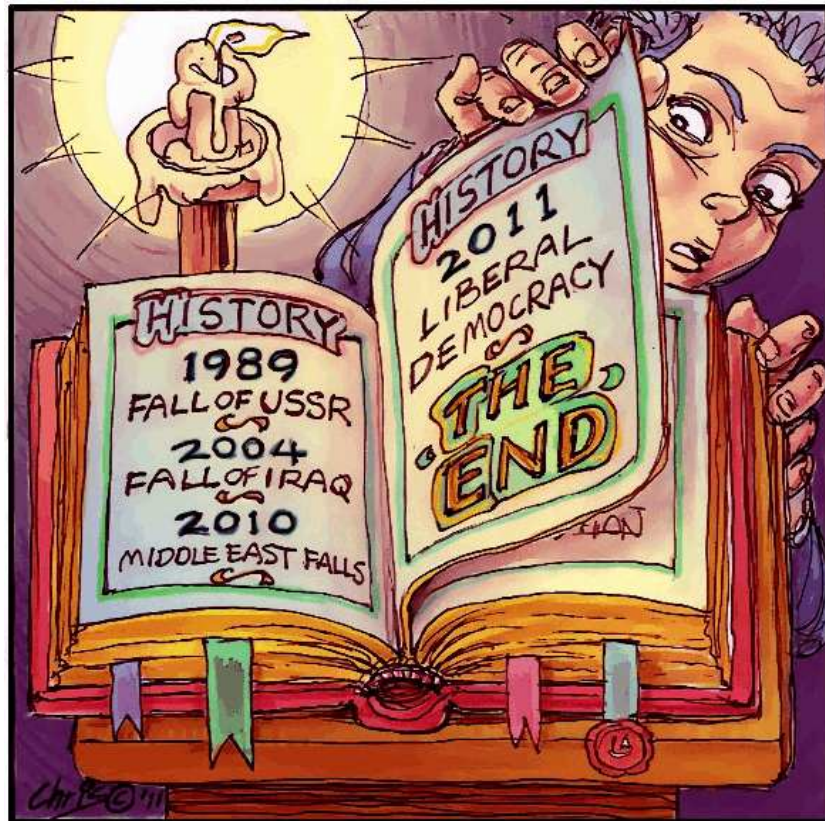


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## Meddling priest's milestone

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

A month ago in *Eureka Street*, Frank Brennan published his critique of the ongoing Northern Territory Emergency Response in Aboriginal communities, better known as the Intervention. These stringent measures designed to address a crisis in remote communities were begun by the Howard Government in 2007, and have continued under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments.

Last week *Eureka Street* carried an elaborate and detailed rebuttal of his critique from none other than federal Indigenous Affairs minister, Jenny Macklin. This response from such a senior politician is a mark of the respect in which Brennan is held, and a symbol of the influence he wields.

Brennan has been one of the longterm contributors to *Eureka Street*, and his pieces carry the epithet 'The Meddling Priest'. This title was first given to him by former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, and of course it's a reference to the famous words attributed to King Henry II condemning medieval Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket: 'Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?'

Since his student days Brennan has been 'meddling' in human rights, bringing his clear thinking and plain speaking as advocate on behalf the poor and voiceless, forensically assessing government policy, and needling the consciences of politicians, the rich and powerful, and even fellow churchmen.

Brennan spoke about this with *Eureka Street TV* in his office at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra where he is professor of law at the university's [Public Policy Institute](#). The interview is part of a special series marking the twentieth anniversary of *Eureka Street*. It's accompanied by scenes from a special Mass held at St Canice's Church, Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, in January this year to celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of his ordination.

Frank Brennan was born in 1954, and is the son of Sir Gerard Brennan, a retired Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia. After studying law in Queensland, he joined the Jesuit order and studied theology in Melbourne.

Since ordination he's had a succession of high profile positions, all in the area of human rights, mainly working on behalf of Aboriginal people and refugees. These include founding Director of the Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre in Sydney, and a stint as Director of the Jesuit Refugee Services in East Timor.

In 1995 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia for services to Aboriginal Australians, and he's been recognised with many other government and community awards.

In 2008 he was appointed Chair of the federal government's [National Human Rights Consultation Committee](#) which handed its report to the Attorney General in September 2009. Its key recommendation was that the government should legislate for a Bill of Rights.

He is much in demand as a speaker around the country, and is a prolific writer. His books include, on Aboriginal issues: *The Wik Debate*; *One Land One Nation*; *Sharing the Country*; *Land Rights Queensland Style*; *Finding Common Ground*; and *Reconciling Our Differences*. And on civil liberties: *Too Much Order With Too Little Law*; *Legislating Liberty*; *Tampering With Asylum*; *The Timor Sea's Oil*; and *Gas: What's Fair?*

## Multiculturalism just works

### MULTICULTURALISM

*John Stuyfbergen*



The Australian Human Rights Commission's report into the freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia report was [released](#) this week, after a year of research and nationwide consultations. Race Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes explains that it is not a list of recommendations but a survey of listening 'to the voices of the community'.

It documents a rich array of multiple opinions in the religious sphere, and argues that 'beliefs, religious, anti-religious or a-religious, may contribute to defining a person's identity'. No surprise then that it is awash with terms such as 'multicultural Australia', 'pluralist Australia' and so on.

Quite a few respondents strongly objected to multiculturalism. In fact, the concept of 'multiculturalism' has changed over the last decade or so, and needs some unpacking, in light not only of the report, but also of several other recent noteworthy occurrences.

One was an interview with the French politician Marine Le Pen that appeared in the [Australian press](#) earlier this month. The headline was 'Multiculturalism is a myth', and in the article Le Pen argued that true multiculturalism ends in war.

The second was Harmony Day on 21 March. Its purpose, as envisaged by the Council of Multicultural Australia when proclaiming it in 2002, was 'to promote a harmonious Australia, built on democracy and the development of our evolving nationhood by embracing our heritage and cultural diversity'. Beautiful words that you can't really argue with, but neither do they call a spade a spade.

Multiculturalism, Australian identity, immigration and ethnicity are concepts that are frequently and intensely debated in the Australian environment. The ABC's Q&A discussion on multiculturalism in February provoked many comments on the program's online forums.

Googling the words 'multiculturalism' and 'Australia' produces over one million entries. Add any other related keyword and the count increases. Furthermore, the entries seem to widen the possibilities of interpreting the meaning of multiculturalism rather than defining it more precisely.

This is not surprising. The concept of multiculturalism has a very muddled history.

In the 1970s, the then immigration minister Al Grassby announced the 'Multi-Cultural Society for the Future' as a way to address the social inequities of immigrants from a non-English speaking background. He knew he had borrowed a term from Canada, where it

was used to unify the English and French speaking populations. Hardly a model for Australia, which didn't have that problem.

Since then the term 'multiculturalism' has been redefined or rejected depending upon the particular persuasion of the various stakeholders at the time or the political willpower in Canberra. Numerous commissions and councils were established to advance or redefine the concept.

Prime ministers accepted, rejected, or changed it (John Howard: multiculturalism). Multiculturalism, as many historians and commentators observed, was a concept forced upon the Australian population without ever being fully defined or explained, apart from some lofty and flowery sentences.

Well known immigrant writers such as Lolo Houbein and Andrew Riemer never accepted the term and the explanation of it. Many recent immigrant/refugee authors often leave out any reference to it. They seem to be far more busy with what is actually happening in our daily lives.

Consider this. Last year, my family and some friends met in a park for a Sunday barbecue. While we were enjoying ourselves, suddenly a group of men among us separated to a spot at a remove from the rest of us. I asked the woman next to me what they were doing: they were Muslims, and they were praying. 'How beautiful,' I said. I was unfamiliar with this gesture among Western Muslims.

Suddenly the men were back. They switched on the radios, and we all listened to and argued about the cricket scores.

Multiculturalism in Australia is not a stark concept with separations based on ethnicity, religion or language, as Le Pen and some respondents in Innes' report would suggest.

We do not have a parliament of factions, alliances, or voting blocs based on ethnicity, religion, colour or race. Neither are we inclined to celebrate multiculturalism once a year on a day proclaimed by a government that never was able to tell us exactly what they meant by multiculturalism.

Rather, the Australian populace itself has, over time, defined exactly what multiculturalism means.

Recent commentators, such as the eminent former politician Petro Georgiou, when discussing multiculturalism, have picked up on this popular movement and, in getting away from the term itself, acknowledge that what the population tries to practise from day to day is cultural diversity.



## Education system is for kids, not teachers

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

***Waiting for 'Superman'* (PG). Director: Davis Guggenheim. 111 minutes**

Cute kids can carry a film a long way. Take Anthony, a fifth-grader from Washington DC. His lips distended by a mouthful of braces, he admits he's determined to stay in school, in order to avoid the mistakes made by his father, and to make his grandmother proud. Smart and smiling Daisy, from East LA, wants to become a nurse so she can help people in need. Bronx first grader Francisco just can't figure out why his classmates don't enjoy school as much as he does.

