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Eureka Street's founding vision

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

This year marks the 20th anniversary of *Eureka Street*. In the fickle world of media where many publications fail to find a sustained readership, this longevity is quite an achievement. To celebrate the anniversary, *Eureka Street* presents video interviews with some of its most prominent contributors. The first series of six conversations begins today, with one appearing every fortnight. There will be a second series later in the year.

Prior to the advent of *Eureka Street*, many Australian Jesuits had discussed their desire to publish a journal featuring intelligent comment on topical issues in church and society. They were inspired by Jesuit publications overseas like the US Jesuits' [America](#), established in 1909, and the [The Month](#) in Britain (1864-2001).

So it's fitting that the first interview should be with Jesuit priest, Michael Kelly, *Eureka Street's* founding publisher, who made this vision a reality. He talks about the significance of the journal, and the future of the Catholic Church and faith in Australia.

He spoke with *Eureka Street TV* last Sunday at St Canice's Church in Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, just prior to the Mass celebrating the 25th anniversary of ordination of fellow Jesuit, Frank Brennan, another high profile contributor to *Eureka Street*.

Michael Kelly is a man of vision, who brought his boundless energy and entrepreneurial spirit to the foundation of *Eureka Street*. He studied the marketplace, and with scant finances put together production facilities. He assembled gifted personnel, such as longtime editor, and now prominent public intellectual, Morag Fraser.

Eureka Street began as a monthly print magazine. In another insightful and, at the time, controversial move, Kelly anticipated the switch from print to internet media and encouraged *Eureka Street* to go online in 2006, well before many similar publications made the move. This rejuvenated the journal and gave it a larger and more diverse readership.

Eureka Street is just one of a host of Michael Kelly's activities and achievements. Shortly after its foundation, he also launched [Australian Catholics](#), a mass circulation bi-monthly magazine. Both publications were part of a revamping and consolidation of the considerable publishing activities of the Jesuit order, coming under the umbrella of Jesuit Communications which he created.

In the mid-1990s Kelly founded, and was the first CEO of [Church Resources](#), a charitable trust which combines the buying power of Catholic and other Church institutions in purchasing services and supplies such as telecommunications and stationery.

In 2004 he was founding CEO of [Aurora TV](#), a not-for-profit independent pay channel that can be seen on Foxtel, Austar and Optus TV, broadcasting original Australian programs from independent and community program makers.

Since 2008 Kelly has been based in Bangkok as CEO of [Union of Catholic Asia News](#) (UCAN), a 30 year old news service reporting on the Asian region. He is bringing the same entrepreneurial skills and innovative spirit to UCAN, launching its online and interactive services, and extending its reach, particularly in India and the Philippines.

Making flood reconstruction fair and sustainable

POLITICS

Lin Hatfield-Dodds



My warm glow of humanitarian solidarity in the face of nature's flood fury has faded a bit in the light of bickering across the country about how to fund post-flood reconstruction.

Well, more *who* should fund the reconstruction. Government, from existing funds? Those directly affected, from insurance payments and their own pockets? Or all of us together via what is being referred to, depending on your political persuasion, as a floods reconstruction levy or a great big new tax?

Yesterday the Prime Minister [announced](#) the Government's flood relief plan. Preliminary estimates indicate the Government will need to invest \$5.6 billion to rebuild flood affected regions.

The Government will source this funding through a mix of spending cuts (\$2.8 billion), delayed infrastructure costs (\$1 billion) and a progressive levy on people earning over \$50,000 (\$1.8 billion).

The majority of pre-announcement speculation focused on the levy. Given the nature of the need and its cause, it was widely accepted that reconstruction on the scale required is a national responsibility. But much concern was aired about who would be hit by a levy and who would be exempt.

The levy announced yesterday is progressive, based on capacity to contribute, and will be paid through normal income tax arrangements (as with the Medicare levy). Anyone affected by the floods or earning under \$50,000 is exempt. This is precisely the type of approach that both social justice principles and practicality dictate.

The flood levy's most serious weakness is that it is a one off response. Given that climate science predicts an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, our just announced twelve month floods response framework will be insufficient to prepare Australia to respond to similar events over the medium to long run. It is time for Australia to develop a permanent capacity to respond to natural disasters. New Zealand bit the bullet last year and developed a national natural disaster fund after the terrible earthquakes in Christchurch.

While our flood response plan includes spending cuts and delayed infrastructure investment, these are really only able to be short term, one-off responses. Government must be able to budget confidently in order to provide the Australian community with the services and infrastructure that it requires. Any longer term thinking about a national natural disaster response capacity is going to have to focus on a levy/tax.

The other key elements of any long term thinking are the consideration of compulsory natural disaster insurance and the location of infrastructure reconstruction. Robust discussion about natural disaster insurance should be on the national agenda. Whether infrastructure is rebuilt in the same places must be under consideration if we are to have a serious response to what the science tells us will be much more frequent extreme weather events.

It may be hard to think about more natural disasters on anything like the scale of the recent floods, and it may be politically unpalatable to name what our climate future most likely holds. But this is precisely the time that we must rise to the serious challenges we face as a country.

Our view at UnitingCare Australia is that the government ought to raise enough revenue to meet the communities' need. We advocate an ongoing revenue mechanism to deal with increasing levels of natural disasters. We must ensure that expenditure spend adequately targets the poor and vulnerable. I would say that we need to review Australia's taxation system, but we already have.

It is past time to dig out the Henry Review and take a good hard look at the bottom end of our tax-transfer system to address complex inequality. We must reduce effective marginal tax rates. If we do introduce a national natural disaster fund then we will need to carefully consider both the structure of any levy and how it is spent to ensure that it protects the interests of the poor. A one off levy applying to individuals earning more than \$50,000 a year is a good short term approach. Over the long term however, it would be better to increase the low income tax offset — and better still to pull out the Henry review and address complex inequalities properly.

The floods levy is both a good beginning and yet another example of why we need to fix Australia's taxation system.

Inside and outside the Facebook fishtank

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

A lot of articles and reviews about the new American documentary *Catfish* will contain some form of the disclaimer that 'The less you know about it beforehand, the better'. It's true that this suspenseful, fascinating and heart-wrenching film gains a lot of currency from the trump cards it keeps tucked up its sleeve until the most opportune moment.

In truth, it doesn't take a genius to work out even from a suitably vague synopsis that it's a film in which everything is not as it seems. It starts out as a sweet and funny document of the long-distance, online romance between a young man, Yaniv Schulman, and a 19-year-old dancer named Megan. Gradually it turns into ... something else.

'It's not a horror movie, but there are scary parts. It's not a comedy but there are funny parts. It might make you cry. It's hard to talk about', says Henry Joost, co-director of the film with Yaniv's brother, Ariel. 'The film is about an experience we had, and part of that is that we never knew where it was headed. That's the best way to see the movie.'

Suffice it to say that the film manages to be at once a cautionary tale and a poignant tribute to the power and authenticity of online relationships. It interrogates the methods of selectivity and fabrication that can be involved in the creation of online personas, but also reveals how deep and genuine virtual relationships can be.

'Niv doesn't regret anything that happened,' says Ariel Schulman. 'If a "virtual relationship" affects you emotionally, then it's not virtual at all.'

'A lot of people say they've committed Facebook suicide [the phenomenon of deleting one's Facebook profile in one fell swoop] since seeing the film,' he adds. 'Even I've scaled back. But it doesn't mean I'm not open to meeting the love of my life on Facebook ... You can't just close yourself off, because that is the way people connect.'

The almost total integration of 'real' and 'virtual' worlds in contemporary Western society is reinforced visually in *Catfish*, through the use of Google Earth and other graphic online interfaces to transition between scenes and physical locations, effectively weaving these disparate fabrics into a seamless garment.

