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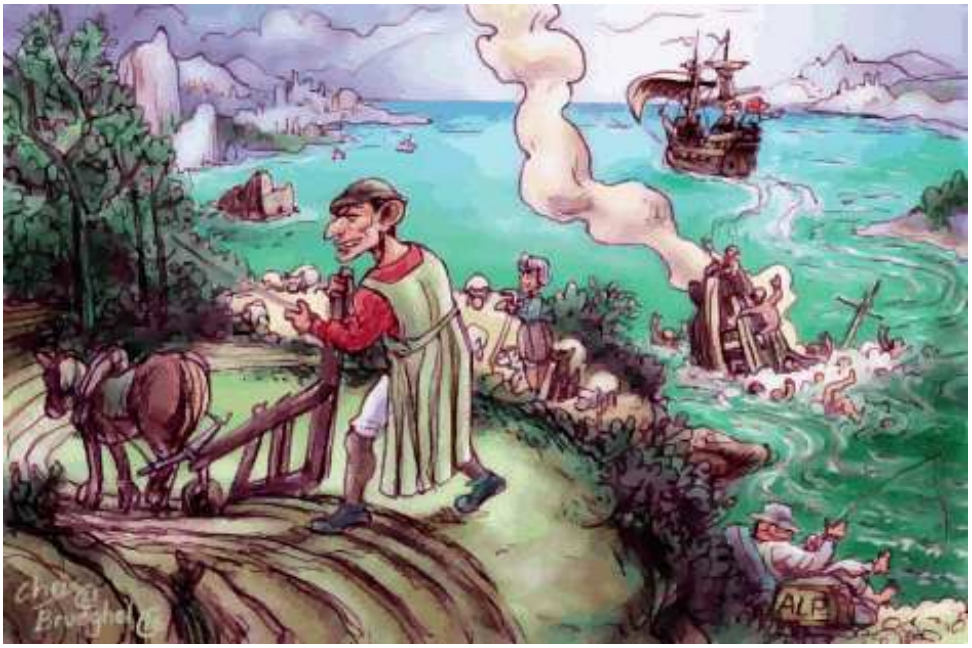

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Creation stories from inferno Australia

REVIEWS

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

***The Garden of Sorrows*, by John Hughes. UWA Publishing, 2013.**
Website

Barry

Fables evoke primary school memories of Aesop. Arrogant gods, grumpy critters and hapless mortals.

That nostalgic take, however, will not prepare you for the sophistication and intensity John Hughes infuses in the 'reverse fables' that populate *The Garden of Sorrows*.

The Garden proves to be fertile soil for both the writer and his partner in the sublime, acclaimed artist Marco Luccio, as they conjure creation stories that transpose the natural mythic order. Instead of attributing animal qualities to humans (Hughes suggests 'this is the natural origin of all fables'), this volume places the spotlight on each animal character's 'human qualities [and] the human it might become'.

Turnabout, Jen, is said to be fair play, but there is way too much bloodlust and passion in this re-imagining of 'Australia, the garden and the inferno' to be inordinately concerned with moral imperatives. Hence, *The Garden* is populated by the larger-than-strife figures who follow their lust of life and self. Kaos the crocodile, who becomes the first man, and Hades the platypus, the first thief. Orpheus the lyrebird, the first actor, and the first healer, possum Prometheus.

The giant red kangaroo, Knuckles, the first ruler; Karma the koala, the first farmer; and mighty Achilles the green ant, who becomes 'the first magician (or priest, or scientist, who could say?)'.

This is storytelling that exults in pain and primordial uncertainty. Primeval passion and purpose. It is also luxuriant prose and a wealth of imagery that doesn't, for me, lend itself to sustained perusal. Did you too, Jen, find it best embraced by chapters interspersed with reflection, space and caffeine?

Just as we punctuate our own lives with insights, duplicities, regrets etc., so too Hughes' all-too-human fauna are complex, emerging from 'the winter fog or the entrails of a beast'. The characters challenge us, via their mystical awareness or dislocation, to consider our own choices and goals.

Profundity on causality and consequence lurks in word and image. We learn from Spindle, a spider who 'had learnt to spin a web', yet 'no one had taught her how to walk across it'; and the last of the thylacines (read Mohicans), Torment, who, deceived into self-harm, found 'all nature turned to blade'.

Jen, I found myself delighted by incidental humour, such as Meta the mozzie tormenting an anonymous wombat and declaring 'I'm going to suck you dry' before Hughes borrows muddily from the tar baby of Uncle Remus; or the foolish emu, Echo, 'shaking her tail feathers' at a thieving goanna.

The Garden of Sorrows is also a visual feast. I found the purest joy to be the artwork of Marco Luccio, who modelled his arcane Australiana on zoological excursions. This work would not be out of place in graphic novels and explorations of the macabre, as suggested by the artist's acknowledgement of Hughes' 'powerful, wicked and inspired stories'. This is an absorbing but puzzling work.

Jen

What are we to make of *The Garden of Sorrows*? This earnest, lingering rendering of Aesop's Fables — with the solemnity of The Brothers Grimm and inventiveness of Roald Dahl — is respectfully mindful. Each story, skillfully retold and illustrated, had me in two worlds and two minds; troubled by the question: Who is this handsome book's intended audience?

As you write, Barry, these 'reverse fables' by author John Hughes 'cast us back to the flux at the beginning of the world ... in a state of formation, Australia, the garden and the inferno'. No wonder I sensed the ghost of Dante flitting between those well-crafted lines.

Hughes, himself, is not only a wordsmith, but something of a conjuror and alchemist, as the following passage from the turtle's fable 'The Making of Time' attests: 'We are all aggregate, alloyed and silicate, living mudstone ... I am myself mixed, she thought, with sea pebbles tossed up by the surf, with chalcedony, carnelian, crystallised gypsum, spar, quartz, chalk and even that black blood, through which living mater returns to stone.' Bravo.

While I gladly lost myself in the luxurious, gothic prose (even minus the assistance of caffeine, Barry), I share your delight chancing upon the inclusion of, if not outright humour, then an unexpected lightness and buoyancy.

What Hughes fashions with words, Luccio, renders in his evocatively charged etchings. You can see why artists are thought to have direct links to God; these line and charcoal etchings find a unique balance between the almost forensic precision of botanical art and the vivid, ethereal lucidity of a Michelangelo.

You're absolutely right Barry; there's much to digest and not just admire here. It's undeniably refreshing (not to mention gratifying) to see such an investment in the skills, talents and insights of a storyteller and illustrator. This is temerity not only writ large, but in hard-back and recycled stock.

Dubbing the fables 'New World stories' seems to me, however, wishful thinking. The truth is that modern society has moved on — rapidly. The world we now live in isn't only less tacit and tactile, it's markedly less fearless.

Is there room for *The Garden of Sorrows* on our book shelves? I hope so. A touch too dark and impenetrable for younger children, it's unfortunate that those for whom these stories could truly resonate are perhaps too preoccupied with iPads, smartphones and Miley Cyrus to venture into such a garden of possibilities.

Why miners will backflip on tax

AUSTRALIA

John Menadue

On 3 June I wrote in my blog that the large foreign owned mining companies in Australia may yet regret that they rejected out of hand the Resources Super Profits Tax (RSPT) that the Rudd Government proposed. Politically, the miners will never admit it, but I suspect that at some point the wiser heads among them will look again at a tax arrangement based on profit performance rather than royalty taxes that the states are now increasingly levying.

This is not to say the Rudd proposal was well handled. It was not. In particular the Rudd Government failed to involve the state governments whose budgets depend heavily on mining royalties. Quoting from a GST Distribution Review Report of October 2012, I pointed out that:

Well designed rent-based taxes are likely to be more economically efficient than royalties, particularly in periods of low commodity prices or high costs ... Other factors, such as the size, variability and timing of the return received by government, as well as administration and compliance costs are also important considerations when choosing between alternative resource charging regimes.

With the slow-down in the mining boom, and with lower commodity prices, states such as Queensland and Western Australia will look increasingly to mining royalties to help their difficult budgetary positions.

A clear trend is now apparent. The mining royalties of all the states have increased five-fold from about $2 billion in the early 2000s. And it is continuing. It is estimated that from October 2012 coal royalties in Queensland will raise an additional $1.6 billion over four years. The WA Government has lifted iron ore royalties by about 14 per cent since July 2013. This is expected to raise an additional $2 billion over three years. It is already clear that WA will need to look to more mining royalties to underpin its budget.

A feature of these increases in royalties is that they are deducted from the Minerals Resources Rent Tax. This tax has raised much less for the Commonwealth Government than expected. But in the political argy-bargy over Commonwealth mining taxes, the states have seized the opportunity to substantially increase mining royalties.

Some miners must be wondering whether they took the right course in opposing the RSPT, in which taxes are levied on the profitability of the enterprise rather than royalties based on the value of the output. Higher state mining royalties, lower commodity prices and higher costs will put the squeeze on the mining companies. It will be quite delicious to see them then urging a tax based on profits/losses rather than royalties.

The business community seems to have been similarly short-sighted. It was proposed that the company tax rate be reduced by 2 per cent as part of the package with the RSPT. The miners complained long and hard to defeat the RSPT, and effectively sidelined the business sector, which lost its tax reduction. This doesn't sound to me as if the business sector was looking after the interests of its members. The Business Council of Australia in particular was so inclined to barrack for Tony Abbott that it forgot to look after the interests of Australian companies.

Ways of knowing people in poverty

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

If we are fortunate in our circumstances, Anti-Poverty Week invites us to look beyond, at another less advantaged world. It also invites us to reflect on our own attitudes. In writing on poverty there is often tension between a hard-edged realism and spiritual or romantic fascination. The tension suggests that neither attitude is sufficient.

The fascination is fostered by many religious traditions in which the poor are blessed, and by a string of writers who have discovered a paradoxical value in poverty. Dostoevsky, Gorky, Steinbeck, Orwell and McCourt come to mind. If we are fascinated by poverty we may be tempted to soften its edges, to see it as ennobling and not as an indictment of the society that tolerates it. We become unrealistic.

When we look realistically at poverty we see the hunger, insecurity, deprivation of what society takes to be the normal things of life, humiliation and destructive ways of escaping that constitute the reality of poverty.

We also see the effects that these conditions can have on people: the stress they place on relationships, the disruption of education, the isolation, despair, addiction, physical and mental ill health, abusive relationships, exposure to violence and to the criminal justice system, and the lack of connection with society, which are often associated with poverty.

This analytical focus on poverty and its effects has its own temptation. It may lead us to see the poor as objects. Their human reality is defined by their experience of poverty. Whether they are the objects of our scorn or of our pity, they are still objects.

This objectification can be seen in the treatment of people caught in or fallen into poverty in the media. Almost invariably they are pictured with glum, sad faces, usually turned away from the camera. They are The Poor whose condition needs to be changed for them. They can then become the object of planning and condign intervention.

The proper starting point for reflecting on poverty must be the lives of people who are poor. Like other human beings, people who live in poverty are defined by their relationships with family, friends, to home, to food and shelter, neighbourhood, to school, to work, to play and to society. Their poverty limits their opportunity to build these relationships.

