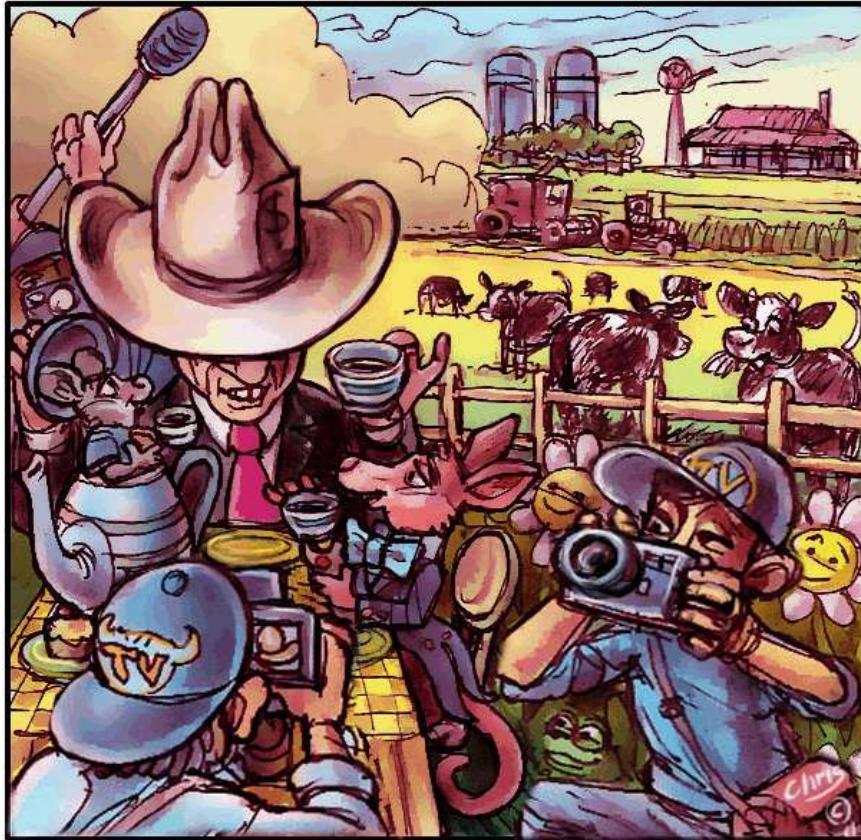


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North Korea's human rights time bomb

POLITICS

Lucas Smith

As the world watches the ongoing catastrophe in Syria, state-sponsored destruction of a much quieter but no less brutal kind is afflicting North Korea. Even while the nation anticipates next year's 100th birthday of state founder and 'Eternal President' Kim Il-sung, NGOs are reporting that the country may have run out of food.

A brutal winter, flow-on effects of the disastrous currency revaluation of 2009 and a poor harvest are contributing to dire conditions in the one-party state. The World Food Program recently announced an aid program in to 'help feed 3.5 million people suffering from hunger'.

The UN has reported that up to six million may be at risk of starvation in coming months. The same assessment found that only four per cent of North Korean households consume the recommended amount of calories in a western diet. Recent reports of people boiling tree bark and grass for sustenance sound chillingly like reports from the 1990s when an estimated 2–3 million North Koreans died of starvation.

South Korea has said it will withhold food aid until North Korea acknowledges the unprovoked sinking of the Cheonan and the deadly strike on Yeonpyong Island.

Former US president Jimmy Carter returned from an April visit to North Korea with a stern message for the United States and South Korea: give food aid to North Korea or be guilty of 'human rights violations'. Such threats are obtuse and unhelpful. Western and South Korean aid has saved thousands upon thousands of lives in North Korea. If North Koreans starve, only Kim Jong-il and his apparatchiks are responsible.

Despite the role of severe weather this will be a man-made famine. According to South Korea's Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, the North spends \$400–500 million yearly on nuclear and other armaments while its food shortfall could be covered with \$200–300 million per year. Simple reforms encouraging private cultivation of crops would almost certainly avert widespread famine.

But despite Kim Jong-il's unwillingness to dip into his Cognac budget, Carter is right. It is our moral obligation to provide for those in need, wherever they exist.

The existence of North Korea buries forever the notion that people get the government they deserve. Concerns from certain quarters that aid will be diverted to the military and used to retrench the regime's power should not be dismissed lightly. The government controls distribution networks and has diverted aid in the past, but if monitoring is good, even if isn't perfect, the moral case for action is overwhelming.

Hopefully, the following story will put the current crisis in context. In 2007, Shin Dong-hyuk escaped from prison camp number 14, and earned the distinction of being the only known survivor of a 'Total Control Zone', the harshest of North Korea's three-tiered prison system. He was born in the camp and lived his entire life in its confines until his escape.

North Korea has taken the exploitation of family ties, a practice common to all dictatorships, to a new low. Up to three generations can be sent to prison for the crime of a single-family member, which may be as trivial as creasing a newspaper so the fold runs down Kim Jong-il's face. Shin's mother was interned for a crime committed by one of her relatives.

Shin knew nothing outside the camp. Because he was expected to die an inmate, he was not taught the facts that for most North Koreans are rote knowledge: the birthday of Kim Jong-il, his habits, his favorite songs, his life, his works. Shin bears scars from beatings and suffers permanent brain damage due to infantile deprivation.

Safe in South Korea, he was asked if he was shocked by the colors, lights and bustle of Seoul. Those things were nice, he said, but not shocking. The day after he escaped he saw two women, one wearing a blue shirt, one wearing a red shirt, walking through a field. That's when he was shocked. He had never seen a human being not wearing prison rags or a guard's uniform.

North Korea is a human rights time bomb. Education is cursory and health care highly unsatisfactory. When the Kim family fiat ends, millions of uneducated, unskilled, illiterate, impoverished and malnourished North Koreans will throw themselves on the mercy of their neighbors and the international community.

South Korea will understandably, and cheerfully, bear the brunt of this, but all nations should be prepared to help. It will be far worse than the gradual exodus of professionals during the amalgamation of East and West Germany. The final horror of dictatorship is that its effects are felt long after it is gone.

Intimacy of religion and violence

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Without doubt one of the big issues of our time is how to deal with violence inspired by religion. Underlying this is the thorny issue of understanding the connection between religion and violence.

Popular analysis of this is highly polarised. Believers tend to say their religion fosters peace, and anyone committing violence in the name of religion is not a true member of that faith. Non-believers — the new atheists are the most strident members of this camp — tend to argue the opposite, that religion is one of the main causes of violence.

French-born philosopher, Rene Girard, now in his mid-80s and living in the USA, is increasingly recognised as providing a cogent framework for understanding the connection between religion and violence.

In fact, his insights into violence — part of an all-embracing theory encompassing the beginnings and development of human culture, language and religion — are so lauded that he has been called a modern day prophet. And when he was admitted to the highly prestigious Academie Francaise in 2005, one prominent academic even called him the Charles Darwin of the human sciences.

This interview on Eureka Street TV is with one of the world's leading exponents of Girard's philosophy, Austrian lay Catholic theologian, Wolfgang Palaver. It was recorded at a conference on Girard held at the University of Sydney earlier this year, and is the first of two conversations with Girardian experts.

Girard argues there is an intimate connection between [religion and violence](#), so much so that the two were the main drivers of the beginnings and evolution of human language and culture. He makes his argument in a number of steps.

Firstly he says that what inspires human desires is [imitation](#), or mimesis of others. This is how we work out not only what we desire, the goods we want, but also what we want to be and what we want to become. On the positive side, this is how and why we learn and develop. But on the down side it leads to jealousy, even to deadly rivalry, and this is the base cause of the conflict and violence that has plagued human society.

He goes on to observe that in the earliest human communities, the very first religions developed in an effort to deal with this conundrum of rivalry and violence. All primordial religions revolved in one way or another around establishing a sacrificial victim which ameliorated the violence — what he calls 'the scapegoat mechanism' — and the divinising of this victim.

And finally Girard saw in the biblical tradition, and particularly in Christianity, a further development in religion in that it sided with the victim rather than with the powerful who create the scapegoat, thus creating a potent tool for defusing rivalry, conflict and violence.

Wolfgang Palaver had unlikely beginnings for his work as a professional Catholic theologian. His parents were not church goers, and he wasn't brought up as a Christian. But when he was nine, they put him into a Franciscan boarding school where he remained for four years, after which he went to a technical high school.

In his late teenage years, he was attracted to the Catholic youth movement, and through this, to activism for peace. In the mid 1970s Palaver became one of Austria's first legal conscientious objectors, opting out of compulsory military service and doing community work instead. He began studying theology, with a focus on theories of peace and conflict which drew him to the work of Rene Girard.

