

The neo-liberal face of the new Greens <i>Matthew Holloway</i>	<u>1</u>
Denouncing bad religion <i>Peter Kirkwood</i>	<u>3</u>
Ethical demands of a regional solution <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>5</u>
Boys learning sin and sex <i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>8</u>
Honouring cleaners <i>Scott Steensma</i>	<u>10</u>
Gillard the least of Labor's worries <i>John Warhurst</i>	<u>12</u>
Working mum's bar blues <i>M. L. Emmett</i>	<u>14</u>
Oregon on the euthanasia slippery slope <i>Frank Brennan</i>	<u>18</u>
Media gag silences asylum seekers <i>Jo Coghlan</i>	<u>22</u>
Peace in Syria will stop the boats <i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>24</u>
The black face of fashion <i>Ellena Savage</i>	<u>26</u>
Mourning Kevin Rudd <i>Lyn Bender</i>	<u>28</u>
Forgiving Japan <i>Zac Alstin</i>	<u>30</u>
Rednecks, bogans and bad boat people <i>Kerry Murphy</i>	<u>32</u>
Doubting democracy in Muslim Turkey <i>William Gourlay</i>	<u>34</u>
My morning with Frank Brennan <i>Brian Doyle</i>	<u>36</u>
Carbon price will cause pain <i>Charles Rue</i>	<u>38</u>
Kinglake undone <i>Jordie Albiston</i>	<u>40</u>
Parable of the unwelcome strangers <i>Greg Foyster</i>	<u>52</u>
Bill Morris and Simon Overland in exile <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>55</u>



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The neo-liberal face of the new Greens

POLITICS

Matthew Holloway

Many commentators have claimed that Labor is losing its way, forsaking its soul, and ultimately turning their back on those people that labor is meant to represent. So what has happened to these people, where have they gone and what new political allegiances have they formed?

Many argue that Labor's workers and progressive elements have found a home in the Greens. But like Labor, and all parties that become part of the political furniture, the Greens too may lose their soul. Indeed segments of the Greens may already have lost their way.

The 2010 Tasmanian state election was a major turning point for the Greens in their birthplace. They gained 21 per cent of the vote and elected five members to the house of Assembly. They were the kingmakers for David Bartlett's Labor party, which won 10 seats. This gave both parties a combined majority over the Liberals, which also won 10 seats.

This was the first true coalition Green government in Australia. Greens leader Nick McKim was given a portfolio, and Greens member for Denison Cassey O'Conner was made a cabinet secretary and later promoted to minister in her own right.

O'Conner was a controversial choice, not only as cabinet secretary but also for as minister. She is one of the least experienced members, elected on preferences after the Greens leader Peg Putt retired in 2008.

In comparison, the outspoken Greens member Kim Booth has been a member for the electorate of Bass since 2002 as was Tim Morris, the Greens Deputy Leader.

How congruent have been the actions of the Greens leader with Green policies? In February McKim stood down 56 guards at Risdon Prison without pay. The workers were preparing for industrial action over safety concerns they had been trying to negotiate with the government over a period of months. McKim locked out the workers and brought in police to deal with the situation.

Unions Tasmania secretary Kevin Harkins stated that McKim had acted against the Greens industrial relations policy while the CPSU likened McKim and his actions to those of John Howard in the 1998 waterfront dispute.

Last week the Greens-Labor Government handed down its budget which seeks to slash \$1.4 billion from the public sector over the next four years, including a \$100 million cut to health within the next financial year.

1700 full-time jobs will be scrapped, including 100 police jobs. The 5 per cent cap on water

prices will rise to 10% and public sector worker will have pay rises capped at 2% per year, well below rising inflation and cost of living increases.

This is in conflict with the the Greens election promise not to accept redundancies of public sector workers.

Since the budget release McKim has also been spruiking the sale of the Hayes Prison Farm, a low-security facility in the Derwent Valley.

He argued that \$4.5 million would need to be spent to upgrade the facility. But he has also stated that much would need to be spent to prepare the facility for sale from which a return of only about \$2.5 million could be expected

This is in stark contrast to the Greens MPs in New South Wales who in 2009 led the campaign to stop the privatisation of Cessnock Prison. The initiated a parliamentary inquiry into the sale.

Recently McKim also took up the Education portfolio. He has promoted the governments plan to close over 20 public schools. He argues that smaller schools struggle to teach a broad curriculum and that money would be better spent upgrading larger schools.

By their actions since they were promoted to government the Tasmanian Greens would astound many progressives who vote for them across Australia.

One may ask whether this the new neo-liberal face of the Greens, or merely McKim channelling Kennett-style austerity measures.

If we are to judge by the Greens' sister parties from Ireland and Germany, these are only the initial signs that the party has been taken over by vested interests. The Greens in many states of Australia have gained control in local councils and in most cases they have continued the business as usual policies of the major parties such as council privatisations, subcontracting council services, cutting funding to community facilities and increase rates above inflation levels.

We might expect that, like the major parties, the Greens will further disenchant and alienate their base as they grow stronger.

The Greens are often accused of being radicals and socialists. But the example given by Nick McKim in Tasmania shows that in power they will keep the good ship capitalism still steaming ahead. Moreover with the Greens taking the balance of power in the Upper House of Federal Parliament from today — 1 July 2011 — a critical eye must be held up to the way the Greens work with policy.

Denouncing bad religion

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

The saturation coverage of the assassination of Osama bin Laden is a recent reminder that bad religion dominates media headlines. It provided further ammunition for anti-religionists, like the so-called New Atheists, to make blanket denunciations of religion, that it's all bad.

The interviewee featured here on Eureka Street TV freely admits there is much bad religion out there. But he makes a plea that if we are to deal with it effectively, we must discriminate between good and bad religion, and there must be alliances amongst the forces for good, including religionists and atheists, against bad manifestations of religion.

British academic, Peter Vardy brings his considerable skills as a theologian, philosopher, educator and communicator to this task. He is recorded here speaking at a seminar in Sydney called 'Good Religion, Bad Religion' organised by the [St James Ethics Centre](#) and the [Islamic Sciences and Research Academy](#) of Australia.

Since 1999 Vardy has been Vice Principal of [Heythrop College](#). Begun by the Jesuits in 1614, the college was originally founded in Louvain in Belgium to educate English priests at a time when Catholics were persecuted and priests were outlawed in England. It is now a specialist college of the University of London, and offers courses in theology and philosophy.

Vardy has a Master's degree in theology, and a PhD from King's College, London, his doctoral thesis being on 'The Concept of Eternity'. He lectured in the Philosophy of Religion at King's College, and other institutions before moving to teach this discipline at Heythrop College.

One of his abiding interests is fostering relations and understanding among religious traditions, particularly the Abrahamic faiths. He is on the academic board of Leo Baeck College which trains rabbis in the Jewish Reformed Tradition in Britain, and he has links with a number of Muslim organizations.

He is much in demand as a speaker, and travels around the globe speaking on such topics as ethics and values education, truth claims in different religions, the impact of globalization, particularly on religion, and nurturing a spiritual perspective in a secular world.

Vardy is a prolific author, and his books include *God of our Fathers; And If It's True?; The Puzzle of God; The Puzzle of Evil; The Puzzle of Ethics; The Puzzle of Sex; The Puzzle of the Gospels; Great Christian Thinkers* (editor); *What is Truth?; Being Human; The Thinker's Guide to Evil; The Thinker's Guide to God*; and his latest, *Good and Bad Religion*.

Peter Vardy will be in Australia in mid July. His books and further information are available from

Wombat Education .

Ethical demands of a regional solution

POLITICS

Andrew Hamilton

The SBS series [*Go Back to Where You Came From*](#) had the great merit of touching the imagination of viewers and participants. It created space for a thoughtful conversation about asylum seekers and the Malaysia solution.

That space is also needed to reflect on the ethical issues at stake in the Malaysia solution. I shall outline my argument that it is not morally justifiable and what follows from that conclusion. Others may disagree. But the subsequent conversation may then illuminate points of divergence about the importance of moral considerations in public policy, and about the principles that make a policy right or wrong.

The starting point of my argument lies in an understanding of human dignity. It argues that each human being is precious, and must be treated as an end in herself, and not as a means to an end. Our dignity must be respected because we are human, not because we are Australian, Christian or whatever.

What respect for human dignity entails can be spelled out in terms of human flourishing. If they are to flourish, human beings need security, shelter, food, health, education, freedom of belief and expression, and a society to belong to and contribute to. The absence of such conditions is reflected in physical and mental distress.

For the argument, too, it is axiomatic that human beings can only flourish within society. We are diminished without families, schools, markets, places of conversation and governments. If we can live with human dignity only because we are supported in a network of structured relationships, we are bound also to ensure that our society respects the human dignity of all others, and particularly those whose flourishing is threatened.

This obligation falls on us as individuals and citizens, and on the governments through whom our obligations to those distant from ourselves are coordinated. That obligation is measured by the extent to which it is reasonably possible for people or institutions to meet it. That is why some obligations can be discharged only through international cooperation. But citizens are responsible for demanding their governments act ethically.

This is the basis for reflecting on what respect for the human dignity of refugees entails. The ethical obligation of society to respect the human dignity of refugees is roughly codified in the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the status of refugees. It commits signatory states to offer protection to claimants who are found to be refugees.

Measured by this ethical framework, Australia does show respect for the human dignity of those whom it brings to Australia as refugees. This is a gesture of international cooperation to

protect those whose human dignity is not respected in their own nations.

But Australia fails in many ways in respect for the human dignity of those who come to Australia, particularly by boat, to make their claim for refugee status. Prolonged detention has led to mental trauma and often to prolonged mental illness. When detention and other measures are deployed as a means of deterrence, they are doubly wrong because they infringe the human dignity of asylum seekers in order to gain a broader end.

Supporters of the Malaysian solution have advocated it as an instrument for sharing international responsibility for refugees. It involves Australia accepting up to 5000 asylum seekers in Malaysia, who have been declared to be refugees but who have not yet found a country that will offer them protection. In return Australia will send up to 1000 asylum seekers to Malaysia without adjudicating or accepting their claims for protection.

The morality of this proposal must be judged by the extent to which it respects the human dignity of the asylum seekers whom Australia proposes to send to Malaysia. Because human dignity is inviolable and non-transferrable, any disrespect for their human human dignity cannot be justified by the benefits received by others involved in the policy. Their claim on Australia for protection cannot be transferred to others.

This means that the proposal can be ethically justified only if it guarantees to those sent to another country as high a level of protection as they would find in Australia. For all asylum seekers this means adequate food, shelter, medical care, security and support for family groups. For refugees, it also means as prompt acceptance into a society with opportunity to build a new life there as they would find in Australia.

