

The search for meaning begins at home	
<i>Ashleigh Green</i>	<a href="#">1</a>
Vigilance needed as South Africa welcomes Zimbabweans	
<i>David Holdcroft</i>	<a href="#">3</a>
Sudan's moment of hope and fear	
<i>Jack de Groot</i>	<a href="#">5</a>
Stable bleatings	
<i>Various</i>	<a href="#">7</a>
Christmas in Islam	
<i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<a href="#">11</a>
Personal reflections on the Christmas Island tragedy	
<i>Tony Kevin</i>	<a href="#">13</a>
Excavating the Bible for the future	
<i>Peter Kirkwood</i>	<a href="#">16</a>
Another date on the refugee tragedy calendar	
<i>Kerry Murphy</i>	<a href="#">18</a>
Oprah and Australia's 'socialist' health care	
<i>Susan Biggar</i>	<a href="#">21</a>
Losing Mikayla	
<i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<a href="#">23</a>
Education in a post-WikiLeaks world	
<i>Fatima Measham</i>	<a href="#">25</a>
Praying to Santa	
<i>Frank O'Shea</i>	<a href="#">28</a>
Shoulder angels	
<i>Various</i>	<a href="#">30</a>
WikiLeaks and artistic freedom in China	
<i>Tony Smith</i>	<a href="#">35</a>
Don't make smokers pay to quit	
<i>Michael Mullins</i>	<a href="#">37</a>
Burmese refugees' Christmas story	
<i>Duncan MacLaren</i>	<a href="#">39</a>
Escaping Oprah and Christmas	
<i>Brian Matthews</i>	<a href="#">41</a>
Oprah and WikiLeaks	
<i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<a href="#">43</a>
U2's way to God	
<i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<a href="#">45</a>
Julian Assange's problem for feminists	
<i>Ruby Hamad</i>	<a href="#">47</a>
Environmental road kill on the highway to Perth	
<i>H. A. Willis</i>	<a href="#">49</a>
Keith Richards' other church	
<i>Philip Harvey</i>	<a href="#">51</a>
Money is rooted	
<i>Various</i>	<a href="#">53</a>
Kevin Rudd and 'harmless' WikiLeaks	
<i>Tony Kevin</i>	<a href="#">56</a>
Cronulla racism five years on	

*Sarah Ayoub* ..... [59](#)  
Don't shoot the messenger, award him the Nobel Peace Prize  
*Michael Mullins* ..... [61](#)

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Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Requests for permission to reprint material from the website and this edition should be addressed to the Editor.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

PO Box 553  
Richmond  
VIC 3121  
Australia

Tel +61 3 9427 7311  
Fax +61 3 9428 4450  
Eureka@eurekastreet.com.au

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## **The search for meaning begins at home**

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Ashleigh Green*

As the end of the year approaches, thousands of Australians will embark on exchange programs, gap years, working holidays and overseas pilgrimages. In the chaos of a globalised world, we hope 'going away' will grant fulfillment and purpose. We scatter ourselves, searching for extra-ordinary moments.

But 'home', perhaps, offers different treasure: an experience of the self, embodied in community.

In the film and novel *Eat Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert travels to the ends of the earth to find herself. Her home town fails her, drains her of life, and Gilbert seeks renewal through escape. She travels to Rome and gorges herself with pizza and wine. Gilbert's purpose is locked away in far-off lands.

As a society, we dream of the romanticised escape. A workmate tells me of her plans to move to England indefinitely. There, she tells me, things will fall into place. There are more jobs over there, more opportunities, more of a chance to discover who she is and what she is to do with her life. 'Things aren't good over here,' she tells me, referring to relationship problems and job difficulties.

I am constantly presented with tales of adventure, various means of escaping the quandaries of the world. Yet talking to my globalised workmates makes me wonder whether 'escape' is the best solution. Italian pizza and Indian ashrams add threads of colour to life's routine, but with these as our focus we can ignore the depth of the local experience.

Just as communities cannot exist without people who are grounded in the local life of the region, we need our communities for solidity of self.

Home need not be the site of failed dreams, as suggested in *Eat Pray Love*. I look to my grandparents, whose identities were formed and flourished in the same community. Their values were nurtured by the elders. Grandparents ground us. As we grow, our grandparents and elders offer wisdom that no overseas pilgrimage will provide: local wisdom.

The workforce today demands flexibility and adaptability. Yet amid the inevitability of external change, local communities offer us strength and consistency of values.

The local experience is core to the spirituality of many Indigenous Australians. I recently spent time in Nganmarriyanga, a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory, where I was greeted by a child. 'This is the country of my mother,' she told me.

Central to the community was pride for the land that bore the footsteps of their

ancestors. Solutions to community issues were sought, not elsewhere, but within the mystery of the land and the wisdom of the elders.

Miriam Rose Ungenmerr speaks of *Dadirri*, an inner, still awareness that draws us closer into our present place of being. 'Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course &mdash; like the seasons.'

Life need not be a monotonous and narrow-minded pursuit. There is no need to hijack our overseas dreams and invest our energy into roast dinners and bread-and-butter custards. But our homes, our communities and our experience of the local is an alternative we forget.

The ordinary has a certain stigma attached, which is manifested in films such as *Eat Pray Love*. Travel has its place. *Eat Pray Love* reveals the beauty of Roman cafes and Balinese retreats, places of colour, life and wisdom. But the essence of our identities can be found locally, in the land of our upbringing.

## **Vigilance needed as South Africa welcomes Zimbabweans**

HUMAN RIGHTS

*David Holdcroft*

The crowd outside the Home Affairs Office in Commissioner Street Home in central Johannesburg shows no sign of abating. Despite the onset of the wet season, which sees heavy rain almost daily, hundreds of Zimbabweans gather for their daily ritual wait. Some are checking on the progress of their applications for work or study permits: others, reportedly up to 800 a day nationally, are lining up for the first time to register.

As the 31 December deadline approaches for Zimbabwean nationals to register in South Africa it is becoming apparent that, as well intentioned as this project might appear, there are some serious flaws.

Last week the Department of Home Affairs announced it had received 123,000 applications for regularisation and had processed around 40,000. It also announced that, although there was to be no extension of the deadline, a receipt showing registration for the process would suffice to enable people to stay in the country past the deadline.

There are an estimated 1.2 to 1.5 million Zimbabweans living in South Africa. While some of these people already have work permits, and others are included in special categories for which the current process does not apply (there were 145,000 Zimbabwean applicants for asylum last year who do not come under the process), there is nevertheless clearly something seriously wrong with the arithmetic.

Put simply, up to 1 million people do not seem to be accounted for. Government has repeatedly stated that those without valid documents after 31 March will be deported. There is fear that a humanitarian crisis looms.

Closer investigation of the implementation of the Zimbabwean Documentation Project reveals a process hastily put together without adequate prior consultation or planning. It is clear now that the project is aimed at people in formal employment and study &mdash; these have formed the majority of the applicants so far and many would have had passports already or, if not, could afford the costs to obtain one. South Africa stands to benefit by these mostly skilled people remaining in the country.

There was recognition too that many Zimbabweans were living with false identities and an amnesty was declared. It is unclear how many people have availed themselves of this.

But there are many groups of Zimbabweans who do not fall into these neat categories. Unaccompanied minors (young people under 18 who are not accompanied by an adult guardian and who have no such person in South Africa),

many of whom have left Zimbabwe following the economic and social disintegration of their families and the collapse of the rural school system, are entitled to protection in South Africa from the Department of Social Development.

It is unclear how these people will be affected and highly likely that, already marginalised from systems, they will continue to attempt to live 'undocumented' and thus will remain extremely vulnerable.

Victims of trafficking and women victims of violence and trauma, some of whom are recruited for the illegal sex industry and thus will be unable to prove employment, remain another vulnerable group. Stateless people, those whose families moved to Zimbabwe from Malawi or Mozambique for work in the agricultural sector, will not be eligible for Zimbabwean passports &mdash; a key requirement for regularisation. Many had moved to South Africa after losing their jobs in the so-called land reforms.

Seasonal workers are another group who cannot prove ongoing employment. It is encouraging to see that Home Affairs introduced a mobile registration unit in northern Limpopo province to take applications from farm labourers. There is an urgent need to extend this kind of outreach to workers in the informal sector, street vendors and others, who may have problems with proving their work status and/or identities and who are believed to form a much larger group.

Lastly there remains concern for genuine asylum seekers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these, when they go to renew their permits, are being coerced into renouncing the asylum process in favour of regularisation. Here they come up against the ambiguity of their status &mdash; they most often do not qualify as a refugee, even though they perceive themselves to be in a refugee-like situation. Vigilance is needed.

There is a growing awareness in government circles that the leniency and humanity shown to people fleeing from Zimbabwe in recent years has had the twin effect of putting pressure on the South African community at the same time as letting Mugabe's government 'off the hook'. It seems that political imperatives may have replaced humanitarian motives.

However, without better planning and some flexibility the South African authorities may have an embarrassing situation on its hands. One can only hope that when the time comes they have the common sense to recognise this, and that they act swiftly in response.

## **Sudan's moment of hope and fear**

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Jack de Groot*

In the wake of Rwanda's tragedy, the world stood as one and pledged: 'Never again'. Never again would we allow such a horrific abuse of human life and dignity to occur. Now, less than 20 years later, less than 1000 kilometres from Rwanda's borders &ndash; we find our promise being tested.

Five years ago, Sudan signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and put an end to half a century of devastating civil war, violence and bloodshed. Today, key provisions of that agreement &ndash; including border demarcation, wealth sharing, citizenship, and determining the status of the transitional areas &ndash; remain unfulfilled, and present a persistent threat to the cease-fire.

But the keystone of the CPA offers hope to a broken nation: a referendum giving the people of Southern Sudan the opportunity to become an independent state is scheduled for 9 January, 2011.

While the referendum has the potential to bring much-needed change to a region plagued by instability, the hope it brings is dimmed by rising tensions and threats of intimidation and violence that remain an ever-present reality.

Should early January see the country plunged once more into violent turmoil &ndash; a realistic fear no matter the outcome of the referendum &ndash; it is likely to reach far beyond Sudanese borders and implicate myriad African nations in a bloody conflict; a conflict the likes of which the world has not witnessed since Rwanda.

Sudan is not yet in crisis, the eyes of the world are not yet focused on the Sudanese people, but we have been here before. The signs are familiar, the potential for disaster unmistakable. The world must prepare.

Over the coming weeks, it is critical that Sudan receive support from governments and organisations around the world to ensure the change it requires for a peaceful future. A return to war will represent a moral failure on the part of all those charged with implementing the CPA, including the CPA guarantors and the international community.

For more than a decade, Caritas Australia has worked in Sudan to improve water and sanitation, education, and livelihood opportunities as well as offering emergency relief in times of crisis. With hope now that the Sudanese people may enter a new era of peace, tempered by the persistent threat to their human rights, the international Caritas network has begun planning its response to the chaos that may result from displacement, mass migration or the outbreak of civil war. Together with our international partners, Caritas Australia is committed to being a presence on the ground in Sudan to provide aid in an emergency situation, but

also working in the long-term to achieve lasting peace and stability.

In this season of reflection and prayer, it is critical that Australia considers its role in promoting peace around the world. The Government must seek involvement in international or regional initiatives that promote stability for Sudan, and all Australians must stay alert and informed of the situation. With the tragedy of Rwanda such a recent memory, we cannot now neglect our responsibilities to the global community.

We do not know what the outcome of the referendum will be, nor whether the ensuing weeks will bring a descent back into the devastating conflict of the past 50 years. What is now vital is that the people of Sudan be allowed their right to self-determination; that they are provided the opportunity to participate in the decisions that will shape their future, and create a more peaceful world in which human life and dignity are held sacred and the common good prevails.



