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## Why Mabo deserves a holiday

### INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

*Paul W. Newbury*

On 3 June 1992 the High Court of Australia handed down the Mabo decision on native title. Each year on 3 June Mabo Day celebrates the anniversary of this decision and Eddie Mabo's unshakeable belief that he owned his ancestral land.

The day is of such significance to the nation that I believe it should be proclaimed a public holiday. It could, perhaps, replace the Queen's Birthday public holiday. This would signify the development of our identity from the days of colonisation, where we relied on our close links with Britain, to today, where we seek to mature as a nation by owning the past and reconciling with Indigenous Australians.

The Mabo decision played a significant role in this process of maturation.

The transformation of our relations with the Indigenous peoples of Australia began in the late 1960s when historians began to investigate the record of relations between Aborigines and Europeans since 1788, and to integrate the Indigenous story into the telling of Australian history.

This revision of Australian history has had an important influence on Australian society. It represents colonisation as invasion, dispossession as theft, frontier conflict as war, the Indigenous response as resistance, the stealing of Indigenous children as genocide, and the lack of moral restraint as racism.

In the Mabo decision, the High Court determined that at the time of the British invasion in 1788, the Indigenous peoples owned the entire continent, including the Islands of Torres Strait. It acknowledged that Indigenous ownership of their traditional land survived the assumption of sovereignty by the British in 1788 and they were entitled to have their title protected under British law.

As the first plaintiff, the ruling bears Mabo's name. He was a traditional owner of land on the Island of Mer in eastern Torres Strait. In the 1960s, he left his homeland to work in Townsville. He was astonished to learn the Torres Strait Islands belonged to the Crown under Australian law.

In 1982, he and other Torres Strait Islanders took the Queensland Government to the High Court to verify their ownership.

In 1992, I was one of many non-Indigenous Australians who viewed the Mabo decision as a tidal wave of justice. The author of the lead judgement, Justice Gerard Brennan, stated that the High Court had entered a process of bringing Australian law into line with universal notions

of human rights.

The decision addressed in some measure the violence, shame and racism of our founding story. The Native Title Act is our principal means of making amends for the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, and celebrating Mabo Day as a public holiday would be a recognition of our debt to them.

The most significant development in native title since Mabo occurred in the Wik decision of 1996. The High Court declared that native title rights can co-exist with leasehold title on pastoral leases. The ruling substantiated Indigenous peoples' right to access their lands to engage in customary activities.

As at 28 March 2011, there have been 143 native title determinations declared by the Federal Court of Australia, of which 104 were successful in whole or in part. Determinations of native title including Indigenous Land Use Agreements (ILUAs) cover 14 per cent of our landmass.

An ILUA is a voluntary agreement between a native title group and others about the use and management of traditional land and waters. They allow claimants to negotiate flexible agreements to suit particular circumstances.

In April 2011, the Australian Human Rights Commission announced the 500th ILUA since 1993 had been registered. ILUAs are legally binding and can develop into native title determinations.

The Mabo decision has transformed dealings between Indigenous peoples and government and has influenced government actions outside native title. In most states, there is a legislative framework for involving Indigenous people in ownership and joint management of national parks and other land of cultural significance to them.

Indigenous leaders describe positive native title determinations as a fillip to their peoples' self-esteem. They cite restitution of Indigenous peoples' right to camp on their land and to hunt, fish, gather plants and protect places of cultural significance as enhancing identity.

There has been considerable disparity in our relationship with Indigenous peoples since Federation in 1901, where Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders were not acknowledged as part of the new nation. Celebrating Mabo Day as a public holiday is one way to signify our respect for our Indigenous peoples as traditional owners of the continent.

## Islam without billboards

### VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

Since last Friday Sydneysiders driving on some of the city's busiest roadways have been confronted by billboards carrying some very simple – perhaps too simple – teachings about Islam.

In huge letters there are four different messages: 'Jesus: a prophet of Islam', 'Islam: Got questions? Get answers', 'Holy Qu'ran: the final testament' and 'Muhammad: mercy to mankind'. The billboards were funded by an Islamic group called [MyPeace](#), and they also carry a phone number and website where people can access more information and a free copy of the Qu'ran.

These very public ads have stirred controversy. Sydney auxiliary Catholic Bishop, Julian Porteous has called for their removal, arguing that 'In Australia with its Christian heritage a billboard carrying the statement "Jesus: a prophet of Islam" is provocative and offensive to Christians.'

MyPeace members have explained they are trying to address misunderstandings in the broader community about Islam, and communicate in a contemporary medium the basic age-old beliefs of this great world faith.

The interviewee featured here on Eureka Street TV is also trying to communicate some of the basics of Islam, but his message is much more subtle and nuanced, and he has a very different approach.

[Andrew Harvey](#) is not a Muslim, but he is a scholar and devotee of the mystical strand of Islam, the Sufi tradition. In particular he's spent much of his life studying the life and writings of the 13th century giant of Sufism, Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, and he's one of a leading Western exponents of this great medieval Muslim mystic.

Rumi was born in the border region of modern day Afghanistan and Tajikistan, but when he was still young his family moved to Konya in present-day Turkey. This is where he lived for most of life, and where he died in the year 1273 at the age of 66. His tomb in Konya is now a place of pilgrimage.

Among his many achievements, Rumi founded the Mevlevi Sufi order, commonly known as the whirling dervishes, which, at its height of popularity in the Ottoman era, had around 100,000 members. He was a prodigious writer and poet, his most famous work being a massive spiritual epic called the *Mathnawi*.

Harvey, summarising the significance of Rumi, wrote of the spread of 'the glory of his work

and sacred vision throughout the whole vast extent of the Islamic world ... | No other poet in history — not even Shakespeare or Dante — has had so exalted and comprehensive an impact on the civilisation he adorned, and no other poet has aroused such ecstatic and intimate adoration.'

Harvey's upbringing in India awakened him to the splendours of Islam, and to seeing the divine in all the world's major religious traditions. He was born into a Christian Protestant family, but from an early age he became fascinated with the trappings of Hindu and Muslim culture, particularly the treasures of Islamic Mughal art and architecture that surrounded him.

As a young adult he studied and taught English and French literature at Oxford University. In 1977 he returned to India, and over the next 30 years he studied and practised with spiritual masters from a number of religious traditions: Hindu, Tibetan Buddhist, Muslim and Christian. This included time spent with Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths at his ashram in the south of India.

Harvey now lives in Chicago, and for the last five years his focus has been on travelling the globe teaching and promoting his concept of Sacred Activism, social action that flows from mystical experience and insight.

He is a prolific author, having written over 30 books including *Hidden Journey: A Spiritual Awakening*; *The Essential Mystics*; *The Way of Passion: A Celebration of Rumi*; *Son of Man: The Mystical Path to Christ*; *Perfume of the Desert: Inspirations from Sufi Wisdom*; *A Journey in Ladakh: Encounters with Buddhism*; and most recently *The Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism*.

## Clergy sex abuse blame game

### THEOLOGY

*Andrew Hamilton*

The recently published [John Jay Report](#) on sexual abuse in the United States Catholic Church received only passing attention in Australia. But it is important both because of its attention to sociological evidence, and because of the larger questions that it raises.

The report shows that the number of reported cases of sexual abuse by clergy in the United States rose sharply in the 1960s and 1970s, peaked in the 1980s, and subsequently declined equally sharply. It explores this phenomenon by setting it against other reported cases of abuse, against sociological studies of Catholic priests, and against academic and popular attitudes to sexual abuse of children over the period.

It dismisses many explanations offered for child abuse, including celibacy, because it was demanded before, during, and after the crisis, and homosexuality. Victims were often chosen because they were most readily available. To explain the spike it focuses on the formation of the clergy, the lack of public awareness of the problem, and the lack of boundaries surrounding contact of clergy with children and adolescents. It also explores the slowness of church leaders to respond to the crisis. It makes clear that the courage of victims speaking of their experience and the publicity given to them was a necessary condition of the sharp decline in cases of abuse reported of the 1990s.

Critics of the report rightly point out that the statistics represent only cases provided by the church chanceries. It is likely that many cases reported to the church authorities were not recorded and that many other cases were not reported at all.

The figures are especially likely to understate the extent of sexual abuse during the 1940s and 1950s. Victims at that time rarely reported the abuse themselves, and those who survived until the 1990s when abuse in the Catholic Church became notorious may not have wanted to publicise it. So the low base line may be misleading.

The Report raises larger questions when it implies that the roots of the increase in sexual abuse are to be sought in the Catholic Church of the 1940s and 1950s, not in the post-conciliar church. It argues that priests who underwent treatment after becoming known offenders passed many years between ordination and their first offenses. So priests who offended in the sixties and seventies were mostly trained in the 1940s and 1950s. The report suggests that they were not prepared for the changes in society that occurred in the 1960s.

Why was this so? This question takes us beyond the disciplines of the report to larger question of culture, and in this case to the distinctive ways in which celibacy, popular theology, the exercise of power and human frailty are intertwined at different times in the

Catholic Church.

The decades after the Second World War saw great growth in the Western churches: in the number of priests and religious, of parishes, of schools and other institutions. Seminaries attracted many candidates, and forming them for ministry was a challenge. Generally speaking the emphasis was on control through insistence on obedience to rules with often severe penalties for infringing them. The heads of seminaries were typically remote. Little attention was given to emotional growth and literacy, much to compliance and loyalty.

This echoed the more general Catholic culture in which the unique claims of the Catholic Church and the authority of the Pope in the universal church, of the Bishop in his diocese and of the parish priest in his parish were insisted on. They were God's representatives in their different spheres.

Control was also exercised internally. It depended on a clear understanding of which actions were sinful, and of the difference between grave and less serious sin. Serious sins had ordinarily to be confessed to a priest for forgiveness. God underwrote and sanctioned the definition given by the Catholic Church to sins and of the requirements for forgiveness.

In retrospect this emphasis on authority and compliance was brittle. It unravelled in the 1960s. In the wider society authorities were no longer given instinctive credence. Respect needed to be earned. In the Catholic Church, the image of a God who simply sanctioned the laws of the church was called into question. It became unbelievable that God should condemn to hell people for one action defined as a mortal sin, like deliberately missing Mass on Sunday. It was seen as incompatible with God's love.

Catholics, including clergy, had to arrive at a personal moral framework less dependent on authority and based in respect for human dignity within relationships relationships. Most did. But it is understandable that the loss of external controls combined with the exclusive focus on the individual's relationship with God should have led some priests to act abusively. What they did was between them and God. The claims of the human dignity of their victims were not salient.

