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## The empathy revolution

REVIEWS

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

***Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*, by Roman Krznaric. Random House, February 2014. [Website](#)**

Jen

It's our first column for 2014 and it's fair to say that Barry and I are aiming straight and unabashedly for the heart with Roman Krznaric's *Empathy: A Handbook for Revolution*.

There's sound reason why one of Britain's leading 'cultural thinkers' would tackle such a weighty topic. As Krznaric writes, empathy (the 'Golden Rule') has its foundation in major spiritual traditions including Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism and Christianity. Empathy, he adds, lies 'at the very core of human existence'.

Most of us like to see ourselves as empathetic, but what does it mean to really 'imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions'? And how do we get there? 'A first step is to humanise our imaginations by developing an awareness,' writes Krznaric, as 'we all possess deep wells of pain and sorrow that we can draw on to help bridge social divides and create empathic bonds'.

Artwork and literature provide the perfect conduits; especially those endeavours that call for true engagement by doing away with the 'invisible line' separating viewer and subject. As Krznaric reminds us, it's no coincidence that one of the world's great empathisers was a writer, George Orwell. While Orwell would go on to finesse his craft as a novelist, there was nothing remotely fictitious about his sombre recollections as an itinerant, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Here, what we also had, in black and white, was empathy 101.

'While challenging his prejudices and assumptions,' Krznaric writes. 'Orwell's journeys also helped him make new friendships, develop his curiosity...' What Orwell would have undoubtedly experienced was the 'adventure' of 'good conversation. If you bring two people together with different viewpoints and experiences, the encounter between them can create something unexpected and new.'

I'm not sure that Krznaric is telling us anything we don't already know (after all, the call for greater empathetic thinking was suitably laid out in Jeremy Rifkin's 2010 tome *The Empathetic Civilization*). And while the subject matter may lend itself to revolutionary thinking, it doesn't naturally lend itself to a gripping read.

That said it's difficult not to be swept up by Krznaric's wave of optimism — don't you agree, Barry? The ideas and thought processes that buoy them are highly accessible and discerning. As Krznaric reminds us, true empathy requires 'sheer courage'; an attribute seemingly in short supply, but no less within our grasp.

### **Barry**

While realpolitik can drive us beyond a healthy scepticism to cynicism and indifference, Krznaric contends that when we look beyond the real — through imagination, creativity, vulnerability and networking (via various conduits) — we can bring about the ideal of 'empathy on a mass scale to create social change' and even go about 'extending our empathy skills to embrace the natural world'.

The man's a dreamer, albeit well-researched, articulate and at times poetic. But when you consider the plights raised, including 'political and ethnic violence, religious intolerance, poverty and hunger, human rights abuses, global warming', it's demonstrable that we need him and his comrades. Without the dream, we're stuffed.

Jen is right to wonder just how we are to move from the dream sequence to actual engagement; how does Krznaric suggest we pull the levers to move the empathic engine of social change along?

In the inculcation spectrum of nature/nurture/culture the author highlights parenting and experiential learning /education as pivotal to developing empathy. This is not new ground, philosophically, intellectually or spiritually. Still, *A Handbook for Revolution* does showcase considerable research heft and powerful case studies of lives enriched or partially healed through compassionate exploration of 'the other'.

The handbook also lives up to its generic description by listing the grunt work and resources needed to turn children and adults into empathic beings: novels, non-fiction books, films/plays, websites etc. His proposed empathy museum is inspired, with a storytelling hub, 'human library' (discussion with 'open-minded volunteers'), interactive theatre performance workshops, fair trade experience, science experiments and dressing up box.

In all honesty, the book has a meditative effect on me (I nodded off a few times). Some terms deployed are especially tiresome (such as balancing introspection with 'outrospection', turning on 'our empathic brain', getting 'in touch with your inner ape', pursuing the status of 'homo empathicus' etc.).

Overall? I sincerely applaud the author's fundamental principle — we need to give a toss. Like Jen, I found Krznaric's optimism infectious.

Pursuing his inner transcendentalist, Krznaric opens his tome with Henry David Thoreau's question, 'Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?' I'd see the bigger miracle occurring if knowledge of other people's suffering actually led to change in our own lives and actions.

Thankfully, that is a miracle I see happening every day.

## Pastoral priests decry clerical culture that fostered abuse

### RELIGION

*Pat Power*

Recently I led the priests of the Diocese of Ballarat in their annual retreat. I was conscious of the burden these priests were carrying in relation to clerical sexual abuse. Yet as an outsider, I had no words of wisdom to impart to a group of men who had agonised over the issue for some time. So I invited them to share with each other their thoughts, feelings and experiences around this painful and shameful time in their lives as priests.

Each priest was painfully aware of the terrible harm done to victims of abuse, their families, the wider community and the Church. They spoke of the need for healing, forgiveness, reconciliation and continuing examination of ways to see that the climate in which such abuse was perpetrated would not continue. Later, I had a heart-rending conversation with one of the priests who said 'I am not a paedophile and I am not a bishop, but a priest who feels he is carrying the can for all the sins committed and mistakes made by others.'

Most priests believe the Royal Commission or something similar was very much needed to face up to a terrible episode in the Church's history. They also believe that sexual abuse took place in an environment of clericalism which was imposed by the highest authority in the Church, and which they felt powerless to confront. 'Father is always right' operated from the Pope down and any questioning of it was seen as disloyal or even heretical.

One of the most blatant expressions of such clericalism is propagated in an Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy (the congregation of the Roman Curia responsible for overseeing matters regarding priests and deacons not belonging to religious orders), 'On certain questions regarding the collaboration of the non-ordained faithful in the sacred ministry of the priest'. This was issued on 15 August 1997 after being approved by Pope John Paul II two days earlier. It can still be [found](#) on the Vatican website.

In many ways it became the basis for the [Statement of Conclusions](#) presented to the Australian Bishops following the 1998 Oceania Synod of Bishops. Generations of Australian priests have shared the lives and aspirations of their people, listening to their stories and responding to their needs. Yet this document criticised such attitudes for being too egalitarian.

Good priests across Australia were and still are appalled at such expressions of clericalism. Many, myself included, believe that unbridled and unquestioning acceptance of authority in so many aspects of Church life is one of the key factors contributing to a climate which gave rise to clerical sexual abuse.

That is precisely what angers my friend quoted above. He and so many dedicated pastoral priests believe they had no say in the direction Church

authorities were dictating, yet they are bearing the brunt of its consequences. Even now they witness individuals and groups calling for reform being ignored and treated as troublemakers.

My friend suggested that I and my fellow bishops collectively submit to the [Third Rite of Reconciliation](#) for our part in this whole sorry episode, acknowledging the pain caused in so many lives. Such a penitential act would demonstrate the collective and social nature of the sin involved. Clearly the victims of abuse are those from whom we should ask forgiveness first and foremost, but we must also be aware of the countless good and faithful priests who are caught in the crossfire and must daily give an account of themselves.

Pope Francis has so often been described as a breath of fresh air in his gentle, down-to-earth pastoral love and care. His denunciation of all forms of clericalism is unequivocal. Throughout the retreat with the Ballarat clergy, I quoted consistently from the Pope's recent Apostolic Exhortation, [The Joy of the Gospel](#), which I had earlier described as the most enriching and life-giving papal document which I have read since Vatican II. May Pope Francis' inspiring words and example give hope and direction in these troubled times.

## A distasteful slice of gender politics pie

### REVIEWS

*Tim Kroenert*

***Labor Day* (M). Director: Jason Reitman. Starring: Kate Winslet, Josh Brolin, Gattlin Griffith. 111 minutes**

It's difficult to talk about *Labor Day* without first saying something about pies. The film's infamous pie-making sequence is nauseating, and not only because it is corny. In it we see a previously despondent and sedentary woman (Winslet) veritably inflamed by the mere prospect of domestic bliss, delivered to her by a man (Brolin) whom she has known for only a few days. 'Let's put a lid on this house,' he drawls with heavy-handed symbolism, as she giddily slaps a sealing layer of pastry on top of the gooey fruit filling. Winslet has played some strong, independent women during her career. This is not one of them.

She plays Adele, a single mother in 1987 Massachusetts who suffers depression and agoraphobia as the after-effects of trauma. The gut-wrenching details of this trauma are eventually revealed — Adele can hardly be blamed for her emotional and psychological struggle. But *Labor Day* offers no robust consideration of mental illness. Far from it. In stark contrast to the male characters in the film, Adele is merely pitiable and helpless, and lacks the agency to raise herself from despondency. *Labor Day* thus conflates weakness with femaleness.

Adele lives with her 13-year-old son Henry (Griffith), who takes care of her as best he can. This is much responsibility for someone so young, but his maleness appears to have invested him with innate moral fibre and a sense of domestic duty. Early in the film he presents Adele with a book of 'husband-for-a-week' vouchers; his future self, as narrator, says he didn't realise there are certain things a husband can give a woman that her son cannot. The message is clear: Henry's help is fine as far as it goes, but Adele needs a MAN.

Enter Brolin's gruff and stoic Frank, an escaped prisoner who was doing time for a violent crime, who now proceeds to hold Adele and Henry hostage in their own home. But not content to simply lie low, Frank makes himself useful, changing Adele's car tires, conducting home repairs, even teaching Henry to pitch a baseball. Adele, initially (rightly) horrified by their plight, grows delighted, even infatuated with this man who gets things done, whose role as de facto husband-father-redeemer culminates in the aforementioned pie-making tutorial.

This all takes place over the course of one long weekend (hence the film's title), by the end of which Adele and Henry are ready to run away and make a new life with this violent man. This is an unlikely scenario, but to his credit Reitman just about sells it. The film deftly weaves elements of thriller, romance and coming-of-age story with an endearingly elegiac tone, so that *Labor Day* is engaging, even touching, in the moment. It's largely upon reflection that its



problems fully emerge.

It's hard to communicate just how distasteful its gender politics are without **a few spoilers**, so if you want to avoid them, skip the next two paragraphs.

