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Don’t bet on the Australian dollar

ECONOMICS

David James

A commonly expressed witticism in the currency markets is that there are two types of traders in the Australian dollar: those who don’t know what it will do and those who know they don’t know what it will do.

The mysteries of the Australian dollar remain as deep as ever. The currency is trading at about US$1.04, close to its highest level since being floated in 1983 and a 48 per cent rise since the end of 2008 — the biggest gain among more than 150 currencies, according to Bloomberg. It is trading well above the trade weighted index of 77.8, which is as close as there is to a benchmark of what the currency is ‘really’ worth.

The strength of the Australian dollar is being variously attributed to aspects of what is happening in the ‘real’ economy: the AAA rating of Federal government bonds, the country’s close trade links with China, Australia’s comparatively high interest rates compared with the rest of the developed world, the carry trade with Japan (whereby Japanese traders take low interest yen and ‘carry’ it into Australian dollars with higher interest rates) or Australia’s reasonable growth prospects.

These factors are influences, but they are not the true cause of what the Australian dollar does. What determines the direction of the currency is not what happens in the domestic economy. Rather, it is driven by sentiment in the financial markets. In this sense, it is arguably the most ‘unreal’, or virtual currency in the world.

A feature of the global financial markets over the last decade has been the decoupling of finance and what finance is supposed to be facilitating. More than $US4 trillion is exchanged each day in the global capital markets according to the Bank for International Settlements (BIS). This amount vastly exceeds world GDP, foreign direct investment or trade. In about 100 days, it is the equivalent of all the capital stock in the world.

The decoupling of finance and the real economy is especially extreme with the Australian dollar. It is the fifth most traded currency in the world (after the US dollar, the Euro, the yen and the British pound).

The activity is heavily skewed towards Australian-United States dollar transactions, despite the fact that China and Japan are the nation’s biggest trading partners. According to the BIS, the average daily turnover between the Australian dollar and US dollar is over $US250 billion, 6 per cent of global turnover (the Australian economy is only about 1 per cent of the world economy).

Compare this figure with annual figures from the real economy and it quickly becomes clear that the Australian dollar has developed a life of its own. The Australian economy is about $1.3 trillion a year, or the equivalent of five days trading. Australia's yearly trade is only $600 billion, less than three days trading.

Australia's total investment in the US is only $410 billion and its foreign direct investment a mere $97 billion. America's total investment in Australia is $555 billion and foreign direct investment $122 billion.

If economic activity or investment patterns cannot account for Australian dollar activity, what does impel it? The answer is perception among financial traders, who like the Australian dollar because it is seen as safe and the market is deep (liquid), which means it is easy to make transactions. To these investors economic and financial indicators are important, but only as signs to be read for the placing of bets.

The Australian dollar, for example, is often used as a proxy for investing in China. It is not possible to invest directly in China because the yuan is fixed, not freely floated, so traders instead buy Australian dollars reasoning that the Australian economy is heavily linked to China's. They then make punts that mostly come in the form of derivatives (activity 'derived' from more conventional transactions).

To add to the sense that currency markets are a law unto themselves, the markets are also being computerised at high speed — micro-seconds or even nano-seconds — through the use of algorithms, a practice known as high frequency trading. This has the effect of amplifying movements and sometimes increasing volatility.

This disconnecting of finance from what it is supposed to be facilitating has consistently caused havoc. The global financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent Euro crisis are only the most recent instances of the harm that can be done. It is a consequence of the pernicious ideology of financial deregulation, which has shifted the power to set the rules of money from governments to traders and private banks.

Harm can come in different forms; it can lead to an over valued as well as an under valued currency. The irony of Australia's situation is that because Federal government debt is low, the banks are solvent and the Australian economy has strong economic links with China, currency traders are interpreting the signs as bullish and are driving up the currency. This is impeding Australia's capacity to compete with its exports, and is likely to cause lasting harm to Australia's manufacturing, education and tourism sectors.

Short of identifying the relevant finance traders (or algorithms) and hunting them down, little can be done about the Australian dollar's strength. Reducing interest rates further might have a marginal effect, but the AAA rating will remain. Australians will simply have to get used to the fact that their economic destiny is

partially ruled by financial traders in New York, London and Tokyo. That is the price of financial deregulation.

Election year food, sex and meaning

BOOK CHAT

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

***The Best Australian Essays 2012* (Ramna Koval, editor). Black Inc Books, 2013.**

Barry:

Writers are a breed apart. Brave, masochistic souls. I say masochistic because there's a degree of suffering in wrestling with words and ideas.

Not so much suffering for art, for me at any rate; rather it's a case of having to 'suffer the little children' in pursuit of time and oxygen enough to write. Mid-draft I'm perched atop my stool to commune with essays and essayists, having extricated myself from playing with Transformers and the six-year-old son and heir, and delicately talking down the spouse and Ms Nine from a violin practice-induced skyscraper discourse over vibrato.

Blink once, I'm baptising dishes; then there's swimming lessons, playdate chauffeuring, grocery shopping, visits to the doctor and a pharmacy, paying tradies and vacuuming away their detritus. Blink twice and the sun is in full retreat. It hits me that I'm yet to indulge in breakfast, lunch or dinner. Thankfully the selections on offer in *The Best Australian Essays 2012*, from 27 intrepid scribes, are like so many cakes.

And it's while deeply engorged in the everyday obsessions covered — food, sex, meaning, joy — that I found this volume's greatest joy: Maria Tumarkin's 'Sublime and Profane: Our Contemporary Obsession With Food'. Educational and provocative for a non-foodie. Tumarkin posits spiritual, psychological, sociological and sundry other reasons for chefs being our new rock gods; the shared meal reborn as the pinnacle of being human.

I savour liquored meditations on mortality from Louis Nowra, and Tim Flannery's inestimable 'The Naked Critic: Memories of Robert Hughes' (the much-mourned Hughes drunk as a Lord and as naked as envy). I relish the high art of quality reportage, Ã la John Bryson's 'The Murder of Azaria', with its aching examination of the trials and tribulations of a family cruelled by fate, intolerance and hungry canines.

Heavy fare such as the deposing of a PM (James Button vs Rhys Muldoon) and David Marr's live vivisection of a prominently-eared opposition leader ('Political Animal') is interspersed with dashes of wisdom and wit from Helen Garner, Gideon Haigh, J. M. Coetzee and Clive James etc.

Great writing nourishes. Quality muses prompt tears, ribald laughter, recognition and, significantly, thought itself. There's good reason why many of us huddle at night, turning pages. Nodding to ourselves, while salvaging a cup of

kindness, unclaimed treats from the fridge and the spouse's Christmas chocolate cache.

The kids are asleep. Grab your copy and settle in. Over a fevered fortnight's time theft, I've sucked the marrow out of Nick Bryant's take on Gina Rinehart. Plucked the pith from Kim Mahood's sorrowfully funny dissertation on 'Kartiya' (white workers in desert Aboriginal communities). It will take time to digest fully.

These diverse essays will leave you sated. Expect to consume same over an extended period, with intermittent mental bloating. My compliments to chef de cuisine, editor Romana Koval.

Jen:

In *The Age* recently, political philosopher Tim Soutphommasane drew on the influence of Michel de Montaigne, a 16th-century aristocrat, who — for fun, no less — invented the essay as a literary form.

'Few (in Montaigne's *Essays*) attempt to explain anything scientifically,' Soutphommasane writes. 'Montaigne regarded his work as 'a book with a wild and eccentric plan', which is to say it was one without a plan at all.'

Well, as Barry reminds us above, this is a fitting allegory for life, too; especially when the needs of a young family outweigh our own. As a working mother of two small boisterous boys I know just how difficult it is to find a chink in the chaos. Even for a moment, let alone for the duration of a chapter.

And so it was that a book with 'no plan at all' seemed right up my alley (yes, *The Best Australian Essays 2012* arrives here on my recommendation).

