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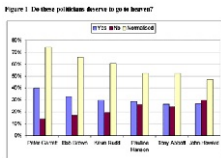
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Polling whether politicians should go to heaven **AUSTRALIA**

Clive Hamilton



The belief that those who live a morally worthy life earn a place in heaven is held across cultures and religions. Even among non-believers, many would say that those who lead a more moral life would certainly deserve to go to heaven, if it does exist.

According to Christian doctrine, on the Day of Judgement we must give an account of our lives. Saint Peter weighs up our good deeds and our bad ones and decides whether we should be allowed in to the place of eternal peace or sent elsewhere.

In Catholic theology, after death we may enter an intermediate place, purgatory, where we are cleansed of our remaining sins. Although sins are forgiven in confession, there remains a liability which is expiated in purgatory.

Catholicism is more generous than some forms of Protestantism: not only do sinners get a chance to redeem themselves, but non-believers can make it to heaven if they are morally upstanding.

Some Protestant churches reject the belief that access to heaven is the reward for good moral character. Salvation is granted by the grace of God, and accepting Jesus into one's life is the only way to be saved, although it goes without saying that living a righteous life will follow the embrace of Jesus.

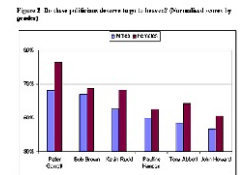
Most other religions believe that good people go to heaven. Traditional Judaism describes a final judgement where virtue is rewarded and wickedness punished. Heaven and hell feature prominently in Islam and represent the reward or punishment for one's life on judgement day, although only believers can enter heaven.

For Hindus the accumulation of good karma is rewarded in an after-life or a better reincarnation. Buddhists see heaven as a transitional stage between one earthly existence and the next; too much bad karma results in suffering in one or more hells, but the fully enlightened being can escape the cycle of rebirth and retire to the bliss of nirvana.

What do Australians think?

If most Australians do hold the belief that good people deserve to go to heaven then a good

measure of how we regard the moral standing of our political leaders would be whether we believe they deserve to go to heaven. These questions have been explored in a recent national opinion survey commissioned by the Australia Institute.



Overall, 63 per cent of respondents said they believe in heaven or some form of life after death. Twenty-three per cent said they did not, while 13 per cent chose the 'don't know' option. Women (74 per cent) were much more likely than men (52 per cent) to believe in heaven or an afterlife.

Overall, only a minority of Australians - 33 per cent - believe that those who lead a more moral life are more likely to go to heaven, with 37 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men taking this view.

However, among those who believe in heaven or an afterlife the proportion is higher, with half (50 per cent) saying that people who lead a moral life are more likely to go to heaven, while a third (34 per cent) said they are not more likely (with 16 per cent remaining uncommitted).

Many Australians are unsure or reluctant to say whether their political leaders deserve to go to heaven. A high proportion of survey respondents answered 'don't know' when asked whether each politician deserved to go to heaven - in fact, between 44 per cent and 51 per cent. This may be due to hesitation in making judgements about these individuals' private lives, or because they do not believe in an afterlife and cannot enter into the spirit of the question.

Nevertheless, using a normalised score calculated by excluding those who do not express a view, we can get a sense of how Australians judge the moral standing of some prominent political leaders.

Among those politicians included in the survey, Australians believe Labor's environment spokesperson Peter Garrett most deserves to go to heaven, with 74 per cent indicating that he deserves that fate and 26 per cent saying otherwise.

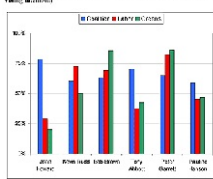
Green leader Bob Brown scored next highest, with a normalised score of 66 per cent, followed by Kevin Rudd on 61 per cent. Both Pauline Hanson and Tony Abbott scored 52 per cent, while Prime Minister John Howard attracted the lowest score, with 47 per cent saying he deserves to go to heaven and 53 per cent saying he does not.

Generally speaking, women are much more positive than men when asked whether leading politicians deserved to go to heaven. Gender differences are most apparent in the case of Peter Garrett - 83 per cent of female respondents but only 66 per cent of male respondents say he

deserves to go to heaven. Gender disparities are also notable for Kevin Rudd (67 per cent for females, 55 per cent for males) and Tony Abbott (58 per cent for females, 47 per cent for males).

The gender gap is smallest for Bob Brown: 68 per cent of females and 64 per cent of males say he deserves to go to heaven. Meanwhile, 51 per cent of females who indicate a preference say that John Howard deserves to go to heaven, compared to 44 per cent of male respondents. On this measure, the Prime Minister appears to be viewed least favourably by both men and women.

Figure 2: Do these politicians deserve to go to heaven? (Normalised scores by voting preference)



Moral standing and religious views - a disconnect?

Do these results simply reflect political judgements? It seems that there is more to it. Peter Garrett and Bob Brown generate the highest level of agreement across the political divide, suggesting that their moral standing transcends political differences. Surprisingly, around two-thirds of Coalition voters who expressed a view said that Peter Garrett (65 per cent) and Bob Brown (64 per cent) deserve to go to heaven, with scores predictably higher for both Labor and Greens voters. Meanwhile, three-fifths of Coalition voters (60 per cent) said that Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd deserves to go to heaven.

The Prime Minister divides Australians more than any other figure, with 79 per cent of Coalition voters believing the Prime Minister deserves to go to heaven (on a normalised basis), compared to just 29 per cent of Labor voters and 20 per cent of Greens voters.

Traditionally religious beliefs have been considered a private matter in Australia. Unlike in the United States, most Australians look askance at those who declare their love of God from the rooftops, and they do not like to see those beliefs intrude into the public realm. Perhaps this helps to explain why health minister Tony Abbott, the former seminarian whose strong Catholic views have coloured his political decisions, scores relatively poorly, while Peter Garrett, who keeps his firm Christian beliefs to himself, scores well.

On the other hand, Bob Brown, an atheist, seems to receive strong support across the political spectrum because, although many may disagree with his views, he commands respect for the principled positions he has taken over the years.

The Prime Minister seems to work hard at signalling his Christian beliefs without going over the top and alienating the non-believers and those who believe religious belief should be kept private. But after more than a decade in office his moral standing seems to have been tarnished by a widespread view that he is 'mean and tricky'. Perhaps God will be invoked more in the forthcoming federal election than ever before, but those who want to imply that they have the

deity on their side should make sure that their own moral standing lives up to divine expectations.

Thanks are due to Josh Fear for his contributions to the research.

Financial decisions not value-free BUSINESS

Les Coleman

More than sixty years ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow advanced a theory that he termed the 'hierarchy of needs' which explains the way that - as each human need is met - we strive towards increasingly cerebral goals. It is this hierarchy of needs that helps explain why Australians saw the environment, a century ago, as a foe to be tamed, whereas today its beauty is highly prized. More prosaically, our yardsticks for the value of an asset have broadened from basic measures of its immediate economic capacity to encompass non-financial, perhaps even non-empirical, benefits such as future prospects and aesthetics. How might financial decisions contribute to higher needs, specifically sustainability?



What is sustainability in the context of finance? Googling 'sustainable investing' or something similar throws up thousands of hits covering reports, advice and money sinks at the United Nations, non-government organisations and financial institutions. Most of this is a long-winded recitation of platitudes, with little actionable advice. The reason, of course, is that the meaning of financial sustainability is not clear, not even to banks promoting their green credentials.

