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Living in the echo of suicide

BOOK CHAT

Jen Vuk and Barry Gittins

The View on the Way Down, Rebecca Wait, Picador, 2012

Jen

Suicide is no easy topic. So, from the outset, my apologies to my Book Chat colleague, Barry. *The View on the Way Down*, by 25-year-old first-time UK author Rebecca Wait, veers headlong into this uncomfortable territory. And it does not apply the brakes.

The novel opens with two brothers on the beach, digging their way to 'Australia', they joke conspiratorially. Their mother is tending to her baby; their father absentmindedly scans the paper. A storm darkens the horizon. This is a Polaroid family idyll under threat.

We quickly shift to the present and meet this same family — or what's left of it — in daily survival mode, visibly reeling from the suicide of one of the brothers, the eldest, Kit, some years earlier.

Despite having been 'spared' the truth of her brother's death, the 'baby', now-14-year-old Emma, is rudderless, seeking more than sustenance (oblivion, perhaps?) in food and religion. Her parents Joe and Rose go about their day duly avoiding each other, as if a wrong word or glance alone can kick up the dust of painful memories.

The family home is thick with absence. Kit's room remains a shrine — down to the Lego he'd left behind — yet Jamie, once the shadow of his older brother, has been all but erased. The reasons for his estrangement are both complex and heart-rending, and Wait takes her time to peel back the many layers.

Wait's masterstroke is her minimalism. This is how she manages to be both stirring and straight-shooting in a single sentence. 'And this time Rose had nothing to say in response,' she writes, 'because she knew it was the truth that she had blamed Jamie, too, and if Joe was responsible for driving him away, she was just as guilty for not protecting him.'

This, to me, seems so utterly authentic. So much about suicide centres on the unspoken; the gaping spaces in between those who are left behind. Wait is nothing if not a writer of economy. In unpacking grief, there's no sign of platitudes. Her intentions are clear. Without a filter we must see compassion with new eyes. And there's nothing comfortable, or comforting, about what we see.

Jamie is the trembling heart of the book, don't you agree, Barry? He's the 'lost son' made to carry the heaviest of burdens. The price he pays for his empathy is absolute and inexorable: 'He'd tried to do what he'd always done, let nothingness

fill him up, take him over. But it was all gone, all used up. Now there was only terror.'

Yes, the terror — Wait never once allows us to forget what it means to exist in the echo of suicide — but this isn't a joyless novel; far from it. Even in the deepest recesses of grief, joy can surprise and interrupt. That's its nature. This is a quiet, unassuming devastation, which merely tilts towards renewal. And it's all the more real for it.

Barry

The 'access all areas' closeness of artists' loved ones leads to potential grist for the mill. Life informs art; so, too, depression establishes a beachhead for the numbing isolation that harrows, and grief shapes the experience of joy. I state the obvious, Jen, because author Wait acknowledges a debt to her parents 'for enduring with me the dark time that led to this novel'.

I agree with you, that *The View on the Way Down* has serious spiritual and emotional grunt, flowing from Wait's insights into lives moulded by loss and suffering. I have to confess, however, that your choice of Wait's work was initially unwelcome. Like many, I know and love people who struggle with depression. I've lost friends to suicide. Melodrama unintended, depression was my constant companion at times and suicide an alluring, far country.

But Wait's deft touch and her skilled unravelling of circumstances and events quickly won me over, as did her 'Jamie'. Yes, Jen; Wait lays much of the burden of loss squarely on his slim shoulders. Jamie's and Kit's words bite. Their plight engages. (On the other hand, I don't find Wait's take on the parents nearly as convincing.)

Tempus fugit, hey Jen? The joys, hurts, panic attacks etc, that Wait nourishes remind us that suicide does not stop with an individual's death. But while time decidedly refuses to heal all wounds, temporal distance and the comfort (literally, to 'share strength') of those we love do help us gain perspective.

Moments of plot revelation touch on profundity; insights into characters' approaches to history and the cyclical nature of existence transcend mundanity. I got goosebumps as Wait's prose resonated truth.

An unexpected joy is the healing laughter that flows from the novel's wrestling with pain. Sympathetic, resilient humour springs from Emma's internal dialogue with/about Jesus and God: 'Emma was trying to leave God out of it, but couldn't help thinking about His wrath'; 'She hated Him ... for always being silent, always unresponsive ... Silently, she informed Him that since He never did anything useful, she'd manage without Him from now on.'

I think Wait's triumph, through superb characterisation, well-shuffled narration and a genuine gift with dialogue, is in adorning the pillars that pioneering sociologist David *Å*mile Durkheim identified long ago as sheltering people from

the prospect of suicide: friendship, family and faith. Home and hope. She promises no easy paths or answers, taking us on one family's journey.

Mental ill health manifested in acute anxiety, depression and other stress-related illnesses is endemic throughout Australia; almost half the nation's kids [suffer](#) from the same. In light of its literary merits and realistic approach to the subject, I believe *The View on the Way Down* to be timely, powerful, therapeutic and courageous.

Labor's cult of Rudd-hate

POLITICS

Ray Cassin

'I'm sorry about this,' Pontius Pilate tells Jesus in a Leunig cartoon, 'but all the polls and the talkback are saying I've got to crucify you.'

A friend who drew my attention to the image saw it as a comment on the behaviour of the media in Australia's undeclared election campaign. Maybe, though I suspect Leunig was directing our attention to the fate of media hate objects in general.

Whatever one's political sympathies may be, Julia Gillard and the federal ALP make unlikely substitutes for the suffering Jesus, and there aren't any obvious contenders for that role on the other side, either. Clean hands are rare in politics, and innocent persons condemned to death 'for the sake of the people' — literally or metaphorically — are almost never found outside totalitarian regimes.

Democracies do, however, have hate figures aplenty. And one of the strangest aspects of this oh-so-strange moment in Australian politics has been the emergence of a pre-eminent hate figure.

Kevin Rudd may have declared that he accepts he will never be prime minister again, and it can be assumed that he won't be invited back to the front bench in what time remains to the Gillard Government. But he continues to have a function, at least for those ALP members and supporters who are resolved that he must never be more than the member for Griffith.

His role is to be hated, to wear the blame for what has gone wrong.

This is not to say that Rudd is one of the rare possessors of clean hands. His plight doesn't readily summon up Jesus before Pilate, either.

But the extent to which he is reviled does evoke another vivid image of baying crowds: the 'two-minutes hate' in Orwell's *1984*, a daily ritual in which the citizens of Oceania assemble before screens bearing the image of Big Brother's arch-enemy, Emmanuel Goldstein, and scream out their loathing of him.

In the novel, the ritual has become so entrenched that what Goldstein said or done that was so wicked has become mostly forgotten and largely irrelevant. What matters is simply that Goldstein is hated, and so now it is with Rudd.

He has been cast in this role for some time. In February last year, when Rudd challenged Gillard for the Labor leadership, party elder Barry Jones lamented that 'Kevin Rudd has not yet been blamed for the bombing of Darwin, but that will come'.

This was only barely hyperbole: Labor backbencher Steve Fitzgibbon had described Rudd as a psychopath, and even though others in the Gillard camp

demurred at the label it set the tone for the onslaught against him. The nature of his alleged psychopathology has never been precisely spelt out, but it appears to involve a perfectionist streak and a short fuse when the competence of subordinates is questionable.

By that measure, half the CEOs in Australia would be psychopaths.

When Gillard won the 2012 leadership ballot 71—31, Rudd announced that he would not challenge again. He left open the possibility of being drafted as leader by an overwhelming majority of caucus, should such a majority ever transpire. But he was adamant there would be no challenge, that another divided ballot would benefit neither himself nor Gillard nor the party, and he has repeated these things many times since.

