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## Australia's mining menace

### POLITICS

*Steven Littlewood*



Speaking on the recent release of Australia's GDP figures, the shadow treasurer, Joe Hockey said 'The economy is increasingly, obviously, reliant on the mining boom, and the evidence out of today is clear: that if there's a cough in the mining boom, the rest of the economy catches pneumonia.' Hockey was right about one thing; the mining boom is infecting the rest of the economy. But he has misdiagnosed exactly what the problem is.

In Hockey's interpretation of events, the resources boom is the engine of Australia's growth, propping up the flagging sectors elsewhere in the economy, and the recipe for success is to grant the mining industry special privileges and hope that it keeps us all afloat.

Unsurprisingly that is a policy judgement the industry endorses, and it has spent considerable time and money trying to convince the government of it. They have been largely successful judging by Prime Minister Julia Gillard's recent reassurances to a mining dinner that 'What I really want you to take away tonight is an understanding of just how central your industry is to the Government's economic agenda.'

The problem with this view of the mining sector as being central to the welfare of the economy is that it's a total furphy. The mining industry is not supporting other sectors of the economy, it's holding them back.

While the big mining states of WA and Queensland are booming, in other parts of the country like Tasmania and regional Victoria the economy is sluggish. Areas that rely on manufacturing are suffering from rising interest rates and the effects of the strong Australian dollar on terms of trade.

The Reserve Bank could offer relief on this by lowering interest rates, which would ease credit for small businesses and help to rein in the dollar, but it is loath to do so because of inflation fears largely caused by runaway growth in the mining sector.

That is the essential problem of the 'two speed' economy; decisions on monetary policy that would benefit the rest of the country are being held back because of the mining states. The boom is driving growth in the resource rich areas, but it is impeding growth everywhere else.

Even in the states where mining dominates, the positive effects of the industry boom on the wider economy are questionable. Business owners in non-mining activities are hampered by their inability to compete with the massive salaries offered in the mines. For residents it is increasingly difficult to find tradies to work on their houses, and when they do they are often charged exuberant fees. All activity is centred on the relentless expansion of the mines and this

is crowding out growth and investment in other areas.

The potential damage of this scenario is obvious to anyone who lives in Ravensthorpe, WA, which was left devastated when BHP Billiton closed down its nickel mine there. The former agricultural town closed down virtually overnight after the mining giant decided to pull the plug. All that is left now are half finished homes, built in anticipation of the mine's long term operation.

If things continue at the current rate, the whole of WA and North Queensland will be left as abandoned wastelands when the boom ends, as itinerant workers flee and leave behind half-empty towns and cities without an economic base.

Hockey's opinion that the economy 'is increasingly, obviously, reliant on the mining boom' is not only incorrect (the financial and manufacturing sectors actually account for more GDP growth than the resource sector), it's dangerous. Placing mining at the 'centre of economic policy' as Gillard would have it condemns Australia to be a bimbo economy. We must aspire to more than that.

If Australia is to continue to grow it needs to be equipped to do more than dig things up for the rest of the world. That means diversifying, investing in new technology and increasing productivity.

These are things that the resources sector has not done well in recent years. Between 2002 and 2011 productivity in mining halved, and as former Newcrest Mining executive Ian Smith advised the Australian Minerals and Metals Association recently, it was all due to a relentless greed for profits.

'The IR landscape didn't do that — we did that as an industry,' he told an AMMA conference. 'Because of the pricing of the commodities there has been an attitude where we would do anything to get the project on while these prices prevail. We destroyed what we were doing as the most productive industry within Australia.'

This is not the kind of model that can sustain for very long. Short-term profiteering at the expense of real productivity is not a secure basis for an economy; just ask anyone who invested money in an Icelandic bank.

The resources sector brings real benefits to the Australian economy and needs to be supported, but the wider economy needs to be supported too, and that means bringing mining's disruptive expansion under control.

Part of the reasoning behind Ken Henry's proposed mining tax was that it would help to bring mining sector growth back to a more sustainable level. A modest slow down would maintain a healthy industry while giving the rest of the economy a break, helping to restore Australia's growth to a more stable footing.

Unsurprisingly this was a message that the mining magnates did not want to hear; why should Gina Reinhardt and Andrew Forrest care about giving a break to car workers in Geelong or small business owners in Launceston? They don't, and after defeating the first mining tax with an effective fear campaign, the industry is once again squaring up for a fight.

The Minerals Council has started airing commercials designed to warn off any attempt to curb its gargantuan profits. 'We all eat from the same tucker box up here' proclaims a small town miner in one of the adverts. Maybe they do, but what about the rest of us?

## Buddhist nun's social activism

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

The Australian Buddhist nun featured here on Eureka Street TV breaks the stereotype of Buddhists as being quiet, mellow and laid back. She is larger than life, a very colourful character, and it's easy to be distracted by the colour.

As described in a December 2000 article in *The Age*, [Robina Courtin](#) has 'been a black belt in karate, one of many daughters in a large Catholic family, a supporter of the Black Panthers, a radical lesbian separatist feminist and a lot else besides ... she speaks at a million miles an hour and can swear like a truck driver/politician. But all that is colour. The substance is that she is a Buddhist nun.'

Courtin is a woman of great substance. She has been editorial director of a prominent Buddhist publishing house, director of a project to bring Buddhist teachings to prisoners, and is now a highly respected teacher of Buddhism in western countries.

Courtin was born in Melbourne in 1944 and was raised a Catholic. She went to a Catholic girls' school, and, after realising she couldn't fulfill her wish to become a priest, shifted her desires towards a vocation as a Carmelite nun.

But alongside her deep and abiding interest in religion, she was drawn in many other directions. She loved music and had a good voice. As a teenager, at a school fete, by chance she bought a record by Billie Holiday whose singing awakened a passion for black American music, and an appreciation of the injustices and prejudice suffered by African Americans. This stirred the beginnings of a strong social conscience, and a drive to become a social activist.

As a young adult she went to London to study singing. While there she joined the feminist movement, and began work on behalf of prisoners' rights.

She spent time living back in Australia and the USA and, in 1974, began studying martial arts. Injuries from a freak accident in 1976 prevented her from practising karate, so she decided to attend a Buddhist retreat in Queensland conducted by leading Tibetan teachers, Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche. She was captivated by these monks and by Buddhism. This set the direction for the rest of her life.

The following year she went to Kathmandu in Nepal and studied at Kopan Monastery. There she was ordained as a Buddhist nun in the Tibetan Gelugpa tradition, in the lineage of Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa.

Since then Courtin has worked in various capacities for the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition ([FPMT](#)) which was founded by Lama Yeshe in 1975. Lama Zopa is

spiritual director of the organisation. The FPMT has monasteries and nunneries in six countries, meditation centres in 40 countries, and runs health and nutrition clinics, hospices and programs in prisons around the globe.

According to its website, the FPMT provides 'integrated education through which people's minds and hearts can be transformed into their highest potential for the benefit of others, inspired by an attitude of universal responsibility'.

In the 1980s and '90s Courtin was editorial director of the FPMT's Wisdom Publications, and editor of its magazine, *Mandala*.

From 2000 to 2009, she was founding director of the FPMT's Liberation Prison Project in the USA which looked after the spiritual needs of hundreds of prisoners spread through some 150 institutions, sending them Buddhist literature and letters, visiting and giving teachings and advice.

In this role, she once asked Lama Zopa to write a card to a young Latino prisoner serving a life sentence. He wrote: 'Your prison is nothing in comparison with the prison of ordinary people: the prison of ego-grasping, the prison of attachment, the prison of anger, depression and pride.'

Courtin often repeats these words, and they have inspired her to take Buddhist teachings to broader society, to spread its message among ordinary people. This is now her main work.



## Students in sex work

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

***Sleeping Beauty* (MA). Director: Julia Leigh. Starring: Emily Browning, Rachael Blake, Peter Carroll, Chris Haywood, Hugh Keays-Byrne, Ewen Leslie. 101 minutes**

In May a German study [revealed](#) that one in three students in Berlin would consider sex work as a means of paying for their education. We've seen similar phenomena in Australia where, in 2005, Dr Sarah Lantz, a researcher with a background in public health and mental health, noted that many struggling students were 'utilising the sex industry to support themselves, their children and their own post-secondary studies'. She [blamed](#) the rise of economic rationalism principles in tertiary institutions for putting the squeeze on students.