If we are to accept that Frank and Adele are two damaged souls who find redemption in each other — which we must, if we are to swallow this tale — then we must be at peace with Frank's history (skillfully revealed through dreamlike flashbacks that flicker throughout the film), and not be content that his masculinity is a virtue in and of itself. And this means forgiving, even pitying him, for the incident of fatal domestic violence that landed him in prison in the first place. If Adele is 'weak woman', then Frank's late wife is 'scarlet woman', whose sins provoked Frank to the violent outburst that ended her life. This is victim-blaming of the most insidious kind.

The best excuse that might be made for *Labor Day* is that it is recounted by a now adult Henry (Maguire) who viewed his mother's bout of Stockholm Syndrome through romantic 13-year-old eyes. But Reitman offers a present-day denouement that makes such a reading impossible, and which reaffirms the troublesome gender politics that have preceded it. It confirms that weak woman Adele is indeed helpless without strong man Frank; that without his muscular arms to hold her up she will always stumble and fall.

Several of Reitman's previous films, including *Juno*, *Up in the Air* and *Young Adult*, offered nuanced portrayals of strong, independently-minded women. *Labor Day* is an ill-judged leap in the other direction.

## **Devil in the detail of asylum seeker directive**

AUSTRALIA

*Andrew Hamilton*

In books and films the enormity of a complex and fraught situation is often conveyed by a detail that is quite tiny in the larger picture. For example, the severity of a famine is evoked by a woman fastidiously picking up and brushing clean a few rice grains that have fallen to the ground. In the detail we recognise the larger reality and the values of those implicated in it.

In the clamour of Australia's treatment of people who come to Australia to seek protection from persecution, with its discordant notes of suffering, humiliation, death, heated rhetoric and managerial complexity, a minor and almost unnoticed Government direction struck such a revelatory chord.

Direction 62 issued by the minister before Christmas affects people who came to Australia by boat, have been found to be refugees and have protection visas. It provides that any applications they may have made to bring family members to Australia must remain at the bottom of the pile. Given the many applications that await scrutiny, the consequence of this direction is that people who came to Australia by boat cannot be reunited with their family in Australia. The money, sometimes in the thousands of dollars, they may have spent in applying to sponsor family members will not be returned to them.

The brevity of the direction belies its enormous effects on the people affected by it. They had set their hearts on being reunited with their families. Their hope sustained them through the long years of detention before they gained protection. Most fled their own countries because they feared for their lives. They had good reason also to fear for the security of their families whom they left behind. Indeed the hope that they could together make a new life in Australia often fuelled their flight. In detention their fear for their families was mixed with guilt at leaving them and with helplessness at being unable to support or help them. When they received protection they directed all their energies to sponsor their families.

To give one example, a young man from Sri Lanka who had to flee for his life from both rebel and government forces, left his wife and two young children behind. One was born after he left. Living in a region with a heavy army presence she lives in fear and in poor living conditions. Her health has also been poor and she needs medical care. While in detention he feared putting her life at risk if he contacted her directly, but was deeply depressed by his separation and inability to help her. Once given protection he immediately put all his efforts into having his family come to Australia. After being told of the direction he has locked himself in his room.

It is easy to imagine the devastation of spirit experienced by those whose hopes are so crushed. It is harder to read the minds of those who devised and signed the

direction. They could not have thought of a more exquisite form of torture. One hesitates to think that this attracted them to Direction 62. But it is equally difficult to think of other compelling reasons. If people are not deterred from coming to Australia by the certain prospect of being sent to Nauru or PNG with no opportunity to settle in Australia (that is, if they avoid interception and return to Indonesia by the Australian Armed Forces), this measure is not likely to discourage them.

The measure is also a costly indulgence for Australia. Because it increases the pressure on the mental health of already vulnerable people who have been accepted into Australian society, society will carry the costs of their medical care and of the lost contribution that they could have made to their new country.

To discriminate against and alienate new members of society, too, has heavy costs. It encourages divisions within society that will express themselves in resentment and hostility.

There are also costs when a government targets groups of the population it rules. The convention that the government should be a model litigant was a wise one: it expressed the importance for public order of the government being seen as a model of good behaviour. When it behaves vindictively it encourages disorder.

At a time of widespread lack of trust in all governments, too, this measure leaves the Government open to a charge of hypocrisy. It expresses support for families and family values. But when it suits its purposes it treats with contempt the most intimate family ties of the most vulnerable people.

There are large arguments against Direction 62. But the most compelling lies in the humanity officers of government and people granted protection share.

## **Cold silent life of a football monk**

CREATIVE

*Frank O'Shea*

I can't remember his name, but I recall that he worked as a shoemaker in a local shoe store. All the girls in town were secretly in love with him, which was no wonder because he was tall and good looking and always well dressed. In a football-mad town, he played at centre half back on the local team and was in that position the year they were beaten in the championship final. After that game, he disappeared.

It was assumed at first that he had gone 'on the batter' and would turn up in a few weeks. Others said he had gone home to look after an aged mother, but then it was pointed out that he was an orphan and had spent some of his youth in an orphanage, which was where he learnt the shoe trade.

Finally, the truth came out. He had gone into Mount Melleray — a Cistercian monastery in the foothills of the Knockmealdown mountains in the South East of Ireland. Only a few of his friends knew and they were the kind who didn't take part in small-town talk and were quite happy to let the truth come out in its own time.

In those days, the Cistercians were the strictest of all religious orders of men. The monastery in Melleray was completely self-sufficient: all fruit and vegetables were grown in its own fields; milk, butter and cheese came from its own herd — the cattle were quite safe, because the monks were vegetarians. They dressed in a coarse woollen habit, white with a black scapular. They spun their own thread, wove their own cloth, made their own clothing and footwear. And they went about their daily work in silence from one end of the year to the other.

Their superior was an abbot, which is the same rank as a bishop and all the monks said the full Office every day — matins and lauds and compline and vespers and I can't think of the others. It was a life completely given over to prayer and contemplation.

Our mothers talked in hushed tones of what it involved and for all I know, tried to ruin our lives by secretly praying that one of their own might get the call. If our fathers had any opinions about it, they kept them to themselves, except that they were a bit annoyed when they discovered that their fine centre half back, who was friendly with their oldest daughter, had disappeared forever into that silence.

When I was in my last year of school, we had an outing to Melleray. It was in one of the cold months of the year, no doubt with the intention of highlighting the great hardship and hence the sanctity of the monks. Snagging turnips on the slopes of the Knockmealdowns in November is nobody's idea of an idyllic existence.

I remember our visit well because the chap from home was one of the monks who showed us around; they were allowed to speak with visitors as part of their work of hospitality.

He was as cheerful as I remembered, but he never asked me about the old town or how the football team was going or which of his friends had married or what had happened to any of his sweethearts. In the monastic pecking order, he was 'only a brother' — he did not have the education to become a priest and was not allowed to sit in chapter, whatever that meant.

He showed us the refectory with its plain wooden tables where the monks ate and one of the spartan cells where they grabbed a few hours sleep before rising at some unimaginable hour for the Office.

We saw the dairy and bakery, the bleak well-pruned orchards and the cold turnip fields; we saw one monk weaving at his loom and another fixing harness for the horses. There was a blacksmith and a tailor, a shoemaker and a carpenter. My friend worked in the fields, because as part of his sanctification he had not been assigned to the trade at which he had worked in his footballing days.

I often think of that young man who tidied up all his affairs before the championship final and then went off to spend his life in cold silence and contemplation. He may well be still alive and working with the same humility and cheerfulness that I recall.

## **Economists undaunted by car industry canning**

AUSTRALIA

*Ray Cassin*

Economics has been dubbed the dismal science. The appellation is a strange one, for many of its practitioners are doctrine-driven enthusiasts who are intent on telling us what we must do to be saved. Far from being dismal, they exude the blithe — and blind — faith of religious revivalists. They cling steadfastly to their doctrine, for they believe that only it can sufficiently explain the human world. Any suggestion that this world might not unfold as the doctrine prescribes is to be abjured as the work of the devil.

The revivalists were out in force on the ABC's Q&A this week, in response to the news that Toyota will cease to build cars in Australia in 2017. Following in the wake of decisions to quit the industry by Holden and Ford, Toyota's announcement means the end of car making in this country.

The industry, including the component makers, employs nearly 60,000 directly and 250,000 indirectly. It is the mainstay of Australian manufacturing and its disappearance will devastate the economies of Victoria and South Australia, with flow-on effects in other states. But apparently we shouldn't worry, because something will come along to fill the gap. The revivalists are sure of it.

This confident prediction was made several times by Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull, to sustained applause from Q&A's studio audience. Turnbull is not an economist. But as a member of Cabinet he vigorously defended the Abbott Government's decision not to extend public subsidy of the car industry, and its more recent one to decline Coca-Cola Amatil's request for \$25 million to help retool its SPC Ardmona subsidiary in Shepparton. That refusal is expected to hasten the end of another branch of Australian manufacturing, for SPC Ardmona operates Australia's last fruit and vegetable cannery.

Turnbull could not explain why another multinational company, Cadbury, will receive \$16 million in public funds for its chocolate factory in Hobart. The Government has previously argued that Cadbury is a special case because making confectionery attracts tourists. But it is not clear why luring tourists to Hobart is more important than providing jobs in the Goulburn valley, where the unemployment rate (8.6 per cent) is even higher than it is in Tasmania (7.9 per cent). Suggestions that the indulgence shown to Cadbury might have had something to do with the fact that its factory is in a marginal seat were dismissed. The doctrine of the pure does not acknowledge the devil's work of political calculation.

Turnbull might have been speaking chiefly out of Cabinet solidarity. Some other panellists and audience members, however, were unrestrained devotees of free-trade doctrine. Yolanda Vega, director of the Australian Women's Chamber of

Commerce, said that since small businesses — she seemed to have cafes in mind — could expect no help from the taxpayer, large manufacturers should not either. Small businesses, she insisted, display an enterprising, innovative spirit that has withered in the large corporations that dominate manufacturing.

