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Life and death issues the election campaign missed

ECONOMICS

David James

Two of the most important issues to have been given scant attention in the election campaign are ageing and property. Even less noticed is the inter-relationship between the two. The effect of ageing on property prices will be arguably the most important financial challenge facing Australian governments over the coming decades.



The ageing of a developed country's population is one of the biggest predictors of long term economic trends — especially house prices. In a number of developed economies, property prices peak when retirees started to outnumber those in the work force (called the dependency ratio). In countries such as the United States, Britain, Spain and Ireland, property prices started to turn down when the dependency ratio turned down. The effect was especially extreme in Japan. Property prices eventually halved, although this was also because of the country's extreme asset bubble.

Australia is now in that territory, and the fear is that Australian house prices will start to follow the same path. Since about 2000, baby boomers have heavily invested in property, borrowing aggressively to do so. Land values have fallen over the last two years, but they are still at about 250 per cent of GDP, up from about 170 per cent of GDP in 2000, and 80 per cent of GDP in 1980. Residential land values are about 200 per cent of GDP.

Australian property is thus worth more than twice Australia's stock market, and a sustained downturn in prices will mean a significant loss of financial wealth. The political challenge will be to manage the different generational impacts. Over the next two decades there will be a steadily growing number of baby boomers looking to sell property as they rationalise their assets in preparation for retirement. For younger people in the work force, the trend in terms of house price affordability is likely to improve.

For the older generations, the implications are less positive. Much of their property investment has been based on negative gearing, an investment strategy that needs house prices to rise to make any sense. If prices start falling, there may be a rush to offload even more properties.

The degree of economic impact will depend on speed: if prices fall fast, the banks will come under pressure. If they fall slowly, the transition will be less painful. But even a slow fall will mean a less wealthy older generation, which will mean a greater burden on the Federal budget.

Ageing is not the only factor affecting house prices. Increasing population pressures also are critical, and the populations in Australia's major cities are

expected to expand sharply. But Australia's baby boomers have punted heavily on property and they may be facing considerable financial disappointment.

The loss of financial wealth in property can be alleviated by lower rates, but with the cash rate at 2.5 per cent, the Reserve Bank does not have much room left to move. And if the international situation should cause inflation to rise in Australia, rates may rise, creating more stresses on property prices.

The once in a generation property boom is probably over. Or at least the debt-driven asset boom is; demographics may still create upwards price pressure, especially in the major cities. There has been almost no mention of this prospect by the major parties, in part because more people benefit from high property prices than are adversely affected by them. Almost a fifth of Australians aged 45–65 receive income from a property investment.

It has been left to the minor parties to make suggestions about how to manage our most important asset class. Bob Katter has argued that land supply should be freed up in Australia's mining towns to improve housing affordability. Family First is proposing a removal on urban zoning restrictions, opening the way for smaller developers by not making master planned communities compulsory, allowing more development of residential infrastructure, privatising planning approvals and not making people pay infrastructure charges up front.

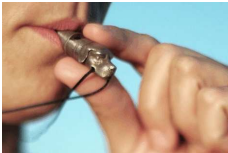
A little less plausibly, Independent Senator Nick Xenophon has requested a housing summit after the election. He observes that in 1980 mortgage repayments were 17.4 per cent of family income, but are now 29.9 per cent.

What we are not going to see happen is the major parties making suggestions that threaten the country's most important investment. That means that whoever wins government will be left responding to the consequences of what happens to the property market, not preparing in advance.

Australia's 20 years of asylum seeker dog whistling

AUSTRALIA

Benedict Coleridge



Throughout the electoral fracas over boat arrivals and the PNG solution, Tony Abbott has been keen to isolate Australia's border control challenges from any international context: in his terms they are 'Australia's problem'. Of course this is language designed to reinforce a sense of crisis and threat, popular intuitions that he plays upon without remorse.

But Abbott knows that Australian border control policy has always been influenced by international policy trends and forced migration realities. He may deny it, but the Opposition Leader understands that the Australian discussion is part of an international debate about national regional responses to people movement.

A historical perspective helps to illuminate this. Take mandatory detention. As a policy it was developed and debated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the moment when the curtain rose on a two decades long Australian political and cultural drama over the issue of asylum seekers in boats.

As is well known, in 1993—1994 the Keating Government introduced mandatory detention of irregular migrants, with the strong support of the then Liberal opposition. Indeed, then, as now, the Liberal Party made it their business to place political pressure on the Government on the issue of migration and borders. During an interview in 2011, Philip Ruddock acknowledged that in the early 1990s the Liberals were deliberately making the matter of boat arrivals a political malignancy for Labor to 'cure'.

But where did the Liberal Party look for inspiration? Their advocacy of mandatory detention emerged at the same time as other Western nations were introducing stringent border measures.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, as European countries aspired towards greater economic and political unity, policymakers negotiated a framework of laws and organising principles (the Schengen agreement) which would structure Europe's immigration and border control system. This framework construed migration as a security issue linked to challenges such as terrorism, illegal trafficking and transnational crime.

European discourse on migration during this period became 'securitised': it conceptualised transnational people movement as a threat that required enforceable policies of exclusion. UK Prime Minister John Major even referred to European borders as a 'perimeter fence', language that evokes plagues of pests rather than human beings.

Anti-immigration parties gained electoral successes across Europe — the term asylum seeker became associated with African, Eastern European and Middle Eastern identities that formed a distinct 'other' and were in turn associated with anti-social characteristics such as criminality and welfare dependence. It's hard to imagine how Australian policymakers, architects of mandatory detention, would have ignored developments in Europe.

And not only in Europe — this was a global moment when, in India, the US, Europe and Australia policymakers were pushing for stringent border controls. In the United States, a sequence of Acts (1986, 1990, 1994) were passed in an attempt to stem the influx of illegal immigrants from Mexico. In India, Major's language of fences was turned into a reality when in 1987 the military began to erect a 1790km guarded fence along its border with Bangladesh to prevent irregular border crossings.

At the same time Australian delegates were traversing the world — appearing at international seminars in Geneva, for example — emphasising the importance of reinforcing 'the sovereign rights of governments to control entry across their borders'.

This reality is deliberately obscured by the Federal Opposition. For two decades they have been eager to develop a sense of Australia's isolation in the face of a growing migration crisis. In the 1993 parliamentary debates on mandatory detention, the then freshman MP Christopher Pyne emphasised 'the depth of the immigration crisis this country faces'. This despite the [fact](#) that in 1993 only three boats carrying a total of 81 people arrived in Australian waters, and that Australia's refugee visa quota was around half of [today's volume](#) .

Today the Liberals are again in Opposition and the language of 'deep crisis' is being used just as it was two decades ago. And again they are keen to reserve this crisis for the Australian electorate. But one glance at our recent history shows that refugees have never been just our problem — nor indeed our 'crisis'. We have always been influenced, for better or for worse, by international developments. We share with the rest of the world certain global realities. We need to find ways to share the solutions.

On Seamus Heaney's turf

REVIEWS

Peter Gebhardt

Seamus Heaney, 13 April 1939—30 August 2013

You are lucky in life if you can meet someone who is both great and good. Seamus Heaney, the great Irish poet, was such a man.

In 1978—79 I had study leave and decided to go back to Harvard Graduate School of Education (I had been there previously in 1963—64) to undertake what was described as a 'mid-career' course, a certificate of advanced studies. Fortunately my advisor suggested that I should avoid any course that involved 'schools'. So I undertook philosophy and allied courses, and an advanced poetry workshop. This later was to have Seamus as the instructor.

He was a man of extraordinary generosity, a critic who could make adverse findings seem like winning lottery tickets. I knew I wasn't a great poet, and he knew it too, but he also knew I liked curling up in the word. He gave me an 'A'! His generosity was no more apparent though than when he agreed to contact an Aboriginal student whom I believed would become a good writer. He sent him a signed poem.

He loved oysters and several times we ate them together at 'One Potato, Two Potato' in Harvard Square. For him a good oyster was like a good word — palpable (he loved that word), firm and sweet, fresh and briny-laden.

When he was here for the Melbourne Writers Festival in 1994 I had breakfast with him and an old school friend of his who lived in Melbourne, Paddy. It was all lilt and love. I sat entranced. He charmed Melbourne and found much that was good in Australia. When he was 56, I received a card from him. He concluded, 'bend an elbow for me in Melbourne' — I had helped him find a cigar.

In September 2003, ten years ago, my wife and I went to Dublin, having been in England to see our son who lives there, and I let Seamus know that we would be staying at the Schoolhouse Hotel, which turned out not to be too far from the Strand where he lived. Upon our arrival there were three notes waiting; the first suggested a meeting, the second drinks, the third 'Heigho, we'll have some scraggs'. He picked us up in a Mercedes Benz. I said something about a poet and such a car, 'Never mind it's got a broken window'.

He had just returned from Dundee where he had given that wonderful lecture 'Room to Rhyme' to graduating students and their parents. (Years later, having given away all my copies, I begged one of him. He sent the last he had. Being printed upside down 'might make it more valuable' — I don't know about that, but I do recommend it to anyone wanting to enter the world of writing. It's a gem.) The Lord Provost at Dundee had given him a bottle of rare scotch — Auchentoshan

and a laurel wreath and the shell from a cannon fired in his honour.

I wrote the following verse in gratitude. ('Winnings' refers to the Nobel Prize and a fellow Irishman's comment.)

Congratulations on the winnings

Thanks to Marie and Seamus Heaney

You said, 'Heigho, we'll have some scraggs.'

I had to make new purchase on scraggs,
Find an inkling in smoked salmon and red wine.

After twenty five years

There was still the puckish beneficence,

And scraggs were sheer gleanings,

As was the Lord provost's Auchentoshan,

Distilled to sate the petitioners' tongues:

The palatable, in sweet remembrance, made durably palpable.

'No scotch could be too big':

The laurel-woven-wreath and the spent-cannon-shell

Encircled and powdered that dictum.

Conversation, like conjunctions, breaches memory,

And makes congratulations into a festive frolic.

It was a night of complete hospitality and he wrote a travel guide to Dublin for us, 'Fart around the Dart' (or Dublin Area Rapid Transit)!

He was unfailingly polite and always responded to the birthday greetings I sent him each year in April. This year there was silence. I felt that something was amiss. He had written in 2006 saying he'd had a small stroke. He was then in high expectations of the arrival of a first grandchild. In the letter he included a copy of a get well card — 'His condition is improving rapidly — he is sitting up in bed blowing the froth off his medicine!' (Flann O'Brien). Sadly, Warfarin limited his 'froth'.

I have always loved the 'Bog' poems and I read the book *The Bog People* that was useful to Seamus. It seems to me that those poems have made a new 'turf' for the preservation of the people dug up from the past. The past is made present, the new present is made a future. He gives a voice to them in his own voice, and the two will ring out so long as man reads. His language is tough, resilient and enduring. It is the language of the deep soil made flesh by the 'snug gun' in his hand. Digging is the beginning and the ending. We should rejoice at the

spade-work and the love that went with it.

In his very first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), the first poem is 'Digging'. It concludes:

between my finger and my thumb
the squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.
He's back in his turf.

Generosity

by Peter Gebhardt

for Seamus Heaney on his 70th birthday, 13 April 2009

'I made no vows but vows

Were then made for me ...'

—Wordsworth

'Praising, that's it!'

—Rilke

'And the word was made flesh

And dwelt among us ...|'

Flesh gives its word and keeps it,

A compact,

To dig and to glean,

To heave the harvest from the hosting soil.

'Ah yes,' says Justin, 'germination grounds incarnation'.

A day late mind you!