These are the minimal ethical demands of a regional solution. Most discussion has turned on whether the basic conditions of human dignity will be guaranteed in Malaysia. But even if the Malaysian government guaranteed the security, sustenance and education of the asylum seekers, the human dignity of those found to be refugees would still be significantly infringed. They would be unable to enter Malaysian society equally, and they have no possibility of prompt acceptance into another society. The claim that they justly make on Australia for the protection of their human dignity is therefore contravened.

This failure to respect the human dignity of claimants could only be ethically justified if the burden that Australia incurred by offering protection were unreasonable, either absolutely, or in comparison with neighbouring nations. Any comparative statistics make that claim unsustainable.

The Malaysian solution raises further ethical question for those who judge it to fail the requirements of respecting human dignity. As citizens, they would be expected to make clear their moral judgment of the policy. If they are involved in discussing and implementing it, they would not be able to take any active part in implementing processes that involve disrespect for the human dignity of the people involved. But they might properly be involved

in attempting to mitigate the effects of the disrespect for human dignity involved in it.

That is my argument. Of course it is open to question at many points. Some will argue that all ethical positions are relative and so irrelevant. Others may assert that it is arbitrary to speak of inalienable human dignity. It might also be argued that only individuals have ethical obligations, not groups or nations, or that we have moral responsibilities only to our own, and not to strangers.

Some may claim that it is legitimate to infringe the human dignity of one group of people in order to benefit a larger number. Some may claim that in dealing with governments one must leave behind one's ethical principles and be pragmatic.

But I expect that there is something to be said for aiming at consistency between our ethical principles, our actions and our hopes for national life. That is the presumption of any ethical discussion.

Boys learning sin and sex

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Tree of Life* (PG). Director: Terrence Malick. Starring: Sean Penn, Brad Pitt, Jessica Chastain, Hunter McCracken, Laramie Eppler. 138 minutes**

The relationship between brothers is not like any other. Growing up, brothers, especially if they were born close together, can be at once the best of friends, and the fiercest of adversaries. I have two brothers, and to this day I can identify the ways in which my character has been shaped by my relationships with them.

There are many layers to Terence Malick's remarkable new film *The Tree of Life*. As [noted](#) by reviewers such as American Jesuit James Martin, the film is first and foremost a meditation, and like any act of meditation, it will speak to each individual in a unique voice. To me, it contains one of the most touching and authentic portrayals of childhood brotherly love that I have seen on screen.

This is a film with esoteric aspirations. In his review Martin poignantly describes watching it as like 'living inside a prayer'; this is apt, for, like Malick's earlier work, notably the sublime war film *The Thin Red Line*, it contains, in place of voiceover narration, the whispered, questioning prayers of its characters.

These tumble across the film's mundane, 1950s American suburban setting, but follow us also, literally, into space, and into the far reaches of the earth's history; to the very corners of the universe and of time, which Malick shows us in a way that sets his characters' tiny lives in the context of a vast continuum of existence.

Not that this makes these lives seem inconsequential. On the contrary, the stylised images of roiling, looming space, accompanied by evocative classical music, attempt to recreate on film nothing less than the formation of the world, with the characters' existence shown explicitly to be the end result of this creative event.

Yet despite such metaphysical considerations, the film's most striking feature is how it portrays ordinariness with such truth and beauty that it is rendered extraordinary.

The core of the film is a portrayal of the childhood of pre-adolescent Jack (McCracken), who grows up in the suburb of Waco, Texas in the 1950s. He has two younger brothers, an adoring, affectionate mother (Chastain), and strict disciplinarian father (Pitt).

Jack is nurtured by his mother, yet comes to relate more closely to his emotionally distant father, after he takes the first tentative steps across the threshold of experience (sin, sexuality), and learns of the cruelty that exists both within humanity and, it would appear, within God

(‘Why should I be good if you aren’t?’ he prays).

This is a coming of age story, and so there is a sense of nostalgia about these childhood memories; romantic recollections of a world where children owned the outside world, running through streets, fields and forests, climbing trees and leaping among the spray of a sprinkler.

That world contrasts with the modern world inhabited by the adult Jack (Penn), who we see reflecting on his childhood from a glass-and-concrete skyscraper world. The contrast is stark, and reinforces the fact that this is a film about loss, and that experiencing loss is one of the formative features of growing up.

The loss at the heart of *Tree of Life* is that of Jack’s brother R. L. (Eppler), who, we learn, died as a teenager. This loss clearly affects the adult Jack still, for many of his recollections centre on his relationship with this cherubic boy. The relationship is beautifully portrayed.

Two scenes in particular epitomise this. In one, Jack goads R. L. into putting his finger inside an electrical socket. The socket is not live, but R. L. is afraid. When he eventually does place his finger inside it is not because of pride or because he has overcome his fear. It is simply, as he says, that he ‘trusts’ his brother.

This scene finds a dark reflection later on, in an incident involving a ballbearing gun. By this stage, Jack has begun to examine, curiously, his own potential for wrongdoing. And so this time R. L.’s faith is repaid with betrayal. Yet the aftermath of this incident finds the boys discovering perhaps their first poignant experience of giving and receiving grace. This is an incredibly powerful image of the unique love that is shared by brothers.

Malick’s vision is ambitious. Not only does *Tree* portray the creation of the world, it concludes with a vision of heaven. This is shown to be a place of reunion with the people you have known in your life. So even in this the grandness of Malick’s vision boils down to a simple acknowledgement of the centrality to existence of human relationships. The film’s metaphysical elements will divide audiences, yet its vision of humanity is profound.

Honouring cleaners

NON-FICTION

Scott Steensma

Spotting Ben before he starts his shift I ask him how his week is going. 'Good. But it's only Monday!' He laughs and throws me a smile. On Saturday I ask him the same question. He runs his hand through his shock of dark, wavy hair. 'Good. Only one day to go!' The smile is tired, but still there.

Ben is one of the service workers whose legions roam office buildings long after the office workers have gone home for the day. Every evening as the office workers finish, they begin: the cleaners, the tidy-uppers, the near-invisible army of people who pick up the day's mess.

They collect balls of paper that didn't quite make the bin, strap on vacpacs to suck up the sugar spilled from lunchtime coffees, and mop away shreds of paper towel that have been ground into the toilet tiles by loafer clad feet.

The office workers return the next morning to find their workplace pristine. They take this their due: in this world some clean and some are cleaned for, and the latter do not contemplate the former, other than to cast aspersions upon them when a bin is found unemptied.

For four years Ben has cleaned my office. On a good night he can clean the whole building in two hours. On a bad night, if the toilet has been vandalised or a child has smeared cake across the lobby, it can take three.

One night after knockoff I stop for a chat. He mentions a second job. And a third.

I tell him he deserves a break. He laughs. 'I just had one. I didn't have a main job for two months. I spent every day looking for a job. That was enough holiday. Now I want to work as much as I can.' On his 'holiday' Ben cleaned our office every evening, and worked all weekend.

The average full time employee in Australia works 44 hours a week. The people in the office Ben cleans pull 35. During his busiest weeks Ben slogs through over 70.

This is an improvement. For seven months while he was studying his working day was truly Herculean. By 3.00am he was out of bed and pushing a vacuum cleaner around an office building. At 8.30am he arrived at a mechanics workshop. Six hours later, his hands black with grease, he went home for a 15 minute lunch before heading into the city to sit in a lecture hall blearily taking notes.

The moment the drone of the lecturer's voice ended he replaced it with the hum of another vacuum as he frantically cleaned the offices of the university. Then he staggered back to class for 90 more minutes of weary learning.

At 9pm he drove to my office to clean up after me.

On a good night he would be in bed by midnight. Fourteen hours of work. Three hours of class. Three hours of sleep.

I tell him this schedule sounds punishing. He responds that 'there were two days I worked like that, but all the other days it was alright because I didn't have the course'. When I note that classes or not he still had to work 14 hours he laughs. 'I had to earn a bit of money, I'm supporting my uncle over here. He was the one who looked after me when I first came.'

Ben arrived in Australia in 2003 to study, supported by his family here and on the subcontinent. His desire to prove worthy of their hopes propels him through seven-day week after seven-day week.

He describes how one morning as a child he and his parents perched on one bicycle to ride to his father's workplace at 5.00am. His father lost sight of the road in the darkness, hit something, and sent them all plummeting into the mud.

'Why did this happen? It's because my dad didn't study that much.' Ben's father was too poor to study, too poor to get jobs needing important-looking bits of paper, and too poor to be able to turn down work that required him to ride miles every morning in the pre-dawn darkness.

Ben is saving every dollar he can to pay for a business degree. While he is eligible for HECS he wants to pay the fees upfront, and has deferred his course so that he can do so.

He works as hard as he does so he won't have to struggle the same way his parents did, and so that he can help his family as they have helped him. 'I gotta lot of responsibilities on my shoulders, this is why I want to do well in life.'

It's getting late, and we head our separate ways. Me to my home, him to the mop cupboard. As I close the door behind me I wave and he flashes me a weary grin. When my colleagues arrive in the morning no-one will notice how conscientiously he has done his job.

Gillard the least of Labor's worries

POLITICS

John Warhurst

Senator John Faulkner exempted Labor parliamentary leaders from specific criticism during his recent [Neville Wran Lecture](#), but he certainly didn't help Julia Gillard by once again focusing media attention on Labor's membership weaknesses.

It gave Kevin Rudd the opportunity to repeat his own [diagnosis](#) of Labor's internal problems and for union leader Paul Howes, who had helped bring him down 12 months ago, to attack Rudd as a hypocrite who was a major part of the problem.

All of this was predictable. But it did nothing to settle Labor's problems at the federal level; rather it only contributed to further gloom about Labor's prospects.

In fact, whatever Gillard's take on the many valid points about greater membership participation that Faulkner made they are not primarily her responsibility and there is little she herself can do about them anyway. Past party leaders, like Gough Whitlam, have tackled such issues from Opposition with nothing to lose. Recent Opposition leaders, like Simon Crean, expended energy on internal reform for little benefit in terms of his leadership.

Faulkner's lecture came just before Gillard's first anniversary as prime minister at a time when the media are floating the possibility that she will go the way of Rudd. It has reached the stage that the Independents, Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott, are being questioned about a change of Labor PM.

The media are not indulging in their own fantasies, but feeding off rumours circulating around Parliament House and gossip from within the party. The message is that Gillard has until Christmas to improve the party's low standing in the polls or she may be replaced by Rudd or someone else.