This dynamic is reflected in the justifications and excuses given by priests for their abuse. Many saw their abuse as an expression of weakness. Others that it was a sin that had been confessed and forgiven, and so not to be judged by others.

It is arguable that the roots of the sexual abuse crisis did not lie in the 1960s but in the shallow Catholic culture of the earlier decades. The 1960s exposed its inadequacies. It is not a model for the Catholic Church of the future.



## Chris Lilley's juvenile justice role model

### TELEVISION

*Tim Kroenert*

For several years I did volunteer work at a residential centre for young male offenders. During that time I had plenty of opportunities to witness the various authoritative styles of the workers. Some were clearly less effective than others. The worst among them would resort to yelling and threats and finger wagging at the first sign of trouble. Needless to say this often led to escalation.

I do not underestimate the stress these workers were under, and many of them seemed for the most part to be adequate for the role. But during those years I did meet the rare special breed of worker. Irreverent enough to be their charges' friend. Authoritative enough to demand respect. Compassionate enough to earn real affection. It's these people that I thought of when I first met 'Gran'.

Gran is an impressive addition to Australian comedian Chris Lilley's gallery of lovable misfits. One of the stars of Lilley's latest series [Angry Boys](#) on ABC1, Gran, a worker at a residential centre for young offenders, is an exaggerated version of these de facto parental figures. She encapsulates Lilley's greatest strengths as a writer and performer; he captures her humanity while gently taking the piss.

Lilley has been called a one trick pony. *Angry Boys*, like his previous series, *We Can Be Heroes* and *Summer Heights High*, is notable for its mockumentary style and for Lilley's appearance as multiple lead characters. But it's unfair to call it a rehash. Each series adds to the gallery of characters. Each character is thoroughly researched and lovingly portrayed, and their humanity upheld.

Gran is a case in point. It's true that the first episode dwells on her casual racism towards the boys. For a football scratch match she divides them into teams based on skin colour (to one boy who misunderstands the instruction: 'I know you're an Aborigine but you're a pale skin'), and yells racist epithets from the sidelines. This seemed like a grab for cheap nasty laughs.

The episode ended, however, with Gran comforting a boy with hugs and tissues as he sobbed violently, perhaps missing his own family and his life and friends on the outside. The boys have made bad life choices, Gran says in voiceover, but 'they're still boys'. This reveals more of Gran's true nature than do the comedic elements of the character.

To end the episode in such a moving way is a statement of Lilley's purpose. He differs from other lowbrow satirists such as *The Chaser*. Their humour is often marked by nastiness. Lilley's is always marked by warmth.

*Angry Boys* also sees the return of two of Lilley's most brilliant creations, garrulous country

boy Daniel and his taciturn twin Nathan, who is partially deaf and (according to Daniel) 'a bit spastic'. (The two previously appeared in Lilley's superb first series *We Can Be Heroes*.)

Both portrayed by Lilley and allowed to share space on screen thanks to some clever editing and direction, Daniel and Nathan, like Gran, epitomise Lilley's ability to marry lowbrow humour to genuine pathos. Daniel often loudly, cruelly taunts Nathan, but clearly loves him. Nathan in turn is surly and resentful, but only because he quietly adores Daniel.

In *Angry Boys* the twins are faced with the prospect of separation, as Nathan, due to recurring behavioral difficulties, is to be sent to a school for young deaf people in the big city. The various ways Daniel has tried to repress with bravado his fear and sorrow over this impending separation has been one of the series' most poignant elements and is no doubt building to an emotional climax.

It's impossible to judge *Angry Boys* definitively midway through the series. New characters such as foul mouthed and child-like American rapper S.Mouse, and washed up ex-surfer Blake Oakfield, whose claim to fame is that he had his testicles shot off in a bar fight, seem lowbrow creations in the extreme.

But it is a mark of Lilley's work that his characters follow arcs over the course of a series, so that the consequences of their actions or external factors beyond their control force some degree of growth or maturity, or to expose to the audience an element of their humanity previously unglimped. There are promising signs and much hope for *Angry Boys* yet.

## How Islamic law can protect Australian cows

### MULTICULTURALISM

*Fatima Measham*

Television viewers reeled on Monday night as graphic images of Australian cattle being slaughtered in Indonesia went to air.

The ABC *Four Corners* program used footage captured by Animals Australia during its investigation with the RSPCA on how animals are killed after live transport. The methods, as Liberal MP Greg Hunt succinctly described them, were ‘unacceptable, extraordinarily out of touch with the modern world, and above all, cruel and inhumane’.

The response was immediate and intense. People tweeted, posted on Facebook, and contacted their MPs to vent their outrage. Online petitions against live export were soon inundated.

Members on both sides of Parliament were also disturbed, the issue drawing out a level of bipartisanship not seen in the last three years. Within two days of the *Four Corners* report, the Gillard Government imposed an export ban against 11 Indonesian abattoirs identified as operating below international standards.

The public outrage highlights the assumptions modern meat-eaters make about how food arrives on their table. Most of us purchase our proteins from the supermarket, where they sit on sterile shelves neatly packaged in uniform containers. We are disconnected from the bloody business of rendering a live organism into a form fit for cooking and eating.

This disconnection explains in part the horror that met the footage of slaughter in Indonesia. While people are generally comfortable with the idea of animals being killed for human consumption, they prefer to assume such animals are killed humanely.

In the age of mass-produced meat, this actually brings us close to older traditions that saw animals as precious and saw their death in the service of humans as noble. Native Americans asked for pardon and gave thanks to animals they killed. Jewish and Muslim traditions also take seriously the business of slaughter, prescribing a method that involves a speedy death and hence the least pain.

Modern animal rights activism has restored the philosophy of ethical slaughter. They have to some degree made us more aware of and careful about how food gets on our plate. In Australia, we see this in the increasing demand for organically produced vegetables and meat, as well as Fairtrade commodities.

But how much of such consciousness exists in Indonesia? Any improvements to animal welfare must begin from local support if it is to be concrete and permanent. Given that

Indonesians are predominantly Muslim, perhaps an appeal to change must begin with an appeal to the concept of *halal*; a term that designates what is permissible under Islamic law.

There are complications here. Stunning, for example, is considered by the RSPCA to be the only humane option, because it renders the animal unconscious before it is killed. However this is precisely the point of resistance for local slaughtermen, because *halal* requires the animal to be conscious.

Yet the practices revealed in the *Four Corners* footage are certainly not *halal*. *Dhabihah*, the Islamic law that prescribes animal slaughter, insists on a swift severing of the jugular and carotid arteries with a sharp knife. The video shows a white steer with a broken leg being goaded for 25 minutes to stand; its nose and eye are gouged and it is kicked several times before it is finally slaughtered.

Perhaps the \$4 million investment spent by the livestock export industry over the past decade to improve animal welfare in Indonesia could have been better spent on managing the idea of *halal*.

In Australia, the reversible (electrical) stunning method is now part of the most common form of *halal* slaughter. Even in instances where ritual slaughter is allowed, wherein a sharp knife is swiftly used to sever the jugular and carotid arteries, a captive-bolt pistol is used immediately after.

These methods should have been promoted far more vigorously in order to bring Indonesian practices closer to international standards. Yet, in the 20 years that Australia has been involved in live export to Indonesia, only eight abattoirs of the hundred that receive Australian animals use stunning.

Indeed, most of the investment by the industry seems to have gone toward the design and implementation of restraining boxes seen in the *Four Corners* report, which did nothing at all to make death speedy and less painful for animals.

## **Indonesian and Australian justice**

### THE MEDDLING PRIEST

*Frank Brennan*

The plight and prison activities of the 'Bali Nine' continue to fascinate the Australian media.

Sunday's papers carried the headline 'From drug courier to devoted husband, a jailhouse fairytale', featuring a photo of Australian Martin Stephens and his Indonesian wife Christine in the Kerobokan prison. The subtitle read, 'Several of the Bali Nine have found true love and redemption in jail.'

I and fellow Australian Jesuit Michael Kelly tried to gain access to the jail on Sunday but the crowds were too great. The jail is presently running at more than double capacity with 1000 prisoners, many of them foreign nationals doing time for drug offences.

On the Saturday, we had attended the opening of the Made Budhiana and Donald Friend art galleries at the Villa Pandan Harum just out of Ubud, and owned by Darwin lawyer Colin McDonald QC. McDonald had once served on the Australia-Indonesia Institute.

The opening was performed by two respected elders, Nyoman Gunarsa, the maestro of the Balinese artist community, and Richard Woolcott, a once long time ambassador to Indonesia during the troubled days of the invasion of East Timor, and our last representative on the UN Security Council.

McDonald recalled that Ali Alitas had described the Australia-Indonesia relationship as a rope with many strands — the strands of art and culture being the most resilient.

In the audience were Australian lawyers who have supported members of the Bali Nine these past seven years and lawyers acting for Indonesian minors still held in long term detention in Australia without charge, as well as Lee Rush, the father of Scott Rush whose death sentence was recently commuted to life imprisonment.

Woolcott reminded the audience that there was no relationship more important to Australia than that with Indonesia. He acknowledged that among tensions and differences, there were always personal relationships strengthened and nurtured by art and culture.

McDonald expressed the hope that the galleries, featuring the work of a deceased Australian artist who drew great inspiration from Balinese traditions and of a contemporary Balinese artist who had painted Australian scenes including the makeshift interiors of northern Australian refugee camps, would 'make a gentle but sincere statement about the virtues of cultural engagement, appreciation and respect for the other, tolerance and the enjoyment of the exotic, and the enduring importance of art aesthetics and the art instinct across cultures'.

McDonald, long impressed by Balinese myths and morality, has been collecting the works of these two artists since 1984.

Budhiana told the crowd, 'A good collector is the one who has good art collections and appreciates them well. A good art collector always visits artists, discusses art with them, shares their knowledge about art, and if necessary, he will build a convenient place where he can showcase his great art collections.' He thanked Colin for supporting him with visits to Darwin and Kakadu for exhibitions.

Though the jail is usually closed to visitors on a Monday, McDonald, Rush and the two Aussie priests were able to ride on the coat tails of a remarkable group of women known as the Bali International Women's Association. Many of their members are Australian. Their immediate past president is the charismatic Indonesian Melly St Ange who also markets herself as a travel consultant specialist and a wedding organiser. She opens Indonesian doors very readily.

The Australian women in her troupe came first to Bali with concerns for the Bali Nine. But wanting to avoid 'social jealousy' in the jail, they now work to assist all the prisoners in this overstretched facility.