When we begin with people who are poor, we see them as defined, not by their poverty but by their humanity. We see them as people who will often surprise us by their resilience and their insatiable and often inarticulate desire to live fully. If

there is a joy in working with the poor, it lies in discovering and being humbled by the resilience, generosity and desire for goodness of people who have so few natural advantages.

This is perhaps the basis of the romantic fascination with poverty. People who live in poverty can be a surprising gift to those who come to know them. Those drawn to them can find deeper human relationships and can find their own superficial relationships to the world and to the others based on possession deeply challenged. They can find their shared humanity a matter for celebration.

If we associate with people who are poor we also notice that they usually suffer from institutional relationships that perpetuate and exacerbate their poverty. They have limited access to good medical care, to family support, to education, to transport and other services. They lack transport to work that might be available to them and cannot afford child care. Without support they, their partners and children will be caught in a continuing cycle of poverty. If we care for them we shall try to change these conditions.

As with other human conditions, poverty matters because people matter. And we sometimes only come to recognise that people matter when we discover a humanity deeper than our own in people who are poorer than us in intelligence, wealth, power, possessions education, skills and other things that matter only relatively. That discovery underlies the romanticism of poverty.

But when we recognise that people matter, poverty will also matter greatly. Certainly exceptional people raised in poverty can transcend it. But that does not entitle any society to neglect the many whose lives are crippled by it. That is why Anti-Poverty Week also matters.

Father Bob, dissident prophet

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

In Bob We Trust (PG). Director: Lynn-Maree Milburn. Starring: Bob Maguire, John Safran. 102 minutes

Pope Francis notwithstanding, Father Bob Maguire is the closest thing the Catholic Church in Australia has to a celebrity. His authentic manner and dedicated work with the homeless in the community surrounding his former parish, Saints Peter and Paul's in South Melbourne, over the course of decades, have earned him many admirers both within and outside the Church. His aptitude at engaging with the media and in recent years his regular Triple J radio show with John Safran, has earned him a deeply committed fanbase, especially among young Australians.

The cult-like nature of his following is acknowledged in the title of this documentary by Melbourne filmmaker Milburn, which follows Bob during the years following his forced retirement from Saint Peter and Paul's, and captures some of the community outrage at the decision, and Bob's own ultimately unsuccessful resistance to it.

Senior members of the hierarchy, including Denis Hart, the Archbishop of Melbourne who requested Fr Maguire's retirement, and George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, with whom Bob has had run-ins related to the clergy sexual abuse crisis, are cast as authoritarian villains against whom Bob the cage-rattling hero must rage. Hart and Pell are all but absent from the film, having declined to be interviewed, which frees Milburn to frame this as an unequivocal tribute to a man whom she clearly admires. She casts Bob as a prophet, and presents a compelling case for that description.

The film opens with a monologue in which Bob distills thousands of years of Judeo-Christian tradition into a single, gripping manifesto, explaining in profoundly casual language how Christianity grew from a grassroots movement based in grace and self-sacrifice into an institution concerned with power and wealth, steeped in clericalism, and susceptible to corruption. He recalls the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s as nothing less than a revolution, which sought to even out the Church's power structures and to open up a Church that had become stodgy and self-referential. The revolution, though, has since been stymied.

This monologue sets the tone for the film, as Bob takes the 'invitation' to retire as an example of the over-extension of power by the hierarchy, and a rejection of his outspoken manner and unconventional methods, regardless of his pastoral intentions. Bob here is cast in a similar mould to Peter Kennedy and Bill Morris, those other earthy Australian clerics who according to the popular narrative were suppressed by the hierarchy for flouting outdated practices while attempting to find ways to be more inclusive. This is an appealing narrative for a secular public

that has become disillusioned with institutional religion, especially due to the sexual abuse crisis and inequitable practices regarding marriage and the role of women within the hierarchy.

Whatever the rightness or otherwise of the Church's treatment of Bob, there is no questioning his passion for the poor, and his unshakeable belief that it is for the poor that Christians are called to work. He reflects at length on these matters, in his utterly compelling, laconic fashion, his monologues laced with irreverance, razor wit, and the kind of pithy, profound hyperbole that sits well with the 'prophet' label: 'You don't want to mess with the Roman Church ... You've got this clash of cultures between, "What would Jesus do?", and "What would the Roman Pope do?" ... It's a Roman phenomenon. They've got to find some mechanism for dealing with dissidence.'

A framing device in which Bob sits on a monochromatic beach, engaging in scripted conversation with a black-cowled Safran over a game of chess, is too contrived to be entirely successful. In one instance Bob recoils from the vision of a cross that appears in the sky above the horizon, gasping 'The devil!' The point, that he might associate this stylised, clean and straight-lined icon with the 'evils' of clericalism and power within the capital-C Church, is perhaps hammered home a little too heavily here.

But this moment does help to illuminate by contrast the ostensibly less pristine symbols that Bob discovers through his interactions with society's downtrodden; notably with Costas, a former street kid who wanders in and out of Bob's home and with whom Bob shares an easy, conversational intimacy, as fatherly as it is friendly. This subplot produces what are easily the film's most touching and profound moments, and reveal the depths of Bob's authenticity and compassion even more so than any of his compelling speeches.

For Bob, the clean, straight edges of that looming, luminous cross don't accurately reflect the authentic role of the church in this world. For him being a priest entails getting his hands dirty, giving everything of himself, and doing what he thinks is right, even if doing so upsets power structures; *especially* if it upsets power structures, if they have contributed to the plight of the downtrodden. That certainly sounds prophetic to me.

My accidental apathy

AUSTRALIA

Megan Graham

I'm ashamed to say that I almost never interact with poor people. I like to think that I care, that I humanise the issue in my mind, that I don't ignore it like so many do. But the truth is I am guilty of not caring — of failing to be touched by the humanity at the heart of the problem.

About a month ago I was invited to attend a screening of a documentary called *The Lucky Country*. A project of a single mother, the film was about the drastic cuts to the single parent payments made by the Labor Government earlier this year.

With little publicity other than a Facebook event page, it was shown to a group of around 50 people at a small cinema in St Kilda in Melbourne's inner south-east. It was produced with literally no budget, a triumph made possible through favours, hard work and the volunteered time of university film students.

After the screening, as I sat in the audience listening to the stories of those involved in the film's production, I felt immensely humbled. I was struck by how removed I am from this world of people who struggle to pay for things I don't give a second thought to.

A few months prior I'd watched an episode of ABC1's *Four Corners* called 'On the Brink', about Australians living on the poverty line. I've been unable to forget one scene in particular.

A woman struggling to support herself and her teenage daughter on Newstart payments was given a $60 supermarket gift card during an appointment at The Spiers Centre in WA. So relieved at the thought of being able to afford items like yoghurt and toilet paper, she cried with gratitude. Returning home, she told the reporter:

I got some toiletries for my daughter because normally I wouldn't be able to get it. I shouldn't have got it because that's that little bit of extra that I spend on, which I should maybe have got food. But just simple things like a decent deodorant for her, personal items, and a little treat of a spray for her.

I tried to imagine not being allowed my favourite deodorant — which all my friends had, too — when I was a teenager. It shocked me that this woman felt guilty not for splurging on designer shoes or indulging in a massage, but for spending a few extra dollars on basic toiletries for her daughter.

Despite a level of awareness that there are people in these situations, being exposed to the bare reality deals a cold dose of perspective.

While my middle-class contemporaries like to dub the inconveniences of modern

life 'First World Problems', we remain oblivious to the true extent of our privileged position.

As my memories of particular brushes with people living in poverty fade, feelings of empathy begin to lose their potency; a natural attrition when their reality, so distant from my own, is so lost among the 'First World Problems' of my inner city life.

What I am reminded of on a daily basis, however, are the mega-rich and famous. To the extent that those who are worse off remain hidden and separated, the comparatively small group (on a global scale) who are wealthier than myself are unendingly paraded before me in the media, creating an illusion of disadvantage which starves the seeds of empathy for the true 'have-nots'.

Christian activist and author Shane Claiborne wrote in his book *The Irresistible Revolution* that the real tragedy of poverty is not that his wealthier Christian contemporaries do not care about the poor, but that they do not know the poor. While socially aware Australians, many of them Christians, speak about the issue of economic disparity, all too often it's from a well-meaning but detached position that has limited ability to take effect beyond the confines of intellectual thought.

Forming opinions about compassionate responses, and even reading articles like this one, are unlikely to ever be enough. The issue too easily remains at a safe distance from one's reality. The tears, the blood, the human beings sick from undernourishment or stressed quite literally to death (via substance abuse, domestic violence or even a self-applied noose) all remain safely distant and out of reach of our deepest feelings.

In facing these realities directly, they become real enough to demand our deep care and attention. And only with deep care and attention do we stand a chance of achieving what needs to be achieved to close the gap threatening the spiritual health of us all.

Politicians' Catholic background

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin

Anger at the fact that Tony Abbott's cabinet includes only one woman has been displaced in media attention by the exclusion of senior Labor women such as Anna Burke and Jacinta Collins from leading roles in the Bill Shorten-led opposition. The gender balance, however, is not the only demographic change in the major parties. As Matt Wade reported in the Sydney Morning Herald last month, nearly half of the Abbott cabinet are 'of Catholic background'. That's roughly double the proportion — 25 per cent — of respondents to the last census who identified themselves as Catholics.

This is an historic shift. Australians who attended school in the 1960s and '70s, like the present writer, will remember that Catholics were then a rarity in Coalition cabinets and that the few who did make it, such as Phillip Lynch, had typically struggled to win Liberal preselection because of their religion. A sectarian divide between the parties persisted even after the Labor split of the 1950s severed what had once seemed a natural link between the ALP and the Catholic Church, and long after an earlier split had resulted in Joe Lyons becoming Australia's first Catholic prime minister, at the head a Coalition government.

Has that sectarian/partisan divide now been consigned to history, and with it the antagonisms it generated? The 1996 election, in which the John Howard-led Coalition defeated the Keating government, bringing Australia's longest continuous period of Labor rule to an end, was also the first federal poll in which more Catholics voted for the conservative parties than for Labor. The pendulum swung back in 1998, when Labor under Kim Beazley attracted slightly more than half of the Catholic vote, but it has been swinging ever since.

There is no longer a bloc Catholic vote, as there was before the 1955 split when more than 80 per cent of Catholics routinely voted Labor. The mere fact that someone is Catholic is no longer a broad hint about how that person votes. The shift Wade reports might, however, suggest where politically active Catholics are now more likely to be found.

As soon as the suggestion is made, however, it must be hedged with qualifications. First and most importantly, the phrase that gives Wade his statistical marker, 'of Catholic background', is an inexact one. It does not necessarily mean 'practising Catholic', nor is it a reliable guide to whether a person so described was raised by practising Catholics. Mostly it only tells us what kind of school that person went to.