Milestones can be millstones,

But not so,

Just polished stepping stones

Across the shining, running, trilling stream

To a distant edge where trees are thick.

It is dark there

And the wretched blackbird is hovering again,

But the eels still slither, trout hoop upstream.
The papal smoke thick thatch
And the farm house's stoked fire
Endow the times with a special glow.
Singing to the legislators
The redress of the word
In building.
Not bombing.
Strangers invited to hold his hand,
We are all stronger
As we join the realms,
The troubling and the troubled,
Man and this world,
And the glorious company of word-weavers.

Credibility at stake for restrained religious media

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

With the Australasian Catholic and Australasian Religious Press Associations hosting their annual gatherings in Melbourne this week, September is the month of religious media conferences. Perhaps because hope springs eternal. This year church media, particularly Catholic media, face a growing challenge: how to deal with bad news about the church. At stake is their credibility.

This challenge is difficult to meet because of the place that church media typically have within churches. The print media generally present news of the regional churches. They also tell encouraging stories of Catholics and their work within the wider community. The writing and production are often very professional, given the lack of staff and financial support available.

Church leaders use their media to address their members. In that respect church magazines are often like in-house newsletters, subject to control over who may write and about what. If Catholic media discuss issues that are controversial among Catholics they will generally present only the position taken by church authorities. More generally they avoid church scandals and matters of dispute. These are more freely discussed in such independent Catholic newspapers as *The Tablet* and the *National Catholic Reporter* and a variety of small magazines and blogs.

This formula generally corresponds to the limited resources available to the Catholic Church for communications. Readers of the magazines and visitors to websites can find some picture of what is going on in the Church, an introduction to people who are significant in its life, and encouragement in their commitments.

More recently the restrictions on Catholic media, and particularly their limited coverage of Church abuse, with comment usually restricted to Catholics in leadership positions, have affected their credibility. Many Catholics instinctively see what is written in Church media as spin rather than as engagement with truth. They then look to the secular media for a more accurate and honest presentation of the state of affairs than they hope to find in the Catholic media.

There is a loss in this. The account of the Catholic Church they receive from the secular media often lacks depth and a feel for context. It could helpfully be complemented by an honest insider's perspective.

This suggests reconsideration of the assumption that it is in the interests of the Catholic Church to control reporting in its media of bad things done by Catholics and of differences between Catholics. The role of Catholic media needs to be reimagined.

That reimagining might start in reflection on the style of Pope Francis. He has

generally urged Catholics to go out, and not to see the inner life of the Church and its institutional challenges as the main game. Even though it might be accident prone, he prefers a Church that goes out into the world to one that is closed in on itself and sick. The Pope's avoidance of formalities, his visits to gaols and detention centres and his refusal to be shackled by what others might think to be the reasonable demands of security have embodied his message.

The Pope's style of communication has been consistent with his insistence that the church is not its own centre. He preaches daily in pithy and demotic language without a text. His press release on the plane returning from Brazil was uncontrolled and open. As his critics have noted, he has often been misquoted and misrepresented. But because he treats misunderstandings as part of ordinary life, they do not become a problem.

At a deeper level the Pope's style of communication appears to come from his own comfort at recognising himself as sinful and fallible and yet called to follow Jesus Christ. That makes him also comfortable in acknowledging scandals in the Church without having to defend them. He is then free cheerfully to preach the Gospel to the poor.

Francis' style suggests that church media might be better seen as a gateway for churches to go out from than as a screen controlling what is allowed out.

In particular it suggests that Catholic media should report the bad news about sexual abuse and failures of governance. In its coverage it should focus on giving voices and faces to those who have been hurt. It should also encourage its readers to go out into the world in an exploratory and not a defensive way. As is the case with life itself, those who try to save their reputation lose it, while those who are happy to lose their reputation in the service of the Gospel may save it.

My election campaign hibernation

AUSTRALIA

Frank Brennan

I am one of those Australians who tends to go into hibernation during election campaigns. So where better to be last week than in China. No democracy here, no electoral lather to worry about.

On arrival, the pollution knocks you over and building cranes span every urban horizon — the opportunity to view some of the results of Australia's iron exports and to breathe the byproducts of Australia's massive coal exports. A lingering cough is a constant reminder of the damage our global commitment to economic development is doing to the planet.

Visits to the terracotta warriors (pictured) and to the Xian Museum housing over 4000 ancient calligraphy stones provide the opportunity to see the Chinese relishing their history and distinctiveness. The 6000 terracotta warriors were entombed in Emperor Qin's mausoleum in 210BC. Mr Yang, one of the farmers who discovered the warriors when digging a well in 1974, is on hand to sign my copy of *The Qin Dynasty Terracotta Army of Dreams*. He never knew how to write before President Bill Clinton asked for his signature on the 1998 presidential family visit.

One of the calligraphy stones dating from the Tang Dynasty in 781AD tells the story of the arrival of Christian Nestorians in China in 635AD. This helps explain the remark of the late Bishop Aloysius Jin SJ from Shanghai — that he did not want there to be the need for a fourth beginning to Christianity in China, following upon the Nestorians, then the Jesuits, then the evangelisation following the Opium Wars and Unequal Treaties in the 1830s.

These historical backdrops help the foreigner to understand something of China's isolation and sense of identity.

It's seven years since I last visited China. The urban growth has been phenomenal. While Australian politicians in election mode talk yet again about the idea of one very fast train and amorphous ideas for future growth, I catch the regular train service from Shijiazhuang to Beijing traveling at over 300kmh, across land every inch of which is dedicated to agriculture, industry or urban development. Without democracy, you can get a lot done.

Over an outdoor meal with church members and local party officials (each part of both!) in a small village outside Xian, a local asks after *Lǎo Kǎiwǎn* (Kevin Rudd). He had heard that Mr Murdoch was being very tough on him! This unsurprisingly is the only mention of Australian politics the whole week. But they were surprised to learn that yet again Australia was likely to lose its only Mandarin speaking PM. They have no idea of the alternatives.

Given their history, their numbers and their phenomenal growth of recent years, it is little wonder the Chinese see themselves and their place in the world as special. Chinese Catholics often feel besieged and misunderstood by both Rome and Beijing. 'We are not second class citizens; we are last class citizens,' one priest said to me.

Pope Benedict's 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics in which he joined issue with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is sometimes seen as too Eurocentric. Benedict said any Chinese attempt to implement 'the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which ... professes the Church to be one, holy, Catholic and apostolic'.

Given the problems besieging the Church in the west and attempts in Australia to set up a more lay controlled Truth Justice and Healing Council, I am left wondering why Rome cannot be more trusting of locals wanting to adapt to their own social and political realities. In China I have met Catholics, including priests and a bishop, who are passionate about the distinctive Chinese lay contribution to the life and identity of the Church. One bishop tells me the churches are full of the old and the young but what's missing is the middle generation.

In a strange way, Chinese citizens feel much like Australians during an election campaign such as the one we have been enduring. We wonder if any real dialogue is possible; where the real choices based on fundamental national values are; and whether it is simply a matter for the power elites to craft messages and choices bearing no relationship to the community values base.

For me, this has been most apparent with the Australian asylum policy during this 2013 campaign. At the outset, Labor decided to neutralise the issue as far as possible by meeting the Coalition at what seemed like the base of the precipice. The Coalition went one step further down. Both sides want to stop the boats for the sake of votes in western Sydney. They're prepared to use punitive rhetoric beyond the limits of utility, just to get themselves across the line. The Greens are left appearing to be the only party prepared to put ethical considerations first.

If there is a need and a political imperative to stop the boats, there ought be the possibility of agitating how this might most ethically be done. It might be possible to put an ethical case for stopping the boats, given the increase in arrivals, the increase in deaths at sea and the development of the people smuggling business model.

But even in the robust Australian democracy, such public discussion is on hold until an election is out of the way. Those critical of all the major parties either remain silent or state ideals that have no prospect of implementation. Most purists on the issue, who see no case for stopping the boats, do not endorse the Greens because of policy differences over other issues. And thus a critical political question is rendered irrelevant to the electoral processes and robust discussion

about what works and what's ethical has to be put on hold.

Even with democracy, there are some things we are not very good at talking about. In democratic Australia, many thinking citizens feel as disempowered on this issue as they would if they were Chinese citizens having to comply with the whim of the party.

But for our Indigenous heritage (which also has been marginal during this election campaign), Australians boast nothing like the terracotta warriors or the museum of calligraphy to mark out our distinctive history and place in the world. During this election campaign, we have accepted the assurance of our key political leaders that we are special because we, unlike the Americans and Europeans, have the geographic advantage of being able to exclude unwelcome asylum seekers. Whether or how we should are deemed unfit questions for democratic resolution.

We have also accepted that this is no time for dreams of bold development. The most we can do is talk about one fast train, while in China all you need do is buy a ticket and catch one.

I return home for the last week of the election campaign resigned to Australian democracy's present incapacity to provide the people with real policy options about contested ethical issues. Alas it has not been possible even to have the conversation about who we are as a people and how we might contribute to a better world. It's been just about us, our material needs and our isolationist fears about *them*, whoever they happen to be.

Thank God we are a democracy, but I could do without another election campaign for quite some time to come. In the end, this campaign has been just one protracted group selfie. We should all be ashamed of ourselves. At least, that to me is how it looks from China.

The bullet that stopped an illicit Irish Mass

CREATIVE

Brian Doyle

One night I was sitting with a friend whose people had fled County Donegal many years ago. More properly we were asked to leave, said my friend; or, more properly still, we were made to leave, by the bailiffs; most properly, if we are using exact words, we were evicted, and had to live in the wet lanes and fields, and the few of my people who did not starve to death, or die of the fever, made their way onto boats, hiding in the stench of scuppers and holds, and those who did not die at sea survived in the new lands, and eventually produced me.

But we remember, we remember. For example, he said, here is a story you should know.

One morning in Donegal, during the time when the penal laws forbade Catholics to assemble for Mass, a farmer herds his four black cows into a corral, along with one white one. This is a sign to his fellow Catholics as to where Mass will be held at noon; this sign of four and one means in a particular hedge under a hill. The people casually drift away from their work before noon and assemble silently around a rock where the Mass will be celebrated.

The priest is a fellow age 40. He gets halfway through the Mass, but just as he elevates the host, just as he lifts it to accept and accomplish the miracle, he is drilled between the eyes with a bullet from a British soldier on the hill. The priest falls down dead and the host flutters into the mud. The usual uproar then ensues and several men are arrested and the priest is buried in a pauper's grave.

The soldier was a man age 40 also, with a son about age ten. He finishes his year of duty in Ireland and goes home to Bristol. His son is a scholarly lad and goes to university and then into the ministry. At age 30 the boy is a curate, with all his future smiling before him, and there were many who thought he would be bishop before long.

But something happens and the boy grows more and more interested in how Anglicanism grew from Catholicism. This is a dangerous road and his superiors frown upon his inquiries, but he persists. When he is 35 he makes the break, and converts to Catholicism. Five years later he is a Catholic priest, to the immense dismay of his father.

One night the father, terribly frustrated and angry, loses his temper, and tells his son something he has never confessed to a soul, not even to his late wife, the boy's mother: that he shot and killed a priest just as the priest was about to celebrate the instant when Catholics believe the very essence of the Creator incomprehensibly enters a scrap of bread held high in the air.

The son covers his face with his hands as the father, shouting, says he never

regretted that shot for an instant, and that he never made such a fine shot before or since, and that the priest and his fellow conspirators got what they deserved, just that, only that, exactly that.