## **Stable bleatings**

POETRY

*Various*

### **Before we begin**

Look at her,  
At the child cradled across her arm,  
Replete in milky sleep, perfectly composed;  
At how her fingers fuss over his perfumed skin,  
The cool heal of her palm.  
In her magnificat of assent  
She is kissed by mystery.  
Already she has begun to mitigate  
All that is obstinate, indifferent, cruel.  
Shy vesper lights  
Whisper in her eyes.  
In the stable  
Oxen shift the cud in their slow jaws,  
And in the mothy dark  
A spider watches from its lofty web,  
A Herod.  
On the hillsides, frost.  
A ewe is bleating in a troubled dream,  
A shepherd coughs.  
The angels are shuffling their feathered silences,  
brimming with a recklessness of song.  
- Grant Fraser

### **Second Thoughts in the Stable**

In the stable, there are animals  
who know what it's like to deliver.

There is no option but to share  
feed and shelter with them.  
There is no going back &ndash;  
my waters have broken.  
Some people love the scent of farms,  
dry hay, excrement, sweat from labour.  
I could throw up.  
Better out here than in the inn.  
I feel unstable, with all conventions crossed:  
Joseph is here. Who would have thought that?  
I am too young, too small,  
too unprepared to be a mother.  
I wonder if it really was an angel.  
What were You thinking?  
What was I thinking?  
What kind of crazy thing is birth?  
I am attended by livestock  
indifferent to my labour.  
Like a child, I want a distracting toy  
or Elizabeth to say the one encouraging thing:  
All within me leaps.  
There is no surely going back.  
All within me leaps.  
I bleat long, and long  
to see my innocence  
in my first baby's glance.  
- Marlene Marburg

### **Confinement**

A tiny dot

a cluster of atoms  
God  
Creator of all life  
locked  
into a cell  
barred  
from light  
blinded  
to former glory  
God  
Creator of Light  
imprisoned  
by dark  
treading  
water  
suspended  
in a sac  
God  
Creator of the mighty deep  
trapped  
in limbo  
cramped  
in so small a capsule  
hands tied  
God  
Creator of all Space  
compressed  
in a cocoon  
heart racing  
bracing himself

for re-entry  
God  
Creator of all births  
is born  
to set us free.  
- Janette Fernando

## **Christmas in Islam**

### RELIGION

*Andrew Hamilton*

The Gospels describe Christmas as a time of great happiness that a saviour has been born. But they also intimate the murderous business through which salvation will come. Not only the star but also the shadow of Herod stands over the place of birth.

This Christmas many Christians in predominantly Muslim nations will also be shadowed by fear.

In Iraq, churches have recently been bombed and Christians murdered. In Pakistan, Asia Bibi (pictured) awaits hanging, accused of insulting the prophet Mahommed. The Pakistan Government has backed off its feeble attempt to provide some measure of justice in the process. Meanwhile the United Nations will consider a resolution that endorses similar laws against religious defamation.

Middle Eastern Catholics have expressed disappointment at the response of Western Christians. This response ranges from helpless and embarrassed attention that quickly modulates into neglect, to an ideological assault on Islam.

The latter sees the sufferings of Christians as the expression of the mortal struggle between Christianity and Islam, and as a demonstration of the innate militancy of Islam towards those whom it classes as infidels.

Neither response respects duly the Christians who suffer. A proper response must consider first the complexity of a situation which cannot be reduced to religious difference. Antipathy to Christianity is fuelled by resentment against Western powers that are identified with Christianity.

This grievance can be traced back to the Crusades. But the militant forms of Islam that have corroded tolerance for Christians in many Islamic societies owe more to contemporary history. Western support for Israel and the humiliation both of the Palestinian people and of surrounding countries have favoured the spread of a more narrow interpretation of Islam.

The United States invasion of Iraq has been catastrophic for Iraqi Christians. Under Saddam Hussein they lived in relative peace. As a result of the invasion, they have been identified both with the United States as Christians and as clients of the Sunni.

The antagonism between Sunni and Shiite and the cooptation by Iran and Saudi Arabia of radical groups has hemmed in the space for happy co-existence.

It is easy for politicians and local landLords to draw on this potent mixture of religion and prejudice to inflame local grievances about property or power. Christians are a convenient scapegoat to focus resentment.

This complexity explains in part why the response of Western Christians is so muted. It shows that they do not have a detached standing point from which to look at the suffering of Middle Eastern Christians. Western Christians, as indeed all Western people, are complicit in it. We inherit the consequences of the Crusades, our policies towards Israel and the Palestinians, our participation in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So, the sufferings of the Palestinian Christians are not only factually complex but emotionally complex. They forbid us to set them in a detached ideological framework, but invite us to work out a more complex form of solidarity.

The 'we' that links Western Christians and Christians living in Muslim societies involves a double set of relationships. The first relates them as groups of fellow Christians. The second relates them as members of Western and Islamic polities, requiring Westerners to acknowledge the often discreditable history of their dealings.

The proper relationship between Christians whose life is stable and those whose lives are precarious is clear. It is adequately described in the early church. One the major thrust of Paul's mission was to collect money to send to the impoverished church in Jerusalem. This was echoed, too, in the care and responsibility that larger churches offered to the martyrs in far off places.

But leaders of Western churches are unlikely to press for such solidarity, or Christian congregations to hear it, unless Western Christians own their complex history with Islam. Solidarity with Christians in the Islamic world cannot be built unless it is accompanied by solidarity with Islamic peoples as well.

It is contradictory to embrace Christians as the victims of Islam while ignoring the way in which both they and Muslims in the region have been the victims of Western depredation and invasion.

## Personal reflections on the Christmas Island tragedy

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Tony Kevin*

For me, last week's sad events offer an eerie replay of my questioning of public accountability about the SIEV X tragedy during ten months in 2002. In just three days, I have been reminded of how efficiently Australia quarantines difficult questions that threaten to disturb our national self-esteem.

Marg Hutton, my former SIEV X research collaborator, advised me promptly when news broke of the tragedy on Wednesday. Our reactions were similar: why had this SIEV not been safely intercepted?

I emailed a few trusted colleagues in public life and media, suggesting that the responsibility of Australia's border protection authorities is to detect and safely intercept in the vicinity of Christmas Island or Ashmore Reef all incoming SIEV boats, whoever has sent them. This is a requirement of the law of maritime rescue &ndash; the duty of care to preserve all human life in peril at sea.

Australia has an efficient and powerful long-distance radar, [JORN](#) . We could normally expect that the boat's movements would be registered on JORN long before &ndash; probably hundreds of miles before &ndash; it got anywhere close to the stormy waters around Christmas Island. JORN's capabilities and limitations were no secret &ndash; anyone could read about them on the web.

Using JORN-sourced voyage data, our border security ships are tasked to go out and intercept SIEVs. A border protection interception boat should have been sent out long before this asylum-seeker boat got anywhere near Christmas Island's dangerous cliffs in stormy weather. This tragedy, like SIEV X, suggested that something may have gone wrong in the border protection chain of information and command.

I spoke to a senior Labor Party politician on such lines. I urged that the Gillard Labor government still had time to get this right, by announcing there will be a full and prompt independent investigation of why the boat was not detected and intercepted safely like the others. I said I wanted to tell him that I would be publicly making these arguments the next day. He thanked me courteously.

Thursday was very busy for me: ABC radio and television live interviews early in the morning, and two hours of pre-recorded interviews with all the media channels later in the morning. *The Australian* invited me to write an [opinion piece](#) for the next day's newspaper.

In all this, I scrupulously held to publicly verifiable facts about technology and border protection administrative procedures. I avoided any discussion of refugee policy issues, and resisted being led into speculation about what might have gone wrong in Border Protection Command's boat detection and interception chain of

information and tasking. I had learned from the SIEV X experience that it is vital to stay *on message* if one wants one's concerns to be heard; though I was sorely tempted to say more by the charmingly persistent Virginia Trioli on *ABC News Breakfast*.

The joint media conference of the Prime Minister and the Home Affairs Minister at midday on Thursday locked in a settled Government strategy. It was distressing to see how ministers were already selectively spinning, distorting and omitting salient facts, while not making concrete claims about what had happened that might be rebutted later.

To summarise, Julia Gillard and Brendan O'Connor indicated &ndash; without saying precisely that this was what had happened &ndash; that Australian radar would have had difficulty (e.g. 'there is a limit to what can be achieved', and 'high on impossible') in detecting wooden boats in the heavy storm weather around Christmas Island on Wednesday.

The media were left to conclude that this wooden boat had escaped detection through technical inadequacy in the radar, under pressures of bad weather. O'Connor said the boat had not been 'tracked', whatever this ambiguous term might mean. The PM stressed the criminal responsibility of the people smuggler who organised the voyage.

My opinion piece in *The Australian*, and my *Crikey* piece (anticipated later today), set out my concerns. JORN is a long-distance, not short-range, all-weather radar system.

Radar target traces are progressively firmed up over the 36 hours or so that SIEV boats are at sea. Wooden boats with metal engines are detectable. It is just harder than with steel boats. Storms do generate interference ('chatter') but there are standard technical means for separating out the target signal.

Oddly, neither the Prime Minister nor Mr O'Connor referred at all to the established Border Protection Command system, headed currently by Rear Admiral Tim Barrett. They presented border protection as a police and Customs agency responsibility. In this way, attention was kept away from questions on JORN data collection and subsequent ADF processing.

The PM announced a coronial inquest, a police criminal investigation, a parliamentary fact finding committee, and 'an immediate review carried out by Customs and Border Protection, that will involve [an] initial collection of facts and the initial assessment identifying any immediate action required.'

The last measure is particularly welcome, but why the silence on Border Protection Command? The suspicion is left that this government is not keen to go into ascertaining what if anything might have gone wrong in the detection and interception system. Customs will examine itself, and Border Protection Command is left invisible.



The media welcomed the PM's focus on the criminal responsibility of the people smuggler, with headlines like 'Police closing in on guilty people smuggler'.

No one noted the fact that all the boats that have arrived safely over the past four years were also presumably organised and sent by people smugglers. No suggestion has been made by authorities that this boat was sabotaged or dangerously overloaded: after all, it reached its destination unaided, despite the stormy weather.

By Friday, the story was already disappearing from the news cycle. The Prime Minister's evident human empathy and her announcement of four decisive actions had impressed her listeners.

Police were hot on the people smuggler trail in Indonesia. Only a few people were still asking awkward questions: David Marr, David Manne, parliamentarians Sarah Hanson-Young and Rob Oakeshott, Greg Barns' Independent Lawyers' Alliance, Pamela Curr and myself &ndash; and, of course, the shocked Iraqi community and detainees on Christmas Island.

The rest of Australian society acquiesced in the spin, and moved on.

It is curious and sad that in weeks when our media are celebrating WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, we can accept so easily a government-managed story, whose public accountability obligation stares us in the face. Perhaps because editors know that our complacent society really does not want to go there. It would be different, I think, if the people who had drowned were Australians on a shipwrecked Bass Strait or Sydney Harbour ferry.

Why is it important for an ethical Australian government to unflinchingly examine the possibility that something might have gone wrong last week in Border Protection Command's data collection and processing and command chain to its intercepting ships? Because if the government does not do so, there is the awful possibility that such a horrible event could happen all over again. Do Australians want this? I really don't think so.

## **Excavating the Bible for the future**

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

A few days ago I received a Christmas card in the post whose envelope, in one corner, featured an image of the baby Jesus in the manger, with Mary and Joseph, in the stable in Bethlehem. It was surrounded by the words - part plea, and part admonishment - 'Keep Christ in Christmas'.

