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Moment of moral truth

EDITORIAL

Published *24-Jul-2006*

As we write this editorial, United Nations relief coordinator Jan Egeland has condemned the destruction caused by Israeli airstrikes in Beirut as a 'violation of humanitarian law'. Meanwhile the website of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert leads with his proclamation to the Members of Knesset: ”This is a National Moment of Truth”.

If the microphone had been left on during a conversation between George W. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, we might have heard words of praise from the US President - ”Nice work” perhaps. What we did hear in the actual electronic gaffe was equally disturbing. As *The Observer* put it on Sunday, ”When Tony Blair offers himself as a Middle East peace envoy, he is casually rebuffed by the American President between bites on a bread roll”. Bush tells him: ”Condi is going”. A moment of truth.

The effort to evacuate Australians was a distraction for Australia's leaders. Still, Alexander Downer was was quick to justify Israel's actions: ”They are trying to destroy Hezbollah, which is trying, in turn, to destroy Israel”. That was before we heard the UN's Jan Egeland describe the results of those efforts as a ”violation of international humanitarian law”. We expect to hear Downer develop his view during the course of the week.

In this issue of *Eureka Street*, Andrew Hamilton identifies the cost as the diminishment of humanity of both the agents and the victims of the violence. He says humanity also requires a certain standard in the conditions of daily life for the citizens of a country. Human dignity suffers in the face of poverty and insecurity, in various measures, in Lebanon, Palestine and Israel.

In another article, Muath Amayreh of the Australian National University regrets that Israel's actions will cause a deviation in the attempts of many Arabs and Muslims to understand the Western World. In fear, he is moved to quote the response of the prophet Kahil Gibran when asked about good and evil: ”When good is hungry it seeks food in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead water”.

This edition also sees the welcome return of Anthony Ham, a Eureka Street contributor of many years standing who looks at some of the poorest nations of the world; Jack Waterford, who gives us his take on events in Canberra in his Capital Letter; Morag Fraser, former editor, on the images that have stayed with her in a week of madness and bloodshed, and Brian Matthews, author, critic, and sage, who spins his globe of memory, and is surprised at what he finds.

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This is the sixth online issue of Eureka Street. Changes have been coming thick and fast for the magazine, and there are more to come. We have been taking on board the comments and criticisms of our readers, and have been working towards making a better site since the day we pressed the publish button for the first time. Some of the changes we have made, or will continue to make, have and will include easier access to the PDF of the edition; a Breaking News section, which will continue to grow into one of the central features of the site; an archive of the work of our cartoonist, Chris Johnston; and an ever-growing archive of back issues.

Some of the articles in Eureka Street will soon be locked. When this occurs, only our subscribers will be able to access all of our archives, the PDF of the edition, and every article we publish in each edition. We will continue to work to provide material for both our casual readers and our subscribers, but there will soon be some articles that cannot be accessed by non-subscribers. All subscribers, if they have not been provided with a password, will receive one in the coming weeks.

Images that stick in my mind

COLUMNS

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Out of the chaos of the past weeks, three images fix themselves in my mind.

The first: a fragment from the Sunday night news. A young boy, sitting at the bedside of his injured, bandaged brother declares that 'they' should have to suffer like this. 'They' should have to pay. I don't even remember now whether the boy was Israeli or Lebanese.

The second: the blackened, pocked face of Australian, John Tulloch, as he emerged last year from London's Edgware Road Tube Station, swathed in an incongruous, violet emergency blanket. His bare chest is vulnerable and pink, his head bandage held in place by a blue silk tie. From his suit buttons dangles a green label: PRIORITY 3.

The third: a view from a balcony. A Jewish friend forwards me an email from an Israeli woman, Gila Svirsky, who has just bought an apartment under construction in Nahariya, five miles south of the Lebanese border. 'The sweetest little town on the Mediterranean coast', she calls it. But now, 'had the balcony already been built, we would have been able to watch the Israeli navy array itself along the coast, laying siege to Lebanon.'

If only the boy could be educated by the woman. If only the man could mentor both boys.

Gila Svirsky has seen the damage done by Hezbollah's Katyusha rockets. She has also seen the Israeli shelling of Gaza and Lebanon. She condones neither. 'As if shelling is sure to make the Hezbollah leaders remorseful and let our boys come home.'

She and the boy might ask one another who is meant by 'they'. Given time, perhaps they might make a tentative start on 'we'.

John Tulloch has spent his own time lying in hospital, bandaged and vertiginous, with glass shrapnel extruding from his body. Now he has turned the experience into a first person account. A professor of media and sociology, Tulloch has written *One Day in July*(published by Little, Brown), a book in which he refuses to be seen just as a victim. Just as resolutely, he won't be co-opted into the 'war on terror'.

The most moving part of Tulloch's book is its postscript, 'Another, better day', addressed to Mohammad Sidique Khan, the young Englishman who sat briefly across the carriage from Tulloch before detonating his bomb. Tulloch talks about his several memories of

Khan, including a photograph and description of him as a teaching assistant in Beeston: 'gently spoken, endlessly patient and hugely popular with children'.

Elsewhere Tulloch invokes the words of Nobel Prize-winning English playwright, Harold Pinter, 'unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation.' And he remembers other, allied kinds of obligation met by those who helped him at Edgware Road, and who went on helping throughout his recovery, not out of nationalism but out of professional commitment and complex human decency. 'That, too, is the determination of citizenship', writes Tulloch. And to Mohammad Sidique Khan, 'You could have been part of that citizenship, which I think you once thought hard about when you were a learning mentor in Beeston. Instead, you choose to kill us. That ... is not the way to another, better day.'

The young man at his brother's bedside and calling for vengeance needs such counsel while he is still alive to profit from it.

Tulloch and Svirsky are both scathing about opportunistic patriotism, about media manipulation and the politics of fear. Tulloch, as a media specialist, is particularly well placed to analyse spin, to look behind simplistic explanations of complex human actions, to examine motive. He notes the current resurgence of interest in Greek drama in Britain. These are plays, he observes, that don't permit easy 'them and us' explanations of human action, plays which examine the tragic consequences of generational violence and the futility of the all-too-human reflex of 'They should pay'.

The better way? It is to be found in the companionship of ordinary Londoners who helped restore John Tulloch's health and confidence. It is embodied in my Jewish friend who passes on Gila Svirsky's belief that her corner of the Mediterranean will again hold sailboats not warships. It's modest, implacable and we can all manage it.

The *World Game* of ecumenical dialogue

COLUMNS

Summa theologiae

Published *24-Jul-2006*

I left for Faverges, a charming alpine village in the north-east of France, on the opening day of the FIFA World Cup. Flying first to London, I saw glimpses of the opening ceremony could be seen at Singapore airport. A friend and I stood in a pub near Soho on a balmy — and, indeed, 'barmy' — London Saturday afternoon to witness England sneak home against a valiant Paraguay.

The newly appointed Standing Commission of Faith and Order was to gather in Geneva a few days later at the Ecumenical Centre of the World Council of Churches. Arriving slightly ahead of time in this great centre of the Reformation in continental Europe, my catholic sensibilities tingled at contact with their 'other' in the new museum dedicated to the same, and in the church in which Calvin preached for some eight years.

The United Nations precinct, dreamy Lake Geneva with its *jet d'eau*, and local shrines to Genevan-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau stirred the Romantic humanist within, such that come Monday afternoon, having found a quiet cafÃ© with a plasma screen wherein to enjoy the fact that I wouldn't have to sit up until the small hours on a 'school night' in order to watch the Socceroos first match, I didn't really mind which team won — at least not until the 84th, 89th, and 92nd minutes! Tuesday evening afforded a more contextual television viewing experience as Switzerland and France played out an all-French-speaking draw.

The next day we were bussed across the border between these two nations and began the business of our meeting: establishing an agenda for the next seven years of this longstanding multi-lateral ecumenical dialogue (Faith and Order preceded the formation of the World Council by some twenty years, established in nearby Lausanne in 1927) — one that is privileged by the full participation of the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox family of churches. According to its By-laws, 'The aim of Faith and Order is to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship... in order that the world may believe.' Within that broad objective, the specific task of the Standing Commission is 'to study such questions of faith, order and worship as bear on this aim and to examine such social, cultural, political, racial and other factors as affect the unity of the Church.'

That this mandate can be interpreted to include deep theological reflection on major international sporting events was agreed by unspoken consensus. Our opening worship after dinner that first

evening concluded just in time to allow many of the thirty Commissioners — plus WCC staff, and other consultants present — to watch the start of the 'late game' between host nation, Germany, and Poland. The salt and vinegar chips were passed to me by a Presbyterian Commissioner from Cameroon, and on in turn to an Argentinian Methodist, while a German Lutheran scouted around for some wine. The General Secretary of the WCC, a Kenyan, who had come to help open the meeting, and delegates from Malaysia, India, and elsewhere, looked on with amused and luxuriant disinterest at the proceedings, and the Brazilian WCC staff member bore patiently the awed anticipatory taunts of all those from merely mortal football-playing nations.

