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Making more room for women in the Church

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

This interview with American Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister, continues the series recorded for *Eureka Street* at the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Melbourne in December 2009. It is sponsored by the [Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue](#) in the Australian Catholic University.

As well as advocating inter-religious dialogue, Chittister is an articulate and fearless feminist voice in the Catholic Church. In the interview she explains the vital importance of forums like the Parliament that promote dialogue, and how her mixed religious upbringing gave her an appreciation of other belief systems and a new interpretation of the story of the Tower of Babel. She also speaks about the vexed place of women in the Church.

Chittister's biological father died when she was very young, and her Irish Catholic mother remarried a Scottish Presbyterian. So, while growing up, she experienced and came to appreciate both sides of the bitter Catholic/Protestant sectarian divide.

In the mid-1950s she joined the Benedictine [Sisters of Erie](#) in northern Pennsylvania, and for 12 years served as Prioress of this branch of the order. From 1974 till 1990, she was president of the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses, and also had a term as president of the US Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an umbrella organisation representing over 75,000 women in religious orders.

She is one of the founding members of the International Peace Council, a group of high profile religious leaders from all the major faiths, including the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They meet annually at trouble spots around the globe and try to help resolve concrete peace and justice problems in each particular location.

She is a prolific author, and a regular columnist for the US *National Catholic Reporter*. She is the founding director of [Benetvision](#), a resource centre for contemporary spirituality located in Erie.

In 2000 she and the Erie Benedictine nuns became embroiled in a very public dispute with the Vatican. She was invited to be keynote speaker at the first Women's Ordination Worldwide Conference in Dublin. The Vatican's Congregation for the Consecrated Life wrote to the then prioress asking her to stop Chittister from attending.

A letter written by the prioress, and signed by all the Erie Benedictines (except one dissenter), in the name of a higher obedience, expressed her refusal to comply:

'I cannot be used by the Vatican to deliver an order of silencing. Benedictine communities

were never intended to be part of the hierarchical or clerical status of the Church, but to stand apart from this structure and offer a different voice ... Only in this way can we be faithful to the gift that women have within the Church.'

Chittister attended the conference and gave a rousing speech criticising the Church's stance towards women.

This incident is emblematic of her career which has consistently, loudly and clearly expressed a 'different voice', a prophetic voice. Though in her mid-70s, Chittister is still a dynamo, highly focused, intense, bristling with energy, and she shows no sign of slowing down.

Gillard student numbers don't add up

EDUCATION

Fatima Measham

On Wednesday, Education Minister Julia Gillard revealed that school-age children across Australia will soon be provided a 'unique student identifier'. This will track their performance over time, regardless of where they study. The Australian Education Union (AEU) was caught by surprise, with president Angelo Gavrielatos excoriating the lack of 'meaningful consultation with the profession'.

Civil liberty groups have also expressed concern, fearing that the program poses privacy risks for young people. The fact that ID numbers will be tracked through the [My School](#) website has only added a layer of controversy over the Federal Government's drive for 'transparency'.

It is tempting to reject the new initiative outright, especially when we recall that My School was launched despite sustained resistance from the education sector. As a result of this recent skirmish, the hopes for reform that came with the installation of the Rudd administration have now turned to cynicism over its real agenda.

On the surface, however, the Education Minister's intentions seem reasonable. She has consistently argued that parents deserve access to data. This was her argument for devising an online tool for comparing schools. She has now presented it justify a permanent ID number for students. It is hard to disagree that parents who are involved in their child's schooling will find these programs valuable. Informed decision-making isn't a bad thing.

But other aspects of Gillard's sales pitch are more dubious. For instance, when she says that number-tracking students leads to 'better measures of how schools are going in developing student performance', she inadvertently implies that the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) isn't already an effective tool for driving school improvement.

In fact, schools have used data from the nationwide tests to identify gaps in teaching even before the figures were published online on My School.

NAPLAN commenced in 2008, barely two years ago. Because students are tested biennially at years 3, 5, 7 and 9, the first cohort of year 3 students who undertook the tests will take the tests for only the second time in May this year. So it is too early to conclude that 'better measures' need to be in place if the agenda is systematically to monitor progress over time.

In fact the Federal Government has articulated two distinct agendas as if they were interchangeable — improving school outcomes and providing information.

Educators accept that good pedagogy has to be grounded to some extent on student data. Until this year, NAPLAN was enforced in good faith. But parents may use the same data for a different, consumer-based reason — to select a school for their children — if they have this luxury of choice. So when teachers argue that NAPLAN figures are meant to be diagnostic in nature, and not to be a lever for market-based competition, they will be perceived as secretive and defensive.

Perhaps this is how Rudd and Gillard want them to be seen. It is certainly consistent with the way they pitch their initiatives to parents. But it is difficult to determine which parents they are targeting, especially when they commend the student ID proposal. According to Gillard, 'Being able to seamlessly track a child throughout education when they get to a new school is vitally important.'

The argument about easing transition between schools is superficial at best. How many children are really affected, given that the vast majority of students change schools only once, as they shift from primary to secondary level? Has the percentage of children who move schools often risen so much that the only way to keep track of their progress is to assign every child in the country a fixed number?

According to Labor backbencher Sharon Bird, the new system is required so that parents don't have to have a shoe box where they keep school reports.

Before resources are again poured into a program that meets resistance from key stakeholders, the Federal Government needs to engage with the public intelligently about a national identification program for school-age children.

Getting high on war

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Hurt Locker* (MA). Running time: 131 minutes. Director: Kathryn Bigelow. Starring: Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie, Brian Geraghty**



War is tough. You'd be hard pressed to find a war film that didn't try to evoke some of the horrors or stresses of combat. The characters of *The Hurt Locker* have a more stressful job than most. They comprise an elite US Army bomb squad unit, charged with disarming bombs laid by insurgents in the sandy streets of Baghdad.

For their fearless (or is that reckless?) leader, Staff Sergeant William James (Renner), this stress is a veritable amphetamine, and he's well and truly hooked. *The Hurt Locker* boxes the intensity of his adrenaline-chasing experiences into a 131-minute study of the psychological impacts of war.

The scene for James' exploits is set during a tense prologue, in which his predecessor in Bravo Company, Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce), is killed when a routine operation takes a dire turn. This leaves Thompson's chums and offsidiers, Sgt Sanborn (Mackie) and Specialist Eldridge (Geraghty), decidedly shaken.

James is brought in to replace him, and is immediately seen to be clearly different from his steadfast predecessor. During one of his first operations with Bravo Company, an attempt to disarm a car bomb, James discards his communication earpiece and ignores advice to abort. The mission is successful, but Sanborn's and Eldridge's astonishment at James' recklessness is exacerbated by the recent memory of the reliable Thompson's death, and Sanborn even responds with physical violence.

Violence, and alcohol, later fuel the strained camaraderie of the trio. We see them, between operations, bonding during a binge in the barracks, belting each other in the stomach and laughing drunkenly. It's a macho ritual that suggests they have been physically as well as mentally desensitised by war. We are given more insight into the extent of James' addiction; Sanborn discovers a basketful of bomb parts, souvenirs from successful jobs, under James' bed.

This is an apolitical film. The soldiers are not heroes, but they do have a job to do. We are made to appreciate the psychological demands of military operations in civilian areas. There is a moral obligation to preserve civilian lives, but also an inevitable and necessary concern for personal safety. Most of the civilians pose no threat to the soldiers, but some probably do (a

hard lesson learned at the time of Thompson's death).

The film's account of warfare is at times tryingly forensic. We spend a long afternoon in the desert during a gunfight with insurgents. It is no high octane shoot-'em-up action showpiece, but the kind of battle where a shot fired from a long-range weapon in one location is followed a moment later by a spray of dust — or puff of blood — in the other, seen only through shaky binoculars.

The scene evokes the monotony and mental strain of warfare, but also the inevitable bonding that must occur between soldiers. There's a near-tenderness, for example, to the way James and Sanborn share a juice-box to clean the claggy sand from their mouths. They are not friends, but they are both soldiers, and human.

The film has its share of humanity and of horrors. James bonds with a young Iraqi boy, Beckham (Christopher Sayegh), whose good-natured trash talk wins a smile and even fondness from the soldier. But war, of course, destroys good things. Their budding friendship foreshadows the most horrific moment in the film ('Have you ever seen a body bomb?') which in turn pushes James closer than ever to the edge of self-destruction.

It seems that in recent weeks most coverage of *The Hurt Locker* also mentions James Cameron's \$300 million-plus piece of eye candy, *Avatar*. That's because both films have dominated the awards season, and each is nominated for an impressive nine Oscars, including for Best Picture and Best Director.