This provides interesting real-world context for the beguiling but perplexing new Australian film *Sleeping Beauty*. Protagonist Lucy (Browning) is a university student who finds herself drawn into working a bizarre niche within the sex industry. The film's title hints at the frighteningly submissive nature of the work she endures.

However Lucy's motivation for pursuing this well paid but decidedly demeaning work is not as clear-cut as 'she needs the money'. References are made to student loans, and we see her verbally tussle with housemates over rent. But Lucy, as coolly portrayed by Browning, is marked by an enigmatic aloofness, rather than desperation.

Prior to entering the sex industry, she has multiple sources of income, working, for example, as a waitress, and as a guinea pig for medical experiments. These each in their own way foreshadow her later sordid work choices: the menial and personable dimensions of waitressing reflect the 'hospitality' dimension of prostitution; the medical experiments, which involve sliding a sterile tube down her gullet while she battles her gag reflex, have an overtly sexual connotation (the administrator of the experiment even thanks her shyly for her services).

Taken alongside a fatalistic personal approach to sexuality, Lucy's frank pursuit of such roles evoke a sense that she is drawn, rather than simply accustomed, to being used, particularly if there is money to be made. The roots of this emotional masochism are not explored. But the progression to sex work seems predestined.

In fact her progression to the role of 'sleeping beauty' seems to be motivated by a desire for extravagance rather than a need to make ends meet. She is advised by matronly manager Clara (Blake) to work hard for a short time and use the money she earns wisely. Contrary to such pragmatism, Lucy literally puts a flame to one bill from her first pay packet. She also moves to a glamorous inner city apartment without even seeing it first.



In this, *Sleeping Beauty* seems primarily to be a study of the vacuity of individualistic consumerist western culture, rather than a lament for the plight of poor students.

Secondarily, almost parenthetically, the film offers a bizarre yet poignant consideration of geriatric male sexuality. Lucy's sleeping beauty 'performances' are graphically portrayed, but notable for their emotional content as much as their soft-pornographic elements. (Writer-director Leigh has said she means to place her audiences in the role of 'tender witnesses' rather than sinister 'voyeurs'.)

For these sessions, Lucy is rendered unconscious by a heavy narcotic, so that she is utterly submissive to the clients' whims, and retains no memories of the encounters. The clients — wealthy, elderly men — may do to her sleeping form as they please (though penetration and physical damage are forbidden). The sequences are unpleasant, but the men's humanity is exposed along with their age-worn flesh and warped sexual desires.

The first (Carroll) caresses her gently, seeming to yearn for tenderness and youth rather than sex *per se*. The second (Haywood) confesses aloud his impotence before proceeding to verbally and physically abuse Lucy, his self-loathing finding form as profanity levelled at this exquisite, passive beauty. The third (Keays-Byrne) lifts Lucy and attempts simply to hold her; the effort proves too great for his aged limbs. In each case it is possible to feel sympathy for the man, as well as revulsion at the perverseness of his behaviour.

For Lucy, ignorance is not bliss. Eventually, she decides she must know what happens to her while she is sleeping. But the film's tragic climax lacks some of the emotional punch it might otherwise have contained, if Lucy were a less inscrutable character.

In fact, first-time filmmaker Leigh's failure to form Lucy's various aspects into a cogent whole is the main weakness of an otherwise bold and accomplished film. A subplot involving her eccentric friendship with a reclusive alcoholic (Leslie) does more to obscure than illuminate her character. That said Browning's courageous and mature performance is bewitching. We are fascinated by Lucy even if we don't understand her.

## **Pope's theory on clergy sex abuse**

RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*

One of the intriguing qualities of Pope Benedict XVI is his intellectual style.

He consistently uses large theoretical constructs, such as secularism, to reflect on the condition both of Western societies and of the Church. He also regularly attributes the dysfunctional aspects of both Church and society to the embrace of false theory. He has regularly attributed sexual abuse by Catholic clergy to bad moral theory.

The strength of this way of viewing the world is that it simplifies complex realities and provides a focus for reflection and conversation with those of a different view. Particularly during his visit to England earlier this year the Pope Benedict has stirred helpful conversation about the place of religion in society. His intellectual style engaged his listeners and offered a different perspective even if it did not persuade them.

The breadth and abstraction of this intellectual style also allow space for confident leadership. If you believe you can identify the causes of weakness in society and the Church, you may also be able to exercise control over them. If the root of corruption lies in false theory, you can work to convert people to true theory. In a church you may also be able to proscribe bad theory, to prescribe true theory, and so to eradicate corruption.

The strengths of this intellectual style are also its potential weaknesses. When you think in large theoretical terms it is easy to miss the subtle relationships that are crucially important. It is also very easy to miss the ways in which your own perspective may be part of the problem, not simply an authoritative guide to its solution. If your diagnosis is inaccurate your remedy will be at best unavailing, and at worst counterproductive.

When Pope Benedict blames bad moral theory for sexual abuse by the clergy, he may offer an example of the weaknesses of this intellectual style. His judgment is firmly held: he has made it in at least three places. In itself his argument is not without plausibility.

Proportionalism, the moral theory that he has in mind, is complex. It could be misunderstood as propounding a moral relativism, within which we could not speak of actions as in themselves right or wrong without referring to our intentions, our circumstances or to the perceived consequences. Someone who held that point of view might then be able to argue that in his circumstances paedophilia would be morally acceptable.

The Pope could also argue that, although different moral theories may have little currency among Catholics generally, they are significant because they influence the moral thinking of future priests. And moral thinking does influence action. Finally, the theory he criticises enjoyed some currency among Catholic moral theorists in the 1970s, the time when clerical

abuse began to rise sharply.

The John Jay report (pictured) [argues](#) against the influence of this theory, at least in the US. It suggests that most offenders received a traditional moral theology that emphasised the good and evil of actions independent of circumstances or intention. The offending clergy, too, recognised the sinfulness of their actions and put weight on their confessing them and being forgiven by God. Their spirituality was focused on the individual's relationship to God.

The roots of abuse then lay in the way in which Catholic life and clerical life were construed before Vatican II, not in moral theories that arose after it.

These conclusions invite reflection that might lead to an explanatory theory. But any satisfactory theory will be unlikely to be simple or to be cast in terms of large intellectual movements.

It will need to reflect on the relationships between interlocking aspects of Catholic life in different periods and cultures. It might ask how power, sexuality, celibacy, clerical status, sin, confession and God were interrelated in the mid 20th century, and what changes in relationship took place from the 1960s and subsequently.

Such reflection will inevitably turn to the ways in which the interweaving of these elements has shaped Catholic thinking about God and the church. Moral theories will be part of the weave of this tapestry, but to focus on them alone entails missing much that is salient.

These kinds of question are susceptible to a patient and intuitive teasing out of thought, of story, of experience and of imagery. They involve a good deal of self-reflection and a readiness to change. They are less susceptible to theoretical analysis in preconceived terms.

This is not to discount the Pope's intellectual style and his insistence on objective moral standards. In an Australian environment where many Christians are among those who see no moral problem in trafficking people to Malaysia to achieve political ends, I find the Pope's insistence on absolute moral values very welcome.

But in the case of clerical sexual abuse, his analysis is not pertinent. It is important for the Church that he leads and for the victims of abuse that it be pursued deeper.

## **Greek crisis viewed from the corner store**

NON-FICTION

*Gillian Bouras*

For people who live in Greece these are troubled times: we know that. But what is to be done about them? Not a lot, but we carry on as best we can, sticking to routine, hoping feebly that pressing problems will go away, putting our heads in the sand, trying to forget that Greece has to cope with the IMF yet again.

I buy potting mix from shop-owner Panayiotis, who runs the mini-market he inherited from his father. I have known father and son for 30 years. Father Spiros was the youngest of a large tribe of brothers born at a time when Greece was experiencing truly dire poverty. Four of these brothers became monks at Mt Athos: I cannot know anything about their religious convictions, but they knew that no monastery would let them starve.