But make no mistake. A book with no plan is not the same as a book with no purpose. 'These are essays full of insight and wit, on the subjects that moved us in 2012,' writes Koval in her introduction. 'When looking for wisdom, it's a good idea to range widely.'

I'm with Barry, there's something undeniably moreish about Flannery's musing on the late art critic Robert Hughes, Bryant's incisive reportage on our 'richest woman' Gina Rineheart and Mahood's moody take on what it really means to be a white man marooned in our sunburnt centre.

Then there are those essays that leave an indelible imprint. Just what is it to be human? they pose. And what better way to tackle this than to dissect our often ambiguous relationship with animals. In her quiet, almost perilously underwhelming way, Garner leaves me devastated with 'Red Dog: A Mutiny', Romy Ash finds amnesty in the hunt and Anna Krien leads me through the Indonesian abattoirs. And she does not let go.

Bryson's reappraisal of the all-too-iconic Azaria Chamberlain case and L. M. Robertson's terrible retelling (reliving?) of being encouraged to 'assist' a miscarriage following the awful realisation that the baby she is carrying is so

severely handicapped that it would not live long after birth, leave me somehow clawing for breath. In both, mother and child loom large and sympathetic. It's a sucker punch to the heart.

We get two perspectives of a man felled by his own ego and, literally, rediscovering his humility. In Button's 'We Need to Talk about Kevin' and Muldoon's 'A Coup by Any Other Name' we're presented with an ex prime minister stripped bare. This is Kevin Rudd hurt, betrayed and, yes, completely human — a man so blindsided that he seems to almost fade between the lines.

Marr's withering piece on Tony Abbott completes the political trinity. These writers manage the impossible: they have me feeling sorry for politicians. Well, almost. I'm not sure if such magnanimity is allowed in an election year. But what a pleasure to discover those grey Canberran corridors harbouring such a chiaroscuro of emotion.

This collection doesn't just showcase great intelligence and humour. If the point of an essay is to 'open a conversation with a reader by the expression of what's on the essayist's mind', as Soutphommasane argues, then what we have here is dissemination writ large. Let the conversations begin.

Migrants and big bank theory

ECONOMICS

Andrew Hamilton

There is often a natural antipathy between the financial sector and the community sector. If you give the dog a bone, say the money men, he will only rub it in dirt and bury it. If you give the bank a bone, say the community workers, it will charge you interest on the transaction.

But sometimes we are nudged to reconsider our reflexive prejudices. A joint venture between a bank and a community organisation , which offers opportunities to African immigrants in Australia, provokes more constructive reflection on the relationship between banks and the community sector. Whereas the engines of a capitalist economy tend to commodify human values, this venture appears to humanise commodities like money.

The project is designed to help African Australians find work in the business sector. It arose out a conversation between a staff member from each organisation about the difficulty experienced by many Africans in finding employment commensurate with their qualifications. The bank culture supports community involvement generously; the community organisation works within the African community. So the project could begin.

In the project successful applicants are placed for six months in an intensive program of paid work in an area for which they are qualified. Staff members of the bank assist them by directing, mentoring and supporting them. By the end of the program they will be able to apply for positions, participate in interviews and enter employment knowing that they understand the Australian business culture. Of the over 90 people involved in the program over four years virtually all have subsequently found work, many at the bank.

A review of the project, commissioned by the bank, embodies the perceptions and expertise of the financial sector, and is challenging precisely for that reason. It describes the project in commercial terms, asking how the stakeholders benefited from it. The stakeholders are broadly defined, including the participants, both successful and unsuccessful, the sponsoring organisations, the participants' relatives, the African Australian community as a whole and the bank staff who supported the applicants.

The benefits to stakeholders were also broadly defined to include income, personal satisfaction, sense of self- worth, achievement of personal goals and connection. In the evaluation, which adopts a widely used methodology that included structured interviews with the stakeholders, these benefits are given a monetary value. By these calculations, the program returned over six dollars of

value for every one dollar invested.

Needless to say, the judgment of the project by the two institutions involved (the National Australia Bank and Jesuit Social Services) was favourable, with the African Australian community wistfully hoping that more businesses will offer projects conferring such great benefits.

The idea of giving a financial accounting of intangible qualities such as job satisfaction and changes in family relationships or in self-worth is provoking. It seems presumptuous to put a cash value on qualities of human experience and development that are priceless. It could entrench commodification.

But in practice the results of this accounting call into question many uncritical assumptions made about what matters in government and corporations. They reveal, for example, how thin and misleading as a basis for public policy is an accounting that covers only transactions in which money changes hands.

To leave out of accounting, and so out of policy making, the benefit conferred by open space, by unpaid work in the home and by the satisfaction derived from voluntary work, seriously distorts the human economy. If public conversation is helped by representing within the budget the value of such things in monetary terms, the end would surely justify the means.

The evaluation also provokes reflection on what matters in commercial enterprises. The bank staff involved in this project were clearly great beneficiaries. So was the bank, through the breadth of experience, the fresh understanding of society and the renewed enthusiasm gained by the staff members.

This benefit argues against the myopic view, commonly expressed in the financial sector before the GFC, that a corporation’s only responsibility is to its shareholders. Only if it looks to the welfare of all those who play a part in its work will it thrive in the longer run.

The success of the project also suggests how important connection is for any society or business. The connections made with the bank clearly benefited those who participated, their families, their mentors in the bank and the bank itself.

Large enterprises often want their employees to have a strong and narrow focus on their central business. But this project suggests that the broader the connections, interests and allegiances of the bank staff, the more they can build within the bank a shared understanding of the community on which the bank itself depends. A social awareness is not merely an adornment of a bank. It promotes its flourishing.

I still cavil at giving human values monetary value. But the practice clearly has its advantages. And, after all, Jesus advised his followers to make friends with the mammon of iniquity, even as they thread their microscopic path through the eye of a needle.

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Time runs out for idiot slavers

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Lincoln* (M). Director: Steven Spielberg. Starring: Daniel Day-Lewis, Sally Field, Tommy Lee Jones, David Strathair, James Spader. 150 minutes**

Abraham Lincoln (Day-Lewis) sits on a raised platform at a shabby Union military encampment and absorbs the entreaties of two uniformed black soldiers. One wearily but articulately notes the inevitable but slow progress of change: if today white Americans can tolerate black soldiers, in 100 years they might embrace a black general. You can almost hear the unspoken denouement to this speech: 'One day we might even have a black president!'

They are joined by two white soldiers; Lincoln groupies who saunter over wide-eyed and stuttering. They begin to recite the Gettysburg address to him: already, it seems, Lincoln is on the cusp of legend. This impression is cemented as the black soldier picks up the speech's refrain. Lincoln watches him depart with an expression of quiet awe, as if the encounter has reminded him he is a man with his hands on the levers of destiny.

Spielberg's *Lincoln* is more a political drama than a biography — split in two it would have sat nicely as an HBO miniseries. It covers the final months of Lincoln's life, focusing on his efforts to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution to abolish slavery; a centrally moral endeavor requiring political maneuvering and even underhandedness to achieve. Tony Kushner's screenplay maps these intricacies deftly and compellingly.

And yet, a confession: while acknowledging Spielberg's skill as a filmmaker, I tend to find his serious films overly contrived in a way that is distracting. This is true even of the relatively subdued *Lincoln*. I say this against the weight of critical consensus: the excellent American critic Richard Alleva, for example, was moved by the humanity captured in a scene where Lincoln suffers a reprimand from a grouchy colleague, then seconds later is seen clasping the man's hand as they receive bad news. But I find this kind of laboured juxtaposition irksome.

The same could be said of the aforementioned opening scene. The unlikely scenario of these young men having already memorised the Gettysburg address and standing in the rain to regurgitate their adored president's own words back to him seems a most artificial way to illustrate the reverence in which Lincoln is held. These kinds of stylistic flourishes lend *Lincoln* a dull sentimentality that belies its great screenplay and excellent performances.