*Waiting for 'Superman'* uses the stories of five intelligent and motivated students as the emotional fulcrum for a sober consideration of the flaws in America's public education system. Most live in low socio-economic areas where school academic performance is generally low, and the drop-out rate is high. For all five, their academic future hangs in the balance.

Davis Guggenheim is the [documentarian](#) who brought Al Gore's climate change manifesto to a global audience in [An Inconvenient Truth](#). *Waiting for 'Superman'* also reveals uncomfortable truths and systemic failures that seem to favour bureaucracy and teachers' rights over students' wellbeing.

The stakes are high: Guggenheim draws a link between low levels of education and custodial prison sentences in later life. Strikingly, he demonstrates how the cost of imprisoning one inmate for just a few years would be enough to pay for a child's entire primary and secondary school education.

The film has its villains. Not just successive presidents who have paid lip service to this popular issue but failed to pass significant reforms. It also paints teachers unions as self-interested clubs whose safeguards for good teachers also protect the lazy and incompetent, at students' expense.

It finds fault with the system of 'tracking' students, under which low-achieving students are held to lower academic standards and given fewer opportunities to improve. Eighth-grader Emily lives in an affluent Northern California neighbourhood. She is generally a high-achiever, but struggles with maths. The tracking system represents a genuine threat to her academic flourishing.

There are heroes, too. The chancellor of Washington DC's public school system, whose tough love approach has seen her close 23 schools deemed 'ineffective'. The Harlem based reformer who devised methods of 'pipelining' students from birth to college. And the proprietors of high-performing 'charter schools', alternative education institutions that receive

public funding contingent upon strict academic standards.

*Waiting for 'Superman'* celebrates the best of these charter schools as modelling a solution to America's education woes. Its five young heroes hope to gain admission to such schools, but with applications far outnumbering the places available, they literally need to win a lottery in order to do so. Some have as little as five per cent chance of success.

Guggenheim mimics perennial pot-stirrer [Michael Moore](#) in using humour to underline serious points. *Waiting for 'Superman'* uses appealingly cutesy animation to enliven statistical analyses, and to illustrate, for example, a process whereby problematic teachers are shunted from school to school, rather than being held to higher standards.

In one instance, Guggenheim presents data which indicates that, on an international scale, Americans' confidence far outweighs their academic ability. He underlines his point with a hilarious (and Moore-ish) montage of *Funniest Home Video* style stunt bloopers, accompanied by the sounds of pop-punk band Green Day's anti-anthem 'American Idiot'.

The film's emotional core, contained in the stories of its five young subjects, culminates on lottery day. The odds are stacked heavily against them, but that bastard hope is a hard beast to keep down. This climactic sequence is tense and emotional. There must be heartbreak, at least for some.

A caveat: advocacy documentaries are of course subjective. Filmmakers will make value judgments, and interpret empirical data according to their own perspective. But Guggenheim makes his case persuasively, and *Waiting for 'Superman'* should provide grist to the mill of Australia's debates about how we fund and measure the success of our schools.



## Rebuilding Japan

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Jack de Groot*

The world has looked on in astonishment as Japan grapples with the most horrific natural disaster in its history. The rolling and images of destruction that have held many of us captive tell the story of immeasurable human suffering and unparalleled loss — the story of communities in crisis.



The tragedy has the makings of a major motion picture. First, an earthquake of such magnitude that its 'aftershocks' are as intense as the quake that devastated Christchurch. Next, a tsunami that demolished coastal communities, claimed up to 20,000 lives, and has seen more than 450,000 people evacuated. And finally, the nuclear crisis that threatens not only nearby communities but also Japan's crops and food exports.

Japan's outstanding earthquake preparedness prevented much further suffering. Short of avoiding the coastline entirely, there is little a country can do to protect against the threat of a tsunami. But earthquakes, however sudden and unexpected, need not always present the same challenge.

In a nation like Japan, precariously situated on the infamous ring of fire, earthquake preparedness is paramount. And in a nation like Japan — renowned for its technological prowess — earthquake-resistant design is fundamental to its cities and its infrastructure.

No matter how well prepared Japan's cities may have been, the nation now faces the grave challenge of rebuilding. In this, Japan can avail itself to its economic strength and the support of the world's economic structures. Grassroots agencies like Caritas will also have a role to play.

Already Caritas Australia's partners in Japan are providing emergency relief for hundreds of thousands of people forced to flee, and the Caritas network anticipates supporting the recovery over the coming three to five years. We are yet to fully understand the extent of this crisis.

As the nuclear crisis unfolds and the longer-term humanitarian response begins to take shape, news outlets will continue to share reports from the field. But as international airstrikes are launched against Libya, as controversy grows around Australia's asylum seeker detention centres, and as NSW prepares for its election this weekend, Japan's tragedy will inevitably slip off our news radar.

Without broad public interest, most humanitarian crises remain hidden to all but those in their midst. This is where agencies like Caritas have a vital role to play. Caritas Australia's

commitment to highly vulnerable communities extends far beyond the daily news round.

Caritas Australia's Project Compassion enables us to set aside funds each year in readiness for the emergencies ahead. Its Emergency Response Fund enables us to support our partners in response to small-scale emergencies and allows for a rapid commitment of funds whenever disaster strikes.

In times of dire need, of immense suffering, and of unthinkable humanitarian crisis such as that which we have witnessed in Japan, public support for these appeals is invaluable. Headlines draw the attention of the nation and millions of dollars are mobilised to ensure the survival of entire communities and longevity of a humanitarian response.

But the great challenge for aid agencies like Caritas is to keep sight of our underlying objective — the eradication of extreme poverty and the pursuit of justice — even in times of dramatic crisis. While saving lives is crucial, transforming lives is a far greater challenge.

This relies upon our commitment to deliver sustainable agriculture, safe water infrastructure, and access to healthcare and education. Our presence in an emergency response is vital, but it is our longevity that will truly make a difference. That is as true in Japan as anywhere else.

## Testing new peace plan on Libya

MEDIA

*Tony Kevin*



The Libyan crisis is the first practical application under United Nations Security Council (UNSC) international peacekeeping powers of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. This is cause for celebration.

In his two terms (1997–2006), former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan tirelessly encouraged an apprehensive UN membership to accept this momentous advance in international peacekeeping practice. Two Australian foreign ministers, Gareth Evans and, during the past month, Kevin Rudd, have advocated in favour of this doctrine.

The UN, like its toothless pre-WW2 predecessor the League of Nations, was established as a voluntary association of freely consenting sovereign states. But the UN Charter included a Security Council with powers to promptly exercise agreed military force against any state which launched unprovoked aggression on another state, thus creating a threat to international peace and security.

The UNSC peacekeeping procedures offer in themselves no built-in rapid sanctions against regimes that treat their own citizens with extreme cruelty. By the time UN human rights-based international diplomacy cranks into action, millions of people can perish at the hands of evil governments.

We saw this in the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia in 1975–79, the Bosnian Serb regime's murder of thousands of Bosnian Muslims in 1992–95, and the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

Annan argued that all states' national sovereignty should be conditional on their fulfilling a responsibility to protect the 'individual sovereignty', i.e. human rights, of their own citizens, and that regimes which violate these rights forfeit their right to be treated as sovereign states.

This concept harks back to long-hallowed Judaeo-Christian-Islamic precepts that rulers are required to govern their peoples justly and in accordance with natural law.

Gaddafi's threats late last week of bloody reprisals against people in the last remaining besieged rebel cities of Benghazi and Tobruk, and his continuing attacks on these cities using tanks and heavy artillery in direct violation of his own proclaimed ceasefires, were the catalyst for the UNSC to finally endorse R2P-based international military action against him.

Gaddafi might have got away with suppressing the present revolution, but for his own arrogance in exposing to the world his cruelty and indifference to his people's rights.

For there is a great fear in the general UN membership, as well as in powerful contrarian states China and Russia, which have their own human rights skeletons in the closet, that the West might use R2P as a cloak for renewed interventions or resources grabs in post-colonial independent nations.

There was also a quietly influential view in conservative circles in the West that Gaddafi provided a kind of stability that kept Libyan oil safely flowing westwards, and that it might be good if he regained control of Libya.

But when Gaddafi finally threatened to go door by door through the rebel cities, killing opponents as he went, the UN saw at last that the world was on the threshold of another genocidal atrocity of Cambodian or Rwandan proportions.

As British Prime Minister David Cameron observed, the UNSC resolution authorising international action to establish a no-fly zone and to do whatever is necessary to protect Libyan civilians from their ruler is necessary, right, and lawful.

In addition to authorising international air-based military action to establish a no-fly zone (a mission quickly accomplished), the resolution approved international force to be used as required to help protect Libyan civilians from Gaddafi's well-armed ground forces.

Here, geography favours the rebels, because tanks and guns on the move across Libya's open desert roads towards rebel cities are easy air targets. Hopefully, the lesson will be quickly learned by Gaddafi's forces that their ground power has now been neutralised.