He is now Chair of the Institute of Systematic Theology at the University of Innsbruck, and is a member of the university's research group on World Order, Religion and Violence. He's much in demand as a speaker, and has written a number of books including *Rene Girard: Violence and Religion* and *Rene Girard's Mimetic Theory*.

Are martyrs good role models?

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Martyrs have always been honoured by Christians, as indeed by Muslims and Jews. Faith mattered enough to them that they preferred to be faithful than to save their lives. It also mattered enough to their enemies for them to kill because of it.

The Greek word for martyr can also be translated as witness. Throughout Christian history people have honoured the memory of the martyrs. In confused times, too, when people feel that their fellow Christians have been seduced by the softer options offered by the prevailing culture, they have stressed the importance of giving witness.

Evocation of the martyrs can brace the hearers to resist hesitations and reservations and to cut through complexity. They are invited to speak boldly, uphold the simple truth, defend the Church, and bear cheerfully with the opposition and mockery that this might entail.

Yet martyrdom itself is not simple. During the Boxer Rebellion in China, for example, some 13,000 Catholics were among the Christians killed because they were Christian. But for their killers, the faith of their victims was just an incidental aspect of the reality they hated.

For them religion was irremediably tainted by its Western origins. The West was responsible for the humiliation of China by colonial powers, for the enforced opium trade with its corruption of Chinese addicts, and for the economic rape of a defenceless China.

The Boxers killed Christians because they were Western, because they adopted Western ways in the practice of their religion, and were the religious arm of a barbarous culture.

Respect for Christian martyrs must take account of this ambiguity. It certainly does not lessen the respect in which people killed for their faith should be held. They do indeed point out what matters in all human beings: the inalienable value of each human being and their right to respect for their security and their conscience.

For Christians they also point to the strength of a hope that trumps the natural fear of death. These qualities of martyrdom transcend the ambiguous context in which they were killed.

The ambiguities of the context do not reflect on the martyrs but on the flawed communities to which they belong. That is why members of those communities must reflect on the extent to which the churches of the 19th century, for example, identified with the interests and customs of the colonial powers from which they were founded in China.

Martyrdom may vindicate faith. It does not vindicate the alien face which faith may be made to wear.

This need to distinguish between faith and the alien convictions and conduct with which it may be associated is even greater in the case of witness, particularly when it is identified with loyalty: the unquestioning support of every attitude and view held by church leaders.

It is certainly true that to accept and apply the implications of Christian faith in the public sphere will incur some unpopularity and criticism. To defend the human dignity of the unborn, of asylum seekers, of prisoners, of indigenous people, of one's enemies in a war, of gay people or of the unemployed will invite criticism and rejection. So will attempts to seek reconciliation with people who are considered outside the pale.

Even though it might seem unduly self-dramatising to describe this opposition as martyrdom, the example of martyrs and the importance of witness can certainly encourage constancy in hard times.

But not all opposition is motivated by the positions people take. It may also be inspired by church practices and attitudes that the critics judge to fall short of acceptable moral standards. Catholics who defend the human dignity of gay people in society, for example, are often accused of hypocrisy because of the apparently judgmental way in which Catholic Church documents speak of the homosexual condition and because of homophobic attitudes displayed by some church leaders.

Such examples suggest that witness does not point to the Christian gospel if it unquestioningly endorses a whole bag of beliefs, attitudes, regulations, taboos and behaviour on display within a church of a given time. Given that the church in every age needs to be reformed from its head to its members, effective witness calls for discrimination. Witness is not synonymous with witless.

Harry Potter's victory over Christian wowers

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Pt 2* (M). Director: David Yates. Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Ralph Fiennes. 130 minutes**

It wasn't exactly Nazi Germany, but it was, nonetheless, an appalling act of biblioclasm. Someone from the local community had donated a set of young people's fantasy novels to the thrift shop attached to the church that I had attended since childhood. The then-managers of the store, whom I had thought to be kindly and moderate Christian folk, literally put flame to the unfortunate tomes.

This was no isolated incident, of course, but the destruction of Harry Potter novels, on the pretext that they promoted occult practices to children, had seemed mainly to be the domain of conservative American Christian wowers. I was shocked, frankly, to find that similar attitudes existed so close to home, among people who I had known and looked up to.

Such fanaticism was ironic, too, given the fact that the series' author, J. K. Rowling, is a Christian, who saw her fantastical saga as a parable in a similar mould to C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. Rowling went so far as to tell *The Vancouver Sun* back in 2000 that any 'intelligent reader', if they knew the details of her religious beliefs, would 'be able to guess what's coming in the books'.

Harry Potter is, after all, explicitly a Christ figure. This may be true of all fictional 'chosen ones' who learn the necessity of faith and self-sacrifice on the path to overcoming evil. But the seventh and final Harry Potter book, *The Deathly Hallows*, and now this, the eighth film, which completes the adaptation begun in last year's [The Deathly Hallows Pt 1](#), take the analogy to its literal conclusion.

There's not much plot to be revealed about this action-driven finale. It picks up where the dark and character-driven quest story of *DH1* left off. Harry (Radcliffe) and his friends Ron (Grint) and Hermione (Watson) have taken the first steps in their mission to locate those mystical talismans, known as *horcruxes*, that are tied up with the mortality of their evil nemesis, Voldemort (Fiennes).

They arrive back at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and to a world that has become utterly oppressed by Voldemort and his army of Death Eaters. Here they prepare for battle.

Cinematically, the results are mixed. Where Rowling's novels, particularly in the second half of the series, suffered from a serious case of narrative bloat, the latter films have displayed their own related problems of poor plotting and pacing. This is true also of *DH2*, into which

the filmmakers have attempted to jam as much action as possible in order to ensure the series goes out with a bang.

Perennial nasties get their comeuppance. A few beloved 'good guys' are dispatched unceremoniously, ensuring the film packs an emotional punch. Several other favourites are given 'hero moments' that, in the screening I attended, prompted dutiful applause from some faithful audience members. In this, director Yates ticks a lot of boxes. But he also robs many of these moments of dramatic impact.

Importantly though, while the messianic dimensions of Harry's final victory are oddly understated, the redemptive revelations about the series' most enigmatic villain powerfully reinforce the themes of love, faith and self-sacrifice, and ensure that the import of these events is not lost. Thematically and narratively, this is the most satisfying element of book and film alike.

The conclusion of the Harry Potter film franchise marks the end of an era. The boy wizard has been with us for nearly a decade and a half, since the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in 1997. Contrary to the predictions of wowers, the series has not led generations into paganism.

Instead they have enjoyed and been inspired by an unforgettable story containing a simple but profound message lifted straight from the gospels. Amen.

My News of the World shame

MEDIA

Alan Gill

As a teenager in 1950s Britain I remember thinking that Catholic clergy must be a pure and undefiled lot, whereas our mob (Church of England) were hopelessly embroiled in scandals about runaway curates, loose canons (literally), and what my father impolitely summarised as 'shirt lifting vicars'.

And the source of this information? That doughty journal, the *News of the World*, banned by my boarding school headmaster, thus ensuring that a handful of copies sneaked from a friendly newsagent circulated like gold dust.

Not that we knew whether or not those of the Roman obedience really were as good as they seemed. We knew their priests were not allowed to marry and assumed the rest. The *News of the World* had very little to say about the still largely ghettoised Catholic Church and its members, but a lot to say about the frailties of us Protestants.

I was 15 when my father joined the demand for a ban on the newspaper. In his case because of an exposé involving a peer of the realm and soldiers in my father's wartime Guards regiment. A quip about 'fairies at the bottom of our guardsmen' was the last straw.

For almost all its 168 years of existence the *News of the World* was an unrepentant scandal ship, but — a point missed by some Australian commentators — changes have occurred, which appear to reflect the manners and mores of the times.

For instance, the 1950s, in which I grew up, and the years immediately prior to the Rupert Murdoch takeover in 1968 show the paper in what I would call 'British hypocritical mode'.

A typical example might be: Staff reporter and photographer enter a high class (illegal) brothel and get snatch story and pix with the Madame and clients as they leave hurriedly. When the story is being prepared, subeditors take care to add a paragraph reading something like: 'An indecent offer was made to our reporter who said, "I am John Smith from the *News of the World*" and left.'

In those days *News of the World* reporters spent a lot of time 'leaving'.

Stories like this make good copy with sex oozing from every paragraph. But there has to be an impression of community mindedness.

Executives on the paper possibly believed their own rhetoric. When it appeared the paper would be sold to Murdoch, the then editor, clearly sensing the danger to his own position, uttered the oft quoted phrase: 'The *News of the World* is as English as roast beef and Yorkshire Pudding. It should not be sold to a foreigner.'