With the feast day almost upon us, it prompts many to wonder about the origins of Christianity, and the relevance of Christian faith to modern society. The man featured in this interview has thought deeply about these questions, and studying them has been his life's work.

Greg Jenks is one of the leading progressive Christian scholars in Australia. The agenda of Christian progressives is to bring their religion into line with the latest scholarship in all disciplines, and discard any trappings of their faith that are no longer relevant in the contemporary world.

Jenks is a biblical scholar, and this interview was recorded at a conference for religious progressives called 'Common Dreams' held at St Kilda Town Hall in Melbourne earlier this year. His talk was entitled 'Imagining a future for the Bible in tomorrow's Churches and a post-Christian world'.

Jenks was ordained an Anglican priest in 1979, and has served in a number of parish and educational ministries, including colleges and universities in Australia and the Middle East. He now lectures in Biblical Studies, and is Academic Dean at [St Francis Theological College](#) in Brisbane, one of the member colleges of Charles Sturt University's [School of Theology](#) .

There are many facets to his research and academic interests. His PhD was on the origins and early development of the Antichrist myth, and his current research focuses on early Christianity and Judaism around the time of Christ.

He is co-director of the [Bethsaida Excavations Project](#) in Israel, an archaeological site about two kilometres from the north-eastern coast of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida is one of the most frequently mentioned towns in the New Testament, but its location was lost until 1987 when it was discovered by Israeli archaeologist, Dr Rami Arav.

At least three of Jesus' disciples, Peter, Andrew and Philip, were said to be born there. And, according to the Gospels, Jesus performed some of his most important miracles at Bethsaida, including the feeding of the multitudes and healing the blind man, and from shores nearby he was seen to be walking on the Sea of Galilee.

From 1999&ndash;2001 Jenks served as Associate Director of the [Westar Institute](#) , and is now a fellow of one of its off-shoots, the Jesus Seminar. These are both based in the USA, and provide a global forum for prominent progressive

Christian scholars from around the world.

He is one of the founders of the [FaithFutures Foundation](#) whose aim is to make the latest Christian scholarship available to the grassroots to facilitate new expressions of Christian faith.

As part of this he has developed the religious wiki the [Jesus Database](#) . One of its services that he oversees is the online publication of a weekly lectionary commentary.

Jenks is much in demand as a speaker, and has written many research papers and book chapters. In early 2011 he is due to publish his book, [The Once and Future Bible](#) : *An Introduction to the Bible for Religious Progressives*.

## Another date on the refugee tragedy calendar

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Kerry Murphy*

Wednesday 15 December is now another date on the calendar of refugee tragedy. We remember the *SIEV X* catastrophe in 2001, and the explosion on the boat in April last year. The deaths off Christmas Island on Wednesday are a reminder of the dangers faced in coming to Australia by boat. Yet still people come. We might learn some of the reasons by listening to the refugees.

Over the last 20 years, politicians from both sides promoted the fiction of 'good' and 'bad' refugees. Good refugees are plucked by the Government from 'camps'. They wait in the 'queue' and calmly accept that if they are lucky, they will be offered resettlement. Bad refugees are those who take the initiative and risk of fleeing in order to seek resettlement and 'take the place' of a good refugee.

WikiLeaks recently released reports of both major parties seeking political advantage from the treatment of asylum seekers.

Some people will risk their life in a boat seeking asylum. Others will come by air. The lucky few will win the refugee lotto and be picked from their temporary home, which may be a camp or a small flat in a city in Asia or the Middle East (nearly half the world's refugees now live in cities).

All who meet the definition of a refugee, are refugees. How someone arrives should not affect how we treat them.

For a while under the Coalition there were five different types of visas for refugees, depending on how they arrived. It is not a matter of saying 'they should all stay', but there needs to be a transparent process that is fair and abides by the rule of law.

Some will not meet the refugee definition. However, we need to give those who do, and their families, a real chance for their future.

Resettlement is the least favoured option for refugees. Refugees want to go home, see their family, live in a country where the language and customs are familiar, where they can safely bring up their children and live their lives.

Sadly, it takes years, often decades for people to be able to return home. Some never feel safe enough, even after 30 years. Some experience exile for generations - such as the Palestinians, Tibetans, Burmese ethnic groups and many others.

Those who are unable to return home need some certainty for their future. You cannot expect people to live on a temporary visa with no certainty to plan for their family and work. The idea that refugees should be given only temporary protection so they can be sent home when the time comes fails to understand the serious

psycho-social consequences of years of living with uncertainty.

Such policies did not prevent the *SIEX X* disaster and would probably not have prevented those who joined the boat that sank off Christmas Island from doing so.

Refugees have told me about the stress of separation from their family for years whilst they sat out their time on temporary protection visas. Some could not wait and went home, and some of those experienced the persecution we were supposed to protect them from in the first place. Others saw relationships end, with families divided for years.

It was no surprise that many women and children started coming on boats after the introduction of the TPV. This brought with it great risk. But what would you do to be with your family?

According to some, the 'good refugee' accepts it when their case is refused, and promptly goes home. However if you genuinely believe you are at great personal risk, and you do not have the chance to properly present your case, would you simply accept the refusal?

We should seek to improve the system, the quality of decision makers, and the availability of country information. Critics say it is the fault of refugees when their cases are inadequately assessed; that they did not present their case well.

Is it their fault if the interpreter is inaccurate? if the decision maker has not understood what is happening in their home country? when the case is refused by a decision maker who incorrectly applies the law? Why should refugees be forced to accept a faulty second rate assessment process?

The right to protection from persecution is a basic human right, yet politicians on both sides want to prevent refugees from having their cases heard in a fair and transparent process - a process that provides for proper review and applies the rule of law.

Australia will only ever be a small player regarding resettlement of refugees and receiving asylum seekers. In the 1980s we accepted 20,000 people each year. In the last 20 years, this has dropped to around 13,000 or so people, while the number of refugees in the world increased.

The suggestion we increase our intake to 20,000 is a laudable proposal of the Refugee Council. This will help prevent some risking their lives on boats.

Refugee policy is often driven by a reactive response. This is a political matter. The terminology people use hints at their politics. Even the phrase 'the refugee problem' is problematic. Is the 'problem' the refugees, or is it how we non-refugees treat them? Policy is commonly framed from the response of resettlement countries. Rarely would the views of refugees themselves be heard.

Every week I listen to the stories of refugees. Some show resilience, courage and determination. Others express severe trauma and fear. Universally they show

relief when their visa is granted. They look to the future and want to make new lives in a new country. Maybe if we listened more to the refugees before drafting policies, we would be able to really help them.

Meanwhile, let's hope Wednesday's tragic events are not exploited for political advantage. We remember those who died and offer prayers and condolences for their families. For the living, they need to be treated with dignity.

## **Oprah and Australia's 'socialist' health care**

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Susan Biggar*

Oprah is here. With a US TV audience of seven million expected to tune in to discover our beauty rich and rare, what will Australia showcase? Should we highlight this country's external magnificence? Or could now be the time to really show off by exposing the US to our healthcare system?

Thanks to the strength of the Aussie dollar, many tourist operators are doing it tough; all they want for Christmas is for Oprah's visit to usher in a flood of big-spending Midwesterners. But possibly the greatest Christmas present we could give America would be a broken leg or burst appendix for Oprah.

If she - friend of President Obama and host of the highest-rated talk show in US history - were to find herself a customer on the doorstep of Australia's excellent and equitable healthcare system, America's best-known mouth might go home peddling a message that could change the foundations of her society.

As an American, though now permanently resident in Australia, I can't imagine a better gift for my compatriots.

Growing up in the Land of the Not-for-Free and the Home of the You-Must-Be-Brave-Not-To-Have-Health-Insurance, I break out in hives at the whisper of words like pre-existing condition, deductibles and co-pays.

When living in the US, I ended up in hospital from time to time; heck, I even made it there on my honeymoon. As an impoverished (and uninsured) Masters student marrying an even poorer PhD student, we begged for six months to pay off that bill.

Another time, following back surgery but this time insured, I happily handballed the \$27,000 tab to my insurance company.

A decade later, while on holiday back in the US, one of our children required an emergency 12-day stay at a San Francisco hospital. The treatment was good - comparable to Australia - but on our way out the door the kind medical staff handed us our discharge letter and a bill for \$52,000.

Nowadays, the term 'universal healthcare' is a phrase I speak in revered tones, reluctant to take it for granted. That's because I have lived with the other kind of healthcare, the kind that primarily works for those who are healthy - and lucky.

While in the US several months ago I spoke with an Emergency Department physician. 'I see at least one family a month forced to declare bankruptcy from an unexpected health event like a serious car accident or a heart attack,' he explained. 'And I only work part-time.'

These, he said, are generally people with health insurance. But the current

loopholes in policies make a mockery of the term 'coverage'.

In the US, American friends query me about Australia's 'socialist medicine', frowning their brows and casting suspicious looks Down Under. 'Australia's public health is an excellent and egalitarian system,' I tell my friends, 'And it's keeping our family healthy without putting us on the breadline.'

Unfortunately, years of indoctrination and anti-communist rhetoric in the US mean many Americans now think 'Fidel Castro' whenever shared costs (like universal healthcare) are mentioned. In fact, Cuba's lean health scheme could teach Americans a few things: according to the World Bank, both life expectancy and infant mortality in Cuba are better than in the US at a fraction of the cost.

Thankfully, there has been some movement in America with the passage of Obama's healthcare reform bills in March of this year. These two bills aim to eliminate some of the most egregious policies of the private health industry.

Over the next four years, changes will be phased in to outlaw lifetime dollar limits, pre-existing condition screening and technical loopholes which have allowed companies to wriggle their way out of responsibility when serious illness strikes.

The law will also increase competition as well as providing subsidies for the poor and small companies to purchase insurance. These changes alone will hopefully significantly decrease the number of uninsured in America, putting a dent in the mortality figures related to this problem - a 2009 study estimated that 45,000 deaths a year in the US were associated with lack of health insurance.

The growing private health industry in Australia is often touted as the answer to our over-stretched public system. Is it really the answer we want? Recently our child's school wrote to the parents exhorting us to buy private insurance in case of accidents on campus. They appeal to our risk-averse nature: cover yourself!

But as we rely more on the private system to meet our increasing healthcare needs should we worry that private coverage for a daughter's broken ankle today may evolve into *Sorry, but we don't cover pre-existing conditions for a diabetic grandchild* in 20 years?

While America has plenty of worthwhile exports, its dysfunctional health system isn't one of them. Australia, on the other hand, has more than just Uluru and the Opera House to commend it.

Even without Oprah breaking a leg, let's hope one message that travels back with her across the Pacific is of the strength and fairness of Australia's public health system. That's one export that Americans are dying to get.



## **Losing Mikayla**

MEDIA

*Tim Kroenert*

*You know what hope is? Hope is a bastard.*

It's hard now to connect that first moment, when we first heard the news, with everything that happened later. *Mikayla has liver cancer.* It seems serious, but she's just a little girl. A child full of cheek and wonder. There's a battle ahead, but she'll pull through. She has to. A lot of life left, yet.

The whole thing ultimately takes something like 100 days, and it's worst case scenario at every step. Mikayla is six, and hepatoblastoma is rare in children older than three. The problem is exacerbated by tumours in her lungs, which must be defeated before a liver transplant can be performed. Two separate chemotherapy plans produce no positive result.

A miracle cure seems a lot to hope for. Hell, the odds were stacked against her getting sick at all. The stars already aligned, but in the wrong order; surely 'miraculous' is now in limited supply. But faith is a powerful thing, and, around the world, people are praying for Mikayla. 'The more the better,' her father says.

During the coming months Mikayla's story seems to broaden the parameters of human hope and compassion. 3AW morning talkback radio host Neil Mitchell learns of her fear, not of death, but of being forgotten, and is moved. From that moment on, Mikayla's illness, usually a personal matter, is played out in a public way.