The fact that nearly half the ministers in the Abbott cabinet are 'of Catholic background' is not an indicator of how they might vote on, say, same-sex marriage if the Coalition were to allow a free vote on a bill to legalise it, or on

Medicare funding of abortion in the unlikely event of that issue again becoming a matter of political contention. Nonetheless stories noting the disproportionate number of Coalition cabinet ministers who are 'of Catholic background' can almost be guaranteed a run in the mainstream media. Yet no one bothers to write that Labor's new leader is 'of Catholic background', even though Bill Shorten, like Tony Abbott, Joe Hockey, Christopher Pyne and Barnaby Joyce, is Jesuit-educated and, like the others, acknowledges this fact from time to time.

It may be that the press gallery sees no significance in Shorten's 'Catholic background' because he supports same-sex marriage and perhaps also some other things that bishops don't like. Is the gallery's view that his 'background' somehow didn't 'take'? If it is, that won't do either. Malcolm Turnbull, who although not 'of Catholic background' is certainly a Catholic (he is a convert), also supports same-sex marriage. The truth is that these days even being a practising Catholic, rather than the nebulous 'of Catholic background', conveys nothing about the course a politician will choose on issues of conscience.

So what, if anything, does the historic shift that Wade reports really mean? It tells us something about the success of Catholic schools, which over several generations have transformed the socio-economic status of Catholics in this country. In that sense, the vague 'of Catholic background' label is probably appropriate, for it was the increased affluence that Catholics attained through education, rather than the sectarian nature of the 1950s split, that really dissolved the ties that once bound the church so closely to Labor politics.

Catholic schools do not, however, purport to measure their achievements chiefly by the number of highly-paid professionals among their alumni. They strive to inculcate an ethical perspective informed by Catholic teaching. How that goal is understood and imparted has changed enormously in the decades since Vatican II, and mostly for the better. Those who remember the intellectual narrowness — and in some instances the blatantly partisan politics — of schools in the preconciliar church will not mourn the passing of that era. It is reasonable to ask, though, whether being 'of Catholic background' still 'takes' as much as those who teach in the schools might hope.

I am not referring to issues such as same-sex marriage, which a pluralist society ought to be able to accommodate alongside traditional understandings. If some Catholic politicians do not feel constrained to heed the advice of bishops on upholding existing marriage law, it is a sign of maturity, not of the imminent collapse of traditional marriage. There are other issues, however, on rivwhich a gulf separates anything resembling Catholic teaching from the stance taken by politicians 'of Catholic background' in both major parties.

In the recent federal election, that was glaringly the case with the policies Labor and the Coalition adopted on asylum seekers. Since boat arrivals became a matter of political contention in Australia more than two decades ago, every level of the official church — the popes, the Australian bishops, refugee agencies — has

condemned the political manipulation of xenophobia and urged Catholics to welcome those fleeing from persecution. Catholic schools have certainly echoed those calls, as the criticism of the Coalition's asylum-seeker policies by students at St Ignatius College, Riverview, eloquently testified. If politicians 'of Catholic background' felt shamed by such criticisms, however, they gave no sign.

When they were at school, they must have been taught what the Riverview students are evidently still taught. Why didn't it 'take'?

Notes against a closed-fist mind

CREATIVE

Peter Bakowski

Eulogy at sea

When a tree

is felled,

there's one tree less

for shelter, shade,

the holding of a bird's nest.

Now there are too many

rooms and conversations

to which you cannot add.

The way you moved and talked
are recalled,

but our gestures and inflections

are secondhand.

Lens and shutter

frame moments —

clothes worn,
places visited,

your repertoire of gazes,

but no one

can be fully known.

You were born,

you were alive,

directed by more than

the compass of your senses.

Let us not forget

our sometimes amazement

at living —

to have lain in summer grass,
alone
or with another,
looking up at the night sky,
trying to understand
galaxy after galaxy,
where each star
issues then bequeaths
its light.
Your body,
rendered into ashes,
can be held
in one cupped hand.
Marvel at this too
as the wind and sea
take you
away from
our mortal reach.

Some observations and a wish

for Ron Padgett

Time is lost more often than it's found.
Be wary of having too many intentions.
Make the rut you're in as uncomfortable as possible.
Don't dwell in dark places unless it's to gain empathy
for those who dwell in dark places.
No one is born with a conscience.
One person's misbehaviour is another person's missed behaviour.
Real progress will occur once we've turned dandruff into a fuel.
During your life the speed at which you remove your clothes may vary.
If pigs could fly, there'd be less bacon.

To ants, a twig is a battering ram.

May your mind resist the impulse to be a closed fist.

The next time you've got writer's block

Take a running scrawl at

what's in the room

or cornered in your heart.

Note

the veins of a leaf, the bank teller's fingernails,

what the people seated at the next cafÃ© table

are saying with their clothes, gestures and mouths.

Remember that you've got a vocabulary.

So have dictionaries, billboards, headlines and traffic policemen.

Words are in one era and out the other,

hiding in ambush amongst Scrabble tiles and crossword clues.

Let a few wander onto a black page.

See whether they react to each other.

If not audition some more.

Return to the circus arena

of being playful and daring,

balancing words on the tip of your nose
as you jump through flaming hoops

in rehearsal

for opening night in a new town,

far from where you've written before.

Australia's asylum seeker vergogna

INTERNATIONAL

Kerry Murphy

Over the last month, over 200 asylum seekers have drowned at sea on their voyage. If they had been intercepted while at sea, or made landfall, they would have been taken to an island for identification and screening. Those who were rescued were taken to the island. Once interviewed, they could wait some time before getting any residence.

What makes this story different to the Australian experience is the attitude of the receiving country. The asylum seekers were from several African countries and Syria. The rescuing and receiving country was Italy.

Italy is one of the major European countries that receives thousands of asylum seekers and irregular migrants by boat every year. The island of Lampadusa has become a first stop in the assessment process, then people are transferred to Sicily or the mainland of Italy. Permanent resettlement can take some time, but apart from the initial screening they are not detained. Nor are they sent to an impoverished developing country for resettlement.

In fact, when the deaths at sea were reported, the Italian Government announced a day of mourning, and some local towns had their own commemorative events. The Italian president called it a 'slaughter of innocents' and the Pope called it *vergogna* — shameful, or a disgrace — that so many people died at sea, and that the Navy and coastal services were unable to rescue them. Other small towns have openly welcomed the refugees.

In Australia, the Prime Minister and Immigration Minister refer to such people as 'illegal entrants'. They demonised them in opposition, and now proceed to punish then in government.

In Australia, an initial screening is done before the people are sent to Nauru — an impoverished Pacific island that is unable to care for its own people and is totally dependent on aid — or Papua New Guinea, a mostly undeveloped and traditional village culture lacking basic health and education services for its own people.

After the tragedy at Christmas Island in 2010, Scott Morrison criticised the then Labor Government for offering to pay for the travel costs of families of those who had lost relatives in the tragedy. He later stepped back slightly, saying his comments were right, but not their timing . In Italy, a state funeral for those who died will be held.

In the Australian scenario, those who help the people to travel are prosecuted and given mandatory prison sentences, regardless of their level of culpability. Free advice and legal services will be withdrawn, and the only visa the putative

refugees will get is a temporary protection visa, which means that for at least five years, they will not be able to sponsor their immediate family or travel to see their family in a third country.

Neither major party comes out of this very well. Deterrence from undertaking dangerous sea voyages was a dominant factor in the Labor policies, but the Coalition has added to this with punishment of the asylum seekers with the TPV and turn-back policies. Saving lives at sea is important, but it should not be tied to policies which emphasise punishment of people seeking protection.

We seem to forget that if the asylum seekers are successful in their claims, they are termed refugees; not illegals, irregular maritime arrivals, offshore entry persons or any of the other linguistic phrase that tends to obscure their stories of fear of persecution.

Italians are not necessarily more ethical than Australians, but certainly the attitude of their government and local officials is in stark contrast with our own. There are many Australians of good will who spend time and money to assist asylum seekers but it seems their good works are overshadowed by official attitudes of punishment and demonisation. Maybe that is our *vergogna*.

Prioritising homelessness

AUSTRALIA

Cec Shevels

Australia has been experiencing high levels of homelessness for more than a decade. Our country has also been experiencing a shortage of affordable housing during this period. There is an obvious connection between the two.

As a nation we attempt to capture the number of homeless people in the Census — not an easy task. In the 2006 Census, the number of homeless exceeded 100,000 for the first time. Then, newly appointed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described this number as a national disgrace and promised to cut the number in half by 2020.

The former Labor Government did have some achievements after 2006 — there was a fall in the number of rough sleepers and there was a welcome reduction in homelessness among Aboriginal people.

Yet by the time of the most recent census in 2011, the homeless numbers had risen again. At the 2011 census there were 105,200 homeless people across Australia and Aboriginal homelessness is still far too high.

It is challenging and disturbing that the most common pathway into adult homelessness is to be homeless as a child or young person. I find it shocking that we should allow this situation to continue.

One of the things I have learnt working in the welfare sector is just how similar we all are — we human beings. We can all be vulnerable to misfortune and suffering and we all have similar wants and needs.

The most common response I hear from disadvantaged people about what they want in life is that they would like what everyone else seems to have.

What we all need is opportunity. To love and be loved, to have meaningful work, somewhere to live and the chance to do well.

Young people who have had a disadvantaged start in life need to dream the dream, get qualified, get a job, get a motor bike or a car, find a partner, get married, have kids, help out at children's sports and so on. That's how you build a strong inclusive community, and that's a justice issue.

People want more from life than to be mere passive recipients of income security. Young people want to achieve their dream as a priority, just like people with disability; just like all of us.

I believe this yearning for 'something more' has seen a growing interest in spirituality over the past two decades in Australia. A spirituality revival appears to have emerged from the grassroots, rather than from organisations, religious or otherwise; it is often secular. I see it among the people we support as well as the

people who come to be part of the work in not-for-profit organisations.

One of the key components of an individual's spirituality appears to be the need for meaning and purpose in life.

We must make it our purpose to build this vision of community, to reach out to those who are left out, shut out because of unfairness, lack of opportunity, discrimination or prejudice.

As a social worker I am most encouraged by the surge of interest in human spirituality around the world. I believe the reality of human spirituality should underpin all social policy and all our social welfare programs.

While homelessness, both the issue and policy, is multifaceted, it can't be denied that a major problem facing all homeless people has been affordable housing. Our housing in Australia is very expensive.

We should expect a federal government to set a housing policy that is underpinned by social values, so that all of us can find somewhere to live in what continues to be a very affluent country.

Liberal MP Kevin Andrews recently said there was a shortfall of 230,000 dwellings in Australia, which will increase to 300,000 by 2020. Now that he is the Minister for Social Services, I wonder what he will do about this?

The reason neither party addressed the issues of homelessness and affordable housing during the recent election campaign is probably because the general public is not too concerned. But I believe we should be concerned, and we should say so. Our challenge to reduce homelessness in Australia is to ensure our country becomes a great place to live for absolutely everyone.

Canada shames Australia on CHOGM boycott

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

Canada's conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has put Australia to shame by confirming that his country will boycott next month's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sri Lanka over human rights concerns.

Canada has criticised the Commonwealth for 'accommodating evil' by allowing Sri Lanka to host the event, while Tony Abbott has said simply that 'different countries have different national priorities'.

After returning from a visit to Sri Lanka in August, UN human rights commissioner Navi Pillay expressed grave concern about the lack of accountability, unresolved enforced disappearances, and decreasing fundamental freedoms.