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote: 'I know of no other method of dealing with great tasks but play.' The FIFA World Cup is an intrusion of the carnivalesque into 'realpolitik' — a moment every four years when the nations devote themselves quite deliberately to the serious business of being playful. The rules of the game become the grammar of discourse; whilst boundaries are not erased, they are experienced differently, tested, and sometimes redrawn; and there is a certain suspension of disbelief that things could ever actually be this way for more than ninety minutes at a time.

Ecumenical dialogue — an ecclesial carnival rather than a contest — might usefully see itself as making just such a contribution to the great task of proclaiming the theologically essential, if historically incomplete, oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ that the world may believe. Not so much, I would venture, that the world may believe in Jesus Christ, as would believe that the churches can model more creative ways of living with difference than they, or 'it' have managed to date.

Subject to the WCC's approval of its proposed study agenda, in the years ahead Faith and Order will address potentially church-dividing issues relating to biblical interpretation, theological anthropology (including human sexuality), religious pluralism, mutual recognition of baptism, and other aspects of ecclesiology. Weighty matters, all. Yet if the playfulness Nietzsche commends attends our work during this period, we might just achieve that necessary suspension of disbelief whereby the shape and form of a more visible unity and eucharistic fellowship can at least be safely imagined.

Mid-East crisis triggers 1974 memory

COLUMNS

By the way

Published *24-Jul-2006*

The disaster in Lebanon triggered something in my memory, the way these tragedies sometimes do, and the undisciplined memories run away on a wild tangent… |

It is October 1974. I am working at the University of Exeter when I receive an invitation from a Professor Reggie Smith at the University of Ulster to speak at a conference he is running on Australian literature. Northern Ireland is in tumult: Belfast is racked by bombings, street battles and burnings when I land at Aldergrove Airport. It is, I am assured, 'the worst night in the worst week' since 'the troubles' had resumed in 1968. But that's another story.

Professor Reggie Smith picks me up the next day as arranged and we set off for the conference in Derry through bleak mists and intermittent whipping rain. He is an interesting bloke, Reggie. Tall, balding down to grey, fluttering wisps, running to fat round a capacious waist, he seems on first acquaintance bumbling and hail-fellow-well met, vaguely aristocratic in that stuttering, hesitant upper class way under cover of which the Poms used to condescend to culturally deprived colonials.

But Reggie has more to him than that. A brilliant cricketer in his day, he had played in Australia and was in the NSW Sheffield Shield squad. He played county cricket in England with distinction, and also first class Rugby Union. Marrying on the eve of World War II, he took his new wife to his new job in Bucharest. When, in October 1940, Ion Antonescu invited German troops to enter Romania and Bucharest was occupied, Reggie and his wife managed to leave the city minutes ahead of the occupiers. They escaped to Athens, then precariously to Egypt and finally to Jerusalem from where they returned to London in 1946 and renounced at last their nomadic and dangerous existence.

This story emerges as we drive through sunshine and shadow, mist and rain, on our way to Derry. The more Reggie fills in the details — he is a loquacious, digressive, often distracted anecdotalist, so the narrative inches out slowly and takes its shape reluctantly — the more I have the eerie feeling I've heard something like it before. I search my memory for whatever cues I can find to explain this sense of familiarity and suddenly it's obvious.

'You know,' I say to him, risking a somewhat personal observation, 'your story is amazing. It sounds like it belongs in a novel. Something like Olivia Manning's *The Balkan Trilogy*.' I'd just finished it and my head was full of the story. The similarities with Reggie's experiences were amazing. 'Have you read it?' I ask him.

He looks at me for long seconds — an alarming few moments, since we are belting along the highway at great speed and I have already noticed that he is an erratic driver at the best of times.

'Olivia Manning,' he says, 'is my wife. So, yes, I know *The Balkans Trilogy* rather well.'

Absurdly, I feel like apologising because in that instant I understand, far more than I had when reading it, that the trilogy is intensely, sometimes nakedly autobiographical — not only in its account of their travels and escapes but also, and much more importantly, in its revelations and analysis of the strains placed upon the marriage by danger and stress, by flight and fear, and by the hero Guy Pringle's (which meant presumably Reggie's) tendency to heedless adventurism. It is an awkward moment but Reggie reverts to his bluff, dithering mode and we survive it well enough. He tells me that his wife would have been with him to attend the seminar but she had badly injured her hand some months ago and was still in some pain and distress. When I returned to Exeter, he suggests, I should come up to London and meet her at their flat and then we would go to the Rugby.

Some years later, I examined the Olivia Manning papers. In a letter to her close friend, Kay Dick, on 30 July 1974, Olivia Manning mentions that her hand is 'swollen still and aches a lot.' I didn't ever meet her because she was still in pain and unwell when I rejoined Reggie in London. I did, however, get to the Rugby. We went to the All England trial at Twickenham on an afternoon so grey and freezing that you felt your bones might crack. Body warmth was maintained, however, by liberal recourse to one of the several flasks of whisky Reggie had thoughtfully provided. Afterwards, we went to a pub where I met some of his friends, who were all very amiable versions of Reggie, and we drank pints of warm beer in a smoky atmosphere of great and increasing bonhomie.

And that was how I didn't meet the famous author, Olivia Manning.

Opportunity passes over Beazley and Costello

COLUMNS

Capital letter

Published *24-Jul-2006*

The feeling I have long had in the pit of my stomach, that neither Peter Costello nor Kim Beazley will ever be Prime Minister of Australia, has been reinforced in recent months. Just precisely what defeats either —the times, events, and a certain want to tinker, in pushing their ambition to the brink — is still in the balance.

Kim Beazley has been, in recent times, in much the same position in the opinion polls as he, and Labor, has been at every one of John Howard's mid-terms: well ahead, and looking like a lay down misÃ¨re. That the bookies, and most of the smart money, is still on the Government to be returned, as they have at every election since John Howard took power, does not reflect a lack of faith in opinion polls, as such, but experience with the capacity to Howard to whittle back such a lead on a timetable. The Prime Minister's superior electioneering, and all of the advantages of incumbency (including setting a poll date), plus the bitter experiences of Labor, and Kim Beazley, dropping the ball, lead me to think this.

At the moment, Labor is effectively campaigning on one issue only, and one which has been stripped down at that. The issue is industrial relations, and Labor has simplified its anti-change message to say that it will abolish all forms of Australian workplace agreements, whether under trade union pressure or because it thinks voters are too dumb to understand any sort of nuanced policy. It adopted pretty much the same approach with its opposition to the GST, at the urging of the same strategic geniuses (and the same leadership).

At this stage of their campaign, according to the polls, IR reform is seriously unpopular, and the Government is making little headway in selling it (despite a highly improper partisan public relations campaign with public money). The situation is the same as with the GST, and the distance away from an election, about the same as well. Alas, the GST settled in, the horrors which Labor had so strongly predicted did not eventuate, and John Howard slowly pulled back Labor's lead not by surgery to the GST, but with highly strategic handouts to particular groups, and some attacks on what had been proclaimed to be its ”mean and tricky" label. Howard had some luck — with terror, the Tampa and the demonisation of boat people — but might well have won the election even without it.

I do not expect that the public will much warm to the IR changes, but their importance in people's minds will fade if the economy runs as strongly as it is now, employment generally improves, and most workers find themselves able to bargain improved conditions on the basis of their scarcity.

They will, I think, still feel emotionally that they have been put in a more unequal and

unfair bargaining position by the Government, but their anxiety about getting the sack, or about having pay and conditions stripped away, will become less significant. Just as significantly, that high number of un-unionised Australians on workplace and informal agreements may even come to fear the advent of a Labor Government, if they perceive either that Labor is determined to reintroduce closed shops, or local flexibilities, or to value pay increases above workplace conditions. The more cheers Kim Beazley gets from the Trades Halls for his simplified message, the more a good proportion of Australians — who have come to think of themselves as semi-independent operators — will feel acutely nervous about Labor's avowedly ”core promise" of returning to the old IR environment.

Yet again Labor thinks itself on such a winner with IR that its other policies are being deliberately de-emphasised, or consciously stripped back to give them the same thrust, with a slightly friendlier edge, as the Government's. There is no fundamental debate going on about defence or foreign affairs or national security — little snipes about getting troops home from Iraq, and muted criticisms of the incarceration of David Hicks represent no essential differences of approach. Labor is, as it has long been, completely silent about a complete revolution in Aboriginal affairs policy, and, now, a new sophistication in processes of blaming the victims. Labor makes little effort to be a champion of those poorly treated by the Government's welfare-to-work policies, and, in truth, has no real problems with it, quite apart from its terror of being painted as the party of whingers, whiners, bludgers and basket-weavers.