Somehow Spiros started his modest shop, and was doing well when I was first here. Since then he has retired, the market has become more complicated, there are a few more shops competing, and life has changed. In all sorts of ways. Still, son Panayiotis remains philosophical. Well, he's Greek.

'How do you see things at this stage of the *krisi*?' I ask, for I'm always asking people what they think of Greece's financial crisis, which is of course not just Greece's.

'Crisis? What crisis?' Pano grins. 'Greece has got a crisis; Greeks haven't.' (They're all inclined to be bush lawyers as well as philosophers, I think yet again, and sophist is a Greek word, after all.)

But he's got a point: café society shows no sign of dying, people continue to eat and drink out, and spending on cigarettes and tobacco seems quite unabated. Girls and youths still manage to dress to the nines, and everybody, just everybody, has a mobile phone.

That's the surface, of course. Lift a layer or two, and then the suffering is revealed: the old scrimp and try to save, the unemployed young are angry and frustrated, the sick have to make do with inadequate care. And a multitude of immigrants scrapes along; who knows how?

Says Pano: 'Perhaps it's all to the good; perhaps we'll come to our senses at last, and things will work out.'

Here's hoping. While Pano does quiet but regular business in this village, Syntagma Square, the heart of Athens, has been packed with thousands of people since 25 May. Protest is mainly anti-bank, and anti-MP: on 31 May, more than a dozen MPs had to be rescued by police after protesters blocked a parliamentary exit.

As well as many passionate speeches by day and by night, there is much clanging of pots

and pans, in a gesture that symbolises the basic level to which many Greeks have been reduced. That gallant old war-horse and genius, Mikis Theodorakis, has been on a podium out there, blaming the political system for the current mess. Well, he's seen a few messes in his time.

The latest mess centres on the German conviction that Greece cannot repay its enormous debt, and that said debt must therefore be restructured. I am clueless about such things, but a friend who is an expert in financial matters did his best to put me straight.

'There is considerable contagion risk in extending the maturities of Greek loans, and so German banks are terrified. Still, Greeks may continue to receive European charity. It might be yet another instance of captive Greece taking her captor captive. Look at it this way: if you owe a bank a million dollars and can't pay, you're in trouble. If you owe banks 60 billion dollars and can't pay, they're in trouble.'

I'm not used to coping with all those noughts, and hate the thought of such trouble, but am trying to look at the awful problem every which way, really, while not getting very far with the kaleidoscope. Although one thing seems clear: Greece's ratings are now below those of Egypt and Venezuela.

Another thing that seems clear is that the *krisi* has divided Greek society very sharply. There have, of course, been terrible divisions in the past: the effects of the civil war linger on. At this very trying point, I can but hope with Panayiotis that things will work out.

## Reclaiming Labor's lost soul

POLITICS

*Fatima Measham*

In 2006, when Kevin Rudd deposed Kim Beazley as Labor and Opposition Leader and Julia Gillard became his Deputy, I wrote an effusive email to them both. Looking back, I'm no longer sure how much of the enthusiasm was due to the prospect of John Howard finally being exited from politics.

The duo represented the strongest Labor contention in years, but also seemed to signal a way out of the wilderness. Many of the policies they undertook reinforced this sense of change. Rudd delivered the Apology to the Stolen Generations, signed the Kyoto Protocol, abolished Temporary Protection Visas, closed offshore detention centres on Manus Island and Nauru, repealed WorkChoices and began developing a climate change policy that sought to place Australia on the frontline.

I finally let myself consider applying for Australian citizenship — by then I had been eligible for six years and been living in Melbourne for eight. Here finally was a government that seemed to speak to my concerns. Here was a party that seemed to represent our better national aspirations.

In this context, you might get a sense of how despondent I've become over its current directions.

In his Wran Lecture last Thursday, former Labor senator John Faulkner [was right](#) in his assessment that Labor has come a long way from the party that attracted 'progressive, socially aware activists passionate about social and economic reform'. As a government, it has 'lost its way', to borrow — with great irony — Gillard's justification for unseating Rudd as Prime Minister.

This month marks a year since she wrested leadership from Rudd. She explained at the time that her decision was based on her view that it was the only way to get the government 'back on track'.

Yet one would be forgiven for thinking not much has really changed. In fact there has been severe regression, particularly with an immigration policy that is considered by refugee advocates to be worse than the Pacific Solution. Labor underestimates the disillusion that it has engendered in this area.

In his diagnosis of the overall malaise, Faulkner notes that the party has 'become so reliant on focus groups that it listens more to those who do not belong to it than to those who do'. I would add that it has alienated even those who do want to belong to it. After the demise of the Democrats, young voters who would otherwise position themselves between the conservative

Liberals and the radical Greens have been left stranded.

They are looking for authentic, principled leadership that delivers. They are looking for leaders who would rather lose big on matters of principle than win by a margin on compromised policy. Labor ought to be the natural home for such leaders. Its own history has shown as much.

Indeed, if there's anything I've picked up from the decade that I've been living in Australia, it is that Labor best functions on principle. Whitlam. Hawke. Keating. They crashed and burned in their own way — but progressives have to in order to overcome self-interested inertia. Their vision intersected with their mettle. Rudd shared their qualities to some degree, including a tendency to be unlikeable.

Today, as Faulkner points out, party machinery is sidelining the activism that used to be Labor's lifeblood. In its preoccupation with electability, it is failing to engage with a community that is more concerned with what it stands for than whether it can win. 'People were attracted to the Labor Party because they wanted to make the world a better place,' says Faulkner. Such people still exist.

I hope that his statement is not taken as memorialising the past, but as signalling the way forward. With the next federal election still a couple years away, there are many opportunities to appeal to sections of the community who are looking for a good reason to vote Labor. I am one of these.



## **Beethoven's vision of God**

POETRY

*Thomas Shapcott*

### **Beethoven**

What is it about his music that appeals?  
The humour is cruel, or very bad form,  
The lyricism is, well, really a little forced.  
Which leaves the anger and the hurt  
And perhaps the vision of a god.  
Is that enough to keep us enthralled?  
There is no other way out. We are drawn in  
By the very obstinacy of the man.  
Oh yes, he was deaf as a lamppost in the end  
So that he never heard a note of it,  
We listen still, and we hear the sound  
Of what it was like to be alone.  
We are surrounded. After all these years  
We have to believe that god was important.  
That music was important and that Beethoven  
Somehow heard all the motives in us.  
We are forbidden to weep  
But we have learned to rejoice. All things  
Shall be given to us. Like it or not  
We are in his company and the gift  
Takes us out of this world and puts us in it.

### **Birds**

If there were no birds would we invent them?

Certainly we dream of flight

But would our imagination stretch to them?

And what else is beyond our capacity

To visualise? We dream so many things  
Although there are limitations. Some things defy us.

Birds not only have wings, they make movement,  
Something to surprise us each time.

They make us rejoice whenever they come.

We are stuck to the ground and to the ground

We eventually come, even though we invented

A sort of flight. We kid ourselves.

We are permitted to dream but our dreams are half-hearted.

There are some things we are able to know

And there are things beyond us. We invented gunpowder.

### **The flight of kingfishers**

I was always too willing to claim for myself

The right of vision, as if only I

Saw the magic flight of kingfishers

Or the view from the top of the mountain.

Others had been there before me

And at that very moment were left wondering.

The only thing I could really claim

Was a way of getting it down

Which was more or less authentic

Give or take a tendency to exaggeration

Or an inclination towards what rhetoric could do.

I was a liar from the start.

Except that I did see these things  
And felt them. What use are they now?  
I close my eyes. There is nothing more to see.  
The kingfisher still plunges from a branch  
And the moment is immortal. The top of the mountain  
Invites even an impartial eye to look and to wonder.

## Admiring the homeless

POLITICS

*John Falzon*

I remember some years ago learning a difficult but beautiful lesson about life. I was invited to attend a meeting of recovering drug addicts who were parents. They were working on a book together. This was a way of telling their stories.

I am a firm believer in the healing and transformative power of stories. Their stories certainly transformed me.

They described the ways in which they had taken drugs in front of their young children, and the pain they felt they had inflicted on their children and themselves. They told of how they went about making enough money to survive, to feed their children and support their habits. Some of the women described the difficulties of balancing work and family while working in the sex industry.