This prompted Human Rights Watch to urge Commonwealth heads to boycott CHOGM, with Asia director Brad Adams declaring Sri Lanka's government should be shunned — not rewarded — for failing to hold anyone accountable for war crimes during the country's recent conflict. 'Attending a summit in Sri Lanka so soon after the UN rights chief decried a worsening situation sends the wrong message to the government and to victims.'

Abbott made it clear that Australia has no intention of following the lead of his Canadian counterpart Stephen Harper. 'Look, I explained to him that I think the Commonwealth is important and that's why I'll be there. Obviously, Australia has some significant bilateral dealings with Sri Lanka over people smuggling as well.'

At least the Australian Government has come clean and admitted that it is conflicted. In saying we have 'different national priorities' to Canada, Abbott has conceded that securing and maintaining Sri Lanka's cooperation in our efforts to 'stop the boats' trumps using the leverage we have at this moment to try to persuade Sri Lanka to respect the human rights of its citizens.

As long as Sri Lanka refuses to respond to the concerns expressed by Pillay, Australian Government claims that Sri Lanka is safe enough for the return of asylum seekers from Australia will look as ridiculous as those of Iraqi information minister 'Comical Ali' when the fall of Saddam Hussein was imminent.

That is the impression given by Peter Arndt of the Brisbane Catholic Archdiocesan Justice and Peace Commission, who has just returned from a visit to Sri Lanka as part of a group of 30 Catholic justice and peace workers from across Asia and the Pacific. He said: 'It is outrageous that Mr Abbott is prepared to ignore the suffering and fear which is rife in the north of Sri Lanka in order to keep his commitment to stop the boats.'

Arndt suggested that the systematic way in which Tamil men are being arrested and detained indefinitely 'looks suspiciously like ethnic cleansing'. 'I wish Mr

Abbott could meet with the women I met whose husbands and sons have been detained, tortured and, in some cases, killed over the last four years. I wish he could have heard the pain in their voices and seen their tears.'

Perversely it seems Australia's vow to push ahead with CHOGM in Colombo is largely about mateship. The Commonwealth, Abbott says, is 'amongst our oldest international associations'.

'There is, I suppose, familiarity amongst members of the Commonwealth which doesn't always exist in every other forum and I think it's important that those friends we have, we should keep. You do not make new friends by rubbishing your old friends or abandoning your old friends.'

If mateship had prevailed during the apartheid era in South Africa, the apartheid regime might still be in place.

So much for Labor values

AUSTRALIA

Brian Toohey

Amid all the post-election talk about Labor values, no one within the party has explained how the appalling behaviour exposed by the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption could have occurred if senior figures took any notice of these supposedly cherished values. Few in the federal parliamentary party, in particular, seem to grasp the significance of what ICAC laid bare. In essence, ICAC set out how the party's biggest branch let one person, Eddie Obeid, gain control of a state government and use his influence to enrich himself and his family.

It is not credible that most NSW state and federal Labor MPs, and key officials, had no inkling of Obeid's behaviour while a backbencher or minister. These are people who usually pride themselves on having their finger on the political pulse. Yet we are expected to believe they missed the vibe around Obeid. There were solid grounds to suspect that Obeid was corrupt, but most of his colleagues did nothing about it. In effect, however, they tolerated these signs as another example of how Labor conducts politics in NSW. A decade ago, one senior figure told this writer on a non-attributable basis that he knew Obeid was corrupt, but ultimately lacked the backing to curtail his power.

Obeid rarely spoke in parliament and showed almost no interest in policy, preferring to build his power as boss of right wing factions until he could, and did, make or break premiers. His power derived partly from his ability to determine who won pre-selections by stacking branches with the help of a highly mobile band of Lebanese Maronite Christians. It also helped that he had conspicuous wealth at his disposal, despite his pecuniary interest statements claiming his sole source of income was his parliamentary salary.

Nor did it hurt that Labor's powerful state secretary in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Graham Richardson, was instrumental in Obeid gaining his seat in the Upper House, which he held for 20 years.

In July, ICAC found Obeid, former NSW Labor MP Ian Macdonald, and several wealthy businessmen, engaged in corrupt conduct in relation to a coal mining tenement covering rural properties owned by the Obeid family. The supposedly left wing Macdonald issued the lease while he was mines minister. ICAC said the Obeid family had received $30 million from this decision and stood to make more. Other ICAC inquiries into Obeid are underway.

In all this, Labor values were nowhere to be seen. Instead, Labor's modern deal making ethos allowed Macdonald to ignore tender processes and let the directors of the favoured company enter into an arrangement (now in jeopardy) to on-sell the licences for almost $500 million without engaging in any productive activity.

In a later report, ICAC made corrupt conduct findings against Macdonald, a former mining union official John Maitland and three businessmen over another lease worth tens of millions of dollars. ICAC also made corruption findings against Macdonald, businessman Ron Medich and his associate Rocky Gattellari, over inducements for Macdonald to arrange meetings with state energy executives. Richardson has worked as a lobbyist for Medich on other projects.

Labor's current NSW leader John Robertson recently revealed that six years ago he rejected an offer of a $3 million bribe from another Medich associate Michael McGurk to sell these two developers a holiday retreat for union members at Currawong Beach. Robertson, who was then head of Unions NSW, has failed to explain why he didn't refer the offer to the police or ICAC. In September, Medich pleaded not guilty to murdering McGurk in 2009. Gattellarri has already been sentenced for his part.

Obeid and Macdonald were clearly aspirational. Perhaps this helps explain why they rang few alarm bells among Labor insiders who insist the party should target the 'aspirational class'. Never mind that most people have aspirations, even if only to a life of quiet dignity. Moreover, Labor was originally set up to help workers who aspired to a better life. But some Labor MPs want to woo an aspirational class loosely defined as relatively well off people who yearn for more material wealth. Labor's former Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon seems to think it is an electoral imperative to not means test those with a family income of $5000 a week because they're 'still struggling'.

The catch cry is that Labor has to abandon old fashioned 'class warfare'. That's fine. Labor and the Coalition should govern for all Australians. But this doesn't mean all Australians should be entitled to budget handouts, especially well off retirees who can fend for themselves. Labor should maintain its earlier values that supported means testing — if it wants to run responsible budgets and fund areas that improve living standards such as better educational opportunities, more scientific research and efficient transport facilities.

Nor, in blunt electoral terms, should it forget that households 'struggling' on a disposable income of $5000 a week are in the top 2 per cent. Australian Bureau of Statistics data released in July showed that low-income households had an average weekly disposable income of $475 compared to $793 for middle-income households and $1814 for high-income households (the latter being in the top 20 percent).

If Labor wants to help those who really struggle to meet their aspirations, it should scrap compulsory superannuation. Perversely, this policy will force low-income earners to have a higher standard of living in retirement than while working and often stretched trying to raise a family. Paying the 12 per cent contributions rate as normal after-tax salary would increase real tax home pay for minimum wage earners by over $70 a week when it is fully phased-in.

Bill Shorten recently said he wants to be Labor leader and then 'the prime minister for the powerless'. Yet he wants to lift compulsory contributions to 15 per cent of salaries — giving the powerless even less power over their meagre incomes. Neither the Victorian based Shorten nor his leadership rival Anthony Albanese, who voted for Macdonald to have another term in the NSW upper house, have supported calls to set up a federal anti-corruption watchdog like the states have — despite the abundant opportunities for corruption at the federal level. Somewhere along the way, Labor values have been lost.

The Coalition and the mandate myth

AUSTRALIA

Max Atkinson

Since the Federal Election there has been much discussion of the idea that, because democracy means respecting the will of the people, elected members have a duty to support the government's 'mandate'. Accordingly, they need not inform themselves and act on their own judgment because the people have spoken. It would not have impressed Edmund Burke — the father of conservative political philosophy — who said this betrays, rather than serves, constituents.

Liberal Senator George Brandis supports the mandate theory. On *Q&A* for 9 September he said Labor has a duty to help repeal the carbon tax because 'it has got to respect the wishes of the majority'. As Attorney-General he is chief Government adviser on the law, including principles implicit in our system of government. Despite this, cynics might think he wants new senators to give Liberal bills an easy passage.

Public servants have a duty to obey the government; but although elected members are public officials they are not public servants. Like all citizens they must obey laws which give effect to policy, but there is no additional duty to assist the government to make laws and no duty not to repeal them.

The idea that popular opinion can impose a duty rests on a misunderstanding. It makes sense only from a sociological perspective, which sees morality through the eyes of someone describing the practice of a community of which he is not a member. From this standpoint we might agree that shared beliefs on moral issues constitute the morality — withholding our own opinion because we mean to clarify, not judge, their culture.

This detachment is not possible in ordinary moral disputes, where we appeal to values we see ourselves as sharing with others. When we argue from this 'internal' point of view we appeal to the values themselves, not the opinions others hold, or the interpretations they offer. In fact we appeal to these values to judge their opinions. Accordingly, when we say that a policy is unfair, or does more harm than good, we mean it *is* unfair or unwise, not that most people *think* it is; we mean this is what they *should* support and what the government *ought* to do.

The fact that Brandis thinks public opinion is itself a moral reason suggests a deep scepticism about values. The same might be said of Julie Bishop's criticism of Labor when it rejected Julia Gillard's policy on Palestine. It arguably explains John Howard's claim that the Iraq War was justified by the security and commercial benefits accruing from 'the alliance' — the idea that one might kill innocent people to further such interests is an abnegation of both international law and the values it stands for.

However that may be, we need to see how this idea of duty fits democratic

theory. The least controversial account rests on a surprisingly modest claim — the representatives of the majority have a stronger right to make the rules than others; whether their rules are wise or moral is a matter, not of counting opinions, but showing they accord with community values, including ideals of fairness which justify democracy.

In the same way, when people in public life speak of acting on principle they mean to assert the importance of values they see themselves as sharing with the community, which they believe support the policies they propose — as when Labor proposed the Gonski reforms and a national disability insurance scheme. The latter gained support from the Liberal Party and may become law; but its merit as a contribution to a just society does not depend on this support — nor would the fairness of Gonski be proved if Labor had won the election.

Finally, some might point to the current impasse in the US. Republicans, led by Tea Party members opposed to big government — especially the compulsory insurance of the Obama health care Act — are refusing to pass a money bill to fund the Administration; critics remind them the President has a mandate, confirmed by successive elections as well as an Act of Congress, which they have a duty to respect. This, surely, is a valid criticism.

The refusal is wrong, not because it rejects a mandate or a majority view on health policy, but because of the means used to force its repeal. To refuse supply compromises the ability to govern and to administer the countless welfare and social justice policies a President inherits, quite apart from the unfairness to public servants, inconvenience to the public, and serious risks to security and global financial stability. It is wrong for these reasons and the case they make that it subverts democracy.

There is no need for a further, dubious claim that public opinion has some mysterious moral authority.