The performances in fact are the best reason to see the film. Day-Lewis, who deserves the Oscar that is coming his way for his embodiment of Lincoln, is all charisma and nuance, capturing the grandfatherly manner, the gangliness, the subtle fierceness, even a hint of megalomania as he looms like a storm cloud over

his just cause. Field, as Abe's sickly and passionate wife Mary, acts her heart out to keep up, but in the end simply *over*acts.

Among various fine performances (Strathairn and Spader stand out in serious and comedic roles respectively) Jones steals the show. As Thaddeus Stevens, leader of the Radical Republicans and an abrasive Lincoln ally, he gets to deliver the most cutting ripostes to their Democrat rivals, and brings a fiery passion to the quest to end slavery. His reaction when the Amendment is finally passed is also the film's most touching moment.

A post script: *Lincoln* forms an unlikely pair with another current film about slavery. The witty dialogue and exaggerated cathartic violence of Quentin Tarrantino's *Django Unchained* are anchored by soulful performances from Jamie Foxx as the freed slave Django, and Christoph Waltz as the enlightened bounty hunter who helps him to free his enslaved wife from a sadistic plantation owner (Leonardo DiCaprio). Where *Lincoln* hums with quiet patriotic fervour, *Django* is pure irreverence and a vicious 'up yours' to the idiocy of white supremacy.

In the halls of Cambodia's Auschwitz

POLITICS

Nik Tan

Duch slouches in his chair, his watery eyes keenly absorbing the next question from the defence. He faces the chamber made up of three judges; the joint prosecutorial team; civil parties; the defence team and security guards. He thanks the presiding judge after each question.

We are at the Extraordinary Chambers of the Cambodian Court (ECCC) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A hybrid United Nations-Cambodia court established in 2003 with a mandate to try serious crimes committed during the Khmer Rouge regime. This is just the second case brought to trial.

You wouldn't find Tuol Sleng (or S21) if you didn't know where to look. The genocide museum is embedded in the inner suburbs of Phnom Penh, an innocuous, decrepit school building. We saw photos of Duch as we wandered numb with horror through the archives of Khmer suspects who were interrogated and tortured at S21, then driven to Cheoung Ek on the outskirts of Phnom Penh and slaughtered.

It is not Duch's trial. Sentenced for life in an earlier trial, and on appeal, he is appearing as a witness in this trial of three former leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled Cambodia between 1975—1979: Nuon Chea, aged 84; Khieu Samphan, aged 79; and Ieng Sary, aged 85. Behind the row of defence lawyers three bald, bowed heads are just visible from the public gallery.

The photos of Duch at S21 are from the period; in one he stands tall among a small group of staff in the early days of the prison. In another, he sits at his desk, pen raised, white teeth flashing in the grey scale image.

In the courtroom, Duch continues to carefully respond to the questions of the American defence lawyer for Nuon Chea. It is his seventh day on the witness stand, having spent the previous six days being examined by the prosecution. The proceedings ramble along, stumbling over procedure and the challenges of a complex case of allegations of war crimes and genocide committed over three decades ago, in Khmer, French and English.

A school before 1975, S21 became the central interrogation and torture point for enemies suspected of undermining the revolution. The genocide museum documents the extensive use of torture to solicit confessions from prisoners. As head of S21, Duch was responsible for ensuring that these confessions, at times running to hundreds of pages, satisfied the requirements of his political masters.

A teacher before the revolution, Duch made annotations in red pen on confessions asking interrogators to elicit information or detail from prisoners, usually through torture.

Slowly the defence draws out an important point — Duch today cannot accurately state the sum of his knowledge of the apparatus of the Khmer Rouge regime during its reign. His understanding in the intervening decades has been developed through extensive reading about the state he served.

We survey the classrooms and open corridors at S21, maintained in the state in which it was found in 1979. At first glance, the only striking aspect of S21 is the razor wire descending on the outside of the corridors — placed there to stop prisoners attempting suicide.

The classrooms are bare save for two remnants: an iron bed with metal manacles still attached, and a grainy image of the last prisoner found in each room. The photos, taken by the Vietnamese upon arrival, show grotesque corpses left rotting by Duch and his staff days before. The bodies of these prisoners were still bloody and mangled, smashed in anguished positions at death.

At S21, hundreds of terrified Khmers are frozen in black and white film, their images at the point of capture displayed to the world. Though not comparable in scale, they resonate with the jumbled thousands of spectacles, suitcases and assorted shoes catalogued and stored at Auschwitz. Men, women and children look back through time from hell on earth.

At the ECCC, Arendt's Eichmann comes to mind. Duch appears caught between his own arguments. On the one hand, his reasons are exculpatory: he was a middling bureaucrat of limited influence trapped by fear. At his own trial, Duch said he was 'both a hostage and an actor in a criminal regime'.

On the other hand, his language is embedded with the revolutionary zeal of committed Khmer Rouge. Writer David Chandler describes Duch as an enthusiastic and proud administrator.

At the lunch adjournment, Nuon Chea's lawyer rises and requests the court allow his client to observe proceedings from the holding cell for the rest of the day. The presiding judge agrees. The three bald men rise slowly as the judges depart and head waveringly for the cells.

Critics of the ECCC question the point of dragging out the horrors of the past from elderly Khmer Rouge revolutionaries. S21 serves as a reminder of the need for restorative justice and the telling of the Khmer Rouge story. Duch is an important figure, as both a middle man and genocidaire, key to understanding and preventing future atrocities in Cambodia and across the world.

Case 002 of the Extraordinary Chambers of the Cambodian Court (ECCC) continues.

NSW Labor's diseased ethics

POLITICS

Tony Smith

The Daily Telegraph
ICAC'S STAR WITNESS IN THE BOX
Obeid says he's just a family man, but phone-tap exposes...
SINS OF THE FATHER

When the latest round of investigations began into alleged corrupt conduct by former state ministers in New South Wales, counsel assisting the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) inquiry described the worst case of rorting since the days of the Rum Corps.

While such comparisons seem extreme, they raise the possibility that Sydney's frontier style colonial history so riddled the state with corrupt cultures that the political disease remains debilitating after two centuries.

As former ministers front an inquiry into decisions allegedly taken to favour political friends, the corruption disease seems to be confined to the NSW Labor Party. Such unethical behaviours led to the routing of Labor at the 2011 election. But a federal Labor MP from NSW has been arrested amid allegations of abuse of power both as a parliamentarian and as a union official. So, are other states immune?

Research suggests that voters in NSW, more than in other states, trust federal rather than state government. This implies a greater mistrust of state politicians in NSW than elsewhere. However, it should be remembered that while specific acts of maladministration might be punishable in law, much of the behaviour that sustains corrupting cultures is not.

Too many politicians act without conscience by lying, rejecting fair criticism and using insulting language. They generate public cynicism, make public affairs distasteful and encourage cultures devoid of ethical understanding. These characteristics are not confined to NSW Labor politicians.

Parliamentary scholar John Uhr in his book *Terms of Trust* noted that governments see ethics narrowly. Their priority is to ensure that the behaviour of parliamentarians is disciplined enough to guarantee that citizens trust them. Uhr says a political ethics regime should foster personal responsibility, and only when responsibility fails should accountability mechanisms be used.

In his *Quarterly Essay* 'Breach of Trust: Truth, Morality and Politics', moral philosopher Raimond Gaita draws a similar distinction. It is not that we need a little bit of ethics enforcement occasionally; we need to demand that politics be treated always as an activity of honour and that honourable behaviour is essential. Managerialism and the separation of ends and means are not conducive to honour.