On Monday, we joined eight of them as they were led by St Ange straight into the office of the jail governor, Pak Siswanto, a Javanese Christian. They solicit donations for basic requirements such as water tanks and septic tanks. They bring fresh fruit, soap and toothpaste for the inmates. This day they also brought some banana trees for planting in the jail grounds.

Siswanto welcomed everyone, calling St Ange 'Aunty' and offering reflections on Matthew 25: that we are all commissioned to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and to visit those in prison. He told a Javanese story about the banana tree. It does not die without first bearing fruit. He urged the women to bear good fruit in his jail so that life in these wretched, tropical and overcrowded conditions might be improved for all.

We then visited many blocks in the jail, the priests being invited to lead prayers for the Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Some Catholics came seeking the sacraments and personal blessings.

The governor thanked us for our visit. On leaving the jail, St Ange was delighted that a truck had just arrived with the next shipment of water tanks. Lawyers discussed the prospects of death sentences being commuted to life, and life sentences being reduced to fixed terms which might earn parole before young men grow old.

There is much about the Australian legal and political system which I cherish. But there are not too many Australian prison governors with this rapport for foreign visitors. There would be justifiable Australian outrage if any Australian minors were held for six to nine months in detention without charge on suspicion of illegal fishing or of being enslaved on an asylum

boat.

I return to Australia convinced that we can learn from each other. Justice and compassion are not an Australian preserve.

## Coastal communion

NON-FICTION

*Gregory Day*

In times gone by, on days when there was more water in the air than air, more ocean on the road than guidance, a famously flinty old Presbyterian woman by the name of Mrs Morgan used to remind anyone she'd meet that such wild weather was in fact god's weather, as if the coastal pastorate had taken on a meteorological morality, the sleet stinging sideways by dint of some divine navigation, some barometric embodiment of the punishment of sins.

Since then the religious beliefs in this area have largely changed but as I drove my two little boys to the footy ground on Saturday morning the weather was still front and centre. I found myself telling them briefly about what Mrs Morgan used to say and then found myself issuing them with a challenge. Whoever could count all the whitecaps on the water would win a box of chocolates.

A cruel father? Perhaps, or just the latest in a long line of annoying dads furnishing car-rides with memories designed to last a lifetime.

When the road finally turned slightly away from the shore and we lost sight of the ocean I changed the challenge. Whoever can count all the leaves on the trees wins a brand new Nintendo DS. Patrick, eight years old and an unsuccessful yearner for that very gizmo his whole life, replied that the challenge was an impossible one. When I asked him why he said it was because 'there are so many trees. Even more whitecaps. The world is too massive.'

At the footy ground the gale of course was blowing to the northeastern end, this being a Bass Strait landscape in May. They gathered with their teammates in the synthetic shine of fresh guernseys, boys at the androgynous age, putti really, crying out in the cadence of girls, for the ball in the warm-up, as if they could eat it, like chicks squawking for a worm.

The whistle blew, they played the game, in the rain and a strangely lo-res switching on and off of sunlight, like you might see on YouTube. They battled and chased and tackled, some had a clue, some didn't, some focused on the ball, some on the shadows of clouds passing over, all learning.

And after four quarters it wasn't so much the victory that was cause for the chaotic swelling of the theme song but rather the more obvious holy grail of the sausages and soft drinks to come at the home-game barbie.

Which, once digested under the pine trees on the half forward flank, left us as a family with the prospect of our other traditional rite of the late autumn season, the special parish mass at the end of the blustery afternoon ahead, where Patrick would begin the steps towards receiving the rather unfashionable sacrament of first holy communion.



At 6pm, in the tiny church built of ecumenical brick, with barely any aesthetic pleasure to distract from the humility of the message, Patrick and his cohort in both the footy and the communion to come, his schoolmate Finn Brown, sat quietly, though with the telltale legs of novices swinging restlessly under the front pew.

What is communion? Patrick had asked me between the game and the mass, just for one more clarification.

I made another ad hoc attempt to explain the meaning of this ritual that's come down through the centuries from our Irish and Sicilian ancestors, and which he now was to become the latest of the family to undertake.

You know how I receive the bread from the priest at mass? I began.

Yes, he replied.

Well, that bread symbolises Jesus and so when you take it it's as if a little bit of his magic rubs off on you.

So it makes you feel good? he asks.

Yes, well Jesus was a man who always spoke the truth, even when it was difficult to do so, and his heart was so wise that even his own mother believed he was a god. It can't be a bad thing to take on a bit of that?

Mmm, nodded Patrick, looking worried now, probably about how his mother would feel if receiving communion made him seem somehow different to her, somehow more than just her son, something other than what he actually was.

Father Wally began the mass, which can sometimes seem a little perfunctory on a Saturday night, but this one wasn't, though it was short, partly because of the excuse of the cold weather, but mainly because of the footrace that would close the ocean road the next morning, requiring Father Wally to hurry off to say an extra mass in Lorne that night.

He found time to mention footy during the service however, right in there alongside the sheepstealers of the biblical fold, and the theme of the importance of vocations, and the fact that the bishop had been let off the hook from making his scheduled visit down to the coast from Ballarat.

Afterwards, the four of us whose children were to undertake the six steps of learning towards the rite of communion over the coming weeks, lingered among the pews, filling in the forms and discussing midweek meeting times, breaking down the days of our busy family schedules, looking for a pause of general suitability, discussing the best options for everyone.

As it turned out this was relatively easy, thanks in part to the dwindling of the 21st century Catholic congregation, but also to the tiny scale of our town, where it seems an age-old

spiritual ritual can still be orchestrated without too many logistical complications.

Our town might be small and the numbers at mass may have shrunk but outside in the dark of the carpark, to use Patrick's words of the morning, the world became immediately massive again. The whitecaps and tree leaves of old Mrs Morgan's morning had been replaced by the clear and copious stories of the starry canopy, and the wind that had favoured the northern end had gone on to whichever place the wind goes — perhaps back into the pre-Christian bag of Aeolus, or simply to settle in the east, as a zephyr hovering over one of the grand Kurnai hills of Gippsland.

As we hopped into the ute Patrick piped up again, to ask me about the meaning of the word 'vocation'. It's like a holiday isn't it? he ventured, in a cheery and accomplished tone.

Confused for a moment, I eventually twigged, and smiled, at the happy phenomena of misheard words, the way our ears desire song lyrics or even the messages of the liturgy itself to mean what we want them to mean, in this case that the vocational path of a priest and of the path to first communion were as fun as some sunny destination.

I started the engine, we pulled out into the starry road, and I began to explain the difference — between vacation and vocation. I contemplated — as you do — the Latin roots. The contrast therefore between *vacare* and *vocare*, between the state of being unoccupied or vacant and the somehow opposite condition of calling or being called.

This was a bit different to the Eels versus the Swans of the windy morning, this was a contest usually undertaken privately, without spectators, and not just on Saturdays but on every day within the equally wild weather of the heart. It was the contest of emptiness versus purpose, absence versus voice, going away or leaving versus waiting, listening and finding a way to speak. A battle in fact that we all, churchgoing or not, undertake, in this vast yet seemingly always enveloping world.

Of course I explained the distinction to Patrick in words he could understand but with the bolster of the beautifully simple Latin lineage handed down to me by Carmelites priests and brothers at school, it wasn't a difficult translation to make. Right then I was grateful for the education that gave me access to the provenance of these English words we still speak, so many centuries since that fiery shaman of Nazareth walked inspired and predestined in the Aramaic soil of his own calling country.

And when I'd successfully made the clarification in the darkness of the cabin, taking care of course to avoid making a vocation seem like the total opposite of the kind of good time you have on a holiday, I found myself saying, half to the celestial windscreen and half to myself, that the rubbing-off of a little bit of divine magic through the act of communion was one reward you could realistically win.

Unlike that box of chocolates on offer on the final day, that somehow disingenuous final

day when the leaves of the world's trees and the wild sea's whitecaps would supposedly be all toted up.

We rolled the ute down the hill towards home in neutral, quite content I think then with our station in the season, and also with the diverse rituals that would lend some kind of richness to the cold winter of southerlies ahead. Perhaps Patrick was thinking more of the call of the ball and the larkabout teamwork of the Saturday mornings, but as we pulled into the driveway I was simply looking forward to revisiting, thanks to him, the call of the humble church at night.

## **Prodigal father**

POETRY

*Various*

### **The stage**

Every actor aspires to play the role of Jesus;  
if the part is taken, they will set their sights on the role of Judas.

—*Damian Balassone*

### **Doubting Thomas**

Frankly, I could not bear to watch what  
they did to him — the whips, the insults,  
the hammering in of nails. So I snuck off  
here, hopes shattered, to lick my wounds.  
Now they beg me to go back to see him —  
surely something beyond belief. At least  
mine. I'm a realist, not into sentiment or  
apparitions. There needs to be a body.  
Today the clouds hang heavy with doubt.  
The others may be deluded. But *if* — and it's  
a big *if* — I see him, touch actual wounds,  
then I will kneel before him, and adore.

—*William Rush*

### **The woman with the alabaster jar**

She knew the lines of a man's back  
as well as she knew the taste  
of decanted fig-wine, or the way the spine  
girdered the back under her hand;  
an uneven scaffolding of flesh under fingers.

It was a gentle gift, this. Acquired slowly  
in the stones arranged on her mother's grave,  
in the deep vault of her hip against his.  
Dipping like water, she learnt to press libations  
into her hair — lavender, dill, coriander;  
to twist strands against the frame.  
There was salvation in this. And Art too;  
that fingers still wet from mulberry  
could etch a form of truth on the skin,  
like the rim of flung-coin, or the  
consolation of Spring oranges and their spurting.  
But the truth of them has been forgotten.  
His dirty feet and tired eyes, her hennaed-thighs  
in sandalwood and linen, how she swung her hips,  
how his loneliness was an atrium arching from his chest  
to the lip of the buttress; aching for her to unfurl her hair.