A month later the son, having researched the annals of the constabulary for the incident, and visited the village, and asked its oldsters where hedge Masses were held in the dark days, finds the rock under the hill, and gathers the villagers one morning, and finishes the Mass that was interrupted 30 years before by a bullet. When Mass is over he and the villagers bury an unconsecrated host and a bullet in the earth by the rock, and then they all trail along back to the village.

Now that is a story you should know, said my friend, and you tell it yourself, when you can, and the more people who know it the fewer bullets there will be, perhaps.

Neoliberalism in the swinging outer suburbs

AUSTRALIA

Luke Williams

The outer suburban marginal seats will almost certainly swing to the Coalition on Saturday. And I'm sure many of the Left intelligentsia think they have the reasons for the swing all worked out: voters in the outer suburbs are uneducated, 'aspirational' cashed-up bogans who only care about their mortgages, negating their working-class origins and keeping asylum seekers on the sunny shores of the pacific islands.

The problem with that explanation is that interest rates are low, the standard of living appears to be steadily improving and the ALP has lurched to the right of the Coalition on boat arrivals. Why then would these voters all now be trending toward the Coalition when all the indicators suggest they should be happy with the incumbent?

The standard explanation is that outer suburban swinging voters are so ignorant they have been tricked into backing the Coalition by the corporate press, or that they are so self-interested they are willing to see people lose their dole simply so they can have a few extra plasma screens on their walls.

Let me paint a different picture for you based on personal experience. The ALP's electoral fortunes in Melbourne's outer south-east broadly reflect what has been happening for the party across western Sydney over the past two decades. Since the late 1980s there has been an overall long-term trend to the Coalition in these seats, though they have swung back to the ALP several times over the last few elections.

Like many who live in these areas, I am a swinging voter with no real party affiliation. I live in Pakenham, which sits on the edge of Latrobe, a marginal ALP seat expected to swing back to the Libs, and McMillan, an outer-suburban, semi-rural seat which is becoming a moderately safe Liberal seat. Adjoining Latrobe are two other tightly held, politically volatile seats, Casey and Aston, held by the Coalition by less than 2 per cent — they generally swing back and forth, but have been trending to the Coalition since the late 1980s.

I suspect the reason is that the neoliberal agenda of the last 30 years has brought clear gains in wealth and quality of life for people in these electorates. Life is good and getting better. Incomes and education levels are above the national average. Personal wealth is increasing, largely through the value of their homes. More and more children from these electorates are going onto university, and while jobs are becoming less secure, the cost of living has remained relatively low. People in these electorates want more of the same, only better.

The outer suburban economy is largely dependent on manufacturing and retail, two industries which have suffered since 2008 under Labor and which are

particularly sensitive to Government policy. People want to build up their businesses and get more work — they are less interested in symbolic politics, social justice or ‘social engineering’ than good jobs, a strong economy and less Government regulation.

Rather than materialism, Australia’s suburban neoliberalism operates on a clear principle of fairness; that your pay-offs should be commensurate with your efforts. This upwardly mobile suburban sense of fairness is on the face of it hard to criticise — if you work hard, you should be rewarded. Perhaps this is why the ALP’s flirtation (under Gillard-Swan) with old-school ‘wealth redistribution’ didn’t resonate as much as the Coalition’s ‘growing the pie’.

The truth is that of the two largely neoliberal major parties, these swinging voters seem increasingly to see the Coalition as the more competent and philosophically coherent party to deliver on their promises.

The problem for the ALP is an acute one — how does the party embrace Australia’s increasingly wealthy suburbia while not neglecting its core principles of egalitarianism and social justice?

Mark Latham wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*: ‘The corrosion of Labor’s culture has produced a crisis of Labor identity. The party is confused on economic policy, not knowing whether to embrace former Prime Minister Paul Keating’s legacy of micro-reform and productivity growth or to accede to the sectional demands of union/factional bosses and the anti-competitive comfort of industry welfare.’ This is the ALP’s great unsolved conundrum and remains between them and a long-term hold on power.

For Treasurer Chris Bowen — who explicitly rejects notions of class and socialism — the broad idea of ‘social liberalism’ has the potential to be flexible enough to serve the needs of the vast majority of the electorate.

He may be right; the ALP’s social liberal-democratic project is not lost on the marginal outer-suburbs just yet. The 2007 rejection of WorkChoices showed that marginal voters are not exactly free-marketeters. Fairness still prevails, even if notions of equality are diminishing. But in the end pragmatism and perceptions of competence play a much greater role than hard-fixed ideologies.

The mortal utterance

CREATIVE

Anne Elvey

Listening at night

The noise of the rain is all around the house, as if
a Bruegel, with its rounded villagers' bawdy business
and children's games, is being staged on the verandah.
In the daytime the cockies toss acorns from the oak

that stands over the bedroom. The tree drops them now
itself and the rain, finished some ten minutes ago,
falls from the leaves in syncopated time. The wood
creaks, as if the walls and the limbs concur that they

are out in the antipodes with their rolling hoops, walking
on stilts, the possums striking the piñata with their tails
and throwing the quince about the garden, like walnuts
or spinning tops. In this raucous abundance, the dark,

not the peasant tones of Bruegel, holds me with two souls,
the comfort of the covers; the shady occupation of the oak.

The little matter of light

Photons catch a rim as if cloud were solid,
an icon of atmosphere the sun trims with gold
leaf. They are not champagne in the mouth.

They are oysters working grit into seeds
to glisten on the tongue. They linger on a road
where taillights stream, are the after-image

of a flash the eye with its gloved hand catches.
They are words the night is memorising like the face
of a beloved. They mean distance, mean a past

seen in the present. They uncurl in grey folds,
pulse lemon when the world dips with
anticipation, that matter might make love.

The mortal utterance

after Isaiah

It is a coal
picked from the fire

at the altar of mercy.

A gust billows —
smoke fills
the tent pitched

for a god. One red
note pulses

where the cherub
blows. A seraph's

breath blisters
the lips. The tongue,

gingerly at first,
feels for the burn.

What a tender
rasp. Magnified,

the anemone cluster
moist as a grammar

that might repair
a world, might

in saliva steep
the possible thing —
language beyond
utility. The phrase

(the seraph stumbles)
brands the open

mouth. Here
is the wound's answer.

Australia's game of rigged Monopoly

AUSTRALIA

Paul O'Callaghan

Last year Shadow Treasurer Joe Hockey declared that [the Age of Entitlement](#) was over. It's not a message you're likely to hear from either party during this election campaign. But as Hockey said then, with our population ageing and the cost of health care rising, we won't be able to afford the same level of benefits and services *and* cut taxes at the same time.

While Hockey resists the idea of higher taxes, just about every Australian economist and overseas observer tells us, like Ken Henry did, that we must generate substantially more tax revenue over the next decade.

But Hockey is also right to challenge the idea of entitlement. Too many of us feel that we *personally* are entitled to lower taxes and better services. And that means that we're asking someone else to pay more or receive less.

It doesn't take much to convince people they're entitled. American psychologist Paul Piff has invited hundreds of people to play [a rigged game of Monopoly](#) in his lab. One of the players starts with \$2000, the other \$1000. The rich player gets \$200 for passing Go while the poor player gets only \$100. And the rich player rolls two dice while the poor player rolls only one.

Before long the rich players are streets ahead and the game is over. 'When we asked them afterwards, how much do you feel like you deserved to win the game? The rich people felt entitled,' says Piff. 'They felt like they deserved to win the game.'

According to Piff, the rich players feel their success is due to their individual skills and talents. [In other studies](#) he and his colleagues have found that real life, upper-class people are often less considerate and compassionate than those who are less well off.

The researchers argue that having more money allows people to be less dependent on others. As a result they are more likely put their own self-interest over the interests of others and are more likely to see the pursuit of self-interest as a good thing.

In some ways life is like a rigged game of Monopoly. Being born in Australia is a huge advantage. And having the parents with money, a good education and connections always helps. Some of us have an advantage before we've even started school. But like the players in Piff's experiments, those of us who do well tend to think we've earned our good fortune through hard work, talent and creativity.

The downside to Australia's recent good fortune is a growing individualism and sense of entitlement. We buy four-wheel-drives, renovate our kitchens and send

our kids to private schools and then tell pollsters and local members that the cost of living is killing us.

We pay taxes and demand value for our money — not value for the nation but for ourselves and our families. Politicians read the polls and study focus group analyses and respond with initiatives like MySchool and MyHospital. They promise each of us that we'll get more for ourselves and our families.

When we see people missing out, many of us tell ourselves it's because people don't want to work. We complain that women are having babies so they don't have to get jobs, that lazy middle aged men are faking bad backs and that teenage boys are taking surfing holidays at our expense.

In one of the richest nations on earth many of us are gripped by fear that somebody is going to take our stuff. If it's not people on welfare living a life of ease at our expense it's boat people 'flooding' in from the north.

We look at asylum seekers and decide that they are 'queue jumpers' or 'economic migrants' without knowing anything about them or the societies they are fleeing. It suits us to believe they are undeserving.

Perhaps the thing we really fear is reality. What if Australia's current prosperity is not entirely the result of our hard work, talent and creativity? What if some of us have more opportunity to succeed than others?

While we shouldn't feel guilty or ashamed of our prosperity, we shouldn't delude ourselves with a false sense of entitlement either. The world is full of hard working, talented and creative people who have a lot less than we do. And there are many disadvantaged Australians whose major failing was to be born to the wrong parents or into the wrong neighbourhood. Those of us who are doing well need to learn to deal with prosperity without denigrating those who aren't.

Whoever wins the election, there are tough choices ahead. The economic boom is winding down, the population is ageing and the cost of services such as health care, aged care, and education are rising. If Australia is going to remain the land of the fair go, we need to burst the entitlement bubble.

Australians are not doing it tough

AUSTRALIA

Greg Foyster

Throughout the 2013 Federal election campaign, both major parties have pledged to address 'cost of living' pressures. Kevin Rudd used the phrase 14 times during a press conference the day after calling the election, and the Liberal Party includes 'cost of living' among its 11-point criticism of Labor on its [campaign website](#). Tony Abbott's [recent announcement](#) of a generous paid parental leave scheme is another example of tapping into middle-class anxiety over making ends meet. But is the average Australian household really 'doing it tough'?

In May 2012, AMP and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) released a [report](#) that argued rising prices were only half the picture: '...[of greater importance is how incomes change relative to prices. This is what determines the financial standard of living for households.] After all, if prices rise by 5 per cent but incomes rise by 10 per cent, households are better off, even if the cost of a litre of petrol reaches a new pinnacle.

The report found that from the period 1984 to 2009-2010, living costs increased by 164 per cent, but average disposable incomes increased by 217 per cent. This meant that households in 2009-2010 had around \$224 per week extra spending money than they did 25 years earlier.

Ah, but what about the cost of living for Rudd's proverbial 'working families'? Aren't couples with mortgages and kids spending more on the basics? The report tested this by splitting expenditure into three categories: basic necessities, relative necessities and discretionary items. For Australian households as a whole, there was little evidence of spending a greater proportion on the basics such as shelter, food and clothing. As for working families, the historical data showed 'that this group, more than any other, has increased spending towards discretionary items while maintaining a steady proportion of basic necessities'. For many Australians, what's increasing isn't the cost of *living*, but the cost of *lifestyle*.

The report was released in 2012, and energy prices have risen since then. But in August this year [PolitiFact](#) tested Rudd's claim that Australian families were 'all struggling from cost of living pressures' and found that although the total price of items bought from a typical pay packet climbed by 2.4 per cent over the past year, the pay packet itself climbed by 3.1 per cent. Once again, it's a case of income outpacing living costs.