To me, sustainability covers multiple topics - particularly the environment, society and economy - and minimises the harmful future impact of decisions. This especially includes impacts that are either not included in conventional analysis (so-called externalities) or those that are diminished in value today by discounting future cash flows. Thus adopting 'sustainable objectives' signals a bias towards longer term goals and places greater value on less quantifiable future costs and benefits. This raises two important challenges. The first is that a longer-term perspective will axiomatically incur immediate expenses or opportunity cost. The second is that a more distant horizon introduces greater uncertainty, which imposes the need for risk management across a longer time frame and over a wider set of exposures.

More specifically, sustainability in finance avoids harmful impacts, now and in the future,

on markets, financial institutions and firms. Sustainable investors will not seek short-term gain if this increases market volatility and uncertainty, and renders markets less efficient; similarly firms will promote stabilising strategies, including ethical dealings, with an eye to longevity. Investors will seek out financial institutions that adopt sustainable practices, including refusal to fund damaging projects and a preference for promoting stability in markets. Finally sustainable investors will commit their funds - whether as equity or debt - to firms with sustainable business practices and products.

Although most investors still ignore sustainable factors or pay only lip service to them, their decisions could promote sustainability in three ways: choice of financial institution; investment strategy; and investment selection. Consider each in turn:

Choice of Financial Institution

Most investors need to use financial intermediaries such as banks, stock brokers, and advisors. These institutions have ample information to assist (or otherwise) customers with particular needs. In short, they can tailor the allocation and cost of capital and management of financial risks to promote sustainability. Thus, to invest in sustainability one should prefer banks that have signalled a sustainable bias, for instance by adopting the 'Equator Principles' that ensure they only fund projects that meet minimum environmental and social standards, irrespective of local requirements.

Investment Strategy

Turning to investment strategy, this relates to allocation of funds between asset classes (shares, property, bonds and so on); the level of borrowings we choose; and the nature of trading. Sustainability avoids short-term goals such as a high turnover of investments or focusing on short-lived arbitrage, and avoiding securities or funds with speculative intent. Investment objectives should be matched to long-term needs, with borrowings that can be confidently serviced and an income stream that will meet future requirements. Some funds should be deliberately directed towards helping to finance start-up firms that have difficulty accessing capital, but have sustainable technologies and business models that offer breakthrough opportunities.



Investment Selection



The final choice relates to individual investments. Superficially this seems simple: select from the wide range of funds and firms that are described as ethical, socially responsible or green. Few of these, however, meet the test of sustainability. For a start they typically underperform the market over the long term: our definition of sustainability eliminates investments that are inefficient. Second, many of these funds use coarse filters such as industry classification or products sold to eliminate investment candidates: refusing to invest in politically incorrect, although quite

legal, firms promotes little beyond the feelgood factor.

Many funds take a narrow view of sustainability, and focus, for instance, on minimising use of non-renewable natural resources. Similarly, firms will affect a sustainable stance to give the appearance of being sensitive to the issue, rather than having any real commitment to its substance. Unfortunately, too, most lists of sustainable-type investments are based on questionnaires that do not get to the heart of a firm's strategy, and whether it really contributes to sustainability.

A better selection tool is required, and fortunately some guides do exist. [Generation Investment](#), for instance, is a fund manager partly owned by former Vice-President Gore that chooses its investments using a broad set of sustainability criteria. The [Dow Jones Sustainability World Index](#) identifies leading companies from a mix of long-term economic, environmental and social criteria. Both include General Electric, and have a heavy tilt towards leading banks and technology innovators. The Dow Jones Index is 16 per cent resource companies and 13 per cent industrials, with around 16 Australian firms including BHP Billiton, Tabcorp and Westpac Bank.

Although there is a dearth of useful information on truly sustainable investments, markets have a propensity to generate information, and we can expect knowledge gaps to be closed in coming years and facilitate sustainable investing.

Sustainable investing requires an eye to long term risks. Intuitively, unsustainable practices have adverse financial consequences, so financial risk is closely linked to risks from non-sustainability. Whilst hard to identify, these latter risks involve possible damage to the long-term viability of a firm or market. Some are behavioural such as unethical practices, poor quality products and weakening reputation. Other risks are sourced in products or processes that have long-lived effects and so could prove damaging in the future. To complicate this issue, many of these risks are - true to Maslow - evolving in light of new technology, and with changing social and economic systems.

If from this article you have concluded that sustainable investing is complex then you are correct. The other objective of this article is met if you still remain committed to using your financial decisions to promote sustainability. Investors are buyers of financial products and services and this affords them a unique opportunity to shape the nature of markets and financial institutions. Financial decisions are not value-free, and investors should not be shy to use their power to promote sustainability.

Hiroshima insider's imprint on Jesuit sensibility
COLUMNS

Summa Theologiae

Andrew Hamilton

Sometimes anniversaries illuminate one another. 6 August is the day on which the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. This year marks the centenary of the birth of Pedro Arrupe. He was a Basque Jesuit who worked in Japan and later became Superior General. He was present at Hiroshima on 6 August, 1945, and subsequently lectured widely about the event. His edited description of the event illuminates significant aspects of Hiroshima:



“I was in my room with another priest at 8.15 when suddenly we saw a blinding light, like a flash of magnesium. As I opened the door which faced the city, we heard a formidable explosion similar to the blast of a hurricane. At the same time doors, windows and walls fell upon us in smithereens.

“We climbed a hill to get a better view. From there we could see a ruined city: before us was a decimated Hiroshima. Since it was at a time when the first meal was being prepared in all the kitchens, the flames contacting the electric current turned the entire city into one enormous lake of fire within two and a half hours.

“I shall never forget my first sight of what was the result of the atomic bomb: a group of young women, eighteen or twenty years old, clinging to one another as they dragged themselves along the road. “We continued looking for some way of entering the city, but it was impossible. We did the only thing that could be done in the presence of such mass slaughter: we fell on our knees and prayed for guidance, as we were destitute of all human help. “The explosion took place on 6 August. The following day, 7 August, at five o’clock in the morning, before beginning to take care of the wounded and bury the dead, I celebrated Mass in the house. In these very moments one feels closer to God, one feels more deeply the value of God’s aid. Actually the surroundings did not foster devotion for the celebration of the Mass. The chapel, half destroyed, was overflowing with the wounded, who were lying on the floor very near to one another, suffering terribly, twisted with pain.”

Fr Arrupe’s view of the bombing of Hiroshima was from the inside. He was inside the house when it happened, tried to find out what happened, and then became preoccupied with tending to the injured. He was a doctor. He does not reflect on the morality of the bombing.

A view from outside illustrates better the barbarity of what was inflicted on Hiroshima. It was apparently a lovely sunny day in a city that had become used to relative peace. Enemy planes regularly droned overhead unmolested but did not attack the city, so the arrival of the aircraft caused no great alarm. Then came the explosion. The elements are there: a defeated air force, a completely unprotected city visited at will by enemy aircraft, a city full of people preparing

breakfast about to be made a laboratory for the effects of a new weapon. It is an image of man's inhumanity to man.

Fr Arrupe's contribution was influential because he spoke much about the bombing and helped people to become aware of the human reality of the bombing. In his account, the bomb is clearly seen to have contributed less to military strategy than to the suffering of innocent human beings. It created a world that needed to be healed.

Fr Arrupe's account, too, discloses two forms of intellectual curiosity. One form is the curiosity of the scientists who conceived and designed the bomb to see whether and how it would work, and what its effects would be. Some subsequently struggled with their consciences.

The second form is Fr Arrupe's curiosity, that of a doctor as well as a priest - about the human effects of the bomb and how to address them. He noted the living conditions in the city, and the state of the survivors. He then turned his attention to the resources he had at hand to treat wounds and address pain, noting the importance of clean dressings.