University turning point

REVIEWS

Brian Matthews

Towards the end of my first year at Melbourne University — a time of exquisite confusion and crippling diffidence for me as I flailed from one to another of the four subjects I was tackling — I was given a book by an older student whom I greatly admired. The only way I could see to climb the mountain of difficulties my studies seemed to present was to work harder and so, as examinations loomed, I stayed back each evening and worked late in the university library. It was after one of these stints, over a cup of the 'caf's' execrable coffee, that my friend gave me the book.

'Don't read it on the tram going home,' he said, 'you might embarrass yourself.'

But I had a long journey ahead and of course I opened it the moment I sat down in the draughty middle section of the nearly empty tram. The book was S. J. Perelman's *Crazy Like a Fox* and my generous friend was Bruce Dawe. And I did embarrass myself because, within a page or so, I was laughing out loud and attracting the attention of the few late night travellers as they clattered home through the windy dark. Someone buckling with mirth was probably the last thing they needed.

Crazy Like a Fox is a collection of Perelman pieces mostly from the *New Yorker*. I opened the slim volume at random and began reading 'The Idol's Eye' — 'Four of us had cycled down from London together: Gossip Gabrilowitsch, the Polish pianist; Downey Couch, the Irish tenor; Frank Falcovsky, the Jewish prowler; and myself, Clay Modeling.' They are visiting Gabriel Snubbers at his villa, 'The Acacias', the west wing of which burns down as they arrive. As Clay Modeling notes, Snubbers' eyes 'were set in deep rolls of fat for our arrival'.

After 'a spot of whisky and soda' — 'Littlejohn, Snubbers' butler, brought in a spot of whisky on a piece of paper which we all examined with interest' — they listen to the story of how Snubbers' great-grandfather left Poona and, 'living almost entirely on cameo brooches and the few ptarmigan that fell to the ptrigger of his pfowlingpiece' at last reached 'Ishpeming, the Holy City of the Surds and Cosines'.

A vast, laconically displayed literary range of reference, a restless imagination, an insatiably curious mind and an unerring eye for the phony, the kitsch and the pretentious are ingredients of Perelman's genius. He described himself as 'a writer of what the French call *feuilletons* — that is, a writer of little leaves ... comic essays of a particular type', but he was also a storyteller. He could lure a reader with the deceptively self-deprecating tone and frank admission of the memoirist.

His piece on pulp fiction 'Somewhere a Roscoe ...' begins, 'About two years ago I was moody, discontented, restless, almost a character in a Russian novel.' Then,

picking up on the Russian novel reference, 'I used to lie on my bed for days drinking tea out of a glass (I was one of the first in this country to drink tea out of a glass; at that time fashionable people drank from their cupped hands).'

And then, the story: deciding he is stale and introspective, in need of 'new vistas', he acts decisively. 'I bustled about, threw some things into a bag — orange peel, apple cores and the like — and went out for a walk. A few minutes later I picked up from a park bench a tattered pulp magazine called *Spicy Detective* ... Talk about your turning points!'

Perelman has discovered the world of Dan Turner, lascivious detective, and his ever-ready roscoe, which spits its deadly bullets with a sharp 'Kachow' in 'Dark Star of Death', 'Brunette Bump-off', 'Find That Corpse' and other treasures, all of which he hilariously analyses.

In one of our late night talks, Bruce told me, 'If you're going to write, you have to write at least a hundred words every day.' He followed his own rule and produced *No Fixed Address*, his first volume of poetry, towards the end of that year. I reviewed it for a magazine called *Prospect* — my very first review. Another time Bruce gave me a venerable edition of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, introducing me to a kind of poetry I'd never before encountered. It sits on my shelf still, its ageless epitaphs every now and then re-read for this or that purpose.

But my Perelman encounter on the East Brighton tram was for me Bruce's masterstroke. By the time I had laughed my way to the terminus and stepped down into the warm dark, I felt released somehow from the weight and vague gloom that I had assumed was part of the student life.

I haven't seen Bruce for years, but I remember with affection his long-ago mentorship, and I salute his tremendous poetic achievements and well-deserved honours. I still try to write 'a hundred words a day', and my battered copy of *Crazy Like a Fox* has survived half a century of culls.

Talk about your turning points.

The boy scout guide to mental illness

AUSTRALIA

Michael Lockwood

Mental health is big business — very big business. I know — I'm an active client of the industry.

Mental health thrives on a classification system spelt out in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, now in its fifth edition (*DSM5*). Unlike guides to diagnosis in other specialties, the *DSM5* is completely focused on the symptoms experienced by the patient — two people could have a consultation with a psychiatrist and be diagnosed with precisely the same illness, irrespective of whether the underlying causes of their illness were poles apart.

As a handbook for clustering like symptoms with like symptoms, the *DSM5* is unrivalled. As a manual that gives us insight into the etiology of specific mental illnesses the manual is severely underdone.

What is amazing is that few among the experts seem nonplussed about this. The *DSM5*, introduced earlier this year, is primarily a diagnostic tool to ensure that like is treated as like, at least when it comes to symptoms. This is a critical part of the legitimacy of the psychiatric profession — we can't have psychiatrists disagreeing all the time on what illness a patient suffers — as well as being the bible for determining the appropriate bounds of medicinal, speaking therapy and other interventions.

In the 1970s the *DSM* listed homosexuality as a mental illness — something that both much of the research community and all the gay community disagreed with. In the stroke of an editorial pen hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, were cured by the declassification of homosexuality as an illness in the *DSM*. The *DSM* is a socially constructed manual, put together by those with a vested interest in mental health.

But what of the current *DSM*? Asperger's syndrome no longer exists, but is part of a spectrum of autism. Depression is expanded to include those down in the dumps for an extended time because of a death of a loved one. This is by and large good news for anyone who wants to match a client with a treatment — don't be too fazed by what is going on, simply look at the symptoms, get a classification and treat accordingly.

The truth is that our society is amazingly ignorant of the underlying causes of mental illness, and would seem not too interested in finding out more. I've been diagnosed with a major depressive disorder, melancholia — you can find it in the *DSM*. But my treating psychiatrist and I work together to find treatments — mostly drugs — to keep me in the realm of the sane. And it works about half of the time.

If the *DSM* came up with another name for my illness, I doubt that my consulting specialist would change course much. If pharmacological firms came up with a different treatment, that might be a different matter.

It is hard to get away from the idea that the *DSM5* and its predecessors are driving the medical health agenda. They are the bible and the faithful shall follow accordingly. But better skilled physicians can take the *DSM* for what it is — a useful but limited taxonomy seeking to group like symptoms with like.

There are two paths out of this impasse. The first is to insist on a *DSM* based on more than symptoms, on the underlying causes of mental illness. Given the state of knowledge, this is not likely to happen in my lifetime. The second is to have medical practitioners use the *DSM* for what it is — a boy scout guide to psychiatric illness — and use their professional judgment to play around on the boundaries of what might and might not work as a treatment.

Sadly, GPs by and large are not trained in this field of endeavor. Most rely on the imparted wisdom of the *DSM*, while psychiatrists present a broad field of those who faithfully follow the *DSM* and others, like mine, who use it as a rough and ready guide before getting down to the serious business of trying to understand what is going on in my head that makes me fit a category in the *DSM5*.

My best guess is that the *DSM* will phase through versions 6, 7 and 8 at the minimum before etiology precedes symptoms as the defining characteristic of illness. In the meantime we can complain about the deficiencies of this diagnostic tool, or seek out and support those physicians who see the *DSM* for what it is — a ready reckoner to get the ball rolling, but not the last word on mental illness.

Relationships key to mental illness treatment

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

Mental illness takes many forms and has many effects. One of its most painful effects touches both those who suffer from it and those who love them. People who are afflicted find it difficult to make deep connections with other people. They often withdraw into themselves. They need people to be there for them for the long haul, but their withdrawal into silence demands great understanding and endurance of their family, friends and carers if they are to stay close.

Although medical and psychological discoveries and better regulation have improved the treatment of mental illness in Australia, the need still outweighs the resources available. People with mental illnesses need others to help them build and develop relationships if they are to thrive. But the same trends that help the better treatment of people also tell against the crucial building of relationships.

The first trend has been to medicalise mental illness. This has had enormous benefits. It has encouraged researchers to identify chemical and genetic causes, and to find chemical ways of curing or lightening the illness. The lives of many people who suffer from mental illness have been greatly blessed. It has also lessened the stigma associated with mental illness by showing it to be understandable and open to cure.

But it has also increased the range of human discontents placed under the canopy of mental illness, and the expectation that these can be treated medically. This can lead to neglect of the curative and sustaining power of relationships from family and friends both in mental illness and in other conditions brought on by loss and trauma.

The second trend has been to commodify the response to it. The limited resources available to treat the mentally ill dictate a high level of efficiency so that as many people as possible might benefit. This demands that those working with the mentally ill account for the type of service they provide and the time spent on each person. This naturally leads them to focus on the material outcomes of each meeting and not on the quality of the personal engagement they have with their clients.

This trend allows more people to receive treatment, which can also be monitored. But it also makes it more likely that the human contact between people who provide the services and the people who are ill will be brief and focused on the service, not on the person who is ill. It makes it more difficult to build the trust necessary if the therapeutic relationship is to foster the connections of the mentally ill person with themselves and with others. Without support the patient may also be less likely to be faithful to medication, particularly if it has unpleasant side effects.

The third trend has been to criminalise the consequences of mental illness. Many mentally ill people neglect to take the medicine that holds their illness in check. They may then act violently or abusively. Others may become addicted to alcohol and other drugs, partly as a way of drowning out pain and loneliness. Their consequent anti-social behaviour, including violence and dealing drugs in order to sustain their addiction, brings them into the justice system, to criminal convictions and often to prison. That is why in prisons the proportion of people suffering mental illness is so high.

This trend is understandable and has some limited fringe benefits. In the absence of places where mental illness can be safely treated it responds to the demand made by society that people should be safe from violent and unpredictable behaviour. Prisons, too, may be relatively safe places where people may be provided with appropriate medication, and occasionally find help to deal with their illness.

But when the consequences of mental illness are criminalised, the stigma attaching to the mentally ill person is reinforced. Prison commonly diminishes people's self-respect and leaves them further isolated in a harsh environment. The relationships they need to nurture are diminished rather than enhanced. Imprisonment is not a favourable therapeutic environment. It also diminishes people's self-respect and isolates them further.

Mental Health Week is an occasion to recognise how, compared with 50 years ago, life has changed for the better for many people with mental illnesess. But it is also a reminder of how many people's lives are still blighted by mental illness. They would perhaps be cured were more resources available.

It is also a time to reflect on the importance of relationships in the lives and treatment of those who are mentally ill, and to value the care given by family and friends and in programs that are based on building relationships.

Laughing at Islam

RELIGION

Irfan Yusuf

When I was at uni, my best mate's girlfriend took me to a pub. She probably did it just to shock me. I was rather devout back in those days, and the idea of going to a place filled with beer and cigarette smoke wasn't exactly spiritually appealing.

The pub we went to was the Harold Park Hotel. There was a new comedy show playing. Two wisecracks named Peter Saleh and Anthony Mir calling themselves the 'All Aussie Are Boofta' show were performing. After the show, she told me: 'I wasn't sure whether to laugh or be disgusted. So I laughed.'