A quick comparison with the economies of other industrialised nations confirms that Australians have nothing to complain about. The annual disposable income of the average Aussie household is more than US\$5800 above the OECD average. 'The Australian economy has experienced continuous growth and features low unemployment, contained inflation, very low public debt, and a strong and stable

financial system,' explains the CIA's [World Factbook](#). We also largely escaped the Global Financial Crisis.

If we broaden the comparison to include all the world's countries, our howls of struggling to survive start to sound like the whinging of spoilt brats. The *World Factbook* ranks Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person as [twentieth](#) out of 229 countries, but that only accounts for the financial aspects of living standards. The UN's Human Development Index, which uses a broader range of measures (including health, education and inequality), ranks Australia [second](#) out of 186 countries.

This isn't to say Australia doesn't have people living in poverty. John Falzon, CEO of St Vincent Paul de Society National Council of Australia, recently pointed out in [Eureka Street](#) that there are more than 105,000 homeless people in our country. A minority of the population is genuinely struggling due to degrading circumstances such as long-term unemployment or socio-economic disadvantage. But 'cost of living' political rhetoric is explicitly aimed at 'ordinary Australians', and the international figures show the average Aussie is very well off indeed.

If we're so rich, why do we cry poor? It would be easy to blame political speeches that evoke the myth of the 'little Aussie battler', who struggles gallantly forward in the face of perceived financial hardship. But the reason for our self-perception of doing it tough runs deeper.

Once people are above the breadline, poverty becomes relative. In his seminal work on the '[income-happiness paradox](#)', economist Richard Easterlin argued there was a 'consumption norm' which provides a common point of reference for appraising personal wellbeing, 'leading those below the norm to feel less happy and those above the norm, more happy'. In other words, once you have the basics sorted, your wellbeing is the result of your perceived place in society rather an objective measure of wealth. What matters for whether you feel 'rich' or 'poor' is your reference group — the people to whom you compare yourself.

Although Australians are extremely wealthy in a global sense, we don't always feel wealthy because our reference group is largely domestic — we are comparing ourselves to each other. When your friends, co-workers and neighbours are as rich as you are, it's easy to fool yourself into thinking that the unprecedented luxury and convenience around you is nothing special. You can become blind to your own privilege.

Worse still, aspirational advertising and the cult of celebrity prompt people to compare themselves to an even richer set of peers. The desired standard of living soars ever higher, and the little Aussie battler is beset with anxiety not because he's struggling to pay for basic necessities, but because he can't keep up with rising social expectations.

So if wealth and poverty are relative, the question becomes this: to whom should we compare ourselves?

In 2012 my partner and I went on a nine-month research trip exploring the idea of 'voluntary simplicity', a philosophy that involves reducing material consumption in order to focus on the personal, emotional or spiritual aspects of life. We met several families who said they'd raised children on very low incomes, but they didn't complain about 'cost of living'. They recognised that although they were poor by Australian standards, they were still rich in global terms. A man with two young boys told me he'd once fed his modest annual income into a website called globalrichlist.com and was shocked to discover that he was the ninety-seventh millionth richest person in the world.

This is the proper perspective from which to assess our wealth — in comparison to the average world citizen. Once we realise that in a global context most Australians are incredibly rich, we'll start to feel happy with what we have, rather than feeling hard done by because we aren't as fabulously wealthy as people on the next social rung.

Australians, on the whole, are not doing it tough. It's time we stopped whinging about First World problems and started counting our blessings.

Parent education is better than child protection

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

As Child Protection Week begins, there are [calls](#) for the removal of NSW Family and Community Services minister Pru Goward for misleading parliament on her department's chronic incapacity to protect children who are at risk of abuse.

Awareness of the pressing need to protect children is at an all time high, partly due to the torrent of revelations of church sexual abuse and the setting up of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. We know that neglect and abuse within families is also rampant, and arguably much more difficult to act upon. The recent harrowing [account](#) of a day in the life of a DoCS caseworker published in the Fairfax papers suggests the problem is out of control.

But maximising child protection measures is only one step towards providing for young people's emotional and physical well being. In itself, child protection is like giving vulnerable young people a security guard. They're less likely to be abused, but they're also unlikely to be empowered to grow as self-reliant human beings. For that, we need to honour them with constant respect and, most importantly, teach people how to do this when they become parents.

Respect is something parents do when they pay attention to their children in a loving rather than controlling manner. They enter into their child's world and listen to their perspective as seriously as they do that of their adult friends. If something has to be dismissed as improbable, it's the idea and not the child that must be cast aside. Affirmation is often a particular challenge for parents who were themselves brought up in an abusive home environment where the rule of the stick prevailed.

In schools, it achieves little to control bullying by putting a protective wall around children who are vulnerable. Instead modern personal development [programs](#) are teaching them how to offer and command respect, from both adults and their contemporaries. This includes lessons about power and control, how to identify when power is being misused, and what they can do about it. For those who are not themselves involved in the bullying, there is the distinction between the passive bystander and the active bystander.

Child protection commands attention from governments that personal development education programs could never hope to achieve. That is understandable, given that there are 60,000 children in the community whose lives are so dangerous at home that they need monitoring by child protection services. But a boost to education programs that teach people how to put the well being of children — and that of their struggling parents — at the centre of public policy will surely take the pressure off governments to provide child protection services.

The politics of disgust

AUSTRALIA

Ellena Savage

A growing body of research suggests that disgust plays an important role in informing people's moral and political beliefs. Disgust includes the physical dimension of repugnance.

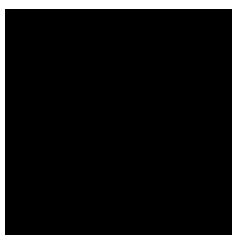


People who are repulsed by images that might include a man eating a handful of live worms, a pus-infected wound, or an emaciated but living person, are more likely to have a conservative political orientation.

Like fear, disgust plays a vital role in human self-protection. It's nicer — not to mention safer — for us to remain unexposed to viruses, infections, and foul odours. But the extent to which this same response informs political and moral beliefs needs to be scrutinised.

Although it is reported that up to 50 per cent of political identification comes down to genetic factors, there remains huge scope for cultural context and contemplation to inform the outcomes of our political and moral responses, beyond sheer visceral feelings.

Politicians, punters and polemicists all frequently invoke disgust in their speech, especially around topics that resonate strongly with us. The sense that the disgust response is 'embodied morality', and therefore a higher truth, leaves little space for rational cognition.



This week saw a strangely passionate response to a particular performance at the MTV Video Music Awards (pictured). 20 year old US actor and recording artist Miley Cyrus 'twerked' in a skin-coloured bikini, and the whole world pulled over to vomit. Being a young-ish person with a high exposure to pop- and raunch-culture, the [clip](#) washed over me when I viewed it online.

For context, I was born in 1987, so during my life there has never been a time that dominant culture wasn't shoving skinny, sexualised young women in bikinis in my face. I can see that Cyrus crossed barriers of good taste, but if you've been to a night club in the past decade, you'll know crossing taste barriers is kind of how kids have fun these days.

The reason I mention what has become known as 'Cyrus-gate' is that I think it is a brilliant example of moral outrage based on those visceral feelings we recognise as disgust. Cyrus dances tastelessly, and we perceive the woman as a harlot.

The man she grinds up against is Robin Thicke, whose most recent hit celebrates the "blurring" of sexual consent, alongside an alarmingly sexist music

video titled 'Blurred Lines'. He escapes all criticism, even though he is arguably more complicit in the subjugation of women in pop music than Cyrus could ever be.

My point is that the response of disgust bypasses the stage of cognition, and charges full steam ahead on the assumption that it is undoubtedly the best response.

It's not. The coming election calls for a pragmatic interpretation of proposed policy. Moral questions remain high on the *rhetorical* agenda of this campaign. These include same sex marriage, asylum seekers, and climate change.

While they *are* undoubtedly moral questions, to frame them as such in a pragmatic-political context is dangerous, because it legitimises the process of determining the best outcome based on visceral feelings. Instead, looking more closely at issues that pertain to proposed policy and budget is a better strategy for casting a vote in this disempowered era.

Joe Hockey's budget is rooted in the ideology of avoidance of environmental responsibility and serving 'economic justice' for the wealthy at the expense of those who struggle. Labor's proposal to build a \$114 billion east coast railway is slightly bizarre, but is long-sighted, as our energy consumption habits are bound to change in the future.

It's a hard sell, looking at what is being offered to us when not much is being offered at all. But we are an incredibly wealthy nation, and the distribution of money and power matters for our future. The problem is that while our political environment has shifted to one of pragmatism, moral issues — the ones we feel something about — are the ones we love to get stuck into. They are vastly more interesting than budget forecasts.

It is important to note that disgust is partly socially conditioned. Statistically its gut response is most likely to invoke racist, sexist, and homophobic responses. US jurist Martha Nussbaum argues the 'politics of disgust' has always had the effects of supporting bigotry in the forms of sexism, racism and anti-Semitism.

The moral questions presented in this election demand rational action based on long-term, inclusive and humane outcomes, rather than responses based on people's initial and unconsidered feelings about gay men kissing, or relinquishing personal property in the form of paying tax. While both major parties are vying for politics-of-disgust votes on the backs of vulnerable people, we can't expect much in terms of great, humane, democratic reform.

But then, federal politics is no longer a place of great democratic reform, but an institution for regulating the distribution of power and money, which retains the power of hugely significant political outcomes. We can't expect that this election will bring about the greatest equality for the greatest number of people. But we can vote with our heads, to at least choose a party who might push for *greater*

equality for a *greater* number of people.

Eureka Street readers shift towards Greens

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin

Eureka Street readers are changing their political allegiance in this federal election campaign.

A readers' survey conducted last week revealed a shift away from the ALP, which the majority of poll respondents supported in the 2010 federal election. Then, nearly 60 per cent of readers voted Labor but this time only 36 per cent intend to do so.

Readers are not, however, moving to the Coalition: the number intending to vote for the Liberals (just under 13 per cent) or the Nationals (just over one per cent) is almost exactly the same as it was three years ago.

The Greens have been the chief beneficiary of the decline in support for Labor. In 2010 just under 18 per cent of readers voted for the Greens but this time more than 25 per cent intend to do so. The extent of the Greens' support varies, however, according to age and religious belief. A majority of readers who identified as either atheists or agnostics — 53 per cent — are Greens voters, compared with 43 per cent of Catholics. Other Christians divide almost evenly in support for the Greens (just under 38 per cent) and support for Labor (just under 37 per cent). Younger readers are also more likely to vote Greens: 40 per cent of those under 50 intend to do so, compared with just over 26 per cent of those aged 60 or older.

The survey data, compiled from emailed responses by more than 1400 readers, was analysed by Emily van der Nagel of Swinburne University's [Institute of Social Research](#). Some of the results do not confirm popular preconceptions about the ways in which demographic groups are likely to differ. Support for the government's National Broadband Network, for example, is higher among older readers — nearly 59 per cent of readers aged 60 or older rated implementing Labor's version of the NBN as either important or very important, compared with 50 per cent of those aged 50 or younger.

Responses to some other survey questions were more predictable. The younger readers are, the more likely they are to support same-sex marriage: nearly 70 per cent of those aged 50 or below either agreed or strongly agreed that same-sex marriage should be legalised, compared with just over 53 per cent of those aged 60 or older. Religion also appears to have shaped attitudes to this question. An overwhelming majority of atheist and agnostic readers (nearly 84 per cent) support marriage equality but Catholics are strongly divided. A bare majority of Catholic readers (50.5 per cent) are in favour, with just under 30 per cent opposed and almost 20 per cent neutral.