The Labor Party's ethical problems are deep seated. National Executive member Tony Sheldon criticised the 'cockroaches' of the NSW Right faction who thrive on

corruption and blamed a culture of managerialism. NSW parliamentary leader John Robertson's response to the ICAC proceedings was to propose a tighter income disclosure regime for Labor MPs. Unfortunately this post-hoc approach is typically managerial.

Sheldon suggested that Prime Minister Gillard was loyal to Labor values and that she could lead genuine party reform. Again it is unfortunate that Gillard's tenure has been characterised by the very managerialism Sheldon says is Labor's problem. Labor has managed policies formulated by its predecessor in numerous areas including Aboriginal affairs, importation of labour and incarceration of asylum seekers.

While some Liberal parliamentarians refused to support some extreme Howard Government policies, Labor MPs have accepted meekly the basing of American weapons here and a minister's insult to welfare recipients when she claimed that she could happily live on the allowance paid them.

Sheldon blamed the NSW Right for Labor's woes. The Right has appealed to the party's head by reasoning that ideological purity is useless without electoral success. Once the party adopted pragmatism as its first principle — possibly at the 1984 National Conference — policy debates lost meaning.

The ideological vacuum was filled by enslavement to poll driven politics and media images. The Left struggled to retain its influence and Labor's heart vanished.

The architects of this approach might claim that the party had to change or face disaster. But under their influence, Labor embraced economic restructuring, the privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank, deregulation of telephone services, emasculation of the CSIRO, exportation of jobs, abandonment of free education, destruction of railways, and de-unionisation of both the party and the general workforce.

When public assets are alienated, the public has good reason to feel betrayed.

When Gillard announced that a federal election would be held in September, Opposition Leader Abbott said that the campaign would be about trust. One third of the House of Representatives seats are in New South Wales, so federal Labor will hope that local troubles do not influence voters unduly.

The ethical credibility of the Coalition parties is also questionable. For example, the O'Farrell Government's decision to allow recreational shooting in National Parks is a cynical manoeuvre to secure upper house votes. It seems unlikely though that voters will punish mere cynicism when they have the sitting ducks at ICAC available.

It will be an interesting contest as luminaries of the Labor Right try to convince voters that they should reject Abbott, despite their growing affinity with his policy leanings and political style.

Intervening in Israel

POLITICS

Philip Mendes

Recently I visited Israel for the first time in 25 years. Back in 1988, I spent five months in the Holy Land staying with family and friends, and also living on a kibbutz. At the time, I was a brash and uncompromising proponent of the two-state solution, a viewpoint which was considered extreme if not completely beyond the pale in the then very conservative Australian Jewish community.

In contrast, the two state perspective was considered quite mainstream within Israeli society. It was not surprising that only five years later Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation signed the Oslo Peace Accord which was expected to produce both an independent Palestinian State alongside Israel, and genuine Israeli-Palestinian peace and reconciliation. Sadly it produced neither.

The Israeli and international Jewish debate has changed significantly since that time. Most mainstream Israelis claim to support two states in principle. So do most Australian and other Diaspora Jewish leaders. But we still seem no closer to actually implementing a two-state solution that reconciles Israel's desire for peace and security, and the Palestinian demand for national independence.

Personally, I have become far more pessimistic about the prospects for a two-state outcome, and increasingly critical of Palestinian as well as Israeli barriers to conflict resolution.

Compared to 1988 my trip to Israel this time was short and rushed. I spent two days in and around Tel Aviv visiting close family and friends, then participated in a three day workshop at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, any visit to Israel is a valuable reminder of the enormous diversity of the population.

It includes dark-skinned Ethiopian Jews, Jews from Arab countries and North Africa known as Sephardim or Mizrahim, Jews from the former Soviet Union, Jews from Anglo-Saxon countries such as my relatives, and the older group of Ashkenazi immigrants from early-mid 20th century Europe. There is also an enormous difference between the mostly secular Jews of Tel Aviv, and the ultra-orthodox Jews that reside in Jerusalem and some other cities. The Arab community also includes a variety of groups including Druze, Bedouins, Muslims and Christians.

The political debate inside Israel plays out very differently to that within Diaspora Jewish communities. Many of the academics and students I spoke to at the conference leaned to the dovish Left, and were strong proponents of two states. One young student of Sephardi background commented: 'We are Arab Jews. We share the same food and language. Israel should utilise our commonality

in culture to make peace with the Palestinians.'

These type of views need to be heard and discussed outside Israel including particularly by those BDS advocates who claim to be supporters of the Palestinians.

Other Israelis were more sceptical of the prospects for change. One Australian-born friend, who is relatively free of ideological preconceptions, suggested that most Israelis are willing to consider two states in principle, but noted that we have been speaking about the same political issues for 20 years, with no concrete outcome.

This contradiction between philosophy and action seems to be reflected in the Israeli election results. Only a small minority of Israelis voted either for parties that unequivocally rejected two states (e.g. The Jewish Home Party gained 12/120 seats), or parties that unconditionally support a Palestinian State (the left Zionist Meretz Party gained six seats, and the three Arab Parties gained 11 seats totalling 17/120).

The vast majority of seats (91/120) went to parties which are either unsympathetic to two states but don't discount the possibility, or which support two states in principle but provide little practical guide to achieving this outcome. In short, the election produced a deadlocked outcome.

Personally, I believe some form of long-term international intervention or trusteeship in the West Bank will be necessary to overcome this deadlock. The Israelis need to be convinced that a withdrawal from the West Bank will not simply lead to a repeat of the Gaza debacle whereby Hamas seize control of any territory ceded to launch attacks on Israeli civilians. And the Palestinians need to be reassured that both Israeli soldiers and settlers will actually vacate sufficient territory to facilitate a genuine act of national self-determination.

Diabetica and other poems

POETRY

Les Murray

Eating from the dictionary

Plucked chook we called Poultry, or Fowl,

a meat rare in our kitchens, crepe-skinned

for festivity or medicine.

As Chooks alive, they were placid

donors of eggs and mild music.

Perches and dark gave them sleep.

Then came the false immigration

of millions crying in tin hell-ships

warmed all night by shit-haloed bulbs,

the coarsest species, re-named Chicken,
were fresh meat for mouths too long corned.

Valleys south of ours deigned to farm them.

When our few silver-pencilled Wyandottes

went down with a mystery plague,

their heads trailing back on their wings

no vet could diagnose them.

Chickens don't live long enough

to get sick, laughed battery keepers.

Much later, when all our birds were dead

a boy of eleven who kept

name breeds said they had suffered

spinal worm. And was there a cure?

Sure. Garlic in their drinking water.

He named a small ration per year.

His parents vouched for him. No need.

We'd seen his small flock, and the trust

that tottered round him on zinc feet.

All of half way

i.m. Sue Ridley

As I was going to Coleraine

a man in Bewleys said to me

I wouldn't wear that green cap up there

if I was you, and I snatched it off —

colours aren't yet mortal in Australia.

It was only our equestrian team cap

that you had given me, but I took

the warning, folded, to Coleraine.

There I found hospitality

and Bushmills and the Giant's Causeway.

No bush near the Mills

but a coracle sea and the Giant's columns

massing on out, a basalt grandstand

of rain-cup pillars, crimped like Rubiks
from cooling out of their rock floor

all of half way from America.

O.K. primavera lips

The coral tree grows

in cowyards and old sties.

Thorny, tan in winter

it bears scarlet bracts,

red lipstick crescents.

Of Earth's most spoken word,

okay, just one suggested origin

doesn't sound far-fetched:

Only Kissing. From saucy times.

Only kissing, Pa, O.K.?

In fertile soil

coral trees pout lips

out of their twigs, before greening.

Ours didn't, until drugged with

superphosphate. Now it grips

itself with carmine nails

to the height of wisteria

that cascades rain-mauve

down wonga vines and gum trees

and the Chinese tallows

ticketed with new green.