The words that have remained with me the most are those of a young Aboriginal woman, who described her experiences of homelessness and frequent incarceration based on racial discrimination. When, naively, I asked her what it was like to be locked up and whether at least she was able to sleep, she told me, quietly but firmly:

‘The cells are a sad place, brother. You don’t get to sleep in the cells.’

The lesson I learned was contained in the one word in the middle of this woman’s deeply poetic utterance: the word ‘brother’. She bestowed this title on me through no merit of my own. I did nothing to prove any kinship with her. Nor could I claim to know what her experiences were like.

When she called me brother she did something very powerful. She took me into the cells with her. She showed me how sad they were. Her life was no longer alien to mine. She belonged to the same world as me. I belonged to her world, a world where her sadness was the sadness of the world.

The Vinnies [CEO Sleepout](#), which takes place this Thursday 16 June, is all about trying to learn a little and share a little about the world of homelessness in a wealthy country. Whether we like it or not, we are all, in reality, part of that world.

The CEO Sleepout is not just about raising money. It’s about changing minds and hearts. It’s about changing negative attitudes to people doing it tough; people who are usually demonised but who, I believe, should be deeply respected and admired for their tenacity and inventiveness.

Our problem in Australia is not the ‘idleness of the poor’, as perniciously proposed by

welfare-bashers of all political stripes. Our problem is inequality. This is a social question, not a behavioural one. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behavior, blaming people for their own poverty, as is so often the case with people who are homeless or in jail because of society's failure to provide them with opportunities and nurture their talents.

People are enclosed by massive walls built around them on the basis of race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the 'aspiration' to scale these walls.

The CEO Sleepout is not about a group of privileged people explaining how to scale the walls. It is about a group of business and community leaders wanting to learn from the people who live in the guts of our greatest social problem. It's about having the humility to listen to the people who can teach us what it is that needs to change in society. It is about committing ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people.

Australia stands near the bottom of the list of relative social expenditures in comparison with OECD countries. Professor Peter Saunders of the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW has been telling us for nearly a decade that it would take an expenditure of 2–3 per cent of GDP to lift all people out of poverty in Australia. In his words:

We can thus pay to remove all Australians from poverty if we want to: the fact that we don't do so is a matter of choice, not affordability.

It is indefensible that in a country as prosperous as ours we still have, on conservative estimates, 105,000 people experiencing homelessness, nearly half of whom are under the age of 25.

It is indefensible that we continue to expect a single unemployed person to survive on \$34 a day, a daily battle that is waged from below the poverty line.

The Federal Government's homelessness strategy aims by 2020 to halve homelessness and to ensure that all rough sleepers are offered accommodation. The St Vincent de Paul Society is committed to assisting in the achievement of these concrete goals.

But we must, as a nation, address the massive shortfall in social housing in order to meet these targets. We must also comprehensively address the national crisis in mental health.

Our social spending relative to our wealth as a nation is the measure of our humanity. This is why we need to think of homelessness as a matter of justice rather than charity.

Lilla Watson and a group of Aboriginal activists in Queensland put it beautifully: 'If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together.'

## Plagued by mice and climate change deniers

BY THE WAY

*Brian Matthews*

How do they run so fast on such short legs? Actually, 'run' is not the word. It's not a matter of all four legs pumping in rhythm. Mice, when the mood or the necessity rules, go from A to B with a sort of flicker so that you're not sure if you actually saw anything at all.

Such was the movement I caught out of the corner of my eye on the back verandah as I bent to collect some kindling for the early morning fire. Soon, a second sighting moved me to deploy a hefty chunk of bait.

Checking this strategy a couple of hours later and expecting to see evidence of nibbling, I was astonished to find that the entire lump had been removed without trace. Either this mouse was, as the footy coaches say, a big unit or, more likely, some kind of rodent cooperation had managed the removal. The same teamwork, I hoped, was being employed in devouring the deadly prize.

My rather obsessive interest in the affairs of *mus musculus* — the common house mouse — is prompted not only by its rustlings, dartings and nibblings around the house but also and more spectacularly by the worst [mouse plague](#) in 20 years in South Australia's west.

I remember some time in the late 1980s heading to Streaky Bay on a fishing trip along roads slippery with crushed mice.

The mudflaps on the old Nissan Patrol were caked thick with skin, innards and blood and our traditional camping sites around Scele Bay were 'alive' with thousands of mice: they trapezed in the branches of trees, cartwheeled and scrambled on the ground, congregated on and under rocks. They would run across your boots and hold conventions in any container, such as a tackle box, carelessly left open and accessible. And food, of course, needed Armaguard-like protection.

If our flailing arms, sudden movements and profanity ever scared them, they showed no sign of it. Shooting them with an air rifle was fair ground fun for a while, but the game palled when the targets leapt up on the barrel of the rifle and did their Band-of-Brothers imitation in and around the box of pellets till it tipped over. We retreated in disorder to the mouse-free zone of the Streaky Bay pub.

The present plague massing in the west is worse than that. Mice in their millions cover the paddocks and ravage any attempt to begin seeding. Sheds and hay barns are crawling with them and the farmers remove ute-loads of carcasses daily but without any noticeable diminution of numbers. Stocks of zinc phosphide — the central ingredient of mouse baits — are under enormous pressure and for many farmers the cost is crippling.

In the biblical narrative, plagues and aberrant natural events — floods, drought, mice, rats, locusts, blights — occur as punishments. There is still the odd zealot who insists on seeing the hand of a vengeful God in the various natural catastrophes that seem to have become so common recently.

And when you consider that the present mice infestation has followed quickly upon wave after wave of locusts — many cars, including mine, still bear traces of their journey through a thick, battering fog of wings and bodies pulping on the windscreen — then you can be forgiven for feeling positively biblical.

That's because an occult explanation covers our actual inability to understand these phenomena. It's clear why mice plagues begin after a good season, but no one quite knows why they end so suddenly. It's called a 'crash' and the population pretty well disappears within days.

Likewise, the precise trigger that sets squadrons of locusts on the move is not fully understood. In less enlightened times this gap in our knowledge and understanding allowed outlandish explanations to enter the discussion like a virus and alter its direction and credibility.

In the 14th century, people did not make the connection between bubonic plague and the fleas on rats. As a result, the deadly and phenomenal spread of the disease was attributed to a wild array of divine, demonic and diabolical causes.

In our more civilised and rational age, we can accept plagues of mice and locusts as part of a natural world which we still don't fully understand but cannot deny. It's hard to deny the existence of an intervention which, before your very eyes, destroys your crops, buildings, and electric wiring and coats your car with smashed insect corpses.

Why the moods and variations of another potent part of the natural world — climate — should be different is difficult to fathom. But different it is: it seems many Australians, some of them in 'high places', need climate change to demonstrate its presence with the murderous, repeated efficiency of the mice and the locusts. That would certainly be proof positive. Vindication among the ruins.



## Blogs and monsters

MEDIA

*Fatima Measham*

On the same day that the UN declared internet access a human right, Syria went off the grid. Seventy per cent of its networks were withdrawn from global routers over the course of half an hour. The country went dark as security forces opened fire on protestors.

Though Internet connection resumed the following day, suspicions were rife that connections had been disabled deliberately on a Friday — the day in the week favoured by activists due to large numbers of people already congregating for prayers. Another outage is anticipated today.

Such shutdowns have become a pattern, drawing special concern for the special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue. In his [report](#) to the UN, La Rue stresses the unique status of the internet. As the principal forum for dissent, it has become key to the self-determination of individuals and societies.

The recent uprisings in the Arab world illustrate as much. In Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, state authorities blocked Facebook and Twitter and cut internet access altogether. The motivation is obvious, given that social media not only consolidates protest but broadcasts it to the world.

According to Damascus-based dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh, the internet 'is the most important and most secure means of contact between people'. Skype, for example, helps activists avoid monitored phone lines. Video reports are uploaded without interference from censors. Tweets fill in the gaps left by detained journalists. Hence, La Rue insists, the internet must be maintained at all times 'including during times of political unrest'.

He probably could have said 'especially during times of political unrest', for it is during such times that state instruments are brought heavily to bear on demonstrators. A 'kill-switch' that isolates a country from the rest of the world during upheaval is rather alarming. As a community, we count on the observation of third parties to inhibit or curtail violence, and bring perpetrators to justice.

