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My heroic, dyslexic son

EDUCATION

Tony Thompson

There is a party trick that toddlers sometimes perform where they read something or identify letters. The adults coo in admiration and everyone agrees that this is exceptional. My son never did this trick.

In preschool, the teachers were impressed with his imagination, his vocabulary, and his humour. They did note that he had struggled a bit with writing his name, but assured us that it would come in time.

Boys sometimes take longer, they said.

By the time he was a couple of years into primary school, it was clear that something wasn't right. I had begun to laugh ruefully every time I heard someone unpack the old saw about kids who are read to, kids who grow up in 'language rich environments', and the other 'sure things' that guarantee a high level of literacy.

The day he was born, I happened to be rereading Shakespeare's King John. I read a couple of scenes to him at the hospital in the evening and haven't missed a night since.

His environment couldn't have been more 'language rich'. His mother and I were both English teachers. There were books everywhere. I was working on one about Shakespeare when he was a toddler. He acquired an imaginary dog called Hamlet and, as I have often recounted, gave me the premise for that book one morning in the car while I was explaining a problem I was having with the fictional aspects.
But the reading simply never came. There were occasional advances that weren't much noticed but took an enormous toll on him. Meanwhile, the other kids had started to pick up on his difficulties. He's a sensitive kid and this was devastating. His self esteem took hit after hit, leaving him confused and often unwilling to go to school in the morning.

He was tested, of course. The results told us what we already knew, and used a lot of jargon that threw us off course slightly. There was a suggestion that it might be developmental. It wasn't.

"When I phoned the person who conducted the tests, they admitted that it wasn't a word they used, but agreed that the term would apply to my son's condition."

The word for my son's condition did not appear on the report. For reasons I am only now beginning to understand, that term had gone out of use in some quarters. It might have been a matter of workplace semantics or perhaps an admirable but doomed attempt to avoid labels.

Whatever the case, it was a few more years before I took out the report again and realised that it was, in fact, a diagnosis of dyslexia. When I phoned the person who conducted the tests, they admitted that it wasn't a word they used, but agreed that the term would apply to my son's condition.

Last year, he got interested in Marvel comics. I made a deal that if he would read them aloud to me, I'd keep buying them. It worked pretty well and I think there was some progress. We have since moved back to books. Over the summer, he read S. E. Hinton's classic, *The Outsiders*, using an audiobook.

I got another of her books, *Rumblefish*, out of the library. He started off pretty well but after a few paragraphs, it was as though someone was moving the text around. He began to lose his place and miss words. The familiar tears of frustration appeared in his tired eyes. The story was interesting - gangs, trouble, knife fights - and he was desperate to find out what happened to Rusty James and his friends.

He adores stories. It's heartbreaking that he has so little access to them in written form.

So what happens next? We'll get him tested again, this time by someone who will use the word dyslexia. We'll start to work closely with the school to make sure he is not put in impossible situations and is given the chance to find some success.

The school has always been supportive but we live in a data driven age where tests matter. Even the finest teachers, and he has had a few, are compelled to teach to the vile Naplan tests.

Dyslexic kids - and the estimates suggest that as many as one in five might have it - are put through unbelievable stress with these tests. If deaf kids were compelled to do listening examinations, there would, naturally, be an outcry. I'm not sure if there's a difference.

I'm also not sure if the ever narrowing scope of education can still accommodate students like my son, despite all the talk about diversity and differentiated learning. From where I stand, as a parent and a former teacher, I can smell the unpleasant odour of the
boardroom and hear the faint echo of neo liberal economics in education today. I hope I'm wrong.

Meanwhile, my son paints wildly abstract watercolours, makes stop motion films, watches ancient episodes of Doctor Who, and continues to excel in a variety of sports. His self-esteem remains fragile but his resilience is unquestionable.

Now in grade six, he grabs his bag and jumps into the car most mornings without complaining. On the way, we chat about music, travel, and our plans for the weekend.

As we draw closer to the school, he goes quiet and I know he is getting ready. I don't know how he does it. When he gets out of the car and walks towards the gate, he is facing certain frustration and a great deal of failure.

I think he's a tough guy. I think he's a hero.

Tony Thompson is a Melbourne based writer and former teacher. His articles on education have appeared in The Age and he has written two books for teenagers which were published by Black Dog Books.
Bob Ellis and the other nuclear royal commission

ENVIRONMENT

Michele Madigan

The passing of Bob Ellis recalls his faithful accompanying of the 1984-1985 royal commission into the British nuclear tests conducted in South Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. He went 'to England and back' and, as he described it, 'to each black polis' of the royal commission hearings.

Ellis' article on the Wallatina hearings (The National Times, 3-9 May 1985), described what he named as the commission's 'worst story of all' - Edie Milpudie's telling of herself and her family camping, in May 1957, on the Marcoo bomb crater.

She told of being 'captured by men in white uniforms ... forcibly and obscenely washed down, miscarrying twice and losing her husband who to prove to the soldiers he knew English, sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so."

'And how the soldiers shot their beloved irradiated dogs.'

'The bad parts of the story,' Ellis went on, 'the miscarriage and afterward, were communicated to Jim (Commissioner McClelland) in secret session, in the distance in the bush, with Edie's women friends giving her comfort, and prompting with giggles and nudges her reminiscence of a story they knew by heart, already an old legend.

'Jim called these women the best in the world, unstinting comforters, inextinguishable friends ...' 

Five years later I had the privilege myself of meeting Edie Milpudie at her Oak Valley camp in the SA Maralinga lands. Many of the Yalata elders had prepared me in a way
with the constant mantra: 'Milpudie - she went through the bomb.'

Re-reading the Ellis article the night before, I was surprised to find tears stinging my eyes. It's so good, I realised, when truth is recognised and held up for our freedom - in the recognition of the 'upsidedown-ness' of our lives and history. 'What has been hidden will be made known and shouted from the housetops.' 'The truth will set you free.'

"She told of being captured by men in white uniforms, forcibly and obscenely washed down, miscarrying twice ... And how the soldiers shot their beloved irradiated dogs."

At our meeting, nothing much happened. But after that personal encounter Edie's story became even more real to me. I knew her family in the following years and so am a witness, however many times removed, to the sufferings and terrible ill health which has afflicted them throughout the generations.

In July 2004, a six-year anti-nuclear campaign spearheaded by Aboriginal women, who themselves had suffered in the British nuclear tests, was successfully concluded with the federal government's announcement: 'No national radioactive dump for SA.'

But who could have imagined that just 11 years later, a new and far more dangerous plan would be launched by another royal commission, perhaps the first royal commission to plan a future scheme rather than examine one past.

Since this royal commission's 'tentative findings' in February for South Australia to import international high-level nuclear waste, which it actually names as radioactive for 'many hundreds of thousands of years', the scepticism among South Australians is growing.

Economists Richard Denniss, chief economist of the Australia Institute, and Professor Richard Blandy, of University of South Australia, point out that the economics quoted in the tentative findings are simply conjectures. Dr Jim Green, noting the commission's 'industry advocacy', points out that the projected 600 permanent jobs would increase the present number of employed Australians by just 0.005 per cent.

Key environmental groups point out that the commission fails to admit 'that there is a consensus or near consensus among qualified scientists that there is no threshold below which radiation is harmless'.

Only after the commission has finished in May will the process for finalising a site begin. As the Josephite national media release last month warned: 'Josephites fear that the proposed sites for the storage of this high-level waste are likely to be on Aboriginal lands.

'These are some of the most vulnerable and sacred lands in Australia, and the proposal is clearly in direct conflict with the interests of many Indigenous communities.'

Nor are good manners during negotiations the answer. As the Josephite SA Reconciliation Circle Response to RC Tentative Findings points out, 'No amount of cultural protocol in negotiations as outlined in these detailed findings ... will have meaning when the aim is to undercut the very basis of culture: protection of land and kin including every future
The southern Pitjantjatjara were removed to Yalata in 1952 to make way for the nuclear tests.

The position of the Yalata leaders themselves was made clear, in a statement from Mima Smart, former longterm chairperson, and Russell Bryant, present chairperson of Yalata Community Inc:

'We are determined not to have this poison - this radioactive waste. We said "No" last year and we say "No" now. A lot of people died from that poison. We want to keep the young generations. Think about it! Not only white people live in Australia.'