The international community could soon face choices requiring it to pursue a policy of the lesser evil. It would be better for Gaddafi and his family to be allowed into some safe international haven, and for the ascendant rebel government to offer amnesty to his armed supporters, than for street fighting to rage on for weeks through the chain of cities between Benghazi and Tripoli. Under the resolution, the West would be unable to (and indeed should not) intervene in any such ground fighting.

I hope Libyans will see sense in this policy and urge it on their Western supporters, however much it might protect Gaddafi from international judicial accountability for his crimes.

To leave Gaddafi no escape option, to push him into a last-ditch Hitlerian bunker stand, would cause much unnecessary civilian death and destruction.

What could go wrong now? Only a clumsy misdirected air attack on Gaddafi's forces in towns, causing civilian casualties, might swing Arab opinion against the UNSC-approved action. This seems unlikely.

Because Gaddafi now has no international support, his cause seems doomed. We will know the outcome, I think, within days rather than weeks. The course seems set fair that the new

doctrine of R2P will pass its first crucial international test.

## Twelve Steps to healing an abusive Church

### RELIGION

*Neil Ormerod*

To all intents and purposes it looked like an email requesting supervision for a research proposal. Nothing unusual in that. I get a steady trickle of these. There was an attached letter which I opened, and immediately knew much more was at stake.



The communication was from a student I had had discussions with over ten years ago about a possible research topic. Without warning or further communication he vanished. Now he was about to open the door of his heart to reveal the reasons for his disappearance.

It was the sort of story I had heard often before when my wife and I were involved with the issue of clergy sexual abuse. It was a story of seduction, manipulation, violation and psychological damage.

In training for the priesthood this young man had been abused by a senior and much older seminarian, in whose pastoral care he had been placed. The seduction and manipulation extended to the young man's family and church community.

While the older seminarian went on to ordination, a position of trust and responsibility in the Church, the younger man's life fell into a spiral of self-destructive behaviours, symptomatic of post-traumatic stress. While the abuser is an honoured member of the Church community, the victim has been shunned by his family and church community. What's wrong with this picture!

The response of Church authorities has been less than inspiring. On advice the victim sought to contact the diocesan professional standards team. Each time he rang (some 20 times) he received a recorded message.

Try to imagine the leap of trust required to contact the Church to report abuse; the degree of agitation involved in drumming up the courage to tell one's story to those who represent the authorities of the very institution that abused you. And then to receive a recorded message – leave your details and we'll ring you back. This is not malicious, but it is a benign ineptitude, a stunning lack in moral imagination.

The sad thing is how little has changed since our original involvement some 15 years ago. Yes, documents and policies have been put in place; apologies have been expressed publicly and promises of doing better have been expressed. Even some degree of moral outrage: 'This must not happen again!' But in the end, not much has changed. Indeed it is still more of the same.



The problem is systemic. Not in the sense that the system produces abuse — abuse occurs within all sorts of institutional and familial settings. But the system has no intelligent and responsible way of dealing with the abuse that occurs. From Church authorities down to the local community there is simply an inability to enter into the perspective of the victim of abuse.

Like the priests and Levites in the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is easier to walk past on the other side than hear the cries of betrayed trust and mental anguish that arise. And this betrayal touches the religious identity of its victim. The one who was supposed to speak to them of God's love and forgiveness, his grace and mercy, has sexually abused them.

This systemic problem shows how badly the Church has failed in its own terms. The Church is supposed to know about sin and grace, repentance and conversion, penance and reparation, healing and mercy. These are part of its core business. A pope once said the Church is an expert in humanity. These problems are the stuff of our human condition, yet the Church's response is fumbling at best. Not much expertise on display here.

I have long felt that the major cause of this lack of institutional response lies with the spontaneous identification of priests and bishops with the perpetrator of abuse. They are all members of the same club. They all had the same formation experiences, live with the same stresses and strains, and have the same temptations.

One priest on hearing from a victim of a fellow priest's repeated sexualising of his pastoral relations with various young women cried out, 'The poor man, struggling with his celibacy'. No sense at all of the trail of destruction caused and the faith damaged. Immediately it became a problem of personal spirituality, narcissistically appropriated, 'poor me/him'; not anger at the spiritual violation of another person.

I cannot recall ever hearing a priest express anger at the actions of an abusive priest (except perhaps [Geoffrey Robinson](#)), and the damage they do to their victims, as well as to their own ministry as the trust of the community towards all priests evaporates. Rather, what I pick up is a sense of shame and tacit complicity. Shame is disempowering.

When I was a child our parish priest wore a badge indicating his membership of a priestly fellowship called the Pioneers. These priests made a solemn promise not to drink alcohol. We need such a fellowship today, of priests who make a solemn promise not to sexually abuse or exploit those in their pastoral care, a network of support and solidarity, of counsel and prayer.

Perhaps the Church should suspend all homilies for a month and sit in silent prayer for the healing of the victims of abuse and the conversion and repentance of their abusers; to help make our church communities safer places for victims to be present.

In the time they save from writing homilies, priests and bishops could develop a searching moral inventory (to borrow from Twelve Step programs) of their own failures to deal with this

problem, their lack of leadership in their communities to make them safe, and the positive steps they can take to repair the damage that has been done to individuals and communities.

Something more than platitudes are needed. The Church is dying on the vine, and tinkering with liturgies and translations is not going to bring it back to life. Its credibility is shot to pieces every time abuse occurs.

## **Gospel truths in children's stories**

POETRY

*Various*

### **My grandmothers red clay pot**

Earthenware circular base and balanced coolness  
as the world teeters a hairline from oblivion  
The heat is manageable in small aluminium cups  
from deep within your endless humanity  
I can feel the river pulse through your porous curves  
your neck constricted and arcing to hips receptive  
Filtering anger to reasoned fahrenheit's  
storing compassion in fissionary atoms more  
Powerful than the compressed anger of your warheads  
so assiduously stored in your misplaced morality.  
Wisdom is terracotted and the smoothness  
touches beyond the lies manufactured  
Frozen and microwaved and served steaming  
when your unthinking hunger sates  
You stare at the children with no names  
hold the next meeting of the privileged  
Around this receptacle of pure  
and feel the warm mud squelch between your toes  
Pour yourself some water that  
has been neither blessed nor cursed.

—*Vinay Verma*

### **Un Ā©lĀ©phant**

Old children's rhyme set to teach us French,  
that's French the language, not the kissing,  
conjured an aerial pachydermal feat  
all in French: the language, not the dressing.  
Unspoken truths concealed in children's songs,  
gospel truth spoken as a fable.  
Unmentioned elephants crowding the room  
*n'Ã©buleuse*. Dodgy, with no label.  
Spider-Man-like these graceful *fatmountains*  
dangle on silvery webs aquiver;  
elephantine tumblers serve as imagery  
for *cause c'Ã©l'Ã©bre, c'est impossible* to deliver.  
Think of imprisoned suspects languishing  
in pest'lent pissholes 'cross the briney.  
*Les accusations*, no trial, solely grief  
and torture, daily, nightly.  
Ponder the pon'drous spinning mammals high,  
sure representations of unlikely  
happenings, like justice 'n' bread for *les pauvres*;  
equity *selon* Shelton Jackson, *Ã la* Spike Lee.  
What's more unfeasible? The dim prospect  
of churches selling off *estates real*  
to house and feed and clothe *les sans-abri*  
or elephants, webskidding with zeal?  
*Un Ã©lÃ©phant qui se balanÃ©sait*  
*Sur une toile d'araignÃ©e*  
*Trouva ce jeu si intÃ©ressant*

*Qu'il alla chercher un deuxième éléphant.*

—Barry Gittins

### **Sunday conquest**

A double bed is a kingdom of bounce and squirrel  
energy on lazy Sunday mornings  
for a tiny tyrant conceived here unimagined  
who, equally demanding as the eye-glint,  
burrows among bicep and breast to lie  
in the overwhelming comfortable, comforting  
smell of owned, known precious bodies.  
In this faux democracy, (Doctor Spock and others  
have much to answer for), the small, legged turbulence  
flush with coltish morning wriggles, turns  
till firmly ordered quiet.  
Quiet persists for sixty seconds, then  
back is braced on one flesh, feet on another flesh,  
to push apart the universe: such power!  
Threats prevail, contentment comes, until  
a sleepy sibling totters to the bedside  
to be welcomed in with arguments of fairness  
that fail with sibling's sibling.  
If the usurper cannot be despatched  
to hell if possible or to purgatory  
at least, a pattern's set.  
Freud knew this, and Goebbels, that loving father.  
Killers come from happy homes as well.

—John Upton

## Earthquakes, poets and God

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*



Glenn Beck of FoxNews horrified and angered many when he [suggested](#) the Japan earthquake could be the work of a vengeful God. Most of us vehemently deny such a possibility.

Beck is merely the latest in a long line of religious zealots to link various afflictions and natural disasters to God's supposed displeasure with humanity. Perhaps the most deplorable was the suggestion in the 1980s that AIDS was God punishing homosexuals.