All of which prompted a columnist (of European Jewish extraction) on another paper to respond: 'Yes, indeed, the *News of the World* is as English as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. Which explains its fondness for stories beginning 'An incident in a railway carriage ...'

I'm ashamed to admit it but I was once myself seduced into being published in the *News of the World*. I was then a young journalist working on a local paper in the south of England. My 'patch', the area to which I was assigned, included Hampton Court Palace and two adjoining royal parks.

As a matter of routine I was required to pay weekly calls on the nearest police station, where the duty sergeant would show me the 'incident register' and elaborate on any parts of it.

In those pre-permissive days young couples, unable to 'snog' (or worse) in the lounge room (where their parents were probably watching the new fangled TV) would be forced to do their courting outside, usually at dusk, but sometimes in bright sunshine, using the long grass areas as cover.

My contact said he had cautioned several couples about such behaviour. Moreover, he thought the practice was becoming commonplace, attracting an army of 'perves', whose idea of an evening's fun was to act like bird watchers, binoculars in hand, crawling through the undergrowth to register a 'find'.

The folk engaged in this pursuit came to know one another quite well, shared information with rivals, brought sandwiches and flasks of coffee for afters, and conducted the operation like a junior military.

After hearing this amazing intelligence from my friendly police source, I discovered (not to my surprise) that the *Surrey Comet* would have none of it.

On impulse I telephoned the *News of the World* and was put through to an individual with a Cockney accent and a manner straight out of a police sitcom. 'Ooh! Bloody marvelous, mate. That's just for us. Catch them at it, if you can. We'll send a couple of our blokes and a photographer.'

When the day came I did my best to oblige, but the weather wasn't very good and I didn't find any action. There was further confusion when my police contact turned up with two colleagues and thought the people from the *News of the World* were the missing 'performers'.

None of this worried me, now decidedly wracked with guilt. Things improved a bit when a couple of weeks later I received a cheque for 50 pounds sterling. A tidy sum of money in those days, equivalent to nearly three weeks pay in my day job.

Childbirth grace and agony

PARENTING

Jen Vuk

I must say I agree with British actress Tilda Swinton on this one. Don't believe what you see in the movies, the actor said recently; natural childbirth is a 'truly murderous business'. Murderous, yes, but with the greatest return — a pink, slippery, squawking newborn in your arms.

How would it feel to be cheated of this miracle moment? In June 2010, Sydney mother Grace Wang was left paralysed from the waist down and suffering from extensive nerve damage after she was injected with antiseptic instead of a saline solution during an epidural while giving birth.

According to a recent study published in the *British Journal of Anaesthesia* the chance of suffering permanent damage epidurals during labour is much lower than previously thought; as low as one in 80,000. Not that such statistics offer Wang or her husband Jason Zheng any comfort.

I first came across the 33-year-old mother's terrible story not long after having my second son. Her plight resonated with me emotionally, spiritually and physically.

I recalled my own epidural experience with my firstborn, looking fixedly down at the floor trying to ignore the blood pooling angrily around my feet and hoping to God that I stayed still long enough in between violent spasms for the anaesthetist to insert the rather large needle safely into my spine.

With her nervous system effectively shut down Wang lay on the hospital bed looking more like a car accident victim than a woman who had just had her first child. Two months on, she was still unable to walk, sit or breastfeed.

Late last month, Wang and Zheng celebrated their son Alex's first birthday. Propped up against a battalion of pillows, Wang smiled for the cameras, watching on as others kissed and cuddled her son.

'When all those nurses hold Alex, when they kiss and hug him, I feel really sad because I really hope I can also hold him just like the others do because our Alex is so cute,' she heartbreakingly told SBS Mandarin News Australia.

How do you begin to reconcile what should have been the happiest day of your life with such a nightmare outcome?

It's a question that took on a sharp clarity as the mummy wars raged once again in the dailies. Up against the frivolity of mothers 'who do it with style' were women challenged by

the choices — or not — and a ticking biological clock. In the background was the growing din of those unable to conceive or for whom motherhood is an odyssey of positive thinking and fertility treatment (such as yours truly).

Stories such as Grace Wang's take the motherhood debate to a whole new level. It challenges and changes us, its terrible randomness knocking us for six and right out of our complacency.

Wang's story isn't simply motherhood interrupted or denied; it's a routine procedure turned modern tragedy. For its part, St George Hospital in Sydney has admitted culpability and is in negotiations with Wang and Zheng regarding offering ongoing care to their small family.

As for Wang, even in the face of such chronic pain, she has the presence of mind and, yes, grace to be thankful for being alive. 'He doesn't ask me to hold him,' she said about Alex, 'but sometimes in the afternoon when I lie in bed and they'd massage me and help me exercise, he'd come by my side, next to my face and touch me.'

This is mother love raw and uncensored; ripe with longing. It's courage not under fire, but under the relentless drive of a growing child.

Wang is a new mother who, in all likelihood, will never properly parent. Despite two brain surgeries and intense rehabilitation she still can't change her baby's nappy or hold him without help.

As I bend down for perhaps the 20th time in any given day to scoop up my youngest son, I simply can't imagine the hell Wang wakes up to every day. The fog of sleep deprivation looks much less impenetrable next to her 'bad days'. A healthy bouncing baby boy her daily reminder of motherhood literally taken out of her hands.

Brother of a suicide and war dead

POETRY

Ian C. Smith

Dreaming America

Read, curved across carpet like a cat,
then, later, in lunch breaks, short-term flights.

Absorb American struggle,
Steinbeck Dos Passos Faulkner,
& on atmospheric evenings
see film adaptations of those books.

Transport yearning abroad,
daydreams drift into night dreams
& you sling your hook with longshoremen,
share views with an unshaven priest
who demands a beer & workers' rights
on a poverty-shrouded waterfront.
Seize your chance under Vegas neon,
run numbers, survive on actors' charm,
stroll Atlantic City's boardwalk,
Lucky between lips, ready rebel.
Be alone & broke
but high on hope & adventure.
Now wake to an absence of jet-lag
& movies that repeat themselves
like a fog of factory hours,
American glamour dumbstruck.
This world spins towards old age

faster than belief, faster than silence,
faster than turned pages of a book,
a narrative about life or death.

Familial fugue

My late uncle, a baritone, never married
referred obliquely to missed cues.
I thought I heard his young singer's voice
when he offered me glimpses of the past.
He seemed strung too tightly, carping
about bad government, false glory of Empire
but then, he was rain-wrapt British
brother of a suicide *and* war dead.
His father apparently loved a singalong
playing his instruments with enthusiasm.
At the piano our mustachioed patriarch
resembled an ex-career army sergeant
summoned to subdue the locals, a man
who loved to hear a bugle pierce the dawn.
The baritone's mother quoted Shakespeare
preferred her husband to their children
placing her faith in him, gin, and ghosts
a fervid aura about her at sÃ©ances.
Who knows what she made of *Hamlet*?
When she turned up breast cancer's card
she hugged her suffering to herself.
Downstairs, her husband conducted

the faint exquisite strings of *Havanaise*
accompanying her visions of the afterlife.
Ironic greetings from my youngest aunt
the last of them, come at Christmas
that crack-patching time for families.
She was attracted to blues musicians
but is alone now, trapped in old age's web.
She stars in family lore for pointing
a carving knife at her father's heart
told him if he tried to thrash her
the way he thrashed those poor ivories
he'd wish he'd not survived The Somme.
She could have included The Blitz
a loving wife, four sons, dead comrades.

500 Rummy

They played with two packs, jokers wild
barefooted, sunburnt in the lamplight
this clan by the beach of a turbulent sea.
Nobody could shuffle and deal
so the father, off the grog, shell-less
went round in circles, cards flying
snarling at them to pay attention.
One might reach for the discard pile
take a chance on a bait-stained handful
then watch the winner go out with a shout.
Caught with your pants down, they'd chortle.

A king of spades, beard curling, looked sad
for a family man on holiday.

You could tell that if he used that sword
to punish some poor hapless subject
it would be for the common good.

A queen of hearts looked like Ann Boleyn
on the way to her own execution
clutching a posy of forget-me-nots
wondering what happened to romance.

Two jokers sat on crescent moons
leering down through binoculars
prankster gods bemused by the in catchphrases
their deft mental arithmetic, the way
the suits always ended up together.

Aborting abnormality

COMMUNITY

Zac Alstin

In a multi-ethnic society, we must be exposed to diversity in order to accept it without fear or hostility. No matter how friendly or open-minded we may be, awareness and exposure are the only way to make something 'new' and 'different' become normal and even mundane.

If this is true of ethnic and cultural differences, it is even more true of the differences that originate in disabilities and medical conditions.

Most of us cannot imagine how life with a disability could ever feel 'normal'. Yet disability advocates attest that the biggest obstacles to a happy and comfortable life stem from the prejudices and discrimination of the wider community.