Both forms of curiosity were scientific, but Hiroshima cast a long shadow over scientific reason. It made evident the conditions of the heart under which a passion for knowledge can safely be indulged. It requires an attention to the complex and deep human reality against which the value of one's research is tested. Since this insight always risks being dulled, the reality of Hiroshima bears remembering.

We can also see in the devastated plain that had once been the centre of Hiroshima the beginnings of later environmental sensibility. It became possible to imagine realistically the capacity of humankind to devastate the world through the development of technology. For many years the threat of nuclear war, exemplified in the tests of the thermonuclear devices that could cause third-degree burns some one hundred kilometres from the centre of the explosion, preoccupied public sentiment. But it also demonstrated that even peaceful technologies could be destructive in the long term, and interested an increasing number of people in the environment. The movement has gathered force around the reality and threat of global warming.

Finally, in Fr Arrupe's description of the Mass that he celebrated after the bomb fell, we can see a tension in religious sensibility that remains with us. He describes the presence of the sick and wounded as not fostering devotion. But his hospitality to the sick and wounded places them at the centre of the mystery that he is celebrating. He leaves Christians with the question of how we bring together the different aspects of devotion: the presence of God in prayer and silence, and the presence of God in the world's wounded. He did not solve this question, but

characteristically he holds them together.

When governments stop listening to advice

COLUMNS

Capital letter

Jack Waterford

There is always a period in the life of any government when it stops listening to advice, a wise old bureaucrat commented recently. But, he said, he had never known a government to stop listening so early in the political season.

It fits in with a Peter Costello remark in the recent biography of Howard by two academics, Wayne Errington and Peter Van Onselen. In Costello's version, 2004 saw the Treasurer's office prepare a smorgasbord of about 20 costed policy ideas that might be put up for the election campaign. Some were about tax. There was an education initiative. A health one. A childcare one. The idea was that Howard, and his tacticians would pick two or three of the best according to their view of the best electoral bang for the buck. But John Howard took everything, and more. As Costello put it, "He ordered everything on the menu: entrÃ©e, main, dessert, the vegetarian option". Ate the toothpicks too, one might add.

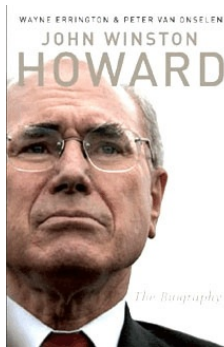
In a later section of the book Costello complains of such binge spending, saying that, as Treasurer, "I have to foot the bill and that worries me. And then I start thinking about not just footing the bill today but, if we keep building in all of these things, footing the bill in five, 10 and 15 years, and, you know, I do worry about the sustainability of these things."

The quotes are noteworthy not for some mere partisan point. It's a major problem of government these days. The remarks were made more than a year ago, even if they were published only in recent weeks. Since then, John Howard (without any form of apparent resistance from his Treasurer) has committed the Government to many billions more in long term public expenditure, and has given every indication that the pace will increase enormously as the country moves closer to election.

More ominously, the expenditure plans are going through no normal process of government. Notoriously, because Ken Henry, Secretary of the Treasury complained of it, there was no input from Treasury (or Finance, or Environment) in John Howard's \$10 billion water plan. The 'plan' - and just what it involves other than spraying \$10 billion about is still quite unclear months after the announcement - was concocted, over four days, by a group of ministers, minders and a few people from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Likewise with the invasion of the Northern Territory in the name of saving Aborigines from child abuse, and from themselves. This was a policy, again without a plan to accompany it

(and with no idea of cost), concocted by a emotional but incoherent minister and the Prime minister over a few days. Not tested against departmental expertises, nor even in proper Cabinet debate, nor weighed, measured and integrated into any sort of whole of government financial, economic or even political plan. More than a month in, not even the players, or for that matter the minister, really know what is meant to happen to reverse what has gone before.



Better managed has been the Commonwealth takeover - through use of the corporations power of the constitution - of industrial relations power, but that too presents problems, not least from the opportunities perceived by politicians, on both sides, for unlimited Commonwealth power in virtually any field. Legal constraint, as well as old-fashioned notions of an ideal federalism, was once an argument almost as important as financial constraint and economic sense in determining good policy.

The Tasmanian hospital takeover was politics at its most crude. The Prime Minister judged, on the run, that it might win him a few votes. There have been discussions before of a Commonwealth takeover of public hospitals - even some ministerial advocates, including Health Minister, Tony Abbott, and some respectable analyses (such as the one by Andrew Podger) of what might be done and how.

Until recently, however, Howard was publicly opposed, and with reason. Nothing he has now announced fits into any earlier ideas of what might be done, or to what strategy or purpose. The individual takeover target in question, in Burnie, must send shudders through both the health and treasury bureaucracy in Canberra, given that propping up the hospital is a defeat for any sort of rational planning, allocation of resources, or pressure on the states for sensible planning.

The Prime Minister's rationale for intervention, indeed, sends a powerful signal to the states that they should not plan sensibly, that they should pay obeisance to all manner of local vested interests, and that the sensible allocation of scarce resources is the least important consideration of all. The problem was aggravated by the enthusiastic invitation from Tony Abbott to any other rent-seeking hospital to get in line. The immediate impulse of some other pressed MPs, almost encouraged by the Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, was to suggest that parents frustrated by school closures or rationalisations should seek direct funding from Canberra.

John Howard, defending his decision, said quite rightly that voters are more interested in outcomes than constitutional theories about responsibility for delivering them. Commonwealth Governments of all complexions have bristled for years about how they pay most of the public hospital bill while having little say in hospital management, while states try desperately to shift further costs on to the Medicare system. Blame shifting is as much a problem as cost

shifting. In education the Commonwealth is also intervening, and making national and local commitments without providing any sort of central rationale, rhyme or reason.

People want good hospitals and good schools. What 'good' amounts to is never entirely clear, though anything smacking of declining quality, reduced investment, complaining and demoralised workforces, and popular perceptions of falling 'standards' is clearly 'bad'. With all the blame shifting, Howard is quite right to say that the Commonwealth has some reason to get involved, or at least, some reason to demand better accountability for the massive Commonwealth investment. An angry Commonwealth may even cut to the chase and focus on outcomes.

But ad hoc responses to the perceived services crises, the more ad hoc for being in an election context, are not a substitute for a plan for a new 21st century federalism, the stretching of old federalism processes, and the selective, almost random, abandonment of negotiation, cooperation and the Council of Australian Governments processes. Even less so is it a reason for throwing out whole-of-government processes within the Commonwealth itself.

A good deal of the time, indeed, no one is arguing about real things. They are arguing about perceptions - not least the perception of being seen to do something. One does not actually have to do anything to create this perception; all one has to do is announce that one has a plan to do something, couple with some number drawn from a hat of millions, or billions, intended to be spent. The politics - including the anger of the states and other players - actually serves a short term purpose of reminding everyone that the Government is now doing something. This is not process taking over outcomes. It is where plans, visions, frameworks, strategies and razzamatazz substitute for action.

A more effective Opposition might be making more effective politics about this, but this is not the bureaucracy's chief concern. Bad habits of governments, of any persuasion, tend to persist into succeeding administrations. Good habits are harder to sustain.

Over the last 30 years, ministerial government has considerably improved, and Australia has been better governed and more economically sound as a result. Ministers developed expenditure review committees. With or without economic rationalism, debates about sound policy became more economic and more rational. The processes of decision making were improved, and systems of taking in advice (including bureaucratic advice), and assessing all decisions against the general, as well as the specific, objectives of government. The amalgamation of departments, and the financial management reforms, fitted in as well.

Howardism, at first, worked off such processes, indeed made the doing so a centrepiece of its claim to being better economic managers. But much of this is now out the window, and the administration now has created in the resulting shambles something in the nature of the 'black hole' that was so politically useful to Howard in 1996.