Diabetica

A man coughs like a box

and turns on yellow light

to follow his bladder

out over the gunwale

of his bed. He yawns upright

trying not to dot the floor

with little advance pees.

The clock on the night-stand

biting off an hour he hates.

Sugar, the sick caterer

managed with unzipping needles.

Blood syrop, shortener of legs,

ichor of the bishop

whose name is on a school

because he could not beget.

Like many milk-blind scholars

and farmers short of breath

above billions in sweet graves.

Climate change and Australia's weather on steroids

ENVIRONMENT

Paul Collins

On ABC Radio National's Summer Breakfast, John Doyle interviewed Foreign Minister Bob Carr, who was attending the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Carr said that what struck him most at Davos was the consensus about global warming, with even Christine Lagarde of the International Monetary Fund saying it is 'the biggest economic problem for this century'.

'The time we've wasted in Australia accommodating climate change denial is quite striking and contrary to the way the rest of the world is veering on this issue,' said Carr. He added that '*The Economist* magazine referred to climate change as "mankind's craziest experiment" saying that the world will face "a crippling financial burden" as we adjust to something we have "inflicted on ourselves via a colossal addiction to fossil fuels".'

Coming from Australia where climate change denial 'fills the air' he found it significant that world leaders see climate change as the world's most important concern 'even above the slow world economy'.

Doyle challenged him with the fact that we're the world's largest coal exporter. Seamlessly changing tack and now sounding more like Resources Minister Martin Fergusson, Carr said Australia is 'pricing carbon' and is leading a global push for 'a comprehensive network of agreements' on global warming.

Carr is too intelligent not to see the monumental inconsistency in government policy between exporting coal, a massive polluter when burned, and calls for action on global warming. But he is right that we have indulged 'denialism'. Perhaps it is because, as T. S. Eliot says in 'Burnt Norton', we 'cannot bear too much reality'.

While sceptics have said little about recent heatwaves in Australia, January's heavy snow storms in North America, Europe and even in Jerusalem have them in a lather denouncing the global warming scientific consensus and claiming that cold winters prove climate change theories are wrong, but ignoring the fact that 2012 was the hottest year on record in the US.

They claim it is all part of a natural variation in weather patterns and cite differences between the medieval warm period (MWP) and the little ice age (LIA).

What this argument misses is that climate change is all about averages. Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe says 'Climate is the average condition, weather is what we get.' And the overwhelming evidence is that the average global temperature is rising.

In Australia each decade since 1910 has been warmer than the last decade, and most of that warming has occurred since 1970. Australian daily average temperatures have increased by 0.9Â°c and overnight temperatures by 1.1Â°c since 1910. The US average temperature has risen 2Â° over the last 50 years.

In the middle of the early-January heat wave one commentator said Australian weather seemed to be ‘on steroids’. We see this in the increasing number of extreme weather events that are occurring globally. The snowstorms and blizzards of the northern hemisphere and heat waves of Australia as well as floods in Queensland are all symptoms of long-term climate change with the planet warming.

On the question of weather over the last 1000 or more years, sceptics claim we are now simply in another warming period like the MWP. The MWP lasted from about 750 to after 1200, followed by the LIA which lasted from the mid-14th to the early-19th century.

Scientific evidence indicates that from about 800 to 900 the Northern Hemisphere experienced the warmest period in the last 2000 years, with the exception of 1990 to 2012. This was followed by a slight cooling between 900 and 950, which was succeeded by a general warming until about 1100. Temperatures then slowly fell toward the advent of the LIA in about 1400.

Weather is never constant and the period 750—950 also saw at least eight incidents of extremely severe winters. The average increase in temperature in the MWP was not much more than 0.2Â° to 0.3Â°c whereas we’re facing an increase of 1Â°c over the last 100 years.

It’s good to know that at least one federal minister actually understands these issues even if he’s not going to do anything about coal exports.

Tax justice for unpaid carers

MONDAY COMMENT

Michael Mullins

Last week the political leaders were brawling over assistance payments for middle-class Australians. Tony Abbott promised 'tax justice for families' by removing indexation from the health insurance rebate and other payments. Julia Gillard considers this 'middle class welfare', but is determined to protect Labor's own generous school kids bonus. Abbott calls this a 'cash splash' that is 'totally unrelated to education' because it does not require recipients to submit receipts.

The spectacle of the leaders' fight for the votes of middle Australia dominated last week's media. Little attention was given to a Human Rights Commission report that highlighted the ongoing need to reward Australia's 5.5 million unpaid carers.

Investing in care: Recognising and valuing those who care focuses on the personal sacrifices of those who care for parents, in-laws, children, grandchildren and others in our community with disability, chronic illness or frailty due to old age. There is no 'tax justice' for these families, according to the Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick.

'The failure of our superannuation and taxation systems, alone, to recognise this contribution and provide a value for this unpaid work means that carers — mostly women — who have had long and repeated absences from paid employment, find they have negligible retirement savings and indeed, often retire in poverty.'

Unpaid carers include both parents and guardians of children as well as those who care for a family member or friend with disability, chronic illness or frailty due to older age. The first group are better provided for, although grandparents who spend many hours providing free childcare may beg to differ. It is the carers of those with lifelong chronic conditions who find themselves working as virtual slaves.

As the report points out, they lack the ability to provide for their own old age, when they may not be fortunate enough to have a family member to care for them. In addition, their activity does not fulfil the Catholic 'moral obligation to link industriousness as a virtue with *the social order of work,* which will enable man to become, in work, "more a human being" and not be degraded by it'.

The report's recommendations include legislation to assist unpaid carers with mechanisms like carer assessments to determine their support needs, and carer cards securing access to services and entitlements which would allow them to participate in society on a more equal footing. There is also a call for reform to the current system of retirement income and savings, including the age pension and superannuation that is currently tied to paid work.

It is disingenuous to talk about 'tax justice for families', or to be providing a school kids bonus that does not require accountability, without also seeking to provide for those whose support needs fall outside established assistance mechanisms. It's time that voters showed signs that they are prepared to reward genuine leaders more than those whose handouts are politically calculated.

Teaching literature to rock stars

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

He was tall, loose-limbed and dark-haired, with a blue-eyed gaze whose piercing intensity was mitigated by the amiable, good humoured look to him, and a generous smile that softened his Heathcliff-like mien. He appeared in the doorway of my Flinders University study one day in early February 1971 and asked if I was the one who was starting a course in Australian literature. His voice was soft and melodic, his accent beautifully Irish.

I told him yes, I was the one and invited him in. His name was Bernard Neeson, better known even then as 'Doc', although throughout the friendship that blossomed from that day, I always called him Bernard. His main interests were drama and film at both of which he excelled, but he was also an excellent literature student.

Beyond the academic walls, he was a member of the Moonshine Jug and String Band which came from nowhere, took the Adelaide music scene by storm, metamorphosed into the Keystone Angels and then, in 1975, after a string of successes, The Angels.

We saw a lot of each other in those years, until the fame of The Angels began to take him on national and international tours. He would often visit us in the Adelaide Hills and it was during one long conversation that he told me something of his early life.

Born in Belfast in 1947, he grew up amid the intensifying horrors of 'The Troubles' and, as a Catholic boy — he would in later years refer to himself as 'a recovering Catholic' — he witnessed and often fled from the brutality and naked violence for which that conflict became infamous. Eventually his parents emigrated and Bernard and his brothers grew up in Adelaide.

He was terrific with little kids and a great favourite of my young family. He would arrive unannounced to bring us signed copies — 'Doc Neeson/E=MCÂ²' — of Angels albums as they appeared. One day I asked him how long he intended to follow the rock'n'roll path, given that he was highly qualified in the fields of drama and film. His answer, with a wry smile, was, 'Till it peters out, Brian. Till it gives me up.'

Gradually, sadly, I lost track of him. His name would pop up at various times in the press and once, when the band came to Adelaide, I tried but failed to get tickets and left a note for him, but I think the world weary-looking custodian of the stage door didn't bother to pass it on.