Let's hope that there is no shortage of those who, like Ellis, will recognise the truth of this, and hold it up for all to see.

Michele Madigan is a Sister of St Joseph who has spent the past 38 years working with Aboriginal people in remote areas of South Australia and in Adelaide. Her work has included advocacy and support for senior Aboriginal women of Coober Pedy in their campaign against the proposed national radioactive dump.

Edie Milpudie by Michele Madigan
Icelandic farmers like rams to the slaughter

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

Rams (M). Director: Grímur Hákonarson. Starring: Sigurður Sigurjónsson, Theódór Júlíusson. 92 minutes

Iceland’s entry in the Best Foreign Language Film category of the 88th Academy Awards, and winner of the top prize of the Un Certain Regard section of the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, Rams is a film that manages to finds broad relevance within its highly localised context. It takes diverse inspirations, from Halldór Laxness' social realist novel of the 1930s Independent People to the filmmaker's childhood experiences on his grandfather's sheep farm, and whittles them down to a simple story about brothers forced by hardship to reconcile following decades of ill will.

In a remote village in the north of Iceland, sheep farmers Gummi (Sigurður Sigurjónsson) and Kiddi (Jóhann Júlíusson) live in separate houses on the same land, but have not spoken to each other in 40 years. The origin of the conflict is never named, but has festered long enough that it frequently manifests in mute antagonism. Healthy competitiveness, yes: the film's opening act sees them pit ram against ram in a livestock-judging contest. But the often-drunk Kiddi is also not averse to firing live ammunition blindly through his brother's window, in retaliation to a perceived slight.
When the valley is struck by an outbreak of scrapie - a fatal, degenerative disease that affects sheep - Gummi, Kiddi and their farmer neighbours must face the prospect of conducting a mass slaughter. This is very much a communal crisis; in part the film is a consideration of the socioeconomic hardships of traditional Icelandic sheep farmers in modern times.

But it's the teasing-out of Gummi and Kiddi's emotional and practical responses to this bleak turn of events, and the ways in which it forces them into dialogue, that drives the film at its emotional core.

"The washed-out green of the shaggy slopes; the stony crags, idly shifting snowdrifts, and wide, heavy skies make ... This is a place that might on a whim be either heaven or hell."

Sigurðsson and Júlíusson are renowned Icelandic stage actors who, coached by Hákonarson, channel their skills with prolific dialogue into characters who exist for long stretches in stillness and silence. While we know scant details of their hostile history, on the strength of these performances we can sense it, swollen and putrefied, but with specks of filial affection. It is grounds for conflict, but also for the threads of dark humour for which the film is notable. Consider Gummi finding Kiddi drunk and unconscious in the snow, and delivering him to hospital in the bucket of a loader tractor.

In all this, the sense of place is essential. Director of photography Sturla Brandth Grøvlen paints evocative live action landscapes: the washed-out green of the shaggy slopes; the stony crags, idly shifting snowdrifts, and wide, heavy skies make the location seem at once beautiful and fearsome, vast and oppressive. This is a place that might on a whim be either heaven or hell. Indeed, in spite of the film's high naturalistic tendencies, the mute, mystical significance of the landscape sets the stage for a
harrowing finale that is nearly biblical in its mythic symbolism.

Tim Kroenert is assistant editor of *Eureka Street*.
Companies' bastardy about more than bad apples

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

To a Catholic observer the continuing revelations about the practices of big companies have been painfully familiar.

The pattern is predictable. Bad behaviour is discovered (abuse/ripping off customers, avoiding taxation). A ritual response is made: 'We have the highest standards', 'We were never told', references to 'bad apples' etc. Further investigation shows that the bad apples were known about.

The response is to launch and vigorously defend legal cases and excoriate the irresponsible media. Further examination shows that suspected bad apples have found a home in other companies. Again, assurances are given that the culture has changed. Finally a few undersized bad apples are prosecuted. Few - neither CEOs nor board members - go to jail.

And finally the government promises a cut in company tax.

Meanwhile the public becomes thoroughly irate at what they see as the bastardry, effrontery and impunity of the companies. The more genteel describe it as reputational damage.

In this climate of judgment it may come as a surprise to recognise that in churches and companies not everyone is a bad apple. Among company managers and board members many good and generous human beings are to be found. So why does such antisocial
and corrupt behaviour breed there?

I believe it can be traced to an economic ideology that is widely accepted in government as well as in business. The ideology sees the driving force of the economy to lie in competitive individuals whose work is motivated by the desire for economic gain.

The national good is defined by an increased GNP and economic activity. All significant relationships that compose a business are measured by their economic value, whether that value is expressed in salaries, bonuses or wages for employees and board members, or as dividends and share value for investors.

"In theory this apotheosis of the competitive individual may seem benign. But in practice it can look very grubby."

If we see companies through that lens, every form of competitive action that is economically productive will be legitimate provided that it is not illegal. And even legislative restrictions in the market that stand in the way of economic gain will be seen as regrettable.

So although regulations must not be disobeyed, they may be circumvented by means that are not actually illegal. It can readily be understood that relatively junior employees will travel close to the legal wind in competing with others to secure bonuses and higher paid positions.

Senior executives, board members and investors will rejoice in the economic value so provided to the organisation and will ask no questions about how it is achieved.

In grand theory this apotheosis of the competitive individual may seem benign. But in practice it can look very grubby.

Its face is the expletive filled greed of the ANZ traders as they set the interbank rates, the craftiness of the CBA life insurance arm as it concocted medical standards to finesse ill people out of their future, and the sleazy company that companies and individuals keep when hiding their wealth in Panama.

Of course, the face we see is the urbane presentation of company spokespersons and lawyers. But the tune that people now hear in the mission statements, the assurance of high standards and the avowals of innocence is the song of greed. Behind the façade of corporate seriousness people now see competitive individuals scrabbling to protect their wealth.

How do good people sink to this? The answer lies in the mutation of economic ideology from the crude buccaneering spirit of doing whatever it takes to get rich into a more urbane form based in self-deception. People see themselves as competing, not only for their own economic benefit, but for that of the company in which they work.

Their identification with their company means that greed can mask itself as altruism in serving a larger good. They become the servants of their investors. Because the good of the nation is identified with its economic growth, too, they can also see themselves as
faithful, profitable, servants of the nation.

As in the case of churches, identification with the company provides reason for minimising and covering up wrongdoing in the company and protecting its reputation at all costs.

The present scandals are the fruit of an economic ideology that recognises the importance of economic striving for human flourishing, but neglects its human context. The economy is the servant of national good, not its goal. Human flourishing is based on the respect for each human being, the interdependence of human beings and the natural environment, and the priority of the common good.

The common good entails ethical relationships between companies and their workers, their customers, their investors, their competitors and the whole community, which their activities touch. These provide the matrix within which they seek to be profitable. Their investors are only one of many groups to which they have responsibilities.

In conversation about economics Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' of the market is often invoked in favour of an autonomous market. It is usually forgotten that Smith was primarily an ethicist concerned to set human activity within an ethical framework. He took it for granted that those acting in the market should respect that framework.

Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of Eureka Street.

Main image: Shutterstock
Invincible Nikitas learns to lose

INTERNATIONAL

Gillian Bouras

My eldest grandson, Nikitas, is ten. When his name was chosen I was haunted by memories of Russian leader Khruschev and his long-ago shoe-banging performance at the United Nations.

But of course those recollections meant nothing to my son and daughter-in-law, who patiently explained that their son was to be called after Nikitaras, great Nikitas, a hero of the Greek War of Independence (1821-1828).

Nikitaras, whose real name was Nikitas Stamatelopoulos, reportedly had many virtues, was sea-green incorruptible, and as a consequence died in poverty. In the prime of his life, though, he was a mighty warrior before the Lord.

Alas for modern sensibilities, however, he was nicknamed ΟΤουρκοφαγος, the eater of Turks. One example of his prowess came at the Battle of Dervenaki in July 1822, in which the Greeks were victorious; Nikitaras is supposed to have used five
swords: he broke four during the savage conflict.

Thankfully, young Nikitas does not divide the world into friends and enemies, at least not so far. But he is very competitive; perhaps his name, which means invincible, influences his outlook. Athletics is his thing, particularly the long jump, but he loves all sport, and also loves to win. Like a great many of us.