Make foolish haste while the Treasurer smiles through gritted teeth EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The unspoken mantra of the moment is make haste while the Treasury is flush with funds in an election year. The Federal Government is scrambling to get enabling legislation passed this week for its Indigenous welfare initiative in the Northern Territory. On Tuesday, Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough could not wait for a delegation of Indigenous leaders to assemble, in order to meet them for what he had hoped would pass for consultation.



Welfare advocates are joining Indigenous leaders in warning that undue haste and failure to consult “risks worsening circumstances for those the legislation is purporting to protect”.

That is how Catholic Social Services Australia Executive Director Frank Quinlan put it in a [statement](#) released yesterday. What Quinlan said reflected what was being said by advocates from across the welfare sector.

“This is significant legislation and we need to get it right,” he said. “The inquiry must provide the opportunity for Indigenous leaders close to these issues to raise their concerns and feed into this important debate.”

Quinlan added that the legislation should be referred to a Senate Committee for further consideration. The Minister has subsequently relented, and there will now be a one-day Senate enquiry on Friday. This is hardly adequate for 500 pages of legislation, but arguably better than nothing. The holding of the one-day enquiry is token recognition from the Government that it is aware of how brazen and reckless its behaviour has been.

La Trobe University Indigenous health researcher and Jesuit priest, Dr Brian McCoy, [wrote](#) in the last issue of *Eureka Street* that “care, sensitivity and wisdom are required” above all else. He has listened to Aboriginal Australians for more than 30 years, and is only too keenly aware that even he has much to learn about Indigenous disadvantage.

He speaks with authority when he makes the following comment on the shrill nature of the Federal Government's intervention: “I also have serious misgivings about a conversation that reduces complex issues to a simple absolute: ‘the child must come first’.

Haste is also written all over the Commonwealth takeover of northern Tasmania's Mersey



Hospital. Catholic Health Australia CEO Francis Sullivan writes in this *Eureka Street* that, for some time, the Tasmanian health service has been taking the difficult but necessary steps to rationalise services in the interests of the general public. “When compared to the \$465 per capita the Commonwealth presently contributes nationally to public hospitals, the Mersey funding package would deliver \$1285 per resident in the area. Something the federal treasury must blanch at.”

Logically, artificially creating advantage for some Australians has the effect of ensuring disadvantage for other Australians.

If the current actions of the Federal Government are reprehensible, we would not know from the reaction of the Federal Opposition, which has been to ostensibly support the Government.

The circumstances of these actions hardly warrant a bipartisan approach. Instead, it is the opinion polls that are suggesting the ALP's “me too” approach is paying dividends in terms of enhancing their electability. But in the end, if both sides of politics are promoting a similar product, why won't Australians stick with the devil they know? “It's time” may have worked for Gough Whitlam, but only time will tell whether “[Kevin 07](#)” will do the same for Kevin Rudd.

Mersey Hospital fix sets scene for wider turmoil

FEATURES

Healthcare

Frances Sullivan

The Prime Minister's pledge to maintain a full range of acute and intensive care services at the Mersey hospital in the marginal electorate of Braddon, in Tasmania, has all the hallmarks of political wishful thinking.

The concept of non-government owned (or community-based) public hospital services is not a new one, and does work. But this decision has more to do with bolstering a recognised inadequate service than it does with instigating a new structure for public hospital management. Moreover, the decision appears to fly in the face of what many Australians realise - compromises are necessary if essential health services are to remain viable and reasonably accessible.

It is always tempting for politicians to promise the world rather than educate the



community about restraint. It is virtually impossible to do so in the context of a general election. A populist approach seeks to prevail, and often pits expert opinion against ordinary voters. The casualty is sensible public policy, and in turn frustrated community expectations.

For some time the Tasmanian health service has been taking the difficult but necessary step of rationalising services in the interests of the general public. The public purse only stretches so far. The challenge for the health service is the limited capacity of the health workforce. Put simply, there are not enough clinical specialists, doctors and nurses to staff every hospital, aged care home and community health service. This is true regardless of whether the services are publicly or privately owned.

Moreover, some major specialties are being duplicated within relatively short distances and this both raises health costs and reduces the capacity for those specialists to perform the necessary number of procedures to guarantee an acceptable level of patient safety. Thus, some rationalisation on the grounds of safety alone is needed. The trade off is between the proximity of services and the quality of the service.

Of course local communities balk at the loss of hospital services. But at the same time, health services can be refashioned to address immediate health needs, particularly through day surgery and visiting specialist programs, whilst neighbouring services can complement with higher order specialist offerings. If the Prime Minister's initiative is planned carefully it could usher in a more sustainable public hospital management arrangement.

Interestingly, as it currently stands, the Prime Minister is offering around \$45 million a year to keep open a tenuous hospital service for a catchment area of 35,000 people. This is an extraordinary handout. When compared to the \$465 per capita the Commonwealth presently contributes nationally to public hospitals, the Mersey funding package would deliver \$1285 per resident in the area. Surely the federal treasury blanches at such profligacy.

The reality of the Mersey hospital situation is telling. It doesn't help any government to withdraw services from local communities. The Tasmanian government's motivation is best understood as being less about 'bloody mindedness' and more to do with the practical solution to the limits of scarce health resources.

The Commonwealth already contributes to the funding of Mersey hospital and has a strong interest in the best use of public funds. It beggars belief that the federal treasury would perform a back flip on its previous position of exacting robust value for money from its financial contributions. The rational analysis of specialist services presently on the table is being ignored. Any future Commonwealth funding package should seek to provide complementary services that bolster the regional health service, not duplicate inadequate coverage.

Accepting that the Mersey hospital situation is distorted by the static of an election campaign, there is still a broader policy issue worthy of attention. At present there is no need

for public hospital services to be owned and operated by governments. The Prime Minister's suggestion of community trusts, funded by a single layer of government, similar to residential aged care, will work. It will work best if state governments play their part and integrate their contribution into health service planning. This system works for Catholic public hospitals and can be duplicated. Where there is a will and a way.

Lifelong friends at first sight

FEATURES

Essay

Chris Fotinopoulos



"Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend" - Albert Camus

Despite my father's warnings against placing too much faith in friendship, I am convinced that good friends can be better than family. My father's distrust of non-family can be attributed to the betrayals and deceit spawned by a war that shadowed his childhood.

My father's allegiance to family was especially evident in his unwavering support for a man who, by my father's words, treated his hunting hounds better than his son. But as my father often told me, "most fathers were like that back then". Nothing, not even the absence of friendship, could shake my dad's faith in his father's love.

My father reciprocated this strange love by expecting my mum to care for his aging father after he joined us in Melbourne from Greece in the early 1960s. My mother's situation was such that it became virtually impossible for her to form friendships beyond the patriarchal realm on account of her full time factory work and domestic duties. Even if she were free to form friendships, most women in our neighborhood were too burdened by domestic responsibilities to manage the luxury of friendship.

I don't think my father and grandfather were ever friends. There was respect and there was love, but there was no friendship - not in the way I understood it anyway. Their relationship brought them pain, frustration, guilt and even joy. I know this because I was caught in the middle of my father's struggle to reconcile friendship with paternal loyalty.

It was around the time when I began to form my own relationships that I came to understand that no child brought up in a relatively free, secure and safe place like Australia

could possibly comprehend the war-mangled logic of family allegiances.

Ironically, it was out of my father's suspicion and distrust of friends that attracted me to the idea friendship. The thought of having friends beyond family became especially appealing after I began to attend my local primary school back in 1969. Despite my reluctance to let go of my mother's hand on my first day at school, I was put at ease by the warm smile and reassuring words of a woman who would spend more time with me in that year than my father and mother.