In 2006 Flinders University celebrated its 40th anniversary. As a member of one of the organising committees, it was my job to contact as many of our past

students as I could find whose careers since their university days had been in music, writing, theatre or film. Many phone calls, emails, letters and enquiries later, I had found lots of them, including — to my delighted surprise — Doc Neeson.

We had a great phone conversation, catching up, reminiscing, joking, but he also told me about the accident that had changed his life. Stopping his car at a Sydney toll point, he was rear-ended by a truck. Severe neck and spinal injuries condemned him ever after to painkillers, treatments and permanently impaired mobility. He was in good spirits, though, and keen to come to the celebration.

The reunion of Flinders graduates from all over Australia and beyond was a great success. But Bernard Neeson didn't turn up. When I rang him a few days later, I spoke to a courteous but highly protective woman who told me that Doc was not available.

I didn't hear from him again and as in the past could only follow him from afar. I know from press reports that he became Bernard Neeson OAM on 1 January and is seriously ill. His son Kieran has said the family is 'optimistic that there will be a good outcome and that he will be able to keep writing songs and making people happy'.

It's hard to imagine the charismatic student-musician who would regularly visit us all those years ago being anything other than dynamic, but he has a testing time ahead and I, along with so many others, wish him well.

They were heady days at Flinders when Doc and the Moonshine Jug and String Band were packing them in round the town and all kinds of youthful talent — Scott Hicks, Nonie Hazlehurst, Richard Tipping, Greig ('H.G. Nelson') Pickhaver, Kerry Heysen, Steve Knapman — were either on campus or had just departed.

And they kept coming. Early in 1975 a memorable scene was repeated at my open office door. A young man came in and, apologising for interrupting, said, 'I've enrolled in your Australian lit. course. I hear you know a bit about Henry Lawson.' He was setting some Lawson poems to music and with two fellow students he was establishing a new band that would be devoted, he said, to Australian culture, history and politics.

His name was John Schumann. The band was Redgum.

But that's another story.

Election year narrative shaped by the common good

POLITICS

Fatima Measham

There was a surfeit of alliteration that broke out after the announcement of this year's election date. Prime Minister Julia Gillard called for 'policies and plans' to be at the centre of national discourse, instead of 'petty politics' and 'platitudes devoid of purpose'. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott reiterated the Coalition's 'positive plans' for a 'prosperous economy'. This preponderance of Ps reminded me of another p-word: personality.

It may seem to some that Australian political culture has only recently veered toward characterisations of political candidates, but we have always been led by such perceptions.

Somehow we need that face, the embodiment of the institution with which we are engaging. It explains why so much of public debate involves personalities and their supposed motives and machinations. Politics is reality-TV writ large, featuring the same fragile alliances, elimination challenges and ceremonial evictions.

Abbott's statement that the 2013 election is about trust is thus correct — but also redundant. Every election is ultimately about trust. The problem of who to trust, however, lies at the end of a string of other important questions. For as far as politics goes, there are no spectators; we are all on the same island.

What then would be the appropriate basis for trust? Are perceptions of trustworthiness grounded in objective measures such as policy costings, economic priorities, and ministerial calibre?

What does trustworthiness even mean in politics, where the best-intentioned people become compromised and governance involves many variables beyond control? How do we reconcile different objects of trust, when relying on our leaders to preserve the status quo is vastly different to counting on reform? How do we make sense of trust when policies are often crafted from two or more equally desirable but opposite things?

It seems the case that framing the vote in terms of trust has limitations, not least because we're talking about politicians here. It renders voters passive, as if their role in the political process begins and ends at the ballot. In democracies, we are called to be vigilant.

Such vigilance is not neutral. For it to have any meaning, for it to not be subject to the vagaries of industry and media, it must be tied to larger, non-dispensable values. This includes our sense of the common good.

It is a notion that has become almost quaint. 'What's in it for me?' drives so much election coverage that the electorate has become convinced that that is how political leaders are meant to be judged. Yet the common good — defined as the

sum of conditions that enable individuals and social groups to reach their full potential — underpins good governance. It demands long-sighted and reasonable decisions, tempered by compassion.

This ought to be the litmus test for policy as campaigns get underway.

Political parties hardly differ anyway, when it comes to touchstones such as education, health and employment. They all say that they plan to make Australians the best educated, best cared for, most prosperous people.

But the language and specificity of the policy detail must bear scrutiny. Are these details concrete and reviewable in the first place? Do they match complex realities? Are they consistent with the advice of non-partisan experts? Do they lend themselves to a coherent national vision? Most of all, does the policy serve the common good?

This question ought to frame the narrative for these elections. It deflates the character assassinations, entitlement mongering and prevarication. It invites conversation about what the common good looks like in Australia, where median wealth is high compared to the rest of the world, and inflation and interest rates low.

What are the ramifications of low government revenue, for instance, on our ability to put the common good into practice? What are the 'goods' we hold to be non-negotiable? How do we forge multi-partisan cooperation on these? Such conversations must have a place in the coming months.

It is in the nature of elections to be educative, highlighting as they do the things that we deem most important. If we — including the media — fail to take the opportunity to reorient away from our reality-TV absorptions and towards a more mature political discourse, then we may indeed deserve the governments we elect.

Evil is relative in the hunt for bin Laden

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Zero Dark Thirty* (MA). Director: Kathryn Bigelow. Starring: Jessica Chastain, Jason Clarke. 157 minutes**

The film opens in 2003 with the humiliation and torture of a prisoner believed to possess intelligence related to the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. It is a graphic and disturbing scenario, but not sensationalised. For an action thriller *Zero Dark Thirty* is the epitome of understatement; a slow-burner that charts the protracted hunt for the man who orchestrated 9-11. It dwells in dingy offices and dusty streets and shadowy hallways as characters converse and observe and interrogate and slowly traverse the sparse breadcrumb-trail of clues.

The film's emotional core is Maya (Chastain), a young CIA operative who has spent her entire brief career on the trail of bin Laden. She observes the aforementioned scene of torture with a mixture of horror and pragmatism. Noting that the chief interrogator Dan (Clarke) has not bothered with a balaclava, she discards her mask, too, realising that the prisoner will never be released to point fingers or exact revenge. She is human, but she knows the nature of the game, and accepts the brutal methodology as necessary to help combat a greater evil.

This kind of moral relativity dwells in the very bones of *Zero Dark Thirty*, but as with her previous film, the Iraq War thriller *The Hurt Locker*, director Bigelow maintains a fine sense of moral detachment. The film's tagline dubs it 'the story of history's greatest manhunt for the world's most dangerous man', but this is ironic. By the time of bin Laden's execution in 2011 he had been in hiding for some years, with limited ability to communicate with the outside world and greatly diminished influence. Arguably, his dangerousness was largely emblematic.

As years progress, Maya becomes increasingly myopic, almost monomaniacal. When a superior points out, quite reasonably, that there are more demanding priorities than finding bin Laden, such as preventing future attacks, she responds with such righteous anger that he backs down. Asked later how certain she is that a secretive suburban compound in Pakistan is Bin Laden's hideout she responds '100 per cent' — an overstatement for what is really an educated hunch. She asks the Navy SEALS who are sent to infiltrate said lair to 'kill him for me'.

Such bloodthirstiness reveals that revenge is at the heart of Maya's quest; revenge for the horror of September 11 crystalised around her own grief and anger for the death of a friend at the hands of a suicide bomber. We can either sympathise with her thirst for vengeance or recoil from it. Certainly the silent tears she sheds during the film's closing moments leave open to question whether revenge has enhanced or diminished her humanity. In this the film quietly calls into question what America itself achieved in exacting its vengeance.