In the week before the most recent challenge Rudd repeated it again, and reportedly sent Simon Crean a message asking that he not speak publicly about the leadership without consulting him first. Crean apparently did not read the message and made his call for a spill. Rudd did not challenge; most of his front-bench supporters have either been sacked or resigned from the ministry; and Labor, already trailing the polls, now faces a catastrophic defeat.

Who is to blame for all this? Logic and fairness might dictate that responsibility lies with the instigator of the farce, Crean, that senior statesman apparently devoid of supporters. Rudd, after all, had merely kept his word.

Yet many of those who had hitherto railed at Rudd for 'destabilisation' now complain that he *did* keep his word, which supposedly makes him a coward. That accusation has been levelled by many in a frenzy of recrimination on social media, and with only slightly more restraint by mainstream media commentators and politicians.

The latter are not all ALP members; Independent MP Tony Windsor said that because Rudd did not challenge he will now be remembered as a Costello rather than as a Keating.

That view probably will become the legend, though the details of the comparison hardly fit the facts. Costello never challenged for the Liberal leadership, but Rudd did challenge Gillard in 2012. Since then he has consistently said he would not challenge again, a stance his colleagues chose to doubt at their cost.

And it has consolidated the view of him as uniquely iniquitous, so iniquitous indeed that if the worst projections of pollsters are vindicated on 14 September and Labor loses all its marginal seats, the Gillard cheer squad will almost certainly apportion most of the blame to Rudd.

It will not matter that he is not responsible for the eviscerated mining tax that has garnered scant revenue; that he is not responsible, either, for the numerous non-solutions on boat arrivals, nor for promising that there would never be a

carbon tax and then introducing one. He is not responsible for the fact that Labor has not yet persuaded the states to cooperate in the equitable reform of education funding.

Above all, he is not responsible for the fact that since August 2010 Labor has clung to power as a minority.

Rudd haters would disagree, citing leaks to the media that damaged the government. But the leaks, whatever their source, pale beside such campaigning ineptitude as 'the real Julia' and her plan for a citizens assembly to deliberate on climate change (why elect a Parliament?). It is difficult to see the 2010 election result as anything other than the voters' verdict on her deposing of Rudd.

No, Rudd is not responsible for the Gillard Government's stumbles. But he is to blame nonetheless, just as in 1984 Goldstein is to blame for the reader is never sure quite what.

Labor has had its hate figures before: Billy Hughes in 1917, Joe Lyons in 1931 and the Groupers in 1955. But they were all 'rats' whose actions split the party, aiding its enemies. In these post-ideological times, the hate figure is merely a man who didn't challenge an elected leader.

When community organisations sup with the devil

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Supping with the devil evokes a rare Faustian night out on the town. But for community organisations it is a regular gig when dealing with modern governments.

You are presented with a seemingly bland discussion paper on which future policy will be based. The paper invites suggestions, is tolerant of all views and suggestions and professes ideals that you can share. How can you refuse? The problem is that the paper politely excludes the value base of your own organisation. So whatever you submit will be translated into a form that at first looks unexceptionable, but which undermines your central concerns.

So do you pick up your bat and go home without a sou for your organisation, or do you engage, allowing hellfire to singe your soul?

Discussion papers speak of stakeholders, of inputs, outputs and outcomes, of a variety of trade-offs, such as those between risk aptitude and public accountability, innovation and maintenance, flexibility and quality assurance, client empowerment and equality of access. They also speak of stakeholders, clients, collaboration, governance and economic sustainability.

Their value statements put people at the centre, insist on the client's right to appropriate support, emphasise the need for respect, and focus on turning passive members of society into active contributors to the economy. Above all they seek a policy that will be economically sustainable.

It is difficult to argue against the values that each of these concepts enshrine. Who could argue against economic sustainability, public accountability, collaboration, quality assurance and flexibility, and encouraging people to be active rather than passive?

Indeed the evaluation of programs to which these terms give flesh is particularly needed in community organisations. Good intentions and mission statements do not automatically turn into programs that respect the dignity and help the growth of those they reach. Catholic organisations, in particular, need no reminding of that.

So community organisations should welcome being asked to provide appropriate evidence that they do the needed good things in the good ways that they promise.

The problem is that the discussion papers are systematically blind to much evidence that is appropriate. Underlying them is a metaphorical framework deriving from a financial analysis of a manufacturing business. The process of production is mapped in terms of costs and results from ordering of material to selling the completed product. All costs and processes are placed under the

heading of inputs, outputs and outcomes. Innovation describes more efficient or cheaper production processes. Integration means combining plants or making them compatible.

When seen from this perspective, organisations that serve people in need resemble factory plants, identical in their part in the process, and so interchangeable. Differences between them unrelated to the productive process will be ignored or disapproved of. The people who work in organisations will be seen as units of input and measured by their costs and productivity.

The people in need, for whom the organisations exist, will be seen as the object of the productive process. Their value lies in the capacity to contribute to production. Respect is shown them by giving them a consumer's choice over the services they choose. All is commodified.

This metaphorical framework has its uses as a subordinate paradigm. It can focus attention on the costs and efficiency of programs. But when it becomes the master metaphor for caring for human beings, it betrays all that most community organisations are about.

Their fundamental insight is that each human being is of great value in themselves. When people are in need they make a claim on society independent of how they can contribute to it economically. Some may never be able to contribute. But the goal of working with people is to help them grow into responsible human beings able to relate to other human beings and to society. The ability to find work and work efficiently is only one sign of growth.

The process by which people move from isolation and from destructive responses towards others and society to taking responsibility for their lives is through relationships. Through community organisations isolated people may meet other people who care for them and respect them as human beings and model a way of relating to others.

This can lead them to reflect on their lives, to begin to see in themselves the value others see, and to ask in hope and not despair what they want to make of their lives. From that flows the possibility of contributing to society.

The manufacturing metaphor is inadequate to account for this process, partly because human transformation cannot be produced. It ultimately rests, not on choice, still less on repeated consumer choices, but on the recognition that one wants to change. That recognition is a gift, a grace, but it can grow in the context of relationships that are also experienced as a gift. It will always come as a surprise.

If the manufacturing metaphor must include among its outcomes such unmeasurables as gift, love, grace and surprise, not to mention the extraordinary courage that keeps a depressed person alive a day longer, or leads a homeless person to wipe themselves out on port rather than meths, its calculator will self

destruct.

When organisations are required to define people as measurable inputs they will be struck dumb. They need a much broader and humane frame of evaluation.

When supping with the devil, the risk is not of being poisoned but of developing a taste for junk food and then feeding it to those you invite to your table. When supping with the devil it is best to bring your own Angel food with you, and offer it to the old adversary. Maybe he will develop a taste for it.

Rebuilding humanity after workplace horror

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Rust and Bone* (MA). Director: Jacques Audiard. Starring: Marion Cotillard, Matthias Schoenaerts. 122 minutes**

The past year has seen the arrival of a number of excellent films that deal with the realities of physical infirmity. Films such as [The Sessions](#), [Amour](#) and [The Intouchables](#) feature able-bodied actors portraying characters who experience disability due to genetics, age and accident respectively. They are remarkable for their central performances but also for their exploration of the imperfect human responses of the other people in their lives.

Rust and Bone belongs to this list but is the most difficult to categorise. It divides its time between Stéphanie (Cotillard), a whale trainer from a theme park who loses her legs in a workplace accident, and Alain (Schoenaerts), a single father and fighter who becomes her confidante. His story is as prominent as hers, if not more so. The contrast between them makes for an optimistic but not mawkish reflection on flawed humanity.