My primary school teacher represented all that was good about the country I was born in. She was young, vibrant and accepting of different views and opinions. She invited boys and girls from all cultural backgrounds to engage in games and activities that promoted trust, mutual respect, openness, acceptance and friendship.

Despite the mandatory singing of 'God Save the Queen' at the beginning of each Monday morning flag raising assembly, I can't recall my teacher praising God, Christianity, or the British Monarchy in the classroom. To do so would disturb the cultural equilibrium that she had worked so hard to maintain. Above all, she wasn't going to let any group, whether migrant or non-migrant, religious or non-religious, Anglo or non-Anglo, compromise her pantheon of ethnic plurality.

By my last year at primary school (which also happened to be the end of the Gough Whitlam era) many of the kids I met in my first year of school had become good friends. Apart from a handful of kids who were unsettled by the idea of having anything in common with kids from homes that bore little resemblance to theirs, most of us stood in solidarity against any person or group - regardless of race, colour or creed - who threatened violence towards or oppression of others.

This is not to say that there weren't fights and arguments between us, but such childish differences ultimately dissolved in a community of companionship that most of us enjoyed and worked hard to protect.

This school ethos was typical of my old neighborhood. Apart from one or two households that elected to keep to themselves, interaction between old and, as they were called back then, 'new Australians' was commonplace. Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Egyptians, Germans, Irish, Scots spoke about politics, religion and sport without the sort of fear or paranoia that many had been accustomed to back home. As for the few xenophobes calling for every newcomer to speak, dress, eat and act in a 'proper' manner, they were dismissed as arrogant outsiders.

We were free because we were able to form bonds with who ever we chose without fear or recrimination. As long as we were able to laugh in the face of self-appointed protectors of decency, we were certain that that they could never destroy our sense of solidarity. If this country gave us freedom, then it also gave us friendship.

Whenever I discuss values with my students, friendship and family are invariably mentioned in the same breath. And although most parents expect their children to place family ahead of friends when it comes to matters of trust, children tend to place greater faith in friendships out of the understanding that friends, as a student once put it to me, “allow them to breath”.

Listening and talking to the kids I teach, I am convinced that friendship is just as important to them as it was to me when I first attended school. Many young adults, especially those who belong to strict households, escape the pressures of parental and social authority by turning to their friends - just as refugees escape oppressive and abusive regimes by turning to countries where freedom and friendship are allowed to flourish.

Whenever I think of my friends, I am reminded of a phrase scrawled on desk by a bored student. “All I want is a different view”. Friends have a way of offering a new and wonderful perspective on life. For me, these views are from the school and streets of my childhood.

I don’t believe in love at first sight, but I do believe that we can recognize our life long friends the moment we set eyes on them. For me, they are the ones who walk beside me on equal terms.

So when I become a little despondent about the future, I think of the times when love meant a lot, but when friendship meant everything. I reflect on the relationships that allowed me to be myself without judgment. I realize that they are not just memories of love - they are memories of friendship. If I can’t have relationships such as these, then I have nothing. Thankfully I live in a place where friendship still means a lot to most - and especially to the people I love.

Remembering a homeless man named Patrick

FEATURES

Community

Daniel Donahoo



A bloke I sit near at work has an aversion to catching public transport.

It simply does not meet his standards, or so he says. Recently, every journey he undertakes has become a mythologised office tale of “grotty” homeless people or “slutty” prostitutes that he has had to sit near. In some moments the language and the attitude make my blood boil. In others I try to reflect on what insecurities might be behind this judgemental attitude (and further, on the hypocrisy of my own judgements levelled at this public transport defeatist.)

Then one day he tells me he is buying a brand new Volvo and I get my back up again.

Maybe all this has made my blood boil a bit more vigorously than usual because I’ve been reading about a gentleman named Bryan Lipmann.

Bryan is the boss at [Wintringham Aged Care](#) in Melbourne. It is his organisation in every sense of the word. Wintringham only exists because of Bryan. He founded it with the idea that homeless people deserve the same level of care and support in their old age as the rest of the community. Indeed, Bryan wants them to have it even better. I have read him telling critics that he wants the people his organisation supports to have Rolls Royce service. Given the lives they have had it is the least they deserve.

I have become obsessed with this former economics student who left town to become a jackaroo, only to eventually return and work in homeless shelters. It was there the idea for Wintringham was born. I wonder who he spoke to there, fellow travellers on the margins of the 1980s ‘greed is good’ society. What he was thinking as he worked with and for these men and women?

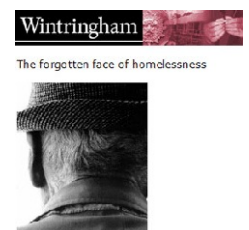
I have to ask him. However, I still haven’t met Bryan. Meeting him is now one of my goals.

I’ve read about his life, rifled through his resumé and read letters from referees who support his nomination for a national aged care services award. I reckon Bryan should win. I’m biased though. Not because I helped write the application, but because Bryan made me remember someone and something I’d forgotten. Something I promised myself I wouldn’t forget.

When you have kids, move to the country and start to build a house you forget things. A decade is a long time. Time enough for economics students to ride the cattle rough across northern Australia and return home to work with the homeless. Time enough for me to forget promises once made.

When I was all of twenty-one I met Patrick Little.

Patrick was sitting outside one of those tired buildings at the top of Spring Street. One of those



buildings where the doors never open. He had his head in his hands. It was two in the morning. I was walking because I'd missed the last train home and I asked him if he was ok. He asked for a smoke and said he was waiting for the door to open.

I spent the rest of the night with Patrick. We went into places that I didn't know existed and haven't seen since. For a night, I fed Patrick no more than nicotine and left him with the ten bucks I had in my wallet. I felt inadequate and unfulfilled.

Then, in the usual way of the writer-as-scavenger, I wrote a story about Patrick and myself almost a decade ago. I wrote of meeting him and took that tale to my poetry readings and spoken word events. I told it with a choke in my throat and friend Simon playing his electric guitar. The twang was softly alt-country. It felt right.

Bryan Lipmann reminded me of Patrick Little. He reminded me of the story I had written and the way it made me feel. The first thing I had thought when I read about Wintringham was "I wonder if that is where Patrick ended up." The more I read about that place, the more I really hoped he did.

But if he didn't, I hope he sits next to that bloke I work with when he next catches a tram and asks him for a cigarette. It would only be right.

To listen to the music that accompanies this article, click - [Patrick Little](#) .

Urban planning threatens Jakarta's river dwellers

INTERNATIONAL

Ben Fraser



Residents have been forced onto high ground to avoid flood waters, which have reached 2m (6ft) in some places.

Perched in makeshift housing along the slippery banks of Jakarta's Ciliwung River, the river dwellers are no strangers to the worst of nature's tidings. So when the heavens opened above Indonesia's capital in late January, their movement to safety was relatively swift and predictable. More dramatically, after close to a week of torrential rain, the city was paralysed, 80 per cent of the capital's sub-districts were underwater, upwards of 300,000 residents were displaced, with many plucked from collapsing rooftops. Basic utilities were unavailable and the government stumbled towards what would become a half billion dollar rescue and rehabilitation program.

As the floodwaters began to recede and the river dwellers ventured back to the swollen Ciliwung, the scale of the disaster revealed itself beneath the veneer of residual mud. What might have been a process of retrieval became a laboured ordeal of disposal and ultimately deep reflection on a life so frequently imperilled by the elements.