Zero Dark Thirty doesn't contain the intermittent adrenaline spikes that helped sustain the equally low-key *The Hurt Locker*, but it is riveting; a finely crafted procedural that builds to a tense and shocking finale in which a pair of stealth helicopters loaded with Navy SEALS rumble into Abbottabad to raid bin Laden's hideout. Even here, its tantalising moral ambiguity does not let up: in the aftermath, the combatants themselves don't quite know what to make of what they have done. 'I killed the man on the third floor,' says one with a strained smile.

Pope sweet on tweets

MEDIA

Andrew Hamilton

Media reporting on church and papal statements usually highlights any critique they make of contemporary mores. So when the Pope speaks on social media the casual reader might expect to hear the musings of an old man out of touch and out of sympathy with modern technology. If so, Pope Benedict's recent statement for World Media Day may come as a surprise.

His treatment is surprisingly positive: he pays little attention to risks, focusing on possibilities. He stresses the capacity of social media to connect people affectively, to communicate information, to enable planning, and above all to encourage people to reflect on what matters deeply to them.

The focus on truth and love, of course, is the Pope's constant theme and the main business of churches. Given his recognition that social media are not simply a technological aid but are changing the way in which human beings communicate, the Church has a necessary interest in them.

With that high view of the possibilities of social media, Benedict points out that social media can encourage superficiality rather than depth. People are more often influenced by celebrity and emotion than by reasoned argument. As a result their engagement with social media fails to touch their deepest hopes and desires.

That leads him to ask what kind of communication does touch the deeper questions of human existence. He explains that it must be authentic, touching both heart and minds. Authenticity depends on being able to enter into dialogue, responding to questions and taking seriously the convictions and discoveries of others.

For Christians, the answers to questions about life, truth and meaning are sought in their faith in Jesus Christ. To communicate faith on the web requires deeply grounded faith, an instinctive understanding of the medium, and discernment in how to speak and be silent.

The Pope also describes some specific benefits of social media for Christians. They provide a network of support for Christians who feel isolated by an indifferent or actively hostile culture. They can also enable people to move beyond the community they build on the web to make direct connections, both personally and through events. He may have World Youth Day in mind.

The tone of Benedict's message is consistently encouraging. He does not regard social media as an obstacle to personal development, but describes it precisely as a medium through which people can give themselves to each other at many levels.

Nor does he deplore, but wrestles with the difficulty of communicating faith in such a democratic medium. His address is exploratory. He raises serious questions

about the human dimensions of the technology, which deserve attention from any readers who take seriously the search for depth in contemporary culture.

I found the address engaging also because it offers the reflections of an ageing scholar who is forced to grapple with a medium which is not favourable to scholarly conversation. It does not encourage carefully thought out speech based in strong, sustained argument.

The Pope responds in part as Plato responded to the Sophists who developed new educational technologies in order to meet the new demand for ready-made arguments. He sees social media as biased to the superficial, giving authority to celebrity and to rhetorical skill over sound argument and a concern for truth. But he does not see this as innate to the media but as a challenge to the people who use it.

In this respect he is less like Plato than Isocrates, who harnessed rhetoric to education in virtue.

Benedict’s address leaves important questions hanging. In other contexts when he speaks of commending faith he emphasises its transmission through the Apostles and their successors in the Catholic Church. This hierarchical form of communication guarantees its authenticity.

But so inherently democratic is the structure of social media that the Pope attributes the authority of those who commend anything through it to their personal authenticity. And this authenticity demands high rhetorical gifts — the ability to listen, to be intellectually and affectively available, and to allow character to emerge.

If it is true that social media will change the ways we communicate as human beings, we might expect that authenticity of this personal kind will be a condition for exercising authority anywhere, including among Christians as well. The challenge will then be to reconcile this with the claims of tradition. It sees faith as received, not made, and as supported by wisdom, learning and reasonable argument.

The importance of the Pope’s message is that he leaves the claims both of tradition and of personal authenticity in commending the Gospel to stand. Their reconciliation will be a long and complex task.

A fine teacher's urination solution

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

There was a girl named Linda in my first-grade class, at Saint John Vianney School in New York. She was shy and tall. She sat in front of me in the first row. We sat in alphabetical order, so that Accopardo was first seat first row and Wyzkyski was fifth row last seat. It was easiest that way for Sister Marie.

Sister Marie was also shy and tall. She was calm and tender and firm and maybe 20 years old. Most of us were six years old but four of us were five. Linda and I were among the fives. The sixes looked down on us as soon as they discovered we were five. They discovered this within the first week of school, and after that there were the sixes and then there were the fives. Why that should matter is a puzzle, but it did.

One day, after a particularly turbulent recess in the playground during which all four of the fives had suffered some indignity from the sixes, we trooped back into our classroom. In Sister Marie's class you were expected to carry the detritus of your lunch back to your desk, so she could be sure you had indeed taken sustenance; but this day Sister noticed that Linda's lunchbox was empty. No sandwich wrapper, no cookie crumbs, no apple core.

Sister inquired; Linda sat mute. Sister pressed, gently, leaning down to Linda at her tiny desk; Linda covered her face with her hands and wept. Sister realised that Linda had been robbed of her lunch by the sixes, and had not eaten at all, and had been humiliated by the theft, and was more humiliated now by public revelation.

Sister straightened up and stared at each of the sixes, her face unreadable, but just as she began to speak, Linda sobbed even harder, and a rill of urine trickled from the back of her seat and pooled on the floor between the first and second rows.

For a moment there was a ruckus as some children shouted and leapt away from the pool but then Sister said *Silence! Seats!* — not shouting, but so firmly that everyone sat down in silence — and then she appointed Meghan to lead Linda to the girls' room and then to the school nurse.

Meghan held out her arm just like a gentleman does in old movies and Linda took her arm and they stepped over the puddle and left the room. You could hear Linda sobbing all the way down the hall.

All teachers admit their students will remember very little, if anything, of the curriculum they were taught. But teachers offer context, manners of approach, and the subtle suggestion that a cheerful humility before all problems is the only way toward a useful solution. What teachers really teach is not a subject, but ways to be.

Sister Marie was a fine teacher. We sat silently for a long moment, after Linda left, and then Sister sent a boy to the men's room and a girl to the girls' room to get all the paper towels they could carry. They came back with one million paper towels. Sister gave each one of the sixes a handful of towel and they mopped up the puddle, one by one, in alphabetical order, by rows. They did this silently.

When they were finished Sister handed each of the remaining fives a handful of towel also, and we also knelt and scrubbed the brilliant floor. No one said a word. The sixes then collected our paper towels and put them in the trash. A little while later Linda and Meghan came back and sat down and we started into arithmetic.

I never forgot this lesson, and I bet that no one there that day ever did either, neither the sixes nor the fives.

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Post 9-11 demon words too simple for Africa

POLITICS

Binoy Kampmark

Characterisations in international relations provide a false neatness to an untidy world. The term 'freedom fighter' can morph with effortless ease into rudderless 'militants' whose only purpose is to inflict terror. 'Dictatorships' become police authorities keeping an eye on 'fundamentalism'. 'Fundamentalists' in turn can be shape-changers. The use of such terms is strategic and tactical, and not merely a matter of semantics.

The violence in Algeria at the siege of the natural gas facility at In Amenas was deadly, resulting in the deaths of 37 individuals. Immediately, the demon word of post-9-11 was employed — al-Qaeda. The hand of this complex and international franchise was in it, exercised through the local group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb .

The *Wall Street Journal* on 21 January noted sources claiming the siege was affected by weapons 'pilfered from Libyan stockpiles'. Broad brushstroke terminology is employed: the hostage taking signalled 'an escalated threat of African terrorism against international targets that the US and other governments are struggling to neutralise'.

The imprecision of the language is unmistakable: 'African terrorism' threatens 'US' and non-African interests. Africa, as it has been in the history of colonial interests, is a projection; a dark, foreboding continent of interest to foreign powers, whose own interests come first. Strikingly, the instability that has resulted in Algeria and Mali can, to some extent, be attributed to the end of the Gaddafi regime, occasioned by Western intervention.