We react against Beck and the like because we associate such positions with hate and religious bigotry. Yet it is unfortunate if this causes us to resist our instinct for deeper thought about the progress of humanity and our own place within it.

Moments of calamity are ripe for reflection, for believers and unbelievers alike. For religious believers, science alone does not explain the creation of the earth. Therefore it's unlikely that they will accept purely scientific explanations for the partial break up of the earth in an earthquake.

In the [Quarterly Essay](#) published last week, David Malouf gives a nuanced reading of the position that Beck has bastardised, harking back to the days when religious belief was the norm that reconciled us with fate.

When we were in the hands of the Gods, we had stories that made these distant beings human and brought them close. They got angry, they took our part or turned violently against us. They fell in love with us and behaved badly.

This refers to a pre-Christian theology that was overturned by the all-loving Christian God. But it does reflect a sense that fate was negotiable, as it continued to be within the Christian world view. Malouf says: 'We had our ways of obtaining [the Gods'] help as intermediaries. We could deal with them.'

Malouf's point is that although 'the chief sources of human unhappiness, of misery and wretchedness, have largely been removed from our lives', the result is that happiness remains elusive. Science and economics rule, and we have lost our power to negotiate. He says: 'The Economy is impersonal. It lacks manageable dimensions. We have discovered no mythology to account for its moods.'

And if religion has been displaced, so has poetry. Malouf recalls Shelley's assertion that poets were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. Malouf argues that poets opened



the way to institutional change by uncovering new possibilities that were capable of firing the mind.

Actually Malouf is not addressing the past. He is suggesting that poets are perfectly capable of uncovering solutions that could save us when scientists have reached their limits. That could very well be now, given the bleak outlook for attempts to avoid a nuclear calamity in Japan.

## **Blame detention centres, not detainees**

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Andrew Hamilton*

Taken together the recent events in remote detention centres are both deplorable and predictable.

The disturbances at facilities housing minors, the use of tear gas against demonstrators at Christmas Island, the approval of such measures by the Minister the next day, the riots and destruction of property on Thursday evening after presently unspecified letters were received by detainees, the demonstrations in Curtin, and the death of a young asylum seeker in Weipa, are simply deplorable.

They cause grief to the detainees, to the officers supervising the centres, to the police and to the surrounding communities.

But these events are wholly predictable. When you place vulnerable people, mainly young men, in remote places for long periods of time, they are driven mad. Prolonged detention of vulnerable people for no just cause, with no set end and with nothing to do, does that to people. It is like building a nuclear reactor, putting fuel rods into it, and neglecting to provide water or to care for it.

When the detention centres are also overcrowded and under resourced, it is totally predictable that people will act out their frustration and anger. When people in such a place, without adequate access to advice and support, receive impersonal Government letters, presumably containing notices of rejection, it is predictable that they will express their despair and anger.

The Government recognised the destructive nature of indefinite detention when three years ago it announced that people would only be detained if they posed a security risk. But because they never passed legislation to enshrine this principle, we now have the present disastrous situation.

Money continues to be wasted in building and staffing remote detention centres that harm the mental health of the detainees and lead to incidents such as those which we see now.

Other Government decisions have contributed to the present deplorable situation. The earlier decision to suspend the processing of applications from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka has both extended the time for which many asylum seekers have been detained and deepened their sense of grievance.

They know that they have committed no crime and that Australia is committed to protect refugees without respect to how they arrive. They can only see the extra months that they

spend in detention as a deliberate punishment.

The length of detention and the consequent injury suffered by asylum seekers have been compounded by the Government decision to require security clearances from ASIO before releasing refugees into the community. Many people have remained locked up for over a year waiting for this clearance.

This demand is discriminatory and unnecessary. Thousands of people are admitted into Australian society as tourists or students without such clearance. If it is needed, it can be secured while living within the community.

If the present detention policy remains, the likely consequences are unfortunately also quite predictable. Asylum seekers' mental health will continue to deteriorate. This will be reflected in more instances of self-harm and of violent protest.

Experience of police dealings with the mentally ill in many Australian states suggests that the responses to such protests will also become more violent and punitive, involving technology like stun guns and tasers. Politicians will defend their use, and blame the asylum seekers for creating the need for such measures. And if it comes to using guns and shooting asylum seekers who act out of mental illness, we shall be assured that it was necessary.

Those who defend the humanity of asylum seekers and criticise detention are used to being dismissed as bleeding hearts. Although name calling is not all that helpful, it would be tempting to respond by referring to those who defend the existing regime of detention as bleeding minds.

Could anything other than bleeding into the brain explain how one could defend the enormous financial outlay on detaining asylum seekers in remote areas, the prolongation of their detention in the sure knowledge that it will drive them crazy, the slowness of releasing children from such a regime, and the generation of conditions in which people will inevitably be injured and even killed.

Allowing asylum seekers into the community while their claims are processed would be a far more rational policy, both in economic and in ethical terms.

## Japan's gods of nature

### REFLECTION

*Catherine Marshall*

A typhoon was bearing down on Tokyo. As we sped along an expressway 250 km to the south-west, late last year, my guide, Yoshiko, was gentle but determined in the face of potential disaster.

'It will hit the centre of Japan tomorrow night. It will hit while we are sleeping,' she reported. 'If I get any more information I will introduce you to it, but it is out of my control. All I can do is make a prayer and kick that typhoon out of Japan.'



It was a scenario all too familiar to Yoshiko and her countrymen. Strung out like a levee alongside Asia's distended midriff, Japan faces the full wrath of the vast and mercurial North Pacific Ocean.

And the fault line that runs beneath the Japanese archipelago is as inescapable as an error written into the genes: there is no knowing when it will unzip and send the islands above it tumbling into themselves, and no telling whether the ocean will respond to these tectonic antics, pouring itself over the land like some hateful monster.

As we neared the city of Hamamatsu, Yoshiko pointed out Lake Hamanako, whose broad, fresh waters were turned to brine by an earthquake-induced tsunami in 1498. Today, eels thrive in these brackish waters, and the city has built its culinary reputation on the popular, nutritious foodstuff.

Not much of a silver lining, but enough, perhaps, to mollify a nation that has suffered its share of humiliation and tragedy: occupation, atomic bombings, recession, typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis and, now, potential nuclear fallout.

The natural disasters — those events that Yoshiko says are 'out of my control' — must surely leave the Japanese with the feeling that they are living in an abusive household; they can never be certain that their unreliable motherland won't turn from love and beauty towards anger and violence.

But Yoshiko's calm, pragmatic approach might hold a clue to the workings of a nation squired by moody geography and shaped by conflict both foreign and internal. To the casual observer, the Japanese seem to carry the demeanour of a people resigned to catastrophe, and ever alert to the exquisite tension between pleasure and pain.

Here, goodness seems to organically inhere in everything, a notion informed by Shinto, the indigenous religion to which more than 80 per cent of the population adheres.

‘Shinto is a nature religion: we give thanks to everything we have,’ said Yoshiko as rain pummelled the earth and hats flew in all directions. ‘For example, today we are giving thanks to the god of wind, the god of rain.’

A hotel manager expressed a similar sentiment a few days later, in the alpine village of Kamikochi, where mist obscured an active volcano, Mt Yakedake. ‘When we are lucky we can see the fumes,’ he said.

This expression of respect — gratitude, even — for the natural coexistence of good and bad is foreign to most of us raised in the west. So too is the unconditional acceptance of personal responsibility, an attribute which is sacred to the Japanese.

I discovered this when Yoshiko was forced to leave behind a journalist from our party who was running late. He caught a taxi to our next meeting point, and Yoshiko confided that she would have to pay the fare from her own pocket. ‘It is my responsibility to ensure that everyone is on time,’ she said. ‘I might get fired if anyone is late.’

It is this remarkable attitude that comes to mind when I try to make sense of the scenes of resignation and capitulation that have seared our television screens since Japan’s north-eastern coast was devastated by an earthquake and tsunami just over a week ago.

To be sure, grief and disbelief are etched on the faces of survivors huddled in evacuation centres and those roaming obliterated streets looking for God-knows-what.

But the shouts of blame and accusation so redolent of other disasters are strangely absent; there is no news of looting or violence, no demands for immediate evacuation and coronial inquests. People form orderly queues for scarce petrol and inadequate food parcels. From the outside at least, the conduct of a people trapped in an apocalyptic nightmare is nothing short of exemplary.

Perhaps the people of Japan tread softly and with deliberate respect in the hope that they won’t disturb the god of geology, the god of the sea, the god of the fiery mountain. Perhaps, as Yoshiko did in the face of that typhoon, they put faith in their *tera tera bozus*, tissue or fabric dolls which ward off bad weather, unless you turn them upside down, in which case they invite the typhoon or tsunami right into your living room.

And perhaps, when the gods decide to show their wrath, these people simply accept that there is no human being big enough to shoulder the blame.