'A lot of the story takes place online,' says Schulman. 'Basically Niv was in love with someone who lived really far away. A lot of their relationship was through the internet. So when it came time to create the graphic exposition, the transitions in the film, it only made sense that those occurred online the way Niv and Megan experienced them.'

The film's most appealing and surprising developments occur deep in the final act, and it

would be a shame to say too much about these. Needless to say that after the adrenalin rush of making the film, the emotional fallout for Niv revealed just how authentic his experience had been, regardless of any lies that may have been told.

‘When we got home and started editing the film, he lost control a little bit and didn’t want to be involved’, says Schulman. ‘He sank into empty depression. It took him a couple of months to get back on his feet. And now ... he’s better than ever. He’s come out on top.’

It’s no surprise. Loss and grief are, after all, formative experiences, in or outside of the Facebook fishtank.

China's 'incremental' democracy

INTERNATIONAL

Mark Chou

When President Hu Jintao last visited Washington in 2006, protestors were only too eager to remind the Chinese leader of his country's poor record on human rights and democracy.

But last week, as the United States once again played host to the Chinese leader, it wasn't so much what the protestors did that made news headlines. This time, the media coverage centred on the offhand remarks of Senator Harry Reid, the Democratic Senate majority leader.

During an [interview](#) with Jon Ralston in his home state of Nevada earlier last week, Reid had this to say about President Hu: 'Jon, I'm going to go back to Washington tomorrow and meet with the president of China. He is a dictator. He can do a lot of things through the form of government they have.'

But then, having perhaps realised what he had just said, Reid quickly added: 'Maybe I shouldn't have said ...ædictator... . But they have a different type of government than we have and that's an understatement.'

An understatement? Really? Or is it actually an overstatement?

It's certainly true that China is no utopia. There is no denying that the country remains a one-party state which only very infrequently tolerates dissent, continues to violate the human rights of its citizens, censures religious freedom, and openly censors the free flow of information. Just last month, the Communist Party of China publicly condemned the Nobel Committee for awarding the 2010 Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo for his human rights activism in China. Liu Xiaobo, as one official Chinese spokesman said, is a 'criminal', and awarding him the [prize](#) amounts to 'a complete violation of the principles of the prize and an insult to the Peace Prize itself'. China's shortcomings in this regard cannot, and should not, be overlooked.

But having said that, it's also true to say that China and its system of political governance have, during the reform period, become something altogether different to what it was under Mao. As Peter Foster writes, 'China is far from free, but three decades after 150 years of invasions, civil wars and political upheaval finally came to a close, it is a [long way](#) from the totalitarian state it has at times appeared to be'. Likewise, the China expert Baogang He has emphasised that the 'totalitarian paradigm is no longer appropriate' for understanding contemporary China.

So how then should we understand contemporary China?

Through the paradigm of 'incremental democracy', argues Yu Keping, the eminent Chinese political scientist.

In recent years, according to Yu, democracy has incrementally been taking hold in people's minds and in key Chinese political institutions. The notion of incremental democracy is not concerned with 'one theory or doctrine of democracy'. It 'embraces all useful elements of various theories and doctrines' of democracy while staying true to the current 'Chinese situation and traditional culture'.

Indeed, when China's leaders met during the 17th National Party Congress in 2007, they did so with the intent 'to expand people's democracy'. They emphasised that crucial to China's political reforms is a renewed vision of citizenship that enables the people to 'enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive way' and 'to participate, to express their views and to supervise the administration.'

President Hu stated that in China the people are to become 'masters of the country'. It's the people's right, he declared, 'to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee'. The committee of leaders and the Party as a whole should, as such, be subject to greater scrutiny in its exercise of power and in its decision-making capacity. Progressively, China's leaders will hold less and less personal authority. They will be less able to dictate.

The empirical evidence for these claims can be found in the moves afoot to increase transparency in local and national politics, in the efforts to nurture a more robust citizenry, as well as in the rising demands for free speech and media. China is witnessing a rise in popular elections at all levels, many of which have become as competitive and as transparent as democratic elections in the West.

There is cause to be optimistic, writes the China scholar Zhengxu Wang, as 'Chinese politics is bringing itself closer to constitutionalism, rule of law, transparency, openness, societal autonomy, and civil liberties.' The data that he cites corroborates this. In a 2001 World Values Survey of China, 96% of Chinese surveyed responded that a 'democratic political system' in China would either be 'good' or 'very good'.

These developments suggest that, at least in its leaders' rhetoric, China has begun to affirm the value of and need for democracy. Although, like Western nations before it, it may selectively mould a system of democratic governance to suit its own history, economy and culture — a 'democracy with Chinese characteristics' — nevertheless the result may be no less democratic.

As democratic initiatives in China are measured to its existing historical, economic and cultural milieu, the transition will be slow, sometimes infuriatingly so. But we must not forget that China's current democratic reforms are only in their infancy. Much needs improving. But judging by the country's social, political and economic transformation of the last decade or so, there is indeed cause to be optimistic.

Western commentators who continue to demonise China and its leaders as democratic pariahs — as Senator Reid did last week — may disagree. That's their prerogative. But by so

isolating China among the community of nations, they may actually hinder more than help the next global superpower on its path to democratisation.

Australia Day

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Lessons about Australian identity from 'The King's Speech'

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

John Warhurst



Some advocates of monarchy have jumped on the film *The King's Speech* as evidence that Australia needs a monarch. Monarchists often argue like this when they want to personalise the constitutional debate by concentrating on a member of the Royal family with attractive features.

An important difference between republicans and monarchists is that republicans believe that individual virtues like humanity and service are widespread throughout the community. Monarchists on the other hand see such virtues concentrated especially in monarchs and Royal families. That is why republicans believe in democracy and campaign for more democratic political structures, while monarchists frequently talk of the magic of monarchy.

Neil Brown, writing the [cover story](#) of a recent issue of the Australian edition of *The Spectator*, claims that the evident humanity and commitment to service of King George VI, played by Colin Firth, will be a knockout blow in any future referendum on an Australian republic. Indeed he suggests that the NO case should send a DVD of the film to every household to guarantee victory for the monarchy.

Monarchs and members of Royal families can be humane, brave and/or dedicated to service. Of course they can. But so can many or even most people. We see it demonstrated around Australia every day, not least in the generosity of spirit shown in the current crises.

Republicans believe in the sovereignty of people and in their virtues. We don't believe that members of the Royal Family, whether it is Princess Anne in her speech in February 2009 at the Victorian bushfires memorial service (extravagantly praised by Brown as far superior to anything else that day) or Prince William, to name just two, have special features not found among the Australian community, including our elected representatives.

He compares Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister, and John Brumby, then Victorian Premier, most unfavourably with Princess Anne. This criticism of elected representatives is not just a partisan shot by a former federal minister and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party, but is rooted in a belief that Royal personages are superior people.

Humanity is a good thing wherever it is found. Of course it is. George VI demonstrates plenty of it in his valiant struggles, under the tutelage of the Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue, to overcome his stammer so that he can fulfill his public duties. But no amount of humanity in any member of the Royal family should counter the arguments in favour of Australia becoming a republic.

Those arguments do not depend either upon monarchs being indifferent or uncaring as Brown suggests. He misunderstands this point totally.

The argument is not personal but based on the principles of egalitarianism and democracy. Republicans sometimes need reminding of this point too. While personalities may make a difference to a referendum campaign they should never be confused with the case for a republic itself. But republicans rarely exhibit the distaste for elected representatives that monarchists encourage.

No film about members of the British Royal Family, no matter how humane and personable they are, will overshadow the case for an Australian republic at a future referendum.

The argument for an Australian republic does not depend either on Australians being especially good blokes and sheilas either. If it did then Logue, played by Geoffrey Rush, would be a republican hero.

He recognises authority but will not bow to it. He insists that his professional work with the Duke of York/George VI is conducted on a no frills, first name basis. He might be somewhat eccentric, but his humanity and humour are enormously appealing. Jack is as good as his master.