How many of us have positive, normalising experiences of disability on which we can draw? I have to admit that I can only recall meeting two or three people with disabilities in my lifetime.

So perhaps we should not be surprised at the data released by the British Department of Health on 4 July, which [details](#) abortions performed for foetal abnormalities over the past decade. It revealed that in 2010 alone there were 482 fetuses aborted for Down syndrome, 181 for musculoskeletal abnormalities such as club foot, 128 for spina bifida, and seven for cleft lip and palate.

While these conditions may be abnormal in a medical sense, abortion is not a medically indicated response. One can only surmise that our sense of social abnormality plays a greater role in the decision to abort. With a scarcity of positive experiences to draw on, we cannot consider disability and other medical conditions to be within the range of 'normal'.

I've never met anyone with Down syndrome. I don't know anyone who has had a cleft palate. There is nothing in my experience to normalise these conditions.

For many of us, the disabilities and medical conditions subject to abortion in Britain and most other developed countries will remain unfamiliar anomalies; notable deviations from the norm. What kind of decision will we make if faced with an unfavourable diagnosis for our own children?

A 1999 literature review focusing on England and Europe [found](#) that 91–93 per cent of pregnancies testing positive to Down syndrome were aborted. With comparable regimes for testing and abortion, there is no reason to suspect that Australia's abortion rates would differ significantly.

The overwhelming majority of parents choose to abort their disabled children. Through the

mechanism of individual choice, we are eliminating those whose medical conditions or disabilities may be detected in the womb.

According to research published by my employer Southern Cross Bioethics Institute in 2007, 85 per cent of Australians [support](#) legal access to abortion for 'severe disabilities', while 60 per cent also support legal access for 'mild disabilities'. The Australian public are firmly behind this de facto elimination of the congenitally disabled.

So while we embrace a multi-ethnic society and encourage tolerance and acceptance of natural human diversity, our medical culture is moving determinedly in the opposite direction. We can look forward to an increasingly homogenised society in which deviations from the medical norm become less familiar and hence less tolerated.

In this sense, abortion as a response to disability and other medical abnormalities forms a vicious circle. The more abortions for foetal abnormality there are, the more homogenous our idea of normality will become. This homogenous sense of normality, intolerant of congenital problems and disabilities, will in turn encourage abortions for foetal abnormalities.

What hope do we have of drawing upon some kind of positive, meaningful, or normalising experiences when we face the prospect of a disabled child ourselves?

Rupert Murdoch as moral arbiter

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

In the wake of the *News of the World* scandal, the British Government media regulator Ofcom has deferred its decision on whether Rupert Murdoch and his executives are 'fit and proper' to increase their stake in the dominant Pay TV operator BSkyB, which is seen to be the country's most important media property.

Ofcom faces immense challenges in deciding because the law that sets out the requirement [does not explain](#) what is meant by 'fit and proper'. If it was about financial solvency there would be no doubt about Murdoch's suitability. More likely it's *moral* solvency, and that's where his credentials are questionable.

We might think our parents and teachers taught us how to separate right from wrong. But for many, these early influences have been supplanted by others, specifically media opinions and role models.

The media is no doubt the most influential agent in forming the opinions of Australians on the morality of issues such as detaining asylum seekers or imposing a price on carbon. We may not be conscious of the fact that we take our moral cues from the media, and that media proprietors are the most powerful moral arbiters in western society. But if Murdoch has the largest share of media ownership, he is the dominant influence on our choice of right and wrong.

[Recent research](#) commissioned by Amnesty International has shown that it matters greatly what we are told, or not told, by the media. Essential Media, which did the polling, found that anti-asylum seeker sentiments are fuelled by misconceptions and a lack of facts rather than racism.

This demonstrates that our judgment of what is right and wrong is largely determined by the information and viewpoints that editors choose to present. For example media headlines and commentators frequently refer to asylum seekers as 'illegals'. Therefore many Australians believe refugees are violating our sovereignty when they arrive in Australia seeking asylum. Editors also decide how much prominence to give to the views of commentators like Piers Ackerman, relative to those of experts such as Julian Burnside.

Obviously it is the task of editors to select which facts the public should be exposed to. But the community needs to be satisfied that editors and the proprietors who employ them are 'fit and proper', and that their selection is geared towards making the world a better place to live in for all. John Menadue of the Centre for Policy Development is one leading thinker who believes their performance does not measure up to this standard.

He [gave](#) a presentation to the St James Ethics Centre on 30 June that discussed ‘the misinformation and untruth which is a feature of the current debate’ on asylum seekers. He said ‘The media has largely gone missing. On asylum seekers the Coalition and some of the media have invented their own ...œfacts... .’ Earlier, in a [commentary](#) for Crikey, he referred to the view of a US columnist who believes we’re moving into an age of ‘post-truth politics’ where facts have become a hindrance.

The consensus of public opinion in the UK is also emerging as a hindrance. This is gratifying in that it appears the public will not stand for media conduct that demeans human beings, and the regulator will be under pressure to act accordingly.

The virtuous circle of Gillard's climate tax

ENVIRONMENT

Lin Hatfield Dodds

The Government and the Multi Party Climate Change Committee (MPCCC) have crafted a historic package of reforms: driving long-run reductions in carbon pollution, simplifying personal tax and making it fairer, and reducing poverty traps and barriers to work.

Each of these steps would be worthwhile on their own. Together, they send two clear signals. First, the Government has found its mojo. Second, minority government is not an impediment to good policy.

The package lays the groundwork for Australia's transition to a clean energy future, allowing us to play our part in global action to address climate change. It will put a price on carbon, drive public and private investment in the development of a strong low carbon energy sector, and support energy efficiency. It adopts a more ambitious, and realistic, long-run emissions target. It also establishes the institutions required to oversee and fine tune policies to reflect changing circumstances, providing flexibility to pursue larger pollution reductions at home if global ambition moves closer to the goals called for by the climate science.

Crucially, the package ensures that low income Australians will not be left behind. Low income and vulnerable Australians will receive permanent increases in allowances, pensions and family benefits that more than cover average cost of living impacts. Initial upfront payments, followed by fortnightly payments, will greatly assist households on tight budgets to manage cost of living increases.

Payments to most households will be provided as an upfront lump sum before the carbon price takes effect in July 2012, with fortnightly payments beginning in March or July 2013 for pensions, most allowances, and family payments, and in January 2014 for students on Youth Allowance.

The real value of these payments will be maintained through indexation. This protects households who have few options and are least able to cope with rising energy prices. There are also commitments to provide targeted supported for improved energy efficiency for low income households, with potential to address both the causes and consequences of fuel poverty among vulnerable groups.

One disappointment is that the arrangements are based on a 1.7 per cent increase in existing payments, rather than basic energy needs. This means that a single pensioner will receive up to \$80 more per year than someone on unemployment benefits. For a couple, the gap is \$130 per year, despite evidence showing that people on Newstart often spend a higher share of their income on energy.

But the package goes beyond offsetting cost of living impacts. In addition to the increases in allowance and payments, the package provides significant reductions in personal tax for people on low and middle incomes. This raises revenue from a bad activity (the creation of carbon pollution) to fund good activity (progressive reform of the taxation system).

This is a historic reform. It is clever policy. It is good policy. It's a bit like spinning gold from straw. It's exactly the kind of smart and gutsy approach we want to see from this Government, and from every government.

It also creates a virtuous circle. Analysis commissioned by the Garnaut Review Update found that combining a carbon price with this sort of targeted tax reduction could promote employment and halve the short economic impacts of reducing emissions. This means Australia could achieve a minus 15 emissions target for around the same impact as the minus 5 target without these tax reductions. Clever, and good.

For those who like detail: the tax changes triple the tax free threshold from \$6000 to \$18,200 per year from July 2012 and rolls in most of the existing Low Income Tax Offset to make the personal tax system simpler and more transparent. This helps reduce barriers to employment by lowering the excessive effective marginal tax rates that create poverty traps for low income earners.

The most immediate benefit is that Australians moving from welfare to work will no longer have to wait a year or more for their tax refund, and instead will receive that money in every pay packet.

This is a significant first step towards the income tax reforms recommended in the Henry Review, although more needs to be done. (So we do not need to cancel the Tax Forum yet.)

A final dimension is the comparison between this package and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme that failed to attract the support required before the last election. Usually, you would expect a controversial package to return in a weaker, watered down form. In this case, minority government and good negotiation skills seems to have delivered the opposite.

The new package has a stronger long term target (an 80 per cent reduction from 2000 levels by 2050), more transparent and independent advice (through the Climate Change Authority), a market based buy out of high polluting electricity generation, and more attention to complementary action on energy efficiency and land-based emissions reductions.