(Continues below)

*Hope is a liar, a cheat and a tease.*

First, though, social media comes into its own. A Facebook support page eventually attracts nearly 4500 members. Mikayla's family tacks updates, confessions of anger, grief and hope, to Facebook's wall, and scores of friends from near and far respond instantly. 'Like' becomes shorthand for 'I hear you, feel for you, am thinking of and praying for you'.

Facebook facilitates the formation of a Cancer Council Relay For Life squad; Team Mikki goes on to raise more than \$6000 towards cancer research. Former strangers meet for the first time on that track. A plush caterpillar named Carl serves both as the team's baton, and as a symbol of the love and concern they share for the sick girl and her family.

After plans for 'one last family trip' to Queensland fall through due to the health risk, Mikayla's father enlists a platoon of volunteers to help him build a swimming pool. Photos of the construction process make their way onto Facebook. They stand as testament to a father and friends 'doing what they can' when there is

little that can be done.

*Symbolism's all crap.*

The mainstream media dons a benevolent face. 3AW, Melbourne's *Herald Sun* newspaper, and Channels Nine and 7 News carry Mikayla into Melbournians' homes. It's easy to be cynical about their motives, but hard not to be inspired by the gush of public support they prompt, or to argue with the smile on the little girl's face: her dawning realisation that she really won't be forgotten.

In an ideal world every sick child would be noticed in this way, wherever they're from. Then again, in an ideal world, Mikayla wouldn't be sick. 'Shit like this just isn't supposed to happen,' one mutual friend says to another. The family has been told by doctors to consider bringing Christmas forward.

*The view offers more joy than they can afford.*

The media attention and the support of the [Make a Wish Foundation](#) enables the creation of the now famous Fairy Party. Jumping castles, pony rides, a helicopter, a clown, face-painters, a woman who makes a living as a 'real life fairy'; more like a carnival than a party. Hundreds of people in fairy wings (the fairy theme is Mikayla's wish) cluster in the bucketing rain to sing happy birthday.

Mikayla, visibly sick, manages a cheeky grin when she takes advantage of the captive audience and pushes her father into the swimming pool he built for her - as if that was her plan all along. News crews are on hand to capture the moment, and could not have staged a more moving scene than that afforded by such spontaneous daughterly mischief.

*If hope comes near you, kick its backside. Got no place in days like these.*

If God answers prayer, for his own reasons he says no this time. Mikayla dies on a Monday morning, her mother's and father's hands upon her as she sighs her last breath.

Mikayla's father appears in the media the next day. Eloquent, but broken. He speaks of his daughter's unending faith, her compassion; his own sorrow. He's grateful that he and Mikayla's family had the opportunity to say their goodbyes to her, and that Mikayla was able to tell him she loved him one last time before the end.

Words like 'closure' are worthless at times such as this. Losing Mikayla is likely the hardest thing her parents will ever face. But life goes on and, even during times of pain, it is not worthless. If it was, we wouldn't care that Mikayla lost hers.

*Just as she's thinking of pulling the blind down, a rocket bursts in front of her eyes ... She tries, and fails, to stop her spirits' rise.*

*With thanks to Kirsten Stollery.*

*Lyric: 'Picture Window' by Ben Folds and Nick Hornby*

## Education in a post-WikiLeaks world

### EDUCATION

*Fatima Measham*

Last week, Federal, State and Territory Education Ministers endorsed the new Australian Curriculum for English, mathematics, science and history up to Year 10. Achievement standards are to be 'validated and adjusted' by October 2011, with the Curriculum 'substantially implemented' by 2013.

The process has stirred passionate debate among educators, academics and politicians. The education ministers' endorsement is not without dissent, with Verity Firth (NSW) and Liz Constable (Western Australia) articulating reservations about the Curriculum in its current form. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority has received over 26,000 submissions which mostly argue that it is 'overcrowded.'

The school curriculum is a highly contested area of education and has always been. Everybody has an opinion on what should be taught and how much of it should be covered. The opinion varies according to conceptions of the purpose of schooling.

To put it simplistically, there are two broad camps. The first camp prioritises post-school employability and national competitiveness in a global economy. It is concerned with both fundamental and high-order skills in areas such as reading, writing, problem-solving and the use of technology. These primarily involve English, mathematics and science.

The second camp favours a holistic, liberal and formative approach to education. It gives weight to subjects that develop a sense of identity, community and citizenship such as visual arts, drama, music, religious education and history.

In the end, the ideal lies in the confluence of both. After all, it is not enough to be literate and numerate if one has no sense of justice. Nor is it enough to be creative if one is unable to articulate the choices made in creating. More importantly, an enlightened society upholds that its young people are more than just future workers; they are human beings first.

Unfortunately, it is easier to generate data for the knowledge and skills that we expect of future workers. This leads to inordinate attention being paid to literacy and numeracy, and partly explains why NAPLAN and MySchool have taken hostage of the discourse on education. While no one disagrees that being able to read, write and calculate is important, there is nothing visionary about data-gathering.

This is at the heart of the failure in the Rudd-Gillard 'education revolution'. It does not inspire. Even supporters of a national curriculum have been disappointed that, rather than presenting a coherent picture of the ideal 21st century citizen, it

mostly prescribes an inordinate, unwieldy volume of knowledge for young people to imbibe.

Instead of overhauling what it means to be an educated person in a post-WikiLeaks world, the curriculum discourse remains predisposed towards consuming content rather than investigating or critiquing it.

This is highlighted by the proposed history curriculum, which proposes a sequence of units for years 7 to 10 that encompasses history from the time of the earliest human communities to the end of the Ancient period, to the beginning of the Modern period, up to the present. That is, from 60,000 BC onwards.

In itself, there is nothing wrong with such a syllabus - we accept that world history is our common heritage and that learning the past broadens our perspective. However, the 'back to front' approach often invites questions from students about relevance, and they are entitled to ask those pesky questions. As cohort after cohort forgets the names of ancient gods by the time summer rolls in, curriculum designers insist on ignoring the challenge of enabling students to *connect the present to the past*.

With the 24-hour news cycle and 140-character bulletins reducing reality to the most context-free, background-weak understanding of events, would it not be more empowering for future adults to be able to trace *back* to historical roots of conflict? Would this not insulate them from media spin and ultimately enable them to treat history as a living, breathing thing that they can actively shape?

Whose truth prevails, to what extent it is true, who gets to tell it, and what the telling of it implies - these are questions that young people should learn to ask. They are inherently provocative because they are political. The answers expose the prevailing political agenda and social mood, which facilitate the inclusion and omission of parts of the truth.

Some would argue, for example, that the teaching of Australian history has largely ignored the role of religious orders in pioneering the Australian bush and shaping its regional areas. The role of Christians in protecting Jews and resisting the Nazis during World War II has been similarly undervalued.

While secularists might point out that spending class time on these aspects is tantamount to proselytising, such facets of human struggle should not be treated as dispensable sub-plots to the main narrative. When they are, we fail to uphold examples of our better nature. It is important for the average teenager, overwhelmed by her first encounter with the horrors of the Holocaust, to feel encouraged that there were good people who risked and sacrificed their lives to do the right thing.

This is where teaching moments truly lie, when young people make that internal shift from learning for the sake of it, as if one were a vessel to be filled, toward learning in order to better engage with the world - as a human being, not just a

worker. Curriculum design that hampers this movement is not only inadequate but lacks soul.

## **Praying to Santa**

NON-FICTION

*Frank O'Shea*

Dear Santa,

As one old fogey to another, greetings and good wishes and I hope the cold isn't getting to your arthritis.

Everything is ready at this end. The wrapping paper was bought in January and is last year's design, but they are too young to notice that. And the parcels are locked in the whiskey cupboard - they know that the only sin in this house is any attempt to investigate grandad's whiskey stock.

At any rate, you can count on my discretion and I am happy to act as your local representative for another year which is probably about as long as I can keep up the deceit.

I have to tell you that there are suspicions, muffled whisperings that probably originated, not from the seven-year-old and her friends but from one of the pagans at kindergarten. The parents are not enthusiastic about the subterfuge and when I remind their mother that she was ten before she gave up her profitable credulity, it is met with a watery laugh.

Nonetheless, this house is sound and although nationally the birth rate is down to 1.8, you are safe for a few more years yet.

But there are other heresies that threaten the continuation of your benign contribution to fellowship. The word commercialism is often used to describe them, but it is more serious than that: it is a reduction of the pageant of which you are one of the more prominent players, to a fable of no likelier veracity than Troy or Camelot.

Time was, as you know, when the world or that part of it we used to think of as Christian, was lit at this time of year by red window candles to guide a fleeing family, a time of carolling more than carousing, when we wished strangers happiness rather than merriment.

But they told us the lights were dangerous and they replaced them with blinking neon and they changed you from a benign giver into a rogue merchandiser.

In older times, you were as much part of what we celebrated as the crib and what it stood for. We invented you, Santa, and named you after a hirsute Russian bishop. For anyone who thought about it, you were a kind of parable; you helped us to believe that prayers could be answered, that there was a bounty that was not diminished by the number of clients.

So maybe you are only a fairy story, but fairy stories have an immortality that history cannot emulate. And the essence of these tales is that for the hero things

work out well in the end. They tell us that living happily ever after can come from good deeds; and that is something we say at the end of our Sunday Creed without ever thinking too much about what we are saying.

Often in the fairy story, the prince comes in disguise, unrecognised and ragged and poor. And, indeed, that is the story of Christmas, the day when children wake with excitement to see whether you have been good to them. Later, they will go to church with their parents, perhaps their once-a-year visit. But never mind, they have come to their religion only after meeting you. They learn their religion by starting on Santa Claus.

By right of course, you should have departed the scene once Newton explained gravity and Columbus discovered America and we learned that we share 98.4 per cent of our DNA with chimpanzees. But you have hung on, you hoary old fraud, because as much as we need science and discovery, we need fable and myth and imagination too.

It would be quite easy to ban you from hoardings and greeting cards and to curtail your promotion of shopping centre trade. Indeed, as you may know, they are trying to do that in the place Columbus discovered because they realise that you have a kind of immortality that fits as uneasily with their philosophy as with their commerce.

But in our clever way, we have coupled you as part of the promise the Man made about 'being with us all days' and that is why I am still, in spite of the cost of living, happy to be your representative and depot manager. What I will do when they find me out, I'm not sure. Maybe I will admit to a lie but excuse it on the grounds that it was a cloak for a bigger truth.

They won't believe it, of course and will probably think that what I tell them about Gough Whitlam is equally fanciful.

While I'm on it, Santa, you wouldn't have another Gough stacked away somewhere, would you?

## **Shoulder angels**

POETRY

*Diane Fahey*

### **Angels: a dossier**

#### *1. Apparitions*

At dawn, a figure looms  
from horizon to zenith,  
a heaven-lit shadow  
above burning coals;  
a gyre of wings, faces,  
blindingly bright,  
rings the meridian sun:  
a golden whirlwind;  
high over the cliffs  
a bird-like form  
hangs on a thermal,  
outlined by will-o'-the-wisp light;  
inside eerie brilliances  
of cloud and lightning,  
for a split second  
a flame-shaped presence.

#### *2. Visitations*

Embodied, they come amongst us,  
feet almost touching earth,  
the hems of their robes  
twitching for take-off,  
their rapt, attentive faces  
not quite human  
never less than perfect.  
Messengers who cannot be killed -



they bring omens, good news;  
with monastic calm announce  
the seeding, saving moment:  
    the depth of the Divine  
    illuminating a fertile soul.

