

Religious seats punish ALP for loss of freedom



Labor frontbencher Chris Bowen's seat of McMahon is the second-most religious in the nation. Picture: AAP

- [Bernard Lane](#)
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Australia's heartland of the faithful punished Labor at the polls, raising new questions about the wisdom of the opposition's partisan tactics on religious freedom.

"What religious people seem to have done is ... see Labor as hostile to the principles of religious freedom," said Jeremy Sammut, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies.

All but two of the nation's 10 most religious seats, chiefly Labor strongholds in western Sydney, recorded two-party-preferred swings to the Coalition at last weekend's election.

The Grattan Institute's Danielle Wood said there was a strong positive correlation between those swings and seats with a large share of voters declaring a religious belief. "I suspect you get a bit of a double whammy — those electorates that are both more religious and less economically secure are more likely to reject (Labor's) major economic policy change."

Last week, Labor frontbencher Chris Bowen confessed that during the campaign he was often told that "people of faith no longer feel that progressive politics cares about them".

His seat of McMahon is the second-most religious in the nation — like other nearby Labor seats, it boasts more than 50 per cent Christians and a sizeable Muslim vote — and it suffered a two-party swing to the Coalition of 5.4 per cent.

Mr Bowen's electorate and others in Sydney's west faced protesters with placards reading "Hands off our religious freedom" and "Hands off our mosques".

All but one of nine very religious seats voted more than 50 per cent No in the 2017 same-sex marriage plebiscite yet their Labor representatives went on to support the bill to legalise gay marriage.

Dr Sammut highlighted Labor's tactics last October when a religious freedom report to government was misleadingly leaked just before the crucial by-election in Sydney's gay-friendly seat of Wentworth.

With the Morrison government vulnerable, Labor leaders framed anti-discrimination exemptions for religious schools as an alarming new mandate to expel gay students.

Principals said this was a furphy, insisting the real issue was the right to hire teachers dedicated to a school's religious mission, without risking an anti-discrimination action. "This is where the diversity and inclusion agenda has got us — religious people feel that their fundamental rights are under threat," Dr Sammut said.

"But Labor has suddenly woken up and found that religious freedom issues actually take political skin off them, and in their heartland, so there's a much better chance of there being bipartisanship now."

Professor emeritus of sociology at La Trobe University, John Carroll, said Labor's attempt to use the Israel Folau case to trip up the Pentecostal PM had backfired.

He said pragmatic Australia did not like fanatics but Mr Morrison came across as down-to-earth and relatable, while there was sympathy for Folau, who was being punished for exercising his freedom of expression.

Dr Sammut said a contentious announcement in March by Labor deputy leader Tanya Plibersek that public hospitals would be compelled to provide abortions was clearly "targeted" at Catholic hospitals delivering publicly funded services.

None of the Labor MPs in the top five religious seats replied to questions from *The Weekend Australian* about the religion factor in the poll.

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<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/religious-seats-punish-alp-for-loss-of-freedom/news-story/a6a18e73f2f7680a2554d80fe8116815>