That scenario is a classic example of failing to learn from your mistakes. Whatever the wisdom of Rudd's demise, the manner of its happening was rejected emphatically by the electorate. It will hang over Gillard for a very long time.

Surely the strategy of changing the leader to save the party would not be employed again by Labor's inner circle, especially those from NSW who are serial offenders in this regard. To do so would reinforce the claims of the Opposition, that it's just the undemocratic way that Labor does business.

Not only is blaming and then changing the leader a bad idea in principle, but such discussion at the moment is seriously premature. We are not yet 12 months into the term of this government. Only from August 2012, after two years, should Gillard be judged on her

government's record. Urgency to act is no excuse as the Government appears likely to serve its full term, unless it pulls the plug itself.

There are much more important issues than leadership for Labor to be thinking about. The first is to deliver on some policies and the second is to plan how it will conduct itself under Labor-Green control of the Senate.

Uncertainty of purpose in government is even worse than having an unpopular leader or delivering unpopular outcomes. The greatest weakness of this government is its failure to make final decisions about those issues that Gillard addressed when she first took office. Issues like the carbon tax and the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees especially have dragged on for far too long.

Even if the ultimate decisions are initially unpopular Gillard Labor needs to make them quickly and then try to explain them to the community and to defend them against critics on both the Right and the Left. Uncertainty is killing the government with open-minded middle-of-the-road voters.

Labor shouldn't fall once again for the apparent 'easy fix' of changing the leader, when it has more important problems to address.

Working mum's bar blues

POETRY

M. L. Emmett

Bavarian Aunt

Aunt Lottie had a slow and careful walk

every step could jar

the delicate balance

of the fragile grand piano

she had swallowed.

It was no ordinary instrument

it was entirely made of crystal

which added to the fears

of its disturbance

or destruction

by the simplest slip or stumble

or missed footing on a step.

It was a slight inconvenience

she had taken in her stride.

Matters concerning the said piano

were only discussed in hushed tones

on Wednesday afternoons

and only with her dearest nephew, Ludwig

who sensitively seemed to understand

the precious nature of imagination

and the tickling discomforts

of digested furniture and such things

as fancy may create.

Worn-down days of winter

In the worn-down days of winter
the night sinks early
in mallee rooted smoke
The days seep slowly
from frosted whites
to saturate with green
The tattered shreds of cloud
are barely held together
by pins of light
A bolt of grey chiffon
has rolled across
the counter of the sky
Riding the tides of wind
wild writhing trees
are waves of unleashed energy
Hailstones
like iced pearl drop
and smash to earth granita

This is not Manet's Paris

This is not Edouard Manet's *Paris*
Not that white marble bar, *un bar aux Folies-Bergere*
with that peachy round, velvet-corseted young woman
soft unseen hands of a lacy courtesan
on display with the pale pink roses and juicy mandarins
facing the elegant 19th C chandeliered room
and her gentleman admirers.

No this is Brack's Bar
Melbourne in the fifties
when the Collins Street mob
have knocked off
to schooner themselves
'til six o'clock and home.
Squared and angular this woman is omnipotent
A working mother with dark shadowed eyes
she offers nothing more than serving drinks
and mopping up the mess men leave behind
working stoical hands planted on the bar ready
ready for action, ready for anything, coping
giving nothing but her labour
can't complain, who'd listen?
But those spring poppies playful
in that over ripe womb vase
they are a future hope of things to come
alive and real they belong to her
and she will take them home

The other side of words

On the other side of words
beyond adjectives and metaphors
beyond the comparisons
and differences
beyond the actions of verbs
and the definition of noun-names
there, the dead are asleep

in a wordless ever-night
a never-light, twilight
on the other side of words.

Oregon on the euthanasia slippery slope

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Americans love conversation and public disputation about contested moral and ethical issues. Given the Australian Greens' continuing fascination with euthanasia, I decided to visit Oregon which has had a physician assisted suicide law in place since 1997.

In 2010, 96 Oregonians asked their doctors to prescribe a deadly barbiturate which they could ingest causing their own deaths; 65 of them went ahead and did so. This mode of dying accounts for just 0.2 per cent of deaths in Oregon. In the Netherlands, euthanasia accounts for ten times that percentage of deaths, and almost a third of them occur without the patient's explicit request.

I met with representatives from Providence Health, the largest Catholic health provider in the state; Physicians for Compassion, doctors who have strong ethical objections to their colleagues prescribing deadly medications; medical personnel from the Oregon Health Sciences University (OHSU), the institution through which most of the suicide procedures are instituted; and with Barbara Coombs Lee, president of Compassion and Choices, the principal national advocacy group espousing 'physician assisted death'.

Coombs Lee eschews use of the word 'suicide', suggesting that it implies that the terminally ill are mentally ill. She insists, 'Assisted suicide, committed by a physician or anyone else, remains a felony in Oregon. If a physician aided or abetted the suicide of her mentally ill patient, she would and should be prosecuted.'

When seeking my meeting with Ms Coombs Lee, I wrote:

I am an Australian lawyer and Jesuit priest. I serve on the national board of St Vincent's Health Care, one of the major health providers in Australia. I am attending the Catholic health conference in Atlanta in early June. On my way home, I will take the opportunity to come to Portland to check out your physician assisted suicide law. I am keen to hear a variety of perspectives on the workings of the Oregon law. Is there any chance I could meet with you?

She replied:

I'm grateful for your curiosity, but would not anticipate your learning anything to impact your Catholic perspective on aid in dying. Our view is Catholic providers should not obstruct a patient's request for aid in dying (distinguished from suicide) and should facilitate referral to cooperating physicians in appropriate cases. The states of Oregon and Washington publish yearly reports and these are available on the States' websites. They would be good general data sources. Our website also has a large body of data. We don't get many requests for dialogue from priests, outside a debate setting, but I'm game.

This was too good a challenge for me. I replied, 'I'm game if you are.'

Jack Kevorkian, known as Dr Death, had just died, and of natural causes. The liberal *New York Times* carried an opinion piece headed 'Dr Kevorkian's victims', pointing out that 60 per cent of those assisted in death, or killed, by Kevorkian 'weren't actually terminally ill. In several cases, autopsies revealed 'no anatomical evidence of disease'.

Kevorkian believed people had a right to commit suicide and a right to receive assistance in committing suicide, regardless of whether they were terminally ill or in great pain. Coombs Lee was very careful to distinguish the aims of her organisation from the *modus operandi* of Kevorkian.

She said, 'We don't think euthanasia is good public policy. For us, the patient being in control from beginning to end is crucially important. Even if very restricted in movement, we think it important that the patient have the consolation of knowing that they are always in control — that they can stop the procedure at any time.'

Since then, she has told the *Medscape Medical News* that Kevorkian was a flamboyant provocateur: 'He never said to other physicians, "Let's develop a standard of care".'

Critics of physician assisted suicide and opponents of Compassion and Choices claim that physician assisted suicide is a step on the slippery slope to euthanasia which has been pragmatically abandoned by such groups for the moment because of its rejection by Californian voters in 1988. Ed Pellegrino, the greatest American bioethicist of the age, once pointed out that:

[T]he slippery slope is not a myth. Historically it has been a reality in world affairs. Once a moral precept is breached a psychological and logical process is set in motion which follows what I would call the law of infinite regress of moral exceptions. One exception leads logically and psychologically to another. In small increments a moral norm eventually obliterates itself. The process always begins with some putative good reason, like compassion, freedom of choice, or liberty. By small increments it overwhelms its own justifications.'

The highly respected Daniel Callahan from the Hastings Center speaks of the organised obfuscation of the advocates for physician assisted suicide. Having abandoned euthanasia after 1988, they now want to avoid the term 'suicide' as one newspaper reporter has called it 'a killer at the ballot box'. Using phrases like 'medically assisted death', 'hastened death', and 'patient-directed aid in dying', Callahan thinks the advocates are disguising their real activity and purpose which is the 'medicalisation of autonomy' and the 'medical legitimisation' of suicide.

Barbara Glidewell, who had been the OHSU Ombudsman for 35 years, was responsible during the first 12 years of Oregon's Death With Dignity Act for facilitating the patient-provider process for terminally ill, adult patients making a voluntary request to access

the law. She told me that in 2010 the most frequent end-of-life concern expressed by patients seeking physician aid in dying was loss of autonomy (96 per cent), with only 10.2 per cent expressing concern about inadequate pain control.

Chuck Bentz, one of the Physicians for Compassion, shared with me the story of his patients, a 76-year-old athletic man with a melanoma. Chuck had known this patient and his wife for over a decade. He provided a referral to a reputable oncologist. According to Bentz this is what happened:

As he went through his chemotherapy and radiation therapy, he became less able to do this activity, causing a depression, which was documented by his radiation oncologist. At his final visit with his medical oncologist, he expressed a wish for doctor-assisted suicide. Rather than taking the time and effort to address his depression, or ask me to respond to his depression as his primary care physician and as someone who knew him, the medical oncologist called me and asked me to be the 'second opinion' for his assisted-suicide. The oncologist told me that secobarbital 'works very well' for patients like this, and that she had done this many times.

Bentz objected and advised that there were better ways to address his patient's needs at this time. Next he knew, his patient was dead, from a lethal overdose. He obtained the death certificate which wrongly listed the cause of death as melanoma. And all is said to be well in the State of Oregon.

Bentz is concerned that this law impacts adversely not only on the doctor-patient relationship, but also on the professional relationships between doctors. The American Medical Association still regards physician assisted suicide as unethical.

Callahan says, 'In the case of Oregon, we have been assured that all is well, that no abuses are occurring. In their confidence and firmness those assurances are the equal of those expressed in the Netherlands prior to its confidential surveys', which revealed that doctors regularly euthanase patients without their consent or without sufficient regard for the mental state of the patient.

The US Catholic Bishops, worried that physician assisted suicide will spread beyond Oregon and Washington, have just issued a statement, [To live each day with dignity](#). Coombs Lee replied, 'We welcome the bishops' clear statement that opposition to aid in dying is a matter of religious belief. We find it unacceptable to impose the teachings of one religion on everyone in a pluralistic society.'

But you don't have to be Catholic to think that doctors should do no harm, that patients are free to forego futile or burdensome treatment, and that palliative care be utilised to relieve pain. Suicide will occur from time to time, but why the need to enact laws conferring medical legitimation on it and increasing its likelihood?