When Alain first encounters Stéphanie she is able bodied. She suffers a physical assault at a nightclub where he works as a security guard, and he intervenes to rescue her. He is tall and powerful, and having thus played the chivalrous knight his physicality is from the outset central to their interactions. It can be used to threaten too: he sees Stéphanie to her home, where he proceeds to intimidate her boyfriend when he questions his presence.

Stéphanie is also physical, though in a way that is surreal rather than brutish. Prior to her accident, there is a scene where she joins colleagues on a platform before the whale pool and 'conducts' the massive beasts to perform for an audience. Her graceful hand gestures seem to control each twirl and leap. There is an element of illusion to this, as the circumstances of the accident prove. Each of us shapes but is also shaped by our environment.

The film follows Stéphanie from the accident and its outcome through her early, draining rehabilitation. Alain re-enters her life some time later at her invitation, and arrives to find her now living alone, wheelchair bound and with her previous vibrancy curtailed by depression. He coaxes her out of her home and into the sea to swim. She begins to come out of her slump. As their friendship intensifies, she revives. They begin a sexual relationship.

Alain is a complex character, often well meaning but insensitive. On the one hand his affair with Stéphanie is shown to restore and affirm her dignity. The film's sex scenes highlight the physicality of the act, particularly how Stéphanie's confidence in her own changed body flourishes through it. But Alain neglects the emotional dimensions of the relationship, and in one scene humiliates Stéphanie

by hooking up with another woman in her presence.

As a father, too, his good intentions don't stack up. At the beginning of the film he is travelling by train with his young son, to live for a time with his sister and her husband. When the boy is hungry, Alain gathers discarded food from among the carriages. There is something tender as well as unsettling in the manner of making and sharing this meal. At other times Alain is seen to willfully neglect the boy, and to be overly rough in his disciplining him.

All of this is bound up with the film's uneasy consideration of Alain's masculinity, which is associated with his physicality. Some women are drawn to his innate fierceness, including Stéphanie. She begins to accompany him to the illegal fights that are his best source of income, and is shocked and thrilled by his ferocity in conflict. His pugilistic brutality foreshadows the power of body and will he'll later bring to bear in the face of another tragedy.

Alain's career as a fighter suggest new possibilities for her, too: she has a fierceness and tenacity of her own, and could help him better channel his animal gifts. Just as Alain had a reviving effect on her, so she has a taming effect on him. This is what sets *Rust and Bone* apart from the other films mentioned above. Really it is a film not about disability, but simply about two humans who help each other overcome the kinds of obstacles humans face.

A Muslim, a Buddhist, a Catholic and two atheists walked into the ABC

RELIGION

Irfan Yusuf

Many must have wondered if it was an April Fools joke. Could the ABC really be planning to broadcast an episode of Q&A worth watching? One without a single pompous pundit or partisan politician? Were we really going to discuss topics relevant to here and the hereafter instead of gasbagging about taxes, polls and overseas conflicts?

It certainly was the case. Even the audience composition at this week's Q&A was presented not as ALP or Coalition voters but as Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Atheist.

The great thing about having a discussion about religion without politicians is that so many of our politicians love to preach about Judeo-Christian values. We get told that asylum seekers aren't very Christian, as if Jesus and his mum should have waited in the queue instead of rushing to Egypt illegally to escape Herod.

And why limit ourselves to Judeo-Christian values when the fastest growing faith in Australia is Buddhism? It seems our polities only embrace religion when they think it gets them votes.

But the members of this week's panel didn't need anyone's votes. They were interested in ideas of faith and love. And what a cryptic bunch they were.

Judaism was represented by Deborah Conway (the atheist lead singer of an '80s rock group), Islam by Dr Mohamad Abdalla (a Brisbane academic sporting a beard and skullcap, perhaps unconsciously representing the rabbis as well), Buddhism by Robina Courtin (an Aussie Tibetan nun), atheism by Josh Thomas (a hipster comedian) and Christianity by Archbishop Mark Coleridge (a Catholic archbishop with no dog collar).

There were some intriguing insights to be gained. Apparently Buddhism is an advanced form of atheism. Courtin said the idea of a creator is superfluous. If anything, we are our own creators. Clearly I didn't do a very good job.

Despite the presence of two atheists, religion dominated the debate, perhaps because the most articulate spokesperson for atheism was herself representing a faith. Conway spoke with real passion and feeling about celebrating Jewish festivals, about Jewish music and about how much she loved Jewish food. I agree with her. Kosher salami beats the halal equivalent hands down.

The high point of Thomas's contribution was when he addressed religion in the public square. He spoke of the Catholic and other Christian churches making 'some pretty odd choices' in the past. He then told viewers how angry it makes him when

religious lobbies try and push their values on 'us'.

I too get peeved each time some horny Muslim moron calls for the decriminalisation of polygamy. But the fact is that each and every legislative, regulatory and policy decision of government represents an imposition.

Thomas cited the Australian Christian Lobby, hardly a body representative of Christians. Yet the ACL has every right to lobby decision makers and pretend it has influence, just as do think tanks (left and right), newspapers, media moguls, chambers of commerce and the odd contributor to *Eureka Street*.

That phrase Judeo-Christian makes me sick. White Western Protestants have been running the show since 1788. The notion that Judaism played a key role in the development of Western and Australian culture is strange considering it's only in the last 60 years that Western Christendom has faced up to the reality of anti-Semitism.

It disturbed me that Conway didn't point this out, and that Abdalla took it for granted that Judeo-Christian values were somehow separate to Muslim values.

It's always fun to hear religious folk talk about sex. There was a difficult discussion however about institutional child abuse, with Thomas claiming (in my opinion correctly) that churches have tried to actively hide perpetrators. But it hasn't just been churches involved in all this. Conway would be aware of incidents in Jewish institutions, with high profile victims such as Manny Waks coming forward to make serious allegations against religious elders.

I'll end with a few words on a topic that deserves many thousands. A Muslim youth worker asked if homosexuality was an Achilles heel for Christian and Muslim congregations. Many Catholics must have been slapping their foreheads when Coleridge said homosexuality represented a glitch in God's creation, or something like that.

Abdalla said being gay doesn't take you out of the faith. We should show mercy to gay people. Yes, thanks for that. Please tell that to your colleagues on the Australian National Imams Council, and to a number of prominent Muslim psychologists who preach the notion that homosexuality is a disease which can be cured.

Anyway, enough cynicism from me. I have to go and download some Deborah Conway songs.

The everyday courage of carers

NON-FICTION

Helen Sage

In 1999 my 22-year-old daughter Jayne sustained a severe head injury in a motor vehicle accident when travelling home from a university placement in the Adelaide Hills. After nine weeks in coma and four years of intensive rehabilitation, Jayne now contends with the use of only one normally functioning limb amid multiple disabilities. Daily she relies on either her father, her auntie or me (her primary carer) to shape her life.

Most mornings I help Jayne with one hour of physiotherapy which entails walking practice, passive riding on her thera-training bike and a few minutes of functional electrical stimulation to her right arm and leg.

During the day we go out to parklands, the beach or suburban cafes. Often we play crosswords, board games and cards, or we send emails and listen to music. Because severe brain injury impacts on short-term memory and initiating, planning, projecting and problem-solving skills, most activities are prompted for Jayne.

In all areas of Jayne's life I try to ensure her personal agency and inclusion; often feeling as if I am pulling her up onto safe ground.