In Yoshiko’s case, her *tera tera bozu* did the trick, for the typhoon made a u-turn and headed for Hawaii instead. But she was careful not to insult the natural forces that had set it in motion in the first place.

With bowed head she said, ‘Thanks to the god of cloud and the god of rain.’

## Embracing Good Friday football

SPORT

*Luke Walladge*



Each Anzac Day, upwards of 90,000 people pack the Melbourne Cricket Ground and millions more tune in on television to watch Collingwood play Essendon in the AFL's famed Anzac Day Match. Audiences see buglers play the 'Last Post' and 'Reveille', hear the 'Ode of Remembrance' and have the traditions of wartime service and sacrifice evoked symbolically through a game of football.

On Good Friday, everyone stays at home.

Football on Good Friday has long been a topic of discussion in Melbourne, the home of Australian football, as well as SA, WA and Tasmania. And for as long as football has been played, the controversy has been firmly settled in favour of leaving the day sport-free.

But in doing so, the Church is missing a wonderful opportunity, and Anzac Day could provide a working template of change for the better. Anzac Day and traditions around the wartime service of Australians have received a massive boost from their association with the AFL. Why not the Easter message too?

In the past the Church could, by virtue of its position in society, rely on an ability to shout louder than everyone else in the market square. This is no longer true. It can't shout loud enough to drown out sports, politics, advertising or popular culture. However much we might wish it to be otherwise, the Church is but one of many voices competing for the attention and allegiance of the public.

It does the Church no credit to insist that its holy days be respected by a largely secular society when most people couldn't name the reason for the holiday, let alone identify with it. For most Melburnians Good Friday is associated with a charitable appeal and a lack of AFL football. If the Church wants its holidays to be relevant to a non-churched community it needs to make them so.

Good Friday football would not be a case of simply playing a normal, garden-variety match. The day could be used to promote the Church's mission and give a public face and voice to Easter's true meaning. And just like on Anzac Day, the excitement and interest generated would be immense.

Collectors taking donations for the Good Friday Appeal could be positioned outside the ground. The match could be preceded by several moments silence, or dimmed house lights and candles or glowtubes. A nominated church leader could offer a prayer of thanks and protection.



The entire day could be a tremendous vehicle for the Easter message, as well as serving to demystify the Church and make it more accessible to the many people to whom Christianity is alien.

The status quo is unlikely to remain tenable. The NRL and the national soccer competition already play matches on the day, a move which they made unilaterally and without input from church groups. Consequently the opportunity to collaborate, influence and use the event has been lost.

That lack of involvement and foresight on the part of the Church reflects poorly upon it.

Football is a social currency. We know this, because television stations pay hundreds of millions of dollars to broadcast it, advertisers pay hundred of thousands of dollars to be associated with it and every office in the country has a tipping competition for us to prove our ignorance of it.

The Church now has to rely on society's mediums to get its message into the world. In this it's no different from any other organisation with a message and a mission, and can't expect to be.

But there's nothing new about this — the Christian message has always needed the symbols of the day for it to be transmitted and made relevant to new audiences and new people. Even St Paul used 'the unknown God' to make his point to the Athenians.

There is nothing that the Anzac tradition has to offer people that the Christian tradition does not. Why couldn't Good Friday, the most important day on the Christian calendar, be used to promote the message of the Church through the medium of football?

## Kids circle the holy parts

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

One day I am sitting in my old body at my old desk reading young essays — essays sent to me by holy children of various sizes — and I can feel the joy sloshing and rising in me as their words pour in, and finally I get topped off by the phrase in *otter words*. A child has scrawled this in the brightest green ink you ever saw: *in otter words, the holy parts are circled*, she writes.



I think maybe the top of my head is going to fly off from happiness, and what remains of my organised mature mind sprints away giggling and mooing with pleasure.

You know how it's said that human beings are the only beings who can contemplate two opposing ideas at once? It's even better than that — we can entertain lots of joyous ideas at the same time, it turns out.

Such as, o my god, otter words, that's enough right there for hours of happy speculation, am I right? I mean, what are the otter words for trout and rain and minnows and ice and fur that has been warmed by the sun to just the right sheen and shimmer? I bet there are otter words for that.

And for clumsy fishermen, and for osprey, and for mud of exactly the right consistency for sliding in, and for dying chinook salmon like ancient riddled kings, and old red drift boats, and young mergansers, and huge herons, and the basso murmur of mossy boulders grumbling at the bottom of the river, and the tinny querulous voices of crawdads, and the speed-freak chitter of chickadees, and the fat feet of tiny kids, and the little pebbly houses of caddisflies, and the rain of salmonflies in season like tiny orange helicopters.

And the holy parts! which are circled, we knew that was true, the holy parts are underlined and illuminated and highlighted, aren't they, and circled with a huge honking blessed magic marker, isn't that so?

Sometimes I feel like the eyes in my heart close quietly without me paying much attention, and I muddle and mutter along thinking I am savouring and celebrating, and then *wham*, a kid, it's always a kid, says something so piercing and wild and funny and unusual that *wham* my heart opens again like a door flung open by, say, an otter, and *wham*, I am completely and utterly overwhelmed and thrilled by the shocking brilliant uniform that kestrels wear, and moved beyond words by the roiling sea in a woman's eyes, and I get the shivering willies hearing my dad's gentle snortling laugh on the phone, and my god have you ever seen a blue jay up close and personal, what a cheerful arrogant street criminal it is, all blue brass and natty

swagger, isn't that so?

And most of all, best of all, better than every other joy and thrill, even the very best beer, which is a very excellent thing, are kids.

Sure, they learn to lie, and sure, they are just not as into dental hygiene as you wish they were, and my god they skin their knees nine times a day, and do things like smear peanut butter on their abraded knees just to see what it feels like, and shake flour on the dog! so that when he shakes off the flour at one million revolutions per minute there will be a flour cloud in the kitchen the size of Utah!, *isn't that cool, dad?*, but more than anything else in the world it is kids who make us see that the holy parts are circled.

You know and I know this is true. We forget.

I think maybe we should write it down somewhere, like on the wall by the coffeepot, or in steamy words on the bathroom mirror, so we will see it every day, and remember it more, and be refreshed to the bottom of our bony bottoms.

If necessary use otter words.

## Christian reverence for science

### THEOLOGY

*Andrew Hamilton*



When Christianity and science come together, the meeting place is often like a battlefield. From the Christian point of view that is a pity, because the central Christian belief, that in Jesus Christ God's reason entered the world, demands that science be given an independent and honoured place.

It implies that both God's ways and the world are reasonable and that we can explore them. The scientific interpretation of the empirical world and the Christian interpretation of God's relationship to the world are compatible.

The two kinds of exploration, of course, work at different levels. Questions of faith have to do with why anything exists at all and with the purpose of human life. Scientific questions ask how the world has the shape that we find it to have. Each way of questioning offers an interpretation of the world at a distinctive level.

Most fights between science and religion have been boundary disputes. They have turned on who has the competence and authority to interpret the world at its different levels.

The emblematic struggles, which have taken on a mythical status, were associated with Galileo and Darwin. In each case churches claimed preemptive rights to exclude scientific interpretations of the movement of the earth and of the origins of life on the strength of a wrong interpretation of scripture. They wrongly moved out of the larger question of why the world exists to pronounce on the question of how the distinctive features of natural phenomena are to be explained.

I think that scientists like Hawking and Dawkins may have the excuse of historical provocation, but make the same mistake in reverse, of arguing that discoveries of how human beings develop prove that there is not a God. Boundaries are not safely crossed. To put it bluntly no discoveries in the natural world can prove that there is a God or define human value and destiny. Nor can they disprove it. Nor can interpretations of faith disqualify scientific conclusions.

But that delineation of boundaries between scientific and religious questions ignores the more interesting question of the overlap between religious and scientific questions. They cannot be kept hermetically sealed, because questions are always asked by people, and most human beings from time to time do ask both questions about how the world we see works, and also about why it exists and what purpose there may be to human life.

And some people are motivated to scientific questioning by religious wonder, while others are motivated to ask questions about God by wonder at the world that they discover through

science. David Attenborough's programs can both draw people to explore a deeper reality of the world beyond possible scientific exploration or dissuade people from it.

Science does impact seriously, too, on the way in which we relate faith to the world in which we live, and so in the way in which we imagine God's relationship to our world. It makes a difference whether we imagine God in relationship to a world that is the centre of a relatively small universe, or in relationship to an earth that is a tiny part of one among many possible universes, with distances in time and space that are beyond imagining. It also makes us see humanity in different ways. Our view of God is enlarged somewhat, and God's relationship to each human being needs to be revisioned.

The image we have of the universe, too, will shape our understanding of the way in which God relates to it. If we imagine the universe as a clock with fixed and clearly defined relationships and laws, the image of God as creator will be different than if we see the world as evolving and with a principled uncertainty built into it. Again our understanding of God needs to be revisioned.

Similarly discoveries of the human genome and of inheritance, too, will shape our understanding of human freedom in relation to God's freedom. It does not destroy the Christian understanding of humanity, but it will raise new questions to which there will be new responses.