For Jakarta's squatter population, the city's riverbanks have become a residential haven. They attract a wide collection of Java's economic migrants. Living in densely packed shanties that shadow the water's edge, most river bank communities are grossly overpopulated with multiple families sharing single dwellings. Environmental hazards abound, particularly the lack of public sanitation and the accumulation of uncovered garbage.

Those who have found employment typically ply their trade in the dark and narrow alleyways, as small shop owners and hawkers, street food vendors and scavengers for recyclable plastics, paper and wood. Incomes are marginal. Literacy, access to health services and the prevalence of disease are significant problems here - more acute than for more affluent residents who often live in safety mere meters above the river flood zones. It is a cruel discrepancy in a city whose population swells to almost 20 million during the working day.

Many of the river dwellers are viewed as 'non-residents' as they do not hold registration or family cards that guarantee entitlement to services, particularly during times of crisis. Government authorities have for years urged the river dwellers to relocate from their temporary homes to 'low-cost' high-rise apartments that flourish all over Jakarta.

These heavily subsidised housing projects have not proven popular with river dwellers though, in large part because of long term affordability issues and the non-traditional living environment. Economic opportunities are also unlikely to carry over from the river bank to Jakarta's urban sprawl. Indeed, a recent Nielsen survey undertaken of residents indicated that more than 60 per cent were no more inclined now to move elsewhere, despite the devastation wreaked by the floods.

Jakarta remains a hopelessly flood prone city with almost half of the capital lying below sea level and a number of rivers intersecting across the city. Successive governments have stalled on the construction of a flood canal system that would divert floodwaters from the capital. These delays stretch back to Dutch colonial rule. The absence of flood plains along the river bank, an insufficient number of drainage pits and accumulated rubbish build-up along Jakarta's river beds have also exacerbated flood risks for Jakarta's residents. For the river dwellers, a façade of bamboo and sheet iron offers a flimsy defence against the powerful flood-tide.

In some communities, flood devastation was near total. Polluted water lapped at doorsteps, shelters buckled under the weight of rain and fallen branches and limp plastic bags decorated tree tops, indicating the perilous



height of the flood waters. For many households, all that remained of homes was a brittle wooden frame with mud lumped inside like an unrisen cake. Streets became a jumble of soiled bedding, broken tables and chairs, sodden clothing and children's toys.

The physical carnage was compounded by emerging water-borne public health risks. Increased cases of dengue fever were reported and diarrhoeal cases reached chronic levels. The floods also inflicted traumatic scars on younger and more vulnerable residents, particularly during their flight to safety. All this amidst widespread electricity cuts, water shortages and a growing criticism of the government's faltering humanitarian response.

In the aftermath of the floods, the 'Gotong Royong' spirit, a traditional Indonesian mantra for community participation towards a common goal, was a guiding force for rehabilitation and recovery. Teams of men and women were instrumental in leading community clean-up days, renting garbage trucks and high-pressure water pumps for removing mud from drains and public places and in reinforcing public health messages to prevent the spread of disease and illnesses associated with the flood. Money was often pooled to assist the worst-affected families deal with the crisis. Gotong Royong was a binding force for communities to put back together what had been so dramatically ripped apart.

Part of the flood recovery focused on preparedness for the next flood. Makeshift barriers and floodgates were built to better protect against future disasters. Evacuation and contingency plans were also discussed by river dwellers, utilising the support of local and international NGO's. However, all of these measures are to a large extent compromised by the river dwellers unlawful status, and the government's desire to clear these slum areas from the river bank.

Undoubtedly, this discord between community and broader urban planning, underpinned by issues of housing rights, threatens both the immediate and longer-term safety and security of a highly vulnerable section of the population. Whatever solution emerges, the floods will inevitably return.

Iraq's Asia Cup victory hides reality of ungovernable society
COLUMNS
Scott Stephens



The press coverage of Iraq's surprise victory in the Asian Cup final was - as Ernst Bloch might have put it - full of utopian sentiment. The win was, admittedly, a remarkable achievement, but one that hardly accounted for the sheer exuberance of the outpoured emotion that followed. Some other factor was at play here, of that one could be fairly certain - but what?

Unfortunately, the Western journalists covering the event leapt to the most obvious answer, and thereby repeated the fundamental error with which the ongoing debacle of modern Iraq began. Could it be, it was everywhere reported, that this victorious team, in all of its ethnic diversity, will act as the prototype for a future Iraq? Rather than simply being a welcome, albeit meaningless, diversion from the brutality of day-to-day existence in Baghdad, Basra or Kirkuk, could this victory in fact bear the seeds of a democratic Iraq-to-come?

In other words, the euphoria generated by Iraq's victory was immediately interpreted as an expression of latent democratic enthusiasm, a defiant embracing of life and culture over against the sadistic designs of terrorists and other religious extremists. This interpretation was given additional weight by the accompanying footage of celebrations on the streets of Baghdad that were eerily similar to those images of popular jubilation following the overthrow of Saddam in April 2003.

The message of this reporting is obvious, if naive. Left to themselves, free from the interference of jihadists and dictators, the Iraqi people will spontaneously form benevolent collectives, much like a football team. This is just another version of the deluded belief - one of the core beliefs that motivated the United States' war effort in the first place - that the people would adopt recognisably democratic forms of social life, once released from Saddam's oppressive regime.

But as the scenes of celebration shifted from those of middle-aged Iraqi men dancing outside their favourite coffee houses, to the more familiar images of gun-toting thugs and hoodlums with flags proudly draped over their young shoulders, it was hard not to feel that this win represented for the Iraqis something different altogether. It was a display of Iraqi pride that was somehow consonant with the violence that continues to brutalise the nation.

And so, while the media waxed lyrical over this hope-filled example of Iraqi fraternity, what was missed was the sickening connection between war and sport in the cultural politics of the Middle East. Both are expressions of the central Asiatic value of honour - an extreme form of respect, a kind of libidinous concern for one's public reputation. And insofar as honour lay at the heart of Islam itself - primarily Allah's honour, and derivatively of Muslim men - it represents a profound aggressiveness inherent to Middle Eastern life.

The Western invasion and occupation of Iraq was an affront to this honour. And so, however unlikely it might seem, victory in a regional football competition was received as a very public display of Iraqi honour in full view of the meddling, unwelcome intervention of

Western forces. As one fan put it, this victory means “leave the Iraqis by themselves [sic], because they can do it by themselves. They proved it just now.”

The pre-invasion assumption that removing Saddam Hussein would liberate the Iraqi people failed to recognise that the problem is the Iraqi people themselves. Confronted now by the escalating tragedy of a nation ravaged by fratricide and uncontrollable violence, one cannot but marvel at the pertinence of the reflections of Iraq’s last actually functioning king, Faisal I. In 1933, shortly before his death, he wrote: “There is still - and I say this with a heart full of sorrow - no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings devoid of any patriotic ideas, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities, connected by no common tie, giving ear to evil, prone to anarchy and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever.”

After the assassination of the adolescent King Faisal II in 1958, Iraq was plunged into a decade of tribal hostility. However unpopular it might be to admit this fact, Saddam succeeded remarkably in suppressing the forces of chaos in Iraq and presided over a fairly bloody peace for nearly four decades. Without Saddam, Iraq has merely reverted to its primordial chaotic state. As George Packer put it, “Iraq without the lid of totalitarianism clamped down has become a place of roiling and contending ethnic claims.”

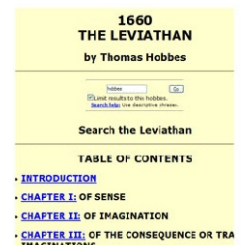
This sentiment is, quite simply, a modern paraphrase of Thomas Hobbes’ infamous indictment of the human instinct in his *Leviathan*;

“Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.”