—*Davina Allison*

### **Easter Fire**

1.  
my longing  
to share this meal with you —  
bread  
kneaded and fired  
in the company of friends

2.  
in the olive grove  
shouts and flaring torches

rupture the darkness —

odd, the fear roused by a man

who seems so ordinary

3.

faces firelit

huddled against the cold

cheeks burning

with shame I recall that night

I said I didn't know you

4.

carrying sadness

like ash from her cold hearth

she waits by his grave

blinded by the rising sun —

he calls her name

5.

from the brazier

in the darkened courtyard

hands pass fire

giving each shadow

a familiar name

— *Anne Benjamin*

**Prodigal father**

All day,

every day

since you have gone,

I stand on the road

shading my eyes  
from daylight's  
harsh reality  
— you are gone,  
too far away  
for me to see.  
How harsh  
is *your* reality?  
Can you see  
a shadow of dusk,  
a portent of gloom  
wishing your spirit  
home?  
All night,  
every night  
since you have gone,  
I've kept the light burning,  
warming my liquid eyes  
from night's  
cold comfort  
— you are gone,  
too far away  
for me to see.  
How dark  
is *your* darkness?  
Can you see even  
a pinprick of light,

a star of hope  
guiding your spirit  
home?  
This day  
I am on the road again  
waiting,  
when I see  
in the distance  
a cloud of dust,  
of hope —  
and I start walking,  
tripping,  
my heart skipping  
to see if it's you.  
How light  
is *your* step?  
Can you see me,  
arms outstretched?  
I am  
on the road to meet you,  
greet you,  
singing your spirit  
home.  
—*Janette Fernando*



## Cate Blanchett and carbon tax plunder

### ENVIRONMENT

*Binoy Kampmark*

Cate Blanchett cannot help but appear polished on screen. Having conquered Hollywood with Oscar winning performances, she has now moved into the field of environmental activism; currently, by advocating for a carbon tax for Australian consumers, in advertisements produced by a coalition of unions and greens urging citizens to 'Say Yes'. The tax man, it seems, has gone green.

The attacks on Blanchett's actions have followed a distinct pattern, all conforming to one theme: She is 'out of touch'. Take the [words](#) of the conservative Australian Family Association. 'It's nice to have a multi-millionaire who won't be impacted by it telling you how great [the carbon tax] is. It's easy for her to advocate it, she's one of the few who can afford to pay it.'

The Sydney *Sunday Telegraph* got personal: '\$53 million Hollywood superstar tells Aussie families to pay up', it declared; yet another 'morally vain Hollywood star' had turned preacher in a 'climate change' cause. *The Australian* newspaper, never a friend of the progressive cause, has released polls showing that 60 per cent of voters were opposed to a carbon tax.

The actor turned activist is a curious sight. Since the actor specialises in dissimulation, image making, an imitation of life rather than life itself, credentials might be regarded as sketchy. Many members of the public go to the cinemas to avoid reality rather than embrace it. The idea that an actor might do the reverse creates a sense of distrust.

That said, modern politics is less the art of reality than the art of packaging. It is hard to imagine how a modern politician might not be actor. Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of a state that made politics and cinema synonymous. Ronald Reagan inundated the White House with fantasy, astrology and movie motifs. A global trend evacuating the field of politics with the creativity of the stage has been taking place for some time.

The progressive side of politics has also succumbed to that idea.

Ostensibly, the tax is designed to target polluters, with Australia being a leader in those stakes. There is, however, a troublesome reality. Instead of readjusting the country's over-reliance on the resource sector, the government is simply finding another avenue for raising revenue. Money spinning, rather than environmental saving, is what the Gillard Government has in mind.

People might debate how effective a carbon tax might be, but the insistence by Blanchett and others that it will somehow benefit Australia in the long run is untested. Debate often centres on whether emissions trading is a more effective means of establishing enforceable

limits on polluting entities.

The International Emissions Trading Association claims that 'Such a [capping] program, when combined with offsets, will accelerate global emissions reductions.' That program, however, would also be difficult to implement. The attempt do introduce such a scheme floundered in spectacular fashion under the previous Rudd Government.

All this demonstrates yet again that a government such as Australia's refuses to deal with renewable energy as a realistic alternative. Australian start-ups and companies investing in green technology prefer to do their work in California, where incentives are comparably more generous.

Instead, the Australian Government hopes to obtain cash from the rich resource industry, as typified by the economy of plunder, or what the Germans might call *Raubwirtschaft*. Everyone, in short, is attempting to cut everyone else's purse.

The resource industry, in turn, portrays itself as a paternal figure of salvation, having cocooned Australia from the great financial crisis by relying on insatiable Chinese demand and an all too generous supply of iron ore and minerals.

A sinister complicity has arisen, with neither side realising how indispensable they are to each other. One mines myopically, and the other taxes unwisely. The consumer will, of course, have to foot the higher energy costs. And Blanchett's capacious purse will be none the lighter.

## **O'Farrell makes a sham of government guarantees**

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

During the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the words 'government guarantee' were a source of great confidence to many Australians. In October 2008, the Federal Government guaranteed deposits and wholesale funding for banks and other financial institutions. That meant our banks would not crash, because we had the confidence to keep our funds with them and maintain borrowing arrangements. It was one of the factors that got us through the GFC.

It worked because Australians trust their politicians to honour government guarantees. The word 'guarantee' implies that what is being guaranteed is sacred. Government guarantees are not like election promises, which are playthings that voters regard with skepticism. Guarantees are fixtures.

Many may doubt the Government's competency in the day to day running of the country. Budgets blow out and cuts are needed. But a guarantee is something that sticks, whatever the circumstances. Having certainty around what we share in common is what binds us together into society.

The 120,000 NSW residents who signed up to the Solar Bonus Scheme of the previous Labor Government received a government guarantee. They would be paid 60 cents for every kilowatt hour of electricity generated by the solar panels on their rooftops, until the end of 2016. That is why so many signed up. They had absolute confidence that they would receive this amount, and relied upon it to pay for their panels during the course of the program.

But earlier this month, the new premier Barry O'Farrell announced that he needed to dishonour the 60 cent government guarantee. He would retrospectively legislate for the payment to be cut to 40 cents. Many more residents than expected had signed up, and honouring the 60 cent commitment would mean taking funds that would otherwise be used for things such as transport and health expenditure.

The premier maintained that using the money for these other priorities would represent a better use of public funds. But he does not appear to have factored in damage to the institution of the government guarantee, which is priceless.

While we cannot cost a government guarantee, we will have some idea of its monetary value — and the price of its dishonouring by the NSW Government — when there is another GFC and trust in the instrument of the government guarantee is discovered to have diminished. That moment could arrive sooner rather than later.

But more importantly there is the loss to the community of the spirit of public trust with the revelation that the government guarantee is a sham. In dishonouring the guarantee, O'Farrell

is effectively and chillingly saying that there's no such thing as a government guarantee in a manner reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's infamous [assertion](#) that there was 'no such thing as society'.

## Labor's poor political antennae

### POLITICS

*John Warhurst*



One distraction following the Gillard Government's Budget has been the dispute over the free set-top box scheme. For \$308 million it aims to provide set-top boxes for aged pensioners, people on disabilities and war veterans at a cost of \$350 per person/unit. The context is the coming national switch to digital television. There has been a trial over the past 18 months.

The Opposition says it is wasteful, more expensive than similar provision by the private sector, and likely to be subject to mistakes in installation.

Retailer Gerry Harvey was quoted as saying that he could provide set-top boxes for half the price. Various small-businessmen raised issues similar to the failed home insulation scheme in terms of capacity, training and routing. The Master Electricians Association complained about the possibility that the scheme will attract fly-by-night operators, which in turn offended some tradespeople.

Some disgruntled clients of the trial want a new digital television instead of a set-top box.

It has become a cavalcade of the disgruntled, the sort that a government doesn't want following a budget, particularly with a program that should be a feel-good scheme.

Julia Gillard and Steven Conroy, the Minister for Communications, have responded furiously. They point to the laudable general goals of increasing access to the latest developments in communication, to the many poor and vulnerable beneficiaries, and to the simplistic view of the program that has been put about by its critics.

The program is not apparently just about set-top boxes, but includes aerials, cabling and after-installation service. The set-top boxes themselves are often not off-the-shelf models, but are specialised units for use by people with disabilities.

This tale tells us a lot about politics and policy-making.

It has been another win for the Opposition, which has employed two successful strategies.

The first has been to link this program to the home insulation saga and the school buildings economic stimulus controversy, both of which contributed to the downfall of Kevin Rudd and the poor Labor performance at the last federal election. The second has been to link the program to the Opposition's tried and true themes of waste, inefficiency and poor implementation.

Failed implementation has been one of the major weaknesses of the Rudd and Gillard

governments. It has fuelled public perception that it cannot deliver. This is an unfair judgment in some cases; the final word on the school buildings program will probably be much more favourable to the Government.

What this set-top box issue tells us, though, is that this Government has very poor political antennae. If it had been aware of the implementation dangers it would have steered away from a program like this which contains many of the same dangers that led to its earlier problems.

Implementation studies are a sub-set of public administration. A basic teaching of Implementation 101 is that the more points of decision and the more participants the greater the possibility that something will go wrong. The more that can go wrong the greater the danger that the program will not achieve its aims and rebound on the governments that introduced it.

A program that just gives away money can still have hiccups, as Kevin Rudd's economic stimulus experience showed. But at least the cheque in the hand is a relatively simple program.

The set-top box program, like the home insulation and school buildings programs, has so many more participants. They include departmental managers, contractors and sub-contractors; within each firm there are individual installers; then there is the after-sales service staff.

Quality varies. So many things can go wrong. Many individuals can become disgruntled. Consumers are not always grateful; sometimes with good reason but often not.

Before long, given the political process, the media pounce on hard luck stories and rorts. The pickings are easy.

Governments should learn from their past political difficulties, even when they may not be willing to admit to a policy mistake. There were always danger signs surrounding this program regardless of its merits; at the very least the Government should have been much better prepared to sell the benefits of the program to a skeptical public.

Ultimately the political benefit-cost of a \$350 cheque in the hand may have been greater than a well-meaning program containing so many potential pitfalls.

## Politics of Slutwalk

MEDIA

*Ellena Savage*

Slutwalk, a feminist rally scheduled to take place in Melbourne tomorrow, 28 May, is a mass response to victim-blaming in cases of sexual violence. The movement originated in Toronto, sparked by a police officer's comment that 'Women should avoid dressing like sluts in order to not be victimised'.

It has spread globally, engaging a generation of women and men that older feminists forever lament have shirked their political responsibilities; who have enjoyed the privilege and forgotten the rage.

Guy Rundle's now infamous article published in *Crikey* last week pointed out that Slutwalk is indebted to the Reclaim the Night movement feminist anti-rape movement, which dates back to 1976.

Although Reclaim the Night marches operate differently in various locations, they are, for the most part, women-only rallies that articulate the right for women to move freely in their communities without fearing, or enduring, harassment or sexual assault. Radical feminists captured the movement in 1978 to also articulate and oppose the gender-based violence inherent in the sex industry.

As such, Reclaim the Night marches tend to embody some of the characteristics of radical feminism: 'separatism' — the political segregation of women — and 'women dressing for women', the rejection of historically 'feminine' clothing and behaviour.