So far, so satisfactory: he and his brother, who has a more relaxed attitude to the whole business of competition, have a bedroom wall liberally sprinkled with medals. But the times they are a-changing. And he's finding the process difficult.

Picture the scene. His aunt Nina recently asked Nikitas how he'd performed at the latest athletic competition. His answer to the question was a heavy sigh: Greek drama is never far away.

'Mavri imera.' A black day.

"It seems to me the child, who is all too rapidly turning into a man, is learning one of life's important lessons, perhaps not a minute too soon: renunciation comes to us all."

Nina said she was sorry to hear this, and asked the reason.

'I didn't win.'

'Well, never mind. Where did you come?'

'Second.'

'But that's excellent!'

Not excellent enough in Nikitas' view, as another heavy sigh was his reaction to Nina's praise. So she was moved to give him a burst about the Olympic spirit, the importance of simply taking part, and so on, but he was apparently not to be persuaded.

My son, in the meantime, informed me that he had been telling Nikitas regularly that he cannot expect to win all the time, that he cannot always have what he wants.

It seems to me that the child, who is all too rapidly turning into a man, is learning one of life's most important lessons, perhaps not a minute too soon: renunciation comes to us all. A Catholic friend sums the matter up by saying simply: 'God reserves the right to say NO.' And I think God usually means it.

Bertrand Russell, agnostic mathematician and philosopher, went into rather more detail in his book A Free Man's Worship.

Despite his doubts, Russell considered the acceptance of submission to power to be just, right, and 'the very gate of wisdom'. Although to the young all things desired and passionately sought are attainable, we all must learn through death, illness, poverty or the voice of duty, 'that the world was not made for us, and that, however beautiful the
things we crave, Fate may nevertheless forbid them'.

We must learn to find the courage then to 'bear without repining the ruin of our hopes, to turn away our thoughts from vain regrets'.

I rather wonder what Russell would have had to say to Donald Drumpf and Hillary Clinton in their battle of wills and their passionate desire to get what they want in the shape of the US presidency.

I imagine there is plenty of vain regret ahead for one of them, as he/she faces the ruin of many hopes. Bernie Sanders, who seems to have his ego under much more control, will cope far better, in the certain knowledge that he has fought a mighty battle for ordinary Americans.

Russell might also have had a few well-chosen words to say to Australian politicians. And then there are the Greek ones ...

As for Nikitas, since the disappointment of coming second he has moved up into a higher age group, where naturally the competition against older children is much stiffer. He appears to be coping well, to collective relief. We are grateful there have been no more references to black days.

Gillian Bouras is an expatriate Australian writer who has written several books, stories and articles, many of them dealing with her experiences as an Australian woman in Greece.

Pictured: Nikitas on the track at Ancient Olympia, wearing the 'crown' his father made.
The ills and thrills of talking about science

MEDIA

Ketan Joshi

When Alan Alda was 11, he threw a simple inquiry to his teacher. What's a flame? The response he received was less than satisfying.

'It's oxidation. That didn't explain anything to me. I didn't know what oxidation was.'

It's a neat illustration of a modern problem. The mere declaration of scientific facts doesn't work.

Alda, veteran screen actor and star of M*A*S*H and The West Wing, visited Australia recently for the opening of the Australian National Centre for the Public Awareness of Science at the Australian National University. Alda's approach is distinctive: he helps scientists take improvisational acting classes to prepare them for audience interactions.

'I was desperate to try to find some way I could be helpful in getting scientists to communicate their science with more vividness, and more clarity,' he told ABC News.

'Most of all, clarity. Not to dumb down the science but to do be clear about it, so the rest of us feel that they're talking our language.'

This mission statement removes simplification - it redirects efforts towards transmitting the thrill of investigating the natural world, and spurring engagement and excitement in the process of scientific inquiry. It's important not to undervalue this shift. Merely presenting over-simplified factoids is no longer sufficient in a world filled with phenomena
like climate denial and the anti-vaccination lobby.

For science to be communicated effectively, it needs to spark passion and excitement.

No category illustrates this more clearly than climate science. Recently, there has been a significant increase in the public acceptance of facts underpinning climate science - yet another poll, conducted at the same time, suggests action on the issue is quite far down the list of priorities for the public.

"We consume the outputs of scientific inquiry like we consume everything else: through a filter of emotion, bias and personal connection."

Though encouraging greater public acceptance of the science underpinning climate change has been considered a priority for the past five years, it hasn't translated into the Australian public perceiving excess greenhouse gas emissions as a salient, high-priority risk.

The threat of human-induced climate change, discovered and delineated by scientists, will not inspire strong public support for action, without the enhancement of science communication and the empowerment of scientists to form deeper, more meaningful connections with audiences.

Happily, there are instances of new formats of science communication looking to inspire these deeper connections.

As part of the World Science Festival in early March, the ABC's Q&A dedicated an entire show to science. The episode was informative and engaging, with a range of follow-up articles the next day.

A panellist on the night, Australian molecular biologist and science communicator Upulie Divisekera, said 'It's the beauty of the universe and the beauty of the things that we study that keeps us going.'

This statement explains the experience of science to the audience. The people dedicating their lives to delineating the beauty of the universe are best placed to be in the spotlight. As Alda says, 'You just need to give them a chance to connect with you.'

Social media can be a powerful tool in this. The Twitter rotation-curation account @RealScientists presents a live snapshot of the experiences of a broad array of professionals. Real-time micro-blogging about the process of science facilitates immediate passion and positivity around scientific inquiry.

The creation of social bonds between scientists and the public is a demonstrably successful tool for inspiring trust, and allows room for the nuances of science to shine through.

It's a vital counter to the dated practice of scientific authority delivering nuggets of truth to the masses. Well-known popularisers of science, such as Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Professor Brian Cox, tend to shy away from the straight declaration of facts, instead weaving them with narrative and humour.
The receptiveness of audiences to scientific facts does not increase as a function of how strong the evidence is. We determine the importance of information quickly and subconsciously, rather than through a conscious process of deliberative and slow reasoning.

We consume the outputs of scientific inquiry like we consume everything else: through a filter of emotion, bias and personal connection.

Scientific inquiry unlocks access to valuable and verifiable bits of the universe. It reveals both beauty and danger. The formation of deep, lasting connections between scientists and the general public can help us react to these revelations as we ought to.

Empowering scientists to engage in this new format of science communication will benefit us all.

Ketan Joshi works in the renewable energy industry in Sydney, and writes on science, technology and political issues. He tweets @Ketanj0

Original artwork by Chris Johnston
Boom or bust

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas
Bob Ellis the gifted troublemaker

AUSTRALIA

Binoy Kampmark

Verbal pyrotechnics, a dash of spicy recall and analysis as a 'commentator diarist': Bob Ellis, who died in Palm Beach in Sydney’s North on Sunday, was the sabre rattling inspired by the Sydney Push; a delightful Antipodean Samuel Pepys, with a vernacular to shape.

His versatile penmanship would dot all brows of Australian culture. With Michael Boddy came The Legend of King O’Malley, which inaugurated a theatrical amalgam of satire, dance and music.

Philip Noyce's Newsfront (1978) saw Ellis co-author the script with wife Anne Brooksbank and others, while propelling the careers of Wendy Hughes, Bryan Brown and Bill Hunter.

Most importantly, Ellis’ work is a prime example of the notion advanced by the French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: that committed literature, and the act of writing, are political and ethical acts. Even in a film script, one can ponder social political change, a world of newsreel men in the Australia of the 1950s that saw an effort by the Menzies Government to ban the Communist Party and jolt Australia with Cold War fears.

Always of the left, but never formally the structured party man of faction and following, the dishevelled, sometimes wild Ellis proved contrarian even to Labor stalwarts. There were never pious reflections, or unqualified praises.

Paul Keating, for instance, was considered hefty in terms of IQ yet a victim of the 'hey-presto quick fix', giving the green light to 'corporate mendacity and rapacity'. The
insanity of economic rationalism remained a permanent bugbear in the Ellis repertoire.

_Suddenly Last Winter - An Election Diary_ (2011) supplied readers with a withering portrait of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard. 'She has no power, no influence, no friends, no learning. '

In contrast, and ever niggling to the ALP, future Liberal prime minister Tony Abbott came in for some praise, possessing 'good manners' and a 'first-class mind'. The latter, for instance, could remember that sentence from Evelyn Waugh's _Brideshead Revisited_ on 'the cloistral hush which down the years'.