La Rue is right to draw our attention to the increasing tendency to criminalise legitimate online expression. Over 100 bloggers were imprisoned last year on charges related to their content. He also points to state-sanctioned cyber-attacks on blogs and websites that are critical of those in power.

Apart from undermining political transparency, such moves contravene article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which enshrines the right to 'seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds'.

The Covenant does not discriminate between methods of transmission, and cites oral, written, artistic forms or 'any other media of ... choice'. Declaring internet access a human right can thus be seen as identifying a medium that the Covenant authors could not foresee, but accommodated in language.

On the other hand, La Rue's report invites questions about what difference it makes on the ground. Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen are legally bound to uphold the Covenant, having variously ratified or acceded to it. Yet they contravened its provisions, even before the uprisings.

The issue of state-owned or centralised control of internet infrastructure exacerbates the problem. Freedom House, the renowned watchdog organisation, recently [highlighted](#) Jordan, Russia, Thailand, Venezuela and Zimbabwe as 'countries at risk' in this regard.

So what can be gained from this report? By placing the internet within the sphere of freedom of opinion and speech, the UN is making overt the idea that internet users have the same protections accorded to other media. It gives the Human Rights Committee, the body that monitors the ICCPR, an explicit language to hold governments to account.

In framing the internet as a catalyst for social and individual transformation, La Rue also recognises that limited access to it has become a layer of disadvantage. Pre-existing inequalities are intensified, for instance, when there are 72 internet users per hundred inhabitants in developed countries, while there are only 10 per hundred in the African region. The UN calls on all governments to take concrete steps to bridge this digital divide.

That internet access is a human right means that all are entitled to the unique benefits that it offers, especially in terms of the ways it facilitates our fuller development as persons. We saw in the Arab Spring how this technology has become the platform for our human longings for dignity and peace through justice. How, then, can we deny it elsewhere or deprive anyone of it?

## No sympathy for abusive clergy

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

The 2009 National Apology to the ‘Lost Innocents’ – the thousands of unaccompanied children exported from England to Australia during the 1940s and 1950s – was, like the Apology to the Stolen Generations, a rare moral highlight of Kevin Rudd’s mostly lacklustre tenure as PM.

*Oranges and Sunshine* relates the history of this dark period of colonial history from the perspective of Margaret Humphreys, the heroic English social worker who in the 1980s uncovered the truth about these ‘child migrants’, and who still [works](#) to reunite the now adult children with their families.

Humphreys’ non-fiction book *Empty Cradles* was the main source for the film. ‘I read it in 2003 in one sitting,’ says director Jim Loach. ‘I knew very little of the wider story of the child migrants, and was shocked by it.’ The following day he phoned Humphreys and set up a meeting. ‘She was inspirational, and had an incredible story to tell. I knew it was a film I wanted to make.’

English actor Emily Watson portrays Humphreys as a steadfast woman on an all-consuming quest. It takes its toll. Frequent, prolonged trips to Australia put strain on her home life; her husband Merv (Richard Dillane) is supportive to a fault, but her young children are not always so understanding.

‘She’s a working mum,’ says Loach, ‘trying to run her own family, but also out trying to repair the damage done to others. That juxtaposition made the story more morally complex. If it was told from the perspective of the child migrants, the rights and wrongs would have been very straightforward.’

Detective work is hardly the most difficult aspect of Humphreys’ job. For many of the children, forced separation from their families was exacerbated by the abuse they suffered in Australian institutions. In the film Humphreys becomes literally ill from her exposure to the trauma that many still carry.

The Christian Brothers, who were responsible for some of the institutions at issue, are portrayed in an unflattering light. During her investigations, Margaret is subjected to a campaign of intimidation that is attributed (albeit ambiguously) to supporters of the Brothers. When she eventually comes face to face with some of the Brothers, at Dimboon outside of Perth, they regard her with resentful silence.

These encounters, Loach says somewhat elusively, are based on ‘something that happened in real life’. That said, the decision to keep the Brothers literally voiceless within the film was

quite deliberate. 'They've had their say,' says Loach. 'I wasn't going to give them another opportunity.'

To be fair, the Brothers as an institution have made efforts to atone for their wrongdoings of that era. That *Oranges and Sunshine* seems to condemn them universally, when it's likely that the innocent have been tarred along with the guilty, is due less to malice than to the fact that Loach's sympathies sit squarely and wholly with the child victims.

He notes that there is an implicit power shift in the scene where Humphreys and one of the former migrants (portrayed by David Wenham, who, along with Hugo Weaving, features as one of Humphreys' most pertinent clients) confront the silent Brothers. 'The power lies in what's unsaid.'

Loach is as strongly critical of the British government as he is of the Australian institutions. But *Oranges and Sunshine* also resonates, unintentionally, with another, particularly Australian story.

When Margaret pleads with government officials for accountability and transparency, they respond that the scheme was carried out in 'a different time' and with 'the best of intentions'. This echoes the apologetics proffered by defenders of the forced separation of Aboriginal children from their parents.

It's enough to make you wonder what defense the perpetrators of the current inhumane treatment of asylum seekers will offer in decades to come. 'It's amazing how you can delete the scandal, insert another one, and the same scene would probably work,' quips Loach.

## Exporting kids and cows

### POLITICS

*Moira Rayner*

On Tuesday the Federal Government ‘suspended’ transport of Australian live cattle to Indonesia for ‘up to six months’. This was not, as some claim, a ban. It was a grudging response to domestic political outrage over the proven — seen, heard, admitted — cruelty to our cows being slaughtered within shambolic Indonesian abattoirs.

Clearly some abattoir workers couldn’t be fagged to sharpen their knives. Equally, although Indonesian laws prohibit cruel treatment, those laws are unenforced and unenforceable.

For most people, especially those who live in cities and towns, our closest contact with animals (other than domestic pets) is on a plate. We don’t much question our right to eat them, and usually prefer not to see how they are raised, and how they are killed.

But our fastidious evasion of the reality of the end of lives of gentle, vegetarian, domestic beasts is not shared by the meat industry in Australia which has known about these practices for more than a decade, nor for the owners and operators of slaughterhouses throughout this secular Islamic nation.

Somehow, because we have not witnessed it directly, the notion of protecting doomed animals from fear, pain and horror is an exotic notion. There are even some folk who believe that beating an animal before slaughter improves the final result: tenderised, adrenalised, and tastier.

Between the Minister for Agriculture Joe Ludwig’s initial, pallid response to the *Four Corners* report calling for an ‘investigation’ (there are now seven), and Julia Gillard’s current ‘ban’, there was a torrent of outrage, tears and hypocrisy about the program’s depictions.

Personally I was a little off-put by Bob Katter’s remarkable assurances that slicing a bellowing Brahman more than 40 times with a blunt machete was a ‘religious practice’ we would, at our peril, disrespect. In fact the notion that the practices we saw were *halal* was publicly refuted by spokesmen for Islam, within and outside Australia.

The Australian live animal export industry has long been aware that standards of humane treatment in Indonesia, and elsewhere, have been abysmal. So have the RSPCA and a large number of not for profit animal welfare industries. What is truly embarrassing is that at least some of the exporters can set aside the callous torture and terrorising of captive animals because of the value of the trade.

It may seem peculiar even to contemplate the ‘welfare’ of an animal designed for our plate,

but even a market based on unexamined, long-accepted omnivorous eating preferences should aim for some kind of efficiency.

What is truly surprising is the failure of policy-makers, producers and consumers to address the very basis of the agreement to ship live animals overseas in the first place: the claim that a primarily Muslim market cannot and will not tolerate the preparation of the meat except in accordance with very precise religious practices that demand particular means of slaughtering.

This temporary suspension of the trade is not, as animal activists prefer to believe, a ban, nor even, as *The Age* trumpeted, a triumph of people power. It is a pause, a hiatus, in the profitable trade of vulnerable, sentient beings by ship, for the profit of third parties.

Does anybody see, other than myself, the dreadful hypocrisy of demanding and obtaining real, inconvenient and expensive interruption to the export of live cattle, and the complete lack of outrage and demand for action to ensure the humane treatment of asylum-seeking, unaccompanied children, and a ban on their being transported to work in the sex trade or enslaved pauperism in Malaysia?

