

The power of one

January 5, 2008

Fred Nile is out in the suburbs raging against Muslims. It has to be good news for the Quranic Society's plans to build a big new school near Camden. The curious lesson of Nile's long career is that sooner or later nearly everything he rages against comes to pass.

Advertisement

Sydney is the Sodom of his imagination. Filth reigns on television. Brothels and casinos boom. Kids read Peter Carey for the HSC. Abortion flourishes. Naked youths on bus stop hoardings flaunt designer perfumes. Mardi Gras effortlessly survives his prayers for rain. Thirty years in public life have seen Nile achieve little but headlines and his own survival.

God, whom he credits with everything - his wife, his children, his old 2GB show, his perch in the Legislative Council, his party, his mission, his colleagues, his (public) funding - must take some credit for his punchy, earthy name with its Old Testament tang. Fred Nile is a name made for headlines.

But they are different now. Sex doesn't sell as it once did. Diatribes against dirty books only make it to the quirky columns, somewhere down the back of the paper near the sudoku. More and more Nile owes his place in the news pages to his views on race. Those who dismissed him long ago as a more or less harmless Christian buffoon are paying fresh attention now as papers report: "Nile party behind anti-Muslim school rally".

These rallies are nothing new on the outskirts of Sydney. Bankstown was in uproar in the late 1980s. Plans to build a prayer hall at Annangrove provoked 8000 objections and angry meetings of locals in 2002. The building site was frequently vandalised. One morning a pig's head was found there impaled on a stake. Once the hall was up, calm returned to Annangrove.

But the town of Camden is in ferment over the Quranic Society's plans. Pig heads have again made their appearance: two this time, with an Australian flag strung between them. A few nights before Christmas, mounted police guarded an overflow "information" meeting at the Camden Civic Centre. The school's backers were not invited to speak. A crowd, rallied in part by CB radio and text messages, chanted: "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oy, Oy, Oy."

Nile and his Christian Democrat Party were - despite his denials - heavily involved in organising the meeting and his was the key name on the bill: the big hitter come to town to denounce the proposed Al Amanah Islamic College as inter alia a possible training ground for a new generation of terrorists.

Cameras were banned from the hall. Reports of Nile's speech are scrappy. He told the *Herald* his topic was: How to maintain our Aussie Christmas. Camden's Mayor, Chris Patterson, told the *Herald* Nile was not interested in planning issues. "He had a wider message that Christianity and Islam don't mix."

Nile condemned Islam, called for a moratorium on Muslim immigration and emerged to tell the waiting cameras: "All the Aussies celebrating carols by candlelight this week - all over Australia, millions of Australians - are condemned by the Koran."

Nile can offend Christians and outrage swathes of the community. But premiers and leaders of the Opposition have to take him seriously and handle him gently.

His slender power in Macquarie Street comes down to this: governments need him. His constituency is tiny but his vote has been crucial for most of the 25 years he has been in the Legislative Council. At times Nile has had the balance of power - or as he prefers to say: "the balance of prayer" - and these days he and one other independent in the upper house can block any Opposition move to embarrass Labor.

After Camden, Nile was condemned by church and community leaders. Even his fellow Christian Democrat in the council, Gordon Moyes, broke with him over this.

But the NSW Premier, Morris Iemma, refused point blank to criticise Nile by name. Iemma kept it general: "There is no room for opposing a school on racial grounds. It has no place in our society and some of the remarks being made in the debate over the validity of the school setting up in Camden are completely unacceptable."

The Opposition Leader, Barry O'Farrell, was scarcely tougher at first, faulting Nile only for "creating tension and division in the community". Later he showed a streak of courage, adding: "It's as dumb as pigs' heads on stakes."

Though he seems to have been with us always, there was once a time before Nile. That ended in 1974 when this unknown evangelist with a bull jaw opened an Australian branch of the prim Festival of Light. Next came a Sunday night show on Sydney's 2GB and he started earning his headlines: "Reverend Fred lashes sin, vice and the media".

