Election a test for East Timor's fragile democracy
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East Timor‘s recent presidential election initially brought forth some signs of hope for the fragile democracy. Opposition parties and prominent independents, including the interim Prime Minister Jos E Ramos-Horta, ran vigorous campaigns for the largely ceremonial post of President against the ruling FRETILIN party’s candidate Francisco 'Lu Olo' Guterres.
There was a huge voter turnout for the election, and on polling day not a single incident of violence was reported. But as counting got underway last week there appeared to be irregularities as FRETILIN suddenly recorded a sudden jump in its vote amid claims that the ruling party had exerted influence on its cadres who worked for the electoral commission and at polling booths.
One observer, associate professor Damien Kingsbury from Deakin University said the jump was "statistically highly unusual, highly irregular".
Support for the FRETILIN candidate jumped from 23 per cent to 28 per cent, ahead of Ramos-Horta on 23 per cent.
Claims of voter intimidation, however, appear to be overstated, given the peaceful environment that prevailed on polling day. And the East Timorese have previously defied threats of intimidation when in 1999 they defied the Indonesian-backed militias and voted to break ties with Indonesia.
A recount of all the ballots may be held in Dili in coming weeks after a formal complaint was lodged by five of the eight candidates. The claims of irregularities speak volumes about the state of East Timor’s democracy and what is in store for the all-important parliamentary elections to be held on June 30.

Prior to the violence of April-June last year, which forced the FRETILIN prime minister Mari Alkatiri to stand down, East Timor looked destined to become a Singapore-style democracy-that is, one in which the ruling party is never voted out. Alkatiri had wanted to hold the election without UN observers, electoral law was being held back and he had proposed making defamation a criminal offence. If FRETILIN continues to tighten its grip, danger is still on the cards.
The position of President under East Timor’s constitution does not have executive powers. However, as the outgoing Xanana GusmÃ£o demonstrated last year, it can have enormous moral authority. Now GusmÃ£o has formed a new political party to run against the ruling FRETILIN party in the

parliamentary elections. He is joined by the leading opposition force, the Democratic Party, which also strongly contested the April 9 election.

GusmÃ£o's party, the National Council for Timorese Reconstruction, bears the same Portuguese acronym as the multi-party resistance council that he founded in 1988. The poet-warrior whose time in a Jakarta prison earned him the title of 'Asia's Nelson Mandela' resigned from FRETILIN in December 1987 in order to establish a multi-party umbrella movement, which became known as CNRT, the National Council of Timorese Resistance. GusmÃ£o believed that the left-leaning FRETILIN party had cruelled East Timor's independence aspirations from the very beginning; its small but vocal Marxist faction and policy of non-alignment with Indonesia's foreign policy sparked fears in Indonesia, the United States and Australia that an independent East Timor would become a satellite of communist countries, most notably China.

When independence arrived the Alkatiri government was dominated by exiles that had lived in communist Mozambique during the 24-year occupation. While espousing free market principles, the government was pre-occupied with communist-style centralization and control. Last year FRETILIN showed its true colours when it invited to its party congress representatives from the communist parties of China, Portugal, Cuba and Mozambique.

The central failing of FRETILIN was its inability to spend the national budget and deliver benefits to the long-suffering Timorese. In the 2005-06 Budget every category of government spending was underspent except one-ministerial travel. Late last year the FRETILIN-dominated parliament passed a law awarding a long list of perks to former ministers, including a lifelong salary, car, driver and overseas travel.

GusmÃ£o and the other opposition parties have the support of the powerful Catholic Church, East Timor's oldest institution, which also lost patience with a government that delivered very little to ordinary people. The Bishop of Dili, Ricardo da Silva told the author last year that despite having significant financial resources at its disposal, poverty worsened in the first four years of independence.

In 2005 the Church became an outspoken opponent of the Alkatiri government, organising mass rallies against a plan to make religious education optional in government schools. The demonstrations also tapped into deepening dissatisfaction as poverty worsened following the withdrawal of Indonesia.

GusmÃ£o also has support from a group of 'reformist' FRETILIN members who failed in their attempt last year to have Alkatiri removed as

secretary-general of the party. The new foreign minister, JosE Luis Guterres, an urbane former ambassador to the United States and the United Nations, leads the MudanÃ§a group.

The East Timor elections are a crucial test for building democracy in post-conflict countries, and indeed in a country that has the added blessing, and curse, of significant resource wealth.

Troops return debate ignores our Iraq havoc complicity
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Last month the Prime Minister, John Howard, embarked on a whistle-stop tour of the frontlines in the war against international terrorism. Within days of his return from brief visits to Afghanistan and Iraq he delivered a speech marking the fourth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

The speech will not go down as one of Howard's greatest. But it is not that it was lacklustre that is of real importance. What matters is that it illustrates something about the sort of debate on Iraq we are having in Australia. In his speech Howard asked his critics to put aside their objections to the original decision to invade Iraq and instead to "consider the situation we now face and the stakes involved."
It is a line the Prime Minister has run before. And it is an attempt at shifting the focus of the debate from the decision to invade to what the Prime Minister called "our obligations to help the Iraqis." By shaping the debate in this way Howard is attempting to reposition himself on the moral high ground.