"As former NSW premier Bob Carr, for whom Ellis penned many a speech, wistfully observed, Ellis was not the sort 'who would miss a train because he was back in the office checking every last fact'. "

This was Ellis the alchemist of political matter, able to navigate positions without tribal fanaticism. It was a rare thing in the parochial settings of Australian party politics. He could still lunch with Abbott and praise the latter's _Battlelines_, while having severe disagreements about other matters.

He would, however, always detest John Howard, who, Ellis claimed in his entry of 22 November 2001 ( _Goodbye Babylon_), makes 'war, enslavement, the cruel torment of children - seem absolutely normal'. Typically, Howard bears the brunt of one of _The Ellis Laws_: power flows to the most boring in the room.

Politics pulsates through his writing, and it was inspired by Australia's participation in the Vietnam War. 'Anyone in journalism who has experience or travelled winds up on the left.'

Such political inspiration would also see him take the plunge in running as an independent against the Liberal Party's Bronwyn Bishop in 1994 Mackellar by-election. 'She is now over as a threat to the nation,' he prematurely suggested, happy to have taken any gloss off a future leadership challenge.

Always in the proverbial hot water for his words, Ellis would face defamation suits, be released from Fairfax in 2011, and then find another voice in the emerging format of independent media such as _Independent Australia_, a nostalgic throwback to the days he scribed for the _Nation Review_.

_Table Talk_, since 2012, had been providing the customary round of riveting observations in the blogosphere. In December, he tagged the coalition government as being of 'criminal tendency', one which would, 'on its way down' take Malcolm Turnbull, 'his chute in flames', with it.

_Goodbye Jerusalem_ led to Tony Abbott and Peter Costello, accompanied by their wives, taking out defamatory suits against Ellis. The published line that led to legal and reputational damnation involved that heady mix of sex and politics.

The book was removed from sale and Ellis bankrupted, financially and spiritually. 'It cost me the right to address mass rallies and demonstrations, it cost the column on moral
issues I had in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, it cost me status.'

As former NSW premier Bob Carr, for whom Ellis penned many a speech, wistfully observed, Ellis was not the sort 'who would miss a train because he was back in the office checking every last fact'.

In leaving Australian political and cultural debate that much duller, Ellis joins the world of posterity shared by such wordsmiths as Robert Hughes, who could write the ordinary canvass into the extraordinary impression.

Thank goodness for their words of commitment and insufferably caustic iconoclasm.

Dr Binoy Kampmark is a former Commonwealth Scholar who lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne.
Death and resurrection on Christmas Rock

CREATIVE

Deanne Davies

Whispering hills

The breeze spills engulfing gorges, ruffling trees. The leaves whisper ancestral stories, signalling from hill to hill creation mysteries. The track wends past abandoned tennis courts their turf is crushed, compacted anthills that Salmon gums reclaim. The creek is waterless but when seeded with rain froglets bleat like lambs. Once trees flaming orange were common on Christmas Rock the granite, grey with age, once barren yet when Earth trembled, it crevassed and soil collected, water funneled, plants sowed. Myrtle now crowns the rock with orange-brown senescence with rain it resurrects and transforms to green with red flowers. It's the song of seasons: Creation, Christmas, Death and Resurrection.

Big sky

altocumulus thatched with diagonal rain distance expanse fields filled with stubble luminescent, silent transcendent, landscape

in other places ancient mesas delineate power matrixes god-generated patterns in heaven and earth where human communities and gods converge

surveying the paddock the black stone monolith Moolymoonga is sacred to the Naaguja mesas skirted with grain, green then golden belong to the Irish vistas of mesas connect peoples under one big sky
Peace

A narrow track through trees.
Green moss on granite outcrops.
Sun-wet grass trees.
The fragrance of coming rain.
The dance and song of a blue wren.
A robin red-breast fluffing feathers.
The laughter of kookaburras.
The creaking click of frogs.
A symphony played by water drizzling on stepped rocks.
The choreography and crack of flames fingerling
axe-pared logs in a fireplace
when outside rain thrums and wind beckons to come in.
A glint of sun on dark water in motion
like the eyes' irises coinciding a smile.
A hug from a friend with whom you've journeyed for years
who knows the darkness inside you but chooses to see the light.
A bath scented with lavender.
The after-glow embrace of a long-time lover.

The geometry of maple leaves

*Acer shirasawanum*
Thirteen rose ´ tinged tantours
on a harvest moon head,
number God's mercies,
he bends, blesses.

*Aconitifolium*
Eight gold fleur de lis
number new beginnings,
diaspora, those saved in the ark,
covenants and circumcision.
Eight gold fleur de lis
numbering new beginnings,
diaspora, those saved on the ark,
circumcision, covenants.

*Dissectum Atropurpureum*
Segments, seven
the number of divine completion,
deeply cut crimson weeps
Jesus said, 'It is finished.'

*Vitifolium*
Six serrated spearheads
dipped in blood.
The sixth command,
'You shall not slay.'

*Villa Taranto*
Five ruby spires
number redemption,
Jesus' sacrifice gives us
a wiped slate.

_Beni Schichihenge_

Four teal tripods with cream edges
stained in red wine,
nature's number: seasons,
compass points, coverings
for Yahweh's tent.

_A lone leaf_

afloat on an invisible sea
comes to rest ashore
aground, gradually it senesces
compost for the living,
'flesh of my flesh,
bone of my bones,'
resurrection.

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Deanne Davies is an award winning poet. Her poems have appeared in print in _Verandah, Arena_ and _Eureka Street_. She is doing her graduate diploma in teaching and learning through Central Queensland University and lives in Geraldton WA.
Life beyond Brussels and Paris terror

INTERNATIONAL

Catherine Marshall

When suicide bombers struck Brussels, I was travelling far from home, in southern Italy. News of the terrorist attacks left me with the familiar feeling of revulsion, fury and sorrow for those people blown to pieces for the sake of someone's warped ideology.

But they also evoked in me something new, a sense of vulnerability, for within days I would board a series of flights from Reggio Calabria to Rome to Abu Dhabi and then Sydney.

I would stand at check-in counters like those victims at Brussels Airport had done; I would disgorge the contents of my backpack at security checkpoints, watch as other travellers were forced to discard everyday items - bottles of water and shampoo and wine, objects transformed into evil contraband in this age of terrorism.

I would spend long hours in aeroplane cabins, crammed alongside passengers who might well nurture malicious intentions towards their fellow-travellers, who might well have smuggled on board a bottle of water with which to make a bomb, a Stanley knife with which to slit the pilot's throat, a fake bomb vest with which to stage a hijacking.

For if terrorists could infiltrate a supposedly secure, world-class European airport then surely no place in the world was safe.

And if the savages who masterminded these attacks could impinge so forcefully on the psyche of a woman travelling in a remote corner of southern Europe, far from any terrorist activity, then they had achieved what they had set out to do: spread fear and distrust far beyond the site of their attacks, across countries and continents and oceans so that eventually the whole world would be infected.

I was reminded at this moment of the Paris attacks that occurred last November, and which sent parents at my daughter's school into a fit of panic. A group of students was set to fly from Sydney to Paris on New Year's Eve and to travel on to Spain a few days later as part of an arts and language tour.

The school had been planning the trip for more than a year; many students had found part-time work to finance the journey - for some, this would be their first overseas trip; we parents manned Bunnings barbecues all year long to raise funds for additional
activities.

"If the savages who masterminded these attacks could impinge so forcefully on the psyche of a woman travelling in a remote corner of southern Europe, then they had achieved what they had set out to do."

But news of the Paris attacks changed everything. After much discussion between school and parents, it was decided that the Paris segment of the journey would be cancelled, as would attendance at a much-anticipated soccer match in Barcelona. One family withdrew their child altogether.

The funds raised at the barbecues were used, in the end, to pay the cost incurred by the changing of airline tickets so close to the departure date. The terrorists, it seemed, had successfully sullied our children's trip, and wasted our hard-earned barbecue money.

But it was fear, rather than the terrorist attacks, that resulted in these last-minute changes. If our children had gone to Paris as originally intended, if they had attended that soccer match in Barcelona, no harm would have come of it, for no attacks occurred in either of those places during that time.