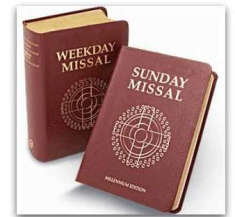
It is not unlikely that *Avatar* will emerge the victor, if only by dint of its sheer scale as a technical achievement and of its enormous box office success. *The Hurt Locker* is a smaller film in just about every respect, from its budget (\$15 million) to its running time. Nonetheless in the depth of its characters, its explosive emotional impact and its unforgettable realism, it is a superior film.

Liturgical payback

RELIGION

Neil Ormerod

For those that lived through it, the Second Vatican Council was a momentous experience, radically changing the day to day life of Catholics around the globe. There was a definite 'before' and 'after' the Council. For most Catholics the biggest change was to hear the mass said in the vernacular, in English, rather than Latin.



We have lived with that particular translation now for over 40 years. Amid some heated debate we are about to receive a new English translation, one which is close in structure and feel to the original Latin text introduced by the Council. How this is implemented and how it will be received within the church remain to be seen.

I am not a liturgical theologian. Indeed my liturgical tastes are not very refined or critical. Like many church members who sit in the pews, I take what I'm given. I've lived with the present translation of the mass for most of my life, and have only fleeting memories of an earlier time when the mass was in a language completely incomprehensible to me.

The present translation has become part of parcel of my liturgical experience, and I am blissfully unaware of its supposed multiple shortcomings that seem to annoy some purists. I also have no great sense of loss in relation to the Latin mass. I studied and enjoyed learning Latin for six years of my high schooling but know well that a liturgy can be equally poor in either Latin or English.

But though I am not a liturgical theologian I do have a strong interest in the theology of the church and in the event of Vatican II itself. The Council brought about major changes in the life of the church, at multiple levels of its existence. It endorsed a shift from the metaphysical language of scholasticism to a more biblical and personalist mode of communication. It encouraged genuine respect for other Christians and even non-Christian faiths. It sought to recognise the rights and dignity of the laity as priestly people.

None of these changes involved a change in dogma, but it did change the way the church related both internally and externally. One major change was in the liturgy and the celebration of the sacraments. For many Catholics this is where the rubber hit the road, because these changes impinged immediately on their religious lives.

Overall, these changes were not well managed. The general model was one based on obedience, with the command to change coming from the Pope and moving its way down the ranks to the local parish. It is clear, for example, that the Vatican II document on the liturgy, [*Sacrosanctum Concilium*](#), envisaged a continuing role for Latin, while also suggesting the

introduction of vernacular translations. However, Pope Paul VI decreed that the vernacular was to become the dominant form, with the use of the Latin rite to be restricted.

Overnight Latin vanished, and for many people this was a shock. Some were not only shocked; they were hurt by the rapidity of the change. They found this change deeply alienating, to the point of schism. The vocal opponents of 'the spirit of Vatican II' regularly argue that this marked the beginning of a long process of decline, with a significant falling off in church attendance. (Of course it is simplistic to suggest that this is the sole reason for the decline, or indeed a reason at all, but that is the argument.)

Given this, one might think and hope that our church leaders will learn from previous experience. They may remember the trauma caused by sudden and largely unexplained changes in the liturgy, and engage in some significant change management of the whole process.

On the other hand, out there in Catholic blogger land, particularly in the US, many see the new translation as payback for what happened after Vatican II. Now the 'liberals' are going to know what it felt like to have their liturgy changed without consultation, without explanation. 'They made us suffer, now it's their turn.'

There are also romanticised postings on restoring dignity and a sense of the sacred to the liturgy through this new translation. But a new translation does not produce new priests, nor will it create a new liturgical sensibility among the people and their celebrants. For many it will just seem like change for change's sake.

The changes are not drastic, but they will jar for people who have spent a lifetime becoming familiar with the present translation. Saying 'and with your spirit' instead of 'and also with you' will take some getting used to; and the use of the word 'chalice' instead of 'cup' in the Eucharistic Prayer seems odd to me.

The Trinitarian theologian in me is happy to see the word 'consubstantial' returned to the Creed in place of 'of one being' in describing the relationship between the Father and the Son, if only because it will give me something to talk about.

I am not privy to what the Australian bishops are planning in relation to the change here, but if the process is just dropped into parish life from on high, with the expectation of automatic obedience, then there may be problems. Present day Catholics are not as compliant as they were in the '60s when the vernacular was first introduced. Without proper preparation, the liturgy could become a battleground, and this would be tragic.

Any expectation that people will flock back to mass because a new translation is in place is not likely to be fulfilled. Far more likely is that, as with the change at Vatican II, there will be a disaffected minority who leave or cease to practice because their experience of the sacred has been violated. At the end we will probably be left asking whether it is all really worth it.

Kevin Rudd's Iran problem

POLITICS

Shahram Akbarzadeh



Thumbing their nose at the International Atomic Energy Agency and the United Nations Security Council, the Iranian leadership has refused to suspend uranium enrichment. Instead President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that Iran has managed to enrich uranium up to 20 per cent.

This claim has been dismissed by US officials as fanciful. There are serious doubts about Iran's ability to achieve such high levels of uranium enrichment. It is most likely that Ahmadinejad is upping the ante for his own domestic advantage. However misguided his efforts at brinksmanship, Ahmadinejad has perhaps provided a catalyst for international action.

Most observers accept that Iran is serious about mastering nuclear weapons production. Ahmadinejad recently scoffed that 'we can build atomic bombs if we want to, and there is nothing anyone can do about it'. This may sound like schoolyard taunting, but it has given the international community reason to pause.

Australia cannot afford to be silent on this matter. Australia has a history of commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and has recently formed the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) co-chaired by Gareth Evans, the former Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Last month Defence Minister John Faulkner invoked the Weapons of Mass Destruction Act to stop the shipment of industrial pipes to Iran because of fears about how they could be used. PM Kevin Rudd applauded this move and warned that Iran is becoming a danger to Australia: 'They are developing a nuclear weapons program which is against the security interests of Australia, against the security interests of our wider region, against the security interests of the world and the international community.'

But what can Australia do to stop nuclear weaponisation in Iran? To date, Australia has not endorsed calls for military strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities. The general consensus in Canberra seems to be that any military strike would complicate an already messy situation. Iran's alliance with Hizbullah in Lebanon and its stranglehold on the Hormuz Strait, a critical bottleneck for oil shipment out of the Persian Gulf, give Iran a menacing advantage, making any direct attack on Iran fraught with regional implications.

The Iranian authorities have not been reticent in pointing to the cards they hold.

The alternative to military action is harsher economic sanctions. This, however, does not seem to hold much promise either.

The United States has embarked on a diplomatic offensive to garner support for a fourth round of sanctions. On a tour of Arab states last week, the Secretary of State Hilary Clinton chose very harsh words to describe the Islamic regime. This signals a reappraisal of earlier efforts to bring the Iranian authorities to the negotiating table. President Obama's charm offensive on Iran lost its edge following the fraudulent June 2009 election and the repression of the reform movement.

In the first half of 2009, the Iranian authorities did not know how to respond to Obama's messages of good will. But once the US made clear its disapproval of the thuggish behaviour of the authorities against protestors, the familiar dynamic of anti-US hostility was restored. Against the backdrop of growing international concern about Iran's nuclear program and its mistreatment of dissidents, Tehran has reverted to its policy of non-cooperation.

Provided Russia and China come to the party at the UN Security Council, the last option before military action will be to impose a fourth round of sanctions. But given that Iran has been under sanctions for 30 years, it is hard to imagine how a new round could change the resolve of the *mullahs*. If the Iraq experience is any indication, the regime will simply divert resources from the civil sector to the military and security in an effort to 'ride out the storm', and blame the international community for the inevitable fall in health care and living standards.

The Australian Government is aware of the challenge, but for two important reasons it feels it has no option but to join the international chorus. First, Australia has an ideological commitment to nuclear non-proliferation and Iran is blatantly contravening its NPT obligations. Second, Australia has a strategic alliance with the US and the 'Iran problem' offers an opportunity for the Rudd Government to demonstrate its commitment to its ally.

This is a tricky issue as Kevin Rudd came to office on a wave of anti-war backlash against John Howard and Australia's commitment to the 2003 war in Iraq. At the time, the anti-war campaign and the Labor Party were accused of weakening the alliance with the US. The Labor Government has been at pains to demonstrate its steadfastness in relation to the US and its strategic interests. The 'Iran problem' presents an opportunity to silence those critics and consolidate the US-Australian strategic alliance.