In bare-floored studios -  
dust motes drifting through ladders of light -  
they lend their eyes to artists, poets,  
guide laden brush or nib towards  
incandescence,  
ensure each rhythmic row of feathers  
glows coral red, maize-yellow,  
ocean blue;  
damascene haloes, wing-tips,  
so they'll shimmer in candlelight.

### *3. Guardian Angels*

*a benign shadowing*  
*a prophetic vigilance*  
*a timeless listening*  
*an enfolding otherness...*

So palpably invisible  
you know they must be there:  
beings of light  
    who spark the soul's intelligence,  
    summon leaps of faith,  
    sow patience.

They do not need to breathe  
but sometimes do,  
in sympathy.  
They have no cause to feel

but often do: standing close  
they allow tides of grief  
to pass through them;  
act as bulwarks against  
gale-force passions,  
the virus of wanting everything.

On a dawn cliff-top, they hover  
in the half-smile shared by strangers  
as a vast wing of sea-light  
spreads over feathery darkness.

#### *4. Shoulder Angels*

The one on the left, wearing  
crimson tights, promises the world,  
probes with his pitchfork for hidden desires,  
sports a prehensile tail  
able to wrap around your mind.

Aureoled by electrum,  
his counterpart, in snowy alb,  
meditates on your right shoulder,  
sending into your soul's bloodstream  
a thirst for peace,

for the balm of its completeness -  
an airy nudge:

*eternity now*

*eternity now*

#### *5. Icons*

1

*Tobias and the Angel*, Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio  
Verrocchio gives us an older brother,  
buoyantly strong, who walks with

a dancer's step beside Tobias.  
Raphael - soon to reel in  
the story's next silvery twist;  
reveal the healing secret -  
shares the glory of his wings'  
palette with his charge  
whose amaranth-hosed legs  
in umber boots, plant him  
so convincingly on earth;  
whose black and lapis lazuli cloak  
lifts, swirls, would fly.

2

*Jacob's Dream*, Rembrandt van Rijn  
Jacob sleeps beneath a canopy of care:  
the half-sketched watcher  
holds out his hand, palm-down -  
instilling the dream  
with a look of such grave compassion  
as to make the angelic seem  
an enhanced humanness.

3

*The Annunciation*, Jan Van Eyck  
Arrayed in an archbishop's  
traceryed gold cope -  
deep-slitted at the back  
so tintured wings can slip through -  
Gabriel waits on Mary's words  
with the graced stillness of one  
able to move between spheres  
as effortlessly as a singer's voice



## **WikiLeaks and artistic freedom in China**

### **POLITICS**

*Tony Smith*

The latest WikiLeaks exposures of US government secrets have created a media storm. In reality the disclosures have been neither sensational nor particularly surprising. Secrecy is an unfortunate characteristic of organisations that believe they have special entitlements to behave in ways that would almost certainly attract public criticism.

It is interesting however, that the case of Ai Weiwei, which reveals much about the authorities in China, has attracted so little comment.

Ai Weiwei is a visual artist. By definition, artists are intellectuals whose interpretation of ideas challenges social mores. In Australia in 2008, a photographer's [portraits](#) of young models attracted criticism from then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Pressure put on galleries could have been regarded as attempts at censorship.

(Continues below)

When Ai Weiwei attempted to leave China recently however, the authorities intercepted him and have virtually placed him under house arrest. He is clearly seen as a threat to the state. The dictatorial attitudes of governments are revealed at times like these.

When Indonesia was slow to recognise East Timorese aspirations for self-determination, Indonesia's international reputation suffered along with the dissidents it suppressed. The same might be said of Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi, South Africa and Nelson Mandela and of any number of brutal regimes which fail to understand that governments earn legitimacy only when they serve their peoples.

China's treatment of Ai Weiwei symbolises its attacks on artists and dissidents and seems to be in the same despotic strain that stretches back to the massacre in Tienanmen Square. For its treatment of Ai Weiwei, China deserves severe international condemnation.

Ai Weiwei was in Australia in 2008. His works, which were [exhibited](#) in Campbelltown, showed a sharp sense of humour, compassion for victims of modernisation and ironic juxtaposition of the old and new, the authorised versions of events and the individual experience.

Ai Weiwei designed the 'bird's nest' stadium in Beijing, but then criticised the authorities' use of the Olympics for propaganda. His courage and determination and his artistic perceptions showed Ai Weiwei to be one of the most important individuals living in China.

Part of the current problem faced by Ai Weiwei is that the authorities feared his trip abroad could be used to express support for Chinese poet Liu Xiaobo. Languishing in prison, Liu [received](#) the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize for his 'long and nonviolent struggle for human rights in China'.

One feature of Ai Weiwei's work at the Campbelltown Art Gallery was a film about writers. Their dissent has cost them dearly. In many cases, state harassment has rendered them ill. They are prone to alcohol and drug abuse and they have difficulty maintaining relationships.

It is difficult for an Australian observer to understand how change is possible in a society that shows so little appreciation of artistic freedom.

Over the course of this century, decision-making has been influenced strongly by a western perception that militant Islamic groups threaten our modern way of life. While China has been modernising economically, its attitude to basic human rights has not. It has moved towards capitalism but not democracy.

The Nobel Prize Committee has had the courage to stand up to China. Other international organisations and governments should also take stances based in principle rather than pragmatism.

The Australian Government for example, supplies raw materials to China, including gas from Queensland fields. In negotiating terms in this exchange, we should express strongly our disappointment at the treatment of Ai Weiwei.

## **Don't make smokers pay to quit**

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

Last week opinion was divided on public funding for smokers wanting to give up. Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon announced that the Federal Government would include nicotine patches in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). This would dramatically cut the price of the treatment from \$160 to \$5 each month.

Some thought that smokers should take responsibility for their habit and pay the full cost of giving up. Others argued that the government would save billions of dollars in health care costs.

Those who would deny smokers this substantial assistance miss the point of society, which presupposes that the strong will help the weak and everybody will be better off.

We do not condemn people for decisions made in the past, especially when new understanding transforms a previously defensible course of action into a diabolical mistake. 'It relaxes me' becomes 'It kills me'.

We take collective responsibility for society's problems, which are often a consequence of past mistakes.

This principle is relevant to many areas of public policy. Many decades ago, farmers and agricultural corporations committed to water-intensive crops such as cotton and rice. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It was profitable, and sustained many regional communities.

But climate science eventually taught us that large-scale investment in rice and cotton has catastrophic consequences for our rivers. Current floods notwithstanding, it [hastens](#) desertification. When the government talks of buying back water allocations and assisting the communities whose economies depend upon these industries, we all pay. That's the way it should be. If they don't receive assistance from taxpayers, they will struggle.

Bad personal decisions force many people into poverty. That's where they stay until their problems are solved by constructive action at the public level. The Federal Government is to be congratulated on the nicotine patch study. But it must keep its resolve to introduce measures to combat gambling, in the face of [objections](#) from vested interests and the new state government in Victoria. There is a temptation to engage in political spin &ndash; to do nothing beyond the cosmetic &ndash; or to manage rather than solve a problem.

As St Vincent de Paul Society National CEO John Falzon says in a forthcoming essay for *Eureka Street*, our collective problems need to be resolved rather than managed, and it's actually simpler that way. He quotes from Dorothy Day's associate Peter Maurin, who urges those with responsibility to tackle the present

for the sake of the future: 'The future will be different if we make the present different.'



## **Burmese refugees' Christmas story**

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Duncan MacLaren*

I am in Ranong and cannot sleep. For the geographically challenged, think Isthmus of Kra in southern Thailand at the point where Burma ends and Muslim Thailand begins, going down to Malaysia. I am in the Marist Fathers' house.

Outside, the fish factory that never sleeps is churning out packaged prawns for markets far away. The people working in it are illegal migrants from Burma, paid a pittance and treated as sub humans. As illegals, they can be arrested by the Thai police but usually pay a 'fine' to escape jail - for a while.

Young Burmese men as young as 15 and 16 come off the fishing boats owned by Thai or Burmese entrepreneurs, their pockets brimming with baht, swagger in their step, and head for the tiny brothels by the side of the road near the port, where HIV awaits them.

Only the strong return from the fishing trips. If you are ill and cannot work, you can be tipped into the sea along with the other rubbish for the seagulls. If you trip and fall overboard, the boat ploughs on regardless.

Young Burmese women in *longyi*, with long, black hair tied in a ponytail, stand out and can be abducted by men in dark glasses in passing cars and taken to the brothels and bars of Phuket, Bangkok or Pattaya. Being illegal with no papers or rights, they disappear, to the despair of their parents. It's part of the dangerous deal of crossing the border from a regime that regards most of its people as scum to a country where a subsistence income can at least be earned.

HIV is rife here - among the Thai and the Burmese. The Global Fund gives money to Thailand for those living with the virus but Thai doctors in Ranong, which has more Burmese than Thai, say the cash for anti-retrovirals is only for Thais. So the Burmese die. A few are saved by the Marists among other religious groups with funds from an NGO. But who decides who lives and who dies?

A young Burmese boy of nine who was found abandoned in the forest and then cared for by a poor Burmese family with support from the Marists plays with the priest's big toe. He ran away again but promised he wouldn't do it in future if 'Father' bought him a TV. He is not quite ready for the factory or the fishing boats and is desperately vulnerable.

A young girl of 15 dressed in a school uniform, her hair cut short like a Thai to escape abduction, is too young for the ACU online diploma but asks to attend anyway to learn, just to be part of the dream of having higher education. She is lucky that her parents don't force her into the fish factory.

We visit a young fishermen and his wife in a wooden warren of tiny hovels for the dispossessed. It leans over the water so that when the Thai police come they

can abandon their few possessions (an ancient black and white TV, a few dishes, a mattress) and dive into the river to escape the fine/bribe.

Both have HIV and they lost their baby to the virus the year before. They show us a grainy picture of the child, beautiful as all infants are, and we are stunned into silence. The dignity of the couple in their immense human suffering awes us.

A few hours south of here, tourists soak up the sun on the beaches of Ko Samui, Phuket and the islands of the film, *The Beach*. In the lead-up to Christmas, the contrast is striking.

In Ranong, through an open door, I see a Burmese woman in the lotus position meditating and venerating the Buddha, hoping the next incarnation will be better than the misery of this existence, as a beatific smile crosses her face.

Happy Christmas.

## **Escaping Oprah and Christmas**

BY THE WAY

*Brian Matthews*

It was Christmas eve. In fact, the hot night had ticked along and it was probably Christmas morning by the time the events I'm remembering took place.

I was sleepily awake, sweating with heat and apprehension, wound to a pitch of excitement manifesting itself somewhere in my chest as a sort of exquisite weight that made breathing an effort. I was about seven years old but, despite my advancing years, I remained a dogged believer in Father Christmas.

This belief was maintained in the face of a cacophony of cynicism and derision from the youthful toughs among whom I grew up and despite my own unspoken perception of certain evidence that would have shaken my belief to its foundations if I'd allowed it any room to move.

Armed with this fragile faith, curled up in my bed in the darkness to which the skylight in the passage just outside the door lent a ghostly luminescence, I sensed his imminence.

Sensing Father Christmas's imminence involved an even greater willing suspension of disbelief than you might think because I shared the room with my two uncles, Jim and Alex. Jim's snores rolled gently but insistently through the darkness like the distant gunfire from which he had so recently and with great relief escaped. Alex, too, was pleased to have survived active service, but daily expressed that gratitude in spectacular binges round his St Kilda watering holes, so that his snores, when at last sleep claimed him from other kinds of oblivion, were neither distant nor gentle.

So, to imagine Father Christmas fairy-footing it across our worn bedroom lino amid what sounded like the Normandy landing was a hard ask. I managed though, and, sure enough, he arrived - a dark shape who seemed to take ages, tinkering and rustling and adjusting.