Such disparity in public outrage, such blindness to the sinful (for once, a proper adjective) lack of compassion for those who have no power and no voice, and such incredible hypocrisy about the likely improvement in the attitudes and practices in both of these countries to whom we have given the discretion to exercise our own moral responsibilities, leaves this writer a little short of breath.

Surely, the moral argument for a ban is relevant not only because of our responsibilities under international human rights instruments (such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and international trading conventions and treaties.

We cannot export our ethical duties to third parties. Our justification for the export of our own animals, and of children seeking our care, does not hold up under the light. We can act humanely, reliably, only within our own national boundaries.

Stop. The. Bloody. Boats.

## My refugee friend

### EULOGY

*Kerry Murphy*

My brother Tuc died recently from kidney cancer. Tuc was not my biological brother, but adopted me as his brother 12 years ago. He was a refugee from Vietnam; a strong Catholic, proud father and great worker for the Vietnamese community through the St Vincent de Paul Society, which is where I met him. Although our lives had different starts, I found much to learn from his life.

Tuc was an officer in the South Vietnamese army. After the war ended in 1975 he was interned by the North Vietnamese for many years, locked up in a hole in the ground. I asked him how he survived. He smiled and pointed to his picture of the Madonna. 'She helped me.'

Tuc had a strong faith which helped him through the trauma of his incarceration and his separation from his family. I wonder if I could have survived such persecution and torture.

Tuc escaped to Thailand in the early 1980s. He spoke good English, so became an interpreter in the camp. He told international officials about US soldiers he'd seen living in villages in Vietnam, long after the war ended. The US listed them as 'MIAs', but Tuc said they had decided to live in Vietnam and had new families. He was puzzled when US officials denied that US soldiers would do this.

He could not understand why these intelligent foreigners could not accept facts that contradicted their preconceptions. I'm reminded of how, in the same way, many Australians do not believe the stories of refugees, because they do not fit with our ideas about how people act.

Tuc was offered resettlement in the US or Australia. He chose Australia because he was disheartened by the US leaving Vietnam to the communists he believed would destroy his country. He arrived as a refugee in 1983, and worked full time in order to save to buy a home for his family, still in Vietnam.

I met him in 1988, about the same time that his wife, son and daughter finally were resettled in Australia. Tuc had been separated from them since 1975.

It was not long before Tuc was calling me 'my brother'. At first I thought this was a cultural thing. But when he called my parents 'my father and my mother', I realised he had adopted us into his family.

A Vietnamese custom is to have a special gathering for the new year, or Tet, which is the same time as Chinese New Year. Tuc would call me every year and wish me happy new year in Vietnamese (*'chuc mung na moi'*) and invite me to a meal to celebrate.



Tuc told me he was touched by the welcome he and other Vietnamese had received from Anglo-Celtic Australians. Once, he told me I was like an egg. 'How so?' I asked 'You are white on the outside and yellow inside,' was his witty retort.

When my mother first met him she asked him what he did in Vietnam 'Kill communists,' replied Tuc. Mum, who had moved from the DLP to support the Liberals, was not terribly shocked. This was his sense of humour, but it also reflected the seriousness of what it meant to be involved in a civil war.

I visited Vietnam a few times and told Tuc about it. I explained how busy Saigon was, and all the shops and businesses that I saw. I told him about the beautiful singing in the cathedral in Saigon during the mass I attended.

Tuc had not returned to Vietnam and I encouraged him to return to see some family there. Tuc said he was afraid to go back because of what the communists might do to him. I tried to reassure him that they would not touch him as he would have his brother the lawyer with him. Tuc smiled, but was not convinced. I learnt how the traumatic experiences of refugees can stay with them for years.

Over the years I attended the weddings of Tuc's daughter and son. He was very proud of them as they had both completed studies at University. He was also very fond of his grandchildren. Whenever I asked him how he was, he would tell me he was 'flat out like a drinking lizard'.

This year Tuc did not call me for Tet. I thought how slack I had been for not calling him, instead.

Then one day he called. I thought he was going to rouse on me in his kind way for not having our Tet meal. But his story was more serious. He was very sick in hospital with cancer.

I was shocked, and I went to hospital to visit him. He was clearly ill. I stayed for a while and then he told me I should go; astute enough, despite his illness, to point out that I needed \$8 in coins to pay for parking at the hospital. His practical side never left him.

The last time I saw him I showed him some photos of Vietnam. It was easier than talking about his deteriorating health. I also took him a pair of mum's rosary beads that had been sitting in the back of a drawer since Mum died a few years before. Tuc held the beads as we looked through the photos. He told me 'our mother will be with me now'.

The next morning he rang me and told me how he had had the best sleep for a long time and thanked me for the rosary beads.

Tuc died on what would have been Mum's 85th birthday. We never did travel to Vietnam together, but I was very lucky to have met him. Every Tet I will still remember him with '*chuc mung na moi*'.

## Losing the fight for fair wages

### POLITICS

*Brian Lawrence*

I was making a submission to the former Australian Fair Pay Commission (AFPC) about single-breadwinner working families living below the poverty line. A member of AFPC observed that living in poverty was 'their choice'; if the second parent got a job, the family would not be living in poverty.

This 'blame the victim' attitude reflects fundamental issues in wage-setting in Australia. How many wage packets are needed to avoid poverty or achieve a decent standard of living? Shouldn't parents in low paid families be able to choose for one of them to stay home to care for their children?

The reality is that families on a single wage, at or near the national minimum wage, live in poverty. There is economic pressure for the second parent work just in order to make ends meet.

AFPC data suggests that the average family of four is usually above the poverty line. However this is because AFPC includes the second parent's Newstart unemployment payment in its calculations: stay-at-home parents are not entitled to this payment unless they are actively seeking employment.

If you hold the view that the second parent *should* 'get a job' or be prepared to do so, the inclusion of this payment might be justified when calculating the overall disposable income of the family. And if it is included, the level of minimum wages can be reduced accordingly.

The Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations (ACCER) objected to these misleading calculations; from 2008, AFPC shows a separate calculation for families of four where Newstart would not be payable. These figures show that the single breadwinner family is well below the poverty line.

Despite ACCER's repeated urgings for the minimum wage floor to be raised, no action has been taken, presumably on the basis that if things got too tough the second parent could get a job, or start searching for one, and therefore qualify for Newstart.

In AFPC's last decision of July 2009 (when it froze wages), it found families of four without Newstart were living 10 per cent below the poverty line, and those with Newstart were 2 per cent above it. Earlier this year a Fair Work Australia (FWA) report put these families 15 per cent below the poverty line.

This is why ACCER argued for the replacement of Work Choices by new legislation that required the wage tribunal to have regard to the needs of the low paid. The Fair Work Act

2009 does that.

The first wage case heard by Fair Work Australia (FWA) in 2010 was dominated by the need to address the pent up claims resulting from the 2009 wage freeze. It was perhaps not surprising that the parties and FWA did not deal with a range of underlying issues.

The Government's 2010 wage submission did not deal with the needs issue, or the question as to whether Newstart should be taken into account. It said it would 'provide a more detailed analysis of the needs of the low paid' in future wage reviews.

This position was curious; the 2011 [position](#) is unforgivable: 'Discussions around the needs of the low paid invariably require a subjective assessment of what constitutes a need, and a working definition of what constitutes poverty ... translating needs into a specific monetary amount can be problematic.'

The Government made no attempt to deal with the issue, despite earlier promises of a detailed analysis. Indeed it sought to denigrate attempts to measure needs and set poverty lines. It seems it intended to weaken or render ineffective the needs-based elements of the legislation.

FWA awarded a 3.4 per cent increase in minimum wage and other pay classifications, which is reasonable given the 3.3 per cent increase in the Consumer Price Index over the past 12 months.

However, ACCER's principal claim was for an increase of \$16.60 to minimum wage in order to improve the position of the lowest paid, and a CPI-based increase to all minimum wage rates. Put simply, this claim was based on a comparison between the costs of living and disposable incomes.