Those who continue to carp on the original decision, such a position suggests, are not only engaging in a stale argument, but worse, they are letting the Iraqis down. Yet while there is no doubt that we now have obligations to Iraqis, it should also be clear where responsibility lies for their current predicament. Our obligations stem from our role in creating havoc in the place.

This is not to say that the Iraqis were living in peace before Howard and his fellow hawks invaded. Iraqis had long been living under a brutal dictatorship. But the situation that Iraqis now face is the result not of Saddam's regime but of the decision to invade and the consequences that have flowed from that decision. It was Howard and his colleagues in the US

and Britain that unleashed this thing.

When Howard points to the devastating implications of a "premature withdrawal of coalition forces" while failing to take responsibility for his part in creating the problem, he is engaging in clever obfuscation.

The opposition leader has played right into this. Kevin Rudd's emphasis on the withdrawal of Australian troops has meant that Australia's debate on Iraq is shallow and parochial.

Rather than focussing on the real issue-the fate of the millions of Iraqis now living in desperate insecurity and the destablising repercussions for the whole Middle East-the debate in Australia continues to revolve around when Australian troops should return.

To be fair, the Prime Minister spoke of his "concern and distress" about the continued "violence and suffering" in Iraq and of a "bloody, chaotic problem." But it is language that does more to obscure than clarify the nature of the problem.

Nowhere in his recent speech-in which he quoted at some length a number of military officials who had made comments favourable to his argument-was Howard able to convey the extent of the tragedy that has befallen Iraqis.

The International Committee for the Red Cross last week reported that as a consequence of the conflict in their homeland, many Iraqis are unable to access adequate food, clean water or health care. Vital infrastructure, including power, water and sanitation systems remain in a state of disrepair.

And then there is the violence. We all know from the daily news reports of suicide bombings killing scores of people. On Thursday, the Iraqi Parliament, a building that is located within the maximum security Green Zone was bombed, killing up to eight people.

There is also another sort of violence that permeates Iraqi society and that is less widely reported. As part of the vicious sectarian conflict that continues in Iraq, large numbers of civilians are being killed and tortured, including by â€˜death squads' with links to the government.

A report by the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq published late last year noted that "7,054 civilians were violently killed in September and October 2006, with almost 5,000 in Baghdad alone, most of them bearing signs of torture and killed as a result of gunshot wounds."

The bodies of the victims of this violence are often dumped on the city streets, a practice that is reminiscent of Latin America's so-called dirty wars. According to one newspaper report, there is a street in Baghdad in which so many corpses have been left that it has become known as the Street of Death.

It is almost impossible to imagine the sort of fear and insecurity that pervades the daily lives of individuals and communities living in such conditions. The situation is so dire that Iraqis are fleeing their homes and their homeland in extraordinary numbers.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, since early 2006 more than 700,000 Iraqis have fled their homes for other parts of Iraq. In early 2007 it was estimated that the numbers of the internally displaced were being added to at a rate of 50,000 per month. A further 2 million Iraqi refugees have sought refuge in neighbouring states and in 2006, Iraqis were seeking asylum in Europe at a greater rate than any other nationality.

In comparison to this reality, the debate over the withdrawal of Australian troops is completely incomprehensible. For Labor, there are political points to be scored by appealing to a policy of â€˜bringing our boys home' and chastising the government for its apparent failure to have an exit strategy from Iraq.

For the government, the question of troop withdrawal keeps the debate focused narrowly on the present without any reference to the circumstances that got us â€“ and more importantly, the Iraqis-here. That Howard and the supporters of the war in Iraq are seeking to assume the moral high ground in the current debate ought to be beyond the bounds of logic.

The failure of the media and the opposition to return again and again to the moral responsibility that the Howard government has for the disaster in Iraq might also reflect something of the state of Australian political culture. It is further evidence that we do not have the ability to have a sustained and serious debate on the things that really matter.

Family policy grapples with modern complexities
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His name was Joe. He was a trade union official, a former communist, influential in the building industry and a good bloke. I phoned him at his home on a Sunday afternoon in the late 1960s about a case in the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. He said he was busy and would have to ring back: "I'm concreting over the lawn ready for my retirement." He was serious.

As someone who preferred grass to concrete, I was a bit shocked by this. But at the time I hardly noticed that he was articulating his own personal vision of life after work and of life being divided into rigid compartments of school, work and retirement, which meant doing virtually nothing as one recovered from the years of labour in the workforce.