Slutwalk, as Rundle states, is in a sense a 'rebranding' of Reclaim the Night. Where Slutwalk differs is that it attempts to transform the language of oppression into a language of autonomy, men are welcome to participate, and participants are free to dress provocatively or not, as a public declaration of their right to safety regardless of their attire.

But his differentiation of the two movements fundamentally misunderstands the cultural distinctions between generations of feminists, branding it a war. 'Slutwalk uses feminist themes as a cover for young women to wage war against older women,' he writes, thus dismissing the political import of Slutwalk. Where he observes power in the form and solidarity of Reclaim the Night, he slights Slutwalk as spectacle.

The movements are necessarily different. Older feminisms have failed to engage younger generations due simply to our different historical experiences of gender. The 'separatism' of earlier feminisms, although grounded in convincing rhetoric, have little currency for women feminists whose only relationships with men are respectful and loving. Women's experiences of gender cannot be universalised.

This is not to say that women in the developed world do not experience political, material, sexual, cultural and legal inequity — Britain's conviction rate of reported rapes is below 7 per cent — but that redefining women's movements is essential for ensuring that women have the space to articulate their own experience of gender.

Women and feminists of my generation are products of a conflicted culture that older feminists may appreciate. Our position is from inside a culture where, for many of us, feminism has been naturalised, but where the sex industry has also been mainstreamed. The emergence of Proud queer identities has also shaped our understanding of sexuality. These are powerful differentiating factors between the Slutwalk movement and earlier movements such as Reclaim the Night.

The way the sex industry has altered sexuality in the public and private spheres is perhaps the most uncomfortable aspect of Slutwalk, and puts Slutwalk under a cautious scrutiny that Reclaim the Night is not subject to. Detractors argue that Slutwalk supporters are mistaking their sexual subjugation for liberation. They appeal to the horrors of the sex industry, conflating bodily integrity with subjugation to violent and degrading sexual constructions.

That assumption entirely misses the point. Slutwalk is one attempt to repossess what the sex industry has consumed. Degrading constructions of female sexuality are only legitimised by male violence, which are in turn legitimised by victim-blaming and shaming.

Another point of difference between older and younger feminists is that older feminists were responding to an environment hostile to them in every way. My generation, although some deny being feminists, have been cultured in a more feminist (albeit not feminist enough) environment, and as such do not require a rejection of old modes of femininity per se to secure whatever political or material goals they aspire to.

But I think the most interesting differentiating factor between Slutwalk and Reclaim the Night is Slutwalk's symbolic references to the Pride movement. This is what makes Slutwalk a uniquely contemporary 'spectacle' with political import.

Pride rallies, the Sydney Mardi Gras being a famous example, combine sexual politics and celebration of diversity, inclusion, safety and autonomy. They are framed in a carnival atmosphere, and have successfully transformed historically imposed shame into pride.

Slutwalk, using the theatricality and parody that Rundle dismisses, performs an inversion of the Madonna/Whore binaries that harm all women, and as well employ a fierce solidarity that Rundle seems to think us incapable of.



## Sex education in Pornland

MEDIA

*Lyn Bender*

Enraged accusations such as ‘man hating feminist’ have been hurled at Gail Dines for her emphatic stance on the tough stuff of pornography.

Dines is professor of sociology and women’s studies at Wheelock College, Boston, and the author of *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. She comes well credentialled and with 20 years of research under her belt.

Dines was in Australia for the Sydney Writers and Festival and appeared on the ABC’s [Q&A](#) this week. Her anti-porn message has been attacked with pitbull-like ferocity.

Admittedly Dines [pulls no punches](#). She was here to tell us that the voracious consumption by young men of 24-hour on-tap, hardcore internet porn is fouling their minds with sadistic and hateful views of women and sex. Women, said Dines, are feeling increasing pressure to behave and look like porn stars, which had led to the banishment of pubic hair and the rise of the full Brazilian wax.

Dines contends that consumers of porn are coming to expect that real-life sex ought to replicate the contrived marketed fantasy of the enormously erect man indulging in aggressive and often painful (for the woman) sexual congress. This is the sexual revolution down to the wire: sans tenderness, sans intimacy, sans love and sans human vulnerability.

What can only be described as a feminist fight ensued over assertions of what was ‘old’ and ‘new’ feminism, while tweeters barracked from the sidelines. The attacks on Dines centred on two themes. She was denounced as demonising men; and of promoting a wowsery, anti sexual liberation stance.

The first point is reminiscent of early critiques of feminists as ‘man haters’. The second implies that all open and unfettered approaches to depictions of sex are progressive, and that any moves towards ‘censorship’ is retrograde and inhibitory of a healthy sexuality.

Dines argues that the hardcore porn industry promotes a damaging view of sex that shapes young men’s (and women’s) fantasies and expectations of how sex should be, at the cost of healthy intimacy. While she makes her point with some feisty statements, she raises important issues.

No-one would wish to return to the sex education model of the 1950s, which erred on the side of suppression and sterility. But neither is the opposite extreme, of sex that eliminates all emotion other than aggression, a desirable alternative.

I am not in favour of censorship. It does not work, and the lines drawn can be arbitrary and

absurd, and can result in the withholding of important stories, facts and communication. I see erotic art, literature, movies, theatre and sensuously arousing depictions as being an important part of our consciousness, with the potential to enrich all our lives.

What of artistic revelations of violence, including sexual violence? In the context of engaging with the true reality of violence and the harm it brings, these revelations can help promote our understanding, compassion and values. Such images have prompted us over time to evolve our civilisation, through, for example, promotion of human rights, gender equality and denunciation of torture.

Positive portrayals including erotica can inspire and guide us by enhancing our perceptions and extending our narrow world view.

But like junk food, the fantasies in most hardcore porn are not good for us. They turn women and men into objects used in an emotionally disconnected fashion, and sex into a purely visceral activity.

I have seen clients who are addicted to internet pornography, who in fact prefer this to engaging with their wives or partners. It is quick and easy, and we can become habituated to it. Needless to say it can wreak havoc in a relationship.

Many women employed in the porn business are damaged physically and emotionally in the making of porn. Regulation is important, and consumers must ask whether support of this business is ethical, just as they might be concerned about the use of child labour in the production of consumer goods.

None of which is to say that we must never view pornography. Like fast food we may occasionally 'indulge' or, in my view, succumb. Too much junk, however, at the expense of the higher quality stuff of intimacy, can be harmful. Just as we encourage our community to eat more wholesome food, we also need an abundance of education and portraiture of healthy sexual relationships.

## Lives of urban Aboriginal women

### FILMS

*Tim Kroenert*

The same week that Warwick Thornton sat down to write the screenplay for his 2009 masterpiece *Samson and Delilah*, fellow Indigenous filmmaker (and Thornton's wife) Beck Cole began work on her own film script. She broke from it during the ensuing years to work, among other things, on a documentary about Thornton's film, and on the acclaimed series *First Australians*. But *Here I Am* never left her completely. Five years on, the finished film will hit Australian screens next week.

The central character is Karen (Shai Pittman), a woman in her 20s who has just been released from a two-year stint in prison in Adelaide, and is determined to make a fresh start. This includes trying to find an honest job (no easy task for an Aboriginal ex-con) and attempting to reconnect with her toddler daughter. The young girl has been in the care of Karen's mother Lois (Marcia Langton), who is far from convinced that Karen has turned (or, indeed, is even capable of turning) over a new leaf.

Producer Kath Shelper has said that *Here I Am* may be the first film about Aboriginal women in a contemporary urban setting. Writer-director Cole agrees that she was keen to capture the particular experience of urban Aboriginal women. 'I grew up bouncing between Alice and Adelaide,' she says, 'and have always been keen to set a film in Adelaide. I don't speak an Aboriginal language. I live in Alice, but there's so many of us that don't live out in the regions. It's important to represent that.'

In the film, Karen derives emotional support from her fellow residents at an Aboriginal women's shelter in Port Adelaide. As filmmaker Cole cast mostly non-professional actors, based upon their natural suitability for certain roles, or as characters conceived especially with them in mind. (Vanessa Worrall, for example, who plays the shelter's manager, is a psychologist who served as an unofficial consultant on the script before being written into it.) This underscores the film's raw naturalism.

'We didn't do a lot of rehearsals,' says Cole. 'We did read-throughs and talked about the script, but that was it. I was attracted to the spontaneity of the performances. The women get the humour, they get the story without me having to bang on about it, because they've all lived it. None of the women ever asked, "What's my character here for? What did she do? What's her back-story?" They get it.'

Given that Thornton served as the film's cinematographer (he and Cole are frequent collaborators), comparisons between *Here I Am* and *Samson and Delilah* are perhaps inevitable. For the most part they will be favourable. The films do share a contemplative stillness that contrasts with the at times emotional chaos and the coarse beauty of the locations on screen. In

*Here I Am* this reinforces the sense of Karen's inner strength, and her resolve to move into a better future from a dark past.

Like *Samson and Delilah*, too, *Here I Am* avoids being explicitly political; its themes emerge not from sermons but from finely observed character studies. That said, Cole allowed herself one didactic moment. As the women bond over a covert bottle of booze, one of them quotes statistics that reveal the vastly disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal Australians caught in a 'revolving door' prison system. 'If there's one thing I want people to know,' says Cole, 'it's that.'

If the moment borders on preachy, it doesn't last long. Soon afterwards, the women turn up the radio and join in a tuneless but passionate chorus of Archie Roach's song about domestic violence, 'Walking Into Doors' (as in, 'She's sick and tired of ...'). 'No man's ever going to lay another fucking hand on me again!' one of the women sobs-shrieks as the song fades. The song is no mere anthem, but a hymn that evokes lived experience.

The film, too, is art that reflects reality. Pauline Whyman, who portrays Skinny, one of the residents, says *Here I Am* resonates powerfully with the experiences of the Aboriginal women who see it. 'They approach me and say "It's so real. I felt like I was in my own community and my own home." That to me is one of the greatest compliments. To know that we're representing other Aboriginal women.'

But the film is also universal; not an 'Aboriginal film', but a film for a wide audience that features Aboriginal characters. 'The urban setting makes it more accessible than some other interpretations of a story like this,' says Cole. She says she wanted to deal with the subject 'in a way that's not slit-your-wrists, boring and depressing'. *Here I Am*, then, is a hopeful story, in which forgiveness and redemption are attainable goals. 'Karen really wants to turn her life around for the better,' says Cole.

## When 'sorry' is not enough

### INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

*Mark Green*

As the nation marks [Sorry Day](#), Caritas Australia joins the Stolen Generations Alliance (SGA) in calling for a fresh national focus to be placed on truth, justice and healing for Aboriginal people who were removed from their families. True healing must include justice for Stolen Generations.