What Logue's portrayal does demonstrate is the difference between hierarchical aristocratic culture and egalitarian popular culture, not just then but now. Logue/Rush is an Australian to be proud of in this Australia Day week. Let's celebrate the values he represents.

On the waterfront in Genoa

POETRY

Helen Koukoutsis and Jennifer Compton

Teaching Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*

(For Samar Habib)

They're all anxious about Darwish;
none have understood his lyrical rant.
'His coffee is too Arabic,' they say,
'his water, too dry.'
'Beirut is thirsty,' he tells them;
but Beirut is too far and too long ago
for them to care. What they really want,
is to be done with him.
The tutorial too.

How can I make them understand?

How can I tell them
that his book isn't about coffee or water,
or even about the bombing of Beirut?
That Darwish writes about history
from inside the red ink-bottle
of atomic bodies; the vacuum-
sealed mind of Feiruz's love song:
I love you, O Lebanon.

When two lovers unite
in the summer noon,
they know the sound
the birds make
at winter twilight.

How do I explain
the union of an Arab
and his Jewish lover?

How can I teach
what I have not experienced,
except through some artificial
world of war and book knowledge?

— Helen Koukoutsis

On The Waterfront In Genoa, Just Before Dawn, At Chucking Out Time

I asked the kids from Piazza delle Erbe who had led me here what the club was called because it had no sign. *Si chiama Pussycats* — they said.

It was two rooms in a warehouse up a flight of stairs. The music was loud.

They had run out of white wine.

The kids took off and I sat myself down on a step made of stone. I didn't know where I was and had to figure out how to get home.

A young man, made of ebony, from Senegal or Somalia or the CÔte d'Ivoire, sat down beside me gracefully.

Here you might think — Well well. But it wasn't like that. He sat next to me as if I was his mother, or his grandmother. I'm old. He was young.

I told him where I was from. He bent his head. Australia. Oh fortunate one.
When I asked him about his country he leapt to his feet and sang.
Oh Mama ... Mama Africa. Oh Mama ... Mama Africa. He danced and sang.
Then the tears came. A boy the age of my son.
I had a chocolate in my purse and I gave it to him. I don't think I know what
hungry is. A stuttering and blind urgent cramming thing.
And yes, but don't tell anyone, I gave him the twenty euro that I had to hand.
Stammering, ill at ease, he asked me what I had in mind.
It disgraced us both that he had to ask what the traffic between us was. But
we strolled on. I bought him a stand up coffee at an early bar.
I had to order it because the girl wouldn't serve him. Her look of disdain.
And then I said — *Goodbye, my friend.* And I went home.

— Jennifer Compton

Oprah's self-serving Australian adventure

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Australia Day is supposed to make us feel good about ourselves as a nation. This year, the scheduling of the four-part TV event *Oprah's Ultimate Australian Adventure* in the days leading up to Australia Day ensures there's every chance we will feel good about ourselves, but as individuals.



The National Australia Day Council [stresses](#) the communal aspect. 'On Australia Day we come together as a nation to celebrate what's great about Australia and being Australian.' It's all about nation-building. That's something we do together, for the good of all Australians, not just ourselves.

Winfrey has a message about Australia's greatness, but it reflects her philosophy of individualism. Australia is such a wonderful country because it helps her — and the 302 'ultimate fans' she brought with her from the US — to feel good as individuals.

To this end, Winfrey's rhetoric emphasises the strength of the welcome that she received. In one of the signature moments of her visit, she [told](#) her Melbourne audience: 'I've never had a welcome like this in my life. In my life. IN MY WHOLE LIFE. WOW!'

Over the years, Winfrey has made a name for herself as a promoter of self-help philosophies and schemes, many of them [dubious](#). After she championed Australian TV talk show producer Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret*, it topped the bestseller lists.

The Secret's main idea is that people only need to visualise what they want in order to get it. A *Salon* [critique](#) branded it a 'massive, cross-promotional pyramid scheme'. It is largely based on New Thought theology, a form of the pentecostal Christian prosperity Gospel that encourages the personal attainment of material wellbeing through the power of positive thinking.

This month Winfrey has taken the step of moving from daytime network television to a dedicated channel on cable TV — the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN). In publicity surrounding the launch, she has [stated](#) some of her programming principles, which include a ban on asking hard questions.

She said that she wanted to create a channel without a trace of what she calls 'mean-spirited' programming. Scrutiny is perceived as a violation of the individual.

Winfrey's compulsory kindness explains the lack of critique and, it must be said, credibility in her *Ultimate Australian Adventure*. Many Australians who do not personally identify with her philosophy justify their support for her visit on the grounds that it could turn around the

local tourist industry. By definition that is unprincipled.

There is also a certain disingenuousness in the gushing welcome given to Winfrey by politicians including Prime Minister Julia Gillard and NSW Premier Kristina Keneally.

In contrast, Victoria's Ted Baillieu deserves praise for his downbeat matter-of-fact [welcome](#) : 'I'm Ted, she's Julia, this is Oprah.' His understated tone is surely right for our celebration of an Australia Day that regards all Australians as equal and rejects anybody who appears self-serving.

Why Wattle Day should be our national day

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Paul Newbury



I am one of many Australians who cannot commemorate Australia Day on 26 January because I find it impossible to celebrate national unity on a day that divides the nation between the Indigenous survivors of invasion and those who inherited the spoils of their dispossession.

The antipathy of the Indigenous peoples of Australia to this day as a day of celebration is deeply entrenched. In the past, they have marked 26 January as an occasion to publicise their grievances against the dominant society.

In 1938, Aboriginal people commemorated the sesquicentenary as a Day of Mourning and Protest organised by the Aborigines Progressive Association. In a manifesto entitled 'Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights', they asserted that 150 years of so-called progress for non-Aboriginal Australians was for them a century and a half of misery and degradation.

In 1972, Aboriginal land rights activists set up the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawn of Parliament House in Canberra on Australia Day in response to the refusal of the McMahon Coalition Government to consider their demand for land rights. This was a highly original protest and the notion of 'embassy' implied the alien status of Indigenous peoples in their own land.

In 2011, Australia is a far different nation to what it was then and Indigenous protest movements have played their part in building a better society.

When I ponder on being Australian, I think of the natural beauty of Australia and the Indigenous peoples whose cultures adorn the island continent. We are a diverse people in a diverse land and these are aspects of our identity we can celebrate as a nation.

I think too of the Mabo decision of High Court of Australia in 1992 that has led to major reform especially in recent times as state and federal governments have shown they are prepared to work with Indigenous peoples to resolve native title issues through mediation.

Considering these important events, I believe we should choose a day other than the day the First Fleet landed at Port Jackson to celebrate Australia Day. I suggest Wattle Day, the first day of September is an ideal day for this purpose.

The Australian floral emblem is *acacia pyenantha* — Golden Wattle.

Wattle as a symbol offers something to Indigenous peoples because it is native to this place rather than being a memorial of our ties with Great Britain. Henry Lawson wrote of wattle as a symbol of Australia and of being Australian. It is also a symbol of the nation's integration as

part of the Asia region, and the first day of spring down under heralds new growth.

In August 1999, Governor-General Sir William Deane stood by Switzerland's Saxeton River Gorge with the families and friends of Australians who died in a canyoning expedition, and threw 14 sprigs of wattle into the waters. He said the wattle signified that a small part of Switzerland had become and would always be part of Australia.

This exemplifies wattle's power as a symbol of the nation — it is embedded in our history and culture.

Lawson likened the power of wattle to that of the shamrock, thistle and rose of the British Isles. Wattle is a unifying symbol and in its multitude of forms, it grows in every state and territory. Its profusion is a sign of fertility for a growing nation.

As a symbol of nature, it is a sign of the depth of feeling Indigenous people have for their land. Their ecological practice is an outcome of their relations of kinship with the natural world and they contribute a great deal to land management across Australia based on their eco-knowledge.