According to Hobbes (who Daniel Dennett describes as “the first socio-biologist”), humanity is rare among animals in its natural incapacity to organise itself peacefully.

The function of the political regime - the terrifying ‘Leviathan’ of which Hobbes speaks - is to exercise such power over the inherently recalcitrant subjects that a peaceful order is imposed under which the arts, science and industry may flourish. Politics then, for Hobbes, is a direct response to the problem of the masses as such.

In our time, when it has become commonplace, trendy even, to rail against the atrocities of state, when the greatest fear is political overreaching - whether it be totalitarianism, federalism, right up to the ecclesiastical assertion of the primacy of the magisterium over individual conscience - perhaps the one truly radical act would be to reassess our pseudo-leftist faith in the people. This, of course, would not be the last word, but it would be an important step toward a long overdue analysis of the banal politico-social form we call democracy.



Iraq's overlooked political factions
INTERNATIONAL
 Dan Read



Last fourth of July, just a few hours before the sun began to rise across the Baghdad skyline, the distinct sound of gunfire could be heard. In a street in the war-weary metropolis, several vehicles containing armed men pulled up outside the house of Abd-al hussein Saddam, head of the Safety Forces of the Iraq Freedom Congress (IFC).

The house was promptly saturated with bullets, some of which found their mark in the body of Saddam's eighteen-year-old daughter as the troops attempted to gain entry to the residence. Leaving the young woman bleeding on the floor, the soldiers apprehended the IFC leader - who himself had been shot - and promptly bundled him into a waiting vehicle. Two days later his badly beaten and lifeless body was dumped at the Yarmouk Hospital.

Such incidents have become commonplace in a nation that has suffered decades of dictatorship and now four long years of foreign occupation. Poverty, fear, and the rule of the gun have all risen up to command centre stage in Iraq. One of the most profound humanitarian and political tragedies of the 21st century is unfolding.

What is notable about much of the media coverage of Iraq is its lack of analysis of the varying political factions either opposed to or in favour of the western occupation. Aside from the myriad nationalist and fundamentalist factions, there are also those opposed to both the occupation forces and political Islamists in equal measure. These secular and republican activists have been overlooked, no doubt because news stories about fire fights and explosions stand a better chance of making the headlines than stories about oil workers protesting against a foreign monopoly, or women's rights activists refusing to cover up at the demand of armed Islamists.

The Iraq Freedom Congress is one such group that has been sidelined. Founded in 2005, the IFC has struggled to survive amidst the fluid and potentially lethal currents of Iraqi politics.

Suffering under the hostile eye of both the government and occupation forces, and those making up the sectarian militias, the organisation has none the less become something of a rallying point for progressive forces. Made up of trade unionists, political activists, women's rights advocates and other groups, they have



managed to gain significant influence in a number of areas across the nation. As staunch advocates of secularism and fierce opponents of division, they rally around the slogan “No Shiite - No Sunni - ours is a human identity.”

The IFC is organised into units known as ‘People's Houses’, which operate under a mandate of popular sovereignty in local areas. Officials are chosen directly from local communities.

Abd-al hussein Saddam is widely believed to have been murdered because of the growing strength of the IFC. As head of the Safety Forces, his job was to coordinate the deployment of IFC police forces - made up of both Sunni and Shia - who protect their neighborhoods from the escalating violence in Iraq.

Although a young organisation, the Safety Forces are now a regular sight in several Baghdad neighborhoods, The IFC has its primary base of support within the Iraqi trade union movement, including the Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) and the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU).

Because of this prominent role in the labor movement, the IFC has found itself in the limelight recently, due to its opposition to a proposed law that will open up Iraq’s oil fields to foreign exploitation. At present, the Iraqi parliament is considering ratifying measures which will effectively grant the majority share of the oil fields to several notable western oil conglomerates, such as Exxon Mobile and British BP Amoco.

But opponents of these laws are having a hard time being heard in an environment where violence is often the preferred means of settling disagreements. The bulk of the trade unions are currently not recognised or legally approved of by the Iraqi government, which has stifled the ability of the IFC to organise in the industrial field.

As a part of the wider movement for democracy, republicanism and independence, the IFC deserves the support - and wide scale recognition - of the progressive movement worldwide. In the final analysis, the Iraq situation is a lot more complex than a simple stand-off between western democracy and political Islam. Until this is understood, a viable solution that takes Iraq towards genuine democracy and self-government will be impossible.

Empathy for an emotionally abusive mother
FILM REVIEW
Drama
Tim Kroenert



The Home Song Stories: 103 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Tony Ayres. Starring: Joan Chen, Yuwu Qi, Joel Lok, Irene Chen, Steven Vidler, Kerry Walker, [website](#)

To say Melbourne writer/director Tony Ayres' new film is a personal project would be an understatement. But while *The Home Song Stories* draws heavily upon true events from Ayres' own childhood, this is not, he insists, the intimate self-portrait it may first appear to be.

"It's a fictional film based on true events," Ayres clarifies. "Even though everything actually happened, I had to fill in a lot of gaps, and make suppositions."

"The film was a constant tussle between the unwieldiness of real life, and my attempts to shape it into a dramatic film," he adds. "At the end of the day I had to separate myself from the pictures in my head, regard the characters as characters in their own right, and make them understandable and coherent in their own terms."

The film centres on Ayres' mother Rose (Joan Chen), a Chinese nightclub singer who follows Aussie sailor Bill (Vidler) to Melbourne in 1964, with young Tom (Ayres' alter-ego, played by Lok) and his older sister, May (Irene Chen) in tow.

Rose is a self-centred, even emotionally abusive character, who leaves Bill after a week of marriage, then returns seven years later to attempt to reconcile, only to commence an affair with a charismatic (and younger) Chinese immigrant, Joe (Qi).



The film is jarringly episodic, but unfolds with a certain emotional rawness, focusing particularly on the impact Rose's destructive behaviour has on her children. When Joe starts to show an interest in the blossoming and beautiful May, it triggers a string of devastating events with an inevitably tragic outcome.

"What's weird is that people expect that making the movie was a cathartic experience for me," says Ayres. "But to be honest, I don't feel that."

"Having lived through it, and told the story to people, I know it's an extraordinary series of events-if I'd been told this story by someone else I would have thought, [I'd like to] turn it into a film. It's based on my childhood, but in making it I had to distance myself. In lots of ways those issues aren't burning issues for me.

"Having said that, I wouldn't have made it unless those issues affected me and unless I felt a need to tell that story. But the story doesn't necessarily still haunt me."

On the other hand, Ayres admits that, like the film's narrator-the adult Tom-he hoped that by

making this film he would gain a better understanding of his mother, and “come to grips with her character; that person who so profoundly affected me.”

“I didn’t know about my mother’s past. The story Rose tells May in the hospital [about a traumatic series of events that preceded the birth of Rose’s children] was part of a story my mother told my sister when they were both in hospital. The difference is that in real life, my mother got my sister to write the story down.”

While Ayres’ sister filled in some of the historical blanks, Joan Chen, the actress portraying Rose, helped Ayres gain some previously elusive insights into his mother’s nature and motivations.

“As an actor she has to defend her character, and carry her in a way she understands. So we had a lot of discussions about what her motives might be, why she was doing the things that she’s doing.”

Although *The Home Song Stories* is a film about Chinese migrants living in suburban Melbourne during the 1960s and 1970s, its themes go beyond “the migrant experience” in Australia.

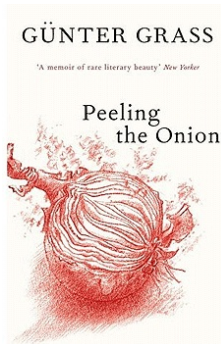
“It’s my story and I happen to be Chinese,” he says. “It’s secondary in a sense. But I do think it’s important that we hear such stories and see them on our screens, simply because that’s what Australia is. We are a nation of many different ethnic groupings, and I think that’s important to see on the screen.”