## Teen sexuality at the apocalypse

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

***Kaboom* (MA). Director: Greg Araki. Starring: Thomas Dekker, Haley Bennett, Juno Temple, Kelly Lynch, Chris Zylka. 85 minutes**

I interviewed Greg Araki in 2004 at a time when the Classification Review Board, under pressure from several community groups, was considering overturning the R rating that had been given to his paedophilia themed film *Mysterious Skin* and declaring it instead to be Refused Classification, effectively a ban in Australia.

Araki seemed genuinely hurt by opponents' (sight-unseen) accusations that his film was an 'instruction manual for paedophiles'. He thought (and I agreed) he'd made a thoughtful and sensitive film about the long-term emotional and psychological effects of abuse upon children.

He was eventually vindicated by the Board's decision to uphold the R rating.

I share this in order to illustrate that Araki does not tackle taboo subjects lightly, but in order that they might become subjects of normal discourse and greater understanding.

Lightly, no, though sometimes lightheartedly. His latest film, *Kaboom*, is much more rambunctious than the sombre *Mysterious Skin*, but equally willing to explode taboos in the pursuit of honesty and frankness.

*Kaboom* offers explicit considerations of queer sexuality within the context of an apocalyptic science fiction storyline. In this regard it harks back to Araki's prominence in the 1990s as a proponent of New Queer Cinema, a genre marked by its robust portrayal of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender protagonists, usually as outsiders or renegades from conventional society.

Such is the case here with antihero Smith (Dekker), a label-dodging bisexual college student plagued by ominous dreams of corridors and dumpsters and waking nightmares of sinister animal-masked assailants. In spite of such baffling mental phenomena, he is forging an unexpectedly intense partnership with forthright straight girl London (Temple), even as his eye and his heart are perpetually drawn by an assortment of boys.

At the same time, Smith's casually sardonic BFF Stella (Bennett) is dating a possessive French seductress (Mesquida) who may or may not be a witch. This all plays out amid a fuzz of acid trips and increasingly perilous rumours of conspiracies and doomsday cults, all of which is sure to come to a chaotic head.

The film deals with sexuality explicitly, though not graphically. And the sex scenes are as much about character exploration as titillation. We gain greater insight into London's



approach to life through one impromptu lesson to a male partner about the proper way to perform a sex act, than we could through pages of dialogue.

In fact this is a quite cerebral exploitation film with plenty of subtext. Smith's aching crush upon his ridiculously straight roommate Thor (Zylka) signifies a sense of alienation that comes with his status as an 'outsider' and a young person. Ditto, Smith's geographically distant mother (Lynch), and his and London's respective absent fathers. Alienation and otherness drive the characters into each other's orbits with the force of a familial bond.

*Kaboom* also happens to be very funny. Notably, Stella, as impeccably portrayed by Bennett, strides through the film on the back of a series of perfectly honed, po-faced one-liners, never missing a dignified step as her quips deflate pretension and self-delusion on every side.

The film's climax is a bit of a car crash. Nevertheless this remains a challenging and memorable film.

## Julia Gillard learns to lead

### POLITICS

*Lachlan Harris*

Julia Gillard's carbon tax announcement was more than just a policy announcement. It was also a death notice for the low risk political strategy that characterised the first six months of the Gillard prime ministership. Unlike many such notices, this one was welcome and well overdue.



Having worked for four opposition leaders and prime ministers, and *against* four opposition leaders and prime ministers, I'm not the dewy-eyed type. But I know a change of prime ministerial strategy when I see one, and the carbon tax announcement was just such an event.

For the first six months of her prime ministership Ms Gillard's core strategy was based around risk management. Rather than an agenda, she had a plan. Reduce the risk of tax reform by doing a deal with the miners. Reduce the risk of health by doing a deal with the states. Reduce the risk of climate change by doing a deal with no one. Risk reduction sat at the heart of the first Gillard campaign.

Until the carbon tax it seemed it would also sit at the heart of the second.

By announcing a carbon tax the prime minister put an end to all that and took the biggest political risk of her career. It equals any of the risks taken by Rudd or Howard as prime minister. It is about as far from her low risk political strategy as Gillard could possibly get.

If risk elimination no longer sits at the heart of Gillard's political strategy, what does? It is early days but the carbon tax announcement suggests that low risk has been replaced with leadership, and that is a very good thing.

The announcement was just that — an announcement — so it's important not to get carried away. But to even announce a carbon tax shows Gillard's thinking about her role as prime minister has come a very long way.

It is important to remember that it is not just Tony Abbott and an army of hyperventilating climate change sceptics who would have been obstacles to making the carbon tax announcement. A battalion of cabinet ministers, factional bosses, backbenchers, advisers, party officials and pollsters would also have been telling Gillard that low risk, not leadership, was the correct course of action.

Being prime minister is the loneliest job in the country. The more risks you take the lonelier your life in the Lodge becomes. But if Gillard sticks to her guns, and withstands the mountain of pressure that will assail her, she will fight her second election with much more strength

than her first.

Modern politics is a game of winning, and no new strategy will ever change that fact. But by replacing low risk with leadership Gillard is starting to think about winning the next election the right way.

Gillard's leadership will be sorely tested in the coming months. Not just on climate change, and not just by the opposition parties. The ferocity of the attack on the carbon tax by some media outlets will be the most aggressive media campaign this country has ever seen. The continuous opinion cycle that now dominates political coverage in Australia will be unleashed with all its formidable force.

The debate surrounding immigration and refugees will also be a high explosive minefield for the Gillard Government. Principle will risk popularity. Popularity will risk principle. The temptation to eschew leadership for low-risk compromises in such a high stakes political environment will be profound. All we can hope is that once again Gillard's taste for leadership will hold the day.

This change of strategy did not come a moment too soon, because Gillard was in real danger of slowly but surely fading away. She was never suited to a low risk prime ministership, and is a significantly better prime minister now that she seems to have found her way.

## Invisible Indonesia

### POLITICS

*Ruby J. Murray*



You'd never know it, but just above Darwin and sort of to the left, around Bali, there are 17,000 islands floating in the Indian Ocean with roughly 240 million people living on them. Grouped together, this rising economic powerhouse and cultural kaleidoscope is called 'Indonesia', and it's the fourth largest country in the world. In fact, Bali is part of this 'Indonesia' place.

I mention this, and the archipelago's vague location, because Australia seems to have forgotten that Indonesia exists, and that there's more to it than Bali, Balibo, Bintangs, and bombings. We forget Indonesia at our own political and economic peril, not to mention at great loss to our culture.

Indonesian Vice President Boediono flew home to Jakarta on Monday after a five-day state tour of Australia that made a negligible blip in the Australian media. The neglect is not surprising. While Australia is a daily staple of Indonesian political and media discussion, back in our great barren land Indonesia rarely rates a mention.

It can be hard to understand why such a cultural and political silence surrounds all things Indonesian. After all, Indonesia is important to us in myriad ways. It's tipped to become one of the world's ten biggest economies by 2015 if growth continues apace.

Beyond the current Australian stock of investment of around A\$4.8 billion, Indonesia has the potential to push forward drastically in the ranks of our most important trading partners in coming years. Not to mention the 13,990 Indonesian students who bring close to A\$500 million into the economy annually.

Indonesia is also a transit country for asylum seekers heading for our shores. While Australia talks 'off-shore' solutions and pours funds into Indonesian detention centres through international organisations, the Indonesian government struggles daily with the flow of people fleeing Iraq and Afghanistan, where Australia is busy waging the wars that asylum seekers are desperate to escape.

It's no coincidence that Australia's diplomatic mission to Indonesia is the biggest we have in the world, and the archipelago is rightly the largest recipient of Australian aid: an estimated A\$458.7 million went there for the 2010–2011 period alone.

Despite Tony Abbott's clumsy attempts to cut the aid flow, Australia has a deep and abiding interest in promoting Indonesian development and education, especially as it moves to consolidate its new democracy. Our nearest neighbour, the world's third largest democracy,

and the biggest Muslim one, Indonesia is a vibrant example to developing countries everywhere.

But in Australian life, the cultural forgetting of Indonesia is all encompassing.

A 2010 study by the Asia Foundation at Melbourne University showed the dire state of Asian language teaching in Australian schools. Between 2000 and 2008, the number of Australian children learning Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese or Korean slid from 24 per cent to just 18.6 per cent.

Despite the fact that Indonesia is our next-door neighbour, Bahasa Indonesia teaching is suffering the most: 99 per cent of students drop the language before year 12. If nationwide trends continue there could be only 100 students studying it by 2020. The government's National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program is too little, too late.

Teaching of Asian history also seems to be in serious decline, especially relative to the preoccupation with European history. It seems we have forgotten what we seemed to know fleetingly in the 1990s under Keating: that Australia is part of the Asia Pacific.

Beyond the schoolyard the situation is similarly dire. Walk into any bookshop in Melbourne and you'll be hard-pressed to find even one book on Indonesia on the history or politics shelves. If you're very lucky, you might be able to scrape up a book on Bali or Balibo.