But, however readers may differ on same-sex marriage, comparatively few regard the issue as a vote changer. Only 35 per cent rated it as important or very important in determining how they will vote, compared with nearly 90 per cent who rated issues of social inclusion — parental leave, equal pay, homelessness and the treatment of indigenous people — as the most important.

Education, the environment, health and the treatment of asylum seekers were also rated highly as vote determinants, though not as highly as social inclusion. On asylum seekers, *Eureka Street* readers strongly reject the hostility to boat arrivals that opinion polls regularly indicate exists among the wider population. More than 90 per cent of readers aged 50 and under, and more than 84 per cent of those aged 60 and older, believe Australia lacks compassion in its treatment of asylum seekers.

Readers also rated the economy lower as an election issue than poll respondents in the wider population typically do. Only 53 per cent described it as important or very important in determining their vote. Care should be taken in drawing inferences from this response. It may reflect readers' ethical priorities, but it may also reflect their socio-economic status. As earlier demographic surveys have indicated, *Eureka Street* readers tend to be well educated and comparatively affluent: anxieties about job security and mortgages might have less sway with them.

International law cannot justify attack on Syria

AUSTRALIA

Justin Glyn



For the second time in a little over ten years, Britain and America (this time with the assistance of France) seem about to launch hostilities against an Arab country on the basis of the possession or use of chemical weapons.

To be sure, they argue that this case is different. In the Iraqi case, no weapons were to be found. Here, there are claims of an actual chemical attack. Surely this justifies a response? Well it's a little bit more complex.

Chemical weapons are horrific and indiscriminate and are therefore largely used to strike fear in populations rather than to achieve particular military goals. After World War I — when both sides made widespread use of chlorine, phosgene and mustard agents — the world largely recoiled from their use. This resulted in the [1925 Geneva Gas Protocol](#) prohibiting the use of chemical or biological weapons. Syria is a party to this treaty, although not to its 1993 successor which, unlike the 1925 treaty, contains detailed enforcement mechanisms.

This did not stop continued violations in the years since. In the 1930s, new neurotoxic organophosphates ('nerve gasses', although actually liquid) were developed by German scientists. Mussolini used chemical weapons against Ethiopia in 1935, the Soviets used them in Afghanistan, and the US helped Saddam Hussein use them against Iran. (He also, of course, turned them on his own, Kurdish, population.) In the aftermath of the Cold War, a new Chemical Weapons Convention was drafted but, as noted above, Syria is not a party.

There is, however, no general right to intervene to prevent the use or stockpiling of chemical weapons. It will be remembered that the purported justification by the US in Iraq was that that country had breached earlier UN Security Council resolutions specifically forbidding it to keep or build chemical weapons.

There can also be no question of the US and its allies acting in 'self-defence' (permitted by Art.51 of the UN Charter), given that this is clearly a civil war.

Certainly, if either side has used chemical weapons in Syria, this would seem to be a 'threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression' within the meaning of Art.39 of the UN Charter (which would entitle the UN Security Council to authorise military action to prevent it). The problem is that the UN Security Council is split down the middle: three powers with vetoes (power to block resolutions) oppose the Syrian Government (US, UK, France), while two (Russia, China) support it. Russia and China, in particular, are nervous of anything that looks like intervention in Syria.

Apart from having their own interests in the region, they are wary of giving anything that might look like a nod to Western military ambitions — with some cause. While they supported the resolution demanding a no-fly zone in Libya to protect civilians, they were less than impressed when NATO members took this as a mandate to remove Gadhafi from power completely.

More basically, it is by no means clear (a) that there *has* been a chemical weapons attack in Syria (b) if so, what agents were used or (c) who used them.

Determining any of these propositions involves complicated chemical analysis and assumes that there has been no opportunity for tampering with samples or for the chemicals to degrade in the meantime. (Hence, the importance of a clear chain of custody for any alleged samples.)

The US and its allies have made clear that while they may seek a Security Council resolution, they do not consider themselves bound by any such resolution (or the lack of one), or the findings of the UN team already investigating alleged chemical attacks.

This is worrying. Both sides seem to have access to chemical weapons and both have been accused of their use. Previous UN investigations were inconclusive on alleged use of chemical weapons (although one investigator, Carla Del Ponte, noted that any evidence pointed to the insurgents as the likely culprits). In addition, in June, rebels were arrested in Turkey carrying chemicals which initial reports (later denied by Turkish authorities) claimed included the nerve agent sarin. These factors suggest more reason, one would think, to wait for the UN to report.

As a result, while an attack on Syria may be imminent, it is difficult to see how — at least from an international law standpoint — it is justifiable.

Small stories of redemption in Laos

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***The Rocket* (M). Director: Kim Mordaunt. Starring: Sitthiphon Disamoe, Loungnam Kaosainam, Thep Phongam, Sumrit Warin, Bunsri Yindi. 92 minutes**

A psychologically scarred war veteran struts about dressed as James Brown. An annual festival sees men celebrate explosives, in a country riddled with unspent American bombs. *The Rocket*, an Australian production set in Laos, finds plenty of humour within a decidedly bleak historical context.



'That one of the main reasons we wanted to make the film,' says writer and director Kim Mordaunt. 'You've got a country that's been bombed [during the American war with Vietnam] more than anywhere on the planet, yet there's a beautiful spirit in the people to move forward and find positivity.'

As far as Kim and his wife, producer Sylvia Wilczynski were concerned, *The Rocket* had to be funny and highly entertaining, not only to pay tribute to this spirit, but also to open it up to as many potential viewers as possible. 'We hoped it might draw a wide audience into a place that they might not normally go,' says Sylvia.

At the heart of *The Rocket*, then, is a simple quest narrative that explores the universal themes of growing up and dealing with loss. The hero is ten-year-old Ahlo (Disamoe), who, following a series of misfortunes that devastate his family — including the loss of their home to an industrial dam project, and the untimely death of a close family member — sets out to prove that he is not a bad luck charm

He soon falls in with streetwise nine-year-old Kia (Kaosainam) and her uncle Purple (Phongam) — the aforementioned eccentric veteran — who become his solace from his emotionally distant father (Warin) and sternly matriarchal and superstitious grandmother (Yindi). His quest eventually leads him to the Rocket Festival, where he has the opportunity not just to compete for a cash prize, but also to attain a kind of symbolic redemption.

'The festival started as an ancient animist fertility festival that happens at the end of dry season,' says Wilczynski. 'It later got mixed with Buddhism ... but since the war, it's got this whole other layer, of shooting back to the sky. There are a lot of ex-military people who are still very damaged but also have good knowledge of explosives!'

The festival evokes a sense both of rejecting the historic aggression that Laos suffered during the war — American bombs caused some 700,000 civilian

casualties between 1964 and 1973 — and also of thumbing their noses at the presence of millions of unexploded bombs that still litter the countryside. 'Sleeping tigers', Purple dubs them, and several episodes in *The Rocket* revolve around such deadly, ubiquitous debris.

Mordaunt and Wilczynski were living in Hanoi and holidaying in Laos when they first became aware of this issue. 'We met some bomb disposal specialists and they opened our eyes,' says Wilczynski. 'We were ashamed that as Australians we didn't know what our American allies had done.' They ended up making a documentary, *Bomb Harvest*, which screened on the ABC in Australia and to wide acclaim at film festivals around the world.

One of the other threads of *Bomb Harvest* concerned young children who collect bombs to sell the scrap metal. *The Rocket* in turn was inspired by the time they had spent with those children. 'All the situations in *The Rocket* are based on things we witnessed,' says Mordaunt. 'When we were making *Bomb Harvest* we saw a lot of villages that had been relocated to make way for industry.' That context, then, became the starting point for Ahlo's story.

'And with that we saw a lot of loss,' Mordaunt continues. 'So we knew this would be a story that embraces loss. Sylvia and I both lost parents at a young age, so it's something we can feel very strongly; what happens to a child when they lose someone, and the dysfunctional mentors they end up falling in with. That's the core of the story ...] then it was about building a context on that, of the country, its history, where it was going, and its mysticism.' The result is a story that is epic (despite the film's concise running time), engaging and universal.

Much of the film's charm comes from its two young leads. Disamoe is a tough and resourceful former street kid, and Kaosainam is a gifted drama student who set the standard on set with her emotional honesty. 'Sitthiphon has an amazing survival instinct and sense of self,' says Wilczynski. With Kaosainam, 'everything she feels is right on her face. She's so natural ... If she's picking her nose when the camera is on, she'll just pick her nose.' Mordaunt adds that on the other hand, 'when she's vulnerable, there's a real vulnerability. You can't see the cogs turning.'

The filmmakers say the young actors initially hated each other, but came to love each other by the end of the shoot. The development of this bond is mirrored on screen, where the characters' natural playfulness (an exuberant sprint through a marketplace marked by moments of impromptu silliness) evolves through shared experience into something more poignant. It crystallises in a single moment when Kia looks 'right into Ahlo's soul', says Mordaunt, to disperse his crippling self-doubt. 'That to me is the soul of the film,' he says. 'And they found that together.'

When punishment fails

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton



In Victoria the murder of Jill Meagher by a man who had been granted parole while serving his sentence for a previous violent sexual crime aroused community concern about parole. It followed other similar violent incidents. The Government commissioned a [report](#) which has now been released. It identified faults in an under-resourced system.

Behind the discussion of parole lies a series of tensions within Australian society. The first tension is between different ways of relating punishment to crime. Some see punishment as primarily retribution for wrong done. The severity of the punishment is measured to the seriousness of the wrong committed. Others see it primarily as a measure to protect society from people whose attitudes and actions threaten public safety. The severity of the punishment is then measured by the extent to the threat to society.

Punishment can also be seen primarily as a means to the reform of the criminal. From the time when imprisonment became the preferred form of punishment for crime instead of a holding pen for those awaiting trial and punishment, the reform of the criminal has received more emphasis. The type and severity of punishment will be influenced by the likelihood of reform.

Parole fits into this framework of reform. Initially prisoners were offered opportunities for study and work. Cooperative behaviour could lead to an early release. Prisoners sometimes graduated from a more severe to a less harsh regime and were supervised after early release for good behaviour.

Within the Victorian penal system, most prisoners are eligible to seek parole. Their cases are examined to ensure that the person does not pose a serious risk of endangering the community, and their behaviour is monitored while on parole.

From the prisoner's point of view, parole offers a respect for their human dignity that other aspects of prison life sap. It offers hope that if they work to build good social connections in prison they will see their sentence reduced. If they are released on parole, they will find some support in making the demanding transition to a life in a changed and often under-resourced community.

A second source of tension arises from financial considerations. Where a retributive view of punishment prevails and is reflected in longer sentences and less flexibility in sentencing, the heavier will be the costs incurred in building and staffing prisons. Parole then becomes attractive because it reduces the number of people imprisoned and the financial burden on society.

But if it is to be effective parole demands well-resourced and informed

judgments on applications for parole, and people who can relate well to those who are paroled. This demands proportional funding from governments. If their dominant view of punishment is retributive, they will be tempted to reduce eligibility for parole without funding the forms of connection that could make it work.

A third source of tension lies between the trust and freedom that are the conditions of human growth and the reluctance to take risks that characterises contemporary culture.

Human beings begin to recognise their responsibility to others when through relationships they can recognise their own hope to live generously, and can see the conflict between their desire and the way in which they habitually act. If they are to nurture these generous desires they must be trusted.

But a society that is averse to risk will simply judge that criminals can never be trusted to reform, and so should always serve their full sentences. Indeed, they may even be held in indefinite detention if they are judged a threat. For prisoners, of course, this distrust by society is likely to be reciprocated and so increase risk.

