



Breakfast of Christians

by Jonathan Aitken

NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFASTS are an American invention that has not always transplanted successfully to other countries. While all presidents since Eisenhower have dutifully attended the Washington NPB, along with massive turnouts of senators, congressmen, and political bigwigs from every state in the Union, what goes with a bang in the Christian community of the United States all too often fizzles out with a whimper elsewhere in the world.

In most European capitals, NPBs have flopped so badly that they are now conspicuous in their absence. Even when they do struggle on, they are a pale shadow of the 5,000 strong extravaganza that Doug Coe and his team at the Fellowship Foundation manage to stage in the Washington Hilton every February. In London you are lucky if a couple of hundred faithful prayer-givers show up at the British NPB, of whom fewer than 20 are likely to be members of Parliament. Maybe this is because we think our legislators are beyond redemption anyway. Or maybe it is because the whole concept of coming to a public breakfast in order to say prayers for politicians makes Europeans want to choke on their croissants. Whatever the explanation, the NPB experiment hasn't yet become the global evangelistic success story that those ambitious brothers in the Fellowship have been expecting.

But lo, I bring you tidings of great joy about one National Prayer Breakfast that makes loud Hosannas

ring domestically, regionally, and, one imagines, celestially too. This is the Australian NPB, on which I can temporarily claim to be an expert. For I have just returned from being the keynote speaker at the NPB Down Under, and the experience was quite an eye-opener.

As a regular visitor to Australia since the late 1960s, I was not particularly sanguine about the prospects there for the success of any large Christian gathering. This is an aggressively secular country whose national religion appears to be sport, closely followed by materialism, hedonism, and all sorts of other "-isms" which have little connection with the Christian gospel. Far too many of Australia's Anglican churches give the impression of being stuck in a 19th-century colonial time warp. Its Catholic churches are only slightly less sleepy and empty, with aging congregations heavily dependent on the 1950s wave of post-war immigrants from Italy and Ireland. Although some new life is being breathed into the religious scene by evangelical mega-churches like Crossway Baptist in Melbourne and Hillsong in Sydney, they are barely denting the transcendent secularism of 21st-century Australia.

Against this background I set off for the capital city of Canberra with no great expectations—*O me of little faith*—that the National Prayer Breakfast would be a popular or prestigious event. How wrong I was!

My eyes began to be opened by the glories of Canberra, which after Washington, D.C., is probably the best-designed seat of government in the world. Once derided as “the bush capital” because it was artificially created in the wilds of rolling cattle country midway between the fiercely competitive cities of Melbourne and Sydney, Canberra today is a superbly sited metropolis of inspired architecture, elegant layout, and beautiful setting. Its centerpiece is Lake Burley Griffin, a 15-mile-long circular waterway interspersed with fountains, inlets, bridges, and splendid buildings along much of its shoreline. This lake and the teeming wildlife in and around it create a peaceful feeling of *rus in urbe* intensified by the city’s six million trees, which bring a kaleidoscope of color to the parks and boulevards. In such idyllic natural surroundings it is easy to feel, in Robert Browning’s words, that “God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world”—an exceptionally tranquil emotion in the most rustic of settings but surely unique in the heart of a nation’s capital.

By far the most magnificent building in Canberra is Parliament House, Australia’s rather grander answer to the Capitol and the Palace of Westminster. Like Lake Burley Griffin, it was designed by American architects who seem to have felt they were in the business of creating a Southern Hemisphere Babylon for the new millennium. For leaving aside the slightly embarrassing fact that Parliament House is far too big for the 300 or so federal legislators required for a nation of 20 million people, it is positively majestic in its scope and splendor, not least in the marble-floored Great Hall where the NPB took place.

TO MY SURPRISE the Great Hall was full. Some 700 Christian enthusiasts (a record) had flown in from all over the continent to have breakfast with and to pray for their politicians. These objects of prayer were present in record-breaking numbers too, and with a lineup of cabinet heavy hitters that was worthy of a Washington NPB.

Heading the list was the prime minister, John Howard. He read a powerful passage from Isaiah as a prayer for an ending of the drought—rural Australia’s greatest problem the past two years. The leader of the opposition read Psalm 130. Each of the 100 tables had at least one or two parliamentarians as the hosts. Among the senior figures was Peter Costello, the federal treasurer or finance minister, who has presided over eleven golden years for Australia’s booming

economy. There was also a good showing of other ministers, including the rising star Malcolm Turnbull, who may one day be fighting against Costello for the prime ministerial crown when Howard retires after the next election.

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How many of these politicians were at their tables out of nominal duty rather than sincere conviction? Only God knows the answer to that question. What I do know, however, after some deep conversations with John Howard, Peter Costello, and the leader of the opposition, Kevin Rudd, is that all three of these top men in Australian politics are committed believers.

WITHOUT WEARING THEIR RELIGIOUS hearts on their sleeve they set standards of leadership that are clearly influenced by their spiritual values. For example, John Howard has handled the issue of Muslim immigration to Australia with a conviction and clarity that puts many other world leaders to shame. “Australia is a Christian country,” he has said. “If anyone wants to come here they must accept our values and not import ideologies of their own.”

For a variety of different reasons, I found the Australian National Prayer Breakfast an inspirational event. It was organized and introduced by the former deputy prime minister, John Anderson MP, with a combination of efficiency and grace that impressed all present. It was patriotic, inclusive, and international in its scope with regional political figures, such as the leader of the opposition of the Solomon Islands, playing important roles in the prayers and readings.

Above all, this NPB made it clear that Australia is a nation led today by politicians, deeply serious about their faith, who commit the issues of their working lives to prayer. Combined with the message that they are supported in prayer by an equally serious Australian Christian community, you have the ingredients that make a National Prayer Breakfast a thoroughly worthwhile enterprise both politically and spiritually. ☞

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