I've never thought it should be mine or other family members' responsibility to deliver full care over a lifetime. But day in, day out, we do this, because we love Jayne, and because we will not imperil her gains or her happiness by placing her in dismal settings where few can fully appreciate her vulnerabilities, idiosyncrasies and capacities.

One way or another, Jayne's family provides 156 hours of continuous care each week. Just one hour of daily care and five hours of weekly respite is organised through Disability SA. Jayne's father and I yearn to be able to guarantee loving care for Jayne forever but we are growing older: Oscar is 70, I am 64, and my sister in her 60s.

Jayne's long-term care is our deepest concern. Often I think of Jayne's poem about the kookaburra:

Kookaburra chorus

Raucous,
rolling
xylophone!
You
so relieve

the city drone.

In silent wonder,
I adore your chortle ...
... as you pick the sonic bones away,
the wonder of a brand new day uncurls.
You ring the day in truly new!
Bring to our ears,
the glory
of
your
warring,
morning chorus.

And I ache as I wonder, 'How can I die and leave a mind so full of grace and trust behind, disconnected and alone?

Indeed few activities for learning and interaction exist for brain injured young people to go to during the day, let alone loving, homely, high-quality care in the longterm. Often I wonder how any person with severe acquired brain injury manages without family — many of them must roam the streets of our cities pitifully isolated, all but abandoned for the bulk of each day.

In my experience, stretched systems, though worthy, struggle to cope with demands. Here at home, I haven't seen a case-worker face to face for several years. Short staffed and underfunded, agencies struggle to respond to ordinary needs, dealing instead with emergencies or situations of high stress.

Calls to Jayne's personal care agencies too have got lost in the system, requiring persistent attempts to solve even 'simple' concerns like her shower-help remaining in place. Where would Jayne be if I could not advocate for her?

Much is made of the 'contribution' family carers make, and the 'support' they give, said to save the nation billions of dollars annually. But carers give much more than support. They are critical for their loved one's survival and wellbeing. Long-term carers of adult citizens are workers and deserve the same rights and options as others — days off each week, sick leave, annual leave and a fair wage. Nobility does not pay the bills or caring costs.

I feel deep gratitude for all members of my family. I ask myself what happens to carers who are totally on their own — who have no-one nearby or whose family member is mostly depressed, aggressive, unresponsive or unable to communicate at all? I could not care full-time and alone in any one of these circumstances. I

would burn out.

Schedule 1 of the Carer Recognition Act 2010 (a guide that outlines obligations for carers that are not legally enforceable) carries statements such as 'All carers should have the same rights, choices and opportunities as other Australians' and 'Support for carers should be timely, responsive, appropriate and accessible.' But how does this actually translate into practice?

Ten years after Jayne's accident I requested a holiday break from the Disability Service Body that funds Jayne's care. I was required to write an extensive and intricate submission and to send numerous emails backwards and forwards to enable me to take leave from Jayne's care. The whole process took several months and I was told that despite the intensive nature of one-on-one care, no-one had ever asked for this before.

I wanted to say, 'And when did you have your last holiday, and was it streamlined, unquestioned and on pay?'

I am astounded by the commitment of all carers everywhere — their loyalty, resourcefulness and ingenuity. Sometimes when my mood flags I go to Jayne's room and, on behalf of all carers and all the people they care for, I read the words of Robert Louis Stevenson hanging in a simple frame on her wall: 'Everyday courage has few witnesses. But yours is no less noble because no drum beats before you and no crowds shout your name.'

Downer and Costello's murky world of political lobbying

POLITICS

John Warhurst



Many more former political leaders are now becoming commercial, third party lobbyists. Ex-politicians are now central rather than fringe players. This includes two of the top three Howard Government ministers, the former Treasurer Peter Costello and the former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

This development is one of the most noticeable trends in the politics of influence over the past 30 years since the Hawke Government won office. Shortly afterwards the new Labor government was faced with the [Combe Affair](#) . This quasi-security scare morphed into an ultimately ill-fated lobbyist registration scheme.

Special Minister of State Mick Young commented then that the lobbying profession was now an established part of the democratic process in Canberra. Now former political leader-lobbyists are an established part of that process.

This development has slowly achieved acceptability. During the 1980s and 1990s former politicians started to infiltrate the political advice process, but tended to do so as individuals semi-privately trading on their individual standing as former prime ministers, like Bob Hawke, or by joining the 'respectable' end of the lobbying continuum as advisers to law firms or banks such as Macquarie Bank, as former NSW premiers Nick Greiner and Bob Carr did.

This 'consultancy' activity was cloaked in respectability and not perceived as being at the hands-on murky end of lobbying. That pretence now seems to have ended and Downer and Costello are good federal examples. There are many others at the state level.

In these two cases lobbying is just one part of their diverse portfolios, including journalism, diplomacy, company boards and Liberal Party advising. Downer was recently touted as a possible new state leader of the Liberals. He serves on the Australian board of China's Huawei Technologies with former Victorian Labor Premier, John Brumby.

Costello has worked for the new Coalition state governments, including heading the Queensland government's post-election Commission of Audit.

Downer formed the South Australian lobbying firm, Bespoke Approach, with former Labor minister Senator Nick Bolkus and Ian Smith, husband of former Democrats leader, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja. They are deliberately multi-partisan.

Costello has effectively transplanted his former political office into the world of lobbying as a new company, ECG Advisory Solutions, with his former staffers,

Jonathan Epstein and David Gazard. Their image is very much Liberal Party in exile.

Costello and Downer join a new world of lobbying which is dotted with former leading politicians as well as the usual former party officials and ministerial staffers. This has become clear in the stories about the role of lobbyists and in-house government relations specialists in the politics of supermarket market share.

Woolworths and Coles are the major players. The challengers include Aldi. The cast of former political players shows how much has changed in the world of lobbying.

Costello and Downer are allies in this conflict. Coles, a subsidiary of Wesfarmers, employs ECG Advisory Solutions directly to supplement its own in-house corporate affairs division. Wesfarmers has its own corporate affairs division, managed by former Western Australian Labor Premier, Alan Carpenter, and supplements this fire-power with lobbying assistance from Downer's Bespoke Approach.

Woolworths, not to be outdone, also has its own government relations team of former Liberal and Labor advisers, under a former federal director of the Nationals, Andrew Hall. Aldi, for its part, uses one of the biggest lobbying firms, Government Relations Australia Advisory (two dozen lobbyists and almost 50 clients), with former federal Labor Treasurer John Dawkins as part of the team.

These big flashy teams of former senior political leaders and their staffs bring process knowledge, personal contacts and political savvy.

The stakes are high. Costello has already been targeted for alleged conflict of interest in Queensland where he both lobbies and advises government. There is certainly room for conflicts of interest when politician lobbyists work both inside and outside government at the same time, as has already happened with earlier state Labor governments. It is an unhealthy development.

Invading Australia

POETRY

Various

A door please!

I live in a house
With no doors
No windows
No roof
A pigeon dropped me in
It promised me a door
But in this house
I found no doors
No windows
No roof
I see the rainbow in the sky
I shout for help
No one hears
There are no doors to their ears
I climb the walls
Up ... up ... up ...
To the roofless top
I try
I fall
I break
I cry
No one sees me fall or cry
There are no windows to their eyes
Tomorrow come, hurry please
Before the rainbow disappears
And all that's left for me to do

Is breathe ...

Saba Hakim

one lucky boat

Resting on sea shelves in dry city suburbs,
schooled in the dust of bush hamlets,
flapping and stabbing the air,
to be garnished, canned with sauce —
more will be; most won't,
in the wide sea of those unnetted
on the far side of one lucky boat.