Never mind, parents said; it might have happened, and for that it was worth curtailing the planned activities.

But what life will we - and our children - live if we restrict our excursions based on what might happen, on what ISIS might have planned for us this week or next?

Though terrorism is a vile scourge that should be forcefully denounced, it seems pointless to allow it to control us when the facts are taken into account.

Americans, for example, are more likely to be crushed by furniture than killed by terrorists; between 2007 and 2011 - long after 9/11 - the odds of dying in a terrorist attack in the US were one in 20 million; even in terrorism-affected countries like Israel, casualties from such attacks almost never come even close to the number of traffic deaths.

But so strong is the evolutionary instinct to protect ourselves - and the media's tendency to overexpose certain stories while ignoring others - that we persist in profoundly miscalculating the risks we face. In so doing, we create for those terrorists the fearful, hateful, shrunken world they so desire.

Not that we should be blasé; about the dangers that exist in our world, or cease practicing caution where necessary. When I was growing up in apartheid South Africa, terrorist attacks were a regular occurrence. Once, a bomb exploded beneath a table in the café; where my best friend and I would eat hot fudge sundaes after school on Fridays. People were killed and maimed; we were acutely aware that we could have been among them.

But terrorism will eventually claim us as its victims, anyway, if we allow such acts to circumscribe our lives, if we become introverted, fearful, suspicious of others.

As I travel extensively for my job, I choose to assume the best of people, and I hope they will assume the best of me, too. Wherever I go, I'm rewarded with connections and encounters and friendships. I see each one of them as a grand triumph over those small-
minded people who won’t rest until they’ve reduced our world to a sad, lonely, spiritless place.

Catherine Marshall is a Sydney-based journalist and travel writer.
Death and peach pies

CREATIVE

Brian Doyle

One time when I was a junior in high school I got a ride with a friend to his house after school. We were going to play basketball. We had been friends since freshman year. I had never been to his house. No one went to his house.

Mothers loved him because he was so polite and courteous and he helped clear the table and offered to do dishes and that sort of thing. We would have razzed him for sucking up to our mothers but he was a wrestler and enjoyed pinning us to the grass for entertainment.

Fathers liked him because he was a wrestler and because his dad had been an aircraft engineer in the war. His dad died suddenly one day in the kitchen. He was the one who found his dad dead at the kitchen table with his coffee spilled on the newspaper.

The newspaper was open to the business section, he told me once. I asked him what he did with the newspaper after he took care of his dad and mum and kid sister and the ambulance and the undertaker and the priest and he pinned me to the grass without comment.

He was an excellent wrestler. He had a crush on a girl in school, and had told us all about it many times, and finally screwed up his courage, and practiced asking her out in front of the mirror to check his facial expression, and was about to ask her out, when suddenly another guy asked her out, and she said yes, and the next day at lunchtime my friend
walked into the lunchroom and sought the other guy out and pinned him to the linoleum floor of the lunchroom without comment.

We parked his car in the driveway and I asked where was his mum's car and he said she and the kid sister were away with the aunt at some army aircraft engineer reunion thing in the city and we had the run of the house so we could eat and then play ball and then maybe watch the Knick game if I didn't have to hustle home. I said great and we went in the house.

I went in the kitchen with high hopes. His mum was the kind of mum who baked more than one pie at a time and gave the extra pies away easily and casually as if a peach pie was something to give away rather than to eat half of immediately and the other half as soon as you could recover. She was always giving pies away to convents and bake sales and firemen and organisations for crippled veterans.

"I asked him what he did with the newspaper after he took care of his dad and mum and kid sister and the ambulance and the undertaker and the priest and he pinned me to the grass without comment."

All I knew about her was the pies because my friend brought in pies for birthdays and teachers' anniversaries and raffles and such at school. I didn't know anything else about his mum.

My friend said she was too cheerful, a remark I didn't understand. He said she was a different person after his dad died, but who wouldn't be different after your spouse died at the kitchen table and got coffee all over the business section of the newspaper?

So I was in the kitchen hunting for pie when he came in and said we have to go. I asked why, if no one was home, and he said we just do.

I said no way, I was going to find one or more pies come hell or high water, and he said we are leaving, and I razzed him, and he said don't make me pin you, so we left the kitchen, but for some reason I went left, toward the back door, as he went right, toward the front, and I saw his mother sprawled on her bed, so drunk the rum had spilled everywhere and there were not one but two bottles on the floor.

She had a red apron over her dress and was wearing one shoe and there was a picture of Jesus by her pillow and a beautiful blue glass rosary looped over Jesus. I turned and went back through the kitchen and out the front door and my friend gave me a ride home and we never, not once, in all these years since, discussed what I had seen, and I never told anyone about it until now.

Everyone is made of pain and joy in such complicated doses that all we can do is be tender and hand each other gobs of attentiveness as if they were peach pies and we were being ridiculously profligate with such rare and precious and wondrous things.
Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, and the author most recently of the essay collection *Grace Notes*.
System must work for victims, not against them

AUSTRALIA

Fatima Measham

The royal commission report into family violence, handed to the Victorian parliament on 29 March after more than a year of hearings, constitutes many things to different people.

For victims and survivors, it likely comes as catharsis. For too long, their experience of abuse had been dismissed as conflict between intimate or former partners, or between family members, not a subject for police attention or public policy. The report is a definitive correction of the persistent view that violence in the home is a private matter.

For activists and advocates, it is vindication. Overwhelming demand across services for women and children in need of protection, as well as family violence-related fatalities, indicate significant system failures. The comprehensive character of the royal commission report is thus received as overdue.

For politicians, the report is a formidable test. Family violence victims come into contact at multiple points across different departments. This means that an overhaul requires a serious outlay of secure funding.

The required investments are wide-ranging, from physical infrastructure to information sharing models, tech-related upgrades, localised response hubs, additional personnel and professional training, governance structures, and research and formal review. This isn't a new menu - it is a full kitchen rebuild.

The royal commission also suggests the development of guidelines for removing barriers to seeking and receiving support in other spaces. Things like: adding family violence to
eligibility criteria for private subsidies or hardship programs; customer service training around recognising economic abuse; routine assessments for family violence risk at antenatal settings or mental health services; and managing liabilities (debt, rent, infringement fines) in favour of victims rather than their abusers.

The imperative is to fix the cracks through which victims often fall. For diverse communities, workplaces, utility providers, banks, landlords and healthcare providers, this is a wake-up call. Being able to identify family violence situations and responsibly handle them can no longer be passed on as 'none of our business'. Everyone is implicated.

For institutions such as the police force, courts and corrections system, the report must be nothing less than a turning point. The recommendations reveal gaps - such as the way case files are built and shared across agencies, the efficacy of intervention orders and safety plans, and capacity levels at magistrates' and children's courts.

"Being able to identify family violence situations and responsibly handle them can no longer be passed on as 'none of our business'. Everyone is implicated."

While cultivating gender equality and respectful relationships runs parallel to structural reform, the degree to which family violence is curbed may well hinge on such institutions. Victims and survivors deserve a system that works for them, not against them.

As long as processes for ensuring their protection and recovery are burdensome and demoralising - rather than liberating - then the system remains broken.

Secondly, protective measures (orders, injunctions, sentences, mandatory programs) must bear strength as deterrents. Perpetrators thrive on impunity. Impunity is built on uncertainty of punishment, cultures of silence, victim-blaming and perceived collusion with figures of authority. It also assumes that there are no alternatives to abusive or violent behaviour.

Dismantling this is central to violence prevention and ensuring the safety of women and children in the home. The royal commission addresses this goal across 227 recommendations.

But the report is the map, not the road. Political will, as with other royal commissions, will determine the extent to which this inquiry has been worthwhile.

Fatima Measham is a Eureka Street consulting editor. She tweets @foomeister and blogs at This is Complicated.

Main image from Shutterstock
Sherpa Spring challenges Western privilege on Everest

REVIEW

Tim Kroenert

Sherpa (M). Director: Jennifer Peedom. 96 minutes

In April 2013, an altercation broke out between Sherpa and Western climbers on the middle slopes of Mt Everest. While accounts conflicted in their specifics, it seems the catalyst was a breach of etiquette by the Europeans, with the potential to hinder or endanger the Sherpa as they worked. Longstanding resentment based in a perception that Sherpa assume the bulk of the risk but a fraction of the credit for Western climbers' achievements on the world's highest peak boiled over, with dangerous results.