Labor's own pessimists fear most the strength of the economy, even if most cannot quite bring themselves to hope that the economy deteriorates before the next election. There's just no doubt about it — the economy is strong, and electorates do not generally change governments when it is. But Labor's problems go well beyond a strong economy, or nit-picking about whether the strength is a product of structural reforms under Keating, further reforms under Howard, China, or buoyant world trade.

It is, simply, terrified of putting Labor's capacity to manage the economy at the forefront of the debate. If I had Wayne Swan as my economic spokesman, I too might be terrified. But one might expect that a Labor Party with a true sense of purpose about making sure that all Australians were sharing in the benefit of national prosperity, let alone one building for the future, would have something more to say about what they would do. Out in the nation, the typical voter has simply no idea, although they have, by now, taken for granted the continued Government jibes about Labor's being profligate, irresponsible and beholden to special interest groups. One could hardly point to a word or an action by Labor to counteract this impression.

Meanwhile a Prime Minister in good form thinks aloud about massive new water infrastructure projects, and is able to chide the (Labor) states about their lack of imagination and enterprise in taking up such offers. Further, projects on energy are carefully calculated and presented to attract a key constituency worried about IR changes while calculated to divide Labor between its environmental and work-at-any-price factions. John Howard also paints himself as infinitely more reasonable and practical than his ideological Treasurer, as they (together) embark on a radical transformation of federalism. He is quite happy to take

the lead on most matters economic, and certainly on credit for the state of the economy, while happily consigning Peter Costello to explaining bad news, if any, or to presenting his sneer to most unattractive vantage.

Not that, it seems, Howard has to do much to handicap Costello, given Costello's own mishandling of his ambitions. He and his supporters insist that they did not bring on the latest public demonstration of Costello's impotence, and disappointment that he has not been handed power. That's as maybe, but it has moved some things on. The clash, such as it was, reinforced Howard in his determination to go only on his own terms, and without the slightest thought given to Costello's hopes. The most for which Costello can hope is that Howard will time his departure for the time when he thinks it is most advantageous to the re-election of a conservative government (perhaps the one after this), but if Howard tries to position his successor, and his party, well, that will not necessarily be with the thought that it will be Costello who is the successor.

Howard has long cultivated people with the capacity, if needs be, to challenge Costello; indeed, he has generally cultivated a high degree of choice, including potential leaders, such as Tony Abbott and Alexander Downer, with the capacity to attract votes from the key Costello support bases, as well as people, such as Malcolm Turnbull, Brendan Nelson and perhaps even Julie Bishop, with first call on the support of other factions. It is not now Howard who is plotting against Costello, but other ambitious party people who wonder whether the deputy deserves all the loyalty he has received, and whether his performance has been all that good anyhow.

The advantage for the Government, however, is that competition of this sort can help everyone improve his, or her, game. It would be hard to say that competition of this sort, whether over ideas or ideals, or even for the mere trappings of power, is not troubling Kim Beazley or the Labor Party. Debate, as ever over the past decade, is an unnecessary luxury. What is needed is lock-step discipline and loyalty as they march towards the cliff.

East Timor Catholic Church caught in the crossfire

INTERNATIONAL

Published *24-Jul-2006*

As gun battles raged in the hills above Dili in May, rival factions from the East Timor army held their fire after they witnessed an incredible sight. Rebel soldiers from the western region of the country were zeroing in on the home of army chief Taur Matan Ruak, and loyalist soldiers from the east were defending it. Suddenly, a vehicle drove into the epicentre of the mÃªlÃ©e, and as bullets rained over it a Timorese nun popped her head out the side window and brandished her veil.

Sister Guilhermina Marcal, a stoic Canossan nun, was leading a daring mission to rescue Ruak's children, aged 3 years and 8 months, together with their babysitter and three other women who were left stranded in the home. As the vehicle came under fire, Marcal instantly thought of the best way to stop the shooting and secure safe passage. Emerging from the car, Marcal told the soldiers to put down their weapons, and later they helped to push-start the car.

As the Catholic Church in East Timor mobilised in April for a massive humanitarian operation in the wake of the country's political crisis and ethnic violence, many stories of bravery and outstanding service to the people have emerged. Some, like Sister Marcal's, until now were left untold.

Shui-Meng Ng, the UNICEF representative in East Timor, says that 'had the Church—the madres and the padres—not stepped in there would have been a humanitarian disaster'.

”They provided refuge to the people, shared what resources they had. They were very pro-active, and they kept the peace,” says Ng.

The Church has been actively involved in this crisis from the very beginning, both as a safe haven for the people affected by it, and as a political player. The Church has for more than a year been one of the most vocal critics of East Timor's first independent government. In April last year it staged a three-week demonstration against the government which involved trucking and bussing thousands of people into the capital from around the country, and then providing food, water and sanitation throughout. The highly disciplined Church network ensured that the demonstration remained peaceful and that it was not hijacked by other groups.

The trigger for the demonstration was the government's plan to make religious education optional in government schools, and its failure to consult on the policy. But the strength and ferocity of the country's biggest demonstration since independence also reflected the

community's deep-seated disaffection with the new government.

The former government, dominated by Timorese who were exiled in Mozambique during the 24-year Indonesian occupation was perceived by the population as, at best, foreign and remote. The former Prime Minister, Mari Alkatiri, stands accused of arming civilian hit squads to wipe out political opponents — including Church leaders. The Alkatiri Government had attempted to sideline the Church after independence even though priests and religious stayed behind and defended and protected the people during 24 brutal Indonesian years. In turn, adherence to the Catholic faith increased four-fold to more than 90 per cent.

The Bishop of Dili, Monsignor Alberto Ricardo da Silva (pictured), says Church staged the demonstration because it wanted to give a 'voice' to the people. He rejects claims that the Church has acted like a political party and says it does not intend to continue to operate in this way in the future. The Church's role during the crisis came naturally, he says.

”It is our job, we must do this. When it is difficult the Church must be ready to do what is needed.”

”It seems they did not have enough experience, maybe. East Timor is quite small, only one million people, it not so difficult to manage everything, but it did not happen.”

When the dispute between the government and a group of almost 600 sacked soldiers erupted into violence on 28 April, thousands of people immediately began fleeing their homes for the relative safety of church grounds. At a time when few people trusted their political leaders, the Church is by comparison a well-organised, highly effective institution that has earned the trust of the Timorese. One of the first places to which they fled was the campus of the Dom Bosco technical school in Comoro, on the outskirts of Dili.

Brother Adriano de Jesus, the principal of the technical school, said that at about 1.45pm on 28 April people began flooding into the compound. A demonstration by the soldiers had been joined by other malcontents and gangs had begun rampaging through the city, burning cars and homes. Other church institutions around the city also drew tens of thousands of people until numbers peaked at more than 70,000, with just as many in camps outside the city.

The crisis in East Timor that erupted in 2006 has led to the deaths of more than 30 people, the destruction of hundreds of homes and the dislocation of more than 150,000 people. The government's inept handling of a dispute involving soldiers from the western region of East Timor transformed a minor, manageable dispute into a full-blown inter-ethnic conflict that put the country on the brink of civil war. Much of what had been achieved since independence has now been lost. At the UN ballot in August 1999 the Timorese defied intimidation by their Indonesian occupiers and with a huge turnout voted 78.5 per cent in favour of independence. While the country was physically destroyed in 1999, it was at the very least largely unified.

With numbers in the refugee camps still near their peak level, the focus has now switched to reconciliation and reintegration. The

Commission for Justice and Peace has intensified its efforts to train church leaders in conflict resolution at the parish level. Recently, more than 30 people have undergone training in the Dili diocese. The Commission is planning to stage a 'Peace Concert' in October aimed at the youth — the cohort that has been lost. Marcal says many youths became 'diabolic' during the crisis, with crazed expressions on their faces. Some threatened to kill her.

The end result is heartbreaking for so many Timorese. Says Marcal, ”I never imagined, I never think about it. We think after we were free life would be getting better. We rebuild East Timor back from ashes, now back to ashes.”

Hezbollah, Israel, and the damage done

INTERNATIONAL

Politics

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Lebanon is a country that has undergone more than its share of suffering and drastic change in the twentieth century. From independence in 1943, the withdrawal of French troops in 1948, civil disturbance in 1958, through to the tragedy of almost continual war from 1975 until 1990, Lebanon has known suffering and tragedy that we in the privileged West simply cannot begin to comprehend.