I return home pleased to know that even the Oregonians and advocates like Coombs Lee

are trying to draw a bright line between euthanasia and physician assisted suicide. I still worry about the slippery slope for vulnerable patients who might think they have no option but to take their own lives. I remain committed to the simple Hippocratic Oath, 'Do no harm.' Don't take life. Care for the dying by relieving their suffering. And that's not just because I'm Catholic.

Media gag silences asylum seekers

MEDIA

Jo Coghlan

In 2001 the ABC's *Four Corners* program [The Inside Story](#) broadcast images of Shayan Bedraie, a six-year old Iranian boy who was detained with his parents in Villawood detention centre in Sydney's west. Shayan was mute, listless and refused to eat or drink.

Shayan and his family had first been detained in South Australia's Woomera detention centre for 11 months before being moved to Villawood. According to [accounts](#) of Shayan's time at Woomera:

There were some riots and he saw people burning, setting fire to themselves. He saw guards with batons, using the batons to try to quell the riot, and that's when he started to withdraw ...

In Villawood, he walked into a room where one of the detainees had cut his wrists, and there was blood, and he saw all this happening. And he ran out and he spoke to his mother and he said, 'There's a man dead.' And he hasn't spoken since.

The footage of Shayan was obtained covertly by fellow detainee, [Dr Aamer Sultan](#), using a camera smuggled into the centre. Sultan then shared the story with ABC journalist [Debbie Whitmont](#). Upon its broadcast, *The Inside Story* shocked some Australians enough to form [Chilout](#) (Children Out of Detention), and motivated people to campaign to have children released from behind the razor wire.

There were tangible outcomes to all this. In 2005 the Howard Government capitulated to pressure from backbenchers and the public, agreeing to release all families into community detention, and amending the Migration Act to state that 'children should be detained as a measure of last resort'.

The case illustrates how giving an issue a human face can change how people think and act. Which makes the fact that today, as in 2001, journalists are banned from interviewing or filming the 6729 people [detained](#) in Australia's immigration detention facilities, all the more troubling.

Since 2001, Australians have heard of the 'invasion' of refugees into a country that is increasingly closing its borders to those in need of protection. But rarely have we seen images of those plucked from the ocean or detained under Australia's mandatory detention regime. The ABC's *Media Watch* has [noted](#) this lack of footage available to Australian journalists.

Since 2002 the Australian Press Council has been making statements about the restrictions placed on media access to detained asylum seekers. It [argues](#) that a 'free press is crucial to the

proper functioning of democracy ... this government is severely restricting the ability of the news media to report freely on a question that has become central to political debate in Australia'.

In response to recent [protests](#) inside Australian detention centres, unauthorised media access to detention centres has been [raised](#) to 'critical' incident status. This is the status given to potential chemical and biological attacks.

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship says its only concern is with protecting detainees. The Howard Government's [ban](#) on interviewing asylum seekers in detention was justified as protecting asylum seekers from reprisals they may face if they return to their home countries. The Department maintains that it refuses media access to journalists to 'respect the privacy and dignity of detainees'.

But as the Press Council [points out](#), 'it is possible to report an interview without identifying the person or persons', besides which 'asylum seekers themselves are surely the best judges of whether they or their families will be endangered if they speak out'. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance says the ban stops the Australian public from hearing the refugees' side of the story.

The media ban is not about respecting privacy or dignity. Surely asylum seekers are capable of determining who is and is not acting in their best interests. The Bedraie family, even under traumatic circumstances, could determine that Whitmont wanted to tell their story with dignity and respect.

As of the end of May 2011 there were [1082](#) children in various forms of immigration restriction on Christmas Island and on the Australian mainland. But for the most part we won't see images of them. Like Philip Ruddock before him, the current Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Chris Bowen is trying to hide refugees away from the public.

In their 2007 book *Silencing Dissent*, Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison argue that 'Citizens see little value or virtue in political engagements or participation beyond their own interests'. While there are multiple examples of this, there are exceptions. The reaction to Shayan and [similar cases](#) shows that Australia is a decent society that does not tolerate children being detained in prison-like conditions.

The inability of journalists to tell their stories and for the public to hear and see children who are being denied basic human rights ensures asylum seekers continue to be dehumanised.

Peace in Syria will stop the boats

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



On the ABC's *Lateline* last week, Middle East commentator Robert Fisk [praised](#) Syria's pro-democracy protestors: 'Tens of thousands of people with great courage go onto the street, they're shot down, then the mourners come along to the funeral and the mourners are shot down.'

Syria is moving quickly towards civil war, and it is natural that we would want to support the side that appears to stand for democracy against the repressive regime. Accordingly the response of Western nations has been to condemn the administration of President Bashar Assad for the violent crackdown and to impose economic sanctions.

Assad has angrily rejected foreign intervention, and foreign minister Walid Muallem has [insisted](#) that 'no one outside can impose on us their point of view'.

While nothing can excuse the government's killing of at least 1500 civilians, Muallem could have a point when he complains that that 'not a single European leader has come to Syria to discuss what is going on'.

The international community looks to be siding with the rebels rather than negotiating with the government to help bring peace. This is despite the fact that — as in Libya — little is known about the rebels or the form of democracy they represent.

It is likely that most Syrians would prefer peace — or national unity — to a western-backed democratic revolution. An overthrow of the government by rebel forces would destroy the delicate balance that sustains unity in Syria and would be likely to disadvantage minority groups such as the country's Christian population.

Earlier this month the Jesuits of Syria issued a [statement](#) that outlined a vision of *national unity*. They argued that 'a truly national peace cannot be built if one part of the population is excluded in favour of the other part'.

The statement refers to aspects of democracy such as freedom of speech, but not democracy as an aspiration *per se*. It could be argued that national unity does not sit well with democracy if democracy represents the will of the majority in a way that leads to the neglect of minorities.

Obviously Christian groups are concerned about the threat to their own rights and welfare posed by regime change. The Orthodox Patriarchate issued a [statement](#) that specifically 'condemned the foreign interference in Syria, and asked the Syrian citizens to be united'.

While democratic principles promote human rights, democratic elections represent the will

of the majority and, as such, tend to neglect minorities. Regime change often forces minorities to flee. Paradoxically minorities frequently do better in countries ruled by self-serving dictators.

The Jesuit statement advocates dialogue rather than revolution. This approach is more frustrating for Western countries, who prefer a quick transfer of power, especially if the rebels call themselves democratic. As the statement says, 'dialogue is not an easy matter for it presupposes trust on one side towards the other and listening to what the other has to say'.

Minority groups cannot be allowed to become collateral damage in democratic revolutions. It is also in the interests of the international community for peace to be given priority over democracy. National unity is a greater prize in countries like Syria that are made up of many ethnic and religious groups. Where majorities prevail over minorities, the minorities are forced to live in subjugation, or flee the country. As such they become part of the international 'refugee problem'.

Western nations need to focus their energies on promoting human rights in countries like Syria in a way that is mindful of the need to preserve national unity. Australia's political leaders are selling the idea that building offshore detention centres is the best way to 'stop the boats'. But engaging in diplomacy that fosters national unity in countries such as Syria will get much closer to the root of the real refugee problem.

The black face of fashion

MEDIA

Ellena Savage

Sao Paulo Fashion Week has come under criticism for its absence of non-European models. In 2008, of the 1128 models who worked at the fashion week, only 28 were Afro-Brazilian (2.5 per cent). According to race protestors, little has changed. This despite the fact that 50.8 per cent of Brazil's population is Afro-Brazilian.

I don't know much about Brazil's racial politics, but *haute couture* follows global trends. The absence of non-white faces might be particularly visible in Brazil where the white population is relatively minuscule, but this is a near universal standard in high fashion. The assumption is that consumers are white, and that white models promote a successful industry.

I moved house last week, which meant I had to re-dewy-decimal my large collection of books and magazines. I unearthed an *Elle* from November 1987, the month of my birth, which I had received as a 21st gift. It was a joy to leaf through the pages of powersuits, cowlicks, and alpha-female perfumes; but I was astonished to notice the number of non-white models on the pages.

I was surprised to be surprised; the pop-cultural icons of my childhood were overwhelmingly African-American, and I belong to the first generation to come of age in the wake of a black US president. Why shouldn't I expect to see non-white models in a fashion magazine?

Likely, because there are so few non-white faces in contemporary fashion. I decided to do some racial profiling — literally. I counted the non-white faces in that 1987 *Elle*. The magazine has 230 pages, 150 of which include faces; 43 of those (just under 29 per cent) include non-white faces.

I scoured the latest edition of *Vogue* to compare. Of the 192 pages, 152 included faces, but just 14 included non-white faces. That's 9.2 per cent.

What has changed during my lifetime?

I was alive in the '80s, but my experiences were limited to drinking milk and learning that the differences between dogs and cats were essential to understanding gender (dogs=boys, cats=girls).

I do know, retrospectively, that Rodney King had not yet mainstreamed the knowledge of, and outrage at, institutional police racism in the US, and that Oprah did not yet direct the cultural habits of housebound Middle America. The late '80s were not an especially easy time to be black in the white world. And yet, there was some semblance of equity in the global

fashion industry.

There are two historical trends that help understand this phenomenon, revisionist as they might be. Firstly, the emergence of hip-hop as a popular subversive cultural expression raised the mainstream cultural capital of non-whites in the late '80s, which is something the fashion industry capitalised on.

Secondly, the trend in Afro-American cultural expression to engage in political downward mobility has had divergent consequences. The rejection by Langston Hughes and other poets of his generation of grammatical English as a white bourgeois pretence is an early example of this trope.

This has propagated similar transgressions in modern black artforms, which has in fact given ammunition to a racially exclusive agenda in 'high' culture. In other words, deliberate commercialisation has ghettoised legitimate non-white artforms.

Can high fashion legitimately purport to be a 'high' cultural expression? Earlier this month, British *Vogue* editor Alexandra Shulman responded to criticisms of institutional racism, saying that, 'In a society where the mass of the consumers are white and where, on the whole, mainstream ideas sell, it's unlikely there will be a huge rise in the number of leading black models.'

By which she means, *Eat shit: millions of flies can't be wrong.*

If 'low' culture mimics the mundane and the vulgar, then 'high' culture is supposed to interpret and transform it. In communicative disciplines (mass media and the arts), 'low' culture is not required to acknowledge its agenda, and displaces the responsibility for its content onto the consumer. The question is whether it responds to the consumer's values, or whether it in fact informs them.

'High' culture is supposed to resist this populism. But the value of 'high' culture has waned, in response to the broadening of the middle classes, who now share a greater portion of the cultural and economic pastry. To retain its value, 'high' culture must impose barriers to its entry: in music, this is virtuosity; in literature, it is education; in fashion, it is the aesthetics of race.