All in a context where only one side of the Parliament, and the cross benches, seem to have any interest in constructive debate about how to respond to the real and pressing challenges facing our nation.

The Government, the Greens, and the independent members of the MPCCC all deserve commendation for delivering leadership and a practical package of measures that hit several important policy targets. This package positions Australia for the future.

Cucumbers and climate change deniers

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Francisco Sosa Wagner, a Spanish member of the European Parliament, enjoys a modest fame as a doctor of law, university professor, historian, and prize-winning writer. His columns on European political, legal and other topics appear regularly in the Spanish press, and he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Saint Raymond of Peñafort for his outstanding contributions to the field of justice and the law.

His European Parliament profile shows him to be a conscientious attendee of the plenary sessions (103 out of a possible 109 days); he has asked 28 parliamentary questions, delivered 15 plenary speeches, contributed to the amendment of 13 reports and given two opinions.

A fit-looking 65, stylishly bow-tied and coiffed, dignified but with the trace of an impish smile, Wagner might not bestride the European Parliament like a colossus, but he is clearly not to be taken lightly or in any way disrespectfully. All of which makes the most famous and recent photograph of him initially puzzling and certainly surprising.

Wearing one of his trademark colourful bow ties, Francisco Sosa Wagner, MEP, is standing at his parliamentary desk holding at head height a long green cucumber. His message: 'We need to restore the honour of the cucumber!'

It may not have been one of his more telling or resonant speeches — though it was surely his briefest — but it was topical because the cucumber had, of course, been grievously besmirched when identified — wrongly — as the cause of the recent deadly E.coli outbreak in Germany.

It's fairly difficult to look dignified and serious while brandishing a cucumber. Cucumbers are themselves vaguely comic and are central to innumerable phallic jokes and claims. Waving one of these priapic evocations above your head is bound to have a deflating and distracting effect on your spoken message no matter how passionate, powerful and apposite your words might be.

But it is a measure of Wagner's dedication to the cause that he was prepared to risk ridicule and, perhaps, deliberate misinterpretation both of his motives and his imagery, to rescue the innocent vegetable. Anyway, it worked. His dramatic fist-full of penile *cucumis sativus* prompted further investigations which exonerated the inoffensive cowcumber, as it was once called, and pointed the finger at fenugreek sprouts imported from Egypt.

The Spanish MEP's willingness to risk his dignity and credibility in an apparently eccentric cause reminded me of Vyacheslav Ilyin, whose story I came across in a dentist waiting room copy of *New Scientist* a few years ago.

Vyacheslav Ilyin is pretty much like you and me, allowing for some cultural differences. He turns an honest rouble at Moscow's Institute for Biological and Medical Problems, trails to and from his office in all weathers protected by his *ushanka* (one of those Russian fur hats), loves his family, despairs at the indifferent form of his team, Lokomotiv Moscow, and wouldn't give you a bent kopeck for politicians.

According to the article, Vyacheslav's government-backed and classified research interest is how the astronauts in the space station cope with their dirty laundry.

It seems that, after the small matter of ensuring that a spacecraft actually stays in space and sticks to the game plan, the biggest problem in orbit is waste disposal. As a result, Vyacheslav Ilyin is obsessed with underpants. It turns out that astronauts must wear the same underpants for up to a week at a time. In short, the biggest problem up there is down there.

At the drop of a *ushanka*, Vyacheslav will tell you that each astronaut generates about 2.5 kg of uncompressed waste every day. Lateral thinker that he is, Vyacheslav scorns such remedies as squeezing the spacecraft full of whitegoods. What he's working on is a mixture of bacteria that will digest the astronauts' underpants and in the process produce methane to power the space craft.

Astronautical underpants are Vyacheslav Ilyin's equivalent of Francisco Sosa Wagner's phallic cucumber. Both are difficult propositions to promote with dignity but both men had the passion and the courage to do so publicly and unflinchingly and both made a significant contribution.

This is in contrast to Christopher Monckton, variously referred to as Lord and Viscount, who has called Ross Garnaut a fascist (for which he was forced to apologise), has delivered a speech in front of a large Nazi swastika, compares climate change consensus to Nazi eugenics and who glibly wondered what has happened to the Australian 'fair go' — a concept so dear to English Viscounts and Lords — when a succession of venues cancelled his bookings.

There are easily enough crackpots around — believing everything from the moon landings to the twin towers attack is a 'put-up job' — to ensure that conspiracy theorists and professional deniers like Monckton will always get an audience. It would all be laughable if it wasn't done with such a veneer of phony class (Lords and viscounts) and insufferable superiority (the insulting dismissal of genuine intellectuals like Garnaut) and if it didn't call upon obscenities in the past for its validation.

Gillard's carbon tax sales pitch

ENVIRONMENT

Fatima Measham

This Sunday, Prime Minister Julia Gillard will conclude what ABC journalist Annabel Crabb has described as its policy striptease over pricing carbon. After months of acrimonious public debate in which even scientists and economists copped stray punches, the Federal Government will finally detail the carbon scheme formulated by the multiparty climate change committee.

At this stage, the legislation is expected to pass both houses of Parliament. So why is Gillard taking the unusual step of making a statement on national television this weekend, followed by a five-week sales pitch during the parliamentary winter break?

Well, why wouldn't she? This is the fight of her political life.

No Greek tragedian could have written such a delicious twist. After reportedly convincing Kevin Rudd to defer the (flawed) Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, then stating at the 2010 election that she would not introduce a carbon tax, Gillard is now staking her government on a climate change policy that few completely understand and many resent.

She needs to successfully prosecute it if her government is to withstand further assaults from the Opposition regarding its 'mandate'. She also needs to insulate the public from the pro-industry ad campaigns that will surely hit television screens soon.

The carbon tax is a complicated sell. The main question people are asking, 'Will I be worse off?', does not have a brief, reassuring answer. Any emissions reduction scheme worth implementing is bound to hurt. It is no surprise that public discourse has focused on exemptions and compensations.

This is appropriate to a degree. The cost of any economic reform must be justified when its benefits are unclear in the public mind. People are likely to see initial price increases, before emissions-based price differentiation starts shifting them toward cheaper products that happen to be less-polluting.

With Treasury anticipating a blowout in the first couple of years of implementation before the scheme becomes budget neutral, it is not voter-friendly policy.

What gets obscured in all this is the idea that there is scientific and economic consensus around carbon reduction as a legitimate response to climate change. Markets around carbon credit are already being created in Europe and Asia. Gillard has had to contend with a sideshow debate on anthropogenic climate change that other world leaders have not.

In fact there is nothing radical about fixing a carbon price as the precursor to an emissions

trading scheme. It provides a concrete, stable base from which a market can be built. (It is ironic that traditionally pro-market Liberals would be so resistant to a market-based mechanism for addressing this problem.)

An emissions trading scheme is all but inevitable anyway. In case anyone has forgotten, Australia is a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol, which specifies this as one of the mechanisms for reducing greenhouse gases.

The first commitment period for this international agreement will expire next year. While our politicians and pundits quibble over the carbon price package, the rest of the world is already operationalising its commitments. For instance, the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme is now in its second trading period since its 2005 launch.

Embarrassingly, while the EU made a pre-Copenhagen commitment of a 20 per cent cut on 1990 levels by the year 2020, the Australian Government insists that it will not raise its 5 per cent cut on 2000 levels until it is satisfied with the credibility of 'both the specific targets of advanced economies and the verifiable emissions reduction actions of China and India.'

Yet the Clean Development Mechanism, another Kyoto Protocol instrument, is being taken up significantly by these very countries. Once used as examples of inaction, China and India account for the largest proportion of CDM-registered emissions reduction projects, through which they earn certified emission reduction (CER) credits that can be traded and sold.

In other words, Gillard's greatest challenge in selling the carbon scheme is in normalising it in the public mind. She needs to overcome the island mentality that is hijacking debate on this policy.

Market-based climate action is not at all radical or catastrophic when seen in the light of movements in the international community. We need to be part of this broader shift. Otherwise, we may be facing a new wave of 'cultural cringe'.

Welcome the Republic of South Sudan

POLITICS

Jack De Groot

Tomorrow, Saturday 9 July, the world will welcome a new nation. After four decades of civil war and six tense months of transition, the Republic of South Sudan will assert its independence.

The birth of a new nation is an occasion for reflection and celebration, but for the international aid and development community South Sudan's independence also represents a raft of new challenges for ensuring opportunity in some of Africa's most vulnerable communities

It's fitting that this week the Australian Government should chose to announce its response to the Independent Review of Aid Effectiveness.

In the most comprehensive review of Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in 15 years, the Government has committed to pioneer a more accountable, transparent and effective delivery of aid to the poorest communities in our global family.