Lebanon is a state founded upon division. In 1943, it was agreed that the position of President would be always held by a Maronite Christian, and the position of Prime Minister held by a Sunni Muslim. In 1990, this arrangement was formalized in the Taif agreement, which also made provision for the Speaker of the House to always be a Shi'ite Muslim. While in theory this sort of formalized power sharing arrangement may seem to be a reasoned, practical approach, in practice this division of powers has come to symbolize the deep divisions that exist within the country.

The fighting in the south of Lebanon is nothing new. The 1975-1990 civil war grew out of Christian-Muslim tensions, the influx of Palestinian refugees that had begun in 1948 with the establishment of the Israeli state, and interference by Syria, Iran and the Palestinians, who were led for the most part by Yasser Arafat as a quasi State-within-a-State. Though the 1990 Taif agreement marked the formal cessation of hostilities, Israel did not withdraw its last troops from the south until 2000; Having done so, Syria filled the void with it's troops that had been stationed in the North until 2005, when they withdrew after international and internal pressure — the so-called 'Cedar Revolution.'

The history of Hezbollah (from the Arabic Hizb Allah — Party of God) is difficult to trace, and involves more than one change in direction. Founded in 1982 as an anti-Israeli group, an off-shoot of the group Amal, Hezbollah (composed primarily of Shi'ite Muslims) was initially provided with support by Iran.

While the current US President was initially heard decrying Syria's involvement in urging on and supporting Hezbollah in their current actions against Israel, Syria and Hezbollah have not always been closely allied. Though it is true that the Syrians have at times supported Hezbollah strongly, their have also been periods of animosity, and even open fighting in 1987 between these (respectively) Sunni and Shi'ite groups. As Muath Amayreh, of the Australian National University says, 'Many governments of the Middle Eastern region fear a direct Syrian involvement, which could lead the entire Middle East in to war.'

What is certain is that the founders of Hezbollah shared the vision of the Iranian Khomeini regime for establishing a state that practiced Sha'ria law, and which followed the

principle of 'Wilayat al Fakih', or the Rule of the Jurist. This was one of the founding goals of Hezbollah.

The other primary goal of Hezbollah, when it was founded, was the expulsion of Israel, and Israeli-supporting Phalangist militias from the south of Lebanon. Hezbollah gained a lot of credibility in 2000 with Lebanese citizens of all stripes, when Israel finally withdrew. Hezbollah, under the leadership of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah since 1992, has also moved into the mainstream of Lebanese politics in the last decade, contesting elections for the first time. Hezbollah is in many respects a very different organization to that which was founded in 1982. It has members of parliament - and not just Shi'ite members— but Sunni and even Christian members. It runs a TV station—Al-Manar. It also has a radio station, shopping centres, and community and welfare services.

In many respects Hezbollah has changed significantly, and made major concessions to its original vision. In other ways, Hezbollah is very much the organisation it has always been. It's hatred of Israel has never ceased.

This hatred of Israel is part of what has led to the current crisis between these neighbouring countries. Hezbollah, as strong supporters of Hamas, have since 2000 been increasingly bold in their relations with the Israelis. Hezbollah has continued to fight Israel around the Shebaa Farms area (upon which at least three countries have some sort of a claim), it has been accused of funding and offering financial incentives to the families of would-be suicide bombers, and even the Palestinian Authority has accused it of seeking to disrupt the (now moribund) peace process with Israel.

The Israeli's strategic dismantling of Lebanon's infrastructure has horrified many people. This action was touched off by Hezbollah's cross-border raid into Israel, which killed a number of Israeli troops on a routine border patrol, according to the Israelis. Of course, Hezbollah claims that this action was in support of the Palestinians, who were themselves being over run by the Israelis, following the capture of an Israeli solder in the Gaza strip by militants.

As Muath Amayreh says, 'War appears to be the only language Israel and the USA are willing to use with these (Hezbollah and Hamas) organizations. According to this notion it is, supposedly, sensible to bomb homes, streets, buildings, airports, bridges and the infrastructure of Lebanon and Gaza.'

While it is true that Israel's use of force has been, in both Gaza and in southern Lebanon, out of all proportion to the number of troops it has had kidnapped and killed, the situation is perhaps not so clear cut. Before the Hezbollah action, support around the world for an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was high. By kidnapping more soldiers, crossing a UN-mandated border, and firing rockets into Israeli civilian populations (regardless of who fired the first rocket or mortar, Hezbollah or Israel), the balance of world opinion has changed. As Muath Amayreh says, 'Some believe it was an uncalculated risk by Hezbollah, while others believe that Hezbollah has played by the pre-set rules (of hostage capture and negotiation), and that the sudden Israeli aggression is completely unacceptable.

While the United States struggled to proffer vocal support for recent Israeli actions in Gaza, the US has had no problem supporting Israel's attacks on an organization the US considers to be a primarily a terrorist organization, and which has support from a member of the 'Axis of Evil.'

Hezbollah has broadened the conflict, and to the advantage of no one. Support for the party in Lebanon has plummeted. Furthermore, Hezbollah's actions have linked the Palestinian people together in with these extremist Lebanese in the international 'collective subconscious' — much to the detriment of the Palestinians.

The short term future of the Lebanese people looks bleak. Bombs continue to rain down on their nation, foreigners flee, and Israel claims it is well within its rights to defend itself. The people of Gaza are again losing out. Half a world away, North Korea continues its machinations and obfuscations, Indonesia suffers through another Tsunami, and the world is distracted by a conflict that need not have occurred.

As Muath Amayreh points out, 'The feeling of injustice that will mount from another wave of fighting will unfortunately lead many Arabs and Muslims away from trying to understand the Western World. It will leave the families that ran for cover tripping over dead bodies thirsty and hungry for justice. The genuine fear is that, as Kahlil Gibran answered in The Prophet, when asked about good and evil, 'verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead water.'

Poor People's Summit on the Niger River

INTERNATIONAL

Politics

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Gao was once the centre of the universe.

It was from here, on the sandy shores of the Niger River in what is now north-eastern Mali, that the Songhai Empire ruled West Africa in the 16th century, its domain stretching from Nigeria to Timbuktu, from the great riverbank towns of the Niger River to the Aïr Mountains deep in the Sahara. Within its borders were the richest gold deposits in the world and its emperors once marched across the desert to Mecca bearing 300,000 gold pieces.

Such largesse was nothing when compared to the Songhai Empire's predecessor, the Empire of Mali, whose kings set out to search for the Americas 200 years before Columbus. Ruling West Africa for almost 500 years, the emperors of ancient Mali transformed Timbuktu into a city of legend with vast universities and streets paved with gold. Their extravagance caused the world gold price to slump for almost 20 years.

But Gao is now little more than an impoverished and dusty frontier town 350km beyond Timbuktu which has become a byword for the end of the earth.

As the leaders of the world's richest and most powerful countries gathered in St Petersburg, a few hundred activists were meeting in Gao to hold what they called 'the Poor People's Summit'. Rather than flying to the conference first-class and meeting in lavish banquet halls, participants at the Gao summit travelled overland along rutted roads and by public buses for up to 1000km to reach the summit which was held in an abandoned secondary school.

That it should be Mali which hosted the summit was appropriate. According to the UN, Mali is the fourth poorest country in the world. Almost one-third of Malians suffer from malnutrition, while 90 per cent of the population survives, barely, on less than US$2 a day. Most Malians die before their 48th birthday.

That it should be West Africa that should hold such a summit is similarly apt. Sierra Leone, Niger and Burkina Faso — the latter two are neighbours of Mali — are the only countries who fare worse than Mali on the UN's Human Development Index. Representatives from these countries also attended the Gao summit.

Put simply, the land once so rich it could afford to de-value gold is now the poorest place on earth.

Although more than half of Malian territory is consumed by the

Sahara Desert, Mali is not without its natural resources. Mali is Africa's third-largest gold producer and sub-Saharan Africa's largest exporter of cotton, which provides 40 per cent of the country's exports.

The failure of such a resource and agriculture-rich land to provide a better life for its inhabitants has, however, more to do with the meeting in St Petersburg than the summit in Gao.

Despite promises of debt relief made at last year's G8 summit, Mali's government still spends more on servicing its massive debt than it does on health or education. In a country where there are just 4.4 doctors for every 100,000 inhabitants (compared to 249 in Australia) and where adult literacy stands at just 19 per cent, these are more than merely statistics.

Mali's ability to fight poverty through self-reliance founders on the fact that US government subsidies to US farmers ensures that it is cheaper to produce cotton in the US than it is in Mali. As a consequence, many Malian farmers must go into debt—as for the country, so too for its individual inhabitants—in order to compete with US and other Western producers. 'The cotton producers of Mali cannot benefit from their production,' Dao Dounantie, one of the participants at the Gao summit, told the BBC. 'Our cotton farmers are victims of unfair trade and we are fighting for fair trade.'