And an audience member asked: 'Why are there so many on both sides of politics who refuse to let uncompetitive businesses die a quiet death? If we don't want to eat tinned fruit or if we want to drive a European hatchback instead of a huge Australian sedan, why fight it? Personally, I enjoy not living in 1983 and wonder why others don't.'

Ah yes, 1983, the year when the Hawke Government floated the dollar and began the deregulation of the financial system and the dismantling of industrial protection. It was a time when tariffs, subsidies and the fixed exchange rate not only kept many Australians in jobs by protecting local industry, but thereby also nurtured the specialised skills on which, with due respect to Vega, innovation depends. In 1983 it was understood that if large enterprises employing many people did not survive, many smaller ones were unlikely to do so either. People who don't have jobs don't have much discretionary income to spend in cafes.

It was also understood that only in textbooks of doctrine can economic activity plausibly be depicted as an aggregation of choices made by individuals with more or less comparable buying power. Quips such as 'If we don't want to eat tinned fruit or if we want to drive a European hatchback ... why fight it?' might reveal something about the speaker. They reveal nothing about the plight of SPC Ardmona or Holden.

The gradual demise of Australian manufacturing since the 'reforms' of the '80s offers a surer picture of the prospect for employees of Toyota and SPC Ardmona than the Micawber-like assurances of Turnbull and others that something will turn up. New sources of employment do not magically appear because they have been foretold by doctrine. As former workers in the now almost extinguished textile, clothing and footwear industry can attest, only about a third of those who are about to lose their jobs in car making or food processing are likely to find new jobs on equivalent incomes. Another third will probably never work again.

Doctrine does not prevail everywhere. It reigns supreme among policymakers and, with only a few dissenting voices, among the chattering classes on television panel shows. But in the real world of economic activity — the world in which people understand that chanting mantras such as 'innovation' is not the same as actually making and selling things — doctrine is treated with scepticism, and sometimes even blamed for bad policy.

Consider Toyota's explanation for its decision to shut down manufacturing in Australia. Like SPC Ardmona, the company did not blame union work practices and allowances. It blamed the high Australian dollar and 'the most open and competitive new car market in the world'.

## Coal hard facts for religious investors

### ENVIRONMENT

*Neil Ormerod*

The international movement to divest from investment in fossil fuels is gathering momentum. Investors are starting to realise the dangers associated with the problem of stranded assets; that is, as governments act to restrain fossil fuel consumption in an effort to address climate change, fossil fuel companies will find their assets being written down. It is of no value to have millions of tons of coal in the ground if carbon taxes or emission trading schemes prevent you from ever digging it up.

A recent article in *The Conversation* by Tom Swann and Richard Denniss from ANU [documented](#) the growing concern among investors as the politics and economics of climate change begin to bite. At the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim argued that investment firms, especially those in pension funds, have a fiduciary duty to review their investments in fossil fuels. He also called on governments to push both divestment and taxes to make fossil fuels less attractive investment options for the future.

In line with this, the World Bank is pulling back from providing development funding for coal fired power stations. This is a significant move. The World Bank is hardly the stronghold of 'weak-minded liberals' or 'greenies'. This is an institution which, together with the IMF, oversaw the most draconian economic reforms in third world economies in the name of economic rationalism and trade liberalisation. They were, and remain, primarily driven by economic concerns, and the economic costs of climate change are starting to mount.

As Jim Yong Kim notes, continued reliance on fossil fuels and the resultant climate impacts 'threatens development gains [made] over the last 20 years'. This echoes concerns raised by international aid agencies that the present effects of global warming are undoing decades of progress in the poorest parts of the world.

Other groups of investors and philanthropic organisations are taking similar action. Development banks in the US and Europe are pulling back from funding coal fired power stations, while a major US philanthropic group with combined assets of over \$1.8 billion is divesting from fossil fuels and investing in renewable energy. 'The magnitude of the climate crisis requires that we no longer conduct business as usual,' the Wallace Global Fund's executive director Ellen Dorsey has told reporters. 'If we own fossil fuels, we own climate change.'

These concerns are particularly pertinent to the Australian context. Australia is the second largest coal exporter and a major expansion of exports is under way, notable through the development of the Galilee basin which contains over [100 billion tons of coal](#). While the carbon footprint of the average Australian is among the highest in the world, our low population means our national impact is



mercifully small. However, we export around the same amount of coal as we use domestically, thus doubling our national contribution to global warming.

It is also significant that the greatest resistance to doing anything about the problem of climate change in international negotiations comes from Australia and Canada, two of the largest exporters of fossil fuels.

It is ironic that the Australian Coal Association [acknowledges](#) that 'the production and use of coal is a significant contributor to climate change', while some of our leading politicians remain less than convinced that this is the case. Indeed the coal industry has a self-imposed levy to raise \$1 billion to develop technologies to mitigate carbon emissions. Hardly the move of sceptics.

All this raises questions for Australian religious bodies and organisations about the prudent and moral use of their resources. At the prudential level fossil fuel investments are running the risk of a carbon bubble, where the value of investments could rapidly collapse as governments are forced to take more drastic climate action. At the moral level, do church investors want to contribute directly through their investments to a problem which impacts most significantly on the poorest of the poor?

Some church bodies are taking up the challenge. The Uniting Church Synod NSW/ACT has moved to divest from investments in fossil fuels. A number of Anglican Dioceses in NZ voted last year to take their money out of fossil fuel investments. Various bodies in the Catholic Church in Australia are being encouraged to act similarly. With its multiple structure — dioceses and diocesan development banks, religious orders, welfare and education agencies, Catholic Church Insurances and Catholic Super Funds — there is ample scope for divestment action.

While the prudential argument carries weight in its own right, one would hope that the moral issue of not investing in something which is impacting the world's poorest would be enough to determine the outcome.

## **Clean, bright, efficient death**

CREATIVE

*Kristin Hannaford*

### **A tiger doesn't change its stripes**

Thylacinus cynocephalus was a mouthful,  
too difficult to articulate, better to imagine  
its wolf-dog-head contemplating  
the tender hides of colonists'  
sheep and a gun-barrel.

Better to mount its robust tail  
erect and purposeful, a mouth full  
of poultry and to consider its still,  
taxidermied potential.  
Small marsupials float, suspended  
in alcohol and glass.  
Curiosities drifting,  
awash with human intent.

### **Contained**

Here, in my hand,  
near the mount of Venus,  
I'm keeping the small things in my life.  
Orange grains of sand  
I've stolen from the sandblow,  
a speckle backed cowry  
grinning its bar of gritted teeth,  
a silvered scar to mark night's drunken fall.  
A gecko scuttles up the yellow wall  
to hide behind the yellow  
dress print of Kahlo  
and her winged eyebrow.

A monkey holds forth to a parrot.

Frida looks out

as the gecko begins to sing.

Understand, as I open my palm  
of trinkets, that this is all

I need to hold.

### **Gold mountain**

Strange to find beauty in this place. At this time.

On a night drive to Rockhampton to see a trio  
of plays about mining, and Luke Howard (a lucky find)  
playing New Gold Mountain on the radio, turned up loud.

And this is gold country too; or it was.

The abattoir to the left funnels steam into the night,

a long slow drag exhaled by a thousand beasts,

also travelling tonight. Poor cattle, horses, and pigs.

Some days, the air is so bloodthick it hinges

at the back of the throat, a glottal of rusty muck.

Not tonight though. The air is winter clear, glassy.

Tonight the abattoir sits atop its small hill festooned  
with industrial ribbons of light. Orwell might have

named it the 'Ministry of Freedom', its chrome pipes  
and turrets silvered by the moon, a grounded star —

its orbit of sportsground light celebrating

some kind of industrial momentum, a night time

broadcast announcing clean, bright, efficient death.

### **Tanning**

*Barlow's Hill, Central Queensland*

Stripping black wattle bark

for tannic acid, they've piled the cart high —

a mountain of bark for tanning pelts.

Saturday afternoons spent in the back  
of the shop perusing snakeskins,  
kangaroo and possum pelts from trappers  
as tanned leather or green hides. Afternoons  
holding up the shapes and shades of animal  
furs and skins, puzzling the contours of new  
boots, laces, belts and bags. Quietly imagining  
the vivid lives of creatures walking  
these scrubby hills. Land bought off the back  
of possum skins, tanned with: alum,  
salt, wattle bark or tea.

## It's time to heatproof our cities

### ENVIRONMENT

*Greg Foyster*

A few weeks ago, as a cool change swept away Melbourne's mid-January heatwave, my partner and I went for a walk around our block. The air temperature had plummeted about ten degrees in 30 minutes, but as we passed a new two-storey home with no surrounding vegetation and a mound of gravel for a front lawn, I felt a surge of residual warmth. The house's dark-grey exterior seemed to shimmer with stored-up heat.

Hurrying on, I wondered how this house — and so many others like it — would cope with future heatwaves.

Climate change has loaded the dice towards hotter days and more frequent heat spells. Australia's average temperature has increased 0.9 degrees since 1910, while the number of record hot days has doubled since 1960. 'Although Australia has always had heatwaves, hot days and bushfires, climate change has increased the risk of more intense heatwaves and extreme hot days, as well as exacerbated bushfire conditions,' [explained](#) the Climate Commission's 2013 report 'Off the Charts: Extreme Australian summer heat'.

Heatwaves don't create the same dramatic news footage as bushfires, floods and cyclones, but they kill more people. From 1844 to 2010, heatwaves were responsible for at least [5332 deaths](#) in Australia, and since 1900 they've killed more Australians than all other natural hazards combined. The January 2009 heatwave in Victoria, when Melbourne sweltered through three consecutive days of temperatures above 43 degrees, resulted in 374 deaths. In comparison, the Black Saturday fires took 173 lives.

While peak temperatures fell short of the 2009 heatwave, the severely hot weather across south-eastern Australia from 13 to 18 January this year lasted longer in many places. Adelaide had a record five consecutive days of 42 degrees and above, and Canberra had a record four consecutive days of 39 degrees. Sydney was spared the worst of the heatwave this time around, but last January the city registered its [hottest day on record](#) .