There are a wide range of cooperative activities between Indigenous groups, government and industry. Indigenous people refer to these as 'looking after country'.

Their co-management practices extend from World Heritage Areas like the Great Barrier Reef to parts of the country where they are the only presence. Living in harmony with the land is an Indigenous practice we can acknowledge on Australia Day. It is consistent with our need to conserve water and other natural assets.

Recently, Prime Minister Gillard announced that the Federal Government would set up a panel to consult widely about an amendment to the Australian Constitution recognising Indigenous Australians as First Peoples. This is a step towards integrating Indigenous peoples fully into the Australian nation while recognising their essential difference.

The consultation process provides a forum for gauging Indigenous peoples' feelings towards celebrating our national day on a date acceptable to all Australians.

Australian politics could use a dash of vitriol

POLITICS

Edwina Byrne

Earlier this month, at a public meeting in Tucson Arizona, a moderate Democratic congresswoman and 12 bystanders were shot by a disturbed young man with quasi-political motives. Were Australia not experiencing a calamity of more pressing import, the shooting might give pause for discussion of the state of political rhetoric. Ironically, it seems our own leaders may have dodged that bullet.

The first pictures most Australians saw of the tragedy were of Tucson's sheriff, clearly emotional, answering clinical questions about rounds fired and security footage, and then, quite unexpectedly, venturing his own analysis.

'When you look at unbalanced people, how they respond to the vitriol that comes out of certain mouths about tearing down the government. The anger, the hatred, the bigotry ... that may be free speech, but it's not without its consequences.'

Sheriff Clarence Dupnik's remarks did not refer specifically to the 'Tea Party' movement (in fact, his criticism of certain sections of the media was much more pointed) but the remainder of the news cycle was devoted to ascribing blame to this extreme and vocal minority within the Republican Party.

This scrutiny was not without reason; prominent Tea Partiers have typically described the movement as revolutionary in character, and make frequent reference to 'taking back America'.

For example, proto-Tea Partier and former presidential candidate Ron Paul addressed a GOP conference last year with the words 'Government is the enemy of liberty', while Minnesota's Governor Pawlenty offered this: 'Patriots in this room and patriots across this country are rising up. And we have a message for liberals: We're planting the flag on common ground, and if you try to take our freedoms, we will fight back!'

Unsurprisingly, the possibility that such rhetoric may have contributed to the shootings found currency with many.

Australian commentators were quick to counter the sheriff's assessment with the insight that the shootings were 'the actions of a madman', and therefore not worthy of further analysis.

I sympathise with these commentators, because frankly, as a writer, it is a lot easier to sound insightful when playing devil's advocate. No editor will publish an opinion piece with a central thesis of 'I agree entirely with what everyone else is saying. There is very little

complexity to this issue.'

I disagree with these commentators (see? that makes me sound considered and printworthy). Those who claim no-one could have predicted that violent language would inspire violent action should consult Act 3 of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, or *Henry V*, or the speeches of Churchill and Hitler.

In fact the only surprising feature of this affair is that the first weeks of 2011 would see American politicians loudly proclaiming that their words have no effect.

We, as audiences and voters, share some of the blame for divisive and hateful rhetoric. We love to complain about negative ads and sound bites, but we listen. Vitriol is an effective public speaking tool, because like it or not, human beings respond to emotive language that pits audiences against a common enemy.

If we proved ourselves disinterested in stereotype, understanding of policy complexity or respectful of sober, thoughtful reflection, we might be rewarded with a more honest and productive discourse.

But it is our political leaders who bear ultimate responsibility for this discourse. In a democracy, the temptation to appeal to the basest instincts of the majority is ever present: great leaders simply find more honourable values to unite us. They speak to the better angels of our natures, and inspire us to act in the service of a more perfect society.

Thankfully, in these early weeks of the New Year we also have a reminder of the upside of our susceptibility to impassioned oratory. *The King's Speech* is less a film about great speeches than a portrayal of one man's patriotic struggle against his own limitations (and, one suspects, a shameless Oscar grab). But in it, George V reminds us of how a nation can hang on every word of a speech whose aim is to unite, uplift, and inspire.

Watching it, I couldn't help but be reminded of watching Kevin Rudd in the first months of his prime ministership, wanting so badly for him to lead and inspire, and cringing as he struggled with a speech impediment that burst forth unbidden: 'detailed programmatic specificity' 'accompanying benchmarks and measurable outcomes'.

The speeches of the Tea Party movement, for all their faults, are notable for their vivid symbolism and appeal to values. Their frequent use of gun-related metaphors and imagery, though problematic in conjunction with their revolutionary image, is quite understandable given the accessibility of these metaphors for a gun-happy audience.

In contrast, Australia's political discourse is dry and shallow. Speeches contain clichés in place of metaphors, bureaucratic weasel words in place of vivid imagery.

George Orwell feared these times, not for the personal attacks or the combative style of speechmaking, but for the emergence of a language in which reams of meaningless, abstract,

ready-made phrases could be strewn together in place of oratory.

When was the last time you heard an Australian politician invent their own intelligible metaphor? Have you ever felt your heart swell with emotion at the announcement of so many billion dollars in grants? Who among our leaders has made you feel proud of your country — not in a xenophobic or superior sense, but so that you feel compelled to contribute to your community?

This is the way the world ends.

In Tucson, it seems, President Obama's own masterful appeals to unity and compassion have resolved the controversy over inflammatory rhetoric. If, in Australia, we postpone this debate until our local brand of political rhetoric ignites the passions of a citizen, we may be waiting a very long time.

The back to school blues

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

BACK TO SCHOOL shout the billboards and shop window displays and it's still only mid January. I suppose this infuriates present day kids as much as it used to stir my juvenile ire. Well, if it doesn't, it ought to because it's a kind of theft of time. Like the table of hot cross buns in our local Woollies: six-pack specials, more than three months before Good Friday.



For former teachers, 'Back to School' probably arouses other, less youthful associations.

After spending the first two years of my working life very enjoyably at a northern Victoria technical school, I returned to the city and an appointment to a new and still growing suburban high school. The headmaster, a large, rubicund bloke accustomed to revelling in both the responsibilities and the pomp and rituals of leadership, told me when I introduced myself a few days before the term started that he had 'two buffoons' on his staff and he was intent on reducing not adding to their number.

On the first day of term I arrived at a few minutes to nine and signed the time book for 8.30, as was the custom. The time-book was an insulting, unprofessional imposition that I and others refused to respect and which would be soon swept away in the upheavals to come. Anyway, on that morning, having scribbled in the book, I was walking past the head's office when he appeared in the doorway.

'Matthews!' he bellowed (a bellow was his normal decibel level). I kept walking.

'Matthews!' he roared again (a roar was his default vocal position). I kept going.

'Mr Matthews!' he positively exploded. I stopped.

'Did you not hear me?' he said, as I approached with a carefully manufactured look of puzzlement on my face.

'I answer to "Brian" or "Mr",' I said, as my father had taught me, 'nothing in between.'

You could see from his beetrooty features that his entire physical and spiritual being was tossing up between having apoplexy and hooking me under the jaw.

Of course, he did neither, subconsciously recognising that, insufferably smartarse and disrespectful though my reply had been, it had a certain justification: times were changing and just as the time-book, resting on its stand behind us as we confronted each other, had had its day, so the custom of treating trained professional teachers like flunkies would no longer

stand up.

It was a passing, slightly ridiculous encounter but, as so often in such otherwise ephemeral moments, it was a small, visible manifestation of gathering currents of dissidence awaiting their hour and the more crucial confrontations of the '60s.

But, for myself, I was poised for flight. I had not sorted out what were the certainties, if any, in my life, or what were the priorities. I was probably part of a very large, persuasive and powerful stirring among the young of that time in Australia's still rather stitched-up cities, but how could I know that?