The interesting thing is that the fashion industry justifies this exclusivity using the populist language of 'low' culture: 'The consumer wants it.'

So is fashion, or should fashion be, culturally regurgitative, interpretive, or transformative? If fashion wishes to be considered a legitimate art form, it must interpret and transform the world it reflects upon. As it is, the fashion industry produces fancy clothes, and little else of worth.

Mourning Kevin Rudd

POLITICS

Lyn Bender

Today marks one year since Kevin Rudd fell from the Labor leadership, making way for Julia Gillard's ascension. One year is a long time, and also no time at all.

It is common to mark the first anniversary of a loss or change; to reminisce and feel renewed regret. *If only, why, and what if* questions plague us. What might life be like now if the death blow hadn't occurred? Has the outcome proven this to be a misjudged decision or a cruel twist of circumstance?

Professor Andrew Samuels, [author](#) of *Politics on the Couch*, who has been political consultant to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Barack Obama, proposes the importance of politicians owning up to their human imperfection. The vision of the heroic leader is doomed to be deflated. The not-perfect but good-enough leader is more sustainable.

In this Samuels borrows the analytic model of the 'good-enough' parent, who is basically trustworthy and principled, but is not infallible. In the heyday of Obama's 'Yes We Can' campaign Samuels was relieved to hear the future president declare 'I'm not perfect' twice.

Samuels contends that in political leadership there is an initial idealisation, an inevitable failure to deliver, then denigration. In other words, the hailed messianic leader is likely to fall from great heights, as disillusioned followers discover his or her human failings.

Rudd and Obama were both invested with the high hopes of many. Obama became the first black president in the wake of the disastrous Bush presidency. Rudd slew the Howard dragon after a decade of arrogant and oppressive rule. In these two wins, intellect seemed to triumph over machismo.

But by the end of his first year in office, each of these leaders was being slammed in the polls. As Rudd fell, the new saviour was installed. Gillard was hailed as Australia's first woman prime minister, which was seen as a great achievement that was destined to raise the fortunes of Australian women.

Gillard was going to lead us (as the previous government had gotten lost) through the wilderness and out of the mire of the mining tax dispute. She would sort out the chaos of border protection and wrestle with the threat of climate change.

But Gillard, too, has fallen. One merciless headline declared her to be 'Madam 31 per cent'. This is even lower than Rudd's famous [nosedive](#) in 2010 to a 34 per cent approval rating.

The latest Nielson Poll shows Labor's approval is at its [lowest](#) in almost four decades, and

that 60 per cent of Australians want Rudd back as leader.

During his first in-depth interview following his being dumped from the Labor leadership, Rudd twice [stated](#) 'What's done cannot be undone'. This is a quote from Shakespeare's Macbeth; it [conjures](#) up the brutal slaying of a king by those he trusted.

So have we erred in the deposition of Rudd, and should we advocate ditching Gillard?

It's possible that opinion polls provide a true measure of people's deeper judgment. More likely, they reflect the mood swings of the fickle political psyche. We may fall in love; but after the honeymoon, become disenchanted. We search again for the euphoria of a new hero or a quick fix on the rebound. It's an old recipe for non-sustainable relationships, disconnection ... and bad political choices.

We are now between a rock and a hard place. If an error was made to depose Rudd, at the fading of his bloom, for the untried Gillard, can or should this be undone? There were as many ready in the wings to feast upon Rudd's remains with facile analysis of his personality and style as there are now for Julia. Perhaps David Marr's [scathing analysis](#) delivered an opportunity for a *coup de grace*.

But we all have fallen at times to the folly of over-idealisation, followed by cruel disapproval when the fallen man (and now woman) proves to be a disappointment.

This is not to say that we should not have appropriate expectations or be critical of important failings. But if we accept that even the best leaders are not infallible, we can take more responsibility for our own political awareness and action, and keep our leaders accountable.

To that end we must decide who is *good enough*. In my view, Tony Abbott is not, and the jury is still out on Gillard. But it seems many of us believe that Rudd was. It remains to be seen whether 'what is done' can, in fact, be undone.

Forgiving Japan

POLITICS

Zal Alstin

The disasters in Japan early this year dredged up some awkward and uncomfortable issues that stand between our two nations.

Despite being Australia's top trading partner for much of post-war history, our relationship with Japan has never redressed the deep divisions that remain from our challenging wartime experiences. Australian experiences of Japanese cruelty have not been forgotten, and Japan's apparent reluctance to fully own up to its wartime atrocities has remained an issue of some contention.

But the problems are not all on the Japanese side.

When the tsunami receded, it left in its wake scenes of destruction reminiscent of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A *Daily Mail* [report](#) made the parallels explicit, matching images from the tsunami's aftermath to historic photographs from the sites of the two atomic bombings under the headline: 'The nightmare returns'.

Our sympathy for Japan could not help but conflict with our moral complicity in that original nightmare 66 years ago. Australia, along with other allied nations, would rather forget the atrocities committed for the sake of our victory, yet at the time, the public welcomed and approved of them.

When the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 85 per cent of Americans registered their approval, while only 10 per cent disapproved. Percentages for Britain were recorded at 72 per cent and 21 per cent respectively, and for Canada 77 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. (Percentages for Australia are unknown but presumed to be similar.)

A separate poll in December 1945 recorded the disturbing result that 22.7 per cent of Americans believed 'We should have quickly used many more of [the bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender'. As of 2009, 61 per cent of Americans still believed the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the right thing to do, while 22 per cent disagreed.

To this day, many Westerners defend the bombings as a 'necessary' action within the context of a fanatically hostile Japanese civilian and military population. The suicidal ferocity and stubbornness of the Japanese military was well known, and the invasion of Okinawa demonstrated that the Japanese military could coerce civilian populations into mass suicide.

Necessary evils have never been a part of Western ethical tradition, nor has the deliberate killing of enemy non-combatants ever been an accepted military tactic. Yet while the narrative

of Japanese fanaticism is upheld, the majority of Westerners seem willing to make an exception.

Whether there were reasonable alternatives to bombing and invasion is a separate subject. For now, we must recognise that allied nations which benefited from and approved of the bombings retain a vested interest in the narrative of Japanese fanaticism.

We are reluctant to try to understand the reasons for Japanese wartime behaviour, because understanding the Japanese wartime experience would humanise the Japanese people and rob us of our primary justification for dropping atomic bombs on Japanese cities.

Why is it that we understand so well the rise of Nazism in Germany, but remain illiterate in the form and structure of the Japanese wartime experience? We are willing and able to distinguish between 'Nazism' and 'Germany', even to identify with ordinary German people as they succumbed to the allure and the power of a totalitarian regime. But what about Japan?

For us it has always been 'the Japanese', with no convenient ideological scapegoat to blame. We allow the narrative of homogenous Japanese fanaticism to persist, because a more complex narrative would force us to identify painfully with the civilians killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Instead, our failure to understand the causes and conditions of the Japanese wartime experience imparts to the Japanese people a sense of 'otherness' that substitutes for real understanding.

The traces of 'otherness' are still apparent in the ease with which many in the West leapt to positive generalisations about Japanese character in the aftermath of the tsunami. The order and calm demonstrated in the wake of such a momentous disaster seemed, to us, unusual.

Yet surely such positive behaviours merit greater study than the simplistic references to Japanese politeness, orderliness, stoicism? Such generalisations may seem benign, but they encourage the same sense of intrinsic difference that underpins our view of Japanese wartime fanaticism.

The positive and the negative are related, and we should be willing to understand them both in the light of our common human nature, and our shared tragic history.

Rednecks, bogans and bad boat people

TELEVISION

Kerry Murphy

SBS's three-part series *Go Back to Where You Came From* is mostly reality TV, but also part documentary. The concept is to take six Australians on a journey through a refugee experience, in reverse.

The six volunteers are mostly opposed to 'boat people', and one openly admits that she is racist, especially against Africans. The volunteers' views are mostly stereotypical.

While on the surface they appear to be six characters in search of a reality TV show, it's possible that they represent the 'average person' by whom we, the viewer, can become engaged. The viewer experiences an edited version of what the volunteers go through, without the yucky bits.

The show raises numerous interesting issues, which makes it worth viewing. It's not perfect: maybe the producers thought some more action was needed to complement the stories shared by the refugees, but the sinking boat stunt in the first episode simply feels like cheap TV. The Malaysian immigration raid captured on camera in the second episode fits into the stories better, as the volunteers, like us, are spectators.

The highlight for me is to hear the stories of the refugees themselves, and see how these stories impact the volunteers. Meeting the people you do not like or whom you fear makes it harder to maintain strongly negative views against them. One of the volunteers says he has to 'think about' what he has seen and heard after visiting Villawood Detention Centre before commenting on camera. Reflecting upon an experience and discerning a response is a good method for developing wisdom and tolerance.

There is a certain contrived nature to series, and although the volunteers are on a 'mystery tour', veteran Australian actor Colin Friels provides voiceover commentary, while the series' host, Dr David Corlett, a researcher and writer, escorts them through each stage, like Virgil with Dante, as they glimpse the *Purgatorio* and *Inferno* that is the experience of refugees.

In this sense, it is not truly free range 'reality TV', because we know that although their experiences will be confronting, and maybe life-changing, they are going through a planned voyage.

As the series is restricted to three one-hour episodes, time permits limited exposure to the complexities of the plight of refugees. It presents only two 'types' of refugees: resettled Africans, and 'boat people' from Iraq.

Reality is more complex, but these two groups are commonly presented as the main

categories of refugees in Australia. The Africans are seen as 'good refugees' because they waited in camps in the mythical queue, whereas the Iraqis are 'bad refugees', because they took to a boat and 'jumped' the same mythical queue.

In the first episode we hear some of the volunteers reflecting on this distinction. Although they understand why the Iraqis fled, they see the Africans as more deserving of resettlement. This dichotomy is, in fact, also a divisive issue among some refugee advocates and supporters. It is explored more deeply in subsequent episodes as the volunteers visit Jordan and Africa and meet the families of the refugees they met in Australia.

Overall the series is very watchable, and SBS ought to be commended for presenting the refugee experience in such an innovative and engaging way. The show's prescience is proven further by the fact that the participants were taken to Malaysia before the 'Malaysian option' was ever posited by the Gillard Government.

Episode three screens tonight at 8.30pm.

Doubting democracy in Muslim Turkey

POLITICS

William Gourlay

In light of the civilian uprisings that are rattling the Middle East, much has been made of the republic of Turkey as a model for reform and democratisation in the Muslim world. By any measure, Turkey is the most successful Muslim democracy, however, if the Turkish experience is indicative, then the process of establishing robust and viable democracies in the Middle East will be long and slow.