Meanwhile, Victoria had a record-breaking average maximum temperature of more than 41 degrees across four successive days, resulting in [139 'excess' deaths](#) in the period up to 23 January.

The elderly are more vulnerable to extreme heat, and Australia's ageing population means we can expect the death toll to rise in the future. But the biggest impact will come from climate change. A November 2011 report from PricewaterhouseCoopers [modelled](#) the effect of future heatwaves on Melbourne and found that, by 2050, climate change could multiply annual average heat-related deaths by five. Melbourne isn't alone — the 'State of Australian Cities

2013' report [predicted](#) heat-related deaths to [increase dramatically](#) in Perth and Brisbane.

Unfortunately, the majority of Australian homes are reported to be 20 or more years old, and they don't cope well in long periods of very hot weather. A CSIRO analysis published in 2013 by the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility [modelled](#) the performance of 10 typical housing types during the January 2009 Melbourne heatwave and found that a safe temperature threshold was breached in every single house type, although insulation did significantly reduce the duration of the risk.

If you lived in a 'worst case' house — with poor orientation, a dark roof and no insulation — you'd probably be better off outdoors.

Newer houses generally have improved insulation, but a 2008 study [found](#) the energy-efficiency of residential buildings has been 'outpaced by the rate of increase in average floor area'. Despite having higher energy ratings, our big new homes require more energy to heat and cool overall.

Not surprisingly, more Australians now own air conditioners and evaporative coolers — up from 59 per cent in 2005 to 73 per cent in 2011. This has advantages, as the quick relief of artificial cooling can save lives during a severe heatwave.

But while offering a short-term solution for individuals, air conditioners increase the long-term vulnerability of society. Firstly, their use ramps up peak energy demand, leading to power outages and 'load shedding' to make up for the shortfall in electricity. When electricity consumption topped 10,000 megawatts in Victoria on 15 January this year, tens of thousands of people were left without power.

Secondly, increased peak demand requires additional infrastructure, which jacks up electricity prices for everyone, but is particularly devastating for the poor elderly who are most vulnerable to heatwaves. Older Australians on pensions might be reluctant to turn on their air conditioners — or even their fans — due to prohibitively high bills.

What's more, thermal infrared maps of Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane show concentrations of low-income households in hotter areas of the city with little vegetation. The people who can least afford the cost of summer air conditioning live in locations where it's most needed.

Several proposals have been put forward to address these issues. New 'smart' air conditioners are fitted with devices to allow power companies to switch off the electricity-hungry compressors for short periods during peak loads, potentially reducing power outages. The Australian Medical Association has previously [called](#) for government to subsidise the cost of air conditioners for the elderly.

But even with these changes, relying on air conditioning is a risky strategy. As an energy-intensive technology, air conditioning increases carbon emissions that

contribute to climate change, fuelling hotter and more frequent heatwaves. The real solutions lie in strategies that keep us cool without simultaneously heating the planet.

The National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility has put together a [framework](#) that recommends a more holistic approach to the spectre of future heatwaves, including retrofitting roofs with reflective surfaces and ceiling insulation. Air conditioners are still part of the solution, but should be regulated to reduce peak demand. Houses could be fitted with a 'cool retreat' in one room, reducing the need to chill the entire interior.

Other reports have recommended more vegetation around the city and a shift from private cooling to collective cooling by establishing public spaces where all citizens can access cool air for free.

Heatwaves are only going to get worse, and air conditioning isn't the godsend it seems. We need to start retrofitting our cities, suburbs and homes to withstand the sweltering summers to come. Any new houses that perform poorly in the heat — like the one I saw on my walk around the block — are going to be a tremendous burden on the next generation.

## Exploiting consumers needs to be illegal

MEDIA

*Michael Mullins*

The ANZ Bank faces a huge payout after a class action by its customers secured a partial but significant victory in a multi-million dollar legal battle against its credit card late payment fees.

In a landmark legal decision in the Federal Court last Wednesday, it was determined that the bank had been illegally imposing penalties for late payments on credit cards.

The class action coincided with a campaign by consumer advocacy group Choice to have fees brought into line with the real costs to the banks. The bank might charge a late payment fee of \$45 even if the late payment costs the bank as little as \$5.

Choice chief executive Alan Kirkland [says](#) charging excessive fees — otherwise known as price gouging — is ‘a draconian measure that disproportionately impacts some of the most vulnerable consumers in our community’. He [told](#) the *Financial Review*: ‘Fees should be an accurate reflection of the costs faced by businesses when customers are unable to make payments on time. It’s not the role of a business to punish customers.’

A 45-year-old labourer who participated in the class action [told](#) AAP that a late payment of wages from an employer or a computer glitch that was the bank’s fault would delay payment of his credit card bill for a couple of days. ‘When you are struggling to get by each week with wages to pay your bills, another \$40 to \$50 out of payments puts you behind the next month.’

The class action sends a clear signal to banks — and other service providers such as Telstra and Optus — that they cannot exploit their relationship with customers without legal foundation.

Such exploitation — whether it is illegal, or simply unethical — is closely related to the practice of usury, which refers to lending money at an exorbitant rate of interest. Usurers have been taking advantage of vulnerable people since ancient times.

The most notorious contemporary example has been ‘pay day loans’, which can charge interest of 1000 per cent or more. They were partially [banned](#) in March last year but remain a problem. Many single parent families or people who have lost their jobs feel they have no choice but to go to these predatory lenders because they cannot pay rent or utilities and sometimes they cannot even afford sufficient food.

Last month, Pope Francis [described](#) usury as a ‘dramatic social evil’. ‘When a family has nothing to eat, because it has to make payments to usurers, this is not



Christian, it is not human! This dramatic scourge in our society harms the inviolable dignity of the human person.'

Australia is fortunate to have regulation in place to protect consumers from predatory business practices. But it's not all good news. The Federal Government came to office promising to lessen the burden of regulation to make it easier for businesses to function. That may help the economy, but it also assists unscrupulous corporations and individuals to exploit consumers.

An example is its likely imminent [winding back](#) of the hard won Future of Financial Advice reforms that were about to take effect. This will legalise deceptive conduct by financial planners and banks that provide clients with non-objective financial advice giving the best financial return to them rather than the client (e.g. commissions).

We've seen with the case against ANZ that laws can protect ordinary people against exploitation by unscrupulous corporations and individuals. We need to have them strengthened rather than weakened.

## Deciphering capitalism's corrupt metaphors

### ECONOMICS

*David James*

George Orwell in his book *Animal Farm* famously parodied the vicious use of language in communist states. 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' was one of his memorable depictions of how the absurdities of language not only reflect but also predicate evil.

The demise of the Soviet Union is viewed as confirmation that capitalism is superior morally and economically. But materialist and illogical use of language is evident in capitalism, too. In communist states language became a tool of state oppression, in capitalism it is a tool of money. But there are many similarities in the language use, especially in the tendency towards dehumanisation.

This is most evident in the disciplines of economics and management. Consider, for instance, the use of the word 'capital'. Capital, whether it is in the form of shares, bonds, cash or bank debt, is the formalisation of a transaction. Transactions are agreements about value and obligation.

Can agreements 'flow'? One would think not. But economists routinely talk about 'capital flows'. A metaphor is slyly created whereby capital is depicted as some kind of fluid that oozes around the world. Then the pseudo-scientists in economics can analyse how that fluid will behave. Instead of capital being correctly seen as something created by people, it is turned into a sort of natural physical phenomena. People are shifted on to the margin in a way that is reminiscent of communism's use of the idea of historical determinism.

Such use of false metaphors about capital almost led to the destruction of the monetary system. By creating a metaphor of money as a kind of fluid, proponents of economic libertarianism were able, over a period of about two and a half decades, to mount an argument that there was a need to 'deregulate' the financial markets.

This is nonsense. Capital relies on rules to exist. If one buys shares, there are rules about how they are traded, valued, and so on. The same applies to any financial transaction. They are, by their nature, rule based, and heavily regulated. It is not possible to 'deregulate' regulations.

But because the free marketeers succeeded in creating a metaphor that capital is a kind of fluid, then it is possible to sound reasonable by saying that the fluid should be deregulated. An image is conjured up whereby barriers (regulations) are removed, allowing the fluid to flow to where it naturally should.

This is rubbish. In reality there was a shift from governments setting the rules of money to the traders setting the rules of money, and this almost brought down the entire monetary system of the world.

According to US Congressman Paul Kanjorski, in September 2008 some [\\$500 billion](#) went out of US money markets in one morning in what was an electronic run on the banks. Treasury threw money at the problem — the ‘deregulation’ solution. When it was realised this would not work, Treasury decided to aggressively regulate. It shut down every money market account temporarily and underwrote bank deposits up to \$250,000.

That is, Treasury said: ‘These are the rules now.’ Had they not done so, according to Kanjorski, \$6 trillion would have gone out of the US banking system by the end of the day (where to is not exactly clear). It would have spelt the end of the American banking system and destroyed the monetary system of the world.

That is what ‘deregulation’ of financial systems can bring. The false metaphor is not just a linguistic oddity, it is downright dangerous. Neither has the danger gone away, because the appalling metaphor has not gone away. Impoverished language use puts people in thrall to their own artefacts, much as communism did.

The same sort of barbarous language appears in management thinking. Take the phrase ‘human resources’. Now, humans are not valuable as a ‘resource’ (they are mostly water, plus a few trace elements). Humans act, resources are acted upon. But the metaphor makes it easier to dehumanise staff. Instead of having to consider how self-aware people might behave, in all their complexity, employees can be seen as objects.

This type of dehumanisation is rampant in management language. When managers speak of ‘outsourcing their core competencies across the full spectrum of capability offerings’ they are not merely speaking nonsense. They are treating people as objects to be manipulated.

Orwell once commented that if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. It is worse than that. The corruption of thought and language leads to corrupt action. Writing in 1946, he said:

Writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy. It is easier — even quicker, once you have the habit.