In deference to his visit, I squeezed my eyes shut and, of course, when I opened them after what seemed only a few minutes, it was morning. The snores crackled on but bright sun glowed in the skylight and silver dust motes swirled in its slanting beam. Inching across the floor like a tentative dawn it revealed a series of marvels.

A camouflaged fortress with soldiers pointing rifles through the crenellations dominated a battlefield below on which were arrayed tanks, platoons of diggers, columns of ghurkas, marines and other battle-ready armies. Confronting each other or milling around with static resolution, they would no doubt have been very surprised to find themselves sharing the same field.

Inside the closed doors of the fortress, gun carriers and jeeps awaited their

hour. Behind the fortress, emerging from the tunnel of darkness under the wardrobe, a line of trucks carrying machine gunners at the ready and flanked by foot soldiers wound towards the action.

It was a truly wondrous sight which left me wide-eyed with amazement. Avuncular snores suddenly sounded right. This was battle and those nasal eruptions became the crump and staccato mutter of shell and machine gun.

I suppose it's all a question of what you're prepared to believe in. I knew very well that my father, a brilliant handyman, had made every inch of the panoply that greeted my Christmas morning gaze: the fortress, the soldiers - from plaster of Paris moulds into which he poured the molten lead then meticulously hand painted the finished figures in various, carefully researched military hues - the troop carriers and gun wagons, and so on.

Yet at the same time, in another part of my imagination, I happily attributed them to 'Father Christmas'. It was a harmless, pleasurable doublethink which, within a year, would yield to the onslaughts of ruthless realism ('How can he get round to every house in the world in one night?').

As for the war theme, the guns and the militarism: with the Second World War still a vivid memory and the Cold War brewing, such things were on everyone's mind and were evocative and exciting. As George Orwell once remarked: no matter how stern one's anti-war credentials, it simply doesn't work to tell your children to go and play with their toy pacifists.

What prompted me to recall all this was not a sudden surge of nostalgia but something like its opposite which, I believe, is apodemialgia: a desire to escape, not relive. And what brought on my attack of apodemialgia was the news that Oprah was coming and long hours of diligent research had revealed to her that Australia was a land of blokes and sheilas who hung out in places affectionately known as McCafés laughingly shouting 'Gimme five' and 'Hi' in the cute Aussie vernacular way.

Add the brash all-American, McDonald's-sponsored presence of Oprah to the pleasant but undeniably testing rigours of Christmas and apodemialgics all over the country will be reaching for something stronger than McCoffee.

## Oprah and WikiLeaks

MEDIA

*Andrew Hamilton*

Oprah Winfrey has come to Australia, preceded by a planeload of audience for her Sydney Opera House programs. The style of her shows forms an interesting contrast with WikiLeaks, which holds up such a telling mirror to so many aspects of our culture. Winfrey's style is confessional in therapeutic mode. The style of WikiLeaks also confessional, but in a heroic mode.

The heart of Oprah's programs lies in her interviews with celebrities and ordinary Americans. Many have shaming stories to tell of their past. She has a gift for empathy, encouraging her interlocutors to speak openly of their experiences and of their feelings. Unlike most television hosts, she is also generous in revealing occasionally stories of her own past and her struggles.

Those interviewed go away cleansed of their sins, assured that they are good and loveable, and able to make a new start, forgetful of the consequences of what they have done.

Confession is ultimately about reconciliation. In Oprah's case the reconciliation is of the individual with the consumer society. The symbols of the beneficence of that society are everywhere to be seen. A book included in Oprah's Book Club can be expected to make a mint for author and publisher. One Oprah audience is taken to explore the resorts of Australia; another, to the last man and woman, receive Oldsmobiles.

Singers and actors who appear on the show find their careers take off. Disgraced politicians forgiven on the show return to political life. All touched by the program are offered the gift of a moment of celebrity, a transfiguration of the ordinary that can also be cashed in for more lasting and tangible gifts.

Where reconciliation is effective it affirms the value of both parties involved. Oprah reassures the viewer that the United States consumer society and its underpinnings are healthy and benign. It rewards candid sinners, showers its sectaries with gifts, including the most precious gift of celebrity.

It displays its compassion in forgiveness and also in promoting beneficence to the poor who live in less blessed societies, like Africa. The show declares those who live in the United States under its free enterprise system to be indeed blessed.

This is very different from the world of WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks is about convicting the faithless of their sins and imposing a penance that will lead to reconciliation.

It echoes the rite of reconciliation open to Christians who had denied Christ during times of persecution by sacrificing to the Emperor. They were required to acknowledge their sin and subject themselves to a long period of public penance.

They were eventually reconciled with a forgiving Church. But the rite made it clear that this Church valued the affirmation of Christ over the preservation of one's life.

WikiLeaks is distinctive because the confession is involuntary. It is made on the sinners' behalf, and penance imposed, by the leaker. What is hidden is brought to light in the hope that the revelation may encourage the perpetrators to recognise their sin and ask forgiveness.

Here too confession leads to reconciliation. But the reconciliation that is offered is with an ideal society whose professed values are lived out in the behaviour of its public officers. In the absence of repentance it offers a bleak indictment of the society that Oprah celebrates, revealing the unstable foundations it is built on.

Most of the documents published by WikiLeaks have to do with politics, not commerce. But the process of leaking undermines commercial processes as well as political ones. It attacks the view that, like everything else, secrets have a commercial value. They are protected at high cost, discovered at high cost, and so should only be sold for gain to the highest bidder who then wins exclusive rights over them.

No one can profit from WikiLeaks. They are a gift for journalists but an offence to proprietors because they cannot be owned or copyrighted.

If Oprah ultimately blesses and reassures the world that its commercial underpinnings are adorable, and frees people to buy without more thought, WikiLeaks strips away reassurance. It discloses the mechanics of sin, the stubborn resistance to efficacious repentance, and the hollowness of reassurance.

That is why Oprah Winfrey and her enterprise will be feted in Australia, and Julian Assange's enterprise will, one way or another, be brought to an end. The grace he offers is not cheap enough.

## U2's way to God

### MUSIC

*Tim Kroenert*

In the queue to see U2. Cooped like chooks among plastic barriers. Standing, sitting, sprawling; waiting, some for many hours, wearied by dumps of rain and sweltering sun. Humanitarian crows swoop upon this vulnerable yet sympathetic flock. Volunteers from two NGOs, who flit among us, collecting signatures and email addresses, tagging each chook with the 'gift' of a black wristband, thus marking their progress.

U2 is a band with substance; frontman Bono a rock star plagued by dreams of God and suffering humanity. A [ridiculously wealthy humanitarian](#), Bono is an object of scorn among many grassroots human rights advocates. But there's no doubt he inspires passion and compassion. He is prone to rages against injustice. U2's catalogue contains songs for El Salvador, Bosnia, South Africa, Burma. To be a fan is, by default, to have concern for your fellow man. No wonder NGO volunteers see us as a captive audience.

True, these days the passion is mostly choreographed, stage-managed and scripted. This is evident later, inside the stadium, as 100,000-odd people jostle about the broad stage with its halo of lights and lunging arches. Rock jaunts as vast as U2's '360' tour are, necessarily, endlessly rehearsed and sound-checked. For a band such as U2, so is the politics. But they have perfected the art of advocacy as theatre.

Consider this triptych of songs cast as a call to fight AIDS and poverty in Africa: the gorgeous 'One', an aching rendition of 'Amazing Grace', and the relentless 'Where the Streets Have No Name', whose lyric Bono wrote while on a humanitarian trip to Ethiopia. The bracket is heralded by a video address from Desmond Tutu, spruiking Bono's ONE aid campaign. This is less a rock concert than a political rally.

The band's 2001 single 'Walk On' was written as a tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi, while she was under house arrest. Following her recent release, the song required recontextualising. U2 achieves this by playing, as a prelude, the prayerful 'Scarlet', with a spoken-word tribute to Suu Kyi from Bono. Bono then rededicates 'Walk On' to those who continue to suffer for the cause of freedom in Burma. This is an efficient way to include a popular single in the setlist without allowing its significance to diminish.

Stirring stuff, but, still, a far cry from the rawness of U2 past. Of Bono roaring 'Fuck the revolution!' during a performance of 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' on the night of an IRA massacre at Enniskillen. Or, during the *Rattle and Hum* version of Pride, declaring, simply: 'For the Reverend Martin Luther King: Sing.'

Similarly, at U2360, the most affecting moments are those free of stagecraft.

Bono, a self-confessed egomaniac, is visibly humbled as the crowd continues to sing songs' refrains after the band has subsided. During the gospel song 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' he holds the microphone aloof and lets the crowd carry the verses; nowhere outside a church (and perhaps rarely there) would you find so many voices declaring in unison: 'I believe in the kingdom come.'

In fact the venue at times seems more like a church than a sports-stadium-cum-concert-hall. Amid Bono's prayerful appeals for peace and compassion, the worshipful dimensions of 'Elevation' ('You make me feel like I can fly so high!'), 'Mysterious Ways' (read: 'She moves in ...') and 'Magnificent' (I was born to sing for you/I didn't have a choice but to lift you up') seem more profound. So, too, does the tragedy of 'Until the End of the World', a reimagining of The Last Supper with Bono cast as a cheeky, tortured Judas ('In the garden I was playing the tart/I kissed your lips and broke your heart').

Later, the numinous is made manifest by the elated guitar licks of 'City of Blinding Lights'. The halo descends in a honeycomb of colourful strobes as Bono yowls 'Oh! You! Look! So! Beautiful!' This sublime moment is matched only by an ethereal rendition of 'Ultraviolet'; Bono, like some repentant demon pincushioned by red lasers and wispy smoke, implores: 'Baby, baby, baby, light my way!'

I have written before about the moment in music [when God shows up](#) . Arguably, U2 fans know that moment better than anyone.



## Julian Assange's problem for feminists

MEDIA

*Ruby Hamad*

For feminists, the case of Julian Assange has produced a headache that threatens to create a permanent division.

Assange is rapidly achieving superhero status, an Australian David battling the American Goliath. A Fairfax article refers to him as the digital age's Ned Kelly. Pundits such as Catherine Deveny proclaim he makes them proud to be Australian. An [open letter](#) to PM Julia Gillard asking her to ensure Assange's rights as an Australian citizen are respected has garnered more than 4000 signatures.

He [claims](#) to be fighting for freedom of speech and government transparency. Ideals that feminists also hold dear. But Assange has been arrested on rape charges and many feminists will find it hard to reconcile their defence of him with their support of rape victims. He denies these allegations vociferously, claiming they are trumped up by his detractors.

There is no doubt that the timing of the charges is suspect. Surfacing and quickly dismissed by Swedish authorities in August, the hunt was suddenly back on in the wake of the first dump of the US diplomatic cables last week. Interpol went as far as to issue a 'Red Alert', usually reserved for cases pertaining to murder ... and terrorism, of which Assange has been wrongly accused.

This prompted many to dismiss the charges as fabricated, which means claiming the two women who made the accusations are liars. This is a common smear against rape victims, whether the man they are accusing is famous or not, and one frustrated feminists work tirelessly to overcome. By placing the shame on the alleged victim and casting doubt on the veracity of her story, such smears discourage other victims from reporting their own experiences. And thus the so-called rape-culture is perpetuated.

This is why Naomi Wolf has attracted ire for her column in the Huffington Post where she scornfully [derided](#) the accusations and hence the accusers, claiming Assange was guilty of nothing except perhaps being a jerk. She, in turn, has been slammed by other writers such as *Salon's* Kate Harding who say she is [undermining](#) her own feminist credentials by 'smearing ... rape accuser(s)' despite a lack of access to information in the case.