With an emphasis on health, education, governance and emergency preparedness programs, the Government's new framework for AusAID couldn't come at a better time for the vulnerable communities of a fragile new nation and the 1.4 billion people who still live in debilitating poverty.

But as we welcome this commitment to an aid program that delivers value for money, and absorb the sector's new buzz-word — effectiveness — into our lexicon, we have to ask: what counts for good aid?

In Sudan's contested border regions of Southern Kordofan, Blue Nile and Abyei, and throughout the poverty-stricken communities of southern Sudan, there is dire and ongoing need for food, water and shelter, and for innovative projects that tackle the root causes of insecurity and poverty in the region.

But before we fly in to save the day, we must first evaluate whether our aid will have a real and lasting impact for the poorest of the poor.

For Caritas Australia, the measure of an effective aid program is its commitment to be by and for the people. There's no doubt that the agency's humanitarian assistance and long-term development initiatives have the potential to render extreme poverty a thing of the past — but where they do not establish genuine relationships with local organisations who have earned the trust of both the international community and the communities they are trying to help, there can be no real progress.

In conversations with the Independent Aid Review panel, Caritas Australia urged that the effectiveness of our nation's aid program be judged on three accounts.

In determining the value of Australian aid, Parliament must ensure that the poorest communities are engaged in the vision, design and implementation of their development; that the quality, strength and reciprocal nature of local community partnerships enables participation and learning exchange; and that our development initiatives build local capacity and skills to outlast our engagement.

As the Republic of South Sudan prepares for its independence, Caritas Australia and its international network are working in partnership with local communities to deliver just this kind of effective aid.

Building resilience in the face of a mounting humanitarian crisis, work in these vulnerable communities encompasses the provision of essential services; the delivery of grassroots education, health and livelihood opportunities; training in emergency preparedness; and solidarity alongside those who face their new citizenship with hope as well as fear.

This week, Australia embarks on a new journey with the most vulnerable members of our global family. We'll be looking to our Parliament to bolster the genuine civil society engagement that Australians so generously support, and to ensure that our nation's burgeoning aid program has the infrastructure and vision to be first and foremost accountable to the poorest of the poor.

Cyber bullies and 'selfish' suicide

TELEVISION

Tim Kroenert

What is Jason Akermanis even doing there?

The famously smarmy bleach-blonde ex-footy player seems an odd match alongside ethicist-comedian George McEncroe, and Chaser satirist Craig Reucassel. I almost expect co-host, comedian Meshel Laurie to start singing, 'One of these guests is not like the others ...' Most of Akermanis' responses throughout the program consist of witless one-liners that conclude with the word 'shit'.

Then, suddenly, everything becomes clear. The panel is in the midst of discussing whether it is okay for parents to spy on their kids online. Suddenly, host Ian 'Dicko' Dickson interjects with a leading question directed at Akermanis, about a youth who committed suicide after being bullied online.

'If you commit suicide it's the most selfish thing you will ever do,' Akermanis declares.

It's a contentious comment that draws a *boo* from several members of the studio audience. But he goes on to open up about his own past battles with depression. 'I've been in that situation [being bullied], and I had the chance to, and I wanted to [commit suicide], and you know what? I'm glad I didn't.' Aker is rewarded for his candour with warm applause.

Can of Worms is a show about the ethics of everyday life. This is typically heady territory for Andrew Denton's production company, Zapruder's Other Films, and it is somewhat refreshing to find it located on prime time commercial television. As the exchange with Akermanis illustrated, there is a genuine desire to get beyond frivolity and provoke reflection and the articulation of varying perspectives.

It's somewhat of a lightweight Q+A, neither as lively nor as incisive as the ABC's water-cooler champion (Dicko, certainly, is neither as smart nor as congenial as Q+A host Tony Jones). But it's made a promising start, and with some refinement could provide Ten with a solid counterpart.

The bulk is dedicated to discussion of two curly questions or 'worms'; probing, through dialogue and light debate, the nuances of the panellists' thoughts and feelings about the given issue. During episode one, an trivial question about whether it was insulting to call someone a 'bogan' became a discussion about elitism, about denigrating the 'other', and about individual pride and dignity.

The one-hour running time is fleshed out with 'fun' segments. One saw the guests asked to take recent news bites — such as the fact that AFL Hawthorn club president Jeff Kennett owns

a golliwog named after star player, Lance 'Buddy' Franklin (who is Aboriginal) — and rank them on a 'wrong-o-metre'. The intention appears to be to delineate genuine ethical breaches from mere PC *faux pas*.

The show's long-term success will depend upon both the quality of the guests (one moment of contrived drama would surely not justify Akermanis' return) and the topicality and substance of the questions. Will future episodes consider guests' views on climate change? the Intervention? Australia's treatment of asylum seekers? the place of religion in secular society? gay marriage?

Hopefully Zapruder's Other Films will opt for substance over frivolity.

***Can of Worms* screens Monday nights at 8.30pm. Episode one will be rerun tomorrow night, Friday 8 July, at 11pm**

Houses without walls

POLITICS

Paul O'Callaghan



Housing researchers Dr Guy Johnson and Professor Chris Chamberlain have recently argued for a 'housing first' approach, that offers people permanent housing to homeless people without first putting conditions on their behaviour.

The concept flies in the face of politicians and welfare agencies in Australia, where it seems the idea of 'conditionality' has never been so popular. It's almost as if there's a race to think of new ways of making welfare support conditional on responsible behavior.

There's an assumption that jobs, housing and a secure income are available to anyone willing to take advantage of education, training and job opportunities. And for those temporarily down on their luck, there are things like welfare-to-work programs and mental health services. So if disadvantage persists, it can only be because some people refuse to be helped.

Conditionality is also popular with the broader public. Most of us believe in equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. When we are doing alright, it's tempting to think it's because we are setting our alarm clocks early, showing up to work and putting in the effort. People who are unwilling to take advantage of the opportunities available have no one to blame but themselves. It's only fair that their welfare support should be conditional on how they behave.

But sometimes conditionality just doesn't work. Homelessness is a prime example.

In the latest *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Johnson and Chamberlain [argue](#) that policy responses to the homeless mentally ill often fail because they expect people to accept treatment before offering them a place to live. This approach assumes that problems such as mental illness are the root cause of homelessness, and insists that people take responsibility for straightening themselves out before we 'reward' them with housing.

But as Johnson and Chamberlain explain, most people who are homeless do not have a mental illness and, in some cases, mental illness is a consequence, rather than a cause, of homelessness. Research by the [Sacred Heart Mission](#) suggests more than half of its clients developed a mental health problem after becoming homeless.

Homelessness has many causes. Many of those have little or nothing to do with individual behaviour. Family breakdown, the death of a spouse or parent, the high cost of housing and the low rates of payment of Centrelink allowances and pensions are just some.

Research in the US suggests that, while it's important to offer treatment and other assistance, supportive relationships are more effective when people enter into them voluntarily.

This is why Johnson and Chamberlain's 'housing first' approach works. Not only does permanent housing provide a more stable environment in which people can receive help, but it offers people a greater sense of freedom, control and privacy. And the evidence suggests that this can often help people get on top of such problems as mental illness, drug abuse and problem drinking.

However, Johnson and Chamberlain's approach also challenges the public's sense of what's fair. Many people want governments to demand responsible behaviour before handing out benefits like housing or cash. There's a strong suspicion that unconditional benefits make problems worse.

And that may be true, in some cases. But in the case of homelessness among people with a mental illness the evidence suggests that relaxing conditionality leads to better outcomes.

Indigenous Australians taking the next step

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Brian Doyle

I have just returned home after visiting friends in remote Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley.

This is the season of the 'grey nomads': older tourists escaping the cold and wet winter weather of the south; heavily packed and well prepared. It is a good time of the year to travel and explore the north. The weather in the Centre and Kimberley is ideal: cold nights and sunny days. The unsealed roads are dry and, while the cost of fuel can be high (\$2.33 in one place), the land and people are warm and welcoming.



While one has to 'pay' extra to travel and experience what locals see as normal, much of the life of remote living can remain hidden.

I enjoyed catching up with families I have known for a long time, but had not seen for a year. As always, new babies, growing adolescents, long memories and old jokes.

In the beginning, time is put aside to pay respect for those who have died since my last visit. This takes the form of a handshake, sometimes an embrace, depending on my relationship to the deceased and their family. My friends gently remind me of those names I need to avoid repeating, in order to show respect for those who have recently departed.

Then we settle down to talk about football, local politics and the latest issues of concern. Their humour enlivens my spirit. Always quick, sharp and clever. Remote living may be tough, day following day and things improving far too slowly, but it always merits a good laugh.