That is a good description of the habits in economics and management language. At least in 1946 most of Orwell’s audience would have known what a metaphor is. In 2014, it is rare for people to have the ability to identify a metaphor in their own language.

Worse, the language of management and economics is infecting the education system. This was pointed out by Chris Fotinopolous in *The Age*, citing Labor’s ‘New Directions’ paper for the education system, which identified ‘productivity growth’

and 'human capital investment' as 'the critical link' to 'long-term prosperity'.

What exactly is 'human capital'? Another bad metaphor designed to dehumanise, much like 'human resources'. It deliberately blurs the distinction between money and a person, implying that a person is just a store of value that can be financially measured.

What is 'productivity growth'? A measure of economic output whose relationship with education is speculative at best. Technical training is important, but the level of productivity mostly depends on the quality of management, little of which can be taught in school. It is mostly dependent on institutional structures and cultural habits.

Many factors affect productivity, including currency movements and investment trends. Australia's recent declining productivity is largely due to excessive investment in mining and over-investment in utilities, as the Reserve Bank pointed out. As the mining investment declines, Australia's productivity will rise. This will have nothing to do with the education in Australian schools.

As there is so little critique of the appalling language use in capitalism and the persistent misuse of metaphors, the situation is unlikely to improve. Perhaps we should all just turn ourselves into 'human resources leveraging our intellectual capital across a market based outcome with respect to capital flows' and be done with it.

## Passion has a place in border protection's age of reason

AUSTRALIA

*Benedict Coleridge*

Former Australian navy captain John Ingram doesn't mince his words. In an interview for the ABC, Ingram, reflecting on his long career in the Navy and his encounters with asylum seekers at sea, [described](#) the policy of turning back the boats as 'morally corrupt' and 'absolutely abhorrent'.

It's easy to imagine some readers brushing aside these comments as fanciful and unreasonable. The Australian debate on border control has for two decades been structured such that 'practical' language is presented as the field for 'reasonable argument', while overtly 'moral' language is cast as the domain of 'do-gooders'; and by extension, as irresponsible, because such language is seen as assisting the 'people smugglers'.

Concepts like 'sovereignty' and 'integrity of borders' have become established as 'reasonable' in the context of the Australian discussion — words like these are now decisive in discerning 'good' from 'bad'. Just think of the way asylum seekers are positioned, as infringing liberty — our liberty. We think of our liberty in terms offered by John Stuart Mill: as long as our actions don't infringe other people's rights then we can proceed, but the state can intervene against those whose actions adversely affect the rights of others.

In the Australian debate, political agents like Phillip Ruddock and Scott Morrison have effectively positioned asylum seekers as a group of people whose very existence, in its challenge to the 'harmony' of our politics, is an inimical 'other regarding action' against which the state has the right to intervene.

The historical reality of states controlling borders can be used to shut down conversation about the moral relationship between those who maintain borders and those who seek to cross them. So one academic commented to me recently that he was a little confused by the philosophical literature that focuses on border controls: 'I don't understand the point of this ... states have always sought to control their borders'. The implication was that discussion about the rights and wrongs of stringent border controls was literally nonsensical.

Of course most people wouldn't accept that there is no further fundamental moral discussion to be had about border controls — but it is a challenge to maintain in public view the ethical difficulties that arise at borders, places where people sometimes die, and sometimes in great numbers. Language, including concepts like 'integrity', can be used to restrain different kinds of discussion, to normalise one particular form of speaking.

In the Australian migration control debate, language is an instrument and occasionally a weapon. The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, referring to a report of one prospective asylum seeker who had acknowledged that the route to Australia

is now 'closed', responded: 'Well, thank you sir, the way is closed.'

I'm struck not only by the 'closing of the way', but by Abbott's use of the word 'sir'. One of the marks of a modern liberal democratic society is that we use such titles to refer to anyone and everyone; it's a great equaliser. But it becomes absurd when directed at the suffering supplicant, a term of derision rather than respect. When the Prime Minister says 'well, sir' he is effectively positioning that man as someone in the world of the absurd, whom he doesn't have to meet face to face.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reflected recently on how people of religious faith should engage in the public sphere — whether they should be able to point to their religious commitments as sources for their political reasoning. His sense was that yes, religious people, although they should no doubt reason in terms approachable by everybody, should have no hesitation in pointing to the sources of their fundamental commitments. With regard to the issue of migration, Williams said he would begin by admitting that the deepest normative source from which his feelings and reasoning sprang would be the biblical image of hospitality.

As in many dimensions of our broader culture, in the Australian migration control debate, 'passion' is construed as opposed to 'reason'. But, to refer again to Williams' lecture, 'passion' in its classical (ancient or biblical) sense, is not opposed to reason (being attuned to the world), but rather to 'peace' or 'harmony'. In the debates on border control, 'harmony' means no information, no angst — only a kind of enforced conversational restraint presented as 'reasonable'. Thus the importance of Ingram's 'passionate' language — alongside practical proposals, 'passionate' language can unsettle uncritical pictures of the issue.

And here there is a role for religious people. As one Catholic migration worker recently [emphasised](#), the very notion of catholicity should present profound challenges to the current border regime since the principles of universality and unity aren't realised in the practice of offshore detention: the policy of stopping the boats should be denounced — 'they have crossed our path and are our neighbour'.

Whereas the Coalition Government deploys the language of 'integrity', 'sovereignty' and 'transgression' to frame the issue, here we have the use of 'path' and 'neighbour'. In the biblical context paths are places of encounter, shared places where the stranger is met and discovered to be not so strange after all.

We need to be suspicious then of language that narrows the issue at hand. To quote Ingram, through 'turning back the boats', through offshore detention, we have placed ourselves in a corner from which 'we need an honourable way out, and we need a way out very soon'. One part of finding this way out is to open up the discussion to include vocabularies other than those of unchallengeable 'reason' and 'sovereign prerogative' — vocabularies that offer instead an imaginative grasp

of larger connections.

## Australia's booze culture on trial

AUSTRALIA

*Andrew Hamilton*

At festive times alcohol sits enthroned. Soon afterwards, as most recently in Sydney, it often stands in the dock, on trial for lethal violence in the cities and the trail of broken bottles lying in wait for children's feet on beaches.

The strategies of the defence and the prosecution are predictable. The libertarian response is to keep silent about the money that is made from alcohol, and to insist that people, not alcohol is the problem. So the proper response is to lock up for longer people who act violently. This incidentally illustrates the libertarian paradox that the higher the priority which societies place on individual freedom, the greater the number of individuals they will deprive of their freedom.

The prosecution will cite the testimony of doctors, social workers and police who see the children injured by broken glass, the people killed and maimed by drunken violence, the women abused, and the damage done to body and spirit by addiction, generally propose tighter regulation. Usually nothing much happens.

In New South Wales the centrepiece of reform has been mandatory minimum sentences for those convicted of violent offences under the influence of alcohol. It has been accompanied by some restrictions on the sale of alcohol in the city. The Victorian Government has taken over only mandatory sentencing. It is doubtful whether any of these measures will reduce significantly the harm caused by alcohol abuse.

As with guns in the United States, it is easy to blame legislators and interest groups for ineffective regulation. It is more helpful first to reflect on the place of alcohol in our culture and the power of a pervasive myth that will always protect alcohol from effective regulation.

The reality is that alcohol is a substance that affects mood, often pleasurably, and lowers inhibitions. Many people drink abusively and become addicted to it, with tragic consequences for their own lives and for society. In these respects it is like nicotine, opium and its derivatives, and marijuana.

The myth of alcohol is that it is an indispensable and effective gateway to autonomous, confident and connected lives. For young people alcohol is an important part of rites of transition: from adolescence to adulthood, and increasingly from childhood to adolescence. Alcohol is valued because it loosens inhibitions against socialising and can help them for a moment to feel in charge of their lives.

Binge drinking among adolescents reflects the myth of adult drinking. To be an adult, particularly a male, is to be able to hold one's drink, to work hard and drink hard, and so to be one of the mates.



All mood changing substances rely on this myth of a better life and relationships. The alcohol myth is distinctive because it is rooted in high as well as in popular culture. Literature and cultivated conversation celebrate alcohol in a way that, with some exceptions, is not true of other mood altering substances like opium and nicotine. The encomia to wine and other drinks romanticise the drinking of alcohol and sentimentalise the way in which abuse and addiction are seen. Alcohol can then be seen to be the spur that makes genius run free, and its abuse justified by its contribution to creativity.

In such popular literature as the crime stories featuring John Rebus and Hieronymus Bosch, heavy drinking is tied to the protagonists' flaws. But it also reflects their integrity in refusing to harden themselves against human pain and injustice, so distinguishing them from their sober and morally compromised superior officers.

Alcohol also has a privileged place in polite society. To talk knowledgeably about the bouquet and aroma of wines or spirits from different districts and to be familiar with the conventions of serving alcohol are seen as a mark of good breeding and sophistication.

My point in describing the ways in which alcohol is so deeply embedded in the myths of our culture is not to decry drinking, enjoying or talking about alcohol but to explain why attempts to regulate its consumption and limit the damage it does will be unlikely to succeed. At all levels of our culture alcohol is protected.

Heavy handed regulation of mood changing substances usually has more bad consequences than good, as was the case of Prohibition in the USA, and is arguably the case in the criminalisation of opium and other hard drugs.

The key changes needed are cultural. Not to demonise alcohol but to mock the romantic myths that obscure its reality: that it is a mind altering drug pleasant in moderation but one which is massively abused with great cost to those addicted, to those whose lives they touch, and to society at large.

The plain packaging of alcohol may for the time being be a step too far, but plain, honest speaking about it is a necessary first step.

## Pilger's cheap shots won't ease Indigenous oppression

### REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

#### ***Utopia* (M). Director: John Pilger. 110 minutes**

Who is John Pilger talking to? Fans of the rabble-rousing Australian journalist and documentarian — myself included — will know him as a fearless critic of the imperialist agenda of Australian and other Western governments, and in this context a stalwart defender of the poor and marginalised. Going back at least as far as his 1986 documentary *The Secret Country: The First Australians Fight Back*, he has railed against the dispossession and displacement of Australia's Indigenous peoples under the continuing impacts of colonisation.