Stark raven Barnaby Joyce

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

What with holidays and the new year you've probably dropped behind with your reading of *1001 Physics Problems You Should Review Before You Die*. In which case you won't have come across University of Oregon theoretical nuclear physicist Amit Goswami's rather sensational reaction to his understanding of Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.

This famous principle states that some pairs of physical properties cannot be precisely known. Take, for example, the position and the momentum of a particle: you can't measure both simultaneously. The more you observe about its position the less you'll be able to establish about its momentum, and vice versa.

Goswami, speculating that the very act of observing activates the uncertainty principle, suggests that there could be no reality existing independently of one's own consciousness as an observer. I see it — therefore it is. My observing creates the real.

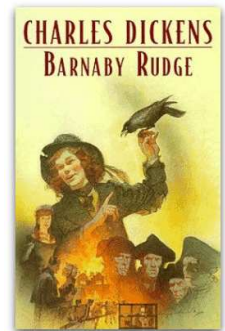
One prominent person who must have kept up with these important theoretical questions is Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey. In a recent television interview he emphasised that Barnaby Joyce was 'real' and that Kevin Rudd and Lindsay Tanner were 'not real'.

Beyond repeating this assertion with growing and visible irritation, Hockey did not elaborate, but his uncharacteristically frowning features clearly revealed that when it came to Rudd and Tanner, and probably other Labor luminaries, he was taking an aggressively social constructionist view: the external world is nothing more than a construction brought into temporary existence by social or cultural forces. Look away and it's gone — and it takes ephemera like Rudd, Tanner and others with it.

How does Joyce escape this same fate? Well, he's real. Unlike those insubstantial wraiths, Rudd, Tanner et al., Joyce is part of that 'reality which', in the words of novelist Philip K. Dick, 'when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away'.

Stop believing in Rudd and Tanner — as Hockey and Abbott earnestly and repeatedly recommend — and *poof!* they've gone. Stop believing in Joyce — as Hockey and Abbott, persuasive evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, repeatedly refuse to do — and he's still there, still hanging round, like a doggedly loyal pet.

In this respect Joyce is irresistibly reminiscent of another Barnaby, Charles Dickens' Barnaby Rudge in the novel of that name, or rather not of Barnaby Rudge himself but of his pet raven, Grip. Grip is given to making tantalising but basically incomprehensible



pronouncements, fluttering annoyingly around the edges of conversational gatherings, pecking at people's ankles and launching sudden, inexplicable attacks.

One of his longer outbursts goes like this: 'Grip, Grip, Grip — Grip the clever, Grip the wicked, Grip the knowing — Grip Grip, Grip ... I'm a devil I'm a devil I'm a devil, Never say die Hurrah Bow wow wow, Polly put the kettle on we'll all have tea.'

The interesting thing about Grip is that he inhabits a different reality from his young master. He seems somehow more considerable than his human peers; he seems always on the verge of insights and understanding that are beyond them. For all the touching and affecting nature of the story of Barnaby and his long-suffering mother, Grip seems more sturdily 'real' than either of them.

It is as if he has come from another dimension, full of ideas and potential but unable to command the vocabulary or the patience or the social judgment to make a coherent impression. As a result, he's a nuisance and, on some occasions, when his strange presence and uncannily speech-like non-talk, always on the edge of comprehension, becomes frightening or dismaying, he can be downright dangerous, inducing alarm and panic among superstitious or nervous listeners.

No wonder Edgar Allan Poe felt that Grip should have assumed a more symbolic and prophetic presence in the novel and no wonder Poe was inspired by Grip to write his famous and mysterious poem, 'The Raven'.

Joe Hockey, though he has not revealed anything of his underlying researches, implicitly invites us to identify Barnaby Joyce with Grip and to see Rudd and Tanner as equivalents of the ineffectual Barnaby Rudge and his mother. And while this is a bit rough on Rudd and Tanner, it precisely captures Barnaby Joyce's strange other-world reasoning, his sudden apparently baseless outbursts and his air of obscure prophecy.

Joyce, we come to understand through knowing his provenance in Grip, is a kind of walking embodiment of the Uncertainty Principle. If you get anywhere near defining his position you lose track entirely of his momentum and he's out of sight before you can say 'phenomenological reality'; and if you nail his momentum — with all its energy, detours, about turns, dead-ends — you lose all idea of his position.

Still, Joe Hockey seems to have worked it out. He makes a clear distinction between Barnaby Joyce and Barnaby Rudd and Barnaby Tanner.

Really.

Dream of me

POETRY

Graeme Kingross-Smith

A photograph of Venice

no-one notices her a blown flag

hurrying across the square's end where pigeons cloy
like filings round the icecream man couple after couple
promenading the tiles in order to be seen in order to cast
long privileged shadows a dark dog watching leg raised
sun hazed among pines probably spring probably thoughts descending
towards the gold of bracelets the lure of dinner father and daughter
striding in step but there's sunlight on serge a conferring
of uniform caps near the fountain another four with swords
trailing like lizards on show another five strutting abreast
boots in concert bearing down on a schoolboy
their epaulettes sharp as prophetic orders on this
softly seething day's end Venice 1939 spiked
with the well-oiled portent of rifles footsteps
imperceptibly hushing Stars of David trembling
against the Vatican's exclusive whispers
no-one noticing as she hurries away
in her gown like a flag
in a scurry of wind

Lorne viewed over sea boulders

...I dark love of these black shamans
on a sloping beach light paying out its primal
minutes a hundred brimmings of bulk and shadow

this new tide that rocks a day to sleep stitching
up the shoreline's steep leaf storeys
silence is tricked out in water's shy asides
I seek reminders in my watch's face
wonder how I stranded here eyes stumbling
guiltily towards forest and far over the gables
of coy houses hills' feet shuffling
among the glint of cars
but back to basics: behind me sunset paints
an epilogue across the bay
retreat
retreat
retreat in silk it's saying
until way down in what we all forget we know
I might be lost again nosing through weed gauntlets
tendrils the sway of millenia in the deep rooms
of world's most solemn pool ... |

Dream

when I get there driving through the night rain's sheen
I come on myself already asleep in the bed
mouth ajar head resting on one elbow
drawing off gloves I bend down
to look more closely I see my face is riven
with concern like a baroque ikon like christ's
gaunt cheeks like a hare in drought
what happens now? do I reach down to smooth
the hair at the temples? do I trace the worry lines

on the forehead? do I kiss the eyelids?
no — I bunch
my gloves and slap a slack jowl hard bringing a red
weal to the upper lip and starting open
eyes that look fearfully beyond me
at something I can't see

Boys with knives

COMMUNITY

Moira Rayner



Last week the lives of two Queensland families were ruined. One 12-year-old boy stabbed another, who died, in a playground before school started. One was buried over the weekend, and the other was refused bail when he was charged with murder. Both families are devastated. The school is in shock. It was a Catholic school. This has nothing to do with the intimacy of violence.

Fifty years ago a lot of teenage boys carried knives not as weapons but as tools. We all used pocket knives, to sharpen pencils, open tins and carve initials into desk tops. But they were a status object, too. They didn't get used in school fights, because disputes were sorted with fists – using a knife was not 'manly', and a boy's own mates would get stuck into him for being a coward if he pulled one.

Boys of the early '60s were far more likely to be scared of authority (headmasters with canes, dads with fists, police with boots and a lavish discretion on how to use them). Most boys looked down on 'crooks', and only a crim would use a knife. But 20 years ago, there was a lot of violence among the schoolkids my daughter mixed with, only we weren't aware of it: the media weren't running the issue, and parents weren't being alerted to it.

Why do schoolchildren use knives? As one year 12 student remarked online to Melbourne's *The Herald Sun*, 'in most schools kids don't bring knives or weapons to be seen as cool, but to scare off bullies. Lots of bullying goes on where one smartass in a pack of mates wants to make everyone laugh.' This group bullying, he said, wasn't picked up and managed by teachers.

Kids don't do their private jockeying for position under adult supervision. Research into playground behaviours and language among boys shows that the 'culture' of childhood hasn't changed much in 50 years: boys still work at their pecking order in the mob, pick cliques, and pitilessly dump on outsiders.

It's a tough boy's world and no amount of equality rhetoric makes any difference to the time-honoured put-downs and rambunctious activities that come with the hierarchical challenges which have been part of western, masculine society since we started noticing it.

Violence among children isn't new. Armed violence isn't either. On 14 September last year, Melbourne's *The Ageran* police statistics documenting a 45 per cent jump in Victoria in (admittedly small numbers of) children aged 10–14 who were using knives during criminal behaviour: 20 per cent of their victims were under 10. More of the older children and adults

were carrying knives in public.