At the same time, and despite the warmth and humour, this was a particularly sad trip. I became aware of the large number of young people who have died in recent years. Some were close friends; we had shared journeys, important ceremonies and special occasions.

So, before I returned home, I went down to the local cemetery to remember and let them know I had not forgotten them. There they were laid out before me: nicely tended graves, crosses, rosary beads and plastic flowers. They represented the painful trifecta of young peoples' deaths: car accidents, suicides and chronic disease.

I found myself quite sad. I have watched them come into life and grow up with all the promise that only the young can offer. Apart my own feelings, however, I could sense a deeper burden for families and communities having to live with such close, lingering and painful memories.

One of my highlights was to spend time with a young mother, her attentive husband and

their first child. Her own mother is in an urban centre on kidney dialysis, her father is in a major hospital after a car accident, an older sister has an intellectual disability and an older brother died from chronic health issues; two other brothers have committed suicide. Whenever we meet I feel rather helpless and I wonder how she can cope in the face of what she and her family have experienced.

Yet, I found her resilient, often with a smile, showing great persistence and personal strength. Her daily and cheerful efforts to bring up her new family humbled and touched me.

I find this year's [NAIDOC](#) Week (3–10 July) message most relevant. The theme, 'Change: the next step is ours' comes with a poster representing the image of a First Australian family with linked hands, stepping out on the road to change.

It speaks to my recent experience.

On the poster the past is laid out, including The Apology, the Closing the Gap campaign and the *Bringing Them Home* report. To that past we could add much, much more. Most Indigenous families have been, and continue to be, touched by the effects of car accidents, suicides and chronic disease. Their past continues to inform their present, but it does not necessarily define their future.

I do not see this young mother dwelling on her family loss, as well she might and, I am sure, is tempted at times to do. I see her choosing to establish a new family, despite her history and the lack of family support around her. I find the steps she takes forward encouraging but also challenging.

I can be tempted to focus on her past and give priority to what is lacking in her life. Or I can choose to focus on the change she has embraced and the steps she is now taking.

While each daily step is hers, I cannot avoid examining more carefully my own attitudes and how my efforts support and encourage hers as well.

Sketching an icon of refugee resilience

NON-FICTION

Vacy Vlazna

Handala is the eternal child; the eternal 10-year-old refugee child conceived in the fragmented childhood of the late Palestinian cartoonist [Naji Al-Ali](#).

In March, I first saw Handala in a painting in the wretched Bourj al Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut; a camp similar to Shatila Camp, where Al-Ali grew up after his family was dispossessed of their home in Al-Shajara village near Nazareth during the 1947 Nakba.

The Nakba, with its symbol of precious keys from stolen or demolished homes (representing the right of return), is the Palestinian Catastrophe in which 750,000 Palestinians were forcefully expelled from their homes, from their beloved ancestral lands and roots by Israeli militia.

In a cartoon, Handala stands under a key hanging around the neck of the crucified Christ. Below is the caption 'Jesus is a Palestinian, says Naji Al-Ali; like all Palestinian people he too dreams of returning to his home in Bethlehem.'

Al-Ali has said of Handala's creation; 'I drew him as a child who is not beautiful; his hair is like the hair of a hedgehog who uses his thorns as a weapon. Handala is not a fat, happy, relaxed, or pampered child. He is barefooted like the refugee camp children, and he is an icon that protects me from making mistakes. Even though he is rough, he smells of amber.'

I learnt about Handala while perusing *A Child in Palestine: The cartoons of Naji Al-Ali* in a Jerusalem bookstore. On the cover Handala stands beside what seems to be a candle taller than him, but is in fact a pen: Al-Ali's pen was such a tour de force for truth that he was assassinated in London in 1987.

The image of this little child reminded me of Michael Leunig's iconic duck and his celebration of innocence as the ground of our conscience or what he calls 'the morality of the heart'.

Handala stands with his little hands clasped behind him silently witnessing the 63-year-wide cinemascop of 'slow motion ethnic cleansing' by Israeli state violence, by Arab and international betrayal and by callous human indifference. As a child he is vulnerable and needs protecting, so to stand by him we must reclaim, with heartfelt honesty, our lost innocence, to imagine what 10-year-old eyes, minds and hearts see and feel when suffering.

In Palestine, Handala is loved and cherished as a symbol of righteous steadfast resistance.

He is everywhere, not only on walls, stickers and T-shirts, but in the eyes of children as they watch their parents humiliated at checkpoints by abrasive Israeli soldiers; in the eyes of

children dying of cancer because medicines are blocked from entering Gaza; in a child's scream as her home is obliterated by Israeli missiles or bulldozers; in the fear of 700 children per annum facing judges in Israeli military courts; in the anxiety of children who are spat at and harassed by settlers and soldiers while on their way to and from school; in the sound of sniper bullets fired at children near the Buffer Zone when collecting rubble for money to help their poverty-stricken families.

Handala transcends the page, transcends Palestine. He becomes every suffering child: its hopes, dreams, courage and rights.

'I presented him to the poor and named him Handala as a symbol of bitterness,' said Al-Ali. 'At first, he was a Palestinian child, but his consciousness developed to have a national and then a global and human horizon. He is a simple yet tough child, and this is why people adopted him and felt that he represents their consciousness.'

Handala is the refugee child in detention suspended in an emotional prison barely hanging on to the universal right to protection. Handala is in the eyes of little Seenan watching his parents drown near the illusory safety of Christmas Island. He is the Aboriginal child belittled by Canberra's intervention.

Humankind needs to be led by Handala to a life of conscience, compassion and responsibility.

Dorothy enjoys a funeral

POETRY

Brook Emery and Rodney Wethererll

I walk among the dead

I walk among the dead. Trimmed and untrimmed graves,
symbols I think are Gaelic, and hosts of Guardian Angels,
some with heads lopped off, chipped smocks, shattered wings.
The morning sun flings light across the sea and, to the eye,
each cross is turned to black. Here lie the much beloved
unknown wives, adored fathers, children gone too soon,
vaults and edifices where family feuds subside.

Six mostly intact angels stand beside one pathway.
All their heads are bowed but this one presses flowers
to her belly, this one scatters blossoms from the basket
of her gown, this one's arms are folded on her breasts,
and this one's palms are lightly pressed in prayer.
This one shelters one child, this one two. And on this last,
brown head twitching, a sparrow has momentarily perched.
—*Brook Emery*

Dorothy enjoys a funeral

The lovely phrases roll off our Vicar's tongue:
all flesh is grass —
isn't it though? Clippings on Val's compost heap,
green and steaming in the rainy times,
brown chaff in a dry summer.
Though worms destroy this body —

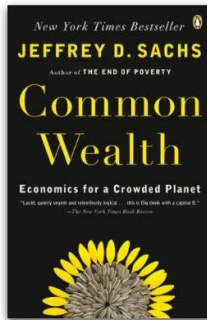
the gardener in her liked the thought.
Now her son is buttering parsnips in a eulogy:
Val's generosity, her merry laugh, her cooking.
Awful to think of her lying in that polished box,
plump though somewhat wasted.
It's a mercy, someone's bound to say,
yet tearful Bill may not agree.
Mercy should have operated eighteen months ago,
when we prayed for an end to it all.
The Lord is my shepherd, and next thing we are walking
through the valley of the shadow of death,
Val's death, then it'll be Bill's, and soon enough, my own.
Lo! I tell you a mystery, says the reader,
We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,
In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,
at the last trumpet.
Beautiful, especially when sung.
Yet I doubt if she'll enjoy that trumpet blast.
Turn down the volume! she will demand,
and as for being made imperishable,
she didn't believe in stuff like long-life milk.
I couldn't fault the Vicar's homily, except for being bland,
one thing Val was not accused of.
Death, where exactly is thy sting?
The words lull me gently, and the music too:
a grand-daughter playing solo flute,
and we sing Val's favourite hymn,

I heard the voice of Jesus say
Come unto me and rest.
For once, she's resting now.
I gaze at, and through, the stained glass
with Jesus triumphant on the cross.
How odd, Val would say as we did the brass —
the triumph came well after the cross.
Now God is asked to graciously deal with those who mourn.
How could he not? Yet some will resist,
Bill, for example, angry in his tears.
Finally the blessing, May the God of peace ...
the god of death and life and everything else
has not forgotten us, here at All Saints'.
The organ plays a sombre march, as for a Queen.
It's a good funeral, and I can hear Val saying
Better than I deserve, Dorothy.
Quite possibly — she had her faults,
a couple mentioned in the tributes, just for laughs.
But now the hard part: getting on without her.
—*Rodney Wetherell*

Opportunities on a crowded planet

ENVIRONMENT

Bruce Duncan



Every decade or so the debate about the size of world population resumes. It is a crucial debate which can have major consequences for millions of people. But it is also a difficult debate, since the issues are complex, emotive and easily sensationalised.