His latest film, the ironically titled *Utopia*, paints with broad brushstrokes a portrait of Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia today, and mines the fundamentally racist ideologies that underpin it. But just who is his intended audience? It is not clear if even Pilger himself knows.

The obvious answer is that it is a film primarily for Pilger disciples, and from this perspective it feeds copious tinder to the flames of moral outrage. Pilger travels to Utopia, a region north of Alice Springs that is recognised as one of the most disadvantaged areas in Australia, and reveals the degradations suffered by the local Aboriginal communities after years of government neglect. He visits Rottnest Island off the coast of Fremantle, where a veil of tourist niceties has been draped over a sordid history of Aboriginal maltreatment. He recounts the events that led to the Intervention and claims there was propaganda sold to the public in order to justify this racist action.

These are appalling realities. But if Pilger is preaching to the converted, he's not telling them anything they don't already know. What then does *Utopia* achieve, except to invoke the tongue-clicking and head-shaking of moral superiority? Because on the available evidence, it seems unlikely that Pilger is chasing new converts. As an exercise in persuasive argument, *Utopia* falls well short.

Pilger asks leading questions of those he sympathises with, speaking for them rather than allowing them to illuminate the issues from their own experiences. And his bold assertions frequently bulldoze dissenting voices, silencing and aggravating the speaker. Fence-sitters and outright opponents are unlikely to be persuaded by such tactics. Even Pilger-sympathisers might object to the way he shouts down Labor MP Warren Snowdon, representative for the Division of Lingjari, as Snowdon attempts to explain how current health policies are attempting to undo past neglect of remote communities.

Pilger is prone to hyperbole too. He refers to a 'concentration camp' that was located on Rottnest Island and proceeds to denounce the atrocities that occurred there, without substantiating the use of such a loaded term. In fact the facility was

an Aboriginal prison, and its history — and the fact that its buildings have been converted into a resort for oblivious tourists — is appalling enough without the need to resort to divisive dysphemism, which in fact only serves to weaken his argument.

During another sequence he conducts a vox pop amid flag-waving Australia Day revellers, goading them with questions about the white invasion that is commemorated by the day. This is predictable showboating that provokes some suitably cringe-worthy (and in one instance downright hilarious) reactions; but who of these individuals or those who share their whitewashed view of history will be persuaded by being ridiculed?

If it sounds like I'm overly down on Pilger, it's only because I share his outrage about these issues and believe they should be firmly on the agenda of mainstream public discourse. Pilger has been fighting the good fight for many years, but moral outrage can only get you so far. I yearned for *Utopia* to contribute to the debate more constructively, and was disappointed that Pilger seems content simply to rage and point fingers.

A series of [screenings](#) is underway during February and March, many of which will be accompanied by a Q and A with the filmmaker. Hopefully *Utopia* then is the beginning of constructive conversation, and not the last word.

## Silence won't answer the Woody Allen abuse allegation

INTERNATIONAL

*Zoe Krupka*

On Saturday Dylan Farrow accused her adoptive father, the filmmaker and actor Woody Allen, of sexual assault for the second time. She first made these allegations when she was seven years old, in the context of the custody battle between her separating parents. At the time, the case was considered too weak to proceed to a criminal trial. This time, she's [asking](#) the people who have worked with and supported him to respond and to be in some way accountable for any part they may have played in promoting or protecting him.

Now 28, she's asking that we not only take her claims seriously, but that we act on them. She's asking, after years of accolades for her adoptive father's genius, for the people who have worked with her father to bear some responsibility for her pain. This is some of what she said in an open letter published on 1 February in a *New York Times* blog:

That he got away with what he did to me haunted me as I grew up. I was stricken with guilt that I had allowed him to be near other little girls. I was terrified of being touched by men. I developed an eating disorder. I began cutting myself.

That torment was made worse by Hollywood. All but a precious few (my heroes) turned a blind eye. Most found it easier to accept the ambiguity, to say, 'who can say what happened', to pretend that nothing was wrong. Actors praised him at awards shows. Networks put him on TV. Critics put him in magazines. Each time I saw my abuser's face — on a poster, on a T-shirt, on television — I could only hide my panic until I found a place to be alone and fall apart.

Every week I sit across from women and men who have been sexually assaulted by members of their families. In over 15 years of practice, only two have witnessed the public withdrawal of privilege of their abusers. This is a [fair representation](#) of the statistical likelihood of abuse allegations leading to prosecution in Australia. The rest, including the daughters and sons of church officials, police officers, doctors, politicians and celebrities, have had to face the continued public adulation of their abusers alongside their silent suffering or public discrediting

So it both astounds and saddens me that in the outcry about Dylan Farrow's accusations, a common response has been that it's none of our business, that instead it's a matter for the family. Actor Alec Baldwin, asked by Farrow and his own fans to acknowledge that he may have played some part in supporting her accused abuser by continuing to work with him, responded with the following tweet: 'What the f&@% is wrong w u that u think we all need to b commenting on this family's personal struggle?'

Cate Blanchett, also named in Farrow's open letter, responded with [sympathy](#) for the family.

Sexual assault is not a family issue. As our own Royal Commission into institutional responses to child abuse so recently tried to teach us, it's a widespread public health issue that touches us all. We are all responsible for the protection of children. Given the current estimated abuse [statistics](#) that one in three women and one in six men will be sexually assaulted before the age of 16, it is extremely unlikely that we haven't lived with, worked with, played with or studied with someone who has abused a child.

We are all surrounded by women, children and men who have a history of sexual abuse. If we leave sexual assault up to the family, then we create a large social circle of protection around abusive men and women, and we leave a small number of family members to fight the sexual abuse of children alone.

There has been an enormous amount of speculation about whether these allegations are true. But that is not our question to answer. It is not even our business. Our business when there have been allegations of sexual assault against one of our friends, colleagues, heroes or family members is not to act like amateur detectives.

There is a real ethical concern when allegations that have been denied in court continue to be raised publicly. But at the same time, we need to acknowledge the court system's history of inadequacy in the area of sexual abuse and family violence. We need to be able to forge a difficult balance between making space for ongoing doubt and fuelling public vilification.

Our job can only be to listen when we are called to hear. Farrow has asked to be heard and like many who make accusations of sexual assault, she has been temporarily silenced in two very familiar ways: by speculation about the truth of her accusations and by a kind of terrible decorum that holds family privacy above safety.

We can avoid contributing to the silencing of victims by allowing ourselves to ask questions. Not about veracity but about sexual abuse itself. How can we be of assistance here? What can we do to ensure that we are not complicit? We need to take accusations of sexual assault seriously enough to suspend our belief in talent, prestige, power, beauty and position long enough to hear that our idols may be monstrous at home.

And we need to stop being complicit in the silencing of victims of sexual abuse by pretending it's a family matter. We keep hearing that it takes a community to raise a child. But it only takes one or two people to step back and throw their hands in the air for that child to fall.

## **Old age is not for sissies**

CREATIVE

*Gillian Bouras*

On New Year's Eve, I went with my son and his family to lunch at the oldest hotel in Kalamata, which has a comfortable atmosphere and a buffet selection that suits my two grandsons, who are now seven and five.

On entering, I noticed a man and a woman at separate tables. Neither, I judged, would see 80 again, and I sent silent messages of congratulation their way, for Greeks generally hate being alone and hate being seen to be alone even more. But sometimes they have no choice.

Meal over, we were putting our coats on when the old man came over, and addressed my son and his wife. 'I just wanted to congratulate you,' he said, 'on the children's perfect behaviour at table.' Of course this was music to parental and grandmotherly ears: I was proud of Nikitas and Maximus. But then I was proud of their parents as well, for the old man wanted to talk, and did so for at least ten minutes while my son and his wife listened and conversed politely and enthusiastically: Greeks are not embarrassed or awkward in the presence of the old.

Later I mentioned the loneliness of old age to my son, and remarked on the courage those two people had shown in fighting it during the festive season. These matters are still academic to him, but he nodded, while I made a mental note to mention Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight' at an appropriate time.

In rural Greece, it is still considered shameful to instal an old relative in a home, and most aged people see their days out in the bosom of the family. My local shopkeeper, for example, has her mother and her mother-in-law living with her. Both are in their 90s, and are hale and hearty: they take an interest in customers and in doing chores around the shop.

As well as company, routines and habits are important, as I observed again in the case of an old man I saw while waiting for my bus. He'd taken time off from chatting with his cronies near the betting shop in order to tame a recalcitrant branch of jasmine nearby. Between us we managed it, with the aid of his walking stick, and he immediately assumed the air of the pleased and practised gardener.

That same day, I had taken a handwritten journal extract to be photocopied: the piece had been written by someone who lived through the German occupation. The man doing the copying glanced at the pages, and said, 'How well I remember my grandfather and his stories of that time.' He and his grandfather had been inseparable companions, he said, and his face lit up at the memory of this valued person.

London journalist Adrian Gill, always trenchant in his opinions, speaks out regularly against the neglect of the old in Britain. 'This,' he has written, 'is the greatest shame and horror of our time.' But there is much worse than just simple neglect: the abuse of the aged is a particularly nasty problem of the iceberg variety; in both Britain and Australia very few cases are reported, and even fewer perpetrators punished. Yet surely our treatment of the old is a basic measure of our humanity?

Gill refers to the 'incremental shutdown' of old age, and ageing does involve sorrow and loss: there is a process of mourning for past youth and missed opportunities. British Prime Minister Disraeli, who died at the age of 77 after a life of great and varied achievement, stated that old age was a regret, while noted Hollywood star Bette Davis (pictured, in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane*) roundly declared 'Old age is no place for sissies.' She had a point: ageing is hard work, and takes guts.

Of coursethere are, at best, compensations: the freedom in not caring as much about what other people think, the pleasure of grandchildren, gratitude for good health, many memories, and the great gift of time. But still, there's the loneliness. The proverb states that it takes a village to raise a child; each community should also look after its elderly. In and at the end, we all need a hand to hold.