The government obediently provided greater search powers for police. A Deputy Police Commissioner said many young people were carrying knives 'for protection', not realising that this increased the risk of a confrontation — they should, he said, 'just walk away'.

Peer relations are an important part of children's development and a lot of academic time has been taken up in writing about it. Conflict resolution is an essential element of peer relations — indeed, it's the essential role of civil society.

Without prejudging the facts in this case, let us assume a knife was used to 'resolve' a conflict; the feelings caused by the behaviour of one that was designed to influence the other's behaviour, which in turn was prompted by each having different and incompatible goals. Where this happens among adults, a range of approaches are available, short of violence, from avoidance ('just walk away') to distraction ('there's the bell'); expressions of anger, or seeking social support, and (desirably) compromise if not capitulation.

It takes hard-earned maturity, or an enforced separation, and the presence or imminence of an external authority for either boy to 'walk away', when every cell of their psyche is demanding an explosive alternative. Even a man like my late father, the gentlest of men, experiences the un-blooded boy's rush of rage, swelling of humiliation, or surge of fear, and even such as my dad may lash out (he laid on with a cricket bat, which knocked the other boy unconscious) and, please God, not kill, but learn never, and how not, to lose control.

Whatever happened between these two tragic children, a boy's play is preparation for the man's life. Adolescence is a time of violent, primitive emotions, of play-acting but also of the most intensely lived reality, and of confrontations adults rarely see because it is played out in the privacy of childhood space. Boys' passionate assertion of relative worth and pecking order is developmentally necessary. That child's place in the society of his peers is, for that moment, a matter of life and death.

So let it be with the outcome. We have to be gentle with children whose judgment is not yet developed, whose experience of life is limited, who are learning. Like them, we must not rush to judgment on the life of the man to be who is, today, a boy in a Brisbane jail.

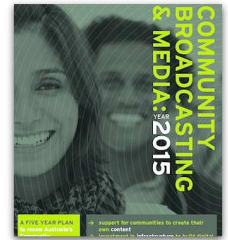
Media's poor need a leg up too

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The Federal Government is having to justify its seemingly scandalous \$250 million 'gift' to Australia's free to air television networks Seven, Nine and Ten.

Earlier this month, Communications Minister Stephen Conroy [announced](#) that the Government will 'protect Australian content on commercial television' by offering licence fee rebates to broadcasters in 2010 and 2011. The rationale for the grant has been overshadowed by its reporting in the context of news of the Minister's US ski-slopes meeting with Seven boss Kerry Stokes.



Media observers have known for a while that technologies such as Internet (or 'IP') TV will make a train wreck of television as we know it, and that Australian content is likely to be a major casualty. New media's challenge for radio is similar. Minister Conroy spoke of the implications of the converging media environment in his media release earlier this month:

'New media platforms are bringing a wealth of choice to Australian viewers, but the Government recognises that Australian television broadcasters have an important role in ensuring that Australian stories remain at the centre of our viewing experience.'

In calling the money a 'bribe' for favourable election coverage, the Federal Opposition is missing the point, showing that it does not understand new media. A more apt response would be to question details such as the unevenness of such assistance — why commercial free-to-air networks have received such a generous concession while other affected sectors have been short-changed.

It is true there was a Government funding increase for the ABC and SBS in the 2009–10 Budget to protect Australian content on the national broadcasters. But one important sector that has received little assistance is the community broadcasters. Community television and radio were given digital spectrum and modest conversion grants only late last year, clearly as an afterthought. Yet they remain an important source of Australian, and genuinely local, content.

Regular city-based local programming on free-to-air commercial television amounts to little more than advertisements and the evening news (except Ten's weekend news which is national). In contrast, most of the programming of community TV, and especially radio, is generated by the stations themselves and reflects the unique interests and concerns of those who live in their cities. Moreover local content is not dependent upon ratings or commercial

values.

Community media is poor, but it is arguably the most faithful media representation of the grass roots of the community. It is marginal in terms of promotion, but the size of its audience is much more significant than many would imagine. A [Community Broadcasting Association](#) survey last year revealed that 57 per cent of Australians listen to community radio in any given month.

Perhaps it's time we heard reports of Minister Conroy playing pool at the local pub with a community radio station manager.

Misdiagnosing Benjamin

PARENTING

Barry Gittins



Spider-Man helmet set squarely on his head, feet on pedals, my three-year-old son, Ben, is set to race his luridly green pushie down our street and around the block. I break out into a slow jog, clinging to the handle mounted on the back of the bike.

Ben is a powerful little bloke and progress, especially downhill, can be too rapid for my taste. Would that it were so in all aspects of Ben's life.

With my wife, I've sailed blithely through parenting our daughter, six-year-old-going-on-30 Emily Georgia, apart from a jeremiad of teething woes and some other health scares. We came aground with Ben, who's now three and a half.

Ben often resides in a daydream kingdom of Bob the Builder, Winnie the Pooh, Dora the Explorer, Roary the Rustbucket etc. When you meet the lad, depending on his mood, you may or may not be acknowledged. He alternates between shyness and exuberance. Engagement and detachment. This has brought strident critiques of the boy from his educators.

Last year I was sitting uneasily with my wife in a room overly crowded with good intentions, early childhood educators and hypocrisy. The subject of discussion was Ben, then two, who was acting out in his preschool room.

Deplorable crimes, a litany of sins omitted and committed, were detailed 'in the interests of your child': Ignoring his teachers' directions. Zoning out if he didn't want to play or conform. Doing a runner if they were taken outside the classroom. (I had to repress a smile at the thought of his teachers trying to catch the little bugger. He's fast.) Pinching toys from his classmates (mostly little girls) and knocking down their sandcastles. In short, Ben was not behaving as his educators wished. At two.

The behavioural problems were ones we were fully aware of and were addressing at home. The grief that came from the meeting and lasted for more than a year came from the misdiagnosis of autism and [Asperger's Syndrome](#). Waves of fear, anger and worry still wash over our nocturnal conversations when, lying in bed, we talk about the two most loved people in our lives.

The meeting ended with my wife in tears and me seething inwardly while maintaining my plastic smile. A considerable amount of pressure was stacked on our shoulders, especially my wife's, to schedule further meetings and take Ben through a battery of testing procedures.

The end play was to either have us pay for a dedicated teacher's aid for our miscreant, or to

get our kid out of their institution. We ended up complying gladly; thankfully he is settling in well at his new kindy and complying much more readily with his minders' instructions.

We, however, are still concerned for Ben. We expect that concern will never depart. We pray it will be lessened. There is, undeniably, the vestigial guilt we feel that both of us are in the workforce (a fiscal necessity). I also know that the father is child to the man that Ben will become (with apologies to Wordsworth).

I was the same. My old man was very freaked if he saw me, even as a seven- or eight-year old, holding my knees and rocking away on the carpet. I was grooving to the songs in my head; Dad saw aberrant behavior that could see me judged and dismissed as not quite right. Unworthy.

The quirks of the father have been visited on the son.

The fear that dogs me, that still visits us as a family, is balanced by Ben's linguistic progress, his growing awareness of his role as a member of his community and his evident love of life.

The attention seeking, the boundary testing, the glances for reassurance, the emptying of the bathwater as he practises his freestyle strokes, the raids on the fruit bowl and the squeezing of whatever pet is unlucky enough to be within range — these aspects of Ben are balanced by sprints that end in leaps and hugs. Big, trusting eyes. The howls of laughter when he cracks a joke. The yellow, plastic hard-hat he insists on wearing to Bunnings (complete with BTB T-shirt, boardies and lime green gumboots).

The boy still stirs the shite out of his big sister. But he also creeps into bed with her to share a cuddle and receive mini-mothering.

When I hurt for Ben, he redeems my fears by taking my hand, smiling up at me tentatively and asking, 'Are you happy?' If there are scraped knees or bruised egos in the home, Ben shows compassion. 'It's okay', he says to the injured while proffering his toy de jour, 'You have Doggy, and feel better'.

The best advice we've received, from both professionals with no agenda and from our deeply partisan friends and family, is to just love our boy and let him grow in his own time.

After a horde of pediatricians, speech therapists, child psychologists etc., we're no closer to knowing where if anywhere Benjamin fits on the scale of all things autistic. We don't know. We don't have to.

Tony Abbott, the poor and Jesus

SPIRITUALITY

Andrew Hamilton

It is a commonplace to associate Tony Abbott's politics with his Catholic faith. He certainly refers easily to the Catholic tradition in his speeches. This is helpful because it provides one gate to reflection on his policies.