This year commemorates the 15th anniversary of the handing down of the *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen Generations, but there is still much work to be done to deliver justice to those who suffered and continue to suffer from being forcibly removed from their families.

SGA highlights the continued difficulty for those removed overseas in returning home. One of SGA's members, Leonie Pope, has been commended for her courage and determination to return home to Australia despite many obstacles. Leonie was adopted without her mother's knowledge and removed to Wales in the 1970s. She only returned to Australia in the last few years.

Leonie now works with the SGA to promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander submissions to the [Senate Inquiry](#) into Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices.

Caritas Australia's Chief Executive Officer, Jack de Groot, recently stated:

The 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations was a high point in the history of our nation. It has been followed up with some excellent initiatives, such as the provision of Bringing Them Home Counsellors and the funding of Link-Up services to assist with the healing process. But there is much, much, more that remains to be done to achieve Justice.

SGA's co-chairs, Jim Morrison and Tina Louise, are determined that the spirit of *Bringing Them Home* and the Apology are backed up by effective action for Stolen Generations. In the words of Morrison:

For too long we have been chipping away at the edges ... without making a significant difference for many of those who have been most tragically affected. We have received reports that some families are now enduring their sixth generation of successive removals and this is just not good enough. We need to get to the core of these issues and resolve them properly.

The members of the Stolen Generations continue to face difficulties that relate to their experiences. A feeling of isolation is paramount among them. Severe isolation impacts socially, emotionally and financially. Some members have no one to turn to in times of need, are suspicious and fearful of mainstream services and often feel uncomfortable (for many reasons)

using Aboriginal services.

Lack of access to records impedes the search to find family, home, culture and country. For example, the In Touch program provided through Centrelink has ceased. This was a key source for Link-Up services to find missing relatives. SGA reports that the government has been saying it will develop a similar program for more than a year to address this need, but this has not materialised.

Many members of the Stolen Generations are in need of practical assistance in a range of other areas, including aged care, funeral assistance — both in terms of returning to country to be buried and attending family funerals — health, housing, mental health support and trauma counselling.

Along with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, members of the Stolen Generations face unacceptably high rates of incarceration, poverty and lack of family support. Without emotional healing, the fundamental challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, such as health and substance abuse, will continue.

In the end, it is difficult to imagine how justice can ultimately be done or healing achieved without other measures of restitution, such as fair compensation, redress and reparation. In this respect, the US Catholic Bishops' [pastoral letter](#), 'Economic Justice for All', remains pertinent.

[T]he deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves.

There is much scope for our national solidarity with members of the Stolen Generations to grow deeper through committed action, addressing their primary needs.

## The moral challenge of accepting an apology

### INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

*Binoy Kampmark*

*'I bear no ill will. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie.'*  
— Gordon Wilson, after the death of his daughter, Remembrance Day, County Fermanagh, 1987

Societies approach apology and its execution by various means. The measure for what is apologised for inevitably lies in the gestures that accompany it. In the context of Australia's national [Sorry Day](#), the urgency of this gesture never dies.

The traditional problems in the context of an apology for Australia's treatment of its Indigenous population surface annually. The wounds are truly, not so much skin deep, but sin deep. To atone for that sin is a permanent dilemma for both the victims and the perceived perpetrators.

Where, for instance, does such an apology rest in the context of the continuing National Territory Intervention?

In one sense, the Commonwealth action demonstrates a crude paternalism that undermines Indigenous autonomy and reduces the subject of rescue to the status of an invalid. ('We will save you, but you shall behave accordingly.') The rescued subject is, in a sense, idealised as weak.

But the same might be said about the entire *modus operandi* of social work: daily interventions are justified on the basis of 'helping' weak endangered subjects. Little thought is given to the intervener, whatever the mantra about empowerment might be on the day.

In another sense, doing nothing would have been equally disastrous, making any gesture of apology empty. Criticisms that the Intervention is merely land appropriation by Canberra's establishment are disingenuous. What is truly required, as the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd [explained](#) on 13 February 2008, is the pressing need to address 'life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity' among Australia's Indigenous population.

Paternalism, even if enacted out of guilt, can prove disastrous. Historically, we had such illustrations of this as the Aborigines Protection Act 1869, a Victorian statute that gave the Aborigines Protection Board vast powers to make laws for 'the care, custody and education of the children of Aborigines'.

The most controversial feature of the Act lay in its intrusive allowance for 'the removal of any Aboriginal child neglected by its parents or left unprotected'. The ghastly details were more than adequately tabled in the *Bringing Them Home* [report](#) from May 1997.

Where the victim is situated in the moral calculus tends to be the most neglected topic in reconciliation. Could it be ever feasible for Australia's Indigenous community to countenance unconditional forgiveness?

Often, the reconciliation debate is framed around matters of the perpetrator's reaction, rather than that of the victim, who holds a superior moral currency. But in the moral synergy of life, both sides have their respective powers to alter the balance, to undermine or strengthen their respective cases.

The Dutch priest Henri Nouwen describes this with some force: 'We need to forgive and be forgiven, every day, every hour — unceasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.'

The old tensions about reconciliation and autonomy in Australia remain, precisely because the sides have yet to work out how the 'fellowship of the weak that is the human family' should order their relations. Rudd's apology, which spoke of the infliction of 'profound grief, suffering and loss' on Australia's Indigenous population was a remarkable, if long overdue, step.

But *Bringing Them Home* itself highlighted the continuing problems with how the subject of forgiveness is identified. Its grotesque accounts of mistreatment risked creating an untouchable moral subject in the form of victimhood. In doing so, it ignored the enormous moral strength the victim can have to address inflicted injustices.

The policy of the National Sorry Day Committee has been admirable, at least in so far as it renamed Sorry Day a National Day of Healing for all Australians. This is not merely semantics. It suggests the role of solidarity required from all sides. As Senator Aden Ridgeway explained on 25 May 2005, 'The day will focus on the healing needed throughout Australian society if we are to achieve reconciliation.'

Forgiveness and reconciliation pose a dilemma in terms of inequality. The victim can show immense moral courage. Consider Gordon Wilson, who held the hand of his dying daughter Marie after the 1987 Enniskillen bombing in County Fermanagh. Without reservation, he forgave the IRA bombers who inflicted the atrocity. Such courage, as Field Marshal William J. Slim explained on examining the conduct of Japanese soldiery, is of a higher order, 'a rarer virtue than physical courage'.

Perpetrators and victims must reach a position where, paradoxically, they become equally human before each other. Forgiveness should be accompanied by true repentance. In a Kantian sense, both must become ends to each other, not means.

This may well be a noble dream. But an even more noble one would be unconditional forgiveness, granted from a vantage point of true compassion. Such sheer moral strength, however, is a rarity.



## Quitting Afghanistan cold turkey

### POLITICS

*Shahram Akbarzadeh*

US President Barack Obama has tried to make his position clear on the Middle East. However, with the obvious exception of the explicit endorsement of the pre-1967 borders for the two states of Israel and Palestine, there were no surprises in his highly anticipated MidEast speech. Even less clear is the administration's long term policy for the future of Afghanistan.

Obama has been under growing pressure to bring US troops back home from Afghanistan. Public support for that war is dwindling. And with Osama bin Laden dead, the Obama administration has decided that troop withdrawal should start this year.

A withdrawal from Afghanistan will have major ramifications for the region. Afghanistan is not a functioning state. It remains on the brink of failure. Corruption and cronyism is rampant and its security forces are in no position to withstand the Taliban surge that will inevitably follow the US withdrawal. The recent [attack](#) on Qandahar, Afghanistan's second largest city, gave a taste of that.

A US withdrawal is also likely to embolden the Pakistani secret service, the Inter-Services Intelligence. The ISI is widely believed to foster Islamists to be used as proxies in the Indian-controlled Kashmir and Afghanistan. The 2008 coordinated attacks in Mumbai have been traced to ISI, while links with the Afghan Taliban are well-documented.

Even more devastating for the US is the discovery that bin Laden may have lived under the nose of the Pakistani military for years. This raises serious questions about the reliability of the US-Pakistani alliance in relation to Islamic terror. And it points to the mindset of the ISI: partnership with Washington is great, but we live in this neighbourhood and cannot afford to be squeamish about whom we use to undermine arch-enemy India and further our reach.

A US withdrawal from Afghanistan risks putting the region on a slide into turmoil. Yet it would be consistent with Obama's declared sentiment to break with the past practice in the greater Middle East.

At his famous Cairo speech in 2009, President Obama [declared](#) his administration will not be imposing expectations of political reform on the Muslim world and would not interfere in their internal affairs. The Arab Spring put this commitment to the test.

While critics have accused Obama of wavering to support the popular uprising for democracy, he has managed to walk a tight rope. He has done well to keep out of the Arab Spring, allowing it to evolve as a spontaneous grassroots movement for democracy.

The urgent question for the administration will have to focus on the limits of the Obama

doctrine. How far back can the US withdraw from the internal affairs of the Muslim Middle East, before it starts to hurt US interests?

Iran plays an important role in the above calculation. So far, Iran has played its hand badly and has made no gains out of the opportunities that the changing landscape presents.

Iran has been rid of two major security threats, thanks to the US removal of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. More recently, the popular surge in the Arab world has put its rival regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia under the squeeze.

The situation in Syria, a close ally of Iran, may be troubling for Tehran. But in the grand scheme of things, the popular revolt against the entrenched status quo holds significant promise for Iran.

Yet, the Iranian leadership (in contrast to its Turkish counterpart) has demonstrated little political acumen to capitalise on these opportunities to assert Iran as a responsible regional state, let alone as a regional leader. While Iran has the potential to influence its neighbourhood, ideological constraints and internal strife in the leadership have seriously undermined its effectiveness.

Obama is faced with a difficult decision. A complete withdrawal from Afghanistan could have major ramifications for the region and ultimately for US interests. He appears to have given in to the domestic pressure for withdrawal, but his administration would be well-advised to adopt a gradualist and long-term strategy.

## Stories from the Struggletown Library

ES CLASSIC

*John Falzon*

There was a liberal use of corporal punishment in my high school.

It was in Blacktown in the late 1970s. We were seen as a loutish bunch of lads who needed a firm hand. Most of us copped a taste of the strap or the cane from time to time, even running a bit of a competition to see how many cuts we could notch up from any one teacher. It never seemed unusual to any of us even though at times the violence was brutal and gratuitous.

I don't feel the least bit of pain in remembering any of this but one thing is clear: it did absolutely nothing to help my education.