When seen within this complex framework it is clear that no easy fix to the parole system will guarantee that the community will be completely safe. Certainly, providing greater resources and perhaps providing an extra layer of scrutiny before releasing violent sexual offenders on parole may be helpful. But paroled prisoners form only a small fraction of those who put society at risk.

The best way to protect the community is to encourage change in those found guilty of crimes. Punishment does not generally do this. People only discover that change is possible through supportive relationships, such as those with welfare officers in prisons, on parole and after release. But this work cannot be done without resources.

From this broad perspective the largest threat to the security of the community comes from a view that sees punishment entirely in retributive terms. Unless the human development of prisoners is seen as central, imprisonment simply begets further risk to the community and swallows all the resources that could build a safer society. Like suspended sentences the institution of parole is a candle that illuminates a better way.

The real scandal at Essendon

AUSTRALIA

Michael McVeigh

This week, the Essendon Football Club has been handed down one of the harshest punishments in the history of Australian sport.

The club's supplement program in 2012 might not have set out to contravene the drug code, but it did aim to stretch sports science as far as it legally could.



The punishments were handed out to the club because their experimental efforts put the welfare of players in jeopardy, and because the club could not account for all the substances the players had received, meaning they could not rule out that the players had received substances banned under the WADA sporting code.

Essendon coach James Hird continues to deny that he has done anything wrong, while admitting that things happened at the club that 'shouldn't have happened'. Most of the club's negotiations with the AFL over the last two weeks centered on the club's desire not to be labelled 'cheats', to maintain their integrity as competitors. Very little commentary has come out of the club about what the affair has done to their integrity as stewards of the players under their care.

The most significant moment during the last few months, and arguably the turning point for Essendon's case, was the phone call by the distraught mother of one of the players to Triple M in Melbourne. This mother — identified only as 'Sarah' — pointed to the real issue at the heart of the scandal and shattered Essendon's defence that what it had done was no different to other clubs seeking an advantage through sports science. Others might have been angry that Essendon was trying to gain an unfair advantage on the field by trying out untested supplements, but the real scandal was that the club had treated its players like 'guinea pigs'.

Reading through the substantial charge sheet released by the AFL, a picture emerges of a club that felt it was in a cold war of sports science — a war that it was losing to other clubs. Text messages from sports scientist Stephen Dank to Hird talk about the practices of other clubs, justifying Essendon's efforts to push the boundaries themselves in order to keep pace. Other clubs have denied that their practices stray outside what's acceptable to anti-doping bodies or put players in jeopardy in any way, but there is no denying that other clubs are using legal forms of sports science - including injections, creams and powder supplements - to gain an advantage over their competitors. The uncomfortable issue this scandal raises for the AFL and other sporting codes is whether Essendon's actions were an extension of current practices, more than they were any kind of exception.

The affair highlights the dangers when sport becomes a contest for scientific

superiority. When bodies become machines to be optimised, it's all too easy for clubs to lose sight of the fact that they are dealing with human beings. The AFL Players Association has said that it will only be through 'good luck', rather than prudent management, if the Essendon players escape negative health repercussions from the supplements they received. With sports science only just beginning to understand the long-term health impact of concussion and other injuries sustained on the field, now players also have to worry about the long-term impact of what clubs are doing to them off the field as well.

The challenge for sporting bodies is to find a way to end the cold war of sports science before it causes more irretrievable harm to players. Firm lines need to be drawn around what clubs can and cannot do in player development and care. If those lines cut out activities not deemed to be 'performance enhancing' by WADA, but which might place undue risks on the health of competitors, then so be it. The issue that guides sports needs to move beyond questions of cheating to questions of player welfare. For one club to gain an advantage over other clubs by cheating is shameful. But for a club to put its own players in harm's way is unforgivable.

Professional sport these days is a lucrative business, and winning brings success off the field as well. That logic would dictate players and teams push the rules to their limits in order to gain an advantage over one another — as evidenced by Essendon's unfortunate slogan for 2013: 'Whatever it takes'. However, the public's hunger for sport isn't just about tasting success. It's also about how that success is achieved. If success comes at the cost of players' long-term wellbeing, the sour taste it leaves in the mouths of fans will mean their appetite for sport will start to wane.

A Syria not so far away from our election

AUSTRALIA

Walter Hamilton



A collective sigh of relief could be detected rising from the nation as our political leaders briefly turned their attention from the election campaign to events in war-torn Syria.

Partly it was an expression of relief at having a diversion from the dreariest political contest in living memory. Partly it was a reaction to being suddenly confronted by something real, something concrete, after weeks of chimera and empty rhetoric.

Syria's murderous ordeal and Australia's contemporary political experience at first glance may seem completely unrelated, and yet certain themes resonate between them. Of course there is nothing in this country to compare with the internecine bloodshed and cruelty of Syria's civil war. Reports of an apparent chemical attack on its citizens by the Bashar regime fill us with horror and outrage, as we also reflect that such hatreds and methods are thankfully not part of our reality.

But what exactly is our national reality? Syria represents the politics of all or nothing, of absolute power as both a means and an end; a state of affairs in which human lives are mere numbers on a casualty list and mercy has become a stranger to justice. Expressed in these terms, could it be that Syria's experience begins to resonate for Australians, as we prepare to select a new government from the mire of negativity, mistruth and mean-spiritedness in which the major parties have chosen to wrestle for our votes?

The thought was prompted by an ABC TV news report mentioning the Liberal Party's forthcoming attack ads, which one source said would 'make the Somme look like a Sunday picnic'. Crass and disrespectful of the victims of the First World War killing ground, the remark saw fit to compare our political process to a mindless slaughter. Similarly, in Labor's television ads — reminiscent of the Grim Reaper campaign during the AIDS scare in the 1980s — hapless 'victims' of Coalition policies are consigned to oblivion.

It is one thing to hold passionately to one's political beliefs, but quite another to turn a contest of social values and spending priorities into an all-or-nothing, winner-take-all, blood sport. Of course we are talking about representations and not realities, inclinations not facts. Like the commercial radio host heard recently explaining that he did not need to provide balanced or factual political coverage 'because I'm an opinionator'.

I assumed he had made up the word but sadly discovered it already existed (my Google search also listed 'opinionator anxiety' and 'opinionator idiot's delight'). It is no longer sufficient just to counter an opponent's opinion; he or she must be

ridiculed, humiliated and obliterated. And if you don't like what he's saying, tell him to shut up. Show no mercy. Or spread the fear that he will show no mercy.

Who of us is not fed up with this charade? Who is still listening when \$5 million, \$50 million or \$500 million is promised for some football stadium, road upgrade or shiny new benefit? At the past two state elections, both major parties promised to install an elevator at our local railway station (which serves a community with a large proportion of retirees). Ten years later nothing has been done. Election promises, too, have become representations, theatrics, not realities.

Regardless of who wins on 7 September, this unwilling suspension of disbelief called the three-year federal electoral cycle will give way to a political reality bearing no resemblance to the Somme, the Plague or present-day Syria. Supposedly sacrosanct policies will be re-forged in the fire of parliamentary and budget realities and emerge in other forms. In many cases they'll be better for it. The electorate — regardless of whom one has voted for — will survive. The lights will not go out. The practical business of governing will stumble on in the twilight of everyday life.

In an uglier place, at an uglier time, our politics would truly be a winner-take-all contest: television ads would be poisonous gas and campaign songs the rattle of machine guns. Why is it, during our own festival of democracy, precious and privileged as it is, Australians prefer to hold up a mirror to the ugly side of humanity? It is a dangerous indulgence that leaves us all a little smaller, a little frailer, a little less kind.

Teen voter avoids fine from the Australian Electoral Commission

AUSTRALIA

Nadine Rabah

In ten days I will cast a vote for the first time. Well, technically.

My first time should have been in the local elections on the 27th October last year, and as a result, I owe the Electoral Commission \$100.



Not a great start.

However on 7 September I will finally be able to have my say in the formation of government. Something I am very excited about.

Even though I've never been fond of politicians, I must admit that — unlike many teenagers my age — I do take an interest in political affairs.

I'm aware of the parties, the figureheads and their rarely mentioned policies. I know how parliament works and occasionally watch political shows on the ABC. My brother has told me that this is 'really sad'. By his admission he doesn't even care.

His views reflect those of most people our age. The civic apathy, the disengagement and the disillusionment are all common themes amongst the latter part of Gen Y. Many of my friends have conscientiously chosen not to enrol to vote as they see it as a 'waste of time' and do not care the slightest about politics. Even those who are enrolled plan on casting an informal vote, or unbeknown to them, a valid 'donkey vote'.

This undermines the whole process as my vote may be effectively cancelled out by the vote of an ignorant or uninterested voter.

Their ignorance is usually by choice, and frankly, I do not blame them.

I consider myself rather informed, and even I'm lost. I've never really had a strong political preference, and ten days out from the election, I still do not know how I am going to vote.

I look to the papers and watch the news for guidance, but they all work to serve different agendas. The media plays a pivotal role during the campaign, and if you look carefully enough, they usually bat for one side. Quirks and gaffes are the focus, policies are unheard of and we see photos with more babies than I thought existed in Australia. What is it about politicians holding babies?

Issues are 'discussed' although you can only hear so much of the same.

Same-sex marriage is in the news and has been for as long as I can remember. The fact is that it is in the public interest and theoretically a democratic

government should discuss it.

'Stopping the boats' has also been an issue for a very long time and both major parties lose my vote on their so called 'solutions'.

Another issue is the state of our economy, which many first time voters do not have a clue about. Australia is still one of the largest capitalist economies in the world, so we must be doing something right.

Other serious issues which I believe should be discussed include Indigenous affairs, starting with recognising Indigenous people as Australia's first inhabitants in the Constitution. There is also online gambling, cyber bullying, organ donor registration, reducing family and female violence, and action on binge drinking.

Politics is all too much for a first time voter, and I keep asking myself who do I vote for?

Many people vote the same way as their parents. However mine are voting differently this coming election.

Do I vote Labor? They have proved to be unstable, untrustworthy and inhumane towards asylum seekers?

Do I vote Greens or another minority party? Minority parties are unlikely to have majority power in the next twenty years. Also I don't think many people can cope with another minority government.

Or do I vote Liberal? Their leader has commented on 'sex appeal', on homosexuality as a fad, and has confused the term 'repository' with something that is inserted into the rectum. All of this was said in three days. Imagine three years.

Living in a safe Labor seat, I often think it does not really matter which way I vote. Kelvin Thomson has been our MP since I was a toddler and will continue to be after this election.

It's scary that in ten days, we first-time voters will be able to cast our votes as to who we believe best reflect our values and beliefs.

Voting will be better than receiving a fine in the mail from the Australian Electoral Commission.

Ten days. I guess that means ten days to figure out who I dislike less.

A letter to my daughter, who will vote for the first time

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin



Dear Julia,

I hope you don't mind my making a private discussion public. The idea of writing this letter came to me after talking to you and your friend Carmen, who will also be a first-time voter on 7 September. Both of you expressed the same perplexity: excitement at the prospect of voting combined with dismay at the choices you're going to find on the ballot papers. Since I am sure that you're not the only young Australians who feel that way, I have decided to continue our conversation in this way.

Disillusion with politics and politicians is nothing new, nor is it unique to democracy. But long-established democratic systems of government seem especially susceptible to it, and there is evidence that a new round of disillusionment has taken hold in Australia. According to the Australian Electoral Commission, nearly one in five eligible voters aged between 18 and 24 had not bothered to enrol to vote when the rolls for this election were closed last week. That's more than double the number of unenrolled people in the wider adult population.