Last week at a meeting of Catholic Social Services he was asked whether he would commit himself to Kevin Rudd's pledge to halve homelessness in Australia by 2020. He declined.

He expressed the desire to improve the present situation, but said many people chose to be homeless. He also expressed scepticism about the value of large gestures of commitment by politicians to heal social problems, contrasting it with the remark of Jesus, 'The poor you have with you always'. He set this within a Catholic tradition of realistic social commitment to do what is possible, but not to expect to make the world perfect.

As casual remarks, Abbott's comments were commonplace. But together they suggested that he does not see homelessness as a major priority. His remarks also provided the skeleton of a Christian justification for that position. So it may be helpful to look in a little more detail at the argument embodied in Jesus' statement that we always have the poor with us. The phrase has often been used in Christian conversation to diffuse the claim that the poor make on us. But in context it is much richer in meaning.

The phrase, 'The poor you have with you always' occurs in a story told in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and John. The story occurs late in the Gospels when the hostility towards Jesus is moving to his arrest and death. A woman comes up to Jesus, breaks open a jar of expensive perfumed oil and pours it over his head. This leads to criticism of the extravagance of the gesture — the jar should have been sold and the money given to the poor. The criticism is variously attributed to bystanders, to Jesus' disciples and to Judas who, it is noted, was a thief. The critics, plainly, are not the heroes of the story.

In response to the critics, Jesus contrasts their general concern for the poor, who are always with us, with the woman's specific compassion for him. She has anointed him in view of his imminent death. The story also implies that right thinking about charity — concern for policy — must arise out of an immediate compassion for the people whom we meet. The saying does not relativise our commitment to the poor. It makes absolute our commitment to the poor person in front of us.

This becomes clear if we look more closely at the remark about the poor being always with us. It is actually a paraphrase of a verse from the Old Testament Book of *Deuteronomy*. God is

represented as saying, 'For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you: You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land.' Here the perennial existence of the poor does not entitle us to turn to other issues. It demands that we address it constantly in practical terms.

When taken together, the story from the Gospels and the instructions in *Deuteronomy* encapsulate the Christian attitude to the poor. It is based in effective solidarity with those in need, and this solidarity in turn is grounded in compassion. In Matthew's Gospel, the twin themes of compassion and solidarity come together in the picture of judgment, where Jesus says that what we do to our neighbour in need, we do to Christ. Solidarity with the neighbour is solidarity with Christ. The woman in the Gospel story was a model of commitment to the poor.

It follows that Jesus' words are not directed against sweeping commitments to the poor, the context in which Abbott cites them, but against generalised statements of concern for the poor which do not express themselves in care for poor people. It is directed against a political rhetoric that is not grounded in effective compassion.

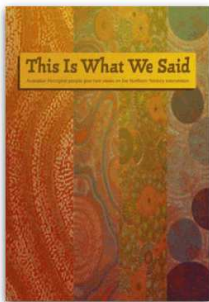
We may ask, then, whether Rudd's large commitment to halve homelessness by 2020 or Abbott's large expression of concern for the poor without making any specific commitment is more consistent with Christian faith. The question will receive different answers. Ultimately another phrase of Jesus may provide a better test, 'By their fruits you will know them'.

Indigenous voices examine the Intervention

BOOKS

Sarah Burnside

Michele Harris (Ed.): *This is What We Said*. Social Policy Connections, 2010. [Order online](#)



In 2009, the Federal Government embarked on consultations with Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory about the Northern Territory Emergency Response, commonly referred to as the Intervention.

Such consultations could enable aspects of the Intervention to be characterised as '[special measures](#)' under the Racial Discrimination Act 1975; such measures can be permissible if they are supported by those affected. If support exists, the RDA could be reinstated in the Territory without initiatives — such as five year leases and compulsory acquisition of land, income management, alcohol restrictions and bans on pornography — being wound back.

A group known as 'concerned Australians' recorded and transcribed the consultations in three of the relevant communities — Utopia, Bagot and Ampilatwatja. A [report](#) including these transcripts was prepared by the Hon. Alastair Nicholson, Larissa Behrendt, Alison Vivian, Nicole Watson and Michele Harris of the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, and was launched on 24 November 2009.

The report — 'Will they be heard? A response to the NTER consultations June— August 2009' — was lengthy, well-researched and persuasively argued. Unfortunately, in the soundbite-heavy discourse that characterises the Australian political scene, it seems to have been largely ignored.

Currently, [bills are before the Federal Parliament](#) that reinstate the RDA but leave in the controversial 'special measures' noted above, on the grounds that consultation has taken place. This justification is difficult to uphold on the strength of the comments recorded in 'Will They Be Heard?' Particularly striking is the statement from the Laynhapuy Homeland Mala Leaders at Yirrkala, which reads in part:

'The problems our people face can be addressed through programs and funding targeted on a needs basis alone, under the Closing the Gap policy ... Our responses to your questions in this consultation must not be used by the Australian Government to argue for the continuation of the NTER, Intervention or justify what has been done to date.'

'Concerned Australians' have now released *This Is What We Said*, a shorter and more accessible collection of the comments made by residents of Utopia, Bagot, Yirrkala and

Ampilatwatja. The book includes photographs taken during the consultations, together with statements made by community members. Aboriginal people are often spoken and written about; those in remote communities have been the focus of relentless commentary in the past few years. *This Is What We Said* provides an opportunity to do some of the talking.

The anger and hurt expressed by those consulted is palpable: 'We're not naughty children'; 'We are not second-class citizens!'; 'why are we being punished?' The residents of these prescribed communities express shame and distress at being implicitly judged and found wanting by the Federal Government. A man from Bagot states: 'I am a qualified teacher and you are telling me how to run my life, how to look after my wife, how to look after my children, that is what the ... intervention means to me'.

The stigmatisation is overt — many comments refer to the 'blue signs' at the entrance to the communities which forbid alcohol and pornography. A resident in Ampilatwatja said 'You pointing the finger at us! Whitefella they see that sign and they think "they must be really bad with that pornography" ... Yet you can still go into a newsagent in Tennant Creek, adult bookshops and so on and buy all the materials there, but not here.'

Others commented that they thought 'you [could] go to Canberra and you can buy even worse books [pornography]' and asked, with respect to mainstream Australia, 'do they have blue signs there as well?'

Community members express their scepticism as to any progress made since 2007 on the initial rationale of the Intervention — the prevention of child sexual abuse. One Bagot community resident noted 'nobody has come back and told us or gave us any results or anything like that'. Another asked 'where are the arrests and evidence of abuse?' A resident of Ampilatwatja is quoted as asking: 'You give us proof, some evidence on how many people have been locked up since the Intervention started'.

This Is What We Said reveals a desire for local solutions, rather than those imposed from afar; one Bagot community resident suggested: 'Surely it would make more sense for somebody to be available here in the community, and to go out to each house and say, look you know, you've gone to bits and you might need help, you know'. Another said that the government 'should have come and sat down [with us] and set up a program, set up a big plan of what the problem is ... sit down with us and then we can work it out together'.

The Intervention has generated a great deal of heat; there has been much debate about who can speak with authority on it. Hopefully the voices of the people quoted in *This Is What We Said* are not lost in the din.

Mr Darcy's suicide notes

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***A Single Man* (M). Running time: 100 minutes. Director: Tom Ford. Starring: Colin Firth, Julianne Moore, Matthew Goode, Nicholas Hoult**

It's the moment that made a generation of women swoon. British actor Colin Firth strips off the outer layers of his immaculate period costume and dives into a provincial English pond. This is a cathartic moment for Mr Darcy, the moody hero of the BBC miniseries *Pride and Prejudice*. He emerges from the pond symbolically cleansed and physically saturated.



The combination of the emotional and the tactile in this image — of the brooding, masculine Darcy newly reacquainted with his softer side, while cool droplets cling to his curly hair and sideburns, and his white shirt equally clings to his torso — still seems to make many women (and no doubt some men) dip their eyes demurely at every recollection.

Fashion designer turned auteur Tom Ford, by casting Firth as the lead character in *A Single Man*, channels this enduring sex appeal to intriguing effect. In Ford's film, an older Firth is cloaked in the foppish attire of a university English professor, complete with thick, black-rimmed glasses. Yet it's not enough to conceal the sex symbol within.

This is important, as sex isn't the first thing that comes to mind when considering the film's plot. Firth plays George, a middle-aged gay man who is steeped in the depths of an eight-month pit of depression, since the accidental death of his (much younger) partner of 16 years, Jim (Goode). George is very English, but lives in LA in the early 1960s. We meet him on an important day: he has decided it will be his last.