Sailing away at the end of the year expunged all other considerations. With three mates, having planned sporadically throughout the previous year — planning usually consisted of drinking beer and poring endlessly over maps of Europe — I boarded the *MV Fairsky* on Saturday 14 January 1961, the recent significant anniversary of which all four of us saluted.

The Sitmar Line's *Fairsky* was one of a number of vessels ferrying boatloads of ever more restless youth away to the northern hemisphere and unimaginable adventure. It seemed as if most of the population under 25 was on the move.

It was fairly easy to go; it took a minimum of arranging and the cost was quite manageable — I had an FE Holden in good nick and its sale provided me with the nucleus of my bankroll aside from the fare of, I think, £112.

That's why, if you could have taken an aerial view of the youthful exodus at the turn of the decade, it would have looked like the rabbit plague: not just local patches, but whole hillsides on the move.

But as the money began to run out, a process which, in my case, was made more inevitable when the absolute certainty carrying my last 50 quid came unstuck by a nostril at Catterick Bridge, it was BACK TO SCHOOL.

In October, after driving through Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, we became 'Supply Teachers' in the English system. For a tumultuous three months I taught — using the term very loosely — at Ockendon Courts County Secondary Modern School Essex. More potently than ideological objections to 'the theft of time', it was that institution for resettled East Enders that for me gave the phrase 'Back to School' its peculiarly violent and depressing note.

If it's a choice between thefts of time, give me an early hot cross bun any day.

Stories of rebuilding after the floods

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton

The media have been at their best in their coverage of the floods. They often are at times of disaster. But experience suggests that as the waters subside, and people move from immediate survival to stocktaking and rebuilding their lives, the coverage will become more scratchy.

The decline does not come from ill will. It suggests that in our culture we lack stories through which we can image intractable situations which require long endurance.

The media have helped Australians distant from the events to appreciate the massive scale of the floods and the human reality of houses and farms overrun by the waters. They have told moving stories of quiet heroism, and of unselfish acceptance — ‘we are lucky that we are not as badly affected as people elsewhere’.

They have mentioned the occasional scams and looting, and both highlighted and encouraged generosity which leads ordinary people to assist those affected by the floods. They have covered respectfully the presence of political leaders in affected areas, and helped them in their important role of showing the solidarity of the whole community in the face of catastrophe.

And they have raised the questions that subsequent enquiry must address.

This is what newspapers and other media do well. Their many reporters on the ground respond empathetically to the people whose suffering they record, and help us to see the events through their eyes. After the immediate crisis, however, the reporting and editing often becomes less helpful as they amplify discontents and disagreements, and seek out people to blame.

This focus is not helpful because it makes it difficult for people to come to terms with their loss and it undermines solidarity.

It is normal to experience depression, anger, denial and isolation in response to the violation of one’s home and to financial loss and insecurity. These feelings need to be acknowledged and worked with. But in times of loss we need encouragement to look beyond our anger and sadness to the task of rebuilding our lives.

When the media focus on expressions of anger, treats delay in rebuilding as an outrage without looking at the broader picture, and try to identify people to blame for the severity of the floods, they encourage people to remain paralysed by grief and to break connections precisely at the time when they need to be strengthened.

But it is not easy for journalists. Our culture has many stories into which to fit floods and

the immediate response to them, but few stories to accommodate the long, frustrating and painful task of rebuilding. Crisis stories of threat, heroes, victims and rescue are everywhere in scriptures and in mythology. But fewer stories tell of the longer and messy processes in which people suffer and recognise a great loss, are powerless to recover from it, and endure a long period of struggle to survive in the face of illusory hopes and almost fatal disappointments.

Such stories as do exist usually describe journeys. The seminal story of the Israelites wandering in the desert after liberation from Egypt tells of a generation without clear direction, constantly complaining. But at the heart of the story is the belief that God will lead them into the promised land. This journey, like the wanderings of Odysseus, will end well despite all its trials.

In a religious culture years of harsh endurance can be set within a larger hope for happiness beyond this world. But in our world there is no shared public story of the journey's end, and so no way of prizing struggle that seems to be unavailing.

For the British the blitz still provides an image of endurance and of hope deferred. George VI provided a model of modest leadership in his regular visits to communities that suffered during the bombing. The popularity of the film *The King's Speech* in Australia perhaps suggests a hunger for similar stories of building happiness out of wholly inadequate materials.

Failing a larger story in which to set the long aftermath of disaster, journalists naturally seek smaller stories in which disappointment and delay are turned into stories of crime and punishment. The floods and the delay in recovery from them are sheeted home to public servants, politicians, premiers and prime ministers, and they are heaped with blame.

What is lost in such a focus is encouragement to stay with the people affected by the disasters, to recognise the intensity of their feelings, and to keep larger goals in view. This is a challenge for the whole Australian community, including the media.

Unmarried misery

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Another Year* (M). Director: Mike Leigh. Starring: Jim Broadbent, Lesley Manville, Ruth Sheen, Peter Wright. Running time: 129 minutes**

In December, Australians witnessed one of the most truthful ‘feel bad’ relationship dramas of recent memory. *Blue Valentine* seemed tailor made to make married people miserable. Stunning performances from Michelle Williams and Ryan Gosling first evoked the attraction and intimacy that make love sweet, then took to extremes the kinds of personality foibles and communicatory rifts that can cause relationships to sour, then expire, then fester like a hideous weeping sore.

Now it’s the singles’ turn. Writer-director Mike Leigh’s *Another Year* contains what are surely some of the most pitiable caricatures of later-life singlehood to ever curse a feature film with their sad presence. The film exposes the intensity of these characters’ misery as they amble amid a group of variously happier friends through a succession of presumably familiar social routines (in many ways this is, as the title suggests, just ‘another year’).

First and foremost, there’s Mary (Manville), who, to be fair, in addition to being single, is somewhat of an infuriating ninny. For the most part her neurotic and frequently tipsy babbling is played for comic value, although by the end of the film we know her well enough — and have witnessed enough of her pained, quiet moments — to appreciate that gasping for breath beneath her wine-swilling garrulousness are deeply felt insecurities and a desperate desire to be loved.

Mary’s misery is reflected and amplified in Ken (Wright); overweight and unkempt, and who moves about amid a clatter of beer cans and a cloud of chip crumbs. We spend just enough time with Ken to see the tortured and lonely soul that dwells within his sartorially-challenged exterior, so that our sympathy remains with him even when he begins sleazing clumsily and drunkenly onto Mary at a barbecue. (Yes, even Mary, the film’s second-most pathetic character, doesn’t want a bar of Ken.)

Mary and Ken’s misery is exacerbated by the well-intended condescension of Tom and Gerri (Broadbent and Sheen), a smug married couple whose contentedness with each other is epitomised by well-practiced, affectionate banter that’s often as quick and humourous as are their cartoonish phonetic namesakes. Tom and Gerri welcome their single friends into their home with the kind of pitying fondness with which one might offer palliative care to an ailing stray dog.

They provide a listening ear, often with barely concealed bemusement, but never what’s

really needed: sound advice and some good old-fashioned practical assistance. When Mary intimates to Gerri that she might find Ken attractive if he looked after himself a bit better, the best Gerri can offer is to inform her that Ken *used* to be good looking, and insist feebly that he 'has a good heart'.

No appeal to Mary's sense of empathy, that she and Ken are fellow travellers on the same unhappy road. No quiet word to Ken that, 'Hey, if you tidy yourself up a bit and learn to eat with your mouth closed, you might be in with a shot.' The characters' apparent unwillingness or inability to help each other or themselves makes them seem both infuriatingly self-obsessed but also relatably human.

Don't get me wrong: this is a fine film, just not a cheery one. The performances are superb, and although the 'year in the life' structure invites tedium and is unsatisfying in its lack of closure, the alternately hilarious and heartbreaking dialogue and finely observed characters make *Another Year* compelling viewing. And like *Blue Valentine*, if it's to be taken as a cautionary tale to those who are unhappy with their lot, hopefully it inspires determination to change, rather than despair.