Peter (now known as Akmal) was of Egyptian heritage. I'm not sure what Anthony's heritage was. They poked fun at all things Arab, Lebanese etc. From taxi drivers to suicide bombers — nothing was sacred. The show ended with a battle of the toilet graffiti. Peter spoke of visiting a petrol station dunnie to take a slash. On the wall, some redneck had scrawled: 'F*cking Arab terrorists go back to F*ckistan'. Or something like that. Below this in kindergarten-capitals, a 'fresh-of-the-boat' cabbie from Bankstown responded with 'ALL AUSSIE ARE BOOFTA'.

It wasn't terribly sophisticated. A purist might say it was racist. But it sure made the audience laugh. Including me. This was more than just 'Shuddupayerface' ethnic humour. Arabs and Anglos could laugh together at themselves and each other. Everyone could see that conventional fears were about as much of a threat as the on-stage gags.

It's all good and fine to respond to prejudice by marching through the streets or penning a pompous and outraged op-ed for fine publications like this one (God knows, I've done both). But perhaps the most effective and most difficult ways to tackle prejudice and fear is to laugh at it. And to get both potential racists and potential victims (two interchangeable categories of people) to laugh with you.

These days, people are scared shitless of suicide terrorism. Australia hasn't had suicide bombers attacking its churches as has been the case in Pakistan. Mother England has. London's home-grown 7/7 bombers targetted its public transport system, killing over 50 people. Pundits and politicians railed against Muslims, terrorists, Pakistanis, converts, etc.

The Daily Mail had a daily field day. *The Guardian* pumped out plenty of opinion pieces from self-styled Muslim spokespeople responding to the latest attempt at collective blame by some MP. Evangelists and evangelical atheists were weighing in on the discussion. Self-styled ex-terrorist terrorism experts were writing books and setting up thinktanks and making a fortune.

It's the kind of circus a satirist like Chris Morris would thrive on. His film *Four Lions* was based on three years of researching terror cells and speaking to imams, law enforcement officials and academic experts. According to Dr Imed Labidi of the University of Minnesota:

Unlike official profiles and the claims of political discourse in the United Kingdom and the United States which ... produced a 'regime of truth' about terrorists as maliciously intelligent, meticulously organised, highly calculated, well trained, extremely dangerous, blindly faithful to their radical doctrines and irrational ideologies, Morris' terrorists up end these truisms. They are the antithesis, the antiheros, and the opposite of terror suspects' official profiles ... Morris' dark humor aims at debunking terrorism as an inevitable, imminent, and almost unstoppable threat.

'What academic hogwash,' I hear some of you say. We all know that 'all terrorists are the product of an imaginary universal Islamic radicalism and Al Qaeda, the mysterious and supposedly sophisticated international terror network that operates out of caves and deserted faraway lands'. That's why we are docile enough to accept intrusive laws that eat away at our civil liberties. Surely terrorists aren't morons manipulated by smart masterminds that would never send their own kids out on a mission.

Here's Dr Labidi again:

Two of the film's characters ... could easily be standins for captured airline terror suspects Richard Reid, known as the shoe bomber, and Umar Faruk Adulmutalib, who concealed explosives in his underpants and burned himself before he was discovered. They each, characters and real life terrorists alike, proved that the official discourse on who jihadists are can be opposite of expectations.

In Australia, our fear of Islamist terrorism extends to paranoia about Catholic and Hindu Tamil and Christian and Bahai Iranian boat people. The irrationality of these fears is real, even if they at times sound ridiculous. If they weren't real, there is no way Fiona Scott would have become Member for Lindsay after her laughable remarks blaming asylum seekers for the state of the traffic.

Asylum seekers are just one of the subjects covered by Australian tax consultant turned satirist and comic Nazeem Hussain in his SBS series *Legally Brown*. Hussain is one half of the comedy duo Fear Of A Brown Planet and appeared in the Australian version of skit comedy show *Balls of Steel* as investigative reporter Calvin Khan.

The show features a combination of stand-up and skits which do more than just poke fun. But not all will find Hussain's humour a blast. Writing in *The Australian*, Chris Kenny objected to Hussain's appearance on *Q&A* which Kenny described as 'highly disturbing and dangerous' and 'an apologia for terrorism'.

As an editorial writer, Kenny spends much of his time manufacturing the conventional fears that push the likes of Hussain to resort to such extremes of comedy. Kenny pontificates: 'If this is the message we get from a young, modern and moderate Muslim Australian, then we all have a lot of work to do.' And if this is the best allegedly conservative pundits have to offer, Hussain and his fans continue to have plenty to laugh about.

Remote Australia's renal refugees

AUSTRALIA

John Adams

Kiwirrkurra is 700km of bad roads west of Alice Springs. I have been visiting the community during the last 12 months, as part of my work with a leading social services organisation. Its senior community members talk about the need to show the young men how to behave with their partners and families, and how to put their community first; how older men need to take these younger men out to country, sit down with them and share this hard fought wisdom.

Old people on remote communities are the glue that keeps them strong. They negotiate cultural and contemporary life in these places. When they pass away, the community suffers a tangible loss. The community becomes more chaotic. The emotional wellbeing of the whole community is destabilised.

Kiwirrkurra has lost a lot of its old people to renal failure either by death or distance. Renal failure, too, forces many women and men from their important roles. Many choose not to make the journey to Alice Springs for dialysis, seeing life away from country and family to be a fate worse than death.

Often people with renal failure don't come to town alone; many family members accompany them. This sense of family has both positives and negatives. The tight-knit family will add homelessness to its woes in overcrowded accommodation in Alice Springs. However they feel it is better to suffer together than in isolation.

Life on dialysis is tough. You are tied to the machine three days a week for five hours at a time. You feel tired and sick. The machine is an assault on your body, trying to do in a few hours what healthy kidneys do all the time.

These conversations have become more urgent recently because more and more older people are being told they have to go to Alice Springs to be put on the machine.

This is one of the ways the system fails these people. The Mandarins in governments of all colours calculate the cost of dialysis in term of cost to their individual departments, not across government. In Central Australia the cost of one dialysis patient coming to town is multiplied by the added burden to housing infrastructure in regional centres, increased health costs for family members accompanying the patients, increased law and order issues resulting from overcrowding and moving people from their traditional land.

Really they are issues that are faced by any population forced to become refugees. These people are refugees as they are essentially forcibly removed from their land to either stay alive or maintain family bonds and look after the person with renal failure. Politicians seem unwilling or lacking in courage to see these issues more broadly than their department or personal career ascendances, failing

both the individual and broader Australian community.

I have been with many visitors to the 'Purple House' in Alice Spring impressed by the great work they do there. My partner has been the CEO there for a decade and in that time I have got to know many exceptionally strong Pintupi people fighting to get there people back to country. An Aboriginal community controlled health service, they began with an auction of paintings at the Art Gallery of NSW 13 years ago. They raised over $1 million.

Their aim was to improve life for dialysis patients and to return people home to participate in community life. Their name, Western Desert *Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku* — 'Keeping all our families well' — recognises that if people are forced to leave their communities to access dialysis treatment, not only are they sick and homesick, but their communities are lessened too.

They deliver dialysis in Alice and in remote communities, currently Kintore, Lajamanu, Hermannsburg and Yuendumu. They are working hard, with little government support, to establish dialysis in Kiwirrkurra and Warburton. They take a holistic view of health and community. This is at odds with the corporate business of health care provision. But this is an issue of social justice not only for the people with failing kidneys but also for the communities they leave behind.

Jesuit Social Services are in this space also, working with the Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation in Santa Teresa and Western Desert *Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku* Aboriginal Corporation to achieve nurse assisted dialysis in Santa Teresa. This has been promised twice now by government, but with the recent change in government, service agreements are yet to be seen.

Another exciting capacity building-project for both Jesuit Social Services and Western Desert *Nganampa Walytja Palyantjaku Tjutaku* is the development of a consumer group giving people in the territory on dialysis a voice so they can advocate for themselves.

Our society grapples with significant moral issues regarding refugees and climate change in the mainstream media on a daily basis. I see Aboriginal peoples access to country in a similar way. Ceremony is often connected to geographical locations and this ceremony is vital to the passing down of knowledge to future generations. It is a moral question for all Australians how we value the beliefs and customs of First Australians.

Are they worth being inconvenienced for? Do we value this culture highly enough? Do we possess enough courage to make a stand in solidarity with Aboriginal people, valuing their connection with land and their right to live in ways consistent with their beliefs?

The ethics of giving service

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

Alice Johnson

In a contemporary society where the focus lies amid a whirlpool of egocentricity, self-gain and self-improvement, one must question where the true motive for giving service lies, and as a result what defines ethical service giving. Service giving in the interest of personal gain has become an increasingly popular outlook on assisting the needy in contemporary society. Conversely, Immanuel Kant might have approached the issue through the paradigm of the ethic of duty, quoting 'duty for duty's sake'. While the 'ethic of duty' is the ethic of the social gospel movements, Kant believed that religion was only valuable as it caused one to lead a good moral life. Thus it is possible to argue that the habit of giving true service lies in the 'ethic of love', which is more in line with Christian humanist values than the former.

'Determining Volunteer Motivations — A Key to Success', a study conducted by Michigan State University, sought to determine the motivations of volunteers, producing eight categorised sources of motivation. In a disparate study, when questioned as to their motivations for participation in international volunteer projects, an overwhelming majority of respondents' motivations lay within the categories of 'to achieve personal growth and enhanced self-esteem, to gain professional experience' and, finally, 'to give something back'. A shifted purpose becomes evident within contemporary volunteering. More frequently individuals seek to involve themselves in volunteer opportunities because of the personal gain, rather than the fundamental 'to help others'.

An article in the May 1988 issue of *American Health* magazine described a study in Michigan that showed that regular volunteer work increases life expectancy. Adam Jamal and Harvey McKinnon's 'The Power of Giving' discusses how 'giving back enriches us all', explaining the individual benefits of volunteering in terms of self-fulfilment and assisting others. While the study balances both interests, many modern day investigations do not, pushing motivations to the self-centred end of the spectrum, where volunteers now expect to receive new friendships, improved health and a feeling of security from service giving. Author Hugh Mackay explored this concept in *The Good Life*, stating, 'as soon as you start wondering if you are going to benefit from being ... kind at some cost to yourself, the whole idea ... has slipped from your grasp'. Mackay explains that giving only in order to receive is not ethical service giving, promoting the close study of what defines ethical volunteering and what ethics apply to giving service in the contemporary era.

Kant's ethics of duty can be applied to service to produce the statement: it is the duty of the privileged in society to assist the underprivileged through giving service. This philosophy utilises duty as the primary motivation for giving service. For Kant, the morally important factor was not the consequences of an action but

the thoughts that preceded it. His philosophy placed emphasis on the 'good will,' where the will was the immaterial and uniquely human power of rational moral choice. The Stanford University study, 'The Good Will', by Allen Wood, reveals that Kant believed a good action is truly good if performed 'solely from the thought that duty requires it' and not from inclination. Applying this to service learning suggests that service carried out only through duty is true service. In the Metaphysics of Morals Kant discusses this belief in the context of the duty citizens have towards their fellow citizens, which expresses an individual's sense of justice. The model suggests that service should be carried out because of an awareness that is a necessary occurrence which allows society to function as a successful community.