Ray Carmichael

Invading Australia, a fragment

'We have wished to invade Australia like you'd never imagined
from where we are based in Pakistan and Afghanistan
countries reduced by hegemony to hell
we ruled the waves till we were in
sight of an island that looked from afar
like a welcome entity
but little have we expected this
that the waves ruled became bigger and louder
more powerful than Pakistan
or Afghanistan
as if designed to defeat
the two
like America
oh, Australia, our hope
our dream
our fantastic
designer
of man-eating waves —

we, the 33 would-bes
will now live
the rest of our death
in your waters
worshipping you forever
in your vicinity
as our saviour
as our designer
and as our keeper
for, after all
we drowned
near you
it's better
than nothing'
Ouyang Yu

Francis and the marginalised at Easter

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Pope Francis has decided to celebrate Holy Thursday Mass in the detention centre for young people in Rome. His symbolic gesture, which includes washing the feet of 12 young prisoners, says something about Easter, and also about the implications of his desire for the Catholic Church to be a church of the poor.



In celebrating this mass in an Italian gaol the Pope is moving from its usual place at St Peter's Basilica in the heart of the Vatican to a prison on the margins of church and society. He will share the company of young offenders who are marginal in any society.

It is also a gesture of solidarity with people who accompany and serve prisoners and others on the margins of society. Those in whose imagination and lives marginalised people have a central place, soon become and feel marginalised themselves.

Anyone who stands with asylum seekers who are slowly drained of their spirit and mental health by prolonged imprisonment, are placed in the community without right to work and on allowances no Australian could live on, have no pathway to making their case for protection or to be reunited with their families, and are deprived of access to Australian law, find themselves on the edge of a society that approves of and inflicts these barbarities.

Anyone who has shared the confusion and pain of people who were removed from their natural parents, never to know them, and see a parliamentary session committed to an apology to them degenerate into a flurry of mobile phones and other fripperies caused by a leadership challenge, will find themselves estranged from political life.

It is natural to feel marginalised in the face of these and other brutalities inflicted on those you care for. The important question is, what do you do about it? Redress has to do with the imagination and with finding space. People do this in a variety of ways. For Christians to whom the rising of Jesus Christ from the dead is not simply a belief but is central in their imaginative world, the story of Easter is a central resource.

The story of the trial and killing of Jesus confirms that those who stand in solidarity with the marginalised will themselves become marginalised. In the religious idiom of his day Jesus said that prostitutes were loved by God and that God's kingdom was open to them. So he consorted with them. This was seen as both blasphemous and socially intolerable. So he was brutalised and taken outside the city to be executed.

By itself the execution of Jesus is a cautionary tale of futility. It can make it possible to recognise the barbarity of what human beings do to one another, and that pitching your tent with people who are marginalised and demonised may cost you your insouciance, reputation, social acceptance and even your life.

But Jesus' rising from the dead offers reason for hope and vindication for acting as if people do matter. It also gives assurance that nothing worthwhile in the most despised of human beings will be lost. The resurrection of Jesus provides a space for conversational prayer with God who knows all about being marginalised, and the costs of sticking with those who are marginalised, and who underwrites the hope for a future in and beyond this world.

All this is a resource for those for whom the Easter story is an operational part of their imaginative world.

I am not trying to justify faith in the resurrection on the grounds of its psychological benefits. Faith needs to be based in the conviction that New Testament testimony that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is reasonable. In any case it is impossible to make something central to one's imaginative world simply because it is useful to do so.

Nor am I arguing that this kind of faith in the resurrection is the only, or the richest, resource for those marginalised by their association with the marginalised. It is not the only resource, and I am not in a position to make comparisons. But this is how it does work for some Christians.

Finally I do not argue that faith in the resurrection is an effective pill to dull suffering. It offers a space to accommodate suffering. The Easter story is not about denying pain but about affirming life through and beyond it both for the marginalised and for their friends.

Gillard's game of thrones

POLITICS

Jim McDermott

The place: Parliament House, Canberra

The Time: The Present

The Inhabitants: Soon to be History

Queen Julia struts into her office, blood dripping from her battle axe. Within, she is met by her aide-de-camp, diminutive Lord Tyrian Lannister.

Julia: Moving forward ...

Tyrian: Tell me you did not dispatch *all* of the rebels.

Julia: Would you have your queen consort with liars?

Tyrian: I wasn't aware there were other choices. And among these were some of your best and brightest. Lord Albo alone —

Julia: Oh of course I've kept Lord Albo. He emits the best of zingers.

Tyrian: And Lord Carr?

Lord Carr steps from behind the Queen's throne.

Lord Carr: I was grossly misrepresented.

Tyrian: And the Lad Butler?

Sitting beside Queen Julia the lad Butler shakes his head, quivering.

The Lad Butler: I love my queen with all of my heart. I cannot wait to see her win reelection.

Out of sight of the Queen, the Lad Butler mouths PLEASE. KILL ME.

Julia: See? All one happy family.

Tyrian: Milady, your people loathe you, and the court still comes for your head.

Julia: Who? Who dares come for my head?

The clang of steel on stone as a dagger slips from Lord Carr's pocket.

Lord Carr: So that's where that got to! Sorry, go on.

Julia: In point of fact I have put down two rebellions already.

Tyrian: Milady, what transpired last week was less a rebellion than a mass-immolation.

Julia: Did I not stand against enemy forces? Did I not prevail, unopposed?

Tyrian: Yes, because the Lord Rudd did not run against you. But even now, he stands alive outside your gates, doing an interview for the ABC.

Lord Carr: Indeed, milady, he has given me this note for you: 'Sorry about the trouble last week. No rebellions to come, promise. I'm sure the polls are wrong, I can't imagine you not winning the next election. KRudd 2016.'

Julia: See?

Tyrian: The point is not that Lord Rudd might come for you. The point is, you've won nothing. The people despise you.

Julia: The same people who condemned Lord Rudd for backing down on the ETS, and then opposed my carbon pricing? The ones who call me fiscally irresponsible, but are more than happy to take the money I've offered for education, mental health, disability and our endless natural disasters? Or the ones who claim my government is an embarrassment, and ignore the jobs and benefits they've kept throughout the GFC? Are those the people whose opinions you would have me trust?

Enter the Ranger Windsor, bruised and battered, his black jacket torn.

Julia: My Lord Windsor, what news?

Windsor: I come from the Wall, milady. Whilst you fight amongst yourselves, forces gather in the North, mighty forces, led by the White Walker.

Julia: The White Walker?

Windsor: Aye, a pale, stiff-walking fellow with his eyes ever on your throne. He surrounds himself with the fiercest of warriors — Maester Pyne, whose very presence overwhelms his enemies with annoyance; Lord Robb, Master of Comments No One Can Understand; and Lady Bishop, the Woman of Strange Gazes.

Julia: How could the Australian people ever elect the likes of them?

Tyrian: Trust me, they're looking better and better.

The ring of steel on stone again. All turn to see Lord Carr, directly behind the Queen, hands coming around her neck, his dagger having slipped out again. He picks it up.

Lord Carr: My kingdom for breeches with proper pockets!

Julia: Lord Windsor, we have no time for fear. We are getting on with the business of government.

Windsor: Rushing a new communications plan through the Parliament without allowing time for debate or compromise — is that the business of which you speak? Or creating a mining tax that yields no revenue? Or blowing a dog whistle against foreign workers when much of our population comes from abroad?

Julia: Mind your tongue, Windsor, lest you find yourself without protection!