In short, Ayres hopes his film’s impact will occur on the more personal, rather than social or cultural, level.

“I would hope the audience would feel a sense of the resilience of childhood, and some kind of compassion for this difficult, struggling woman,” he says. “I wanted to create an emotional experience for the audience; tell an emotional story.”

Tony Ayres has been nominated in the Original Feature Film category of the AWGIE Awards - the awards for the Australian Writers Guild, which take place on 31 August in Sydney.

Uncovering Nobel laureate's Nazi past
BOOK REVIEW
Biography
Gary Pearce



***Peeling the Onion*, by Gunter Grass, Harvill Secker, ISBN 978-1846550621; \$59.95 [website](#)**

The publication of Gunter Grass's memoir comes surrounded by considerable controversy due to revelations last year that the Nobel laureate had been a member of the Waffen SS. We have long known that Grass was a member of the Hitler Youth, was drafted into anti-aircraft batteries in the final stages of World War II and had ended up as an American POW. We didn't know that as a 17-year-old he had volunteered for the armed services and had then been assigned to Nazism's elite unit.

The ensuing furore was clearly charged by culture wars over questions of complicity with Germany's Nazi past. Grass's work had always posed important questions about Germany's failure to come to terms with the past; this latest revelation focused attention on his own failure in this area. *Peeling the Onion* unsettles our reading of that previous work while also perhaps representing its most developed achievement.

The memoir deals with a common theme in German letters: the growth and education of the young artist, albeit refracted through the extreme conditions of Nazi Germany. It skips over Grass's very early years, beginning in the period beyond childhood innocence - which he puts at eleven or twelve years old - and continues up until the publication of his first and defining work, *The Tin Drum*. If the hero of that first novel refused to grow up, this was clearly not an option for Grass.

The memoir's central metaphor suggests the attempt to redress the ambiguities of memory, to peel away its layers and reveal things covered over. The narrative begins in Grass's native city of Danzig (present day Gdansk), one of the places to witness the opening salvos of the Second World War.

Grass worries about his past thoughts and actions, often disallowing the comfort of retrospective justification and excuse. This work may not satisfy critics expecting some more direct form of confession, but it does powerfully underline the ordinariness of responsibility.

Grass didn't have a choice when he was drafted into the Luftwaffe auxiliaries and the Labour Service but he doesn't allow this to excuse him or others.

The sequence in the book causing the most controversy addresses and focuses on the period where Grass actually volunteered for active duty in an attempt to join the submarine fleet. This was partly for the mundane reason of trying to escape a claustrophobic family flat. Then at seventeen Grass was accepted and assigned to tank gunner training in the Waffen SS. If he was



not actively complicit - he was not aware of war crimes until after the War - he was at this point "incorporated into a system that had planned, organised and carried out the extermination of millions of people."

Grass admits that he has always held onto the fact that he never fired a shot during the War as a way of alleviating the shame that he carries. If he held any illusions of heroism they soon died with the fear and confusion of the disintegrating war front. When he arrived in Berlin, it was already in flames. The corpses of executed deserters hanging from trees were signs of the prevailing desperation. His war ended when he was wounded and sent to a military hospital.

Grass was put in an American POW camp in Bad Aibling where he played dice with a "bookish Bavarian" called Joseph, "a gentle know-it-all": "We talked about God and the world, about our experiences as altar boys - his permanent, mine very much auxiliary." Grass can't swear his friend's name was Ratzinger but he notes the tabloid reports of the Pope's internment in Bad Aibling as a young man.

The immediate postwar period has Grass work as a farmhand and a miner. He felt no guilt at this time; many dismissed the holocaust as propaganda. Of this he states plainly: "It was some time before I came gradually to understand and hesitantly to admit that I had unknowingly - or, more precisely, unwilling to know - taken part in a crime that did not diminish over the years and for which no statute of limitations would ever apply, a crime that grieves me still."

It is consistent with his stress on the ordinariness of failure and responsibility that Grass admits to wide-ranging personal shortcomings beyond the Nazi period. He held little concern for his family or anything beyond himself in the period just after the War; his interest in dancing and girls was an attempt to forget. With a nod to the taboo topic of admitting Germans also suffered in this period he tells us that he learned only later that invading Russian soldiers had raped his mother.

Grass met with the important coterie of postwar writers, Group 47, on the basis of some poems he had written. It was the weight of the past, however, that propelled him into looking for form and words to deal with a personal and societal history. In the Summer of 1956 he left Berlin with his new wife for Paris in search for an apartment and the words that eventually began his novel: "Granted: I am an inmate of a mental institution..."

This is a brave work by the 80-year-old writer. The admission that Grass makes is so very late and as he says he will continue to carry that shame. Yet his careful weighing of experience, history and responsibility is compelling, particularly in a climate that values moralism over more complex seeing. We can only hope that this kind of reckoning offers some inoculation against the return of a murderous twentieth-century legacy.

Xenia, the first safety net

POETRY

Jaya Savige

Xenia

Looking back at the introduction
to the Odyssey, I realise what I once
assumed was an encompassing theme
was in reality a brief reference.

The reference was
to Zeus as Zeus Xeinios,
Zeus the protector of strangers,
of the shipwrecked exile, the refugee.
Xenia the root, hospitality.

Xenia made perfect sense:
anyone might get wrecked on the coast
of the Mediterranean. Where then
would one be, without a gentle host?

Xeinios was what you'd call the sky boss
when without a visa or a passport
you were at a loss in another land.
Having lost the bet with fate, you'd hope
for xenia, the west's first safety net.

You'd think it was hard to forget,
even if the ocean was choking sand.
But if one never thinks themselves a guest
in a strange land, how could they intuit
the pricelessness of a warm welcome?

Dead Air

for Merlin Luck

having stitched your lips shut
with the duct
tape you snuck
past the thousand and one lenses,

boos like angry bees
echoed through the studio
stinging executives - this was calculated
premeditated murder of television -

you knew full well
and we could tell by the welling
in your glazzies
bloodshot with conviction.

no cheap angel
wings propped up your eviction.
the enraged host, a former columnist
couldn't turn to grist your most

expensive silence.
uttering no words you spoke
volumes in instants
of our vacuous entertainment

and our treatment
of those who, like
you, we locked up, then voted off
the show.

The Monastery of Sant'Onofrio

Winter is in the trees. The fountain's moss-stained
cherubs spit endlessly, rehearsing
unrequitedness, their cold lips' 'O' wrapped
around the water's soft calypso. An old wind wakes
the holly oaks, sneaks along marble,

flirts with one plump Nike
dangling, fruit-like from a bough.

What hermit lived here, disowning
his other half, paired only
with an absent god? Another gust, another decade,
the nearby basilica rising like the scalp
of serene Janiculum,
the skeleton in the fresco hinting all.
Two birds fall into the fountain.

The martyred sun will soon come down
from its cross, prised from its sky of cruel silicon.
At the base of the stairs, an impatient Vespa
blares above the Vatican traffic;
someone shouts abuse, and try as I might
I cannot confuse the sound,
cannot mistake it for a lover's call.

'the economy, stupid'

benign as Mugabe, market
forces the not-so-new
religion, set to sort all things worth sorting
through competition & the rags
promote the fight in which they're invested.

(in bed with ads, big media roll over -
the advantage of poems, perhaps)

what's left for us? the choice between two
different brands of toothpaste,
finger-on-the-pulse stuff: wouldn't want to miss the
bargain on the zeitgeist shampoo.

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