But FWA did not adjust minimum wage beyond the general increase. One reason was that it included, in its calculations of disposable income for a family of four, Newstart for the second parent. It estimated disposable income at \$100 per week more than a single-breadwinner family on minimum wage is entitled to.

This returns us to the early days of AFPC, with the implicit acceptance that a poverty wage can be set for a family, and that the second parent should seek or get a job in order to break out of poverty. Neither AFPC nor FWA gave reasons why Newstart should be taken into account.

This year's wage review was conducted 120 years after the release of the papal document [Rerum Novarum](#), which had a significant impact on the development of Australian industrial relations and minimum wage-setting.

To mark the anniversary, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference issued a statement, which heralded the minimum wage provisions of the Fair Work Act. It noted, however, that 'it

is only by the outcomes of the decisions that the success of the legislation can be measured’.

To date, the provisions cannot be regarded as a success.

## Islam in denial over burqas

### RELIGION

*Muhammad Izhar ul Haq*

They were furious. They were chanting slogans. They were swearing to crush the conspiracy being hatched against Islam. They were cursing the Western 'flawed' way of life. The rally was organised to condemn the banning of the burqa (full face veil) in France.

Paradoxically, hardly any of the protesters had actually read the text of the French enactment banning, from April, the full face veil. In countries like Pakistan, the nucleus of present Muslim extremism, where literacy is not more than 15 to 20 per cent and centuries old feudalism has been successfully forestalling education, who'd bother to find out and go through the text of the legislation?

The intellectual decline which has engulfed the Muslim world has thrown it into a dangerous state of denial. Everything that other, especially advanced countries, do is perceived and analysed in the light of 'conspiracy theories'. The majority of Muslims are suffering from a devastating persecution complex, which, in turn, is begetting and aggravating militant extremism. Such has been the reaction to the French burqa ban.

Every Muslim knows that wearing the burqa has never been irremissible in Islam. A considerable number of Islamic jurists do not support it. Millions of Muslim women, while reaping crops in agricultural fields, picking cotton in plantations of central Pakistan, handling herds in Central Asian pasturelands, teaching in universities, working in banks and elsewhere do not wear the burqa.

Billions of Muslim women have never, and will never, cover their faces while performing the pilgrimage to holy Mecca. They are not allowed by Islam to do so during pilgrimage.

In France, as elsewhere, only a handful of Muslim women cover their faces. Yet fanatics are making the French enactment an issue and presenting it as anti Islamic sentiment. The full face veil is being jumbled up with the *hijab* (head-covering). France has not prohibited covering of head. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has made wearing of *abaya* (robes) mandatory for all women who visit that country or live there, irrespective of their religion.

This brings us to another issue being thrown into oblivion by protesting Muslims. Millions of Muslims have migrated to the developed world where 'flawed secular' values are at variance with Islamic, or so called Islamic, requirements. There are more than 50 Muslim countries, some of which (such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar) are fabulously wealthy. Why it is that not one of all these countries can accommodate Muslim immigrants?

Statistics are mind-blowing. According to 2009 figures, 365,000 Muslims have made Australia their home, 281,000 live in Belgium, 657,000 in Canada, 3,554,000 in France, 4,026,000

in Germany, 946,000 in Netherlands, 650,000 in Spain, 1,647,000 in UK, and 2,454,000 in USA.

Millions are ensconced in Italy, Greece, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Austria, Japan and New Zealand. Millions more are struggling to follow. There are long queues in front of the embassies of Western countries. Asylum seekers are setting ashore from boats and cargo vessels. Many manage to land with tourist visas and vanish.

Economics is not the only catalyst. The unemployed destitute and the affluent lucky-one are equally enthusiastic to reach these promised lands. The rule of law, democratic norms, equal opportunities, better education prospects, and religious, political and personal freedom attract them to these countries. None of these is available in their homelands.

A strange *Kafalah* (sponsorship) system is prevailing in oil rich Middle Eastern citadels of Islam. Every migrant worker needs, by law, a guarantor who must be a local citizen. The guarantor legally owns the business and all movable and immovable property of the migrant, and documents are held in his custody. Nothing belongs to the migrant, whether he is entrepreneur or employee, except his passport, which he must carry wherever he goes.

‘When employers have near total control over migrants’ ability to change jobs, and sometimes to leave the country, workers can get trapped in exploitative situations in which they are forced to work without wages, get beaten or face other abuse,’ says a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report.

Outrage over slights such as the burqa ban in France are a distraction from these more important issues. Look at the protests against this backdrop. Isn’t it a farce? Albeit a tragic farce!

## New English biblical translation

POETRY

*Various*

### New English text

Paul is reading Porter and  
doesn't know  
so many words:  
'aleatory', 'gallimaufry'. He  
hasn't read Hesiod:  
'verdigris' is from the  
French, grey-green, a shadow on the  
humidor, so I'm  
guessing Hoplite's helmet was  
made of bronze —  
I remember the shine of  
new copper on  
Corpus Christi, quickly dulled, the  
body of christ is  
a Cathedral now, shares with  
the duomo and other public pates the  
chemistry of oxidation,  
a colour that, dichromatic,  
I know by name but cannot see.  
They are *translating* God again: (that's  
'carrying across', not 'carrying a cross',  
though carried away might be  
closer to the mark). Can



You decline 'Vernacular'?  
*Verna*, a home-born slave, hence  
the tongue of family. The  
diction'ry equates the  
Vulgate of St Jerome, in its day the  
lingua franca, but only of the erudite —  
The modern law aspires to common speech  
(in contracts, not in court) so  
Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and  
Let us pray away our way Yahweh and  
Save your thee's and thou's.  
Jesus said 'G'day mate, why don'tcher  
try a cast off the point there, I  
had a few bites just now, reckon you'll  
catch a feed, at least. I'll get the billy on ...'  
They knew him in the breaking of the bread:  
Awesome is what stuns our soul to love and  
Clumsy words cannot make it so.  
Hoplon's a shield, hoplite its soldier bearer:  
Greek, not Roman as Golgotha, where  
(casting lots by chance, 'aleatory')  
an outer garment found another corpus:  
that's a 'gallimaufry' (medley) if you like,  
but Porter does it better.  
—*Paul Dignam*

## Royal Ballet

I make friends with an old lady at the ballet,  
we talk about music,  
it is serious and we are serious too,  
We are on our own, looking for beauty,  
ready to snatch it out of the air  
and stash it in our pockets,  
We hoard it for long days  
stretching out in council flats,  
someone else's music blaring between floorboards,  
These dancers have us for this moment,  
both of us dazed,  
sitting next to each other but still managing to be alone,  
We chat politely in the intervals,  
the rest of the time we watch the beautiful bodies,  
sway with the score,  
scour the glistening air.

—*Jonathan Hadwen*

## NSW and Victoria's 'tough on crime' confusion

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

'Get tough on crime' is a game of one-upmanship that state politicians play during election campaigns. In the lead up to this year's March election in NSW, Coalition leader Barry O'Farrell [announced](#) a 'blitz on crime', committing a Coalition government to the recruitment of 550 new police officers. This was in response to Labor's Kristina Keneally, whose promises included a \$60 million law enforcement package.



It was a similar story in Victoria before November's state election, with Labor's John Brumby and Coalition leader Ted Baillieu both attempting to demonstrate toughness.

Now that the elections have been won and lost, both new governments are seeking to follow through on their election pledges. What is remarkable is the different approaches to what constitutes getting tough on crime. As mentioned, NSW believes police numbers is the answer. The Victorian Government, on the other hand, plans legislation to ensure more offenders are jailed.

To that end, the state's Attorney-General Robert Clark recently [asked](#) Victoria's Sentencing Advisory Council to look into minimum jail terms for teenagers convicted of violent crime. Meanwhile his NSW counterpart Greg Smith has [vowed](#) to reform the state's prison system by cutting what is Australia's largest prison population.

NSW is looking at Victoria's current relatively low rate of incarceration as a model. Victoria is seeking to adopt NSW attitudes from the era when, according to Smith, former premier Nathan Rees thought it was a 'badge of honour' to have 10,000 people in the jails.

Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards has [spearheaded](#) an innovative approach to protecting young offenders at risk. She has criticised Victoria's indiscriminate 'one size fits all' approach to sentencing and suggested the state's Attorney General should 'look north of the border as the new Liberal Government looks to reduce Australia's largest jail population by diverting offenders away from the prison system and reducing the rate of re-offending'.