Windsor: Milady, at this rate it is from your protection that I shall need protection.

Windsor leaves.

Julia: Clear thinking, nothing to tie them down — independents are such bastards.

Tyrian: Indeed.

Julia: Now, enough with dire warnings.

And enough of this insistence that my policy decisions should make sense to the rabble, Lord Tyrian. Were you not there when I appointed Lord Slippery to the most honourable office in the land? Were you not present when I announced an election eight months from now and believed no one would see that we were going to spend the whole time campaigning? Were you not there when I traveled to Western Sydney to be with my people and then did only carefully controlled media events? I do not need to make sense. I am Queen! Now, send me my Guild of Faceless Men.

Tyrian: Milady, they appear to have vanished.

Metal on steel. All look to Lord Carr, whose knife has somehow gotten stuck in the throne, just missing the Queen. He smiles and shakes his head, embarrassed.

Lord Carr: So clumsy today!

Tyrian: Egads, what does it take to stage a proper coup around here? Someone, get me back to Westeros!

The Lad Butler: *[whispers]* Take us all with you. PLEASE.

Christmas Island capsizes demands coronial inquest

POLITICS

Tony Kevin

It is true that 'only' two people died in Monday's apparently mishandled Border Protection Command (BPC) interception at sea of an unnamed asylum seeker boat. But there are questions to be answered nonetheless.

The Australian Customs vessel *Ocean Protector* made physical contact with the boat, reportedly carrying around 95 people, in early daylight on Monday morning, at a location 14 nautical miles off Christmas Island. It had responded to a distress phone call made 13 hours beforehand from the boat to the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. It had monitored the boat by technical means through the night.

The distress call had reported the boat was lost. But it had engine power and kept heading in the general direction of Christmas Island. *Ocean Protector* met the boat in the customary BPC interception zone, between 12 and 24 nautical miles off the island. There was no sign of damage to the boat and it was moving under its own power, so the event was handled as a standard border violation interception rather than as a rescue at sea.

Ocean Protector sent boarding parties in two or more tenders (small operational boats) towards the asylum seeker boat. Somebody on the asylum seeker boat apparently switched off the engines, assuming the Australians wanted it to stop so they could board it. It is not clear if it was ordered to stop. The boat started to rock in the swell.

During a lengthy media conference on Monday afternoon, BPC commanding officer Rear Admiral David Johnston [described](#) the state of the sea at that time as 'sea state three', which implies 'around 15 knots worth of wind and swell height that could be around about a metre' but also the possibility of larger waves, which 'appeared to have occurred in this circumstance'; he suggested the waves may have been up to two and a half metres.

Customs and Border Protection Minister Jason Clare added that 'when a vessel stops motoring along its stability is significantly reduced', and that when this particular vessel stopped for the boarding party to board and 'was hit by two waves' the vessel 'took on water and a number of people entered the water'.

We are told that within two minutes after the first two members of the boarding party (Customs officers, it seems) boarded the boat, it was either swamped or capsized by two large waves. A number of people — by some media reports, everybody on board — finished up in the water.

We are told that all were rescued save for two whose bodies were recovered — a boy aged four or five and a woman in her 30s. Two of the persons recovered were critically injured, including another boy aged six or seven and a pregnant

woman in her 20s.

So, only two deaths and nearly all on board saved — surely this is too small an incident to warrant the cost and effort of a coronial inquest.

Not so. The details of the event as so far publicly known suggest seriously life-threatening negligent process, on the part of whoever issued the policy directions to halt and board the heavily laden boat in such sea conditions.

A safe alternative was readily available. The asylum seeker boat could have been ordered by loud-hailer from a safe distance to follow *Ocean Protector* into calmer waters in the lee of Christmas Island before boarding was carried out. Such a journey by the boat under its own power would have taken three or four hours, quite safely. The boat was simply lost — its engines were still working.

No one would have died if this unnecessary, and on the face of it unprofessional, halt and boarding had not taken place. No amount of blaming the asylum seekers for poor seamanship can get around that fact.

Even for those to whom lives of asylum seekers are of lesser importance than Australian lives, the fact that two Australian officers were already on board the boat when it foundered or capsized reinforces the case for a coronial investigation of the circumstances.

There is also the matter of precedent. In every case of deaths on an asylum seeker boat that has entered Australian waters or come under BPC control, there have been coronial inquests. There is no reason to treat this one differently, especially as the death toll could have been much higher. If 95 people were thrown into the water, many of whom one assumes could not safely swim, the boarding party was lucky to rescue most of them.

The Government might think they can tough or bluff their way through for a few days and the incident will then be forgotten. They may have a few more colourful details, perhaps photos of heroic rescues of children, to drip-feed to the media if pressure for a coronial inquest builds. We've been here before, on Children Overboard in 2001. Australia's responsible media should not be misled. There are serious issues here.

Asylum seekers deserve the same safety-of-life-at-sea procedures as any other boats stopped and boarded at sea by Australian authorities. The temptation to offer a second-class rescue response to asylum seekers 'because they came in unseaworthy boats' or 'should not have tried to come at all' must be resisted, if we are to remain a civilised country with a civilised government that observes international maritime law.

Australian teacher's refugee wake-up call

HUMAN RIGHTS

Jessica Brown

I'd been to Jordan twice previously. I stayed with my friend's family and experienced Middle Eastern hospitality. I fell in love with the people and culture, and decided to return alone to volunteer and see what opportunities would arise. I arrived in August 2011 for what was to be a six month stay.

Within the first month I was invited to visit a refugee camp 40 minutes away from Amman. I accepted the invitation, but did not know what to expect. I was met with harsh realities and deep sadness — a far cry from the life I had grown accustomed to in the capital.

The Gaza refugee camp in Jerash contains many thousands of Palestinians who cannot return home. Each family of up to eight or nine people is given approximately 90 square meters to live in, in buildings said to house asbestos. There is little means of entertainment and children pass their time on the streets. Depression hangs in the air, mingling with the overwhelming odour from the inadequate sewage system.

I met one family in their home, and asked if they would mind me taking pictures. I was shown a small bedroom shared by all members of the family, and a makeshift bathroom. Tyres as well as bricks lined the roof to protect against wind and rain, and a swing hung precariously in a tiny room for the children.

Despite the standards of living, the family unity was strong, and the seed of hope evident among the young people.

I visited Qaran House, an organisation that offers preschool to four and five-year-old children. It is the only establishment of its kind in the camp, and it struggles for resources. Children sit on the floor or cramped around tables and unsafe wooden desks. But they are happy to be there.

I thought back to my own experiences as a teacher in Sydney; of how I complained about a lack of resources in my classroom. What I saw at Qaran House made my complaints seem insignificant. I remembered my five and six-year-old students writing their weekend recounts, describing how they would spend time playing video games, going to the movies and playing with their friends. How different the children at this camp were.

There were only five small rooms at Qaran House for a camp with many children. Clearly children within the camp have very limited education possibilities.

I came back to Australia with a desire to advocate for the rights of these refugees. Seeing their poverty has given me a responsibility to share my experiences in the hope of promoting awareness. Talking about these issues might also allow other Australians to realise the fortunate position we sometimes take for

granted.

I did not realise until developing the photos later that there was a painting outside the door of the refugee family I visited. A large, harrowing eye is marked on the clay, tears splashing down. To me, this image encapsulates the suffocating sadness that is palpable throughout the camp.

Generations of people are being born in these camps, while the elders, on occasion, still hold the key to their home in Palestine. We do an injustice to these people if we turn a blind eye. I will never view my circumstances in the same light again and I hope the power of conversation can make a difference.