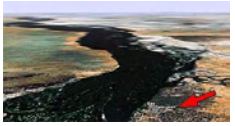

BBC NEWS
Sub-Saharan summit begins in Mali
Several hundred people are meeting in Gao, north-eastern Mali, to raise awareness about the problems faced by poor people in sub-Saharan Africa.
Dubbed the "Poor People's Summit", it has been timed to coincide with the G8 talks in Russia.

With the notable exception of the BBC, the world's media barely mentioned the Gao summit in passing, if at all. It is indeed true that this remote meeting of activists in the Sahara Desert could only point to the problems, while the solutions could only come from those meeting in Russia.

But the issues of chronic poverty and inequality that the Gao summit highlighted are ones that refuse to confine themselves to Africa.

Already, West Africans — Malians primary among them — make up the majority of illegal immigrants to Europe. In the past year alone, illegal immigrants from the region have stormed Spain's African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla and arrived in their thousands on Spain's Canary Islands. On one day in March alone, 796 such immigrants arrived in boats on the islands — and hence in Europe — while more than 8000 have made European landfall this year.

The response by European governments has been to set up rapid repatriation agreements with African governments, and to pay massive sums in military aid to assist West African governments and Morocco in patrolling their shores. Even as the journeys to Europe — many of these journeys begin in Gao — are made ever more dangerous by such measures, the numbers of boats arriving have not fallen at all. The only impact has been the death of up to 5000 would-be immigrants in the last eight years.



The difficult truth seems finally to be dawning on European governments. Spain has launched a three-year aid and diplomatic offensive in West Africa, while President Chirac warned on the eve of the G8 summit that, 'If we do not develop Africa, if we do not make available the necessary resources to bring about this development, these people will flood the world.'

Such sentiment was given added urgency by a British government report on the 13 of July, that by 2050 — by which time Africa's population is expected to soar to two billion — most of West Africa's agricultural land will have been reduced by 20 per cent as a direct result of global climate change.

Further reasons why the leaders of the G8 countries should heed the warnings of the Gao summit can be found in Gao's hinterland.

Western intelligence agencies have become increasingly concerned that al-Qaeda has begun to use the region's obscurity to set up terrorist training camps in the Sahara Desert of Mali and Algeria. There have even been whispered rumours among Western diplomats in the Malian capital of Bamako that al-Qaeda affiliates are developing a secret nuclear weapons facility in the desert.

The rumours stem from four visits to Mali and Niger by Abdul Qadeer Khan — the disgraced former head of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme — between 1998 and 2002. On his last visit, he was accompanied by Pakistani nuclear scientists. It is now believed that Mr Khan made contact with al-Qaeda representatives while in Mali. The arrest in Mali of Pakistani missionaries on charges of preaching support for Osama bin Laden has also increased concerns in Western policy circles.

In particular, the remote region of Kidal north-east of Gao-the former headquarters of a rebellion against the Malian government by Tuareg nomads in the '90s and the scene of an aborted rebellion in May — is seen as a potential flashpoint. The region has been awash with guns since 2003 when a northern division of the Malian army was discovered selling its weapons on the black market. Reports have also emerged that the ongoing opposition to the Malian government among former rebels and the desperate poverty of the region has provided fertile ground for an estimated 2000 Saudi and Pakistani missionaries thought to be operating around Kidal.


DEFENSE

Special Forces Support Pan Sahel Initiative in Africa

The US government — which has been involved in training the armies of West African countries in counter-terrorism operations since 2004 as part of its 'Pan-Sahel Initiative' — is taking the speculation so seriously that in August last year they conducted their largest military exercise in Africa since World War II. Operation Flintlock 2005 involved more than 1000 US personnel, and the armed forces of seven countries chasing a fictional terrorist group across the desert from Mauritania, through Mali, Niger and Chad.

Just days before Operation Flintlock began, 15 Mauritanian soldiers were killed in an attack on an army camp on the desert's fringe. The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) claimed responsibility for the attack on what it called an 'apostate and puppet army' of the US.

The GSPC, which has declared its support for al-Qaeda, came to international prominence in 2003 when it kidnapped 32 European tourists in the Algerian Sahara. After several months, the hostages were released in Mali, reportedly after the German government paid the GSPC's ransom demands. That ransom money, along with people and cigarette-smuggling rackets which the GSPC operates across the region's porous borders, is reportedly providing funds for al-Qaeda in a region that impoverished African governments

do not have the resources to combat.

Thus it is that Gao, forgotten for centuries by the world's powers, may again take centre stage in the great issues of the day. And thus it is, too, why the G8 leaders who issued a communiquÃ© promising support for 'a democratic, prosperous and peaceful Africa, would do well to heed the warnings of those who gathered in their dusty robes in an abandoned school on the fringe of the Sahara.

Military power no way to uphold human dignity

INTERNATIONAL

Politics

Published *24-Jul-2006*

When we look from a distance at events in Israel, Lebanon and Palestine, it is natural to feel great pity and helplessness. It is also easy to be so paralysed by the complex historical and cultural roots of this conflict, and by the fierce debate about who should be held responsible, that we abstain from judgment.

But it is important to develop a moral perspective on the conflict that goes beyond marking down praise and blame. A properly based moral response leads us beyond the immediate horror to reflect on what will contribute to a longer term resolution of conflict. It offers directions by which we can evaluate the tragedy we now see.

Of course, moral perspectives differ. Mine is influenced by Christian faith, but the central insight on which it is based is more generally shared: that human beings are precious, and that the exploration of what is involved in human dignity is central to any moral discussion.

If we are to live with dignity, we need food, shelter, security from fear for our lives, education, the space in which we can build cooperative relationships in our work and families, and freedom to express our religious and political views. This is the basis for human development.

When set against these standards, the conditions even of ordinary daily life in Israel, Palestine and Lebanon habitually put human dignity at risk. In Israel, suicide bombings, kidnapping and rocket attacks not only kill; they also create fear, and impede the flourishing of working and personal relationships necessary for a humane society. Palestinians in Gaza also live under constant fear of retaliatory attack and in a daily dependence that is humiliating and destructive of hope. There, as in Lebanon, the lack of strong central government prevents the society from addressing lawlessness. Sectarian divisions, too, erode the trust on which civil society builds.

The challenge to the authorities in these societies, and to the world community, is to protect the security of their citizens in a way that respects the human dignity of all those affected. This is necessary to foster the conditions under which peace can have a chance.

Set against these criteria, suicide bombing, kidnapping and rocket attacks are morally indefensible. They commonly demean the humanity of those who indulge in them and those who suffer them.

The response to acts of violence is morally more complex. It is important first to name the response correctly. It is not appropriate to describe it as a war against terrorism, and so to claim the license that goes with war. This conflict is not between

states, but between a state and groups that operate from within other states. The response should essentially be defensive. It includes protecting one's own society against attack, and also policing the violations by holding to account groups that plan violence.

Policing, too, has moral boundaries. Actions done in its name must be properly authorised, set defined goals, and offer good hope of success. The harm that they inflict must also be proportionate to the harm that they address. When these conditions are breached, the price is the diminishment of the humanity both of those who are the agents and the victims of the policy.

Judged by these standards, the response of Israel to kidnapping by Hezbollah and Hamas cannot be justified. Because it extends beyond its own boundaries it is not properly authorised. That is why, in the absence of effective government in Lebanon and in Palestine, the United Nations has properly called for a multinational force. The goals of the Israeli action seem to go beyond policing wrongdoing to punish the societies in which wrongdoers operate. And the harm inflicted in Palestine and Lebanon, both in killing and in the destruction of social infrastructure, is growlly disproportionate to the harm that is redressed. The military operations have diminished the human life of great numbers of people.

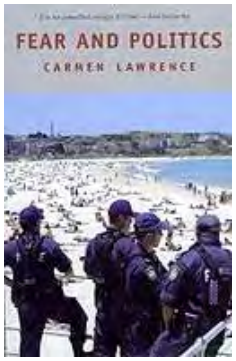
Finally, it further erodes the authority of the administrations in Lebanon and in Palestine, whose weakness is a critical element in the current violence. Weak government will make more likely further violations.

Where policy is not ethically based, it usually fails to achieve its own goals. Disregard for human dignity engenders its like. That has been evident in the invasion of Iraq. It is similarly difficult to see any good result coming from the assault on Palestine and Lebanon. In the longer term, the victim may be Israel itself. A small nation that relies on the local use of overwhelmingly superior military power, made possible by the patronage of a powerful nation, is inherently vulnerable to changes in its environment. For all nations, there come times when they must ask, and not command, respect for the human dignity of their citizens.