A year later and with those events as a jumping off point, Australian filmmaker Jennifer Peedom travelled to Everest, to document the sizeable tourist industry at the mountain from the perspective of its often unspoken heroes, the Sherpa. She sets her sights on Phurba Tashi, from the village of Khumjung, Nepal, who works as a guide for New Zealander Russell Brice's expedition company. At the time Phurba had summited Everest 21 times - once shy of a world record.

Her film explores Phurba's home and family life: the spiritual dimensions of his and other Sherpa's relationship with Chomolungma, Everest; and his wife's fear for his safety in what is an extremely dangerous (if well-paid, by ordinary Nepalese standards), profession. It also charts the often-fraught relationship between Western climbers and Sherpa, from Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay up to today's half-billion-dollar industry, dominated by Western tour companies and largely staffed by Sherpa.
If Peedom was expecting to find signs of a growing sense of self-agency behind the docile facade of the legendary 'Smiling Sherpa', she couldn't have predicted a rawer or more tragic scenario against which it would play out. The film details the risks endured by Sherpa working for the tour companies in Everest's notorious Khumbu Icefall; then, when an avalanche comes through and kills 16 Sherpa doing just that, Peedom and her crew are there to capture the aftermath.

"Peedom was expecting to find signs of a growing sense of self-agency behind the docile facade of the legendary 'Smiling Sherpa'."

It is a harrowing and politically provocative account. After confronting the initial grief and shock, the other Sherpa on the mountain become outraged at the meagre compensation offered by the Nepalese government to the dead Sherpa's families. They feel that the industry on Everest is a cash cow for the government, yet has been poorly regulated by them. What's more, they collectively don't wish to keep climbing that season, out of respect for their deceased friends and colleagues.

This predictably does not sit will with the Western climbers and tour operators. For some members of Brice's group, this year marks their second tilt at the summit, after a previous tour several years earlier was cancelled due to dangerous conditions. They feel the outlay of time and money, not to mention the 'bucket-list' imperative to conquer the peak, entitle them to proceed. Their sense of injustice is directed at the striking Sherpa, as is that of some tour operators (with at least one eye on the bottom line).

Polite facades peel away to reveal ugly attitudes. The indignant Sherpa are dismissed as 'hot-headed' by one tour operator, and compared disparagingly to the Arab Spring. One American climber, responding to a dubious claim that some Sherpa have threatened others with violence if they keep climbing, dubs them 'terrorists' and refers inane to September 11. So readily is the cage of privilege rattled by the sound of marginalised
voices amplified by unity and conviction.

Tim Kroenert is assistant editor of Eureka Street.
The value of protest lies in ritual not results

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

The Palm Sunday Refugee Marches have come and gone; the travails of people who seek asylum continue. In a recent article that reflects her rich experience, Moira Rayner was right to say that marches are not effective in changing policy. She was also right to emphasise the importance of small local groups that beaver away. But there may be something more to be said for marches.
Marches are certainly not usually effective. Where they are, as in the Vietnam War marches in Australia or in Manila under Marcos, the fortress was already crumbling.

But more typical was the march, one of the largest held in Melbourne, to dissuade the government from joining the prospective Iraq invasion. Very shortly afterwards, supported by compliant commentators and public opinion, John Howard sent Australians to join that deceitful and foolish adventure whose costs the world is still paying.

If marches are often without effect, they are not a waste of energy. Their value lies not in their effectiveness but in their ritual. They are a form of celebration, appropriately held on the weekend, the descendant of the Sabbath day that freed people from work for more important things.

Marches belong to Carnival, interrupting the severe regime of fasting from justice and from compassion that marks the long political Lent.

The energy of marches comes from the small groups of whom Moira spoke so tellingly - the rural congregations, the community organisations, the special interest groups, the committed individuals, all joined together in a raggle-taggle line frayed by the bobbing placards of different heights and shapes.

They bring to life a great tradition, as nonagenerian members of the post-war peace movement mingle with children of environmentalists.

In marches, people spruik their wares, seeking disciples and advertising their events. Banners badge organisations and their work, but their badging is often undercut. A life-size Pope Francis carried on a stick marches alongside a boy in a T-shirt that invites its readers to do unseemly things to Tony Abbott.

"Ultimately marches are important because they enact a full, vibrant and humane vision of society in the face of a narrow and vicious version."
Good marches are a place for play, and so are never far from anarchy. Small boys make their own double-sided placards, one side of which invites the sympathetic to ban uranium mining. The other side invites the hostile to support it.

To many of us, too, they offer the delight of walking with police alongside us down the main city streets, gazing condescendingly at the prowling cars that snort impatiently at the cross streets, frustrated in their passion to skitch straying pedestrians.

Marches also declare a ceasefire. People stand alongside each other on issues promoted by the march, who regard each other as enemies on many other matters. Marchers from faith groups explore rather than dismiss where Marxists, anarchists and ecofeminists are coming from, and vice versa.

Of course, marches have a serious purpose. It is put into words in the ritual speeches and endorsements by politicians and other serious people.

But it is more strongly embodied in the presence and tribulations of the people whose cause the march takes up: young men in community detention, a refugee doctor walking with Doctors for Asylum Seekers, a young Muslim women with her children, and the people whose haunting faces are displayed on placards. These people are the royalty of the march because they embody its cause.

Ultimately marches are important because they enact a full, vibrant and humane vision of society in the face of a narrow and vicious version.

The peaceful anarchy, the clashing of symbols, the enthusiasm of generous small groups, the reconciliation for the day of natural enemies, the enthusiasm that comes from unexpected connection, all compose a living sketch of society in which strangers are welcome, people meet in joy and not in fear, in which broad and hospitable values prevail over the narrow calculus of self-interest, and where people practice, not for war, but for peace.

Marches are rarely effective in achieving their immediate goals. They live on only in the memory of the participants whom they encourage to keep the faith. But the hope for society that they embody in time will shame and finally judge the powers responsible for the brutalities against which they protest.

Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of Eureka Street.
Leaders of the opposition

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas
The bleeding obvious about homelessness

AUSTRALIA

John Falzon

The Prime Minister wants us to be clever. Well here's clever: How about we make sure everybody's got a place to call home?

We're a rich nation, so how can we not afford to provide something as basic, as essential, as a place to live? What are the compelling economic reasons why we can't make sure everyone has a place to feel safe, a place from which we can go to school, take care of our health, and go to work?

How is it okay to deny people, including children, a place where they can love and be loved, where they can connect with each other instead of being cut off and, sometimes literally, locked out?

We can afford to line the pockets of corporations that manage offshore concentration camps in our name - a highly expensive exercise in cruelty and barbarism. We carefully construct limbos to which we consign people who, as it happens, believe so strongly in Australia that they risk life and limb to come here as they flee the cruelty and barbarism that has overtaken their countries of origin.

If we want to be clever, if we want to be innovative, these are the very people we should welcome with open arms: people who believe in us, and desperately want to build a different future with us.

If we want to be clever - and I agree with the Prime Minister that we should indeed aspire to this as a society - we'll make sure everyone has a place to call home, along with a well-resourced, needs-based education system and universal healthcare. Let's face it;
not having a place to live and feel safe is about as bad as it gets when it comes to barriers to education.

Homelessness can also mean unbearable and overcrowded living conditions, parents struggling with the difficult job of trying to get a job (while being told that they are just not trying hard enough), or kids trying to attempt the herculean task of studying when all they have is a tiny corner of a cramped and noisy lounge-room that doubles as a bedroom at night.

The problem of homelessness and the shortage of social and affordable housing is so huge that we need a massive solution and a massive financial commitment if we want to lay claim to being civilised and fair, let alone smart and innovative. This is why, among other things such as reforms to negative gearing and capital gains tax exemptions, we need a $10 billion social and affordable housing fund.

"You're not going to encourage innovation if you keep relying on the blunt tool, but sharp weapon, of class, race, gender and disability-based incarceration."

There are more than 100,000 people experiencing homelessness and over 850,000 households experiencing housing stress (where a household's income is in the bottom 40 per cent of incomes and it is paying more than 30 per cent of this income on housing).