While Kantian moral theory can foster an understanding of ethical service giving, Christian values argue that this is neither a holistic view nor the morally correct approach to assisting the needy. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount could be considered a preview of Christian living within the new creation, identifying the ways in which followers of Jesus should behave as a result of their acceptance of God. Through the Beatitudes Jesus explained that truly fortunate people are those who are not materially rich, but rather spiritually rich. In Matthew 5:7, 'blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy', Jesus stresses that the quest for material prosperity is misguided, and human fulfilment is found in being responsive to the needs of others just as Jesus was. He goes on to radically redefine Christian morals in Matthew 5:44 with 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' and Mark 12:31, 'love your neighbour as yourself'.

Showing mercy to others includes both forgiveness and compassion, and occurs in the lives of Christians as a result of the mercy they have received from God; they learned to show mercy to others because they were shown mercy. It is important to respond accurately to this aspect of the Christian values system, as explained by Australian theologian Bruce Kaye, 'Christianity is about following Jesus Christ as a disciple and that implies some clear patterns of behaviour.' Charitable works, as a result, should not be carried out simply because you believe that God will reward you for your good behaviour, as this model of personal philosophy holds the core belief that 'it is by grace you have been saved, through faith ... not by works', (Ephesians 2:8-9) in ignorance and instead regresses back toward Medieval archetypes. Nor can service giving cannot be regarded as the purpose of the Christian faith, but rather a by-product that occurs when one fully adopts the Christian system of ethics.

Ethical Volunteering is an organisation that seeks to preserve the integrity of international volunteering by connecting individuals with organisations that carry out volunteering with honest intentions and protecting them from those that exploit both the volunteer and the recipient's expectations. The organisation, started by Dr Kate Simpson in 1998, is an example of one of many groups recognising the importance of maintaining ethical volunteering in an era where society most needs the influence of charitable works. Service based on an

inaccurate or negative ethical system of thought results in the exploitation of volunteer organisations and even those they are working to assist, as people strive to benefit only themselves through the experience.

The value of the Christian ethical system is proven in one aspect when applied practically to volunteering. Following the Christian ethic of love defined by Mark 12:31, 'love your neighbour as you love yourself', service becomes an act carried out through the belief that all people are deserving of what the affluent in society have. Volunteers motivated in this manner are deemed to hold humane values at the core of their actions, through a strong concern for the welfare of others. Rather than a selfish or misguided motivation for service giving, the Christian humanist tradition of caring for the needy promotes ethical service giving which has love for one's neighbours at its heart. As a result, ethical service giving could be redefined by Christian tradition as service carried out primarily, if not solely, for the benefit of others, rather than with concern for the benefit of or the costs to oneself.

Humane values could be characterised by a strong concern for human welfare. The moral path of giving service out of duty popularised by Immanuel Kant is not aligned with humane values as it promotes charity only through the mandate of one's duty in society. Similarly, service carried out for personal benefit is not aligned with humane values, as it concerned only with personal gain, regardless of any exploitation of others that may ensue. This practice promotes service as a mechanism for amassing personal wealth, status and success and could even be said to contradict the original purpose of service, and could be likened with becoming a doctor with only the possibility of great personal wealth in mind and no concern for the healing of others. In contrast, the paradigm of human values allows the conclusion that the most ethical way to give service is out of love, a practice defined most clearly in history by Christian humanist traditions and the ministry of Jesus. Author Hugh Mackay explained this moral outlook in The Good Life as 'the good life is one defined by our capacity for selflessness, the quality of our relationships and our willingness to connect with others in a useful way'. In his ministry for Jesus, Saint Ignatius of Loyola defined this principle, 'teach us to give and not to count the cost'. Perhaps the concerns of contemporary society would have him redefine this as 'teach us to give and not to count the cost, or the gain'.

Warm fuzzy flipside to a fidgety control freak

CREATIVE

Brian Doyle

One reason we invented the poem

is to try to say what can't be said

For many years I worked for a man who drove me stark raving mad.
He was the worst meticulous fussy fidgety perfectionist control freak
In the history of human beings. He would rather that things were way
Late than that they were done with any hint of a mistake. We did not
See eye to eye about this, or much else. Yet no one cared more about
The work we did, and what it meant. He was subject to fits of temper,
And you never met a gentler man. He held grudges, and was the soul
Of mercy beyond sense and reason. He was a pacifist who had earned
A Bronze Star in a war. He was the worst manager I ever saw and the
Best employee. He had been a quiet drunk and when he realised he'd
Damage his new children he stopped and never took another sip. Lots
Of people knew him and no one knew him well. He wouldn't allow it.
Yet he wept easily when he was moved, which he was every amazed
Day, usually by something having to do with a child. He was so close
With his emotions that you wanted to scream but no one was courtlier.
He took his faith so seriously that no one was ever more furious about
Its crimes and lies and greed for money and power. He retired at dawn
This morning. He cleaned out his office and went home and sent email
To a few people. Even his leaving was meticulously controlled so that
No one could say farewell or tell him they admired him; I have to grin
At the sheer consistency of that. But one reason we invented the poem
Is to try to say what cannot be said, and what I want to say is that I am
So thankful for your honesty, your integrity, your patient commitment
To work that in the end was about the holiness of tall children. I won't
Forget that, as long as I live. It would have been cool to tell you that in

Person but you won't allow that, you brilliant oddity, so here's a poem.

A whopping poem

Need not be *gargantuan*, though, know what I mean?
It could be epic while remaining lean; terse and huge
At once, if we find the right subject. A child's defiant
Grace under duress, her adamant laughter, his tireless
Courage without the slightest reason to be brave. She
Has a bone marrow transplant today. He is once again
All too familiar with the murmur of the infusion room.
We don't talk about this much because it's just too big.
We just can't handle kids suffering — they're too small,
I think. You want to hear something huge, though? Go
Listen to a nurse or a teacher in the humming corridors
Of the floors with the most pain. They'll tell you some
Whopping stories and they only use a few small words.

Te absolvo

Of course we remember everything that ever happened to us.
Sure we do. We can easily make a concerted effort to forget,
And successfully forget from Levels One through Eight, but
You remember, somehow — at the cellular or molecular level
Perhaps, where shame and embarrassment are in cold storage.
The things you most want to forget are the things you cannot.
You can say, as I have, that you have no memory of that evil
Minute when you lied or cheated or dodged responsibility or
Worst of all pinned it on someone else; but of course you do.
One sweet thing about being Catholic is that you can politely
Ask for forgiveness, and be *granted* forgiveness — I mean, *te*
Absolvo, aren't those the two most terse glorious words ever?
But the crucial part of the sacrament that we don't talk about
Is the next part, the part after you leave the church. You walk

To the river and while you are pretending to watch for herons
You envision each person against whose holiness you did sin,
And to each you apologise, and ask for forgiveness. Some of
Them are long gone from this world but not from the Infinite
Mercy who remembers all levels and forgetteth not a sparrow.
You are absolved not when a man says so but when you have
Asked, with every fiber of your being, to be forgiven, to walk
Home clean, to start again, to be *possible*. What we really ask
For in the sacrament of reconciliation is to be a question mark
Again, to be a verb, to be not what we did but what we might
Yet be able to do; a map of the unknown, an unfinished song.

Miraculum

One day years ago a very small child said to me,
Quietly but firmly, *you are not listening to what*
I am saying, and ever after I have been trying to.
I bent down, that time, feeling shame, but it was
Too late. Words and miracles are swift and rude
And sometimes words are the flags or tendrils of
Miracles. I find that stories often have doors and
Windows through which you can see the miracle.
Miracles in my experience are not naked, and do
Not arrive with trumpet flourishes, and announce
Themselves, and register with the local authority,
Religious or civil. Miracles are in general uncivil,
In fact. Quite often they are an unholy holy mess;
The girl in the first line of the poem, for example.
I saw her arrive wetly in this world: *what* a mess!
Yet the miracle is inarguable. Many words apply,
Like *cellular mitosis*, but they're only drapery on
That which seems normal but is of course miracle.

Though, wait, there *are* naked miracles — *she* was.

Five poems

Well, we have already established expectations, just from the title
Of the poem, we have set them out like tent stakes, but, you know,
There's only you and me here, so let's sneak away and have some
Fun with it and see what happens. For a while let's make the poem
About five beers, or bears. Or five brothers, or five round abbesses.
What if we give the abbesses the beer, and ask them about courage?
Don't you think they would have some piercing things to say? Who
Needs five whole poems across, say, three pages, when you can say
To the abbess, Mother, speak to me of grace and mercy and humour?
I bet all the poems ever written aren't able to catch all she could say.
We forget this about poems. They're so good at catching a big story
In a few lines, or hinting at a thousand stories as they slide past one,
That we forget they are little things, and stories are bigger and older
And wilder than we could catch in a million years. Poems are lovely
Conversational sparks, though. You can go anywhere inside a poem,
Say anything, break all rules, as long as you hint at something huge;
Something you and the reader know full well between you but never
Get to say, much. Like the whole thing with the abbess. I know: let's
Take the rest of the afternoon, and all the space we would have given
The next four poems, and sit with the abbess, and talk of these things.
That will be an afternoon beautifully spent, with four poems to spare.

The forgotten Nationals

AUSTRALIA

John Warhurst

The Nationals are the forgotten party. After a successful federal election they are nestled in a comfortable governing relationship as the junior partner of the Liberals. They can laugh at all those critics who for so long have predicted their demise. But they are out of sight.

Independents Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott, in New England and Lyne, are gone and they can even see the light at the end of the tunnel in their battle with renegade Bob Katter in Kennedy. They regained Page, on the NSW north coast, despite the growing presence of retirees and greenies as part of wider demographic change.

Clive Palmer's insurgency, despite his Nationals roots, is more urban than rural. Moreover where there was rural insurgency it was Independent Cathy McGowan beating the Liberal Sophie Mirabella in Indi. The Nationals quietly fed that upset.

But they remain diminished. Permanent Coalition arrangements once led political scientists to describe the Australian party system as comprising two-and-a-half parties rather than a full three party system.

Today political scientists could class the Nationals as a quarter party rather than a half. Right across northern Australia the Nationals do not exist as a separate entity. In Queensland the two Coalition parties exist as an integrated Liberal National Party (LNP), the party of Nationals leader Warren Truss. In the Northern Territory the two Coalition parties exist as a single integrated Country Liberal Party (CLP), the party of Nationals Senate Leader, Nigel Scullion. Even where the Nationals exist as a separate party, joint Senate tickets prevail.

The old Country party was quite distinct in policies and identity from the Liberals who denigrated them as rural socialists capturing government to protect rural interests from the vagaries of the market and/or the climate. It was also socially distinct, reflecting class distinctions between pastoralists and battling farmers.

Thirty years ago the Country party wrestled with many of the same questions about identity, strategy and tactics that the Greens face now. The strategic questions are about how close to snuggle up to your bigger partner, Liberal or Labor. The tactical questions are about competition within the partnership. Where do you draw the line? Is opposing coal seam gas mining the equivalent for the Nationals to carbon pricing for the Greens?