Assange is undoubtedly the victim of a witch-hunt, with calls to charge him with terrorism, espionage and even - absurdly, given that he is not a US citizen - treason.

Ironically, even as the likes of Sarah Palin call for Assange to be hunted down like Osama bin Laden, even as WikiLeaks continues to have its access to resources shut down due to US governmental pressure, and even as the Australian

government talks of cancelling his passport, the mainstream media continues to publish the documents that WikiLeaks has - legally - made public.

But to automatically dismiss the allegations because of suspicious timing could potentially undermine future cases of sexual molestation. While commentators such as Wolf claim the women simply had a case of regret, this ignores the fact that often women do reluctantly submit to unwanted sex due to intimidation and fear, only to find themselves awash with anger and shame and a very real sense of violation. This is not simple 'regret.' This is a sex crime.

If Assange did use his body weight to hold down one of the women, if he did continue the sex act after she asked him to stop, if he did refuse to wear a condom despite repeatedly been asked to, as has been alleged, then he has committed serious crimes. But according to one Reuters report the women originally approached the police not to have Assange charged, but in the hope of [persuading](#) him to undergo an STD test.

What then led to such serious charges? If the accusations are found to be false or exaggerated, the credibility of future rape victims and the likelihood of them coming forward will be seriously undermined, particularly in high profile cases. In an ideal world, Assange's status as WikiLeaks founder and spokesperson would have no bearing on the rape case. But in reality, there is little doubt that WikiLeaks is also on trial.

It's a murky case and one in which the true details seem unlikely to emerge. But one thing is certain: it's only going to get uglier for Assange and his alleged victims.

His adoring fans are already mounting web-based personal attacks on the two women, calling their credibility and morals into question. But at the same time, the cult of personality surrounding Assange mean the likelihood of a fair trial is next to impossible. Hatred of his organisation has led to a stop-him-at-all-costs mentality.

It is more than likely that Assange will wind up in prison. There is even [talk](#) of his being extradited to the US from Sweden. Vindication perhaps for the supporters of his accusers, and haters of WikiLeaks, but cold comfort for those of us who not only believe in justice but who balk at women being used as pawns to settle scores between men.

## Environmental road kill on the highway to Perth

### ENVIRONMENT

*H. A. Willis*

Apart from a couple of foxes north of Gingin we didn't see much road kill as we headed up the Brand Hwy towards Geraldton. There had been a fair amount of rain and rough weather and the roos had apparently decided there was no need or sense to be abroad.

I did see an emu, somewhere between Badgingarra and Eneabba. It was minding its own business a few hundred metres off the road, on a slope covered with mallee heath interspersed with grass-trees. You don't want to hit an emu.

It's a four hour drive to Geraldton from Perth. At Eneabba, 280 km up the road, we stopped to change drivers.

Like most small settlements along major highways, Eneabba is now bypassed. The traveller must enter by a side road, 300 m down which is the Shell roadhouse and a rest area. Most visitors are unlikely to have reason to go beyond that point. They may glance at the nearest dwellings, veiled by the low trees, but they are not going to see the general store, tavern, school, nine-hole golf course or swimming pool.

Some West Australian travellers (but few from the eastern states) may have heard that the nearby mineral sands mine was recently moth-balled. If they have, they probably don't remember the details. With all that's going on in mining these days, it was hardly news.

At the right time of the year Eneabba is the gateway to one of Western Australia's best wildflower displays. But I was there a few weeks too early and had to content myself with filling my lungs with the fresh air blowing in from the south-west across the coastal heath.

The winds are strong on the Batavia coast. They created the famous leaning trees up the road at Greenough. They power a 90 MW wind farm on the rise behind Walkaway - Randolph Stow's Haunted Land - and an 80 MW one at Emu Downs, about 70 km south of Eneabba.

The Eneabba rest area is directly across the road from the roadhouse forecourt. It offers toilets, picnic pavilions and a large Information Bay map (You are HERE) - a place to have a piss and stretch the legs. This all backs onto the sports oval, on the other side of which runs the Brand Hwy with its steady shrushing drone of road-trains, campervans and big Four Wheel Drives towing big Recreational Boats.

At either end of the rest area, behind the toilets and the map, are a few gnarled eucalypts, about ten metres tall. These stands of trees are about 100 m apart. There are no other trees in the space between them and - with the car park, road and servo forecourt behind, and the oval in front - you stand in a very open space

beneath the deep blue of the mid-West coast sky.

Yet there, on a two metre post, is a painted sign: Beware Falling Limbs. Attached, hanging below the official one and taped to the post, is another notice, hand-printed: Beware Magpies Swooping.

The nearest trees are 50 m away. Phantom limbs?

The mystery had me consulting Google Earth's Street Search, which photographed the place about three years before our visit. The image shows a large dead tree close to where the picnic pavilions have since been erected, in the approximate spot now occupied by the sign.

Presumably, people were parking near the skeletal tree in order to catch whatever scant shade it afforded on sweltering afternoons. And, perhaps, someone (or their 4WD) took a hit and the Shire received a nasty letter. Anyway, the 'You have been warned, so don't sue us' notice was put in place.

But the sign did not disappear with the dead tree. Maybe the workers charged with cutting down the tree had no instructions to also remove the sign.

On that sunny day, I saw a bus load of Irish backpackers fresh from or waiting their turn for the toilet, lining up beneath the pristine vault of heaven with their mobile phones to capture an image of those signs in all their splendid detachment. Somehow they have become a tourist attraction, an image to be recorded, twinkled around the world and archived on some website.

The State Government recently gave approval for the Aviva Corporation to build a 400&ndash;450 MW coal-fired power-station at Coolimba, 15 km south-west of Eneabba. It will be, according to environmental groups, one of the dirtiest power stations in Australia. Aviva maintains it will be 'carbon capture ready'; there are 'plans to phase in' carbon capture and sequestration 'as a separate project when feasible'. When feasible.

As things now stand, when the station is commissioned in three or four years' time, it will pump out about four million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per annum for 30 years, because 'there remains a lot of work to do to identify and secure the sequestration sites'. Coolimba will produce the same amount (perhaps a little more) of carbon emissions as Hazelwood, the station the Victorian Government wishes to close.

An EPA recommendation for Coolimba's stack emissions to meet European standards was overruled by Western Australia's Environment Minister, Donna Faragher. Instead, sulphur emissions will be managed 'to meet regional airshed requirements' - that is, sulphur blowing in the wind. For the next 30 years.

An Aviva website assures us 'prevailing winds will favour non populated areas to the east and west of the Project area'.

So where does that leave the marine life to the west, the flora and fauna to the east, that emu I saw, and all those magpies a-swooping?

## **Keith Richards' other church**

NON-FICTION

*Philip Harvey*

A favourite book of mine is *At Home with Books: how booklovers live with and care for their libraries* (Thames & Hudson, 1995).

There are converted barns lined with vast volumes, Scottish castles with glass bookcases laden to the ceilings, New York apartments where all living quarters (even the bathrooms) are designed for the multitude of monographs.

The owners offer their views on preservation, how to control bibliomania, and even such painful subjects as weeding the collection. They are what we would expect, wealthy antiquarians in the Classics, erudite translators of French poetry, inheritors of their great-grandfathers' fondness for the folio.

Incongruously on page 208 we are shown into the library of Keith Richards. The librarian in me immediately reaches for the magnifying glass to read the spines in the photographs. Richards has a deep interest in history, in particular the Second World War.

(Librarians keep mental checks of borrowers' reading interests, for future reference and to know how the library is being used. Not that I am expecting Richards to walk into my workplace, he is a Rolling Stone who plays rhythm and blues in deafening stadiums, usually on the other side of the world.)

'Incongruously' only because the public image of Richards as the drug-heightened, whiskey-inspired soul survivor No. 1 is at odds with the conventional image of the regular book-loving inhabitant of the library. Both of these images are misleading and librarians know better than anyone that the library attracts the most unusual and unlikely clientele.

Richards writes, 'When you are growing up, there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully - the church, which belongs to God, and the public library, which belongs to you. The public library is a great equaliser. As a child, you get to feel all these books are yours.'

All of this came back to me when I read about the promotion of Richards' new autobiography, *Life* (Little, Brown, 2010). The launch was not in some sleazy nightclub or glamorous rock dive, but at the New York Public Library.

Richards spoke eloquently, revealing that he had originally aspired to be a librarian. He said that the library is the only place around where he willingly obeys the rules. This infers that he is an old-fashioned visitor, used to libraries that have not been turned into chat cafes.

He declared that when he walks into a library he is always made truly aware of civilisation, of something that we are part of and that is at the same time greater

than we are. This from a man who once led a side project band called The New Barbarians.

At primary school in the 1960s I was inevitably caught up in the major dispute of the times and have never changed my position that the Beatles are greater than the Rolling Stones. I am not the only one who thinks their last great record was *Some Girls* (1978), with its magnificent soul masterpiece 'Miss You'.

Their subsequent career reminds me of those old bluesmen who keep playing the music they love best until the end of time, even if there's nothing very new going on. But this is unimportant, compared with the dignity, honesty and humility in fact in which Richards relates his indulgent but harrowing life.

Once when trying to describe our modern era concisely, the distinguished historian Simon Schama said he couldn't think past the changing face of Keith Richards. Perhaps another reason for the seeming incongruity is that Richards epitomises the clash between culture and counter-culture of that time.

That rock and roll rebellion is now a norm, even a cliché, of Western societies has blinded us to the dependence of all this behaviour on the broader culture. We still expect Richards to chain smoke, knock back Jack Daniels like it's water, and never sleep. But *Life* reveals he hasn't had heroin for 30 years. The mainstays of his existence seem to be the love of his family, the creation of his music, and libraries.

Books were his refuge before he discovered blues music. Growing up in austerity England, Richards had no library at home, so values the retreat he has built for himself late in life. 'It's my sanctuary,' he writes. 'Reading keeps me in one spot. After a life on the road, reading anchors me.'

It might be just as well Richards never became a librarian. Apparently he recently tried to organise his collection, even teaching himself the Dewey Decimal Classification system before giving up because 'it was too much hassle'.

My advice would have been not to worry. At his age, Richards' time can be better spent reading rather than classifying. I imagine he has the inbuilt ability of the private library owner to know where most of the titles are, anyway. He keeps his favourite books on special shelves and takes the risk of gregariously lending books to his friends and relations.

This would be anathema to a collector who knew the price of his books, but the value of none of them.

## **Money is rooted**

POETRY

*Various*

### **That old new saying**

When in Spain, do as the Spaniels do. A bush  
is handy with two birds. But not worth it.  
All roads lead to Spaniels. Then spin even further.  
They're better than a poke in the ear with a dry frog.  
You can't have your cake if it's eaten. Or your cooked  
goose if it's no good for a gander. Golden eggs  
are useless in a fragile economy. And what goes up  
must keep going. Money is rooted.