Coke selling sexism

MEDIA

Ronnie Scott

The Australian summer offers something to love for just about any type of person: the beach person, the family person, those who loathe the five-day work week. And if you're an ad person — not a Mad Man, but a fan of such a character's creations — it's usually a treat to see a new seasonal wave of advertising by Coke.

Coke's advertising campaigns are successful for many reasons, not the least of which is saturation. But they're also often distinctive and sharp.

Ask some people to picture a polar bear, for example, and most Australians will still think automatically of Coke's over Bundaberg Rum's. Coke's polar bear was introduced in 1993, and in recent years has been decreasingly utilised; but it's easy to see that it has far outpaced its initial advertising budget.

This summer's campaign for Diet Coke has been distinctive for the wrong reasons. Each of the ads features a computer-generated character that looks suspiciously Bratz-like, posing beside a playful, assertive slogan. 'Shopping is my favourite kind of cardio!' one enthuses.

'Three words every little girl loves to hear: It's. On. Sale,' says another.

The world is full of advertising that either miscalculates its audience, or reveals frightening things about what we like — frightening because the things we like are often an expression of who we are. But to see these ads from Coke is particularly shocking because when Coke comes up with a good advertisement, it's exquisitely exciting.

It scratches a weird, deep itch when we're made to want to buy something in a way that feels intelligent and fresh. Coke manages to scratch that itch frequently. Phraseology after phraseology — 'always the real thing', 'things go better with Coke', simple word after simple word in such powerful new contexts — Coke seems able to telegraph moments the culture hasn't known it's been waiting for.

That kind of cultural prescience requires a serious kind of energy, and it's an energy Coke's customers seem to appreciate. Along with the taste of the Coke product, people seem to feel fondly, of all things, about its branding: Coke's advertising succeeds partly because we want it to.

But the frequency with which Coke nails us probably causes us to misremember the overall quality of its output. To me, the new Diet Coke ads feel lazy, cheap, sexist, and patronising.

Of course the market research would reveal that affluent women might enjoy cardio. Of course Bratz dolls are what one would think of if one wanted to make a product 'kicky'. It's all

the right research. It's what advertising euphemistically calls 'insights'. But it's got none of our general understanding of that term.

According to Coke, the characters in the Diet Coke ads are supposed to be puppets, not Bratz dolls or robo-girls. While they've only hit Australia this summer, they've been present in the UK since March, when Diet Coke launched them to compete with a Diet Pepsi campaign.

The puppets' names are Eleanor, Bernadette and Irene, and they 'encapsulate the Love it Light spirit'. Eleanor — the redhead — is 'sassy', says the puppets' Facebook app, 'the girl with a passion for fashion. Her lighter attitude to life will always leave you smiling. It's time to celebrate fun, fashion and fabulousness with Eleanor and Diet Coke!'

Sultry Bernadette, the frizzy blonde one, is 'the girl in the know, and certainly knows a thing or two about life! The other girls turn to her for their gossip fix, and love it light when they do!'

And Irene is 'the life and soul of the party, and always shares her fun, fabulous insights with the girls to keep things light and positive!'

By the way: I'm not a girl, and I know this campaign is not targeting me. But I've broached the topic of this campaign with a number of girls, girls who are qualitatively different from each other, humans who respond in discrete ways to creative and commercial stimuli. I spoke to lots of girls about this campaign. They don't like it.

Whether or not you're a fan of marketing, it's incredible that Coca Cola's marketing has had as many hits as it has. Large-scale advertising, to maximise its impact, usually aims for a low common denominator. So when an ad for a successful product is funny, smart, and canny, that's probably a very special thing. And when a company has several campaigns that feel somehow special, it might be more than we should hope to expect.

Besides which, when it's not a hit, the Coke brand is elastic — it has endless power to absorb its own bad advertising. Its slogan for the year 1933, for instance, was 'Don't Wear a Tired, Thirsty Face'. That's a long way from today's Coca Cola, which is always, for better or worse, the real thing.

And what if these Coke ads are somebody's 'real thing' — if they do feel special to someone? The problem isn't that I know they deserve better. The problem is that Coke must know it, too.

Australia through American eyes

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle



Went to visit a classroom of nine-year-olds the other day, the topic being Our Friend Australia, and I was invited because I have been in Australia for nearly 30 days in my life, all told, and so obviously I know the country like a twin brother, and things got so hilariously out of hand in class that I wrote down as much as I could remember right away, and here are the highlights.

Do Australians hate us?

No, because we invented basketball.

Who does Australia hate, then?

The Collingwood Magpies.

Who is the president of Australia?

Gary Ablett Junior.

What does the country look like?

Like Utah married New Jersey, but with crocodiles.

What do Australians eat?

Yeast paste. You wouldn't believe how foul and horrifying this food is. It tastes like someone ground up a penguin and then left it in the rain for a month before adding rubber and dirt to it. It is incomprehensible to me how anyone could ever in this lifetime eat such a terrifying food. It's not even the color of any food known to man. It was invented by evil trolls who pretended to be a man named Cyril. No one else knows this story. Don't tell anyone. Forget we had this conversation.

Are Australians better at sports than us?

Yes, except for basketball. Although they have Lauren Jackson, the best female player in the world. But she'll get old and then we will be the best again. No worries.

What color are Australians?

They range from light tan to dark tan, except for Rod Laver, who is red.

Who is the most famous Australian ever?

Cathy Freeman, the only woman who ever carried two countries on her shoulders in an

Olympic race. Also the greatest cricket player ever was Australian.

What is cricket?

Something to do while eating yeast paste.

Who is their best writer?

Paul Kelly.

Why did you get so upset about the yeast paste?

It's a criminal conspiracy. The first time it touches your tongue you want to die, or move to Canada. It's like the revenge of all the foods that are not delicious. It's the sort of food they find traces of in the tombs of pharaohs, and you wonder after a while why all the dead kings have traces of Vegemite in their crypts, why is that? It makes you wonder.

What is Australian Rules football?

Like soccer married basketball and then took steroids.

What was your favourite thing about Australians?

Their brave grace and the ceaseless river of their dry humour.

And your least favorite thing?

I don't want to talk about Vegemite anymore. It's dangerous to even think about it. Your head starts to swell and you become a Collingwood fan. That's the dark side. Let's not go there.

God understands more

POETRY

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Bellosguardo

(for Peter Porter at eighty)

Re-triggered,
I now recall
that nor-west corner
in thick heat, and
stumping along above
the Carmine
by a tread-road's
unhurried winding
and some lazy lizards
doing a late scuttle
just as I
presumably came
to his near-piazza,
one reno-villa
sprawled below me;
another leftward, higher, solid
with flame-pink
cyclamens nestled
in that umbrageous dark,
like historical truth

or the destinies
he was painfully
trying there
to unravel.

The dream injunctions

'I want to drive along thin, lost roads.'
The hand has its firm grip on the fist.
He who ties a knot around his thumb has other knots up his
sleeve, for himself.
I meant this May but appeared to say, dismay.
The police think you can eat French bread without salt.
What a funny way to spell Chekhov, asking him to magnificently
elaborate.
There are no coyotes east of Boston.
My head is full of books in the dialect of Ouch.
All people fall into one or another of three categories.
The Stendhalians have also buried theirs.
Take the keys and hide them somewhere safe in the car.
Being asleep with glasses on, you might bite your tongue.
It will be alright, Leavis is one of the passengers.
You can't get up by canvas: it's all a matter of glitz.
One can say, not tonight, pineapple.
It all takes place because of some geological fault.
I think God understands more things than he is given credit for.