The Nationals resolved these bigger questions for themselves. There is no going back. The party's future is more likely to be even greater integration into the Coalition/Liberals than re-emergence as a more independent party.

Consequently the Nationals must extract what they can from the new Abbott Government by influence within the Cabinet and the ministry and/or influence within the Parliament. In both arenas the Nationals have made an uncertain start.

The party now holds the three Cabinet positions of Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development (Truss), Minister for Agriculture (Barnaby Joyce) and Minister for Indigenous Affairs (Scullion).

This gives them a weaker hand around the table than when they formerly held portfolios like Treasury and Trade. This may reflect changing rural priorities but it also about both a critical self-assessment and Tony Abbott's adverse conclusions about their capacity. The Nationals are largely inexperienced and untested. It is unclear how they could ever impose their priorities on Cabinet.

Under John Howard, Nationals senators like Ron Boswell and then-senator Joyce exercised some independence. Joyce threatened to cross the floor but has already said that he won't do that as a minister.

Michael McCormack, a Nationals parliamentary secretary, has spoken up defending compulsory student fees to support facilities and amenities at regional universities. Coal seam gas policy under Liberal Minister for Industry Ian Macfarlane might also lead some Nationals to speak up for their rural constituency.

The Nationals are one model for a minor party. They can make an important contribution to the diversity of the Australian party system. The surface picture looks rosy but it is at the cost of greatly diminished independence.

Tolerating corruption will destroy Australia's brand

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

Australia tied with Denmark, Finland and Japan for the title of the world's least bribe-ridden country in 2013. According to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer, only 1 per cent of Australians surveyed admitted paying bribes for services.

Our cultural resistance to corruption has long been a major contributor to Australia's reputation as a good global citizen. From time to time there are well publicised cases of corruption within Australia, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

However a few years ago we had the AWB oil-for-wheat scandal, and now there are allegations of corruption in the international dealings of the large Australian construction company Leighton Holdings and the Reserve Bank subsidiary Securency. The Reserve Bank scandal has been described by Dr David Chalkin of Sydney University as the 'worst corruption scandal in our history, not because of the amount of money that's been involved, but because the most respected institutions of our country have failed to discharge their responsibilities to the public'.

It's argued that it is impossible to do business in some countries without engaging in bribery and corruption, often at the highest levels of government. As a *Sydney Morning Herald* letter writer put it, if you insist that Australian companies are 'squeaky clean' in their international dealings, 'be prepared to see your superannuation funds shrink rather than grow'. The reasoning is that our companies can only expand overseas and grow their dividends by 'adhering to the local standards of business behaviour', however corrupt they may be according to our standards.

It is true that turning a blind eye to what we perceive as corruption may bring us a greater financial dividend in the short term. But in the medium and long term, it will make us poorer. Corruption and bribery increase poverty in poor countries that have the potential to be among the world's most prosperous. These include Iraq and Indonesia, where Leighton is alleged to have bribed officials. It is no coincidence that the least corrupt countries — Australia, Denmark, Finland and Japan — are among the wealthiest, while some of the most corrupt — such as Zimbabwe, Paraguay and Liberia — are on the list of the poorest.

This argument will appeal to you if you agree with British prime minister David Cameron, who this week talked up the profit motive. But being 'squeaky clean' is not just good business practice. It's also an admirable quality to have attached to Australia's brand and the Australian character, so that if we believe in ourselves, we believe in transparency.

It is a particular value that we have to promote to the world, in an almost evangelical sense. As Pope Francis said in his *La Repubblica* interview a few days ago: 'Everyone has his own idea of good and evil, and must choose to fight evil as he conceives them. That would be enough to make the world a better place.'

Invisible Icarus and asylum seekers

AUSTRALIA

Maureen O'Brien

Most of us organise our lives according to priorities. We get caught up in routines. The degree to which these impinge on our ability to respond to what is occurring outside our immediate areas of concern is a vexed question. Brueghel, in his mid-16th century painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, examined this.

The dominant figure in Brueghel's landscape is a ploughman on the side of a cliff. With his back to the sea, he negotiates the wooden plough drawn by his horse. If he heard Icarus falling from the heavens into the sea it didn't interrupt his routine. The crew of a ship close enough to rescue the drowning boy instead takes advantage of a favourable breeze and sails away. The shepherd daydreams, the angler continues fishing. To all intents and purposes Icarus is invisible to those in his immediate vicinity.

Since the 1990s consecutive Australian Federal Governments have had a penchant to render asylum seekers invisible to the general public. Our political leaders, working on the assumption that out of sight will mean out of mind, have prevented the media from having access to camps on the mainland or on Manus Island and Nauru. Kevin Rudd brought this to new lows with his 'PNG Solution', a policy which has now been adopted by Tony Abbott.

It's difficult to relate to stories of personal human suffering while we accept or embrace policies which deliberately exclude us from witnessing or hearing about them. While asylum seekers remain an anonymous group, rather than individual men, women and children with names and life stories, they and their sufferings remain invisible.

For a moment in mid-2013 the possibility of asylum seekers becoming visible seemed a reality. On 17 JulyChristmas Island Administrator, Joh Stanhope, called for the name of a baby boy, who drowned when an asylum seeker boat capsized, to be made public by the Australian Government. This was never done, and his body, along with the bodies of others from the same boat, remained nameless in the morgue. Were his parents among the drowned? Or were they rescued and left to grieve?

When we know people's names, backgrounds, history, when we see them and hear them, we can relate to them as individuals. We can like or dislike them, agree or disagree, sympathise with or criticise them, but we can no longer treat them as part of an anonymous mass that can be shifted here or there according to political expediency.

Ironically the recent limit imposed by the Abbott Government on the reporting of the number of boats and asylum seekers who arrive on Christmas Island, and the number of people who drown on the way there, has misfired.

In the vacuum created, an ABC journalist interviewed a would-be asylum seeker who survived the most recent boat disaster and we saw him and his fellow survivors on our TV screens. Newspaper reports included an interview with a woman whose husband and children, with the exception of one 11-year-old son, drowned. We saw their faces, heard their voices, and we want to know more about them, what will happen to them now, along with the whys and wherefores of this disaster.

Any further news blackouts may also be stymied by the residents of Christmas Island who have vowed to tell the media about boat arrivals. This is in keeping with the humanitarian approach by the island's residents, who do see the asylum seekers up close. On 15 December 2010 they threw life jackets from the cliff top to those flung into the sea when their boat was wrecked on rocks at Flying Fish Cove, and were dismayed when their rescue attempts could not prevent 48 people drowning. These residents are the antithesis of the figures in Brueghel's painting.

A majority of Australians still support government policies on asylum seekers. Most of them are concerned about deaths at sea or issues of border security. That other concerns may be involved was illustrated when newly elected Liberal politician, Fiona Scott, said in a pre-election interview that she was in favour of stopping the boats because asylum seekers caused traffic jams on the M4 in her electorate.

The bizarre policies to 'stop the boats' include Abbott's pre-election commitments to turn back boats, to buy unseaworthy boats from fishermen and to pay individual Indonesians to report on people smugglers. It is with some relief that we now see these proposals 'outed', in the recent visit by our Prime Minister to Indonesia, as no more than pre-election rhetoric for a domestic audience. Abbott had his priorities pre-election and he had other priorities in his discussions with the President of Indonesia.

What remains to be seen is to what extent the Government's new attempts to render asylum seekers 'invisible' with news blackouts, will succeed or fail when there are competing moves to make their predicament visible in an age of access to the media that Brueghel could not have foreseen.

Getting serious about asylum seeker ethics

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

In his recent article my Jesuit colleague Frank Brennan asked whether there is any ethical discussion to be had about stopping the boats. He proposed seven points that would give greater ethical coherence to the Government's 'shock and awe response'.

I am in substantial agreement with Frank's argument, and recognise how much hard labour will need to be invested in the political process if his seven points are to be adopted. I would like to carry the conversation further from the ethical perspective.

My question that goes beyond the scope of Frank's paper: if his seven points were implemented, would Australia's asylum seeker policy be ethically coherent or acceptable? I shall argue, as I suspect that Frank also would, that this is not the case. The corollary of this position is that pressing for legal and practical changes to policy will not redeem the policy but will be a necessary and worthwhile exercise in harm minimisation.

The ethical premise from which I begin is that all human beings are precious and unique simply because they are human, and that this value must be respected. They cannot be treated as things or as statistics. In particular their treatment cannot be used as a means to a policy objective that does not look to their personal good.

The second premise of my argument, flowing from the unique value of each human being, is that nations, like individual persons and communities, have an ethical responsibility to help people who come to them in great need if they can. When the priest and levite in the story of the Good Samaritan passed by the traveller in desperate need, they did not simply act uncharitably. They acted wrongly.

Australian asylum seeker policy is based on the harm done to people who come to Australia in great need. The harm done to people is caught in Frank's phrase 'shock and awe'. In military theory the exemplar of shock and awe is Hiroshima. It involves an exercise of overwhelming power that will instil in the enemy the fear of action that will shut down their society and render them unable to fight. That is a fair description of the effects on human beings of prolonged detention in Australia and Nauru documented over many years. In McGorry's phrase they are 'factories for producing mental illness'.

In exercises of shock and awe the destruction of civil society is a means to a military end. In Australian policy, too, the harm suffered by people who have claimed our protection is a means to an end. That end has variously been spelled out in terms of stopping boats, impeding people smugglers, saving drownings and

creating an orderly and fair immigration program. Because it relies on the harm deliberately caused to innocent people as a means to these ends, however good these goals may be, the policy is ethically unacceptable.

Seen from this perspective the seven points made by Frank mitigate to some extent the unjustifiable harm done to people by the policy. But they do not make the policy ethically acceptable. If implemented they will certainly exempt from the full rigour of the policy unaccompanied minors, some of those who arrived by boat after the August 2013 cut off date and the group of West Papuans. But the harsh treatment of other people who claim protection from Australia remains ethically unjustifiable.

Frank also emphasises how important it is that Australian refugee policy should be duly enacted in Australian law and that its administration be consistent with it. I agree with this insistence. Parliamentary approval is necessary if the Australian people are to accept responsibility for what the Government does in our name, including our treatment of people who seek asylum.

But of course the fact that a policy is implemented in law does not make the treatment of people that follows from it ethically acceptable. This truism has reference also to use made of the legal distinction between the direct and secondary movement by people who claim protection from Australia. The circumstances of their flight may be humanly material to the ethical claim they make on us; they may also be humanly irrelevant to it. The matter needs to be assessed in each case.

For this reason I would argue that the legal distinction between direct and secondary movement cannot ethically function as a sole or automatic criterion for accepting some claims for protection and excluding others, particularly if the treatment of those excluded is designed to deter other claimants.

I conclude by reemphasising the importance of engagement with government and with the political process in order to make an inhumane policy less inhumane. That work for people at risk is arduous and necessary, and is not helped by making ethical differences central to the engagement. But it is also important for ask and make a call on whether our asylum seeker policy is ethically justifiable.

The conversation won't change Australian attitudes. But the people whose humanity is damaged by our policy and the Australians who will come after us deserve no less from us than moral seriousness.