It's true that to fix a massive problem there will be a massive cost. But, to use a housing analogy, the longer you leave it to repair the roof, the more you'll end up paying to fix the damage.

Similarly, the longer we leave it to fix the housing problem in Australia, the bigger the social and economic cost will be, for all of us. Because the cost of condemning masses of people to unemployment, low education outcomes and poor physical and mental health are incalculable.

That's in economic terms. In human terms we're staring down the barrel of a social crisis; a completely avoidable human tragedy writ large.

I know that those of us who are calling for a concrete solution to the housing and homelessness crisis are going to be written off as dreamers. Perhaps that's because there are forces in Australian society that don't want to acknowledge, let alone address, the nightmare that those who are forced to bear the daily brunt of inequality live within.

From the First Peoples all the way through to the most recent seekers of refuge, people suffer precisely because we have failed as a nation to bite the tax reform bullet; because there are those who persist in the fiction that it is justifiable to take way from those at the bottom in order to preserve the perks and privileges of those at the top.

I know too that we are going to be dismissed as bleeding hearts. But we're not bleeding hearts. We're just stating the bleeding obvious. You're not going to create the space for innovation unless you take care of accommodation as well as health and education.

And you're certainly not going to encourage innovation if you keep relying on the blunt
tool, but sharp weapon, of class, race, gender and disability-based incarceration.

Because right now, in the midst of the homelessness and housing crisis, we’re making an art-form out of locking people up instead of housing them.

If you’re a member of the First Peoples or an asylum seeker or someone forced to bear the brunt of class or gender inequality or someone living with a disability, being locked up follows hot on the heels of being locked out. But as activist and philosopher Angela Davis reminds us: 'Prisons do not disappear problems. Prisons disappear human beings.'

Making sure everyone has a place to call home on the other hand; well, that makes us feel human.

Dr John Falzon is Chief Executive of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

Download the St Vincent De Paul Society report The Ache for Home: a plan to address chronic homelessness and housing unaffordability in Australia here.
Jailing fine defaulters punishes poverty

AUSTRALIA

Kate Galloway

The death in custody of Yamatji woman Ms Dhu in WA in 2014 brought to public attention the ugly reality of law and policy that allow the jailing of those who default in payment of their fines.

Ms Dhu was picked up by police in 2014 with unpaid fines of $3622 and jailed. She was suffering from a broken rib at the time of her arrest, but a medical examination deemed her fit for custody.

Her condition worsened, but a second examination also declared her fit. While her health continued to deteriorate, police officers ignored her pleas for help until she died. An inquest into her death is presently underway.

There are many layers of injustice that play out in this case. One is the treatment of Aboriginal people in custody, in a justice system that is wracked with racism. If Ms Dhu were treated with appropriate care in custody, her life may have been saved.

Treatment of victims of domestic violence is also in issue in this case. It has been put to the inquest that Ms Dhu should not have been treated as a criminal, but as a victim of domestic violence. This too may have saved her life.

But at the root of this case, and so many other cases of incarceration of Indigenous Australians, is the issue of imprisonment for non-payment of fines.

Fines are usually levied as punishment for less serious offences that are not themselves worthy of jail. However jail may be a consequence of failing to pay a fine. For those who
are able to afford the fines, jail might seem inevitable.

The WA corrective services minister, Joe Francis, has made it clear that fine defaulters are to be punished. He has proposed that the WA government garnishee offenders' welfare payments to recoup unpaid fines, and to increase jail time where they remain unpaid.

In his view, those who do not pay fines are shirking their responsibility, and many are taking what he calls the 'soft option' of spending four days in prison instead of paying their fines.

His comments fail to appreciate how fines operate to entrench disadvantage. Fines that cannot be paid are an inappropriate and discriminatory form of punishment.

"Whatever Francis may say, prison is not a 'soft option'. It is a dangerous, even life threatening, option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians."

There are three key problems with the way in which fines function in the criminal justice system. The first is that there are some offences that disproportionately target people who are disadvantaged in some way.

One example of an offence that disproportionately affects Indigenous people, particularly in WA, is unlicensed driving. It has been found, for example, that 40-60 per cent of Indigenous prisoners in Roebourne Regional Prison are there on driving offences.

Many Indigenous Australians do not have birth certificates and therefore cannot get a drivers licence. Others cannot afford to become licensed.

Yet those who live in remote areas often have no means of transport other than by car. When they are caught driving unlicensed, they receive a fine, and since many are unable to pay, they are consequently are jailed.

The circumstances of many Aboriginal people in remote WA thus makes it difficult for them to participate in the apparently mainstream activity of driving. The ultimate consequence of attempting to do so, ending up in prison, thus significantly compounds the initial disadvantage.

The comments by the WA corrective services minister Francis that there are 'those in society who don't want to have to pay or do anything for their failings' ignores the reality behind these offences, and that many are simply unable to pay their fines.

Even where the system of fines allows for offenders to negotiate based on their special circumstances, this assumes a level of literacy and regularity of habit. For example, it assumes that offenders are able to get to the court, that they are able to show up at the right time, and that they are able to engage with bureaucratic processes.

This last issue has a cultural component also, namely the confidence with which a person can deal with authority. For sections of the community that routinely experience discrimination, such as Indigenous Australians, this can be an impediment to engaging
successfully with an authoritarian system.

It may not be clear just why Ms Dhu defaulted on her fines. But what we do know is that because she was an Aboriginal Australian, she was at risk of being fined, that she was at risk of being unable to pay the fine, and that being sent to prison put her at grave risk for her life.

Whatever Francis may say, prison is not a 'soft option'. Further, we know that it is a dangerous, indeed a life threatening, option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Because of the established links between being an Indigenous Australian and being fined, unable to pay, and jailed; and because of the need to minimise incarceration of Indigenous Australians, governments must address how these offences are framed, and the appropriateness of the punishment for breach.

There are simple measures that may have kept Ms Dhu out of prison, and thus saved her life. Although Francis says that 'the punishment needs to fit the crime, not your income', there are successful models in which penalties are proportionate to income.

Ultimately however, there must be the possibility of forgiving the debt in appropriate circumstances. It must be possible, for those who are unable to pay, to wipe the slate clean. In the case of Ms Dhu, such a provision would have been the difference between life and death.

Kate Galloway is a legal academic with an interest in social justice.
Family violence needs whole community response

AUSTRALIA

Julie Edwards

Over the last few years Australians have become much more aware of the extent of family violence and of its effects on victims and perpetrators. The tragic death of Luke Batty and the advocacy of Rosie Batty, his mother, were catalysts for this change.

But the statistics continue to horrify. Seventy-nine women were killed by family violence in Australia last year. This year, barely three months old, the toll already sits at 14.

At the time of Luke Batty's death, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews declared the whole system broken: 'It doesn't protect the vulnerable, it doesn't punish the guilty and more of the same policies will only mean more of the same tragedies'.

In December 2014 his government announced Australia's first royal commission into family violence. Many community organisations, including Jesuit Social Services, welcomed this.

Today the Royal Commission has released its report. It contains 227 recommendations about how the government can work with the community to make real and lasting changes, all of which the government has already committed to implement.

The work of Jesuit Social Services both with people who have experienced family violence and those who perpetrate it has convinced us that a more integrated and coherent way to prevent violence against women and children and to keep them safe is needed.
This includes sustained investment in safe, secure and affordable housing for women and children escaping violence. To this end, the commission recommends a 'blitz' on rehousing family violence victims stuck in crisis and transitional housing, as well as individualised funding packages to open up access to private rentals for people fleeing violent relationships.

But, important though it is, it is not enough simply to support the victims of family violence. We also need to prevent family violence from occurring. This requires a strategy for preventing family violence that involves the whole community.

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It is heartening to see this supported in the report, which acknowledges that the government does not currently have 'a system which coordinates and oversees implementation of responses to family violence'.

This whole-of-community approach would include a school curriculum to teach children about respectful relationships. It also must include culturally specific responses for Aboriginal Victorians and other newly arrived communities.

At the heart of preventing violence is changing men's behaviour. The recommendation of the royal commission that 'more work is needed to develop a suite of interventions and programs' for men is welcome.

The implementation of this is vital. Through our work with men of all ages who act violently in intimate relationships and in their families we are very aware of the consequences of the shortage of relevant and effective programs to change men's behaviour.