We follow George as he spends the day making his arrangements. He lays out personal papers, funeral instructions and farewell letters in a tidy grid upon the desk in his home office. He schedules a final binge with long-time friend, drinking partner and former lover, Charley (Moore). He teaches what he believes will be his last class, a tutorial on Aldous Huxley that digresses into a monologue on fear.

There are hints that despite his intentions, George isn't entirely lost to life. In a sequence that exemplifies the balance of humour and pathos that is managed throughout the film, the ever impeccable George rehearses the suicide, showing great concern for his personal comfort during what will be his final moments, and for preserving the cleanliness of his environs — God forbid he should make a mess, even in death.

George is a likeable character, yet somewhat predatory. His eye is drawn to what he

perceives as beauty, often physical characteristics of people he encounters. We see, in close up and from his point of view, the features that attract him: an eye, a mouth, a bare torso. His gaze lingers almost leeringly. It is not always unwelcome by the subject. Nor is it diverted by gender; while socially gay, George appreciates beauty in both male and female form.

At such moments, George experiences a lift. The colours of the world literally become brighter, and warmer. Once the moment passes, insipidness seeps back in. This visual effect suggests a certain irrepressibility in George's libido, but also an awareness that happiness can be drawn from seemingly small things in life, even when sadness overwhelms. This is an important theme as the day — and George's life — progresses towards its end.

We see both the good and evil faces of George's intense sexual appeal. His drinking session with Charley is foreshadowed by a series of phone calls. In each, Charley is seen incrementally more 'made up', progressing from mussed and pallid to ostentatiously glamorous. The impression is that while George has been preparing for death, Charley, ignorant of his suicidal intentions, has spent the entire day making herself beautiful for him.

While Charley's infatuation with George has reached self-destructive proportions, there is something sweeter in the interest shown by one of George's students. Kenny (Hoult) has an almost effeminate beauty combined with a streak of James Dean bad-boyishness; childlikeness combined with world-wisdom. Yet despite the age difference, there is nothing creepy about the attraction that develops between George and Kenny.

In fact it proves to be George's saving grace. Kenny's gentle forthrightness leads the older man to unseen truths within himself. The film's various plot threads draw tight around a physically naked but ultimately non-sexual tryst within the glass walls of George and Jim's home. But the final, decisive resolution seems to sell short the character of George, so meticulously studied during the course of the film.

Firth won a BAFTA and has been nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of George. He is deserving, evoking as he does a man devastated by grief, gripped by depression, intending suicide but not yet ready to shake off life. Credit to first time filmmaker Ford for finding innovative ways to allow us to share this intriguing character.

Real stories betray Abbott's homelessness untruth

COMMUNITY

John Falzon



In 1994 I started working in community development in some of the large public housing estates around Sydney. There I learnt a valuable lesson: that everyone has a story. That might sound obvious. It is however the most obvious truths that sometimes need to be spoken.

Now is one of those times. On one hand we have a Government committed to the humiliating blanket imposition of compulsory income management on the basis of race and class. On the other hand we have a Leader of the Opposition who persists with the most offensive attitudes to our sisters and brothers who are doing it tough.

Everyone has a story. And they don't happen in limbo. They happen in the context of developing social and economic structures. Each person's story is a unique intersection of the personal and the political. Each intersection continues to change.

Tony Abbott's recent [comments](#) on poverty and homelessness reveal an inability to understand these intersections. If you don't know how intersections work you're sure to come a cropper!

The deeply offensive aspect of Abbott's comments is that he blames people for being left out or pushed out. Nothing could be further from the truth. Choices are constrained for those who have been systematically locked out of the nation's prosperity. There's not much choice between a rock and a hard place. But of course, such a world view lets governments off the hook. It denies the reality of the social.

When I was forced to engage with what was happening in people's lives I was able to see the bigger picture emerging. I found myself being completely re-educated on the causes of inequality and how these social relations intersected in the lives of the people who were pushed to the edges of society.

Every day the members of the St Vincent de Paul Society and many NGOs across Australia see and touch the Australian face of marginalisation. Many of us see this experience as a sacramental encounter. Many of us believe in the real presence of Christ in our disadvantaged and demonised sisters and brothers.

We are driven by the truth of what we see and touch. And the truth is that we, as a society, have within our means the ability to change the structures that cause or exacerbate poverty and exclusion. The question is whether we, as a nation, have the political will.

We continue to be subjected to social policies that mimic the paternalism exemplified in Margaret Thatcher's contention, 'there is no such thing as society'. Paternalism starts (and ends!) with a highly unequal relationship of power. It is described by Lawrence Mead, one of its leading US proponents, as 'the close supervision of the poor'.

The New Paternalism is a relatively recent version of this approach. The focus is on the supposed individual deficit rather than structural deficits. The very name bespeaks the manner in which people are objectified and treated like young children who have no capacity to make decisions or take control. Any decision imputed to them is roundly condemned by a moralising discourse from on high.

The New Paternalism is exemplified by such policies as compulsory income management or using the threat of financial penalties on sole parents or people in receipt of unemployment benefits.

The New Paternalism assumes that people are largely to blame for their own marginalisation; that people who are marginalised are naturally without power; that power naturally rests with those who deserve it; that those with power can, at best, use their power to bring about a change in the behaviour of those without power; and that the problems experienced by people who are marginalised are their own problems, but bleed into the 'mainstream' through increased costs, increased crime, loss of productivity, market constraints and disorder.

These assumptions are as pernicious as they are unproven. They lead to either treating people as if they are 'sick' (pathologisation) or as if they are morally bad (criminalisation). Being locked up often follows hot on the heels of being locked out.

Nothing good can come out of these approaches. They are cursed not only by their lack of compassion but also by their denial of justice. We should be listening to the people who are most oppressed by the structures that cause inequality and marginalisation. We are obliged to engage in bringing about the necessary social change.

The only lasting liberation is won collectively by the people who hunger for it, to paraphrase the Beatitude.

Jean-Paul Sartre once noted that no matter how terrible the situation a person finds themselves in, the impetus to seek change does not come automatically. Someone does not wake up one morning and decide that this is enough, that something must be done. Rather, you will do something about the situation only when you realise that an alternative is possible.

This must happen on a collective level if we are serious about creating genuine pathways out of homelessness and poverty. We must create the alternatives rather than condemning our own to be imprisoned in an oppressive status quo. More than this, we must have the courage to imagine the possible together if we are to build the kind of society where homelessness and

exclusion are prevented in the first place.

Immersed in India's light and shade

NON-FICTION

Anne Doyle

We arrive by mini bus after hours of driving through the Haryana villages north of Delhi. We are greeted with bare stone buildings set along laneways of compressed dirt, like the ruins of a ghost town. Walking in the oppressive heat we catch the wan glances of older villagers sitting in doorways. Young men smile shyly as we raise a hand in greeting.



Before long we come upon an open stone building — the meeting room. We enter to find 60 weathered women seated on mats on the dirt floor. Their saris fill the enclosure with colour. Their faces tell the poignant stories of their lives. Children gaze out from their mothers' laps while others crowd about the windows peering curiously in. We greet them with hands clasped and heads bowed: 'Namaste' — 'I honour the divine within you.'

As we take our seats a rustle of chatter ripples about the space. Our cups are filled with water. We are garlanded by strong beautiful women and our hearts are touched by this generous welcome. We are regarded as royalty.

These are the members of the women's self-help group of the village, administered by the Chetanalaya Social Support Service of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese. Through an interpreter we learn about their struggles, their lives and their daily efforts to garner a small income through a micro-credit cooperative. It helps them support their families and each other and restores pride and self-respect.

Several women stand to tell their stories. We hear of the seven buffalo the village has purchased and the small dairy they have established. Some have set up village stores, another was able to pay for important surgery and others can now provide essentials for their children. Each feels she has improved her family situation. Their pride in their achievement is clearly evident.

'Before, I could not be heard. Now I have a voice', one woman explains.

Later, surrounded by excited children, we are guided past dogs, cows, chickens and goats along the lanes to a house. This is home to 12 people, two-roomed and spotless. We sit on the two beds and a few plastic chairs and sip sweet chai tea as the proud home-owners look on. We feel like royalty again. Despite their desperate poverty they treat us with the most gracious hospitality.

Leaving, there is a frenzy of smiling, 'Namastes' and hand shaking. A small boy proudly

introduces me in English to his grandmother. They hug, and her toothy smile betrays her love and pride. She signs for me to take her photo. I show her and she is so happy to see herself there.

We are escorted to the bus. Our visit was clearly a wondrous event for the villagers. Their welcome is a soul-searching moment of grace for us.