The damaging and ongoing consequences of the global financial crisis make our current situation still more urgent. Before, many development specialists and economists were quietly confident the world had the resources to feed its growing population until population size levelled off at about 9 billion people in 2050, although this would require skill and effort on a global scale.

This commitment was evident in the UN Millennium Development Goals, which aimed to rapidly reduce hunger and the grossest poverty within decades. Importantly, the Goals included improved health outcomes for children and women, and increased educational opportunities for girls and young women. These aims were seen to be critical in curtailing excessive population growth rates.

While there has been major progress, particularly in Africa, the GFC has severely handicapped results. The economic crisis in developed countries savaged credit for developing countries, and resulted in perhaps 100 million people being pushed down into the most severe deprivation and hunger. The crisis reversed the steady progress that many countries had been making to reduce severe poverty.

The task of reducing global poverty suddenly became much harder.

To make matters worse, the threats arising from global warming and climate change challenged the assumptions agricultural experts had made about how to increase world food production at affordable prices. Droughts, floods and more extreme weather patterns were causing unexpected shortages, resulting in higher food prices and increased hunger for the poorest people.

No wonder some people are alarmed. Australian entrepreneur, Dick Smith, wrote recently that the world 'is already hitting against' its limits to growth. 'On a finite planet, we are ... literally exhausting the environment on which we rely for our survival.'

Even the eminent economist, Jeffrey Sachs, coordinator of the large group of economists who devised the details of the UN Millennium Development Goals, called for a cap on population of 8 billion in 2050. In his 2008 book, *Common Wealth: Economics for a Crowded*

Planet, Sachs nevertheless insisted that measures to reduce population growth must be voluntary and not coerced.

Given that world population is already at 7 billion, it is inconceivable that population size could be contained to 8 billion. Even though the birth rate in about 50 countries, including China, is already below population replacement levels, most people are living longer; and even if couples only had two children, population would still increase well beyond 8 billion.

Unless countries are prepared to implement draconian birth-control policies like China's, realistically there is no alternative but to prepare for a world of 9 billion people. The right of couples to decide how many children they will have is a fundamental human right. It is inconceivable that countries would willingly sacrifice such intimate and important freedoms.

Nevertheless, couples make their decisions about family size in the context of their culture, social environment and economic situation, and hence responsible decision-making will vary accordingly. Governments also try to educate their people about the costs or benefits of population size, and provide incentives to optimise family size.

Demographers have shed much light on the complex dynamics of population growth, and emphasised key factors in reducing high growth rates: alleviating poverty, improving social security, reducing child mortality, educating girls, and providing economic opportunities.

The good news is that excessive population growth rates can, and in many places have been, reduced by improving human wellbeing and economic opportunities.

Further, the projected increase in global population need not provoke a catastrophe. We have a wide array of new means of increasing food production and making better use of resources to offer all people the chance of a decent and humane standard of living.

We will of course need to be smarter and more modest in our use of resources, especially to wind back carbon emissions and to distribute wealth more equitably.

I do not for a moment underestimate the challenge before us in the next 40 to 50 years. It is a decisive moment in human history, when we have the opportunity to develop a sustainable economy and environment, not only to eliminate hunger and the worst poverty but to secure resources for future generations.

It is an unprecedented opportunity, but it is imperative that we manage this transition well.

Aung San Suu Kyi's inner freedom

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Over the weekend, Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd had the privilege of spending two hours with Burma's pro-democracy hero Aung San Suu Kyi. The rest of us were privileged to have the opportunity to listen to the first of her BBC Reith Lectures, which was broadcast in Australia last night on ABC NewsRadio.

The series of two lectures, which can be watched or [read](#) online, is titled *Securing Freedom*. It was recorded in secret and smuggled out of the country by BBC staff.

Aung San Suu Kyi was released on 13 November last year after having spent 15 of the past 21 years under house arrest. What is most remarkable is that she does not regard her release as the moment of her freedom.

Freedom for her is something altogether different from being allowed to move out of her house. The way she explains it makes her actual release from captivity seem almost inconsequential.

She says that whenever she was asked at the end of each stretch of house arrest how it felt to be free, she would answer that it felt no different because her mind had always been free. The freedom that mattered most to her was an inner or *spiritual* freedom.

'I have spoken out often of the inner freedom that comes out from following a course in harmony with one's conscience.'

She insists that spiritual freedom does not imply passivity and resignation, but instead it reinforces 'a practical drive for the more fundamental freedoms in the form of human rights and rule of law'.

The first step in the battle towards freedom is to conquer fear, because fear paralyses individuals and whole societies. It is the real enemy, and once it is overcome the battle is as good as won. Meditation plays no small role in this particular struggle.

Western democracies wage wars in the name of freedom. President George Bush spoke about the freedom America was securing for Iraq, but did not seem able to go into detail about what he meant by freedom. He was not the only one. It is therefore not surprising that freedom eluded the so-called Coalition of the Willing.

Aung San Suu Kyi's Reith Lectures should be compulsory reading for every commander in chief.

Regional issues beyond the mad hatter's tea party

POLITICS

Rachel Baxendale

'Hasn't the country had its fair share, and destroyed the country, and given us a desperado in a big hat in the process?'

This was Don Watson's characteristically provocative opening to an interview with Judith Brett, author of the most recent Quarterly Essay, [Fair Share: Country and City in Australia](#), at the Wheeler Centre in Melbourne.

Notwithstanding the current high profile of rural independents Bob Katter, Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott, and the prominence of issues such as the NBN rollout, live cattle exports, and the fate of the Murray-Darling Basin, flippancy and apathy are frequent features of any debate where Australia's pronounced country/city divide comes to the fore.

When [Q&A](#)'s largest-ever studio audience filled the Albury Entertainment Centre in May, Liberal senator Eric Abetz's concerns about leftist bias received almost as much press publicity as the event itself.

In contrast with the studio audience, the TV audience for the Albury Q&A was down on the weekly average, and the Twitter stream filled with disparagement from bored Fitzroy and Surry Hills pundits switching off their TVs.

Metropolitan columnists from Catherine Deveny to Miranda Devine regularly fill column inches by hating on the bucolically backward.

On the other hand, agrarian socialist rants from the likes of Katter don't help the stereotyping, and it's easy to paint the [book burners](#) at last year's Murray-Darling Basin protests as no more than ignorant, self-interested environmental vandals.

Enter Brett with *Fair Share*, and finally there's a voice in the debate that resists resorting to the crude dichotomies and sweeping condescension that so often dominate perceptions on both sides, and conveys the importance of Australians in the cities taking an interest in the fate of the country.

30 per cent of the Australian population, 70 per cent of the Indigenous population, large numbers of the nation's long-term unemployed and increasing numbers of recent humanitarian refugees call rural areas home. An interest in rural Australia's future is therefore imperative for anyone interested in the future of the nation as a whole.

Some aspects of rural life at present are dire: 2010 Rural Woman of the Year and Albury Q&A panellist, Alana Johnson, went as far as to term the state of rural health a 'human rights issue'.

As an audience member noted, those in the country are 30 per cent more likely to die from a heart attack than those in urban areas.

It's also clear that in some areas, ways of life that have survived for several generations are unlikely to be sustainable for much longer.

Take the wine industry in the Murray Valley. Brett argues that the policies of governments and business are at least as much at fault as the affected communities and individuals.

It's easy to contend that many of those who planted vines during the boom in the late '80s and '90s were naive opportunists, and that the free market has given them their just desserts for having commandeered precious water in order to flood it with the ocean of goon in which the nation's wine industry is now drowning.

But this argument ignores the role played by tax incentives and outside investment, and the huge encouragement larger companies — who should have known better — offered smaller growers in the form of lucrative, long-term supply contracts.

The wine industry is just one small part of the rural economy, but its current predicament illustrates the impact that decisions made in the cities have upon country people.

When 75 per cent of funding for agricultural science research and development is spent in capital cities, as Charles Sturt University Science Dean Nick Klomp noted on *Q&A*, it's hardly surprising that such decisions aren't always wise.

As Brett establishes, it's not all doom and gloom in the country. Many larger regional centres in the eastern states are thriving, the mining boom is fuelling exponential growth in parts of WA, the Northern Territory and Queensland, and almost half of the Australian tourist dollar — a bigger part of the nation's economy even than mining — is made outside capital cities.

But if we are to aim for the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to citizens regardless of geographic location, policies must be developed through partnerships between city and country.

Brett's essay should be mandatory reading for every politician, public servant or business person whose conduct has a very real bearing on the everyday lives of rural Australians.

As she contends, it won't do to abandon 'all but the coastal fringe and a few regional towns' to blackberries, feral animals, and Bradley John Murdoch.