Elections on 12 June saw the third successive electoral victory of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi, AKP), cementing the mandate of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and reaffirming popular approval for his economic development and democratisation agenda.

Emerging in 2002, the AKP won its first decisive majority after a long period of Turkish political instability notable for weak coalition governments and military interventions. Successive elections have seen AKP increase its majority. However, some observers regard the AKP's dominance as heralding the spectre of Islamism rather than representing the ongoing evolution of Turkey's democratic credentials.

The AKP undoubtedly has its roots in Islamic political activism. It grew out of the ashes of the Refah Party, which temporarily held power under Necmettin Erbakan, the prime minister ousted by the generals in 1997 in the most recent military coup.

That the Erbakan government was deemed to have violated the principle of secularism that underpins the Turkish constitution, sets alarm bells ringing for those who see Erdogan as intent on the same. And Erdogan's efforts at rapprochement with neighbouring Syria and Iran have caused some pundits to opine that Turkey is 'turning east'; some diplomats even asked how the West had 'lost' Turkey.

Yet despite its ideological foundations, the Erdogan government has displayed consistent pragmatism rather than proselytising zeal. Under AKP stewardship Turkey finally began EU accession talks in October 2005. Various human rights issues have also been addressed, ostensibly with a view to expediting EU membership, nonetheless the result has been some freeing up of the public sphere.

Erdogan has also sought to promote a more pluralistic milieu within the country tackling the 'Kurdish question' and seeking reconciliation with Armenia. Little tangible progress has been made, however discourse is now more inclusive and less defined by nationalistic parameters.

On the economic front, the AKP government has proved a steady hand during an uncertain

time. It kick-started the economy after a crash in 2001, facilitated the expansion of the private sector and weathered the global financial crisis. In fact, such is the AKP's economic stance that some observers depict it as a standard centre-right party, albeit one with a Muslim core constituency.

Now topping the AKP's political to-do list is the rewriting of the Turkish constitution, a document formulated by the military in the wake of the coup of 1980, which gives the generals considerable scope for intervention in the political domain. A revised constitution should realign the pillars of the Turkish polity, empowering public and legislative bodies so that the prospect of 'military tutelage' no longer hangs over Turkish democracy.

For those prone to scenting 'Islamist' conspiracies, the prospect of an openly observant Muslim government rewriting a constitution spells disaster for Turkey: such pundits portray an AKP-sanctioned constitution as a first step towards the country becoming the 'next Iran'. Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian streak and intolerance of criticism has only heightened these fears; critics claim that further empowered he would become the new 'sultan', unaccountable and unmovable.

The election of 12 June has resulted in the happiest of all possible outcomes: Erdogan has won a convincing mandate but not the three-fifths parliamentary majority that would allow the AKP to unilaterally rewrite the constitution. Rather, the AKP will need to reach consensus with their political opponents; the rewriting of the constitution will necessarily be achieved through consultation with a diversity of voices rather than an imposition of the will of the government.

Since winning the election Erdogan appears to have lifted his political vision from the domestic sphere, reigniting the issue of reconciliation with Armenia and, in recent days, speaking out forcefully against the Syrian regime's crackdown on its own people.

A consensual reworking of the Turkish constitution will be a noteworthy precedent for the building of democratic institutions that must inevitably follow in the wake of the popular uprisings across the Middle East. Erdogan already enjoys acclaim on the 'Arab street', not least because of his criticism of Israel, and in speaking out against Assad's 'savagery' he is likely to broaden his own appeal.

If, in fostering a truly pluralistic, robust and inclusive Turkey, Erdogan can illustrate a replicable model for Middle East polities, one that reconciles Islam with the exigencies of the modern world and the demands of democracy, then perhaps he is indeed the world statesman that his supporters claim him to be.

My morning with Frank Brennan

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Sat down in the shocking broad sunlight recently, at the edge of a dense copse of trees, and fell into riveting conversation with the estimable Father Frank Brennan, of the Society of Jesus and of the Order of Australia.

But this delicious sunlight was in Oregon, not Canberra, the usual Brennanesque haunt, and the trees were Douglas firs, not gums and wattles, so you would think Frank would be out of his element, but this was not so, which seems worthy of note for *Eureka Street* readers, who may not have heard Frank in full flow, which I have, and which I do not think I will forget in this life.

So here is some of what we talked about, for entertainment and perhaps inspiration and meditation.

He talked about George Cardinal Pell's absolute personal charm being wedded harrumphingly to a peculiarly confrontational public style, and I talked about how the best spiritual leaders I have met are either remarkably liable to humour, such as the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, or absolutely devoted to working for others and not talking about it, such as Australia's first saint, Mary MacKillop, and the Congregation of Holy Cross's first saint, Brother Andre Bessette of Montreal, who couldn't read and was a door porter his whole career.

He talked about Australia's history with assisted suicide, and his quiet worry about the looming possibility of euthanasia in his native land in the near future, and I talked about Oregon's history with assisted suicide, which was voted into law in 1994, reaffirmed in 1997, and affirmed as legal by the United States Supreme Court in 2007, although only 460 terminally ill Oregonians have killed themselves by physician-prescribed medications since 1997, an average of 34 annually.

He talked about not being a particularly fanatic footy fan, despite the Collingwood Magpies cap he carried with him, as he had been a Brisbane boy before football invaded from the south and tried to impinge on rugby's sway in Queensland, and I talked about having been dragooned into being a Geelong Cats fan by none other than the late Senator John Button, by whose side I chanced to see my very first footy game ever, and so was lured into the blue and white for life, a mixed blessing.

Frank, grinning, presented me with his Pies cap, which I cannot bring myself to wear, feeling that the Senator somehow will notice and be dismayed.

We talked about Australian laws and culture and history and attitudes and apologies as

regards First Australians, and Kevin Rudd's apology, which I find enormously moving and which Frank assured me was indeed written mostly by Rudd himself, and the issue of compensation, which Frank considers a separate item as yet from the necessary and moral primacy of apology, and the rise of National Sorry Day, which is unfortunately titled but a lovely gesture, and the crucial roles that Patrick Dodson and Michael Long and Vincent Lingiari have played in negotiating respect and reconciliation between black and white Australia, and I talked about how it seems to me that athletic and musical artists are often the most effective messengers from the future, perhaps because their messages lean less on words than image and memory, so that a Cathy Freeman or a Paul Kelly or a Neil Murray are more effective in changing hearts and opinions than any gaggle of senators or inertia of commissions.

We talked about health care, and about the prospects of re-election for young Mr Barack Obama of Hawaii, and about the way that John Howard held the coattails of George Bush as a hedge against a looming China, and about the day that he, Frank Brennan of the Order of Australia, went to church in Atlanta, at the church where the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King once preached before being shot in the right temple for his temerity in saying that racism was stupid and a sin.

The Reverend was right, said Frank quietly, and right about then it was time for me to go, which I did, gingerly carrying my Magpies cap and the memory of a riveting conversation with an Australian who seems to me one of the great men you have in your country. I could be wrong, but I don't think so.

Carbon price will cause pain

ENVIRONMENT

Charles Rue

When it comes to cutting carbon emissions, one can use the image of a sports trainer in full voice: 'If there is no pain there is no gain.'

To allay fears and gather support from poorer households, Labor government spokespersons have told them that they will not be worse off when a price is put on carbon. They say big business and the wealthy will have to pay and poorer household will be compensated. A spokesperson added, 'You may even make money'.

This is playing dirty. It hides the fact that when a price is put on carbon our way of life will be changed. Perhaps it will be just as happy or even happier, but it will be changed nonetheless. Pain will be involved in adapting and redirecting where we spend money. As homes and transport are redesigned to become more efficient, as new job opportunities and the new training needed to do those jobs expands, as the real cost of producing food is reflected in the supermarket and the supply of cheap imported goods slows, life in Australia will be changed. Even cheap and frequent overseas trips will slow. The inconvenience of readjusting our life plans will be a part of adjusting our expectations. Some will enjoy the venture in developing new lifestyles despite the pain. But others will hanker for the way things were.

Some years back, Professor Derek Eamus, Director of the Institute for Water and Environmental Resource Management, [spoke](#) at the University of Technology Sydney on the Australian lifestyle under the title, 'Is the Australian Dream killing us?' Buying into unreal expectations has given us a busy lifestyle.

In our exhaustion we look for more and more exotic holidays to soothe our frenetic psyche, disregarding the carbon footprint. In the Wallace Wurth lecture, Kerry O'Brien laid much of the blame on politicians and the media for a race to the bottom. Politicians form policy to placate the latest fad proposed by focus groups; the media searches for news-entertainment to titillate the masses. Both fail to present what is real and of value. But responsibility must be shared by ordinary people and their blinkered demands.

Facing up to rapid climate change is the great challenge of our times. The physics of increased greenhouse gases is clear. That human induced fossil based economics and its associated First World lifestyle is the main factor causing the increase is also clear. The impacts on food production, more frequent severe weather events causing storms and floods, droughts and fire storms have already begun. This is the reality which no amount of denial will take away. D'nile is not a river in Africa. Denial is not a response owned by St Peter alone.

Many people do not like religious ideas, such as the place of human suffering, to be brought into public debates. But the declared atheist A.C. Grayling speaking on his recent publication, *The Good Book*, says that philosophical writings from the continents over millennia prompt us to think for ourselves and ask questions about what constitutes the good civic (civilised) life. These writers speak of the human virtues needed for us to grow a peaceful and happy human society. They tell us that each person can choose to practice the virtues needed, including resolution in striving with pain and anxiety.

Philosophy is not foreign to religious traditions. Siddhartha (the Buddha) chose the ascetical journey on his path to enlightenment and changed to a humble non-grasping style of life. Gandhi led his followers to accept beatings as they confronted colonial salt taxes and exposed the moral bankruptcy of the British investors. Jesus suffered in confronting the accepted arm-twisting ideas on religion of his day to affirm the giftedness of life. Francis of Assisi chose to reject the empty frivolity and flamboyant consumerism of his day. Mary MacKillop took a little brandy for her health but chose to bear the opprobrium involved in confronting the accepted educational practices in her day and the place of women in church leadership.

Given the present state of cultural values in Australia, perhaps the spirit behind the carbon debate is as important as any debate on the mechanics of a carbon tax or carbon trading. That busy and grasping spirit may hold us back from imagining an economy and lifestyle based on alternative energy.