Big business twists tax truth

ECONOMICS

David James

Australia's business lobbies are fond of complaining that company tax is too high at 30 per cent. Lower it, they argue, and the economy would become more dynamic and everyone would benefit. But it isn't that simple. The combination of Australia's dividend imputation system, or franking, and the compulsory superannuation scheme, means that for a very high number of investors in big public companies the effective tax rate is only 15 per cent.

Dividend imputation works like this. Say a company makes \$100 in before-tax profits. It pays tax at \$30, leaving profits of \$70, which it pays out to investors as a fully franked dividend. When that is distributed to shareholders they get the benefit, so there is only one taxable income, not two. That means a tax free \$70 to the shareholder.

The situation is different when the dividends go to super funds, which is the case for about half of public company dividends. Super funds pay a tax rate of 15 per cent, but get the credit for tax having been paid at 30 per cent (the company tax rate). That means they get the dividend, plus a refund (\$15 in our example) from the tax office. So in effect, \$85 goes to the super fund, tax free. Not-for-profits are in an even better position.

This means that a significant portion of dividends paid by Australian public companies have an effective tax rate of only 15 per cent. About \$1.4 trillion is held in Australian superannuation funds, about the same level as the market capitalisation of the Australian stock market. These super funds have large holdings in Australian listed shares, so they receive the franking benefits when those companies pay dividends.

Of course, companies typically do not pay out all their profits in dividends. Usually the rate is somewhere between two thirds and three quarters (except for mining companies, for which the payout ratio is much lower). Nevertheless, the low rate of tax on profits when they are given out as dividends to shareholders has far reaching consequences for the value of our larger listed companies.

A common notional way of valuing a company's shares is to calculate the future value of dividends, after making adjustments for inflation and other factors. A low tax rate on dividends will thus, at least notionally, have a directly positive influence on share prices, all other things being equal.

While this is extremely difficult to quantify given the plethora of factors that intersect to determine share prices, it will always underpin the share value of any company that has predictable profits it can farm out as dividends.

Dividend imputation puts pressure on big public companies to pay out their

profits as dividends rather than reinvest them. In Australia's intensely oligopolistic industry structures — most sectors are controlled by duopolies or a small number of dominant companies — this has the effect of making them tend to focus on defensive cost containment in order to keep dividend payouts high.

While this need not inevitably be the case — companies can pursue innovation as a way to increase profits — when a corporation has a large, captive market share and strong revenue streams, that it is the option usually pursued by management. It is a way to be reasonably assured that share prices will remain strong, with all the happy consequences it brings to senior executives. Bonuses, for instance.

The irony is that if Australia's company tax rate were lowered it would make little difference to super fund investors. It would simply mean the refund from the tax office would be less to accommodate for the lower rate of tax paid in the first place. If, on the other hand, the government were to lower the company tax rate to, say, 25 per cent and abolish dividend imputation, it would actually increase tax revenues.

That is not going to happen. But it is worth remembering that when business lobbies complain about Australia's high company tax they are only giving part of the picture: the tax on the initial profits. What is not taken into account is the final level of tax once it reaches the investors. That does not just advantage investors, it is also of great benefit to Australia's big companies.

Where granny got her stick

POETRY

Various

Above

we exchange peanuts with strangers
choose a watch from the in-flight magazine
somewhere to aspire to
other than here
we block the coughs of bodies
bury our heads in a beverage cart
barely looking down
in so much perspective
removed from the wrap of place
we are giddy
we exercise our right
to walk about the cabin
choose from the menu
small measures of control
make us bigger than
the blue out the window

Below

the shadow of a plane
over yellow-green
landscape woven rivers
different streaks, crops, billabongs
miles of belly-flop blue
the peter-out of cloud
smears of vessels
fishing boats long gone
in the drown

Escalator

a ladder in constant climb
each step falling away to flatness
progress dissolving
they squeal as they unhinge

The mission kitchen

the donated knives
are not sharp enough to cut onion
or score a scone
all around me
the peel of blunt skinned
hard vegetable that no-one wants
knuckles gnarled with rust
discarded weapons
beneath the constant hack of
smokers' breath and gravel talk
a musical shaking out of pockets

No substitute

you asked granny where she got her stick
wanted one that didn't look old
or ugly
a wooden sturdy poker
it helped on the days when you couldn't feel the floor
but was no substitute for
a seat on the tram when you don't look
sick or expecting
you clutch to the rail
a numbness you can't explain

Smile

you contort

twitches at the side
weak at first you check
the register against the light
their eyes
looks more like a grimace when you
catch it in the window
you coerce it to the same side of the street
and swing on it
bags in your arms
to home

Labor's cruel joke on asylum seeker women

POLITICS

Susan Metcalfe

The recent transfer of pregnant women from the Papua New Guinea detention centre to Australia was a good decision by the Gillard Government. The choice to follow medical advice not to transfer children under the age of seven to the facility is also good policy. But who could credit a Labor Government that believes detaining women and children (of any age) in remote locations, without justifiable reason, is a good idea in the first place?

The detention of any person in Nauru or PNG is bad policy. Care must be taken not to obscure the needs of vulnerable men when focusing on women and children. But the incarceration of women and children in particular sits uncomfortably with many Australians. The Government would be wise to suspend future transfers.

The capacity of the offshore asylum seeker camps is already surpassed by large numbers of ongoing arrivals, which render meaningless the 'deterrent' excuse. If the Government continues to make an example of women and children, the chorus of dissent will continue to grow. When Labor returned to power in 2007 it was on a promise to end the cruelties of the previous Coalition government, not to embrace or entrench them.

While Labor regularly finds itself wedged on asylum policy, the Coalition is gifted with an easier ride and allowed to indulge in higher levels of hypocrisy. Detaining asylum seekers in Nauru and PNG is Coalition policy — they invented it, they claimed it, Tony Abbott advocated for its return. But as the policy fails to produce desired outcomes, shadow immigration spokesperson Scott Morrison (pictured) is shifting blame to the Government.

Ray Hadley and other commentators supportive of the Coalition never call Morrison out on his 'inconsistencies'. Hadley, like Abbott, deliberately refers to asylum seekers as 'illegal' as he rails relentlessly against Gillard, and Morrison is one of his favourite guests. The rest of the media should stop letting Morrison off the hook.

When news broke of the transfers of pregnant women from Manus, Morrison quickly linked the move with the Government's decision not to transfer young children to Manus (based on medical advice covering a range of issues, including immunisations).

This was, he cried, 'another example of how the Government doesn't think these issues through' — meaning: women in Manus will get pregnant and give birth to children under the age of seven. But evidence of past Coalition practice, under its hastily cobbled together Pacific Solution policy, gives no reason for Morrison to gloat.

Morrison claims he doesn't oppose the transfer of pregnant women to Australia and says 'you always have to have the proper care provided to people who are in that situation'. But under Coalition policy, newborn babies, toddlers and pregnant women were all indefinitely detained in PNG and Nauru, and women were not transferred to Australia to give birth to their babies.

Medical reports from the Coalition's time in power note the case of a 17-month-old in Manus with congenital hip dislocation, yet nowhere are concerns raised about the toddler's immunisation or about other very young children. The case of an eight-year-old with Malaria, complicated by severe urinary tract infection, was reported during the same month that two depressed pregnant women told staff they wanted to abort their pregnancies.

Both major parties have taken risks with the health of detainees transferred to Manus. Malaria, for example, is a serious problem in the region and numerous detainees (including young children) and staff were infected during the Coalition's time in power.