In other words, many of your contemporaries — whose votes might conceivably have determined the outcome in some seats — have declined to participate in the democratic process altogether.

Many observations might be made about this decision to opt out. Some people I know attribute it to compulsory voting, which Australia has but most democracies do not. In this country if you are enrolled to vote and want to express your contempt or despair at the choices available, the only legal way of doing so is to spoil the ballot paper in some way. Why put yourself in the position of having to resort to such a farcical solution?

I happen to agree with the critics of compulsory voting. Voting is a duty as well as a right, but it is a duty that should be freely recognised and accepted. Compulsion encourages an unreflective, almost mechanical form of participation, and it is one of the reasons why Australian elections are too often decided by people who have no interest in politics whatever the choices might be. Such voters are easily susceptible to slogans and distortions, and politicians know it. We would have a more vigorous democracy if political parties and candidates had to work at 'turning out the vote' as it is called elsewhere — at persuading people that their vote can make a difference.

But gripes about the effects of compulsory voting do not really explain why many people, especially younger people, are opting out of participation altogether.

If voting were not obligatory, the question would simply reappear as 'why aren't young people turning out to vote?' Whichever way the problem arises, it points to a deeper question: why don't people trust democratic process to change the things they think should be changed?

Again there is no shortage of people who think they know the answer to this question. I don't find any of these answers entirely convincing but some are more plausible than others. I have some sympathy for one in particular: that the kind of politics we have now is devoid of any great moral clash of ideas.

People who take this line usually point to the fact that the major political parties — the only ones that can really aspire to govern — resemble each other more than they are willing to admit. Despite all the arguments about government spending and debt that you will hear in this campaign, the philosophical gulf that once separated Labor and the Coalition on economic policy has vanished. Both sides bow to the free market, or what they like to pretend is a free market.

Nor is the economy the only issue on which the two sides have converged. Their rival policies on asylum seekers, for example, amount to a competition to see which of them can be more conspicuously punitive, and thereby more astutely exploit unfounded fears about boat arrivals.

But there have been times of convergence and realignment before. And democratic politics, which is about building majorities, has always required compromise and negotiation. If that were not so minor parties like the Greens, who in the last parliament exercised greater sway than they can usually expect to do, would wield no influence at all. I suspect that the deepest reason for disillusionment comes from unease about this process of compromise. People think it is tainted and wish to shun it.

The temptation to see democracy, and its inevitable choices between less than perfect alternatives, as tainted is one that we should resist. In a lecture he gave earlier this year, the Coalition frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull noted that 'so often the best political objectives, the most important goals, are frustrated because people lose sight of the need for compromise and allow their idea of the perfect to be, indeed, the enemy of the good.'

Think about that, Julia: the perfect can be the enemy of the good. It is wise counsel in many aspects of life, but especially, I think, in politics. If we did not implicitly follow this maxim, we would not have democratic politics at all but something much worse. We would be on a slide towards totalitarianism.

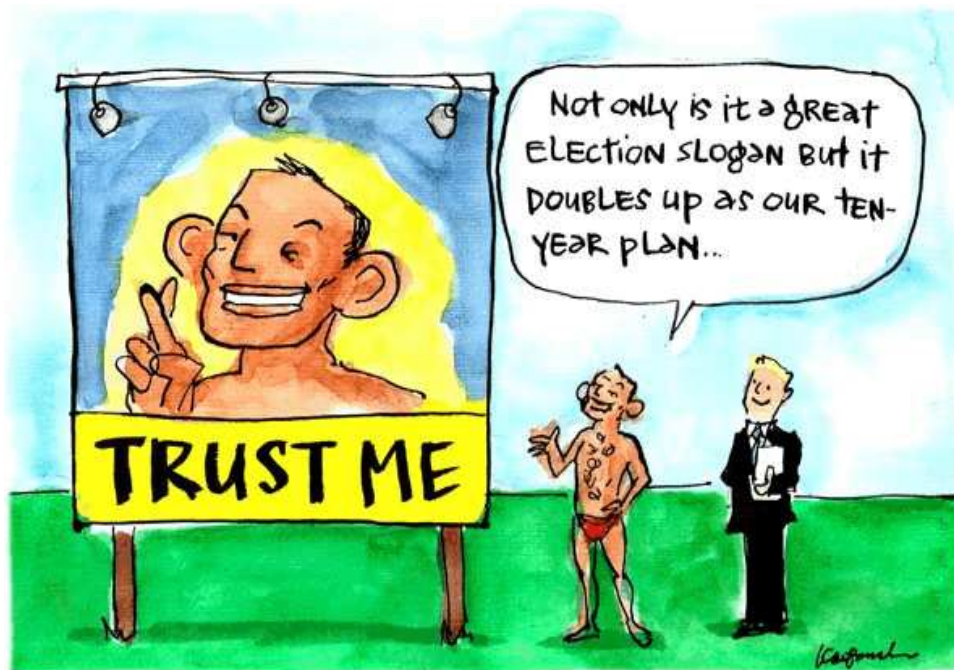
So when I suggested to you and Carmen that if you don't like any of the choices on offer it is still important to choose the least worst, I was not ignoring, and certainly not trying to excuse, the all-too-real imperfections and sometimes tawdry compromises of politics as we know it. I was just saying that that's what you have to start with if something good is to be achieved. Getting there may be a longer process than any of us would wish, but that is hardly a reason not to start.

If you want our politics to be better than we now experience it to be, I can only offer you this advice: vote!

Who can you trust?

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



21st century hermit

CREATIVE

David Lumsden

Hermit

He carried no phone
and sent no text.

He took holidays
but no photos,
downloaded no jpegs,
burned no CDs,
got no snapshots printed.

He maintained no blog.

He had no email address,
deleted no spam,
subscribed to no mailing lists,
unsubscribed from no mailing lists.

He downloaded no songs,
and ripped no music to mp3s.
He created no playlists.

He carried no camera or iPod.
He recharged no devices.
He never backed up.

Optics Before Dawn

Trees their own shadows,
lone cars test the streets.
colour seeps in like arousal,
or useless knowledge
filling the brain's catchment.

Trees stand in their own shapes and fidget;
dark stationary cars imperceptibly rust.
Colour like pain kicks in
at a certain intensity.
Shadows in photographs are wrong:
the world comes out too bright.

Flowers wait for water,
stagnant traffic dispersed in driveways.
Wet spots on road or fabric are darker.
The eye works tirelessly.
There are always thresholds.

Dawn's barrage
ignites the trees with detail.
Small birds chirp their barcodes.
We use yellow crayon for the sun
because shadows are illumined
by the clear sky's scattered blue.

Cosmã Tura: St Dominic, c.1475

The theme is those dry wrinkled hands,

The stark high-contrast folds of white
And dark cloth, how the knuckles glint,
An emaciating holy blight
Upon the spirit, one lean face
That pities all the world, he stands
Jointed in diamonds, in iron hurled,
To intercede between God's wrath
For Man, and iconise belief,
Minted in an abstract space.
The metallic backdrop of gold leaf
Makes it plain this is no scene
Of earth, or what earth can ordain.

The marks he made

In Florence a spirit had said clichés must go,
so he'd broken a toe off the left foot
of the David by Michelangelo.

And then there was that time in Prato:
in the darkened duomo he had added
with a marker to a Lippo Lippi fresco.

In Rome's Gallery of Modern Art
he used a marker again to attack
Jackson Pollock's 'Watery Paths'.

One man's war on abstraction: he'd planned
to wreck a Manzoni, but had found
one 'equally ugly' to damage.

Moved from prison to a psychiatric ward,
he's now on day release and has a job
working as an art museum guide.

Boost budget by chopping charities' tax take

ECONOMICS

David James



The prospect of a small drop in dividend imputation credits in the Coalition's paid parental leave proposal has caused great consternation.

Retirees, charities and other innocents were all going to suffer unnecessarily, it was claimed. The Coalition's 1.5 per cent levy on 3200 companies will not qualify for franking credits, meaning that shareholders would lose a portion of the tax breaks on their dividends.

This suggests two things. One is that, no matter how small or logical the change to the tax system, the objections will be loud and long.

This was evident when the Rudd government proposed to crack down on fringe benefits tax for cars, which was little more than saying: 'We will administer our own rules properly'. It set off a furore, which was as close as it is possible to get to a collective admission of guilt. The more people complained, the more obvious it was that the whole thing has become a rort. Imagine people having to prove that they use the cars for the purpose for which they claim to use them.

Secondly, it reveals by implication that Australia's company tax treatment should not just include the headline number. Business leaders are fond of claiming that company tax is 'unsustainable' at 30 per cent. Is that correct? 'Up to a point, Lord Copper' might be the reply, at least when it comes to Australia's big public corporations. The gross statistic does not include the effect of dividend imputation (franking), which is designed to stop 'double taxation'. Once company tax has been paid, it is not paid again by the investor on the dividends.

Australia is one of only a few countries in the world that has a franking credit system. If company tax has been paid on dividends, then those dividends are tax free in the hands of shareholders. It makes the profits paid out as dividends more valuable, after the effect of tax is taken into account.

According to economist Nicholas Gruen, the cost of imputation (franking) is about \$20 billion a year. That suggests, at least prima facie, that if dividend imputation was eliminated it would remove about two thirds of the current budget deficit. Or the savings could be used to reduce the company tax rate. Gruen argues it could be lowered to 19 per cent.

To show how imputation works, consider an example. If Telstra makes \$1 billion pre tax it is liable for tax of \$300 million. If it distributes 70 per cent of that profit to its shareholders they receive \$490 million. In most countries the dividend income is taxable in full. But not in Australia. The shareholders are deemed to have received the whole \$700m made up of cash of \$490m and \$210m of a tax

credit.

For conventional shareholders this just means the dividend money either attracts no tax or, for higher income earners, less tax. But for charities, not for profits and superannuation funds it is better again. Last year the Tax Commissioner generously refunded over \$500 million to charities and not for profits on dividends because they pay no tax.

That refund means that charities value dividend stocks higher than ...œnormal... shareholders. Instead of getting, say a dividend yield of about 5 per cent the refund means they get a gross return of about 7 per cent. That is considerably better than what you get from a term deposit. It has the effect of making these dividend paying stocks overly attractive, which distorts the market.

The picture is similar with super funds. They pay 15 per cent tax, half the company tax rate. That means they also get imputation credit refunds. Given that total superannuation funds are about \$1.4 trillion, equal to the value of shares in the Australian stock exchange, it is a sizeable bias in Australia's stock market. It greatly favours the high dividend paying big public companies, whose share prices are supported because their dividends are so tax advantaged.

The financial implications are large. According to one estimate, about \$1.65 billion in dividend imputation credits are paid to self managed super funds (SMSFs). This results in refunds of \$800 million from the ATO. Self managed super funds have about a third of the total superannuation assets. If that pattern is repeated across the whole sector, then over \$2 billion is paid to super funds as refunds. Add in the \$500 million for charities and not for profits and the figure gets closer to \$3 billion a year.

Why is the ATO paying out refunds of that size just because these entities have no, or a lower, tax rate? Dividend imputation was supposed to remove the double taxation of dividends. It was not supposed to be a double reward for entities that already have tax favoured status (sorry retirees, charities etc. etc.).

The ATO could stop paying refunds. It would be a less dramatic change than eliminating dividend imputation entirely. Charities, super funds and not-for-profits would still pay no tax, but they would not get an extra payment from the ATO. At a time when it is difficult find budgetary savings, it would seem to be a fairer way to improve the tax take.