Carmen Lawrence exposes the Politics of Fear

AUSTRALIA

Published *24-Jul-2006*



Former ALP heavyweight Carmen Lawrence asserts that the developed world is safer today than it's ever been. Her argument flies in the face of the reality that there has never been greater rewards for politicians willing to peddle fear.

I meet Australia's first female premier following the launch of her book *Fear and Politics*, which is based on a series of four public lectures given for the Freilich Foundation in 2005. Dr Lawrence, who entered the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1986, strikes me as forthright and astute in person, as any half decent politician must be.

For the first time in two decades, she appears to have moved away from the ALP - despite the fact that she was Labor's first directly elected President as recently as 2004. A former minister in the Keating Government, her career has been marked by highs and lows, including the Penny Eastman Affair.

The central thesis of her book is that contemporary politicians routinely use fear to gain and maintain their foothold in the electorate. The ubiquitous 'War on Terror' is employed by governments and agencies everywhere to promote and engender a climate of fear, which in turn allows for greater liberties to be taken with basic civil rights than ever before.

I ask her what she means when she claims the developed world has never been safer.

”We all construct world views that give us a sense of meaning,” she says. ”Mostly it is about belonging to a group and having a sense of identity and purpose.”

Lawrence suggests that events like Bali, September 11 and the Cronulla riots, simply remind us that we are mortal.

”Where the link with Cronulla comes in is that the constant repetition of the idea that we are at risk of a terrorist threat, in a sense makes that an almost pathological response instead of a normal response.”

She believes the promotion of fear causes people to withdraw into the groups with which they identify. Subsequently they act in much more discriminatory and hostile ways towards others.

”They hang on to national symbols, they become more intolerant, they dislike dissent and so on,” she says. ”My thesis is the events themselves will provoke us into those

reactions."

Lawrence quotes Sir Robert Menzies' wartime use of fear to achieve his political aims. Menzies described frightened people as "much more pliant instruments and much readier receptacles for notions of hatred and revenge".

Her use of the quote in the book clearly indicts the Howard government for fomenting discord and disharmony, at a national level, in order to gain political mileage.

When I put it to her that the Labor opposition has not been so very different in recent yeas, she is robust in defence of her former colleagues.

"I think we (the Labor Party) have spoken out often enough in opposition to what the government has done," she says in their defence.

I cannot help thinking, however, that this is at odds with her stance during the November 2001 election campaign - when it was common knowledge that Dr Lawrence disapproved of Labor's handling of the Tampa Affair. Similarly, Labor's failure to take a strong stand against the Government on migration led to her public disagreement and eventual resignation from the Federal Shadow Cabinet in December 2002.

When I push Dr Lawrence on this disagreement with her former colleagues, and her thrust for a change of party policy at the time, her response is short and to the point.

"If you sign up to be a shadow minister, you make certain concessions (if you like), to the right to hold your own opinion, and that's why I left. I was disturbed… | by the lack of vigour."

But that was Labor then. Is it even up to Labor to lead the way now, or should change be sought at a grassroots level?

"I think if political leaders and community leaders start to say 'Come on guys, this is not a way to live your life'. That we have to deal with these threats. They're real, but deal with them without going into this continual panic mode. When Howard is distracted, he drops it for a while too. And he is at the moment, you don't hear so much talk about terrorism threats. It diminishes in intensity."

I put to it Dr Lawrence that Labor does not seem to be offering a strong alternative view, a different framework within which Australians can re-imagine their nation. She stops short of agreeing with me — old habits die hard, and old colleagues are difficult to criticise. But she does concede that the ALP needs to offer more than just 'hope' as an alternative to fear. Whether it can actually 'sell' something as ephemeral as hope is another question entirely.

"Fear and Politics" is published by Scribe , ISBN 1920769870, RRP $22.00

More 'special features' in store for DVD technology

MEDIA

Consumer

Published *24-Jul-2006*

I have a serious problem. Seems I can't pass within a kilometre of JB Hi-Fi without popping in to check out the DVDs. And then the reflexes kick in; I spot a film that interests me, pick it up and flip it over, my eyes instantly drawn to that most desirable of DVD phenomenon: the special features list.

Special features are the DVD equivalent of a free set of steak knives. They're the final incentive — the bonus 'thrown-in' to seal the deal. All you DVD-philes out there know what I'm talking about. 'Vanilla' editions (i.e. containing the film only — like a sundae without the nuts and chocolate fudge) should be avoided at all costs. You're a collector, after all — make sure you're getting a decent return for your investment.

True, the appeal isn't solely economic. Film buffs are attracted to the idea of expanding their bank of esoteric movie knowledge. Special features offer a way to do this. The irony is that if you're anything like me, once you get the DVD home, no matter how noble your intentions, most of these special features don't even make it off the proverbial shelf.

I'm sure there are people reading this who can't relate. These are the people who gritted their teeth and waded through every skerrick of additional info on the bloated four-disc extended editions of The *Lord of the Rings*. They're people who, yes, have actually watched all three of the 'alternate endings' to *28 Days Later*.

If you're one of these people, I'd love to know your secret (is it a Zen thing?). No matter how hard I try, I simply can't do it. And I'm sure I'm not alone. Given that special features so often seem to get all the use of that extra set of knives you got with your copy of Mediocre Hits of the '90s, you can't help but wonder if we've all been victims of some cunning marketing ploy.

It's a fact that film distributors depend more on DVD sales than box office takings. According to the Australian Film Commission, wholesale revenue from VHS and DVD distribution reached $1 billion in 2005 (and you can take VHS out of that equation without affecting the final figures very much).

In comparison, the distributors' share of box office takings in 2005 was a relatively measly $817.5 million — a decrease of some $48.3 million since 2003. In other words, DVD sales equal big bucks.

Can it be true? Have we, in our rush to possess a copy of every movie we've ever stayed awake through, been needlessly greasing the cogs of capitalism, blinded by the promise of

an endless barrage of often not-so-special features?

Of course, special features are not the extent of the money-makers' bag of tricks. Next-generation technology is the next wave that threatens to part film lovers from their hard-earned cash. Promising five times the storage capacity of DVD, Blu-ray, for example, will allow for not only better sound and picture quality, but many more special features.

Once they kick in, Blu-ray and its main competitor High-Definition DVD will no doubt take off with the same fervour as DVD before them. What does this mean for us addicts? Well, unfortunately it means the cycle of addiction will perpetuate. We'll continue to use, while our dealers sit back and smile gleefully at the figures lining up in their bank accounts.

Makes you wonder if, at the end of the day, we'd be better off kicking the habit, bypassing JB Hi-Fi and visiting the video rental store instead.

Graphic smoke packs a shock to the system

MEDICINE & HEALTH

Published *24-Jul-2006*

The Federal Government has fired up its anti-smoking campaign with new national regulations forcing tobacco companies to include large colour photos of diseased and cancerous body parts on cigarette packs.

Previous anti-smoking warnings have proven to be impotent against the 'evil' and vicious cycle of nicotine addiction and it seems smokers' attempts to kick the habit would continue to be futile without these other more strident warnings and bans planned to come into force state by state.

So instead of the tamer text warnings that have become so ubiquitous, smokers are seeing a range of photographs of lung disease cases, tongue cancers and even a dissected brain. As of 1 March 2006, it has been obligatory for these warnings to cover 30 per cent of the front and 90 per cent of the back of the box. The graphics are meant to leave no doubt about what medical experts already know — that smoking kills.

These new regulations are part of a series of recent changes that include the implementation of a nationwide policy of smoke-free pubs as well as other enclosed public spaces.

Tobacco smoking is a serious public health problem. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 17 per cent of Australians aged older than 14 years smoke daily. That's about 3.4 million people. These people make up our beloved families, friends, neighbours and work colleagues. They commit themselves to a life plagued by lung and heart disease and potentially to cancer of the mouth, colon and every organ in between. Their passive smoke has also been implicated in reduced birth weights, lower respiratory illnesses and chronic respiratory symptoms in children.

Globally, tobacco products are responsible for one in ten adult deaths each year (about five million people). But why do so many still insist on inhaling?

Tobacco is profoundly addictive and the culprit is nicotine. Nicotine addiction is one of the most prevalent addictive behaviours worldwide. The physiological basis for nicotine addiction has been hotly debated for more than 40 years. A current theory proposes that nicotine has a dual response in the body. Initially, it stimulates the pleasure response from the brain but when taken over longer periods, it creates a relaxed state.

Like a double-edged sword, nicotine withdrawal is a painful one, disproportionate to the pleasure often attributed to it. Withdrawal symptoms are time-limited and proportional to

the depth of nicotine dependence. They include anxiety, irritability, difficulty concentrating, restlessness, tobacco craving (no huge surprise there), gastrointestinal problems, headaches and drowsiness.

So having a drag makes you feel good and stops making you feel bad. Simple really — need I go on?