In fact, the Australian preoccupation with the shootings of the Balibo Five, a great tragedy, is nevertheless emblematic of just how blinkered the Australian narrative surrounding Indonesia is.

The journalists were killed in 1975 in Indonesia's early incursions into what was then Portuguese Timor. In the 25 year occupation that followed, however, between 102 000 and 183 000 East Timorese [died](#) while Australia sat mutely by.

Maybe this was where we began to forget, as we will surely persist in our continual attempts to forget the human rights abuses being committed in West Papua. Without the language, without the history, we're just bossy neo-colonials with all the answers and no idea what the question is.

Boediono made a couple of speeches, shook some hands, and was seamlessly aware of Australian manners and mores as he passed through. Like so many Indonesians, after all, Boediono went to university here. Before he even left, we had forgotten he had come.

When we forget Indonesia, we exclude ourselves from the community of our region, passing up the chance to share in and understand a vast tapestry of traditions and languages, a syncretic society as richly complex as batik, right on our doorstep, invisible in our midst.

## Japan's nuclear distortion

### POLITICS

*Brian Vale*

The recent major earthquake and tsunami off the east coast of Japan has left me shocked and carrying a heavy heart for the huge loss of life in the Miyagi area.

My memories of visits to Sendai include the wonderful hospitality of friends and a beautiful coastline with gnarled pine trees and spectacular rocky outcrops by the sea.

The people of that area of Japan who survived will be in deep shock for some time as they try to understand and make sense of the depth of their many losses: family, friends, homes, villages.

Japanese culture places a heavy emphasis on the group. One's identity comes from being a member of a group.

This brings strengths which will be invaluable in the upcoming months and years of repair and rebuilding of lives. This will help them to recover and they will be able to work well together and have a sense of solidarity.

Group decision making processes in such a culture, however, can tend to take longer so that most people's opinions can be listened to and gradually entwined together. There is probably a fear within an individual making a decision in such a culture to rush in and make a mistake so emergency responses can seem tardy to many Westerners.

Taking responsibility for mistakes is a significant moment in such a culture. In the previous Hanshin earthquake in 1995 the reaction responses of the Government agencies were recognised as too slow.

The international news agencies have begun to switch their focus to another shocking dimension of this huge disaster. There is an ongoing risk of nuclear reactor meltdowns at some nuclear power plants in the disaster area with a possible dispersal of radiation into the atmosphere.

There has been some admission of a rise in radiation in some areas and reports of further explosions. This news will be chilling for people who are simply trying to survive the initial period of this disaster because Japanese people are very aware of the risks of nuclear radiation.

Some would say that they have an 'allergy' to anything nuclear after their experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Most high school children have visited the Peace Park



displays in Hiroshima or Nagasaki and seen the shocking images of the devastation and the consequent long term effects of radiation. Peace education is part of the school curriculum. My own visits to both Peace Parks left me stunned at the devastating effects of radiation.

Many Japanese also hold a strong suspicion of officials connected to the nuclear power industry because previous radiation leaks and other mistakes were either denied or downplayed only to be admitted much later. Opponents of the nuclear power industry in Japan were not able to stop the construction of nuclear power plants in known earthquake prone areas.

It will be difficult for the people caught in the midst of surviving this current disaster to know how to respond to statements from officials who use phrases such as 'acceptable levels of radiation' and 'no immediate threat'. Fortunately local people have been evacuated 20 kilometres away from the Fukushima plant which suffered an explosion. So far the pattern is consistent. There is little information being shared and what is given out is not helpful and often contradictory.

Dr Rosalie Bertell is a Sister of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart and an eminent environmental epidemiologist. My understanding from a talk she gave in Tokyo several years ago is that any exposure to radiation will hasten the ageing process in our bodies.

What then is a 'safe threshold' of exposure to radioactive material? If one is exposed to radiation some particles stay inside our bodies so even if there is no 'immediate threat', as Japanese officials are saying, the health of people exposed may eventually be affected. Hopefully the people of Fukushima were not exposed to a very strong source of radiation and, if so, not for very long.

This earthquake and tsunami is the greatest disaster in Japan since the end of the Second World War with the dropping of the nuclear bombs and any new radiation contamination will strike deep into those memories and only make it harder for the people of Japan to come through this disaster.



## Laura's French fry odyssey

NON-FICTION

*George Estreich*



Two days after the redevye from the West Coast, we'd settled into Vacation Standard Time: beach, pool, TV, sleep, repeat. But my younger daughter's sleep patterns were atomised, destroyed.

We were in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to spend a couple of weeks with my wife's family: her mum, her sisters and their families, and her brother.

Laura loved the commotion, fearless in the waves, bobbing happily in the pool with her styrofoam-filled swimsuit, putting away far more than a two-year-old's share at the deeply unhealthy Southern buffets. But sleep, on our schedule at least, was not in her plans.

She inhabited the time zones of several continents, none of them ours. She napped from five in the afternoon until seven in the evening, stayed up till one, fell asleep, woke up in the middle of the night for an hour, went back to sleep, slept in till 11.

I should mention, I suppose, that Laura has Down syndrome.

How much this mattered was hard to know. Between the genetic factors (like an extra chromosome, or a tendency to insomnia, inherited from me) and the environmental factors (the redevye, the shift in routine), we had an abundance of explanations, none of them particularly helpful.

But the practical result was obvious: Laura wanted Mum.

Theresa works, and I'm the one at home, so Mum-in-the-daytime was a comfort and novelty. Laura mainlined Mum for hours on end: Mum all day, nothing but Mum, Mum in the morning, Mum at night, Mum to herself while I surf-fished and her older sister Ellie screamed in the waves with her cousins.

One night, at 11, when Laura was clearly just getting revved up for another two and a half hours of play, I said, here, I'll take her.

We drove to the Wal-Mart Supercenter. The parking lot was disorientingly huge. Football fields. Proving grounds. I drove the rented Suzuki across the lane lines, parked near the entrance. Inside, I let Laura rifle through sweatpants and T-shirts on their hangers, fingering the colors, inspecting the sleeve of a blouse. We played peekaboo. I picked out a shirt for three dollars, another for four.

This way, Laura, I said, this way, the distance like elastic between us. I backed away, beckoning, keeping her in sight. I could see her deciding whether to follow, then smiling, rushing towards me, hands already up.

We could have been 5000 feet underground, after the end of civilisation. That several miles away, past roadside culverts, palm trees with browning fronds, and billboards for lookalike superstars, Theresa was back with Susie at the condo, surfing through 80 channels of cable, I did not doubt; but that life seemed a shadow.

Mum mum, said Laura, and I said, brightly, Later! We'll see her later! I did our made-up sign for *later*, two index fingers indicating an event stage right. As if she'd asked for directions, and I'd said, No, the place you want is two doors down. Later.

We circumnavigated the store. She signed *up*, and I lifted her into the cart. We played the game Ellie and I played, years ago: I shove the cart away from me, let it coast, and then look around distracted, saying, Where's Laura? Where is she? Then I see her, run after, and save her, just before the cart plows into the air fresheners.

She signed *eat*. We found the cafeteria, about an eighth of a mile away. It was closed. She saw the Formica, stainless steel, and plastic, and signed *french fries* — her instinct for junk food is unerring — but the registers were unattended. No, Laura, I said. It's closed now. She signed *french fries*. I said: Let's find something else! How about apple? She shook her head. Avocado?

She signed *down*. I set her down. She led me forward, hand closed around my index finger, in her cheerful half-run, half-stumble, head down, charging forward. We walked past Intimates, Baby, Men's Apparel, Sporting Goods, Magazines, and soon we were in the supermarket section, itself bigger than any supermarket in our hometown.

Laura ran ahead; I followed.

She signed, again, *french fry, french fry*. No, Laura, I said. No, it's closed. *French fry!* she signed, more definite. I shook my head. We were in the frozen foods section. She pointed, exasperated, at the glass door: behind it were boxes and boxes of frozen deep-fried potato products, Tater Tots, steak fries, crinkle cut fries, the pictures magnified, glistening with fat. French fries.

We paid and left. It was 12.30am. The air was humid, and in the parking lot, light pooled at the base of each tower.

I set Laura in her car seat, buckled her in, loaded up the bag of vacation groceries: Coke, Oreos, milk, cereal, chips. I opened the bag of Cheetos we'd bought, handed it backward as we pulled away, felt her tug it from my fingers. By the time we got back to the condo, her face was completely orange.

## Cool hip tear-shaped suburb

POETRY

*Pauline Reeve*

### **At Home in Clifton Hill**

Roaming the green corridor  
beside Merri Creek, we're glad  
of game-wakened dog song  
and the weir-teased water,  
far from the wipe-out week.

Here where we fatten on heart's ease,  
one among us is not at home.

Someone caught in an endless trip  
masking misery through Melbourne streets;  
shrouding night in a picnic shelter  
walled in by the road embankment,  
tiered cliff and the half-pulled curtains  
of bush that lets the bike paths in.