It was the libraries, both school and municipal, where I did most of my learning. I had a deeply enriching time there and feel a debt of gratitude to the librarians and to those who championed the cause of public libraries.

I don't know what drove me to the libraries, but I am certain it was not the stick.

Why, I wonder, in these more enlightened times, do we continue to see a class-based approach to the education and training of people who are living on the edges of the economy; a class-based approach that begins, moreover, with the assumption that the more disadvantaged you are classified as being, the more you need to be controlled and coerced?

The 2011 [Federal Budget](#) solemnly proclaims the Government's faith in the virtues of education and training, primarily, it must be said, to prepare you for the even higher virtue of work, spruiked with true Calvinist conviction. The urgency with which we must get potential workers into the labour market is intoned as a matter of national emergency.

It's funny how quickly we are meant to forget that many of these people were seen as expendable and surplus to the needs of capital in times past. Others have been injured while on the job, sometimes after years of hard and unrewarding work.

It appears to matter little. All are bundled together by Government, Opposition, and the other dismal cheer-leaders for paternalism, as being in need of at least a little nudge if not a firm hand. The people, and, let's admit it, entire locations, that have been previously judged to be surplus populations, are now described as the unwilling workers that the nation is crying out for.

Along with the financial penalty stick and the humiliation stick they are also subjected to the stick of tiresome moralising; told in no uncertain terms that the time has come for them to take responsibility for a change. The Government and business community are doing all that they can to help you (so the narrative goes). Now you've got an obligation to help yourself

and stop being dependent on the state.

This discourse is as inaccurate as it is offensive. It ignores the real stories that are happening in real places. Instead it wallows in the shameful rhetoric of welfare-bashing.

A strong, flexible social security system, one that actually delivers social security rather than insecurity and vilification, is essential if we are to build a fairer Australia. A good social security system, however, is not, in itself the answer. It should be a means to social, economic and political inclusion rather than an end in itself.

‘Welfare’, as the Americans like to call it, is neither the problem nor the solution, any more than hospitals are the cause of illness or, indeed, the creators of good health for society. You wouldn’t want to be without hospitals, would you? And neither should we acquiesce to the whittling away of a robust social security system. Especially not under the guise of forcing people to learn and be trained.

The Government can threaten with all the sticks under the sun but this will not lead people to learning. They can suspend a young mother’s entire income if they want. This will cause hardship for both mother and child and it will mean that the young woman will need to get assistance from her extended family or friends, neighbours or a charity. But will it instill a desire to learn? It will not.

It will, on the other hand, teach the young woman a little bit about society. It will teach her that she is of little value and that she is able to be controlled and disciplined and made to ask for charity. It will teach her perhaps how to develop innovative ways of survival; how to work within, or around, the social security system. It will teach her many things about where she sits in the social order; things that I fervently hope she will one day challenge, critique and, with others, undo.

During the welfare-to-work measures imposed by the Howard Government a fascinating report, entitled *Much Obliged*, was written by Mark Considine from the University of Melbourne, Gavin Dufty from the St Vincent de Paul Society, and Stephen Ziguras from the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Their research, which received far too little recognition, demonstrated that increasing compliance measures under the hallowed banner of mutual obligation did little to actually facilitate employment participation. In their survey of the experience of disadvantaged job-seekers they [found](#) :

Contrary to the aims of active labour market policy, the emphasis on compulsory activities appears to generate avoidance and resentment. While people may comply, these requirements are in practice not a means to finding work, but rather a necessity for remaining eligible for benefits. In effect, then, the system operates for many disadvantaged job seekers not as ‘welfare to work’ but ‘welfare as work’.

And poorly paid work, at that: since 1996 our unemployment benefit has fallen from 54 per cent to 45 per cent of the after-tax minimum wage.

You don't create a smart and confident Australia by taking to people with the stick or keeping them below the poverty line. This might have sat well with the moral prescriptions of the mid to late 19th century and it might be a clever way of scoring political points, but it will not build a stronger, smarter economy or a fairer society.

But let us, with unabashed nerdiness, return to my beloved library.

One of the great attractions of the library was its diversity. All sorts of books sat next to each other, offering all sorts of windows onto the world. When, one time, I asked the school librarian to explain the torn-out page from *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, she told me that one of the Brothers performed this act of censorship because there was a rude word in one of the poems. Of course I had no choice then but to save up and buy a copy and yes, it is still on my shelf.

How welcome it would be to see a greater diversity of responses to the diversity of stories that bring people into the social security system and the labour market; how good to see no more pages torn out of people's stories — no more pretense about the conditions in which people are struggling. Sadly, it's sometimes a matter of one stick fits all. Some of the most innovative attempts at social policy involve creating different sizes and shapes of sticks. Not the kind of diversity we hope for!

Disability advocacy groups have been good at explaining the concept of the social relations of disability, whereby the negative impact of disability is constructed and exacerbated by the barriers our socio-economic formation erects, especially in regard to economic and social participation.

This is a useful conceptual framework and is profoundly applicable to all who are condemned for the sin of un-productivity. People are made and pulled apart by social and economic structures that dehumanise, compartmentalise, destroy, humiliate and blame.

We build walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the 'aspiration' to scale these walls.

With both sides of politics singing the praises of 'tough love' in the months preceding the Budget we would have been surprised had there not been anything there that smacked of coercion and paternalism. The Budget wasn't all negative; not by a long stretch. The investment in mental health is groundbreaking. I do hope, however, that the punitive treatment of people on social security benefits will not cause greater problems with mental health.

A harsher welfare compliance regime and the extension of compulsory income management are measures that assume that if you are disadvantaged your problem is

idleness. Idleness is not the problem. The problem is entrenched inequality.

The fact remains that for a single unemployed person, the battle to survive on \$34 a day is waged from below the poverty line. The Government is right to look at this and say that life should be better, but wrong to claim that the answer lies in making life harder.

I am very hopeful that during this time of low unemployment many people will find jobs. The story is not, however, as simple as it seems. Unemployment rates are still high in some locations and among certain age groups. Professor Bill Mitchell of the University of Newcastle's Centre of Full Employment and Equity (CofFEE) reminds us:

The evidence continues to show that the Australian labour market continues to fail our teenagers (15–19-year-olds) and exclude them from employment growth. Teenage employment growth in the last month remained negative losing 500 jobs (net) — loss of 5000 full-time jobs and gain of 4500 part-time jobs. The overall decline in teenage employment has been a continuing trend over the last few years.

At a time when we keep emphasising the future challenges facing the nation in terms of an ageing population and rising dependency ratios the economy still fails to provide enough work (and on-the-job experience) for our teenagers who are our future workforce ...

It makes a mockery of those (like the bank economists and our politicians) who claim we are close to full employment. An economy that excludes its active teenagers from any employment growth at all is not one that is using its existing capacity to its potential. An economy that sheds 73,000 jobs that were formerly held by teenagers (including 72,000 full-time jobs) is nowhere near full employment.

I am confident that no matter how hard the forces of coercion and control are arraigned to break people, people will continue to be resilient in the face of oppression. We are all broken in some ways, but out of our shared brokenness we shall create a new kind of society.

The women and men who are currently not listened to still have their stories, still carry the knowledge of what has happened, what is happening, and what needs to happen.

Another kind of world is possible because of the truth that is told by those who live on the margins. And if we look a little bit closer, we will see that the 'margins' are actually at the heart of our society. It all depends on where you stand.

Finally, I wish to express my deep sense of gratitude and solidarity with all the community organisations working with, and on the side of, people who are pushed to the margins. There is a natural affinity among all who listen to the stories of the people on the margins and who work to nurture the seeds of a new society growing from those stories.

## Churches where no wheelchairs go

NON-FICTION

*Moira Byrne Garton*

During a recent family holiday we visited a well known Australian big city Catholic cathedral. Upon seeing the series of steps at the front, we looked for disability access and were rewarded with the familiar stylised wheelchair symbol. We proceeded uphill to find the side entrance also had steps.



Continuing on, we made our way to the back of the church, where we discovered a long ramp leading to a door. We rang the bell, and waited. And waited. A security guard patrolling the perimeter found us, and a short while later met us inside. We finally entered the sacred building.

Later that day, a disability advocate shared the story of a discussion with representatives of a local church, regarding disability access to a church building. The representatives said providing access was not an issue for their congregation, because it had no members with mobility issues.

The advocate gently explained that perhaps the design of the church building precluded people who had movement difficulties from attending.

From personal experience, I am aware of the cost of building modifications to improve accessibility. No doubt costs are even more prohibitive for buildings designed for wide communities, or of heritage value. Yet there are simple changes churches can offer people with mobility difficulties.

Well-signposted disability car parks are a must. Where it is necessary to walk, hobble, or wheel a distance to a special entrance, hand rails and cheery signs along the way help the path seem short. If assistance is required to enter, assign someone to be present to provide support.

In certain cases, temporary ramps allow access to wheelchairs and walking frames. Allocated spaces for wheelchairs reduce fears about 'being in the way'. Movement is made easier if aisles are wide enough to accommodate both a wheelchair, and someone mobile to walk around it.

Some of these suggestions cost money; but money is spent on providing music, technology, art and other things that subtly invite people to participate. Compromises on updating or replacing resources, or questioning the necessity of new purchases, could release funds to build a more accessible church.

Some years ago, our parish catered for the extra numbers anticipated at Easter by adding a

chair to the end of each row, and including extra rows of chairs at the back of the church and in the foyer. Unfortunately, this had the unintended consequence of relegating people with mobility issues, injuries or small children to the periphery of the gathering as aisles were reduced to narrow tracks.

One can speculate what message could inadvertently be inferred by people who may be attending church for the first time in a long while.

In London, the Anglican Church developed [strategies](#) to ensure that people with disabilities are considered in worship. The Anglican Church in Australia is also working to enable greater [participation](#) by people with all kinds of disabilities in the life of the church. [Churches](#) are willing to take up the challenge, and an [evaluation](#) process forms part of the approach.

It is heartening to see [similar moves](#) in Australian Catholic churches. The Australian Catholic Bishops established a Disability Council as part of the Bishops Commission on Pastoral Life. This signalled the priority and importance of addressing issues of disability in the Church, and includes resources to assist the involvement of people with intellectual impairments as well as physical needs.

A new Mass translation in [easy English](#) would have made a welcome addition to these strategies

While entry to the aforementioned cathedral was not particularly wheelchair-friendly, we were pleased to see there were wide aisles and other technology designed to facilitate participation, such as large flat screens attached to pillars that could assist people with vision or hearing impairments.