Quitting is very difficult, there's no doubt. The breadth of smoking cessation programs supports this. Behavioural interventions (physician advice, counselling and social supports), nicotine replacement (gum, patch, inhaler and nasal spray) and anti-depressants are the mainstay of most programs. Acupuncture, hypnosis, aversive therapies and exercise programs are touted as alternatives. Despite this, the long-term abstinence rates are somewhat pitiful — less than 25 per cent.

It's not hard to understand why. Aside from the physical pain of withdrawal, smoking is a powerful social tool. Asking someone for a light may start a conversation that finishes with a coffee date. The 'smoko' is a tradition of sorts, part of Australian culture. Picture a gathering of like-minded individuals, forced to engage in the activity against a backdrop of the biting-cold Melbourne wind, whilst smug 'others' sip lattes, shrouded in an angelic glow, warmed by the haze of their ducted heating system.

Tobacco companies are required to adequately inform consumers about the risks, but have they? The right of accurate information is a fundamental consumer value. No smoker can be reasonably expected to fully appreciate all the risks associated with their ostracised behaviour. The tobacco industry claims that smokers are fully-informed about the risks, but this information appears superficial and without true understanding.

As part of the new national changes, a general warning on the toxicity of cigarettes will replace details on nicotine, carbon monoxide and tar content, and packets will carry a phone number and web address for the national Quitline.

These changes are vital in making a lasting impression on potential smokers. Do you think a 16-year-old girl who lights up in an attempt to impress school friends really understands the cigarette could lead to a nicotine addiction? Or do you think she realises this addiction could cause chronic airways disease, to such an extent that she needs to carry an oxygen tank with her at all times? Or that the airways disease could be so disabling, she may get short of puff trying to go to the toilet, thus forcing her to a life of incontinence pants and bed pans? Would she realise that it could cause her to have a stroke, thus rendering half of her body immobile? Despite all of these distractions, she still must attend her day centre three times a week for dialysis for her kidney failure, and chemotherapy for lung cancer. It doesn't sound like the sort of life any 16-year-old would wish upon themselves.

Is demonising smokers and smoking the answer? Amputated limbs, gangrenous toes, black teeth, holey and tarred lungs, young and old people on death's door in hospital and milky porridge being milked from a 'smoker's aorta' have become hallmarks of anti-smoking advertising in Australia.

Legislation passed in NSW and Victoria seeks to ban all indoors smoking in pubs and clubs from 1 July 2007. Many venues are constructing smokers' havens in the form of largely covered and walled courtyards and beer gardens, allegedly to cushion the blow of the new regulations. Smoking is currently restricted to a single room or less than 25 per cent of the total indoor area. Queensland and Tasmania have already banned indoor smoking, while South Australia and the ACT are set to follow suit.

The anti-smoking lobby has painted an extremely unattractive portrait not just of smoking, but of smokers — the three-and-a-half million people, addicted to nicotine, who are also our friends and family.

As a result of this, could it be that smoking has become as much a sinful pleasure as an act of rebellion, rather than of self harm?

Shouldn't we bring our smokers in from the cold? Could this acceptance help some to be anti-establishment in a less harmful way? Perhaps opening the door to these outcasts may help them on their road back to health.

So now we know why people smoke and why it's so difficult to quit, but how do we use this information to stop people killing themselves? We can inform people about all the risks, the implications smoking will have on their lives and finally help them find methods to quit that suit them.

I have to admit something — I was one of them. Yes, me! I should have known better but, coffee in one hand, ciggie in the other - what a treat it was. But, I quit. Was it the warnings on cigarette packs? Fear of vascular disease? No, I just couldn't breathe when I went for a run.

So whether you have the smoking habit already, or are bothered by passive smoking, you should already be noticing some drastic changes around the country. Non-smokers will be happy about further smoke-free spaces, and smokers will be facing the graphic and in-your-face evidence that they should become like their non-smoking role-models.

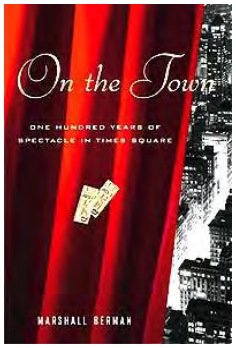
Times Square's slice of life in the Big City

BOOK REVIEW

Published *24-Jul-2006*

On the Town: One Hundred Years of Spectacle in Times Square

Marshall Berman, Random House, 2006, ISBN 1400063310, RRP $52.95, website



A century ago, New York's Longacre Square made the transformation from urban neighbourhood to Times Square and came to define the urban experience with its panorama of lights, signs and people. In his new book, *On the Town: One Hundred Years of Times Square*, Marshall Berman takes in the history of Times Square's music and spectacle in an overflowing and diverse narrative well suited to its subject.

Berman is a professor of political science at the City College of New York and, having lived and worked all his life in New York, his work reflects the accumulation of personal experience intertwined with wider culture and society. As with his previous book, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Berman traces how modern life energises and enables our development through the modern world while sometimes threatening to overwhelm us.

In tone and perspective, Berman writes from the democratic and libertarian stream of the 1960s New Left. This is seen initially in the way he invests popular culture with the seriousness of high art and universal value. An early chapter celebrates Al Jolsen's *The Jazz Singer* for defining the look and sound of America's 'vulgar modernism'. He describes The *Jazz Singer*as 'the great American Bildungsroman', depicting the struggle of Jewish Americans to simultaneously connect with and transcend their immigrant families and 'make it.'

While he professes to be wary of nostalgia there are moments in this book when he can't seem to help himself. The 'great noon' comes with the famous *Life* magazine photo of a sailor and nurse embracing on Times Square on the day victory was declared in the World War II. The sailor is representative of a new community looking to the future: brave, democratic, modern. This couple evoke the justice and purpose of the war against fascism. America and New York would never seem so energised and united.

Berman's characteristic optimism sees popular culture morph, too easily perhaps, into the culture of the popular front. The figure of the sailor carries this into Broadway musicals like *On the Town* and *Fancy Free*. Berman shows us a Times Square that made people not only want to embrace but also to dance and sing. Astonishingly, in 1945, at the height of a brutal war with Japan, the Japanese American, Sono Osato, played the lead in *On the Town*. For Berman, Times Square was an environment that invited people to cross ethnic, class and

sexual lines in defiance of more isolationist impulses.

Women are central to Berman's story. They came to work in the offices or garment factories nearby or to participate in the emerging forms of popular entertainment. As a place to be public, to become sexual subjects as well as objects, many women found Times Square liberating. It also involved a kind of heroic risk in defiance of moralists who railed against the corruptions to be found there. Berman identifies 'the Times Girl' on postcards and billboards, in the theatre, in musicals and movies such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, even in Betty Boop cartoons. The Times Girl combines sexuality and innocence, vulnerability and resourcefulness, looking to get ahead but also to connect with what was authentic within herself.

Things turn decidedly sour in the 1960s and '70s when guns, drugs, the sex show and child prostitution come to Times Square. Berman notes correctly the continuing dialectic of creativity: this was the era of *Midnight Cowboy*, *Taxi Driver* and Lou Reed's *Dirty Boulevard*. The reality, nevertheless, was a more aggressive and nastier edge that alienated many women. He writes that this was 'not only material impoverishment but spiritual collapse.'

Not that Berman is all that positive about the feminist response. He detects a claim for exclusive possession in a campaign by Women Against Pornography to 'take back the night.' There is an extended critique of Laura Mulvey's work from the 1970s for positing an all-controlling male gaze. He also notes the extremely problematic 'Dworkin-MacKinnon' laws, which tried to exclude pornography from free speech protection by redefining it as a form of rape. Berman sees attempts to empower women as important but he also argues that some moves contained a more ominous policing of culture and framing of women as victims.

Fast-forward to the 1990s and developers and politicians were joining together to campaign against sex on the street. Women entering the top ranks of private and public administration were prominent in this campaign. An 'interim plan' was developed for Times Square that promised 'a street for everyone.' The reality was that the city acted as virtual agents for the developers with secretive deals and the bending of planning rules in areas such as public amenity.

In the end, Berman's optimism is undiminished. Today there is a contradictory mix of skyscrapers and a street for everyone. He argues that despite overwhelming corporate visions, the 'exploding lights and multicultural crowds' bode well for how people will find a way to claim their right to be part of the city spectacle. This vibrant and generous book makes you want to believe even if it is sometimes difficult to go along with Berman's unbridled enlightenment faith. At least he acknowledges that nothing is assured — evidently that is part of the exciting risk you take in the big city.

Young Bobby Darin meets mature Bobby Darin

FILM REVIEW

Drama

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Beyond the Sea: 118 minutes, Rating: M

Director: Kevin Spacey, Starring: Kevin Spacey, Kate Bosworth, John Goodman.