The modest bow wave of his radio success washed him into the Legislative Council in 1981. He has never matched that first win: 248,425 citizens, or about 10 per cent of the electorate, cast their vote for the tough-talking Christian who promised to be a digger, a truth seeker, a scourge of government.

"We are aiming to clean up Sydney," said Nile, earning himself right at the start a place in every compendium of great Australian quotations. "If Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he must be heartbroken over Sydney."

Democracy doesn't make heavy demands on legislative councillors. In those days they were elected for 12 years, a term later reduced to eight. Though Nile is the longest-serving member of the NSW Parliament, he has only had to face the electorate four times: in 1981, 1991, 1999 and 2007. At intervening elections, he was able to bring fellow souls on board.

When Nick Greiner beat Labor at the 1988 poll, the Nile team of Fred and his wife Elaine plus Marie Bignold held the balance of power in the council. Fred was ecstatic. "It is a miracle and God is providing this miracle." He boasted his bloc would see the end of Mardi Gras, street prostitution and X-rated videos. AIDS sufferers would be isolated in jails. None of this came to pass. While a huge nuisance on these issues - and many more - Nile has never been able to parlay his tactical advantages into substantial achievements in legislation and policy. He's not a Brian Harradine. He doesn't have that wily Tasmanian's patience and intellectual ferocity. He doesn't take his demands to the brink.

Nile sees this as a virtue: "I've developed that strategy from what I believe is my Christian philosophy: that I shouldn't blackmail governments".

Nor has he been backed by the leadership of his faith, as Harradine was by the Catholic Church. Nile has only ever spoken for the conservative rump of the Uniting Church and embarrassed its leadership from the start. He sees himself instead "representing grassroots Christians".

Then Nile's faction split. The comedy of the next two years, played out in the chamber and the press, saw God speaking directly but at cross purposes to both Bignold and the Niles. The brawl was ferocious and the rhetoric hilarious. "I know how John the Baptist felt," Nile declared in November 1988. "Mrs Bignold wants my head on a platter."

Later that summer when the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence carried his head - a great roast surrounded by vegetables - up Oxford Street in the Mardi Gras parade, Nile threatened prosecution.

All this took its toll. On his first return to the polls in 1991, his vote more than halved, leaving him with the support of less than 4 per cent of the community. Nevertheless, God provided him once more with the miracle of the balance of power. Again Nile issued a public list of his demands - no casinos, cheerful novels for the HSC, a conscience vote on abortion - but again these issues got nowhere.

Nile observers wonder if he began to lose faith in his own morals crusade. When Labor came to office in 1995, they found the Niles easy enough to deal with. It helped that they were, in their way, a likeable pair: polite, serious about their duties and sharing the constitutionally admirable view that it wasn't the role of the Legislative Council to make and break governments.

Even so, Labor was always short of a majority and had to work on Nile. The assessment of senior figures in the party - ministers and their staff - was that Nile itched for respectability. Early on, they appointed him to the council of Wollongong University. Labor weathered the ridicule.

When Nile resigned from Parliament in 2004 to take a tilt at the Senate - he won barely 100,000 votes - Labor arranged a rare joint sitting to restore him to the council. Labor's massaging continues. Mid-last year, Nile was awarded a new title of assistant deputy president of the council, with shadowy responsibilities and an additional salary of \$24,000.

But crucially for the Government, Nile loves to chair committees. His willingness to run Labor-friendly inquiries is a source of particular anger for his Green opponents in the council. Lee Rhiannon says: "He really saves the Government when they are under scrutiny." Nile doesn't altogether disagree. "I've always had strong reservations about politically motivated committees set up by the Opposition which are simply a political witch hunt."

Here's how it works: by the rules of the upper house and a quirk of the numbers through the Labor years, the Opposition has been able to set up hostile inquiries with real teeth. Theoretically. In practice, Labor trumps the Opposition by establishing its own inquiry with friendlier terms of reference, more often than not with Nile in the chair.