## **The Bible LOL**

CREATIVE

*Geoff Page*

### **Jesting with Job**

They say there's humour in the Bible  
but I am not so sure.

The scholars cite a joke or two.

Why aren't there rather more?

They say there's punning in the Hebrew.

I'll take their word on that.

And ironies, of course, abound  
in God's Magnificat.

'He that sitteth in the heavens  
shall laugh,' we're told — and, yes,  
we have no trouble seeing why.

In Proverbs, I confess,  
we find an inner smile or two  
or wince of moral truth,  
a grin perhaps less pretty when  
we lose an eye or tooth.

The Book of Psalms (one twenty-six)  
has mouths that 'filled with laughter' —  
but that's no consolation if  
a smiting's coming after.

The Song of Solomon, they say,  
is good for jokey quotes:  
that bad-hair day when Sheba's locks  
were 'as a flock of goats'.

Scholars argue Jesus had  
a penchant for the comic.



His turn of phrase, I must concede,  
can often be ironic:  
vide, Peter, named the 'Rock',  
who leaves him in the lurch;  
vide, Peter, bouncing back  
in Rome to found a church.  
One parable might fit the bill —  
that story of the son  
whose brother has to fatten calves  
while he's off having fun.  
Humour, down from Aristotle,  
is hellish to define —  
but camels through the eyes of needles?  
Water into wine?  
My Jewish and my Christian friends  
can get a little tribal  
but in their dinner repartee  
there's not much from the Bible —  
although my Jewish colleagues manage  
quotes from Genesis;  
they sniff out humour there among  
its threats and menaces.  
The Book of Job is is hardly stand-up.  
God hands him lots of strife.  
His poor 'bowels boiled; and rested not' —  
which hardly pleased his wife  
who also found his breath was 'strange'.  
The moral though runs deep.  
Much much later, Job was given  
'fourteen thousand sheep'.

There may be nonsense in the Gnostics  
(who failed to get the nod)  
but they're, of course, apocryphal,  
and not approved by God.  
Some say the triumph over death  
may bring an airy smile —  
St Peter's cheerful applicants  
lined up in single file.  
The Bible's handed down from heaven,  
suitably embossed  
(we like to think) in English but  
with all the wisecracks lost.  
I type them back as God looks on  
to save me from conceit.  
It may be just be a year or two  
before my job's complete.

### **Twirps**

How well-suited words can be!  
'Twirp', for instance. Etym. dub.  
'Stupid or annoying fellow',  
less than welcome at the club.  
'Smart-arse' isn't quite the same;  
a 'smart-arse' can't compete with breeding.  
Twirps are upper middle class —  
and rarely find their heart is bleeding.  
To hunt them down's not hard — although  
a silver spoon may be required.  
Private schools can be of use.  
Debating also, three a side.  
Twirps aspire to leadership

but check in short on gravitas.  
Their running commentary suggests  
less the racehorse, more the ass.  
Twirps annoy, by definition —  
often more than half the nation  
though sometimes one may rise to be  
the Minister for Education.  
Sense of humour is essential;  
twirps are quick to sneer and laugh.  
Since life's a mere debating point  
a silly grin's their epitaph.

### **Seven births and seven deaths**

How often did she think about  
the old man I would need to be  
if all her hopes were granted?  
At the end, her seven kids,  
mostly in their sixties then,  
had somehow all survived  
the trickeries of gravel,  
the cancer genes, the wayward hearts  
and all the accidents in turn  
a station life can offer.  
How far forward did she worry?  
For those who had to leave she wished  
a job, a marriage (happy mainly),  
a pension in good time,  
a house to raise the child or two  
who at the end would see them off.  
Flood-grey in my early thirties,  
I must have spooked her just a little.

Did she see me stooped already,  
skinny wrists and thinning hair,  
tilting on a frame  
with one small room and three sad meals,  
not so unlike the boarding school  
that housed my adolescence?

She had no time for such addresses  
and checked out via a heart attack  
the night she ended up in one.  
Being protestant and prudent,  
she'd surely thought some way ahead  
but never quite too far.

How old were we in her mind?  
Somewhere still we lived as children  
roaming paddocks, riding ponies,  
clambering on rocks or swimming  
all day in the seaward pools,  
the carefree '40s/'50s childhood  
before our marital adventures,  
the wash-in of the grandkids with  
their several degrees of charm,  
an easy sense of repetition  
though never quite the same.

Seventeen there were, with smiles,  
but nothing could replace her seven.  
Our futures and their outer limits  
must be our own concern.

She always said that she'd be gone —  
and so would never have to see  
the slow varieties of decline

or rationing of sudden deaths  
the life she'd handed us required.

Beyond those nineteenth century maxims,  
she never talked about it much.

Her own (rejected) diminutions  
were numerous enough —

why bother to foreshadow others'?

Seven births are seven deaths.

Seven fadings-from-the-frame  
or sharp obliterations

may help ensure that we, like her,  
contrive it so we do not see  
what happens to our children.

## **Don't rob the poor to pay the rich**

### ECONOMICS

*Bruce Duncan*

Travelling around rural and coastal towns, you cannot fail to notice the number of shops that have closed or are empty. Despite the overall good economic figures for Australia, many businesses are struggling. In addition, some of our major industries, including car manufacturing and refineries, are moving offshore resulting in big job losses, hitting towns like Geelong very hard.

Minister for Social Services Kevin Andrews is introducing a review of income transfers, particularly to the unemployed and those on disability benefits. He has said that the aged pensions will not be touched, though this is where most of the problem lies.

The age pension costs Australia \$36 billion a year, a third of total welfare spending, with Family Payments costing \$26 billion. In the last ten years, the cost of the age pension has increased by nearly \$13 billion, but only \$5 billion of this was due to ageing of the population. The rest of it resulted from generous changes to entitlements and eligibility.

The then shadow treasurer Joe Hockey on 17 April 2012 told the Institute of Economic Affairs in London that 'all developed countries are now facing the end of the era of universal entitlement'. He continued: 'Addressing the ongoing fiscal crises will involve the winding back of universal access to payments and entitlements from the state.' What might this mean?

The cost of various entitlements varied from \$15 billion for the Disability Support Pension, \$8 billion for Newstart, and \$5 billion for Parenting Payments. Yet rather than causing a blow-out in the budget, as a proportion of the overall economy these payments have actually decreased over the last ten years.

One would welcome a review of the Newstart benefit of \$36 a day for a single person aged 22 to 65 (\$250.50 a week), which is only 45 per cent of the after-tax minimum wage and \$130 below the poverty line. Compare this with the aged pension rate at \$53 day. The Newstart payment is unconscionably low. Even the Business Council of Australia supports an increase in the Newstart allowance, by \$50 a week in the view of welfare advocates. Newstart is very important in helping tide people over while searching for jobs, and is already tightly targeted.

The numbers of unemployed have been trending up from a low in July 2011 of 4.9 per cent to 5.8 per cent in December 2013, numbering 716,000 people. In December full-time jobs decreased by 31,600, though this was partially compensated by an increase of part-time employment of 9000.

This unexpected jump in unemployment may be partly explained by the Government from January 2013 moving 75,000 people off Parenting Payments to

Newstart when one's child reached six years of age (for a couple) or eight years of age (for a single parent).

Quite properly the Government needs to work towards a more balanced budget after the deficit spending that protected Australia during the worst of the Global Financial Crisis. But as is evident from the European experience, austerity budgets and drastic cuts to spending only drive economies down further. As J. M. Keynes argued powerfully in the Great Depression, governments must stimulate and manage the economy in the interests of the whole people, especially the unemployed.

Had the Howard Government not been so generous with its tax cuts to upper and middle income groups, there would today be no budget deficit. The problem for later federal governments was how to restore adequate tax income, against the populist mantra of 'no new taxes'.

In large part, the answer lies in restoring greater equity to the tax system, especially by eliminating overly generous income transfers via tax concessions to upper income groups. For instance, government doles out largesse to wealthier groups through tax concessions on superannuation, negative gearing on house investments, tax deductions of billions of dollars a year to the mining industry for fuel, along with tax loopholes like family trusts, mortgage offset accounts and other devices.

Governments all over the world, including Australia's, are now making serious efforts to curtail transfer pricing by major transnationals, depriving countries of billions of dollars of tax by moving profits to pop up in low-taxed countries like Ireland. Google made profits of Â£900 million in the UK in 2012, but paid only Â£11.6 million in corporate tax. Google is not alone in such massive tax evasion.

The budget problems of the Federal Government are not caused by Newstart or disability pensions, which have been declining as a proportion of economic activity. The problems largely derive from inadequate tax revenue.

## Vulnerable victims of government hit-and-run

AUSTRALIA

*Irfan Yusuf*

Could this humble Sydney-sider make an observation about Melbourne drivers? It seems each time I see them wait for a pedestrian, they can barely restrain the urge to run the poor person over. The other day in Footscray, I saw one driver turning right at an intersection menacingly moving his vehicle forward to a poor fellow in a wheelchair moving quite lawfully in the other direction. As if to make the fellow even more terrified, the forward moves were accompanied by a horn and a few f-words.

You'd expect a responsible driver to give way to a pedestrian at an intersection. Pedestrians can't hold out their palm to stop a car. Pedestrians, whether old or young or disabled, are vulnerable. Pedestrians are individuals.

Similar observations could be made about how our politicians confront the most vulnerable individuals. Apparently we live in a liberal democracy, and the focus of the state is on protecting such individuals' rights. So why are we now once again hearing politicians sitting in their comfortable offices with access to staffers and spin doctors use their Commonwealth cars to run over income support recipients? Why focus on making the often precarious positions of dole payees, single mums and disability support pensioners even harder?

And why don't we see Liberal MPs question the generous welfare entitlements of middle and upper-middle class Australians? Why won't Labor MPs fess up to their past sins in this area? Instead we read Jenny Macklin in *The Australian* on 27 January proudly declaring that 'recent history shows that when it comes to getting results, only Labor can keep our social security system sustainable and strong'. Indeed. And at whose cost?