The increasing claims for compensation from flood victims to live cattle exporters suggest a distorted grasping Australian spirit. The pain of these victims is real and sad to see, but are the cries misplaced? To dismiss responsibility for building on flood plains or for being slow to teach humane animal practices is to deny reality. The risk assessments used by insurance companies accept that climate change poses huge and imminent risks to the nation. The dithering and failure to act by our civic and business leaders may well feed future compensation claims.

Part of the human enterprise is to think beyond the immediate. We should begin by asking what legacy we leave to future generations. Will it be one of increasing climate related disasters in food supply, of rising sea levels and of environmental refugees? Will it be a rapid diminishment of the planet's diversity of plants and animals? To address either of these evils might lead us to campaign for the worldwide financial transaction tax [proposed](#) by Jubilee Australia . Just a 0.05% levy would generate some \$48 billion a year in Australia alone. Ordinary businesses would pay a small percentage of this compared with currency speculators.

Speaking to a group of ambassadors recently Pope Benedict XVI used the phrase 'human ecology' to argue that we 'must adopt a lifestyle that respects the environment and supports research and the exploitation of clean energy sources, respectful of the heritage of creation and harmless to humans. These must be our political and economic priorities.'

Kinglake undone

POETRY

Jordie Albiston

Lamentations

I.

Ah, look how the township sits solitary *that* was so full of people: look how she sits like a weeping widow, the town that just yesterday! sat queen of Murrindindi, *and* of the Great Dividing Range, that sat jewel in the crown of all Melbourne.

Black is the only one here: black is the only one left: whichever way we turn it is black who meets our eye, black who shakes our hand, black who murmurs nothing in our ear.

Can you *believe* it?

Do you believe what you see?

Everything is missing now, there is no movement in the bush: everything is gone and there is no bush.

Flora, fauna, family.

Gone.

How has it all come *to* this?

It has all come to this: the township is gone into dissolution, she that breathed free: she has no breath, and she is dissolved: up *between* the mountains, and down between the hills, and in between the hours of the day.

Jehovah, even the soil is vanished into air, become as a vapour into the sweet summer air: and the ground that we tread is powder to our foot: that is black, that is dust, that is black and dust, that is *clogging* to the sole of our foot.

Kinglake and the ways to Kinglake do mourn: all her gates are desolate: her hilltops sigh, her soil is afflicted, and she is *in* bitterness black.

Look! all her beauty is departed: her trees are become like hearts without pasture,
and they are gone without strength in the moment of the day.

Murrindindi is without strength, *without* sound.

Nothing is moving, there is no movement in the bush: nothing is moving *and* the
bush is soft without sound.

O! Kinglake is fallen into the hand of the fire, and she is removed: the black is in
her hair, and in her skirts: the black is in her memory, in the just yesterday! of
green.

Prayer has not prevailed: from above and from below the firestorm is come: from
the north *and* from the south the firestorm is come, and the township is come
down wonderfully.

Queen of the ranges, and of the Murrindindi Shire, Kinglake is undone: she sits
silent without lover or friend: she slumps in her blackened skirts: she slumps in
black dust: she slumps in her black *that* was green.

Remember her green, o! you that pass by: behold, see if there be any pain *like*
unto her pain: recall your own sorrow, and magnify it: make of your own sorrow
multiples of many: *and* multiply the many again.

See your own sorrow and unshut the door of your heart.

Turn your back on the place that is spared, and face *unto* the black of Kinglake: for
she is in the midst of distress, and her sighs are manifold, and the heart of
Kinglake *is* faint.

Undo this thing: turn it back!

Victoria, Victoria: unburn this black queen of ours!

II.

Ah, today you are bringing your baskets to Kinglake.

Bread and meat are in your baskets: you are bringing them to Jehosaphat Valley, *and* to Masons Falls, and to Kinglake National Park.

Children are in your cars: you are bringing them with your biscuits to picnic in Kinglake.

Driving up the mountain, you stop to snap shots *of* flowers, and of the forest, and of Strathewen far below: and of Melbourne, farther below, *that* is covered with cloud in its heat.

Each leaf is shining, as *if* it were of a garden: each leaf of each tree, within each of the habitations, along the road that you are driving with your baskets and children, all the way to the place of Kinglake.

Ferns in fern gullies stand solemn beneath the trees: beneath the sanctuary of green arms, in the pleasantness and the coolness beneath the tall trees, either side of the high winding road.

Green is the palace of the *queen* of Kinglake.

Her skirts hover in the heat: her holy relics glim: her sceptre holds over the land.

Insects and tiny creatures whirr between the moments: birds swing and switch between the hours of the day: from within the cars, with the windows wound down, you hear the insects and the creatures *and* the birds.

Jehosaphat Valley is right: before the shops of Kinglake, before the bakery and the pub and all of the shops: *just* before the town of Kinglake you turn right.

(Kinglake is sleepy on this Saturday morning: Kinglake is asleep in the heat.)

Leaving the cars in the leaf-covered car park, and the pleasures of picnic in the leaf-dappled cars, you gather the children, and walk down to the valley: you walk into Jehosaphat, and clap your hands *saying* This is the valley of perfection of beauty, that we call the joy *of* the earth.

Messmates and mountain ash and mountain grey gums lean high above: the trees do not creak: there is no breeze: the trees do not creak today.

Nimble you work your way with the children, along the narrow path: you know *where* to go: you are going to the place where you sit and are quiet: the place where the lyrebird shudders his harp and sings for his plain-tailed mate.

Over there: you *whisper* the children: you walk off the path and into the bush, to sit in the bush, to sit with the children and wait.

(Quiet.)

Picture the creature as he picks out a path, as he circles his hen who scratches the earth: and sings: song after song, all the sounds of the bush: song after song in the place in the bush: in the bush of Jehosaphat Valley.

Rustling and clacking his scabbard of feathers, he rattles his tail: he raises his tail, and sings.

Silence returns, and you walk with the children back to the cars: through the *tabernacle* of trees, the cathedral of green, back to the cars and the pleasures of picnic awaiting you back in the cars.

Then driving again, toward Masons Falls: along the long road, past the Kinglake shops, *past* Bald Spur Road and Bowden Spur Road, past the pine plantation, and along the long road: past the raspberry farm and the strawberry farm, and down into Masons Falls.

Under the cover of leaning trees, you carry your baskets: you hear the leafy sounds: under the canopy you hear the trees *lean* in the heat-riddled breeze: the stillness is gone and the wind is come through the trees.

Victoria sizzles: you clap your hands saying *Kinglake* is the place to be.

III.

Alas! we are the people *that* have seen the fire, on this day of days, on this seventh day of the second month of the year.

Alas! it has led us, and brought us to darkness, and delivered us not *into* light.
Against us has it turned: it has turned with the wind, *against* us all the day.

Behold! our flesh and our skin is become old: it has made white of our hair,
it has broken up our
bones: it has builded against us, and compassed us with fear: it has set us in
darkness, as *they that be* dead of old.

Caged about: we cannot come forth: it has made our chain heavy.
Crying and shouting: our shouting and crying is stifled.
Crying and shouting: our shout and cry is unheard.

Down at the falls, it has *enclosed* our way, with smoke and flame and falling
trees: it has made us
deaf and blind.
Down at the falls, it has made our path crooked and closed.

Embers fly on the white wings of corellas, and on the black wings of cockatoos.
Embers screech on the backs of swift wallabies, on the backs of slow wombats,
on the backs of
each creeping thing.

Flames set the messmates *as* marks for an arrow.

Flames set the messmates alight in the dark.

Flames set the world alight.

Gravel and stones are in our mouth: we are eating of ash.

Grit and smoke are in our eye: we are seeing of ash.

Gaseous vapours are in our lung: we are breathing *of* fallout and ash.

Hell is arrived on its chariot of fire: let us lift up our heart with *our* hands unto heaven.

Hell is come: it has covered us with cloud, that our prayers should not pass through.

Hell is here: it has made of us *refuse* in the midst of cremation.

In fear, our eye runs with rivers of water for the destruction of our home.

In terror, our tear trickles for the destruction of our home, and ceases *not*, without any intermission.

Jehosaphat is burning, with fire, and with all the vengeance and imaginings of fire.

Jehosaphat Valley and Masons Falls burn.

Jehosaphat Valley, and Masons Falls, and all of the places along the long road, burn.

Kinglake is burning, with the devices *of* fire.

Kinglake is burning, with the devices of fire: and with all the vengeance and imaginings of fire,

Kinglake burns.

Let us call *to* one another in the bush, on the dam, with our highest and finest voice.

Let us crawl to one another on the coals of hell, and find comfort in one another's arms.

Let us cleave to each other on the floor of the bush, and on the floor of the flaming house.

Multitudes of trees burst with multiple explosions of sound.

Many and loud are the explosions now, in this moment between moments, in this unholyest of moments in time.

Now is the moment between the hours: now is the day of fire.

Now is the moment, between the message and the warning: now is the day of fire.

Now is the moment, when the fire gathers height and opens its many mouths.

O! we are its music: we are *its* terrible song.

On the wings of the fire, we sing out our terrible sorrow.

On the tongue of the fire, in the throat of the fire, we sing.

Quickly! the notes rise in the pyrocumulus sky.

Quickly! the sounds fall to ground.

Quickly! the song sounds: and *is* sung.

Pray: pray for Kinglake.

Pray for the bush and the paddock and the town: pray for the *sky* and the ground.

Pray for the possum, the ringtail and brushtail: for the koala and the grey

kangaroo.

Remember to pray for the spider and the skink: the goanna, the gecko, the pink galah.

Remember the rosella: remember the snake: the heifer, the horse and the brown-speckled hen.

Remember to pray for Kinglake.

Sit in your chair and turn on the news.

Sit with your family beside the radio, in front of the television news.

Sit with your friends, *and* all of the ones that you love.

Tell them you love them.

Tell them *a* story.

Tell them the story of love.

Understand the story of firestorm and flame, of north wind and southerly change.

Understand the story of drought and of fuel.

Understand, and understand: and understand again.

: Victoria is altered.

: Victoria is burned.

: Victoria is not, can not be the same.