No preventative medication can provide complete protection, and the Royal Perth Hospital notes that malaria is a significant cause of stillbirths, infant mortality and low birth weight, and 'pregnant women are twice as attractive to malaria-carrying mosquitoes as non-pregnant women'. The World Health Organisation cautions, 'pregnant women should be advised to avoid travelling to areas where malaria transmission occurs'.

Morrison also tells us that he is concerned about inadequate separation (a wire fence and green shade cloth) between families and single men in the Manus facility. But how can we take him seriously when the Coalition previously detained men, women and children within mixed gender offshore compounds — without even a shade cloth — and women reported being too frightened to go to the toilet in a camp full of male strangers?

If Labor continues to support an inhumane and flawed policy, which is not slowing boat arrivals and does nothing to address the problems of displaced refugees in the region, the effects of the political wedge will always be Labor's to own. But it was the collusion of both major parties that gave us the Pacific Solution in 2001 and both are responsible for the decision to reintroduce the policy in 2012, against the advice of government agencies.

Both Labor and the Coalition should now be feeling the full force of the media's scrutiny, and both should be condemned for toying with the lives of vulnerable human beings.

Gillard's finest hour goes unnoticed

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins

Most of our attention to Thursday's events in Canberra focused on the disintegration of the ALP, reflecting politicians at their worst. But on page 9 of Friday's *Sydney Morning Herald* was a [headline](#) that described the overshadowed [Forced Adoptions Apology](#) as revealing Prime Minister Julia Gillard 'at her finest'.

The Apology was one of the recommendations of a 2012 Senate Inquiry, which found that up to 250,000 babies were forcibly taken by their mothers, often illegally, by governments, hospitals, churches and charities.

'Today, this Parliament, on behalf of the Australian people, takes responsibility and apologises for the policies and practices that forced the separation of mothers from their babies which created a lifelong legacy of pain and suffering,' [said](#) Gillard. 'You were not legally or socially acknowledged as their mothers and you were deprived of care and support.'

Opposition leader Tony Abbott also excelled himself, praising Gillard's 'eloquent and heartfelt statement', with contrite [words](#) of his own, in reference to his former girlfriend Kathy Donnelly. 'She deserved nothing but love and support, not coercive expectations, social stigma and — I say this with more than a pang of personal guilt — men in her life who had failed to live up to their responsibilities.'

The Forced Adoptions Apology echoes the 2008 [Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples](#) and the 2009 Apology to the [Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants](#) .

There is an emerging pattern of bipartisan official determination to bring about reconciliation between the Australian nation and those of its number whom it has hurt. It represents a break from the position of previous government which saw such hurt as the sole responsibility of past generations of Australians and their leaders.

Abbott showed signs that he is on board with this, in his [address](#) on Indigenous disadvantage at the Sydney Institute earlier this month, [distancing](#) himself from the policies of John Howard and previous generations of Liberal leaders. 'John was of a generation, of a circumstance, where perhaps Indigenous people were not as valued as in different circumstances and different times.'

The challenge for Abbott, and also the ALP, is to be consistent, and similarly value all disadvantaged Australians and other people whose care is our responsibility. This includes a number of groups, notably asylum seekers.

History shows that it takes time to realise the hurt we cause to our fellow human beings through rational but inhumane government policy. But the pattern of formal apologies since 2008 demonstrates it is the right and noble task of

politicians to give priority to atoning for such public errors of judgment that cause so much suffering. Such moments are indeed our political leaders' finest, and they deserve more attention.

Abbott's quest for constitutional inclusion

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

The conservative side of politics has always been more successful than Labor in proposing constitutional change in Australia. That's not because Liberals or Nationals are more committed than Labor to constitutional change.

The Australian Constitution is a very democratic instrument. Our politicians cannot amend it without the approval of the people. The people are very unlikely to approve an amendment proposed by politicians unless both sides of the parliamentary chamber support the change. Even then, the people may suspect that the politicians are in cahoots acting against the interests of the people.

In the field of Aboriginal affairs, a referendum proposed by an Abbott government would be more likely to win support from the parliamentary Opposition than one proposed by a current Labor government. This has nothing to do with the personalities of the two leaders; it has everything to do with the Coalition being the more difficult side of politics to bring on board with constitutional change when it is in Opposition.

Given the present opinion polling and the divisions in the Labor Government, it is no surprise that Tony Abbott is confidently preparing his team for government. Anything he says about constitutional change therefore carries considerable weight.

Last week he spoke at the Sydney Institute and repeated some of the themes from his very welcome parliamentary speech backing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Bill 2012. Each time he has broken from the John Howard mould and demonstrated a bipartisan spirit by referring to Paul Keating's 1992 Redfern speech. He told the Sydney Institute:

There may come a time, perhaps some decades hence, when we can be relaxed and comfortable about the circumstances of Indigenous Australians — but it's not now. Our failure to come to grips with this remains, in Paul Keating's resonant phrase, a stain on our nation's soul.

Having demonstrated his willingness to move beyond the anti-black-armband view of history, each time he has been quick to indicate that he is not opening the Pandora's box of wide ranging constitutional reform. The cautious sting was in the tail of his parliamentary speech: 'I believe we are equal to this task of completing our Constitution rather than changing it.' Last week he underlined that caution when he told the Sydney Institute:

An acknowledgement of Aboriginal people as the first Australians would complete our Constitution rather than change it. Aboriginal people need to know that they will never be regarded as just a historical footnote to modern Australia.

Done well, such an amendment could be a unifying and liberating moment, even surpassing the 1967 change or the Apology, so it's worth making the effort.

Within 12 months of taking office, an incoming Coalition government would put forward a draft amendment and establish a bipartisan process to assess its chances of success. The difficulty of crafting an amendment that satisfies Aboriginal people while reassuring the wider community that we are not creating two classes of citizen should not be underestimated.

Australians of all political persuasions will have differing views about what constitutes completion, and whether it requires any change. We also need to get used to the idea that there will be a divergence of Aboriginal opinion about the desirable content of the Constitution, and about how best to proceed to seek constitutional change.

Last week's election of Adam Giles, the first Aboriginal Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, presented the nation with an Indigenous leader who unashamedly speaks more as a Liberal in the John Howard mould about Indigenous affairs: 'Our future in the Northern Territory is about jobs, jobs, jobs, not welfare, welfare, welfare.' He jokes that his Aboriginal father would be 'turning in his grave' to know his son was now a conservative.

When working for the Howard Government reviewing Indigenous policies, he realised that 'welfare and socialism are what's killing Aboriginal people'.

Within Indigenous communities as well as among Australians generally, there will be a range of views as to what constitutes completion without substantive change of the Constitution. And there will be those who think completion without real change won't be worth the paper it's written on.

In his parliamentary speech, Abbott pointed across the Tasman at the Treaty of Waitangi whereby 'two peoples became one nation'. Things are not looking that simple and complete in New Zealand. The government there had to cut a deal with the Maori Party in 2008, setting up a Constitutional Review Panel which is still looking at a range of issues including 'the role of the Treaty ... within New Zealand's constitutional arrangements'.

The panel has had to counter allegations that it has a secret agenda 'about making the treaty an overriding piece of law which cancels all other law out'. It will be interesting to watch the New Zealand panel as it consults and reports by the end of the year.

I well recall Sir David Lange, the expansive ex-prime minister of New Zealand, once laughing at us Australians during an after dinner speech because we are always seeking the final settlement of Indigenous grievances. He said the best you could ever do was seek durable agreements which lasted a generation or two. That sounds more like change than completion.

There will be a lot of hard work to be done to complete or change the Australian

Constitution, regardless of who is prime minister after 14 September.