You, Wallace Stevens

'Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation.'
After the flim-flam and that hullabaloo

When Doubtful slouches past the lagunaria
To scratch out moments of ascendancy
Or peace, the butcher's curse, like precedence,
He wishes he could sip an iced kachang
Under some academic's pergola.
Could it have been that warping dominie
Proclaiming tariffs over subsidies?
No, it must have been the daggy worse
And so to pillows. Or the pillow-book,
Something oriental for the clavichord,
Setting blue thongs down by the pool
Where orange carp dawdle. Ole. Ole.
But who is garnering shillings for the icecap
Which might be on the fatal downward slope?
Your polar bear will never scan these lines,
Nor metaphysical orang-utan;
Our fiery weather spirits them away
With dolorous drip and fatal forest-falls
While we lounge, reading their anatomies
In bronze Novembers near Apollo Bay.
For so retentive of their feral selves
Are men, that Doubtful puts his doubt to bed
With lazy glances at the fiscal news.

Chekhov days

But it's all as though
they're stuck there, in either
Castlemaine or Benalla

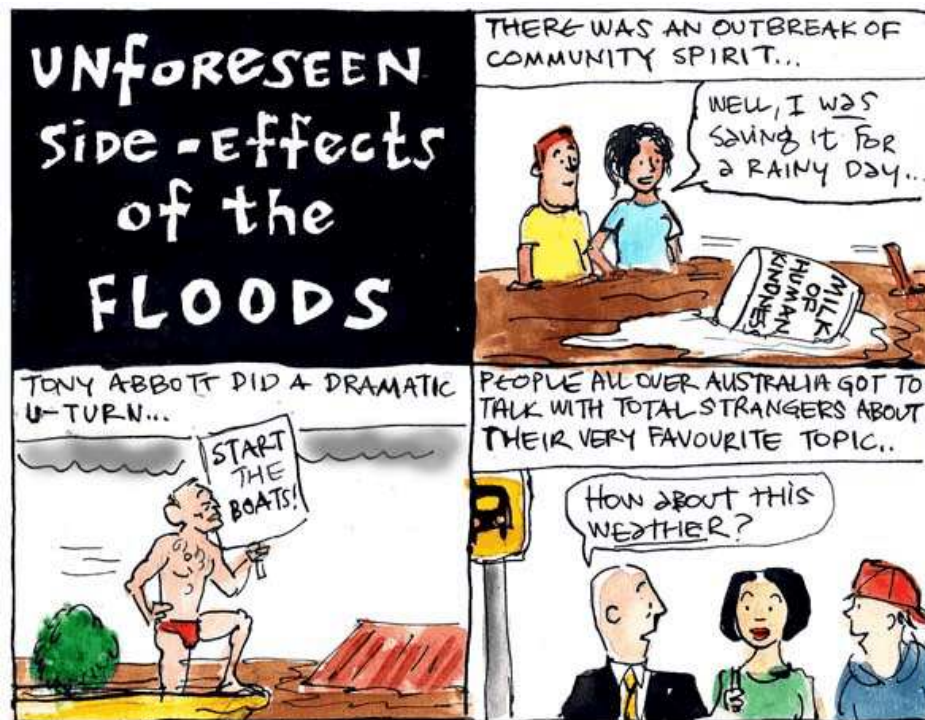
waiting for grants to come through from Ozco
and there's no remaining postman
or else the highway is cut
by those recent floods.
They swap despairs
or turn them into failure
with every turn and variation
while the gravel back road
remains more or less open for them
but only leads to Beckett
by way of Nine Mile Creek.
One of them has a gun.
But, mate, what a pack of wankers!
None of them will ever
pull the proverbial finger out
being ready
to do an honest job for once —
except for the doctors, maybe,
but let's face it,
that has to be the case because
the author himself was in that line of business
and you don't shit in your own nest.
Mind you,
apart from all falling in love
with inappropriate objects,
they're quite a witty lot,
so he should have hired a train,

packed them all off to Moscow
and subdivided.

Unforeseen side-effects of the floods

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Gillard, Bligh and leadership in a crisis

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

Queensland Premier Anna Bligh has won grudging respect from TV reporters and newspaper columnists for how she led Queensland's response to the floods.

She has been visible and accessible, making sense out of chaos in regular media conferences. She brilliantly mastered her detailed briefings and could explain, reliably, what was happening at grass roots level and in the currents to come. She was even, once or twice, appropriately emotional.

Better than Christine Nixon during the Victorian firestorm, said some. Better than Julia Gillard, said others, unfairly in my view, and here's why. Put simply: it wasn't Gillard's gig. It wasn't her role to 'lead' a uniquely Queensland fight-back.

I am bloody tired of journalists comparing one woman against another, as if there were a competition to find the 'real' woman leader, a winner and losers. That isn't how women tend to use power: it can be shared, and used for the common good. We saw them doing it, and didn't get it.

It is not easy for Commonwealth and State leaders to share power. We needed a written constitution to make federation even possible. Even now, Australia is a relatively short-lived nest of feisty, autonomous nation-states, among whom the balance of power is not only elastic but a little sticky.

Queenslanders have a view of themselves that is at once annoyingly parochial and powerfully positive when necessary. At crisis, people clamour for authoritative parenting. When we feel the fragility of order, we want and need leaders. And leaders come. But we have to feel they are one of us.

Real leaders don't plan to be there when levees split or planes hit a tower. They act because they are there, and can exercise judgment.

They're not usually the men and women who make excellent policies and plans in more placid times, though we need them too: Brisbane, for example, was not flooded by sewage as well as the river because a project team put sewage controls well above 1974 flood levels, finishing this a month before Brisbane swam.

Nor are such leaders usually those who found office through the ordinary cut, thrusts and betrayals of daily political struggle. The greatest leader in time of war is not usually the one who assiduously sought power through the manipulation and approval of their peers, but the one who is animated by the demands of the hour; who has the means of influencing the

outcome, and is decisive.

Wartime great Winston Churchill had been a tipsy, narcissistic political failure until Hitler warred on England. Only then did sly intelligence and opportunism allow him to become the wartime hero to a resilient and adaptive people.

Queensland's flood pain was Queensland's alone, until the rest of the country heard its voice. Bligh was a visual symbol: utilitarian shirt-sleeves, casual hair drifting across an animated face, spontaneous, and clearly across every detail of what was happening. This was reminiscent of Gillard on her feet in Parliament when she was deputy PM, roasting the opposition over a slow fire, or standing up for women's rights at work.

Bligh showed leadership, exuding authority, not charisma. She behaved like a monarch; an ennobling, arbitrary, tender and organically human institution.

When Elizabeth I was confronted by an apparently unstoppable Spanish Armada, she rode down to the cliffs of Dover and into a plot for her murder, and told her soldiers, and all of her people, that though she had the weak and feeble body of a woman, she had the heart and stomach of a king.

In modern times we give spontaneous affection, not loyalty, to a monarch, because she is there, the bearer of our dignity, the embodiment of the people as we wish to be and even, perhaps, a kind of mascot.

At such times, a monarch has no political vision because she does not have any interest in manufacturing or selling illusion, which is an ordinary politician's business, but instead has a sense of urgency and purpose. In a time of crisis, a queen is order, empowerment, cooperation and an enforced equality.

I would think of Bligh's press conferences in terms of the film *The King's Speech*: and as a career highlight in which neither Botox nor sound bites played a part. It was all human weakness and pluck.

The King's Speech is less fact than a fable about a relatively ordinary man who did not want the throne yet felt both duty-bound and completely unfit for it: a man who learned, through the exchange of love, encouragement and endurance, the confidence to do and say the right thing at the right time.

We thank God now both that his Nazi-sympathising brother, Edward VIII, was not king at the time of war, and that 'Bertie' King George VI had no real power at all, for *doing* was not his forte. George VI was 'authority' and earned it by pursuing a worthwhile purpose, exercising judgment, and making sound decisions when the outcome was most uncertain.