Pundits of international relations now find that singling out Gaddafi as the next cartoon gangster for removal was good propaganda but bad policy. No-fly zones initiated to protect civilians ended up assisting anti-Gaddafi forces who have proven unruly and poor in governance. At the behest of an Anglo-French-US operation, ill-understood fighters and factions have created a security vacuum that threatens considerable parts of the African continent.

It would be a mistake though to see the disturbances in Algeria and Mali as having a purely international dimension. Local specifics are ignored. As Patrick Cockburn, a long time student of Middle East and African affairs has pointed out , an organisation like al-Qaeda thrives on the false assumption that local disputes have international import. Provocations such as those in Algeria are 'presented as a threat to the rest of the world'.

The same goes for the disputes in Mali. As Cockburn asserts, 'Local disputes — in this case between the Tuareg of northern Mali and the government in the

capital, Bamako — become internationalised.' While police actions to restore order might be initially welcomed, the presence of a great power can prove destructive in the long run.

This is the danger France finds itself in with its response to Mali's instability, executed with UN Security Council blessing. The intervention again threatens to entrench European and US interests in the region to fight a complex array of militants.

This is not to suggest that those in Ansar al-Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and AQIM in West Africa have noble aims — indeed, there is much to suggest these groups are despised by the local populace. But it is also dangerous to view external interventions as surgical and altruistic. A group such as AQIM can hardly be designated a threat to France let alone Europe, having limited its activities to the drug trade and lucrative hostage taking.

The French fear Islamic militancy and theocracy, but have ignored the fact that the Tuareg revolt, led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, is nationalist in nature. Furthermore, AQIM, with its origins in the vicious Algerian civil conflict of the 1990s, was tolerated in northern Mali to keep Tuareg in check.

It has been conveniently ignored for the most part that the Mali government for many years shared in the ill-gotten gains of AQIM's drug and hostage operations. Now, the goal posts are being changed again, with the return of Tuareg soldiers previously in the employ of Gaddafi's forces.

This overview merely skims the surface. As *Al Jazeera* journalist May Ying Welsh has shown , the region contains a highly diverse range of interests and conflicts. Ansar al-Dine consists of Tuaregs and has a religious bent, but is careful to avoid engaging other Tuareg groups for tribal reasons. They deny links with al-Qaeda. As Welsh's piece shows, simplify at your own peril.

The response from Washington is troubling. It has threatened to expand its counter-terrorist blueprint used in the Middle East to parts of Africa. The use of drones against militants has not been ruled out. Nor can it be ruled out that the Mali intervention triggered the seizure of hostages at In Amenas. Every good turn deserves another.

Behind the labels of undifferentiated militancy lie dangerous consequences. The mistake on this occasion has been to equate local troubles with international significance. Both the branches of the al-Qaeda franchise, and Western powers, are playing on this theme. And both, in doing so, have created enormous suffering.

Gillard's election year crash course

POLITICS

John Warhurst

This summer has been the lull before the storm where federal politics is concerned. Summer in an election year is usually a period of not much political action but lots of serious thinking and recharging of batteries before the long, hard run to the line.

Campaigning has now begun. The likely outcome of the election is still a Coalition win. The polls are tighter but still pro-Coalition and the front-runner is always hard to run down, though it is sometimes possible. Paul Keating caught John Hewson in 1993.

The biggest question for election campaign observers is whether this year will be a case of more of the same on both sides or whether either Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott will try something different.

This is where Gillard's Captain's Pick of Nova Peris to be the Labor candidate for the Senate in the Northern Territory comes in. In doing so Gillard has unceremoniously dumped the 15-year veteran Trish Crossin for an Indigenous candidate, who was not even a party member, and bypassed the usual, democratic party procedures.

The decision has provoked both outrage and support. It has set many hares running, including Gillard's ham-fisted style, party democracy, the value of celebrity candidates, outsiders versus insiders among MPs and internal Indigenous politics. It has re-ignited Gillard-Rudd tensions and elevated criticisms of Labor's inability to handle even the best ideas smoothly.

Labor will win a Senate seat in the NT whoever the candidate is, despite losing government in the NT last August. Therefore, in the bigger electoral picture only two things matter. Will this help Labor in the NT by shoring up the House of Representatives seat of Lingiari held by Warren Snowden by 3.7 per cent? Will it hurt or help Labor's image in the wider Australian community?

The answers to both questions are unclear. Locally lots of dust needs to settle. Australia-wide it may help marginally, but Australian voters generally care little about either local internal Labor processes or NT politics.

The Peris selection, for better or for worse, has put the focus on the Gillard Government rather than the Opposition. She has courted attention but also trouble. Her usage of Captain's Pick is interesting because it is an attempt to use a NSW Rugby League sporting concept to justify her action.

Rather than more of the same this could be a signal that Gillard will try to get on the front foot this year. Her alternative was to rely on a continuation of the gradual improvement of Labor's fortunes as some federal issues are put to bed

and while the State Coalition governments slowly gather more critics and make voters forget some of Labor's more obvious faults.

She still needs this to happen, and for the state Labor Opposition leaders to start scoring points. But since her famous misogyny speech last October, she may have decided not to die wondering but to crash through or crash.

All of this poses an interesting dilemma for Abbott and his team. While still confident of victory later in the year they must now be wondering whether more of the same will be enough. Or should they tweak their strategy?

One of Abbott's strategies has been to stress the Opposition's continuities with the past and he has done little to actively refresh his team (though Arthur Sinodinos has been one bonus). In fact he has emphasised a return to the Howard era by pointing to the 16 members of the Howard team who are apparently ready to take up ministerial posts again. The trouble-prone Mal Brough would make 17 if he makes a successful comeback.

Abbott has taken some unilateral decisions, including deciding without consultation on a most generous alternative maternity leave scheme. But on the matter of his shadow ministers he has held his team together rather than impose his will upon its composition.

Now is the time for an Opposition reshuffle if it is going to happen before the next election. Perhaps the Opposition Leader should pick up the phone to his MPs and make some Captain's Picks of his own.

Mortality made articulate

POETRY

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Following me, old footprints

Firstly is the bit about feeling older, much
girdled by this early growth of leafage
to offset all that grease of trams and buses
diffused into our dirty urban air.
For what, I ask you, was somebody called our saviour
in the turbulent middle-east (still in trouble,
of course it must be) two long Ks ago?
Light flickered on dwellers in death's dark shadow
yet those turbulent sandy nations truckle on,
just where their ancestors ambled out of Africa
toward the hideogram of history.
Hungry, long-legged in the walnut tree
a falcon pecks away at faceless lumpage,
driftings of down descending: bleakly,
with mortality made articulate
in air at least, I'd say.
Little grey bones lie in the lawn.
They won't be getting older
but we can.

A deceptive calm

Scrambling down the last flank
through prickly-moses or frail
fringes, headhigh bluegums
bent by years of salt bluster,
tussock grass in its bunchings,

dry, uneven, slippery,

aromas in moist gullies.
He knew it all now by heart;

those mountains were his body,

their perfume of musk and rot

could be our past.

Heat, salt: a deceptive calm

reigned on the rolled hills like haze.

Kicking out a shower of stones

an echidna bulldozed fast

fleeing some nameless danger.

One cloud lay on the sea;

decades drifted on those tides

rippled and crimped as a brain.

Caught in a brambletangle creekbed

under leather leaves, over

rapidly washed ellipsoids

there lie the ad hoc remains

of a deserted railway,

tramway rather, rust-raddled

and twisted out of all shape.

It used to bring down timber

to a non-existent pier:

such iron can be called passing.

The point of noon yawns always
out of reach, raw paradise,

and we can't feel the vacuous names

our tongues have laid on our lives

or on this twig-thick shoreline.