Much good has come to us all today.

It is our last night in India. It's 11.15 pm and we are returning to our modest hotel on the Mumbai waterfront. The steamy air circles around us and there is a pleasant feeling of satisfaction, even a mild euphoria after our last dinner together. We have shared stories, thoughts and good-hearted humour over dishes of fine Indian food. The warmth and companionship of new friends stimulate the spirit. It has been an evening to remember.

But our walk is disturbed by a now-familiar sensation — a tug on the sleeve and the voice of a woman which creates a tug on the heartstrings so very hard to ignore. Instinctively we shrug her off and the shame twists deep within. The sadness of her plight is palpable but we ignore it, knowing her role in a chain of pimpdom.

We walk on, hearts suddenly heavy. Small children huddled on ragged cloths take their rest after a day of begging and running the streets. Here beneath a roadside tree a family is gathered, babies asleep, the parents still awake, their few possessions cluttered about them. Under the shop awnings long human shapes stretch out beneath discoloured sheets. On the street corner we step around two more sleeping children and encounter another small woman, baby on her hip, hand extended. We pass by.

It is 11.30 pm.

The traffic flows, taxis sound their horns interminably and young people stop for snacks and drinks at street vendors' stores or chat across parked cars.

We go upstairs to complete our packing. We each take two plastic bags and fill them with our excesses. It seems like the least we can do; the only thing we can do.

At midnight we creep down the worn wooden stairs of the hotel, nodding to puzzled houseboys. We retrace our steps. The huddled groups are all settled now. Silently we place the bags in easy reach. It is so easy for us; no loss. A convenience, even; it simplifies our packing.

A tiny step towards redressing the balance? Or simply a partial cleansing of the conscience?

Legacy of a whingeing bogan

POLITICS

Irfan Yusuf



Picture this: London, July or August. The new Prime Minister, the Conservative Party leader David Cameron, is seated in a chair once occupied by New Labour's Gordon Brown. Maiden speeches should hardly be the biggest headache for Mr Cameron. But then a maverick ex-Tory MP who lost her Conservative Party endorsement rises to give her maiden speech. In a shrill voice she declares: 'We are in danger of being swamped

by bogans.'

And whoever she is, she might just have a point. Because Pauline Hanson, an MP who made a name for herself whingeing about the privileges of the underprivileged and whinging about Aborigines and immigrants, has announced that she is heading for the land of the biggest whingers of them all. The whingeing bogan will soon be [transformed](#) into a whingeing Pom.

Hanson is eligible to hold a British passport because her grandfather migrated to Australia from England. She is proud of her mixed English-Irish heritage. However, if her past form is any indication, Hanson is certainly not too thrilled about having [at least 9 per cent](#) Arab/Middle Eastern heritage. Still, we cannot be sure if her ancestors were [Christian Muslims](#) or Muslim Christians.

And Hanson is clear about what she's looking for in mother England. 'I've really had enough. I want peace in my life. I want contentment, and that's what I'm aiming for.' England is, of course, a place full of monocultural peace and contentment. You don't see uncontrolled immigration or nasty Muslim (as opposed to Christian Muslim) terrorists running riot there.

If you don't believe me, just ask Hanson's rough equivalent in the UK, the allegedly conservative blogger and columnist [Melanie Phillips](#). In her 2006 book *Londonistan: How Britain Is Creating A Terror State Within*, Phillips selects chapter headings that show just how wonderful things are up there:

- Chapter 1 — The Growth of Londonistan
- Chapter 3 — The Security Debacle
- Chapter 4 — Multicultural Paralysis
- Chapter 8 — On Their Knees before Terror
- Chapter 9 — The Appeasement of Clerical Fascism

Back in 2002, Phillips [wrote](#) these telling words:

‘Britain is now receiving around 200,000 migrants a year from outside the EU, of whom around 100,000 are asylum seekers (of whom only 10,000 are currently removed), 60,000 are dependants of those already here and the rest (on a low estimate) are illegal immigrants. If this trend continues, there will be at a conservative estimate an extra two million people every decade — almost another Birmingham every five years.’

Which makes you wonder why Ms Hanson would want to consider opening a fish and chip shop in Londonistan.

Hanson may not remain in Australia in body, but her spirit will stay with us for decades to come. Our politics, media and public discourse have been infected by Hansonite thinking. I saw this myself in action in the November 2001 Federal Election. At the time, I was the endorsed Liberal candidate in the safe Labor seat of Reid. I was required to run all media and public comment past the Campaign HQ in East Sydney.

Someone introduced me to a man who lived in John Howard’s seat of Bennelong and whose two nieces had drowned with 350 other asylum seekers in the SIEV-X incident. I wanted to say something about it in public and contacted Campaign HQ. The reply came — do not talk about the issue or face disendorsement.

‘Listen, I know how much you hate Pauline Hanson. You’ve got to understand that we have a deliberate strategy here. We want to destroy Hanson by sounding like her and attracting her voter base away from her. It’s part of a deliberate strategy, and it’s temporary.’

It was supposed to be temporary. But over seven years have gone by and we are still happily demonising those we deem to be different enough to be a threat to our collective cultural ego.

But is this just the fault of Hanson and those who opportunistically use her reasoning to get elected or stay in power? Why has the politics of marginalisation been allowed to become and remain mainstream? Why don’t we have a consistent thread of resistance to racism running in our political and popular culture?

Why are we rightly intolerant of certain kinds of intolerance toward Jews and yet tolerant of virtually identical kinds of intolerance directed at other groups? Why are the prejudicial themes used against Catholics in Australia for more than a century now used by some allegedly devout Catholics against other groups?

Could someone please explain?

Foodies savour the smell of rich people

COMMUNITY

Georgina Laidlaw

In one memorable episode of the long-running but now discontinued ABC food program *The Cook and The Chef*, Maggie Beer sniffed ecstatically at an Australian black truffle before proffering it to co-host Simon Bryant. The chuckling Bryant told her it smelled like rich people.



Historically, truffles appeared on the plates of the posh and peasants alike. The stuff of legend, awe and luxury, truffles were denounced as the devil's food and adored as an aphrodisiac, all while remaining the gleaner's ultimate treat. More recently, war and global warming have seen European production fall dramatically, adding rarity to the truffle's considerable cachet.

But in Australia, the truffle has been typecast as an indulgence of the wealthy. Somehow, Australian food culture has reduced the truffle, a complex cultural icon with the ability to cross class boundaries, to little more than a rich man's treat.

It would be easy to blame economics — to say that the cost of supply dictates a price that only the wealthy can afford. But this explanation ignores the undertow of Euro-centric pretention that drags at Australian food culture.

Centuries of human appreciation, reverence — even love — have given the truffle a complex history. In France, Spain and Italy, the truffle grows wild — the least pretentious starting point imaginable. It hides beneath the soil, waiting to be unearthed by the Trifulau's dogs or, less often, pigs.

Appropriately, black and white truffles are listed alongside saffron milk caps in Patience Gray's *Honey from a Weed*, which explores Mediterranean wild food culture through anecdotes and recipes.

At the other end of the spectrum, Antonin Carême, chef to George IV, the Romanovs and Napoleon, lists in his collection a recipe for Salmon à La Rothschild, circa 1825, in which one pound of sliced black truffles are arranged over a whole salmon in a velvety replication of scales.

There is, of course, a middle ground for truffle enjoyment. Edouard de Pomiane's 1930s recipe for poached eggs directed his housewifely readership to 'add salt and pepper and the truffles cut into slices'. And his truffles were tinned.

It seems odd to think of the truffle as everyman's indulgence, for here in Australia, truffles divide, rather than unite, the dining public. Stepping off the escalator into Melbourne's David

Jones food hall at the right time of year, shoppers may be confronted by enormous air-freighted truffles in their own glass case — a presentation that implies the price (up to \$3500 a kilo) even before customers spy the little slip of cream card that displays this improbable figure.

Who could justify the purchase of even 50 grams? Other than restaurant owners, those who buy are less likely to be diehard gourmards than upper class, conservative ‘foodies’: people inspired more by festivals, packaging, produce-porn cookbooks and foodie flimflam than the prospect of growing their own beans or skinning a rabbit; people for whom the only substance that might conceivably get beneath the nails is crÃ©me fraÃ©che.

In the upper class foodie’s truffle-love lies an abiding nostalgia for Europe, and a desire to emulate rather than adapt. These diners gaze longingly from a country they decry as being largely wasteland, toward Europe’s bountiful landscapes.

It’s not just the truffle that lures the foodie — it’s the idyll it represents: a simple life lived to seasonal rhythms in a place where feasts are garnered from the forests. A place their ancestors left for the Australian treachery of dust, drought, chain supermarkets and a culinary history that stops dead at sausage rolls.