A friend is a dog breed when he's in need  
of a mean deed. You can't judge a cover  
by the book: you need thorn-coloured glasses.  
It's like comparing ovaries with underwear.  
The world's your oyster shell when all's  
said and dun-coloured. There's no place  
like homeotherapy and people in glass  
parachutes should let bygones be biplanes.  
*&ndash;Paul Mitchell*

### **Diogenes**

Oh to be a dog  
Ignoring urbanity  
And only barking  
Yet truth, wisdom and knowing concomitant  
Even in the day  
Trying to find an honest face needs a lamp  
But are you also blinded

By other's affectation?  
With human abandonment  
You are still a glutton;  
Casting away your clothes and austerity  
Only transcendence  
The leg cocked and all the rest  
Taking from the front pocket with a knife  
Or the back pocket while seemingly invisible -  
Is there virtue in throwing shards instead of holding the mirror?  
Are they listening while you are naked?  
Or have they heard better  
With the emperor's new clothes?  
There was a gathering  
Though you had been exiled  
Of hands outstretched  
Wondering when you would ever come in from the cold  
*&ndash;Kerry Ridgway*

**Impulse upon rising**

I will wear this day like a garment,  
I will draw it upon my spirit reverently.  
Abroad within it,  
I will bear witness to the bright dash of birds,  
the diligence of spiders  
and the devotion of animals.  
I will absorb myself  
in the visions and voyages of people  
as we rediscover the Indies in each other,  
the slavery, the music,  
the flogging, the ropes of hold,  
the flights of mind,



the trudging in darkness.  
I will bear witness to blindness,  
I will feel the unfeeling  
and trumpet the epiphany.  
I will affirm the muscularity of love,  
the assertiveness of hope,  
the relief of laughter.  
And when night comes  
I will shed this day like a skin  
and disappear into the ether  
in the hope of finding another.  
*&ndash;John Upton*

## **Kevin Rudd and 'harmless' WikiLeaks**

### **POLITICS**

*Tony Kevin*

During my last months as Australia's ambassador in Cambodia, I had the odd experience of reading words from a secret cable I had sent to my employers in Canberra plastered all over the front pages of a Sunday newspaper.Â

I had reported the outbreak of fighting in Phnom Penh on 4 July 1997 as a long-planned insurgency by military forces loyal to Prince Ranariddh, leader of the royalist party Funcinpec, against the legitimate state authority of his co-Prime Minister, former communist Hun Sen.

While Hun Sen had been on holiday in Vietnam, Ranariddh fled without notice to Thailand, where he announced to the world that Hun Sen had staged a coup against him.

I advised my Minister that this was a last-ditch gamble by Ranariddh to recover his political fortunes. Ranariddh's power had drained away, but Hun Sen was still internationally mistrusted. I expected Ranariddh's ploy to fail, because Hun Sen had the authority at home and the steel his rival lacked.

I advised that Australia should not come out in support of Ranariddh's claim, but should await the military outcome which I predicted would soon go Hun Sen's way.

Most of this got into the Sunday newspaper, as the war still raged. I did not know whether to be proud or embarrassed: I had intended my private advice to remain private.

When I asked if the leak would be investigated, I was told not to be silly. It seemed my cabled advice had been leaked from the top, as a trial balloon: if I was wrong, I could be disowned.

Fortunately, my advice turned out to be right. Hun Sen saw off the threat, and consolidated his power. Australia accepted this outcome. I had to wear the silent reproach of valued Funcinpec and human rights movement contacts in Cambodia, who regarded me as having betrayed their cause.

I view the leaking of my cable, presumably by someone in Alexander Downer's office, as an unethical breach of trust towards me and the Australian diplomatic service.

So I have been reading the WikiLeaks controversy in recent weeks with wry amusement. Sometimes, people in high places leak embassy confidential reporting when it suits them politically to do so.

I do not regard [Julian Assange](#) as a gross villain. His actions are a salutary reminder to diplomatic professionals that their confidential reporting is always

open to leakage for whatever motive, and is in that sense accountable in terms of its accuracy, relevance and timeliness.

A diplomatic reporting system of a country like Australia or the US is a very expensive private newspaper, paid for by the taxpayer. Embassies compete fiercely for the Minister's attention. Only a fraction of cable reporting will be chosen among the most important cables prepared for the Minister's office. It is a matter of pride if a reporting cable makes the cut. So embassies try hard to make their cables striking.

I took a lot of care over our cables from Phnom Penh, especially their titles and first paragraphs. Some of my colleagues wrote beautiful, crisp and exciting cable series on the unfolding of dramatic events in troubled countries, which could go straight into a book without any editing. Others wrote cables whose pomposity, laboured humour, and self-conscious striving for effect was a bit embarrassing.

The huge Assange trawl of US State Department cables will contain examples of all of the above. Let me focus on two interesting published examples.

The [Dagestan wedding cable](#) is the kind of cable that conveys the feel of an unfamiliar cultural setting. A foreign office needs to have this kind of information, in making judgements (for example) about how to advise national companies thinking of opening up business operations in such places: how law-based or corrupt, how effective or incompetent, is a particular regional or national government?

Since the time of Renaissance diplomacy, good diplomats have used invitations to functions like high-level state weddings to make and report such frank judgements. I don't regard the Dagestan cable as trivial: there is a role for this kind of local colour reporting, as long as it is politically relevant.

Here, Assange's violation of confidentiality was only mildly embarrassing: the US Embassy in Moscow could live with fewer invitations to state weddings in Dagestan.

On the other hand, to have made public disparaging embassy views on current national leaders like the presidents of Russia or France could make more difficult the tasks of future US ambassadors striving to develop good rapport with national presidents. This is the source of Hilary Clinton's professional anger.

But I thought the description of Putin as an 'alpha male' was quite apt, and one of which indeed he might be quite proud.

Kevin Rudd's conversation with Clinton on China as reported in the US cable system will help the Gillard Government and Rudd to fend off any opposition canards that Rudd might be too soft on China. It gives veracity to similar things Rudd often says on China publicly, and won't shock the Chinese.

I was amused by Rudd's language. He was keen to impress Clinton with his

sagacity on China. I suspect she may have gone away from this meeting wondering if he had gone a bit over the top in characterising himself as a 'brutal realist' on China.

This cable confirms much about the nature of the US-Australian relationship. As ever, Australia is Thomas the Tank Engine, striving to prove its worth as a useful and loyal ally. And as ever, a bemused but polite US is trying to reassure Australia its contribution is valued. This cable speaks volumes about Australian insecurity and diplomatic immaturity.

On balance, I welcome the WikiLeaks trawl. We have seen in recent years much disastrous misuse by the US, British and Australian governments of their classified diplomatic and intelligence reporting systems. I think here principally of the false intelligence before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which took hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives for no commensurate strategic or humanitarian benefits.

It is good to see the other side getting a few runs on the board, in holding what governments say and do to public account. It can do no great harm, and may in the longer run do some good.

## **Cronulla racism five years on**

### MULTICULTURALISM

*Sarah Ayoub*

Five years ago, a first-generation Australian-Lebanese girl introduced her conservative Lebanese parents to her first serious (Anglo-Saxon) boyfriend.

It didn't go down well, and a few days afterward, the girl received numerous phone calls from concerned friends about the likelihood of her relationship sustaining societal expectations and criticism. An Aussie bloke and a Lebanese girl could never work out, they'd told her, and the evidence was there before them: race riots against Lebanese by the Aussies down in Cronulla.

In the five years since, many are still unsure as to how the riots occurred, and what their perpetrators had wanted. No more Lebs in Australia, no more Lebs at the beach, or 'no Allah in Cronulla'? Whatever the motive, it seemed that in a world where appearances are everything, anything 'of Middle-Eastern appearance' was something to be feared, and needed to be stopped.

The riots themselves may have subsided, but their roots are still around us. For all our sayings about judging books by their covers and looks being deceiving, our biggest problem is our innate susceptibility to stereotype. Representation, or misrepresentation, in media, pop culture, social/political policies or even everyday conversation, has the power to shape our perception and attitudes towards the other.

And it is this 'us and them' grasp of otherness that still prevents us from moving forward after witnessing our young men fight, protest and retaliate over difference or, rather, their warped, alcohol or frustration-fuelled misconception of it.

And misconception is where our problem lies. A few weeks ago, I led a scripture class at a high school in Cronulla. Afterwards, I joined a few of the regular teachers for breakfast, and was told plenty of people in the shire still don't take kindly to 'Lebs'. The students couldn't fathom that I, their teacher, was a 'Leb'.

So what was a 'Leb' exactly?

At the time of the riots, to Labor's Federal Member for Bankstown Jason Clare, 'Leb' was the six Lebanese Muslim boys he took to Kokoda to bond with six Aussie boys from the shire. Not a mixture of mixed-faith Lebanese boys, which meant that all the Lebanese Christian boys who were socially rejected and attacked in the media had to stay at home, forgotten about where positive press was concerned.

'Leb' is the Muslim girl who wears the hijab and is verbally assaulted for outwardly sharing her faith, even though her fellow Muslim female, who harbours more anti-western sentiments and sympathises with Bin Laden, gets off scot-free from the public because she doesn't wear the hijab.

'Leb' is also the role of the drug dealer, criminal or terrorist in Aussie films and television, reserved for those who don't fit the physical mould where casting is concerned.

If we struggle to get an ethnic character on *Neighbours*, it makes for a good media and cultural studies university debate. But we need to apply our 'otherness' education elsewhere. Ethnic enclaves are the biggest downfall of multiculturalism, but they are a reality of our society.

Unfortunately in a society where image and representation are everything, our perceptions of the other become blurred across boundaries, suburbs and ways of life, and then, on the off chance that we clash somewhere in the middle, we can't take the interference, and we riot.

Granted, the Cronulla Riots subsided just as they'd erupted, but the solutions at the time seemed to involve engaging people from opposite ends of the spectrum in as many peace-keeping press opportunities as possible. Not very productive considering that afterward, these people dusted themselves off and once again went their separate ways, to lead very separate lives in the same great country.

In the five years that have passed, I doubt that our grasp of our differences (and let's face it: it's the acknowledgement that we are, in fact, all different that will save us) has been perfected to the point where we have learned from the mistakes that led us to that social horror.

Rather, any debates about racial cohesion seem to have fallen by the wayside, which is devastating considering the new generation of youth who still see otherness in the same vein as those behind the riots. Unfortunately, we've become content with sweeping the issues that brought us to Cronulla under the rug - and we've never taken out the trash.

And in the share house that is Australia, that is not what we might call a 'fair go' for our countrymen.

## **Don't shoot the messenger, award him the Nobel Peace Prize**

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

WikiLeaks and its founder Julian Assange are being demonised by what appears to be a slanderous propaganda campaign being waged at the highest levels of governments around the world.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has [branded](#) the release of secret information as 'an attack on the international community', and Assange is [wanted](#) by Interpol on account of dubious sex crimes.

Assange's character flaws are being exaggerated in order to shift the burden of shame from governments on to Assange himself. There is a possibility that the messenger will be shot, literally.

Yet this year WikiLeaks has taught us valuable lessons about the suppression and manipulation of information, and how such activities pose a threat to the common good.

This is how it goes. We accept a particular version of events because it is presented to us by a public figure or organisation we trust. That is how it should be. But public officials need scrutiny to ensure they are acting in the public interest, and not their own or that of a third party.

It's our right to query the benefit in being kept in the dark, for example, on the secret moves of US and UK officials to [undermine](#) the ban on cluster bombs. One of the cables released by WikiLeaks shows that the British Foreign Office suggested a loophole to allow the US to keep cluster bombs on British soil should be kept from Parliament.

It's likely that the geopolitical interests of the US and the UK were being put ahead of the lives of innocent civilians in war zones.

Such activities fly in the face of our humanitarian obligations. Yet the suppression of information about them is presented as being 'in the public interest'.

In Australia, there is an implication that our national interest is being served by Australian Attorney-General Robert McClelland's vigorous [investigation](#) into whether WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has broken any laws. Arguably Assange deserves a Nobel Peace Prize nomination for upholding the value of transparency and the internationally protected human right to freedom of information.

In its inaugural session in 1946, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) - 59(I) - which stated:

Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and is the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated. [It] implies the right to gather, transmit and publish news anywhere. It is an essential factor in any serious effort to promote the peace and progress of the world.

The holding of information is an important aspect of the stewardship of public office. There are instances when the common good requires certain information to be withheld from the public. But WikiLeaks has demonstrated that the withholding of information by officials is often self-serving. It is designed more to keep the officials and their governments from embarrassment than to save innocent lives.