

Title: A moral test for true believers, Rudd style
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Date: 5 Jun 2008
Source: [Sydney Morning Herald](#)

KEVIN RUDD wears his Christianity on his sleeve more prominently than any Labor leader since the devout Catholic Arthur Calwell.

It is a stance that yielded political dividends at last year's election, when Labor achieved its highest level of support from regular churchgoers since 1993. But now the Prime Minister faces a decision that may alienate socially conservative Catholics and born-again Protestants.

The Rudd Government is considering overturning the Howard government's ban on Australian overseas aid being used to fund abortions in poor countries.

This year the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, began a review of AusAID's family planning guidelines, establishing a subcommittee of Labor MPs to examine the issue. Labor's Catholic Right opposes changes to the guidelines, which say government aid funds must not be used for abortions or contraceptives that are not registered in Australia. But with a well-organised cross-party group of MPs pressing for the guidelines to be scrapped, anti-abortion Labor MPs fear they do not have the numbers in the caucus.

Some believe Mr Smith, arguably the most senior Catholic in the cabinet, is determined to change the guidelines. But he is insisting he will take the views of government MPs into account before reaching a decision.

One Labor MP who opposes any change reckons the final decision will be made by Mr Rudd.

"It will be a caucus decision on a major policy matter and the final call will be the way the Prime Minister wishes to resolve the matter," the Labor MP said.

Asked on ABC TV recently whether his religious views would influence how he ran the country, Mr Rudd said: "No. You are elected on the basis of the views you put to the Australian people; the policies you put to the Australian people."

Mr Rudd has a mixed record on the three socio-moral conscience votes since he entered Parliament in 1998. In 2002 he voted for legislation allowing stem cell research. In 2006 he supported removing the health minister's power to bar the abortion drug RU486. In 2006 he voted against legislation allowing embryonic stem cell research.

The decision on using aid funds for abortion services will not go to Parliament, as AusAID's guidelines are a government policy. The issue pits moral opposition to abortion against concerns about the health of women in poor countries. It divides MPs on both sides of politics.

The head of the Catholic aid agency Caritas, Jack de Groot, said if the Government was reviewing the guidelines it should acknowledge the church's role in providing primary health care in many poor countries. "Most Australians do not believe that our government's international aid program should be spent on procuring abortions," Mr de Groot said.

The head of the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, Jane Singleton, said more than 500,000 women a year died from childbirth or related causes.