Someone now cast in forgetfulness,  
out cold — dumped down in a sleeping bag  
moulded like a burial mound.

And by their side neatly aligned,  
threads of an abandoned bedside?  
paired runners with socks tucked inside.

Feet plunge on passing peddles;  
eyelids hood a second look;  
dogs lose themselves in scent. You  
turn hungry for home

in a cool hip, tear shaped suburb [1].

[1] Brown, Jenny. 'From a tip to serene and green' in *The Age: Domain*, May 3, 2008, pp 4-5.

### **Strait Record**

*...nature has provided many means for securing  
concord...not merely to afford pleasantries...*

*Erasmus*

We've only paddled in the strait;  
only strolled by light's diamond-scattered  
cabinet of glass, though we've baked  
here in luck with mates all holiday.  
We've been lulled behind sun shades  
by romance on the Honeycomb Coast.  
But we'd break the beached ranks if peace  
walked like a prince on this water  
and overruled a smoking wind.  
We'd push in and block the minders;  
climb on a friend's shoulder to look  
and cup a burst of whoops in our hands.  
We'd swamp the TV shows with the news;  
damp down *Tax Cuts* with mean print and swell  
*Miracle* with coloured headlines,  
if peace rode up in an armoured tank  
on a carpet of shirts, out of dunes,  
into Jerusalem and Baghdad.  
As it is, peace is the shy achiever  
in our house; the mortar sandwiched between

bricks, the pipe that fetches and freights in water.  
It is the squat chair underneath our coat;  
the switch for light and heat; the bulb wintering  
for spring, plumb deep in bedded-down garden.  
It is the roots holding the trunk up like a hip;  
the footpath jogged on beside stretches of green;  
the freeway whizzed down without a second thought.  
It is the car cuing the speedster past,  
who gives them the finger; the click of amber  
and the bridge the level-headed thrum across.  
Peace is the teacher who, in the gullet of shells  
and gunmen, spirits the teenager still to write  
words on yellowed newspaper. It is the neighbour  
edging a hole through the wall, to cable  
a share of power salvaged from the flotsam  
left in the wake of insurgents, wrangling for blood.  
Put down the love story. Take off  
the glasses. Flick away the sand.  
Let's roll and rocket on a breaker.  
We'll mingle our shades of salt and warmth  
with the swimmers in a strait where west  
and east coursing oceans rub and sift.  
Let's be fools, pull right out—further,  
further—past the lifesaver's buoy; fill up  
the lungs; fall in with the strongest  
of currents downwelling to stillness  
beneath the flush of thinner waters;  
clear a passage for them to flow.

If we dare, we could plunge all the way  
down towards the current  
that drifts from the other hemisphere;  
reach to rewrite the records—  
nudge a strait of all oceans, lift  
to the tug, surge with the fall.

## Cheap milk, no guilt

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

One morning last week, ABC Sydney presenter Deborah Cameron was encouraging listeners to support dairy farmers by forgoing large savings offered by \$1 per litre home brand milk at the major supermarkets. Opinion leaders across the country shared the sentiment and did likewise.



Independent Senator Nick Xenophon [told](#) the Senate inquiry into milk prices that the 'unsustainable' \$1 per litre price will force farmers off the land and ruin Australia's dairy industry.

It's true that farmers suffer inordinately from droughts and floods. It's tempting to think we're doing them a favour if we forgo discounts and pay higher prices for branded milk. But a better way to help struggling farmers is to give to the relief appeals organised by Vinnies and other charities, enjoy cheap milk, and drink more of it, guilt free.

Low milk prices are the market god's gift to consumers. Like milk itself, market mechanisms that reward viable, well-planned businesses are healthy.

Economists argue that consumers and dairy farmers alike stand to benefit from \$1 per litre milk prices. Price reductions create new markets, which is what happened with discount air fares. If milk is cheaper than Coke, people will drink more milk and less Coke. In this instance, it's not the farmers who lose, it's the Coca Cola Company.

In his [economics.com.au](#) blog last week, Dean of Business and Economics at Monash University Stephen King [ridiculed](#) the opinion leaders who predict ruin for dairy farmers. He suggests the following mock headlines:

Coles threatens farmers. 'We'll sell more milk'

Farmers plead: 'Don't sell more of our product'

Increasing milk sales to hurt dairy farmers

King's logic is that low prices and increased retail sales help producers who supply what economists call the 'inputs'. For milk, the main producers are the dairy farmers. More milk will be sold and retailers will need to persuade farmers to supply more milk. You cannot do that by harming the farmers.

To drive home the message, he uses the analogy of China. Australia provides inputs such as iron ore that enable China to sell low priced manufactured goods. Australia is the beneficiary of China's low prices in the way that the dairy farmers gain from supermarket milk discounts.

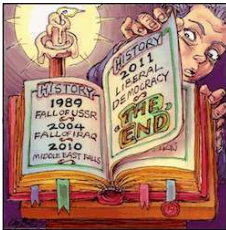


The broader message is that replacing fear with informed thinking can produce an outcome that is more pleasing than that dictated by popular sentiment. This applies not only to milk prices, but also to much larger issues such as carbon reduction.

## History continues in Egypt and Libya

### POLITICS

*Ben Coleridge*



At the end of the Cold War, when perestroika undid the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama wrote his [thesis](#) on the 'End of History'.

For a very short time, until it was apparent that 'history' was alive in various forms of ideological struggle, the 'end of history' was an idea — or, more accurately, a catchphrase — that caught on. Now Fukuyama's paradigm has resurfaced, to capture the significance of the upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and the simmering protest movements elsewhere in the Middle East.

Even the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kevin Rudd, has referred to the 'end of history' catchphrase while considering these events (in order to [dismiss](#) it).

It is worth exploring what Fukuyama's view of history has to offer as we consider the unfolding events in the Middle East. History is the story we tell ourselves about why and how things have happened, how these events fit into a longer narrative. The emphases we bring to the story-telling matter.

What did Fukuyama consider to be 'history'? In his understanding, it was the clash of competing ideologies enacted through the rivalry of political movements and states. History's end was, according to Fukuyama, a state of affairs in which liberal democracy became the world's pre-eminent political ideology, unchallenged by other rival political doctrines.

Thus, Fukuyama extrapolated from G. W. F. Hegel's 19th century [belief](#) in an inexorable movement of history: history in Hegel's mind was a process with a beginning, middle and end and he believed it culminated in an 'absolute moment' that would usher in the final form of state and society.

Does the movement towards political change in the Middle East constitute an 'absolute moment' which forecasts the realisation of democratic governments across the Arab world? Is it at all accurate to think in these terms?

Fukuyama did not argue that the fall of the USSR would usher in democratic regimes across the globe. Rather, he argued that there was now no political idea besides 'liberal democracy' that possessed the same attraction and power.

It is true that such is the contemporary power of the democratic ideal that even authoritarian regimes resort to the language of democracy to cast a veil of legitimacy over themselves. Thus in Russia the former (and perhaps ongoing) Putin regime coined the phrase

‘sovereign democracy’ to describe Putin’s preferred system of government.

And, in Iran and Malaysia, the ideas of the rule of law and elected government have been articulated within various religious and cultural frameworks in ways different from western liberal democratic expressions.

Importantly, Fukuyama worked with a limited definition of ‘liberal democracy’. It was ‘liberal insofar as it recognises and protects man’s universal right to freedom’ and democratic ‘insofar as it exists only with the consent of the governed’.

It would be reasonable to say that it has been these two aims (along with the desire for jobs and affordable food and housing) that have energised the Middle East protests. It is tempting then, to fit the caption ‘end of history’ on to the story of these events.

But the protest movements will ultimately result in various and dynamic realities. Herein lays the flaw in Fukuyama’s — and Hegel’s — argument.

To view these events as ‘absolute moments’ that make a decisive break with the past and a decisive step into the future, is to simplify the future. In each of these countries, there are social, economic and historical factors that will make for complex futures in which the past will remain present.

Hegel saw the ‘end of history’ in the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt in 1806, where Napoleonic France defeated the Kingdom of Prussia. He understood the defeat to signify the advent of a new order, and saw the victory of French revolutionary ideas forged out of the triumph of military power.

Yet what followed was reaction — the alliance between the great monarchical states of Europe and a prolonged period of unrest, repression and war.

So the triumph of a particular set of ideas does not occur in a temporal ‘moment’ or event. It depends more on the accumulation of individual and collective human experience and reflection.

Political and social ideas are a means of conceptualising the urgings and desires which people find within them: what Simone Weil described as ‘needs of the soul’. They grow and develop, gradually becoming stronger as people learn to articulate them in more compelling ways.

Thus, there is a difference between the desire for freedom and the desire for a liberal democratic order. The desire for freedom may arrive at a different conclusion, beyond Fukuyama’s limited definition of liberal democracy.

In any event, wherever it rises, the desire for freedom faces a continuing struggle before it is realised in systems of government directed towards human flourishing.