This kind of authority requires more than looking good on television or manufacturing well-scripted sound bites, which are part of a different kind of political life. A good leader of

the former kind is for the moment, but not necessarily for the whole journey. Britain needed a Churchill in war, but politicians with a different kind of guts for the reconstruction

So, let us praise Bligh, but not at the cost of Gillard, who was in a different role, which does not particularly suit her. Remember and observe how Gillard had to stand back, and that she is still struggling to be both prime ministerial and an unscripted, natural leader.

Crises bring out the best, and sometimes the worst, in our elected leaders (Menzies, for example, in war-time was a drip). Gillard hasn't really had one (other than the last election).

One swallow does not a summer make. As Churchill famously said: 'Wait, and see.'

Addicted to disaster porn

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



During the past week, we've been treated to wall to wall television coverage of the Brisbane and Queensland floods. Being able to see inside people's waterlogged homes gives us an insight into how they must be feeling. But does it facilitate empathy, a human connection that might help them through the crisis?

That has to be considered unlikely, if we are to take to heart some of the lessons of 9/11.

After that event, BBC correspondent Stephen Evans [described](#) as 'pornographic' the relentless repetition of images of the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre towers.

Disaster porn [refers](#) to media putting 'horrific or tragic images on a 24 hour loop, constantly driving them into your head, and then referring to the events portrayed as an *unspeakable tragedy*'. It is exploitative and voyeuristic, rather than contextualised.

The British broadcaster ITN was rebuked by the regulatory authority for a sequence in which it used images from the 9/11 attack with music but without the context that is provided by commentary. ITN's editor-in-chief said the intention of his team was to 'allow people to dwell on the images'.

Some would argue that television, and indeed the media in general, is all about fulfilling the human need for gratification, prurient or otherwise. Academics Lelia Green and Steven Maras reflected in a 2002 print article for the *Australian Journal of Communication* on feeding audience hunger for the resolution of tension.

Even journalists that tried to move on to coverage of other events found that their audiences did not want to leave 'ground zero': 'the readers and the newsagents reported back very quickly that the readers still wanted to keep reading about it on their front pages'.

It's clear that media consumers can exploit disaster victims for their own gratification. But it's also true that most, if not all, have no idea that they're doing so. Even those responsible for the coverage can have much more laudable intentions on their minds.

Channel 9 Queensland Managing Director Kylie Blucher [told](#) the Televised Revolution podcast on Thursday that, in the interest of community service, her bosses in Sydney had given her the nod to put aside the ratings. Instead her mantra was 'keep repeating hotline numbers' in order to get information about the Brisbane floods out to people as quickly as possible.

But the reality is that most viewers don't need the hotline numbers. Those looking for the numbers are more likely to be listening to the radio, as the power was cut in many affected areas, and everybody has a battery radio. That was certainly the experience of Susan Prior, whose experience of the flood is [published](#) today in *Eureka Street*.

Those tuning to TV rather than radio coverage would be bystanders attracted by the images of the tragedy, and it goes without saying that there must have been a great deal of repetition of images to fill Channel 9's continuous [coverage](#) from 4:00am until 10:30pm. Whether they are a stated priority for the executives, the ratings for such television events are usually phenomenal, and the Brisbane flood coverage did [not disappoint](#).

Viewer gratification aside, it has to be admitted that media coverage of such events does contribute greatly to the solidarity that is vital to assisting the community to get through such a calamitous event. It promotes the need for assistance, specifies the priorities, and puts the public in touch with appeal collection points.

In all likelihood, it does much more good than harm. However if you think you might have a weakness for disaster porn, it would be wise to choose to inform yourself by [radio](#) rather than TV.

Diary from the eye of the flood

COMMUNITY

Susan Prior

It began for Brisbane on a wet, rainy Monday as a wall of water tore through Toowoomba to the west of the capital. There were forecasts that Brisbane may experience flooding so immediately we went into preparation mode.



According to predictions based on earlier floods the ground floor of my house was going to be inundated, so all our worldies were brought upstairs; we filled buckets and tubs with clean drinking water; bought matches, candles, and batteries; replaced our gas cylinder ... and waited.

It rained.

On Tuesday morning something interesting started to happen. People started nattering to each other and telling their stories. Down came the usual reservations and people conversed freely. I wrote the following on my Facebook page:

Camaraderie among the tinned baked beans and bottled water

I was only pontificating just yesterday to my two daughters, about a calamity bringing communities closer together. It was interesting in the supermarket this morning. I wish I had had a recording device to go around and interview everyone, because they were all chatting to their neighbours in the long queues. Swapping stories, news, gossip. Listening to all the conversations around me actually made the time in the long queue go very fast. Now why can't we all be so chatty and have so much fun normally? Hmmmmm.

People who had lived close to each other for years suddenly got talking and offering to help each other in preparation for the inundation ahead. 'Have you heard?' 'What are you expecting?' 'Are you ready?' 'Were you flooded last time?' 'Are you insured?'

The power went off in anticipation of the deluge on Wednesday morning ... and we waited. And while we waited we talked to our neighbours over the fence.

And it rained.

The predictions were for early flooding of the lower lying areas in the morning and a rising tide throughout Wednesday with the first peak in the late afternoon. It became apparent that if we didn't get my oldest daughter to the airport early (for a midnight flight to Europe) then she could be stranded. We bundled her on to a train, bid her a hasty farewell and went back to our preparations.

The highest peak would be at 4am on Thursday, we were told. Expect the worst. And we did.

And still it rained.

At 4am on Thursday a huddle of men could be seen not far from our house tentatively creeping forwards, their torches sweeping the dark ground in front of them. Where was the flood? How far had it gone? They started chatting to their neighbours. They were okay, they had avoided the worst. But those unfortunates just over there, they were gone.

We were in the eye of the flood. Surrounded by water but sitting high and dry. We awoke to a beautiful, sunny Thursday morning — the first sunshine in what felt like days — and an eerie silence. All the local dogs were silent, the birds were silent, there were no trains or traffic. Just silence. Over the airwaves we heard Anna Bligh dubbing it the 'blue sky flood' — very apt.

We had no real idea of what had been happening all around us other than what we could glean from local radio. It quickly became clear that we were in the calm centre amid complete chaos.

In fact, at first, we didn't believe anything much had happened.

Then we heard our Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, in her monotone drone: she was sending helicopters. All of Australia was behind us. Troops were coming. Food was coming. Help was coming.

I am sure we were all relieved to hear it, but she didn't exactly inspire us, or fill us with confidence!

And we heard Queensland State Premier Anna Bligh: Anna who had been so on-the-nose with the electorate in previous weeks and months was suddenly given her moment to shine.

A tired and emotional Anna outlined to Queenslanders exactly what was happening and how she and the government were going about it. There is no doubt Queenslanders at that moment rallied behind her. It could mean victory for her at the next state election, depending on how she handles the recovery post flood.

And Brisbane Mayor Campbell Newman emerged from the slime smelling of roses. The next term is surely his for the taking if he wants it.

And the neighbourhood talked some more. About how Julia, Anna and Campbell were handling it all. And the straw poll was unanimous. Anna and Campbell: ten out of ten. And Julia? Julia who?

Then the phone calls started. Were we okay? Had we flooded? We got on our bikes to survey the scene. We walked the dog, and we talked to the neighbours.

With no power there was no work to be done, no housework or cooking, no computers, no TV, no games. With the roads blocked there was nowhere to drive to. Everyone who was lucky enough to have stayed dry in our neighbourhood was out and about. And everyone was talking.

As the day wore on people lit barbeques, invited over the neighbours and drank the last of the chilled champagne that had been saved for just such a rainy day.

In those few hours an immense bank of good will, or social capital, was built up.

And it would be needed. Because the very next day all these neighbours were walking over to their new friends and offering a helping hand along with a mop and bucket.

Every scrap of this social capital is going to be spent in the big clean up ahead. But at least we all now know our neighbours!