The just-completed inquiry into the Royal North Shore Hospital was a perfect example of the system in operation. To head off an Opposition investigation, Morris Iemma rang Nile, negotiated a tighter schedule and friendlier terms of reference. Nile was in the chair. The upshot was a report that had unpleasant things to say about the hospital, but inflicted no real damage on the Government. One prominent witness dismissed it as "bureaucratic waffle".

At least Nile's energy couldn't be faulted. On December 19 this 73-year-old warrior for Christ first released his hospital findings in Macquarie Street and then headed out to Camden to denounce Islam.

"Nile defends his report" read the headlines. And: "Is Nile's party truly Christian in its attitude to Muslims?"

The synergies are obvious. On gays, drugs, promiscuity, abortion, marriage, obscenity, blasphemy and modesty, Nile and the mullahs see eye to eye.

Muslims joined Nile picketing Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation Of Christ* in the late 1980s and a decade later Nile spoke for Muslims as he attacked Mardi Gras.

But electoral reality was catching up with him. He could see by this time that his blue-collar Christian vote was under pressure from both John Howard's Liberals and Pauline Hanson's One Nation. The 1999 NSW poll - only the third time he'd faced the people - saw his vote slip a little further. He could now count on the support of only 3.2 per cent of the state.

A few days after Tampa, Nile took his party in a totally new direction, demanding Christian refugees be given priority over Muslims. "What countries are persecuting Muslims?" he asked.

"NONE. No Muslim is being persecuted because he is Muslim! These illegal boat people are leaving Muslim nations and are travelling through Muslim nations ... On the other hand, millions of Christians are being persecuted and even murdered by militant Muslims in Muslim nations ..."

Nile reaped headlines with every attack on Muslims that followed. They ran for weeks after he called for banning the chador to guard against hidden bombs.

He raised the perils of Islam in his 2004 Senate campaign and the centrepiece of his state campaign last year was the call for an immediate moratorium on Islamic immigration. His vote rose to 4.4 per cent.

Although Nile denies the new direction in which he has taken his party was chosen in any "cold-blooded way to get extra votes", he acknowledges it has had that effect: "I thought it was a factor."

The prominent Uniting Church commentator David Millikan has forgiven Nile a great deal in the past. But he can't forgive his campaign against Muslims and his leadership role in the Camden fracas.

"He is actually goading the Islamic extremists. He is out of his depth. He can set forces running here that he has no way of controlling. I think he should shut up."

But Nile blames critics like Millikan for encouraging violence by putting the idea out there in the first place. "I would be totally opposed to anything like that," he said. "And I would strongly condemn it."

Surely he considered the dangers of whipping up passions in the heated atmosphere of Camden? "There was no attempt to whip up passions. The people were already passionate."

Nile won't admit it might be inflammatory to tell the crowd that millions of Australians were condemned by the Koran for singing Christmas carols.

He says he was just quoting the Islamic text. "I'm saying the Christians are celebrating Christmas and the theme is Jesus Christ is born the son of God and that is condemned in the Koran.

"And if that's taught in the Muslim school, how does that promote unity and harmony in our society? That's the issue I was raising. How do we deal with that?"

But the language is inflammatory?

"I don't believe it's inflammatory. I believe it's accurate."

Aren't you just an anti-Muslim rabble-rouser? "No. I could be a rabble-rouser but I am not. Pauline Hanson is a rabble-rouser. I am not. I'm not making radical statements attacking Muslims as a daily occurrence. That's why I didn't respond to all those negative statements in the paper about me. I'd rather let it cool off than inflame it, keep the whole thing going."

God, he says, and a new constituency among Middle Eastern Christian congregations in the suburbs compel him to take this stand against Islam. "I'm a Christian and I pray and I just believe God puts into my heart these convictions ... and I try to be faithful in following them."

The people of NSW - or 168,545 of them - have given Nile a perch in the Legislative Council until 2015. By then he will be 81. He says he feels young and determined to carry on. "I see I have an obligation to continue to serve God and the people of this state so long as I'm making a contribution. I really believe in my own heart I am making a contribution."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/01/04/1198950075839.html>