When participants are ready to work towards change, they often face long waiting lists. In addition, many of the programs that exist are not tailored for specific groups such as young men or men with intellectual disabilities. Critical windows of opportunity are being missed.

The most effective way to keep women and children safe is to change the attitudes and structures in our society that excuse or minimise violence against women, and simultaneously to work directly with individual men at risk of perpetrating further abuse or violence against their partners.

The criminal justice system has a particularly significant role to play in working with men at risk of acting violently in the family. It must adopt proactive and systemic approaches to people who have acted violently towards family members, by both holding offenders to account and working to prevent repeated violence by helping them to address the causes of their violent behaviour.

Only when we get this right can we begin to create safer communities for women and children.
The memory of Luke Batty and the appalling statistics cited at the beginning of this article point to the extent of family violence and the human cost associated with this. They also compel us, the entire community, to address it. The royal commission has proposed some valuable recommendations, and the challenge now is to implement them.

Julie Edwards is the CEO of Jesuit Social Services.

The Jesuit Social Services submission to the royal commission can be downloaded here [PDF].

Main image: Shutterstock
History of disability discrimination is present in Australia

AUSTRALIA

Justin Glyn

There is a persistent vision of humans as needing to conform to a model of perfection in order to earn the right to survive: success, good looks and power. Those who flourish must be the best ... well, because they flourish. Those deemed to fall short of the mark for whatever reason - especially if they happen to have physical or other incapacities, are pushed aside.
While Darwin may have observed the phenomenon of 'survival of the fittest' at play in evolution, leading to a scientific veneer being given to 'social Darwinism', the logic of might makes right is, in fact, ancient.

It is brutally expressed in Thucydides' Melian Dialogue in which the Athenians justify the genocide which they are about to commit (in 415 BCE) on the people of Melos:

'Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a law of their nature wherever they can rule they will, This law was not made by us, and we are not the first who have acted upon it; we did but inherit it, and shall bequeath it to all time, and we know that you and all mankind, if you were as strong as we are, would do as we do.'

While this is ostensibly a more civilised age with lip-service being paid to the common rights of humans since the French Revolution, the Athenian world view is proving to be a remarkably persistent stain to eradicate - especially when it comes to the most vulnerable within societies.

The continuing struggles of women and people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds for equality are well-known. Less so, perhaps, is the history of disability discrimination.

People with disabilities have lived on society's margins since biblical times. In 1939, extending eugenics and sterilisation campaigns developed in the US in the early 20th century, Hitler authorised the vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens ('the destruction of lives unworthy of life'), targeting those with extreme mental, physical and psychiatric disabilities.

This project was accelerated with the development of trucks designed to discharge their exhaust fumes within the car. The direct result was the gas chambers first tested in Sobibor and Treblinka and then used to destroy others deemed undesirable by the Nazis including, most notoriously, Jewish people.

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- which can no longer be afforded when there are belts to be tightened or hard choices to be made."

But today, things are different, surely? It is true that the disability rights movement has flourished in parallel with other equality movements since the Second World War. Life expectancy and employment among those of us with various disabilities has soared, at least in the West.

Unfortunately, however, not only has discrimination not been eradicated but people with disabilities (including those adapting to the debilitating effects of age) have, like indigenous people, the poor, refugees and others with limited voice in society, been seen as soft touches.

Meeting our need to live full and productive lives falls under a narrative of charity or pity - something which can no longer be afforded when there are belts to be tightened or hard choices to be made. In other words, we are not regarded as full and equal citizens.

This came out in Britain when the Chancellor, George Osborne, in announcing his budget, announced that new tax breaks for the richest in society were to be funded by a £4 billion cut in disability services. Most of these would come from stripping people of allowances designed to allow them to adapt to their disabilities and live independently in such areas as dressing and toileting.

About 370,000 people will be affected if the cuts go ahead, in an average amount of £3000 each.

In Britain, however, those with disabilities might be saved by the referendum on the European referendum. The fight over Britain's threatened exit from the EU which has led to the resignation of the responsible minister, Ian Duncan Smith, seems to have also resulted in the cuts being kicked into the long grass ... for now.

Australia is, however, not exempt from the logic of persecuting its weakest, so spectacularly displayed in Britain. So it is that the Minister for Social Services, Christian Porter, infamously used his social media accounts late last year to favourably quote an article which described spending on people with disabilities as 'a burden'.

At around the same time, Scott Morrison (the Treasurer) announced that pensions should not be seen as an 'entitlement' but as a 'welfare payment'. The idea that 'welfare' is an act of grace and favour extended at the will of the government is pernicious - it implies that it can be withdrawn just as easily.

Equally, the idea that those too incapacitated or aged to work are 'burdens', rather than members of society entitled to support by reason of their common humanity is equally telling.

Indeed, the debility that comes to everyone with age exposes the myth of disability as something that only happens to 'them'. Then again, you don't need much history to see that the idea that some lives, the weakest and most vulnerable, are less worthy than others does not lead anywhere good.
Justin Glyn SJ is studying for the priesthood. Previously he practised law in South Africa and New Zealand and has a PhD in administrative and international law.
Turnbull's uncertain road to glory

AUSTRALIA

John Warhurst

Media reaction to Malcolm Turnbull's decision to recall Parliament on 18 April was remarkably glowing. The move was acclaimed as a masterstroke and his decisiveness applauded. However the story about the path Turnbull has laid out and the roadblocks that still remain is actually more complex.

Turnbull faced two roadblocks. One was a recalcitrant Senate while the other combined a conservative Liberal party and a disgruntled Coalition partner.

Both were overhangs from the Abbott era. The Senate roadblock by the micro-parties was famously linked to the failed 2014 Budget, the most important element in the demise of the Abbott government. But, despite Turnbull's decision to undertake Senate reform, this roadblock had already diminished in public importance since he became Prime Minister last September.

The more important road block was internal. He had cornered himself when he negotiated the leadership and then been further blocked by conservative party colleagues, continuously led from the backbench by Tony Abbott.

It was his internal party and Coalition compromises on social policy plus indecision over taxation reforms which weakened his public profile. His falling public support was not related to failure to pass legislation through the Senate.
Turnbull's strategy is to deal with both of his roadblocks together by linking industrial relations reform for the building and construction industry with Senate reform. His hope is that both his party and his Coalition partner will unite behind him on an iconic conservative parties' issue, thus resolving both his internal and external problems in one swoop.

That assumption may misread the nature of modern Liberal factional politics. While his internal conservative party opponents are interested in economic and industrial policy that may no longer be their major interest. They have become cultural warriors rather than old-style economic advocates.

"If the legislation does pass the Senate he could still use another trigger to call a double dissolution, but that would look like a tricky breach of faith."

The second aspect of getting on top of things for Turnbull is to ultimately win the election convincingly, thus earning a mandate within his own party and with the electorate. However, neither successfully treading the path to a 2 July election nor winning that election convincingly is certain.

He has recalled the parliament for three weeks discussion and debate of his industrial relations legislation. In doing so he has challenged the cross-bench to pass this legislation so as to avoid a double dissolution trigger. However he has also promised that if the legislation is passed he will not call a double dissolution.

He must be supremely confident of gaining a double dissolution election, but a lot remains outside of his control. If the legislation does pass the Senate he could still use another trigger to call a double dissolution, but that would look like a tricky breach of faith.

If he opts for an ordinary election then there are two consequences. First, the micro-party senators will still be humiliated. He will have to deal with their anger not just until the next election but, in the case of all but Senator Madigan, until 2020.

Secondly, Turnbull must now deliver a popular Budget despite severe financial constraints. It can't be a normal pre-election Budget loaded with inducements for voters. Personal income tax cuts have effectively already been ruled out by the Treasurer, Scott Morrison.

Any surprises in the Budget must be attractive because the electorate is in no mood for further hits. By then we should all know what sort of election we are going to face and when it will be. We should know whether the first Morrison/Turnbull Budget is a short-term election special or business as usual.

Furthermore the popularity of the government remains much less predictable than it seemed to be last Christmas. The polls have tightened. The Labor Opposition has been given a small sniff of victory, while the Greens are flourishing.

Turnbull has set out on a long and winding road which might look clearly marked but is still paved with uncertainty.
John Warhurst is an Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University and a former chair of the Australian Republican Movement.