Today thousands more single parents are sitting on the crumbs of Newstart. This is due to 'reforms' introduced during the office of Australia's first female prime minister which disproportionately affect women (and their children), such as the severe restrictions on access to the Parenting Payment.

Labor also oversaw rule changes that make it harder for genuinely disabled people to access the DSP. Why is it that people with less severe MS who can barely walk without a stick, frequently lose their balance, and cannot perform many household chores let alone do manual labour, are ineligible for the DSP?

The Liberals seem intent on pursuing the ALP's approach of punishing the vulnerable. Human Services Minister Kevin Andrews refuses to see any reduction in the often middle class welfare dished out to 2.3 million aged pensioners. Instead he wishes to make life harder for Newstart and DSP recipients and applicants.



The irony is that business lobbies have been clamouring for Newstart to be increased. Conservative economists such as Judith Sloan and Ian Harper have said the same. Harper told *The Age* on 16 October 2011: 'When your living standards are going down like that, people get desperate and depressed. The system is out of kilter. And if they stay on it long enough, they get depression and then they're moved on to the DSP.'

And here's more bad news for the average punter. The Social Security Act is among the more complex pieces of Commonwealth legislation. This Act (and its associated regulations and departmental policy) is almost impossible for your average solicitor to understand, let alone the average punter. Centrelink officers make mistakes. You can appeal their decisions. The broad appeal procedure looks deceptively simple in a brochure. But wait until you actually have to appeal the potentially incorrect Centrelink decision.

If you apply to Centrelink and are knocked back, you can go for an internal review. If you are knocked back there, you can try the Social Security Appeals Tribunal (SSAT). Centrelink don't turn up to tribunal hearings, which often are done over the phone. Instead, Centrelink send a bundle of documents about your application which the tribunal then sends onto you. Good luck if you can understand much of it.

If you get knocked back at the SSAT, you need to go to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT). It's here that you definitely need a lawyer. The procedures and court documents prepared along the way are not easy to follow. The hearing itself is held in a formal court room. The legislation being argued over is complex and often the subject of much judicial interpretation.

You can always try your luck on your own. You will be up against a trained lawyer from the Department of Human Services who knows the legislation inside out and probably conducts 2–3 AAT hearings a week.

You can always contact legal aid in your state or territory. Not all legal aid offices handle tribunal appeals, preferring to focus on defending clients being prosecuted for social security offences. In which case, you can try contacting a welfare rights solicitor working in a community legal centre. Many centres won't have the resources to take on your appeal, and are likely to give you advice.

If reforms to the social security system mean more complexity to the Act, surely punters should be able to access more expert advice and representation.

People on income support, at least those who really need it (as opposed to those whose votes are needed by the incumbent government), are the kind of people liberal democracies need to assist. MPs refusing to do so, who instead make disparaging remarks and pass despicable legislation, will hopefully find themselves in a Centrelink queue after the next election.

## **Obama's cannabis defence illuminates NSW booze laws**

INTERNATIONAL

*Ruby Hamad*

Last week US president Obama surprised many by [claiming](#) in a New Yorker interview that marijuana is 'less dangerous' than alcohol 'in terms of its impact on the individual consumer'.

The statement was made amidst the legalisation of cannabis in Colorado and Washington, which Obama called an important 'experiment'. Although careful not to endorse the drug (he explicitly stated he would discourage his own daughters from partaking), Obama nonetheless drew swift and heavy criticism.

The Drug-Free America Foundation [claimed](#) the president is 'either seriously ill-informed ... or is completely ignoring warnings from his highly-esteemed advisers'.

The American Society of Addiction Medicine released a statement saying marijuana impairs memory, motor function and respiratory health, while the National Institute on Drug Abuse pointed to the drug's highly addictive nature, with 4.2 million Americans either addicted to or abusing it in 2011 alone.

In mistaking comparison for endorsement, Obama's critics spectacularly missed his point.

Far from giving the drug his presidential seal of approval, Obama was attempting to start a conversation, on societal attitudes to marijuana versus alcohol certainly, but primarily on the way marijuana laws disproportionately affect black and Hispanic communities: 'Middle-class kids don't get locked up for smoking pot, and poor kids do ... And African-American kids and Latino kids are more likely to be poor and less likely to have the resources and the support to avoid unduly harsh penalties.'

Obama has highlighted an obvious double standard at work and the reasons for its existence must be explored.

Cannabis use is targeted with a fervour that saw eight million arrests from 2001—2010. And yet alcohol, despite its own addictiveness (one 2007 study [found](#) that 30 per cent of Americans will abuse booze at some point in their lives), is not only socially accepted but widely encouraged.

But pointing out that marijuana may not be as dangerous as alcohol is not the same as saying it is harmless.

Indeed, a recent long-term study has [indicated](#) that cannabis affects young brains differently than those of adults, leaving teenage users 'at risk of permanent damage to their intelligence, attention span and memory'.

While such findings are used as justification both for criminalisation and harsh

punishment, the already legal status of alcohol makes it easier to excuse its own destructive qualities. These [include](#) impaired brain function, increased risk of some cancers, liver disease, weakened immune system, loss of concentration, and decreased productivity. Then there is the problem of alcohol-fuelled violence, which I will get to a little later.

To quibble over which drug is more harmful is to misread Obama's statements. The real question is, why is marijuana treated as a legal issue and not one of public health?

The answer certainly involves race, as Obama well knows. The president is not, as his detractors so often [accuse](#) him, 'playing the race card' when he says the criminalisation of marijuana disproportionately affects blacks. The *Washington Post* [reported](#) earlier this month:

Black Americans are almost four times more likely to be arrested (for cannabis possession) than whites. While white and black Americans use marijuana at roughly similar rates — though whites aged 18 to 25 consistently surpass their black peers — arrest rates are nowhere near comparable ... African Americans represented 14 per cent of drug users ... yet accounted for 34 per cent of all drug arrests and 53 per cent of those sent to prison for a drug offense.

It would be a stretch to say marijuana remains illegal simply to keep black people in prison, but the 'war on drugs' does help America's private prisons turn a [profit](#). Mandatory minimum sentences for many drug-related crimes (including simple possession) has seen the prison population increase by 700 per cent in the last few decades (despite violent crime rates decreasing). One in six federal prisoners is in a for-profit institution.

It's no surprise then that private prison corporations are among those special interest groups funding the war on drugs. As this MSNBC report notes, the top three private prison companies have spent over \$45 million on lobbying and campaign donations to pro-drug-war politicians over the last decade.

Other parties paying to keep marijuana illegal include [pharmaceutical companies](#), who would see a large dent in profits if medicinal marijuana was legal, and [alcohol distributors](#), who would also suffer losses should recreational users have a legal option to choose cannabis.

And in a nation still divided bitterly along race lines, blacks, and to a lesser extent Hispanics, bear the brunt of the prisons-for-profit program. Not only are they more likely to be arrested, charged and imprisoned, but also — as Obama noted — the entrenched discrimination that sees more minorities living in poverty means they are less likely to have the resources to escape punishment.

The perils of mandatory sentencing should also serve as something of a warning to NSW, which has announced mandatory minimum sentences as a [response](#) to alcohol-fuelled violence. First time offenders convicted of one-punch assaults could

likely find themselves with much [harsher sentences](#) than long-time criminals, depending on whether alcohol was a factor in an attack. Which goes to show that it's not about which drug is more dangerous but how society chooses to deal with each one and why.

This is the conversation America should be having in the wake of Obama's comments. Drug dependence is a public health issue but the unholy alliance of capitalism and racism means the lives of minorities are effectively destroyed for a crime that's usually punished with little more than a slap on the wrist when committed by whites.

## ABC should lose international TV channel

MEDIA

*Michael Mullins*

Those who understand the role of public service broadcasting in a democracy have dismissed as absurd Prime Minister Tony Abbott's accusation that the ABC is unpatriotic.

Speaking to Ray Hadley on commercial radio station 2GB, Abbott criticised the ABC's coverage of news stories relating to Indonesian spying leaks and asylum seeker abuse claims. He said: 'A lot of people feel at the moment that the ABC instinctively takes everyone's side but Australia's.'

Even the Government's own Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull dismissed the comment when [speaking](#) to Leigh Sales on 7.30.

There is nothing in [the ABC Charter] that says that it should be nationalistic. The big issue, Leigh, is accuracy and balance and this is where you as a broadcaster and the ABC have got a very different role to, say, a talkback host on commercial radio 'cause you have to be — you are bound to be balanced and objective, accurate and fair.

Turnbull should make a fine Communications Minister if he is able to impress upon the Prime Minister this grasp of the essentials of public service broadcasting, which has nothing to do with patriotism or nationalism.

Far from it in fact. Being patriotic is about selling a nation's positive self-image within and beyond its borders. Like selling in general, it gives priority to persuasion and good feeling over truth and a balanced perspective.

But it can be electorally rewarding for a government to have voters deluded into knowing only what is good about their nation and their government's performance. They are shielded from knowledge of ugly realities such as the country's shameful treatment of asylum seekers. Media manipulation is a successful strategy of leaders of pariah states such as Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, who manages to remain relatively popular despite his appalling record of service to the people.

If patriotism took hold of our public service media, we'd need to resort to foreign media to discover unpalatable truths about our country such as the living conditions of Indigenous Australians. Already we sometimes learn from foreign media hard truths about our nation that are ignored or glossed over by our own media.

Unfortunately the ABC has muddied its own waters with its pursuit of the non-core activity of running the Government's Australia Network international television service. The network's role is described as 'soft diplomacy' on Australia's behalf, and its mission is precisely patriotism. There is no mention of truth, accuracy and balance on the 'about us' [page](#) of its website, because that's not the

essence of what it's about. What matters most is the 'uniquely Australian perspective'.

So the Government could be doing the ABC a favour if it axes the Australia Network in the May Budget in line with media speculation during the past week. The ABC would be left to pursue unambiguously its mission of truth, accuracy and impartiality in reporting good and bad news about our nation and its government.