There is another problem with dividend imputation. Australia does not get tax money from foreign investors who receive dividends. When Australian investors take dividends from overseas companies, they typically pay a withholding tax to the government of that foreign country (which is then used as a credit for Australian tax).

But the same does not apply the other way. The Australian Tax Office does not get any withholding tax from foreign investors because it is deemed to be

expunged by the dividend imputation credit (even though that credit has no meaning in the foreign country).

About two fifths of the Australian stock market is owned by foreign investors, mainly focused on the high dividend paying larger companies. This suggests Australia is missing out on considerable tax revenue from foreign investors as well. It is time for some greater scrutiny of our dividend imputation system.

So what should the political parties do about our dividend imputation system? Absolutely nothing of course. The effect on retirees, charities, etc. etc. would be unconscionable.

The distraction of red lines in Syria

INTERNATIONAL

Evan Ellis

Sleep.

You wake suddenly, disorientated. You're crying uncontrollably but not sad. Sprawling out of bed you notice your entire face is leaking.



The nose gushing, the mouth drooling, the eyes still crying. After a few unsteady steps, you bend over and start to heave. It's everywhere.

A few more steps and the rest of you splits open; your bladder and bowels give way. Chest constricting, you fling yourself forward. But by now your vision has started to blur, making it harder to see hallways, doorways, loved ones.

You know when you're on the floor though. You feel it as you thrash yourself about like a demoniac: heaving, wrenching, convulsing. And then you're not. You're still. Paralysed. Inevitably it comes.

Sleep.

Sarin gas was originally used for exterminating bugs before we realised we could turn it on our selves. The agent works by targeting the nervous system, blocking the important enzyme that allows our nerves to know when a bodily function has been carried out. James Hamblin from *The Atlantic* [explains](#) what happens when our body loses these 'off' switches. Because of its cruel effectiveness, even the Nazis balked at its military use, fearing a chemical retaliation from the Allies. However there is a growing body of [evidence](#) that the Assad regime used this or a similar agent in the Eastern suburbs of Damascus last Wednesday morning.

The evidence is strong, growing but not yet conclusive. World leaders still prefix their denunciations with the word 'alleged'. Also, while sarin is often tipped as the likely agent the available footage is [not](#) a perfect match for a sarin attack. A UN inspection team was actually staying in Damascus when the footage began to appear online. The Syrian Government has finally given in to significant international pressure to allow this team access to the site to determine conclusively whether it was a chemical weapon attack and what agent(s) were used. Even Russia, for whom Syria is a staunch ally and offers a unique strategic foothold in the Middle East, agreed on this.

This is about the only thing the veto carrying, permanent member on the Security Council supports. The UN seems [hobbled](#) by Security Council politicking, which is only intensifying pressure on Barrack Obama to do *something*. Diplomatic avenues, particular getting Russia (and China) to cut Assad loose should not be overlooked amongst all the talk of intervention.

However Obama backed himself into something of a corner when he said last year that the use of chemical weapons was ...œa red line... to rethinking military intervention in Syria. In fact this line was likely crossed before the recent alleged atrocity. As early as April of this year Miguel E. Rodriguez, assistant to the president and director of the Office of Legislative Affairs, could [write](#) to select senators that, 'Our intelligence community does assess with varying degrees of confidence that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons on a small scale in Syria, specifically the chemical agent sarin.'

His response, or lack thereof, has drawn criticism. Syrian journalist Hassan Hassan tweeted: "US experts discovered that the *red* colour is actually *pink*. #ObamaRedLines" Hawkish members of Congress are getting louder for armed intervention. The respected war writer Fred Kaplan [thinks](#) we're only weeks away from Obama reluctantly staging an aerial campaign modelled on the NATO intervention in Kosovo.

Maybe. However if you read through the [transcript](#) of Obama's most recent interview on this subject, it wouldn't be his first choice. The constitutional lawyer in him is nervous. Georgetown University professor Rosa Brooks has an [article](#) on why this might be. And it is clear Obama is conscious of the [nightmare](#) of Iraq, where the US suffered a lot for very little and most recently in Libya, where despite attempting to [lead from behind](#), still ended up with its personnel killed and strategic objectives slipping away.

Those who have accused the US of arrogance might actually be seeing a humbler foreign policy when he says, ...œsometimes what we've seen is that folks will call for immediate action, jumping into stuff, that does not turn out well, gets us mired in very difficult situations, can result in us being drawn into very expensive, difficult, costly interventions that actually breed more resentment in the region....

In some ways the intense focus on chemical weapons and red lines is diversionary. Granted, the truth of what happened in Damascus should be established. But what of the 100,000+ people who have been killed already? Is being gunned down in terror really that much preferable to being gassed to death? Is it somehow easier on the International Community's conscience to think of families being ripped apart by artillery shells than dying from chemical warfare? And what of the 1.9 million people who have already poured out of Syria into neighbouring countries, or the 4.25 million people have been displaced internally. Surely the destruction of human life and the misery inflicted is of paramount concern; how it is inflicted remains secondary.

Or in the 21st century is that the best our squabbling, fragmented international community can say. 'Kill as many as you like but only weapons from this approved list.' Heck, even the Hutus that participated in the Rwandan genocide sail under that low bar.

No. Enough blood has been spilt to paint a thousand red lines. The real question is would an intervention actually improve things? To answer in the affirmative you would have to prove (with reasonable certainty) that Assad can be toppled without wholesale destruction, identify what credible leadership will replace him, show how minorities will be safeguarded from reprisal attacks, outline a plan for sidelining the genuinely scary elements opposing Assad and ensure a potential influx of weapons wouldn't fall into the (many and open) wrong hands. In short, answer the question Gen. David Petraeus asked as another Middle Eastern country was falling apart: ...œTell me how this ends....

We are yet to have a convincing, comprehensive answer by any world leader. And the suffering continues.

A Martin Luther King dream for Australia

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

This week we celebrate one of the greatest milestones in the advancement of civil rights in the USA, Martin Luther King's August 1963 'I have a dream' [speech](#) . It is remembered for its arresting rhetoric, and also its vision for a future in which his children would 'not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character'.

The context was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at a time when opportunity was routinely denied to African Americans. The dream was that the right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' guaranteed to all Americans in the country's founding documents might indeed apply to all Americans regardless of skin colour. In a hopeful sign that dreams are rooted in reality, African Americans were progressively given opportunity and America now has its first black president.

King's words have implications for the human rights of people all over the world, in particular those who are guaranteed rights by a particular convention or declaration but denied them by the political masters of the day. In Australia in 2013, it is relevant to the rights guaranteed to asylum seekers by the 1951 Refugee Convention but denied by political leaders of the two major parties.

If King arrived by boat seeking asylum in Australia today, his vision might be for a future in which his children would not be judged by how they got here but by the content of their character. He would be faced with the denial of opportunity to work and live freely by the harsh rules that apply to asylum seekers, especially with the likely revival of temporary protection visas.

In America 50 years ago, many whites associated African Americans with crime and delinquency, and consequently the content of the character was assumed to be poor. In cases where the character of African Americans was poor, it was invariably a result of their having been denied opportunity. Without jobs and freedom, human beings tend to drift towards lives that are held back by petty crime and drug addiction.

It is no different with asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat. Some political leaders persist in using the erroneous term 'illegal' arrivals, and this encourages Australians who don't know any better to regard them as criminals who should not be given an opportunity to settle here. Without the opportunity to work or live freely, they suffer psychologically and they are indeed more likely to commit crime or suffer from drug addiction.

Asylum seekers dream of life in another country in which they can enjoy the rights that belong to them as human beings. Such dreams are in fact rooted in reality, as we know from the practice of previous decades when asylum seekers

arriving by boat from Indo China were judged not by how they got here but by the content of their character. Several decades on, the good character of the arrivals has produced better opportunity for all Australians, with a stronger economy and population diversity.

Australia's misplaced friendship with Turkey

AUSTRALIA

Peter Stanley



The NSW Parliament recently [passed](#) a resolution condemning the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman empire against its Assyrian, Pontic Greek and especially Armenian communities during the Great War.

The Turkish Consul-General in Sydney, the foreign ministry in Ankara and even the city council in *Å*anakkale (Gallipoli) immediately responded. They deny that the genocide had even occurred and have warned state parliamentarians that they will not be welcome in Turkey when the two nations commemorate the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign in 2015.

Australians unaware of the details might be surprised at the vehemence of the Turkish response. Aren't Turkey and Australia friends? Don't the Turks generously welcome Australian and New Zealand visitors to Gallipoli throughout the year but especially in April? What have we done to offend them?

The answer is that the parliamentarians have had the temerity to acknowledge the truth about one of the great crimes against humanity of the twentieth century. (Let's for the moment put aside the question of whether a parliament's view is even relevant. If the parliamentarians had resolved that the genocide had not happened it would still be an historical fact. But both Turks and Armenians regard legislative endorsement of their version of the past as scalps, and the Armenians are winning.)

Australians have been captivated by the Turkish narrative of Gallipoli. The Turkish nation has built around the campaign (in which they defeated a British (and Anzac) and French invasion of Turkish soil) a national epic of salvation. That Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the father of the modern Turkish nation, commanded some of its defenders makes Gallipoli part of Turkey's national founding myth. In this the two nations have something in common.

The problem is that the day before the 1915 invasion, the Ottoman empire, suspicious of its Armenian minority, embarked upon the systematic elimination of the empire's Armenian population. Impartial scholars accept that about a million-and-a-half of the empire's two million Armenians were killed directly or died of starvation and sickness over the next few years. Neutral missionaries and diplomats, and even Turkey's German allies witnessed and reported the massacres and deportations — as did Anzac prisoners of war.

The world was outraged at the time, and the surviving Armenian community, including a substantial Armenian diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, North America and Australia, has never forgotten it. Turkey, on the other hand, denies that genocide occurred, disputing its definition in international law or arguing that

while villagers may have been deported they died of incidental causes.

The NSW resolution disrupts the astoundingly successful charm offensive Turkey has conducted in Australia for years, fostering a positive relationship with Australia through the shared ordeal of Gallipoli. The NSW resolution, instigated by Australia's energetic Armenian National Council and promoted by the Christian Democrat MP Rev. Fred Nile (but also by the premier Barry O'Farrell), has upset Australia's acquiescence with Turkey's desire to emphasise the shared history of Gallipoli while eliminating any reference to the genocide.

You might argue that the Armenian genocide is remote from the Australian experience of the Great War. In fact, Australian troops (both prisoners of war and as combatants) encountered the genocide and its effects, and Australian civilians contributed vast amounts of money and time to the international relief effort mounted from 1915 and for years after. In effect, Australian troops in the Middle East were fighting to defeat a regime capable of state sponsored atrocity, just as Australia's forces in the Second World War were fighting to defeat the regime responsible for the Holocaust. The Armenian genocide is part of the story of the Great War, something to which Australians should not be blind, and certainly not blinded by Turkish denial.

The controversy obliges Australians to take sides. I am an impartial historian, having been convinced of the facts by the historical evidence. That claim makes me immediately suspect in Turkish eyes. I suppose I'll be banned as well. But having examined the evidence, I am co-writing a book on Australia and the Armenian genocide. As President of the recently-formed coalition [Honest History](#), dedicated to standing up for honesty in our relationship to the past, I cannot connive at the falsification of history.

Australia and Turkey are friends. But friends tell each other the truth. They don't react like children — 'if you say that you can't be my friend anymore!' Turkey's extraordinary response to the NSW parliamentarians will oblige Australians to choose between being a friend of Turkey or being a friend of the truth. I know which way I choose.