I am always skeptical about American biopics. The studios seem to churn them out so often, that we hardly have time to enjoy *Ray* before we are watching country star Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line*. This time, Kevin Spacey brings us his creative version of '50s crooner Bobby Darin's short life.

This is a pet project of Spacey, who is also known for *Superman Returns*, *The Usual Suspects*, and *American Beauty*.He writes, produces and directs this very funny and touching film about Darin's short yet fulfilling career. Spacey is excellent as Darin, allowing us not only to feel Darin's pains and happiness, but also to understand his ambitions and reactions. Spacey proudly leads us through scenes of Darin's life, both true and fictional. The film is studded with old style musical scenes of euphoric dancing and Broadway style arrangements.

The supporting cast is as passionate and involved as Spacey. Bosworth (*Superman Returns*, *Wonderland*) is a stand out as Darin's wife, the all American girl Sandra Dee. Her role seems a small one to begin with, but she brings great depth and range to an actress who only ever played Gidget. A standout moment occurs when Darin and Sandra Dee return home from their wedding, and Dee is scared to continue further. Thoughts of coitus, 'ever—after', marriage and family splish-splash through her head, and she cries and screams and begs Darin to end the whole affair. We all look forward to something new, yet the realisation of this beginning is often scary, and Bosworth holds our attention brilliantly.

Darin also spends parts of the film in discussion with the child actor who is/will be portraying young Darin in the film which Darin is making about his life. Sounds complicated, but it does work. More than a novelty, it allows Darin many personalities and beliefs at the same time. Spacey has no need to use normal screen tricks to indicate time or emotion. He achieves this by having young Darin and older Darin interacting throughout the film.

The true virtue of this film is the faith the actors and producers have in Spacey's vision of Darin's life. This film does feel like one of the old musical comedies of the days of Elvis,

Sinatra and Martin. The self-reflective nature of the work is a constant reminder that we are in fact watching a film, which is a re-telling of someone's life as art.

Characters unpredictable, unsettling, but compelling

FILM REVIEW

Arthouse

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Hard Candy: 103 minutes, Rating: R,

Director: David Slade, Starring: Patrick Wilson, Ellen Page.

The opening scene of *Hard Candy*takes us inside an Internet chat room where 'Thongggirl14' and 'Lensman319' are exchanging lines of flirtatious text. 'Lensman319' is 32-year-old photographer Jeff, and 'Thongggirl14' is schoolgirl Hayley, who claims to be far more mature than her 14 years. It's an unsettling beginning to this highly disturbing film. There are no hesitations in the chatting between the pair, despite each knowing the age of the other.

After organising a rendezvous at a cafÃ© and meeting in the flesh, their flirtation continues in the awkward way which one would expect between an adult and a child. *Hard Candy* is such an uncomfortable film to watch. There are more violent scenes to come later in the story, but for me it was this seduction and the feigned innocence of both Hayley and Jeff that was the most stomach churning. Before too long, the two are back at Jeff's house in the secluded hills. After more flirting, one of the characters is drugged, tied up, and held at the point of a scalpel.

Hard Candy is written by playwright Brian Nelson, who based the story on true events which took place in Japan, where a group of young girls would find men on the Internet, before beating and robbing them after meeting them in person. Nelson's screenplay is a study of preconceived notions of gender and audience's prejudices to think along these lines. Hayley and Jeff both cross lines that are not often approached in cinema. Their characters fake innocence but show they are increasingly capable of manipulation and violence.

Neither character is sympathetic, their motivations are constantly unclear and their behaviour is pathological. Yet they are exciting characters, the kind that are not often seen in films being made today. Unlike so many thrillers that follow a predictable formula, *Hard Candy* is a film where the audience can never tell what will happen next or how far the characters will go.

David Slade deserves much credit for filming what is essentially a stage play in an interesting manner. His cinematography and editing are highly stylised yet don't detract from the actors at all. Patrick Wilson and Ellen Page both deliver intensely strong performances, particularly 17-year-old

Page, who fluctuates between an innocent girl out of her depth and a vicious predator seeking revenge.

*Hard Candy*is a confronting film. It has been given the strongest rating by the Office of Film and Literature Classification—not for anything graphic, but for its implications of violence and authentic horror. So this isn't a good choice for a relaxing night out at the cinema. If you are tired of watching predictable characters on screen then this is definitely a film for you. *Hard Candy* is compelling viewing.

Aboriginal life without the colonial backdrop

FILM REVIEW

Arthouse

Published *24-Jul-2006*

Ten Canoes: 92 minutes, Rating: M

Director: Rolf de Heer

Exotic and familiar, comic and tragic, *Ten Canoes*, which was released at the end of June, is a rare delight. Director Rolf De Heer is better known for the psychosexual suburban nightmares, *Bad Boy Bubby* and *Alexandra's Project*. Co-written with its amateur cast, it is a fascinating and bittersweet tale of a people we know little about.

Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the storytelling occurs within the storytelling. David Gulpilil speaks to us in voiceover about the long-ago time, which then flashes even further back to ancient times. Aside from the English voiceover, the entire film uses the native Ganalbingu language of north-eastern Arnhem Land.

The story revolves around a remote Arafura tribe of families, where the old men take several wives, and the younger men in the hierarchy have none. It begins with young Dayindi (Jamie Gulpilil), falling for his brother's youngest wife. On a goose egg hunt, his brother regales him with the tale of a time this happened before, and the consequences that ensued from 'living the wrong way', or breaking tribal law.

The story snakes away from our expectations, giving us a fascinating insight into the lives and cultures of the characters. Day-to-day life, conflict with other tribes, polygamy, reincarnation, sorcery and payback retribution are all embraced in a natural and non-judgemental manner. As Australian cinema has historically depicted Aborigines in relation to modern-day white society, the pre-colonial setting of *Ten Canoes* enables us to better identify with the characters.

A photograph of ten native men in their ten bark canoes on the Arafura swamp, taken by anthropologist Dr Donald Thomson in the 1930s, gives an impression of the film as a documentary. The pacing may be a little slow for some. The story also branches out in several directions at once.

The familiar Australian landscape is important. The characters see themselves not separated from the land or in conflict with it, but of the land itself. They come from the land, they will return to it, and they will come from the land once more. And the beauty of this area on screen never fails to amaze.

Universal and profound, with real and natural performances, *Ten Canoes*is a fascinating insight into the rich texture of the characters' culturally diverse lives. Essentially optimistic and visually stunning, and made in an affectionate and humorous fashion, the film provides an absorbing and captivating glimpse into a part of humanity we may have neglected.

Paddington [Brisbane]

POETRY

Published *24-Jul-2006*

In every gully
there is a cached surprise of house
tucked away in amongst the lush growth,
on every ridge the breath is drawn
away from the lungs
as the airborne mind
swoops across to the next ridge,
the houses winking at each other
as the sun makes its autumn parabola
over the wrinkles of the land.
Renovator's paradise, these dwellings
rising off their tall stilts,
shouldering each other aside,
up and down the slopes,
dry timber awaiting the lick of fresh paint,
window casements to be eased,
acroteria to be repaired, barge board
to be treated with finial, belvederes to
be braced, colours to be chosen
from the alluring charts.
Down in the dip, near where the builder
was hard at it amongst the cut boards
and the stack of timber,
three recalcitrant youths gave us the finger,
one threw a fruit at the car, and then

they darted like Wild Indians into the deep
canopied bush, their school bags
flapping uselessly like extra limbs.
Heavy rain concluded the chase
and in the gathering darkness
the antique shops lost their allure,
the lights of the city began to emerge
in the glimpses back down the valleys,
as we headed off the ridge once more, down
to the dark mangrove flats of the coast.

Scanning the Horizon

POETRY

Published *24-Jul-2006*

At six-thirty a.m.
I drive the back road
from Shoalhaven Heads to Berry,
winding past Seven Mile Winery,
the bronze-yellow scarring
the ocean's line of horizon,
past the bed and breakfasts,
round the sweeping bend
of Far Meadow,
avoiding the potholes
that like a cancer refuse to be mended,
watching the bleeding sky behind
turn milk-white ahead,
past Rumbles Earthmoving,
the fiery clusters of the coral trees
lining the road,
to the left, towards Nowra,
orange lights of homesteads
marooned deep in the steaming vale,
the mill-smoke drugged and white,
suspended in air,
the near cows like monuments
in the low-level mist
probed here and there
by a scalpel blade of sun,

over Broughton Creek bridge

drowning in its image,
the skin of the water unblemished

but for a solitary duck

cutting a lesion from the farther reeds,

past the old Creamery,

a lone jogger exhaling the vapour

of his smouldering pain,

and over the crossing

to the station: and my three hour train ride

to where the specialist at her city desk

prescribes for me another, unfamiliar

road I'm now on.