Under the current Victorian law, the judiciary has the ability to hand out a harsh sentence if the situation requires. She argues that taking this flexibility away by fixing sentences in law is a backwards step. 'Judges, not politicians, should be setting sentences. When you are unwell you go and see a doctor... | [not] your local politician.'

Edwards also points out that the idea that the electorate wants harsh treatment for offenders is a furphy. She cites the [Tasmanian Jury Sentencing Study](#), which found that from a survey of jurors, 90 per cent agreed the judge's sentence was very or fairly appropriate, with

more than half of those surveyed leaning towards greater leniency than the judge's sentence.

The NSW Government is not alone in its recognition of Victoria's enlightened approach to law and order, where helping to keep young people out of prison through early intervention has been the key to preventing crime and ensuring community safety.

## How not to treat asylum seeker kids

### POLITICS

*Kerry Murphy*



Watching Immigration Minister Chris Bowen on ABC1's *Lateline* late last week, I was saddened to note that the Government's policy of sending asylum seekers to Malaysia is less concerned with protecting the asylum seekers' human rights and dignity than with breaking 'the business model of the people smugglers'.

Asked by host Tony Jones if this involved 'making an example' of 800 unaccompanied minors by sending them to Malaysia, Bowen [said](#) it's 'not a matter of making examples' but of 'ensuring you have a robust system in place to break the model. And of course we will treat people with dignity and ... with regard to their circumstances.'

'I do not want to send the message that it's okay to get on a boat if you fit a particular category,' he added, with reference to unaccompanied minors. 'The decision making is not based on principles of human rights and dignity, but on 'solving the boat people problem'.'

The focus on the situation of unaccompanied minors is legitimate. They present the Immigration Minister with a number of legal and ethical dilemmas. As Minister, he is legally their guardian and should be acting in their best interests.

Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the Refugee Convention. This creates legal obligations, to provide security for children, act in their best interests, and provide for family unity or family reunification. So is sending them to Malaysia, not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, in their 'best interests'?

The political issue is that if minors are exempted from the Malaysian deal, it creates an incentive for people smugglers to fill up their boats with children, who will legitimately want to be later reunited with their parents and family. There was a similar consequence when the temporary protection visa was introduced in 1999, and men found themselves separated from their families for years. By 2001, many of the passengers on the boats were women and children.

This is a genuine fear. It is not as if the smugglers worry about these international obligations. However, to focus on people smugglers misses the point of the issue.

I recall an incident in Woomera detention centre in 2001. It was late at night, and we had been working for several days preparing cases. Many of the detainees were women who had children with them. The fathers and husbands had arrived previously and had been granted TPVs, but could not sponsor their families.

One night while preparing a case for a young Iraqi woman, I gave her children some highlighters to draw with. I did not notice that one child started to use the highlighters to draw on the office wall. The next day, an officer from the camp saw the graffiti and was very critical of me for letting the child do this. 'This is damaging government property,' I was told. 'Someone will have to pay for the damage.'

That night there was a strong storm and the doors to several rooms were seriously damaged with the ferocity of the wind. The next day I cynically asked the officer, 'Who is going to pay for the damage caused to government property by the wind?'

Like the officer at Woomera, the government's focus is misplaced. We should not be obsessed with people smugglers, or with a child scribbling on a wall. These are diversions from the central issue, which should at all times be the dignity and wellbeing of the human lives that are at stake.

Rather than focusing on asylum seekers, we must focus on establishing fair systems that protect refugees from being returned to places where their lives or freedoms could be threatened, while also providing for family unity and certainty for their security. Talk of breaking 'business models' only distracts us from these key obligations.

## Why we swear

### COMMUNITY

*Philip Harvey*

It is instructional to consider those people who refuse to swear in court on a Bible because, they say, swearing on the Bible is forbidden in the Gospel of Matthew. Presumably anyone who firmly follows everything in Matthew is not about to commit perjury anyway. Refusing to swear for sound scriptural and legal reasons is a right, I would imagine. But this is not the same kind of swearing that is rousing the attention of lawyers, activists and others in recent days. Fuck no.

Victorians are facing the prospect of receiving on-the-spot fines for swearing in public. It's hard to believe that this is happening in the same city that has the world's biggest comedy festival.

Why do people swear? 'Buggered if I know' is a normal response. For some it is an outlet, a safety valve for frustration or annoyance. A swear word can emphasise a point in discussion, but is a poor instrument in rhetoric. In the hands of a skilled orator though it can clinch the argument. Observe Billy Connolly on a good day. The rest of us are not Billy Connolly, but still he demonstrates that timing is crucial.

Australian comedy has always thrived on the swear word, be it for cheap laughs or satirical demolition. As any joker will tell you, if laughter is your market you will try every sales strategy.

I sometimes catch the train known affectionately by its customers in Melbourne as 'the effing Epping' and there is nothing more tiresome than overhearing late-night conversation on that train where every third word is one of the Big Three: B, F, or S. This is not conversation, but a certain state of mind. It shows not so much a paucity of vocabulary — the talkers are every day exposed to the riches of English — as a combination of low expectations and sheer verbal laziness. The gift of language has been traded for a mess of pottage.

Not that we want to judge their talk. Such speakers seem to have forgotten they are even using swear words. They are, in fact, the first and easiest targets of language police with the power to inflict on-the-spot fines.

The problems escalate once we meet a main cause for swearing: anger. Swearing warns that we are nearing the short fuse, the ballistic broadcast, the imminent four-act play in five minutes. Saint Paul, among others, entreats us to be slow to anger, but even Saint Paul must have had his moments.

It is when swearing signals aggression that we have to worry. Abusive language only begins to be funny if we are not its focus. The worst part of repeated and vicious swearing is



when its intention is clearly to close down further conversation. It is probably the fear of that extreme which prompts some people to find a way of killing it by the opposite action: threat by fine.

I am fascinated to know what constitutes swearing. Where does it start and end? In Australian life, the workplace is not real until the odd 'bloody' has been muttered during a heated exchange or in response to some minor incident.

Indeed, 'bloody' is one of those curious proofs of democratic life. It is a sign that we are all human after all. 'Bloody' is the spontaneous response any of us may use, whether in parliament or in the woodshed. It is the automatic disyllabic utterance when we hit our finger instead of the nail, or watch a Collingwood ruckman shirtfront our favourite idol. It is hard to imagine police issuing fines in such situations.

Another use of swearing is to make light of, or break, taboos. One of my favourite Italian poets is Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli, who wrote thousands of sonnets in Romanesco, the local dialect of the Eternal City. Among the many vulgar and outrageous poems in his output, Belli wrote two sonnets consisting entirely of slang words for the male and female members: *ciscio*, *nerbo*, *tortore*, *pennarolo*. Translations have come up with English equivalents (percy, peter, poker, wonder-whammer) yet when considering that this is only one dialect within Italian we are reminded of the complaint that modern English does not have as many good swear words as other languages (a fair complaint when you consider its vast vocabulary).

Of swearing there is no end and banning it only makes people more inventive than ever with terms for essential parts of the human anatomy. If I were to quote all the swear words used at the Melbourne Comedy Festival it would exceed the word limit of this article. But imagine how many inventive new words will be added to the English language once we are forced to stop using the ones we have already.

Language is untameable. Fining people for swearing is, on the face of it, silly. We can no more control what people say than we can hold the wind, or even a very large fart.

Speaking of which, who decides where the correct words end and the rude ones start? Is a government department head going to issue police with a list of which synonyms for breezy bottom are swear words, and which are not? Which ones raise a stink? Which ones should be silent but deadly? No doubt our department head, the one who uses 'bloody' in a democratic manner, is not losing sleep over this issue.

Because the intended law is not about controlling language, but who uses the language. It is not likely to be enforced on users of the democratic 'bloody', sports fans on a Saturday afternoon, or teenagers who shout out expletives for the fun of it. It is much more likely to be used either as threat or reality on those who can least afford the fine and cannot fight back: poor students at public demonstrations, individuals unjustly accused in a melee, drunken Aborigines on the last train home to effing Epping.