Distance corroborates truffles’ exclusivity. Antipodean truffle eaters must rely either on the auspices of air freight or local farmers. The Australian Truffle Grower’s Association advises that it can take five to ten long years to produce a commercial crop. Truffles are only getting more expensive, and more desirable.

At heart, though, it’s fashion that drives upper class foodies to buy truffles. Apparently, any ingredient prized by the foodie establishment is worth the price in dollars and food miles. At truffles, enviro-ethics and consumerist self-realisation collide. They’re European! Maggie recommends them! And they’re so very indulgent!

Despite damnation, bombs and climate change, the truffle continues to prove that peasants can eat like kings — just not in Australia.

Today I desire less debris

POETRY

Marlene Marburg

Celebrating yet another anniversary

We summon the lift, go high rise
and pop our ears on the way,
walk to room 4614,
the 46th floor of the hotel.

We muse about a suite on the 50th floor.

It is harder to write poetry
when you are rich.

But how would I know? I imagine
that rich life is about desire
more or less.

And today I desire less
debris, less of the indecipherable tangle.

Less of the jumbled alphabet.
making no sense inside me.

What am I doing here?

People in Haiti are dead
dying, grieving,
starving and hunting for loved ones,
and if they have the energy,
they are looting the few things left.

Do I really believe
that mine is yours, my friend?

Do I believe that when I am here

with 'Healthy Breakfast' and room service,
leaving food because it is excessive,
extravagant, exorbitant,
and such a short time from the evening
sumptuous meal at No 35 restaurant
just one sleep ago;
do I believe all will be well?

Stripping the family altar

In a past season, it mattered what was on the table.
Now I see with quiet eyes the cloth is frenzied.
The creator has the mind of a spitting fire
frightful synapses, black and purple, hell all over.
The candle is first to go; the last time
its molten fragrance will waft to heaven
to honour the saints, prophets, zealots.
The flame extinguished lightens the room.
Listening Angel goes behind glass
in the cabinet where, to be sure,
she will guard us with her porcelain eyes.
Next the crucifix
capturing the naked moment
suffering violence,
arms restrained and wide-open
childlike.
Oh God
the body is cold
I run my fingers over

the hands, feet, thorns,
the lips which spoke
I come so you will have life.
I lay it down gently
as if it hurts him less.
Lastly I strip the excessive purple, cloaked
across the whorled and unbleached wood.
Round and grainy, the table top
suggests a host of things, never ending
to one raised in symbol and the cycle of days.
I look at it, raw and unadorned,
and kneel,
moved by the bread it is to me.

Winter Games cool Aussies' long hot summer

SPORT

Michael Visontay



The death of the Georgian luge competitor was a shocking introduction to the [Winter Olympics](#), yet the main news of these Games is the warm temperature at the Vancouver resort hosting the competition. The men's downhill skiing has already been postponed because of slushy conditions, and that is after snow has been trucked in.

Unsurprisingly, the spectre of climate change has been invoked. I wonder if they said that in 1928 when the second ever winter games at St Moritz were faced with a thaw that forced the cancellation of the 10,000 m speed skating. My history book also says the 50 km cross-country skiing was held in 20 degree Celsius temperatures, and victory was based on who chose the best ski wax to cope with the slushy conditions.

Weather aside, the winter Olympics occupy an unusual place in our collective imagination. To most Australians, these Vancouver Olympics are a romantic escape from our hot, humid summer: two weeks of crisp, alpine scenery filled with breathtaking feats of skill.

They make for beautiful television — the whirr of skiers hurtling down the slopes, snowboarders doing somersaults in the air, skaters dancing ballet on the ice, the sheer madness of the luge as it defies gravity while tubing down the mountain.

And yet, in some important way, these disciplines feel more like recreation than competitive sport. That is not to demean them. On the contrary, the purity implied in that word 'recreation' endows skiing and its winter cousins with something special: a link with the original spirit and intention of sport.

That vibe starts with the organisation of the event itself. The host city doesn't build a huge, showpiece stadium, nor does it present an opening spectacle on the same scale as the summer counterpart. In the absence of grandeur and ambition — no Water Cube or Birds Nest — there is an intimacy which focuses our attention on the sport rather than the spectacle.

These athletes train hard but they don't get messed up with drugs like runners or weightlifters, they become famous but not household names. The champions are sponsored but they don't receive the same money that Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt command. They are not commercialised to anything like the same degree that summer Olympians are.

The whole expression of their skill seems closer to youthful thrillseeking than serious competition, their daredevil antics not so far removed from my adolescent son last winter as he lurched towards a chairlift stanchion at Perisher Blue. For the first 20 m, try as he might to

move away, his skis dragged him toward the big metal tower. 'Turn, turn, turn, you idiot', I swore to myself from up above. Somehow, at the last minute, he snowploughed away and avoided injury.

The next day he and another boy goaded each other on to new levels of risk. Distracted by the constant dares from his friend, my son left his ski poles trailing along on the chairlift. Suddenly we heard a long scraping sound and turned to see his poles bent by 45 degrees rendering them useless.

We laughed it off and he skied down the run in hot pursuit of his faster, more experienced companion. 'Don't do anything stupid', I said meekly. But that seems to be exactly the point of these winter pursuits: take an enjoyable pastime and ratchet up the adrenalin by taking life-threatening risks.

Of course, winter Olympians have sacrificed as much as swimmers or runners in preparation for their events, and suffer the same elation and heartbreak as anyone else. Yet their exploits do not linger in the memory, even in the northern hemisphere where winter recreation is a way of life.

Perhaps the best example of this contrast lies in the legends that grow out of the two Olympics. From summer, the enduring myths are created by people like Ian Thorpe, Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt for their superhuman achievements. Which names do we remember from the Winter Olympics? British skaters Torvill and Dean for their ballet on ice in 1984 and four years later, English ski jumper Eddie 'the Eagle' Edwards for finishing last in both jump events.

From a local perspective, nothing can top the moment in 2002 when Australian skater Steven Bradbury waltzed through a pack of fallen skaters to claim the gold medal in the 1000 m race at Salt Lake City, his face smitten with bemused joy.

Winter sport is about getting out in the cold, having fun and enjoying the aesthetics of the white wonderland. The Olympics are just that, and we should celebrate them for being so tuned to nature — even if they do have to truck in the snow.

Rudd's apology was also our apology

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The heat is on Kevin Rudd. On the second anniversary of the apology to Indigenous Australians, we look instinctively to the Prime Minister to tell us what he's done to improve the lives of Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders over the past two years.



Doing his duty in Parliament on Thursday, he conceded that progress has been slow. Opposition leader Tony Abbott then criticised the Prime Minister for his focus on process rather than results. Tom Calma, who chairs the Close the Gap Steering Committee, said the government has no comprehensive plan to improve indigenous health.

The rest of us are relieved that we have Kevin Rudd to blame.

Rudd did put himself in the firing line when on 13 February 2008 he rose to the challenge and delivered on the promise to apologise. But while he may have voiced it, the Prime Minister is not solely responsible for the apology and what flows from it. We handed him the mandate to make it when we elected Labor to government a few months earlier. John Howard's strident refusal to countenance an apology was one of the reasons we tossed him out of government. We own the apology and whatever comes of it.

Thursday's speech was the Prime Minister's second annual report to the nation on what his government has done to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. When making the apology two years ago he promised to give a progress report every year.

It's turned out to be Kevin Rudd's moment of contrition, and we have looked on as spectators. We do need to know if we are getting value for money from the government we elected. That is our right and role as electors. There is much that the Federal Government needs to do in the near future, such as delivering on its pledge to reinstate the Racial Discrimination Act in relation to the Intervention legislation.

However that's not the full story. It could and should also be *our* moment of contrition, a time for us to take stock of what we have done — locally and personally — to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

To cite an example, somebody tells us that Aboriginal youth have painted graffiti on a wall near where we live. We pass it on to our neighbour that Aboriginal youth have painted the graffiti. We have widened the gap. It may sound simplistic, but if we had chosen not to identify the race of the alleged offenders, we would have done something significant towards closing the gap.

Some Australians practise more overt discrimination when they oppose initiatives designed to improve Indigenous health or wellbeing, such as the construction or acquisition of premises for the purpose. The project they're opposing may adversely affect land values, or increase the perceived need for personal or other security.

If we decline any invitation to take part in the 'NIMBY' action, and indeed write to the local newspaper or speak against it in some way, we are doing our bit to close the gap. Moreover we add authority to any criticism we make of government action.