IV.

ah / how is the green become dim / how is the most fine green

extinguished

today you are bringing your baskets to kinglake

behold / all the soot is poured out in the top of each street

as if it were of a garden

children faint for sorrow in the top of each street / the young and

the old lie on the ground in the streets

kinglake is asleep in the heat

dogs are vanished / even the crow and the fence-post is vanished too

the trees do not creak

everything is missing and we cry between hours / who is escaped /

and who of us all is remained

children are in your cars

for our eyes have yet failed / in our watching we have watched for a kingdom

that could not save us

you stop to snap shots

gone is the queen of kinglake

is the palace of the queen of kinglake

here she crawls like a crone in the dust / clawing the dust for her sceptre

her throne / rooting about for relics as holy as home

who scratches the earth

in the time between moments she is come to her end

rustling and clacking

joy lies black in the ash of each street / beauty lies black in the ash

solemn beneath the trees

kinglake no more welcomes / she cries / depart I am unclean / depart depart
touch not

song after song in the place in the bush

look how she crawls like a crone in the dust
before the shops of kinglake

marvel as she claws like a crone in the dust
before the bakery and the pub and all of the shops

never has she been raised as low as this / that was full overthrown in a day
the wind is come

o / just yesterday
you whisper the children

queen of all melbourne / she was greener than green-stone she was whiter
than milk she was more ruddy in body than rubies or blood / her polishing
was of pearl

you clap your hands saying kinglake is the place to be

pity she that is widow today
picture the creature

rejoice not in her ashes or streets / laugh not along her long road / smile not
on her earth that is black

this is the valley of perfection of beauty

save all your mirth for another
that we call the joy of the earth

today is the day of the time between moments / today is the time that is come
quiet

undone is she undone is she
quiet

vanquished is she / on this day of the day of fire

V.

Remember, Victoria, what is come upon us: consider, and behold our loss.

(we remember Murrindindi)

Prepare yourself.

(we remember Murrindindi)

Our inheritance is turned to *strangers*, our place is turned to *dust*.

(we remember Murrindindi)

Nothing moves in the bush that is *gone*.

(we remember the bush)

Gone is the shrill of the butcherbird, and the noise of the noisy miner:

(we remember the butcherbird and the noisy miner)

Lost is the wattle and the fern:

(we remember the wattle and the fern)

Departed are the marsupials, and the marsupial young:

(we remember the marsupials)

Empty are the gullies that were full:

(we remember the gullies)

Undone is the mountain:

(we remember Kinglake)

Forgotten is her song:

Jehosaphat is Jehosaphat no more.

Hold your map to your hand: *consider* the colours, and *compare*.

(we remember Murrindindi)

Inspect the landscape that was.

(we remember Murrindindi)

Bald Spur Road is barren and *black*, its houses are become as *graves*:

(we remember Bald Spur Road)

Coombs Road is *black*, its homes are become as *graves*:

(we remember Coombs Road)

The children are *orphans* and *fatherless*, the mothers and wives are as *widows*:

(we remember the fathers)

Music is *ceased*, our dance is turned into *mourning*:

(we remember the music and dance)

Quiet is the air:

(we remember the air)

Silent are the streets:

(we remember the streets)

Alone sits the queen, and
(we remember Kinglake)

Kinglake is no more Kinglake.

Victoria: remember Kinglake.

Parable of the unwelcome strangers

POLITICS

Greg Foyster

The year is 2001. You live in a large sharehouse on the south side of town. The place has millions of rooms and people are always coming and going. One day a stranger knocks on the door. 'Help!' he shouts. 'The people in my house are trying to kill me! I need to hide here for a while.'

Instinctively, you reach for the door handle. A wrinkled hand, old yet firm, grabs your wrist. You look up and see your landLord, a bald man with thick rectangular glasses and bushy eyebrows. 'We will decide who comes to this house and the circumstances in which they come,' he says, sternly.

He locks the door.

Later, you watch as workers erect a chicken wire enclosure on the traffic island near your neighbour's place. A sign reads 'Processing Centre'. The stranger is placed inside.

Every morning for the next seven years, you stand by the window, watching. Thousands of strangers are now crammed into the small enclosure. They wrap their fingers around the chicken wire and shake it. They say they want to be let out, to see a lawyer, to live and work in the house. They say they have done nothing wrong; they are simply fleeing for their lives.

The old landLord steps in front of you and closes the curtains. 'Just ignore them,' he says. 'They're lying. They should have waited their turn.'

Then, in 2007, something astonishing happens. The old landLord dies. He's gone, just like that. A new landLord takes charge, a nerdy man with square spectacles who speaks a different language. He opens the curtains and points at the enclosure on the traffic island. 'We have a moral imperative to prioritise the streamlined decommissioning of that facility,' he announces. Nobody is quite sure what he means.

But it doesn't matter, because he keeps his oddly worded promise. You sit by the window, watching as the enclosure is boarded up, a smile spreading across your face.

The year is 2010. The new landLord has been murdered. Stabbed in the back. A house meeting is called to elect a replacement. You sit among your fellow permanent residents — more than 20 million of them — gauging the discussion.

The first candidate stands. He's a bronzed, blokey guy with ears like radar dishes that he

tunes into people's fears. 'I will take direct and real action,' he says, 'to protect our property, and stop the strangers.'

'If necessary, I will turn the strangers around. Force them right back up the garden path.'

The next candidate stands. She's a fiery red head, and says the same words over and over again in a hypnotic accent. 'Moving forward,' she says, 'we need a regional approach, and that means a regional processing centre, moving forward.'

'I am in discussion with our neighbour Jose about a new processing centre on a different traffic island so we can move forward differently,' she adds.

The room is silent. You look around at your fellow permanent residents. They lived here when the old landLord was in charge. They saw the group of strangers suffering out the front because no one would let them in. They witnessed the overcrowded enclosure, the strangers with their lips sewn together, the children behind chicken wire. And they know many of these people were eventually let into the house — they were held in that enclosure for no good reason.

You expect someone to stand up and say 'these strangers are in need'. You expect someone to say 'we have an obligation to these people'. You expect someone to say 'I was a stranger once, but you let me in'.

But wait — the residents are applauding. They're giving a standing ovation. 'A tougher stance,' they say. 'We don't want any bloody strangers hopping the fence into our backyard.'

You can't believe what you're hearing.

The year is 2011. A decade since you first met that stranger at the door. A decade in which little has changed. The red-headed woman has reopened the old enclosures. Once again, strangers are locked up, screaming to be let out. A respected doctor, Resident of the Year no less, says the enclosures are sending the strangers mad. Nobody listens.

Exasperated, you call a house meeting. 'Fellow residents,' you say, 'we pride ourselves on giving everyone a fair go, so we should give these strangers the benefit of the doubt.'

The residents murmur uncomfortably among themselves.

'Perhaps these strangers are not lying. Perhaps they really are fleeing from danger?'

The residents stop murmuring and stare.

'And besides, the number of strangers is very small, far too small to affect our way of life if they are let inside.

'Finally, we should remember that we ourselves are strangers to this house. We barged in

and kicked out the previous inhabitants, so we have no right to say who can come and go.'

The residents are silent. Then a ruddy-faced man in singlet and thongs staggers to his feet. 'Look mate,' he bellows, 'if you don't like it here, why don't you just piss off where you came from?'

You stand on the traffic island near your neighbour's place, your fingers wrapped around chicken wire. You should have known this would happen. Of course they were going to throw you in the enclosure. By questioning their way of life, you showed you were different. In their eyes, that makes you a stranger. And, as we've all come to learn, strangers aren't welcome anymore.

Bill Morris and Simon Overland in exile

EDITORIAL

Andrew Hamilton

Although politicians constantly urge us to move forward, a much harder challenge is to move on.

During this May and June there has been much to move on from. Among some of the events that have caused dismay are the Malaysian solution to asylum seekers, the forced resignation of Bishop Bill Morris, the moves towards severe and inflexible sentencing in New South Wales and Victoria, and most recently, the resignation of Simon Overland, the Victorian Police Commissioner after he lost the confidence of his police minister.

Whatever his failings, Overland was a patently good man. His resignation followed a disedifying and concerted campaign against him by media groups, the police union, some of his colleagues and many politicians. It is hard to see any good coming out of this affair. We may expect something like the New South Wales police department as portrayed in Jon Cleary's Scobie Malone novels.

One of the difficulties we may have with moving on is that it's always the victors who counsel us to do so. They suggest we should accept what has happened, and go into the future not only with respect for the humanity of those who have engineered these events, but with admiration for their wisdom, courage, motivation and methods. We should leave behind any solidarity with the people who have been injured in these affairs.

In moving on, we are to accept our helplessness, fold up our tents, deal clinically with our feelings of guilt, and cut our connections with the asylum seekers we have sold into exile, with Bill Morris and with Simon Overland.

For many that kind of moving on will seem too come at to high a cost. But what are the alternatives?

One response, popular after the Whitlam sacking, was to 'maintain the rage'. But as time goes on, anger seems faintly ridiculous. It also tends to corrupt those who nurture it and does little for public life.

A more constructive response is to weave abominable and piteous deeds into art. The Bible, which has fed so much of Western literature, is full of stories of good people undone and humiliated by scheming arrogance. The Book of Psalms particularly contains expressive prayers of complaint at the triumph of the unjust. Dante's *Inferno*, and the novels of Solzhenitzyn fix the protagonists of their era for all time in heaven or hell. The literature of the Holocaust remembers the reality of things done which were suppressed by their perpetrators.

But to move on in good order demands personal resources and the support found in lively conversation. When much has been lost, apparently definitively, the most pressing task is to focus on what matters. This is difficult in the wreckage of a decency previously taken for granted and the feelings occasioned by the wreck.

What always matters most is the welfare and the spirit of those who are affected by unseemly events. Their claim on us continues. To move on by cutting our connections with these people, to treat them as a problem to be solved, and to accept that in polite company their names should disappear into silence, would be to move on from our decent selves.

After Tampa the exemplary figures were the country women who took buses to Baxter and Woomera to visit asylum seekers and to keep their hopes, their names and their claims alive. They moved on to some purpose.

What also matters is to maintain the ethical principles at issue in the unjust treatment of good people. In dealing with a new settlement that follows improper actions, it is necessary to recognise reality and to negotiate for the least bad treatment of people affected. But those kind of dealings can easily distort one's moral compass. So it is important to be clear about what is required in a society based on respect for human dignity.

We may not move on from that. The claims of asylum seekers to be treated as human beings and not as items for export may not be moved on from. Nor can the need in church governance for respect based on transparency and due process. Nor can the need for a non-politicised police force whose members are accountable for their actions. These are the things that matter. They continue to be worth fighting for.

To focus on what matters and to continue to press for it is a lonely path. It is easier to move back into silence or to move away from engagement in church or public life. Constancy needs to be supported and directed by good conversation. Winners always try to control the story and drown out conversation by censorship or ridicule. So to move on decently demands nurturing convivial conversation among like-minded friends. Ultimately moving on takes place in the imagination. The task is to keep the imagination fresh and decent.