There is a story in the Gospel of Luke in which the friends of a paralysed man could not find a way to bring him into a crowded building where Jesus was. So they climbed onto the roof and lowered him on a stretcher. These friends worked hard to ensure that their friend did not miss out on meeting Jesus.

Church members can take a cue from this example, by ensuring they also bring people with injury, illness, impairment or disability to the heart of their communities.



## Despite dementia

POETRY

*Various*

### **The man who never forgot how to dance**

*for my father*

When you tried to walk through the wall you were still  
living at home. What did you see beyond  
the opacity of brick? You were so sure  
it would absorb you that moments passed before  
reality kicked in and, furious, you pushed the boundaries  
of that curious borderline, grazing palms and skinning  
knuckles. Taking your arms — just like they'd said to,  
or perhaps I'd read somewhere — I put one of my hands  
on your shoulder, one of yours at my waist  
and clasped the other, hummed a little.  
You calmed and smiled and started waltzing, me  
following and following your unfaltering lead towards  
the armchair by the window where you sat  
and, quite suddenly,  
fell asleep in the afternoon sun.

—*Virginia Jealous*

### **Chooka's got gift**

Susan Boyle was first  
and who heard of Chooka Parker  
except his shearing mates and dad  
beating rhythms on oil drums;  
the dad who let Chooka grow

in open hands pointing to a limitless love  
no ego, no standards.  
Chooka did you proud, displayed  
and played his soul across the keyboard  
I saw his heart open wide, keys  
percussed and loved to life  
Chooka drew closer, his nose on the keys,  
eyes shut in intimate embrace.  
He did not see their jaws drop.

—*Marlene Marburg*

**A plague of persistent happiness**

*Won*

We are old enough to discover pleasure.  
Not wise enough to bury it.  
All have been in training  
louche lips sink ships  
stretch them till the fillings shimmer  
each tongue is a long distance swimmer.  
Can I rest yet? Never ...  
the extra mile of smiles  
goes all exponential,  
a drink at the local bar graph  
with 16 friends, real friends  
who love you to stasis.  
Grey abandon. Pip the epiphany.  
Lip-gloss on a grassfire. Be aware,  
the next step involves dance,

underwear pulse  
sport of our fingers  
tapped over, look, ah,  
eyes soldered to the ceiling.  
This injury of enjoyment ...  
the mind tinkles  
like an Indian jewellery stand.  
Work-worn knees will forget their appointment, disappointments —  
a knobby spectacle up a lavish Mother Brown —  
towns frown but still the wild content —  
cheese in please, tactile tentatives to  
priapic pyramids, resolutely relished.  
*Too*  
A fundamental wrongness of longness  
fatigues the soul. Guitar scar  
mandolin terrapins  
shrug off their shells, sprinkle  
wrinkles like star-splay.  
Five days later the mouth is dried & the jaw is maw.  
Beg for the balm of odium,  
maybe a diminutive boredom.  
We are born to swing but the muscles set.  
Seems even harmony is a habit  
with a rocket  
but burn, burn  
up. The solace of ash ...  
our crash in the spheres

will be historic.

—*Les Wicks*

### **Nursing home visit**

My mother waves away greeting.

Despite dementia she has learnt  
the elusiveness of thought.

‘Beautiful

so beautiful ...  
blonde hair!

curls, you know,

blue eyes

and he wears the

loveliest of ...

what are they called?

gold, all gold, white ...

He’s blonde ... |

time for everyone

speaks speaks to

each one even

that thing over there ...

(she points with a vigorous

subtlety) blue eyes ...

did I say that?

(That dashing ever so handsome

lieutenant — American —

accompanied always by a sigh

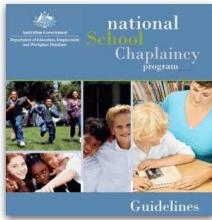
is as if he never was and  
no mention of her crimson dress.  
Is the War over? At last! She seems  
to have no plans to break out tonight.)  
She is waiting. Her face crinkling  
out of eagerness. As ever, I'm too  
slow on the uptake. 'Yes, of course',  
I say, 'You may ... yes, the bread  
a sip of wine ...'  
The Lord comes to us in many ways;  
most of us are not so lucky  
as to find him blonde, blue-eyed  
and sexy.

—*Kathryn Hamann*

## School chaplains and pink batts

EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*



This month's Federal Budget provided \$222 million to maintain the National School Chaplaincy Program for a further four years. Chaplaincy funding has proved to be one of the more controversial inclusions in this year's Budget. That is because many state school parents don't want their children exposed to religious proselytising, and no not trust chaplains not to proselytise.

Their skepticism was vindicated recently with the revelation that the group Access Ministries has been using the program for proselytising, contrary to the its Guidelines and Code of Conduct. The Fairfax press reported that Access Ministries CEO Dr Evonne Paddison [told](#) participants at a 2008 Anglican conference that the program was a 'God-given opportunity' to evangelise, and that they needed to use it 'to go and make disciples'.

It is clear that Dr Paddison was encouraging conference participants to ignore item 9 in the [Code of Conduct](#) that chaplains are required to sign. Item 9 stipulates that 'a chaplain should not take advantage of his or her privileged position to proselytise for [his or her own] denomination or religious belief'.

However those who conceived the program must take some responsibility for abuses that occur because their default position — expressed in the program [guidelines](#) — is that the chaplain must be a minister of religion, or at least a person who believes they have a religious calling.

At least in the context of Christianity, many ministers of religion understand that their role is precisely to proselytise, in the spirit of Jesus' [command](#) to 'proclaim the Gospel to all nations'. It is a minority of ministers who would have the training and the disposition necessary to exercise the degree of impartiality required for a chaplain's role in a state school.

Moreover it is unlikely that the majority would be sympathetic with the principles of modern missiology, which has the immediate aim of building understanding between different faiths and cultures, rather than winning converts. Such wisdom has much to offer institutions such as state schools, which recognise and celebrate a diversity of faiths. But the program's [guidelines](#) are very vague and do not allude to such principles at all, thereby leaving room for fundamentalist approaches to religion.

While at first glance the 25 page *Guidelines* booklet may in fact seem comprehensive, it contains only one paragraph specifying what the program is and what the chaplains are required to do.

‘It is a voluntary Program that assists schools and their communities to support the spiritual wellbeing of their students. This might include support and guidance about ethics, values, relationships, spirituality and religious issues; the provision of pastoral care; and enhancing engagement with the broader community.’

That’s all. It’s likely that a more thorough description of what the program is about could suggest a different type of candidate altogether.

Rather than tapping the religious fervour that exists in Access Ministries and the like, the most successful chaplains might be individuals who have a broad knowledge of religion but do not have any interest in proselytising. They may be former ministers who have become agnostic in their own beliefs but still mentor young people coming to terms with their spiritual identity.

But it appears such agnostic candidates — with no conflict of interest — would fail to meet the religious selection criteria as detailed in the Guidelines. However those from groups such as Access Ministries — who do have a conflict of interest — clearly meet the selection criteria.

While originally a Howard Government initiative, the National School Chaplaincy Program could be another Pink Batts, in that it has not been thought through.

## **Labor worse than Howard on asylum seekers**

POLITICS

*Andrew Hamilton*

The design of the Labor Government policy on asylum seekers is now clear. Its overriding aim is to stop asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat. The regional solution is not a solution for the problems faced by refugees but for an Australian political problem. The despatch to Malaysia and Manus Island of people who arrive by boat is about deterrence.

This development was probably inevitable from the day before the last election when Prime Minister Gillard adumbrated a regional solution focused on East Timor that would ensure asylum seekers would be processed overseas. The lure of a regional agreement muted the criticism of many people working with asylum seekers. It became easy to overlook the ethical implications of the promise.

Those implications are also now clear. Effectively, Australia is excluding from the right to claim protection a group of people who flee to Australia to escape persecution. Instead it will condemn them to treatment that amounts to an abuse of their human dignity. The mental illness developed by those on PNG and the hopelessness of existence in Malaysia, with its attendant cruelties, will deter others from trying to come to Australia by boat. Human beings are being punished in order to achieve broader policy goals.

This should lead people concerned for asylum seekers to reflect on how we have come to this and what we can learn from it.

The promise of the Government to negotiate with Malaysia conditions that respect and monitor the human rights of asylum seekers is a see-through fig leaf. From the Australian perspective the asylum seekers will be in the same position as other asylum seekers in Malaysia, unable to claim protection. From the Malaysian perspective they are items traded by Australia — why should it be more concerned for their humanity than Australia has been?

In its treatment of asylum seekers the Labor Government has not only returned to the worse features of the Howard Government. It has gone beyond it in betraying the central principle underlying any ethical refugee policy, namely that asylum seekers should not be sent to places where there is no guarantee that they will not face persecution.

One can only imagine what the Coalition Government that will most likely follow the next election will build on this abrogation of principle.

These latest developments also invite reflection how refugee advocates and their agencies should deal with government. The coloured wrapping on the rotten apple of refugee policy can distract us from focusing on what really matters. In this case, it is naturally attractive to be part of designing a regional solution that would improve the ultimate lot of refugees, with all



the intellectual excitement and closeness to government that goes with it.

Well-designed regional agreements are certainly desirable and are worth contributing to. But the fact that the Government's support for a regional agreement has always been about preventing asylum seekers from claiming asylum in Australia should temper enthusiasm for it.

Ultimately, for those concerned for asylum seekers, one thing matters in relationships with government, and one only. That is the welfare and human dignity of the actual human beings who are asylum seekers.

The preservation of Christmas Island as the primary processing centre, the failure to pass adumbrated legislation that improved the treatment of asylum seekers, their continued routine detention, the suspension of processing, the renewed detention of minors, the carting around Australia without notice of asylum seekers and the establishment of centres in remote parts of Australia, have all been inconsistent with respect for human dignity.

Those who speak for refugees need publicly and uncompromisingly to insist that the policy and the diminishment of vulnerable people that follows from it are unacceptable. They should also insist that the goals of such a policy not dominate the shape of regional agreements.

In Australia the normal form of cooperation of asylum seeker representatives with government will be to minimise harm. It is proper to cooperate in order to lessen the suffering of people affected by bad government policy. It is quite another matter to be silent about the evils of that policy in order to remain part of the conversation with government, still less in order to have a part in administering a destructive policy.

To focus on what matters is never easy. It is the more difficult in a field on which you will never make a lasting difference. Those who want asylum seekers in Australia to be treated justly and humanely will have small victories and huge defeats. A few boats will bring down whatever small gains have been made with great labour towards a humane and reasonable policy.

Asylum seekers are familiar with failure and misrepresentation throughout their lives. Their friends will experience the same things. Commitment must be for the long haul.