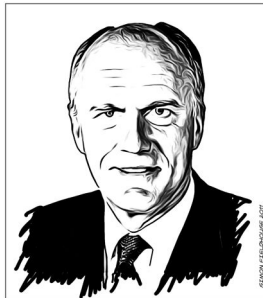

God, family and country: Politics, the Abetz way

by Steven Andrew



Eric Abetz likes to joke he started life as a union official.

A champion of the Liberal Party's right faction, Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Opposition workplace relations spokesperson and a "go to" man in tough political debates, Abetz will happily wake up a stuffy workplace relations conference with the "shock" revelation he spent his early years at university in union politics.

Only later, with a wry grin, will he reveal it was spent fighting the Australian Union of Students over its imposition of compulsory union fees.

Politics "on the right side" (with emphasis on a big "R") has been a factor in Abetz's life right from those early years, with any free time outside the classroom in the late 1970s devoted initially to the student representative council and later, his national presidency of the Australian Liberal Students Federation.

There, he got to know soon-to-be Liberal Party colleagues, party powerbroker Michael Kroger (a "good mate"), Tony Abbott, Peter Costello and Gary Humphries, and Labor's Nick Sherry, who attended the University of Tasmania at the same time as Abetz and Michael Danby.

Any profile of Abetz, however, should probably start – and end – with a reference to his Christian and family values. Like Tony Abbott, Abetz is a Christian. And like Abbott, Christian and family values underpin Abetz's personal and political beliefs – some would argue occasionally to his detriment in an increasingly secular Australian society.

With MPs spending a lot of their time away from home, "family values" may seem a conflicting priority for any politician. But insiders who know him claim Abetz is genuinely happiest "dropping a [fishing] line off a boat" with his wife Michelle or attending his local community church in Kingston, just south of Hobart, "any Sunday he can" with his wife and three grown-up children, two sons and a daughter aged 21, 18 and 17.

Making the tough choices, however, is nothing new for Abetz or his family. Abetz's father Walter emigrated with his wife and six children – three-year-old Eric the youngest – to Australia from Germany in 1961 to take up a position as a safety inspector on the hydroelectric scheme in Tasmania.

Abetz says he is astounded how many people still come up to him in his travels around Tasmania to tell him they knew his father. "His job in the early years was to travel to the various power stations and test the equipment for safety and maintenance issues", Abetz said. "He had a wooden leg courtesy of the Russian front, which probably made him hard to forget. But universally, I found he had been a very liked man and fellow worker."

Schooling for a young Abetz, he says, "was always a bit of a chore". "I had various visions of what I might do, but none genuinely excited me." Later, while doing a Bachelor of Arts degree, he started to think about law and discovered his calling (before politics), adding a Bachelor of Laws to his list of credentials.

Abetz was apprenticed on graduation, and then worked as an employed barrister and solicitor in a one-man firm in Hobart's northern suburbs. Abetz said the work was "varied" but involved a lot of criminal and family law. After five years, Abetz and a mate set up their own firm, Abetz Curtis, which still exists today but without Abetz's involvement or financial connection.

Throughout his legal career, politics continued to bubble along in the background. Abetz served in a number of Liberal Party positions before being named State President of the Liberal Party's Tasmanian branch, a position he held from 1990-1994, a precursor to his nomination and election as Senator for Tasmania in 1994.

Now the Opposition Shadow Minister for Workplace Relations, after spending time in the Howard government as Minister of Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation along with being Manager of Government Business in the Senate, Abetz says workplace relations interested him “right back to my uni days” where he studied workplace relations as an option and “practised on the edges”, including advising the Meat and Allied Trades Federation.

Abetz said his political leanings were never in doubt in those early days, despite acting for workers in a number of wages disputes. In perhaps a portent of things to come, the medical report in one of those matters – a worker assaulted by his boss for asking for his correct wages – was provided by a young general practitioner and soon-to-be Liberal parliamentary colleague named Dr Brendan Nelson.

The makings of a potential union industrial advocate, however, were not to be, with Abetz joining the Liberal Party in protest over being forced to join the student union while at the University of Tasmania.

Thirty years on, Abetz concedes his roles of Leader of the Opposition in the Senate and Shadow Workplace Relations Minister “require juggling”.

Workplace relations, however, is “never far from my mind”, he says. As a member of the Howard government, Abetz was part of the backbench group that worked on the Reith/Democrat reforms to free up workplace agreements. After the 2004 election, he led, for the Coalition in the Senate, debate on WorkChoices – and subsequently on the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth). For his efforts, Abetz was appointed Shadow Workplace Relations Minister in December 2009.

Abetz told *Workplace Review* the Coalition had “learned from its errors with WorkChoices” (“Oops – I’ve said it”, he quipped). Asked whether WorkChoices was truly defunct, Abetz said his party accepted the verdict of the Australian people. “To coin a phrase, WorkChoices is ‘dead, buried, and cremated’.”

Back on the front foot, Abetz told *Workplace Review* some parts of the WorkChoices replacement – the *Fair Work Act* – required further tweaking. A review of the Act was needed, something the Gillard government was “only now starting to realise”, Abetz said.

According to Abetz, good faith bargaining, adverse action, unfair dismissal, right of entry, transfer of business and scope of industrial matters all needed closer inspection and potential change. Abetz said finalisation of the *JJ Richards*, *Barclay v Bendigo TAFE* and the students minimum hours’ cases would provide a “clearer picture” of the best way to proceed.

Abetz is damning of the government’s handling of one of its biggest workplace relations tests since elected – the Qantas dispute. “I have said publicly and called for government intervention under s 431 of the *Fair Work Act* [a ministerial determination terminating industrial action] in the dispute. This would have avoided the grounding of the fleet. Discussions whether the use of s 431 is ideal or not is interesting. But a practical solution is needed for a practical problem in the context that the only tool kit available is the *Fair Work Act*.”

When elected, a Coalition government would curb the “endless tribe” of trade union officials appointed to Fair Work Australia, Abetz said, but the Australian Building and Construction Commission would remain.

“The Minister would intervene in more cases as the voice representing the public interest rather than allowing two vested interests to simply vie for dominance over each other. There would be a genuine emphasis on achieving productivity, which can be achieved without the old-fashioned notion that productivity must mean less pay for more work.”

On the wider issue of balancing family life and politics, Abetz says it is a “genuine struggle”. “The social data on families with absentee fathers is not good. Absences from family is the issue that churns me out the most. In a vain attempt to try and provide some balance, I seek to have Sundays as the day for church and family.”

In regard to his own religious beliefs, Abetz is circumspect. “It takes as much faith to believe there is a God as it does to not believe there is a God. My Christian faith helps inform my world view.”

Christianity is a “higher authority than the latest poll or popularity in the party room”, he says. “It also reminds me of my failings which should make me more tolerant to others’ perceived failings.”

When things get tough, a sense of humour helps.

Welcoming Princess Mary in her visit to Australia in November, Opposition leader Tony Abbott could not resist a friendly jibe at Abetz’s expense. “It is pretty good, if I may say Your Highness, for a girl from Taroona High School in Hobart. Much better, if I may say so, than has been achieved by your fellow Taroona High School graduate, Senator Eric Abetz.”

Jokes aside, no one is debating Abetz’s importance to the Opposition in its fight to return the Opposition to power. But if all else fails, Abetz knows the law is always there. “Who knows, one day”, he jokingly quipped to *Workplace Review*.

With Abetz only 53 and happily ensconced as a key player on the Coalition’s frontbench, that day is unlikely to be any day soon!

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Portrait by Simon Fieldhouse.