Usually it meant watching television, a few beers and, by today's standards, an early death.
This world was what has recently been characterised as "the wage-earners' welfare state" in which men were the breadwinners and women remained at home, as an unpaid workforce, performing domestic functions, including the care of children and relatives. There was not much employment mobility. Men often had only one job in their lifetime and earned wages sufficient to support an average family. Their jobs gave them employer-paid entitlements to sick leave, annual leave and long service leave. The state provided an old-age pension.
These were the essential elements of the social security system and part of the "Australian Settlement", largely devised by Alfred Deakin with the substance added by the support of the industrial arbitration system. And for three quarters of a century it worked.

Though it was not obvious, at the time I had my phone conversation with Joe, this whole world was being undermined. The widespread use of the contraceptive pill was accompanied by increased demands for gender equity, both in the workplace and the home. Rapid technological change was making traditional work skills obsolete and creating demands for new ones.
And in the 1980s the whole basis of the economy was changed from one which was protected and isolated from the world to one which was faced with the realities of international trade and competition. The combination of new technologies, social changes and the opening up of the economy meant changes in jobs, in families and in personal relations. The traditional security of the provence of law and order provided by the Australian settlement has now almost disappeared. Lifelong employment is rare.
All these things and many more important changes which influence the life courses of individuals have happened in less than half a century.

In his book Weighing up Australian Values, Brian Howe (pictured) modestly describes his aim as being "to establish a values driven social policy,

which takes account of change". What he is more precisely concerned about is how a society like Australia might make the transition from the social policies of the past, which worked reasonably well in protecting people from serious poverty to new social policies which provide a similar sense of security and relevance to our contemporary world.

The starting point is that the life courses of individuals are so different from those of individuals before the recent period of massive change. People change jobs, juggle responsibilities between family life and work, enjoy less leisure and increasingly share the burdens of caring and raising a family. Technological changes raise the importance of education and re-training.
The second area of coping with complexity is education, "especially for vocational education and training in the knowledge economy". Again it is a matter of arranging the life course to accommodate a variety of pressures of which maintaining skills is undoubtedly one.

In respect of each of the issues raised in his book, whether it be the analysis of the problems or some of the proffered solutions Brian Howe has researched the topic thoroughly and drawn extensively on the work and experience of European social policy thinkers such as Professor Gunther Schmid of the Social Science Research Centre in Berlin.

In Australia, as he points out the old economic model is obsolete, but "the new neo-liberal economic paradigm model excludes the possibility of social reform." This book doesn't; it is "concerned about the risks to which Australian are now exposed."

Howe has in effect given us a new paradigm for thinking about social policy in Australia. It is an important book and should create food for thought for a gaggle of social policy wonks. It might also challenge Australian politicians to think about the purpose of their existence in Canberra.

Two things are particularly refreshing about it. Firstly, since he left the Australian Parliament Brian Howe has been thinking about future generations of Australians in a creative policy way proving that for some there can be a very worthwhile life after politics. Secondly it is nicely written.

In an introduction to the book Gunther Schmid mentions the fact that in the late 19th Century British and European Scholars were influenced by social policy experiments in Australia and New Zealand. Once again he says, with this book, Europeans have the opportunity to learn from "Down Under". Whether Australians similarly take up the opportunity remains to

be seen. I think we should.

Brian Howe's Weighing Up Australian Values: Balancing transitions and risks to work & family in modern Australia is published by UNSW Press. (RRP $29.95, ISBN 9780868408859, website)

Work-life balance goes beyond the family
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Family planning, it seems, doesn't mean what it used to. Now the planning keeps on going and going - endless negotiations around every aspect of family schedules. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report on balancing work and family, titled It's About Time, has taken us into a series of Australian family homes. And it's confirmed that there's a dizzying array of ways to structure family life: who works when, drives whom where, cooks and cleans between which other tasks, and negotiates exactly what with their family-friendly employer.

It's all important stuff-of that there's no doubt-but the report is not really about time at all. It's not even about general arrangements for all employees, or about balanced lifestyles. What it's actually about is family. And when the structures of nuclear family start to be equated with 'life', and as that portion of our time which is not 'work', then we would do well to start feeling a little nervous.

Such a narrow family focus prompts me again to wonder about Jesus' attitude to family. Perhaps religious views of family are often trotted out in these kinds of debates, so it's probably worth starting with a couple of qualifications. Firstly, and perhaps obviously, family space and time really didn't mean the same thing in first century Palestine. We're talking about a time when meals were conducted with open doors at the side, through which complete strangers could enter at any time and take a seat in the background.

And, sure, blood being thicker than water would be a good way to describe the priority for care for kinship groups, but this was a far cry from mum, dad and 2.4 kids. The Jewish tradition from which Jesus hailed contained clear responsibilities for quite extended branches of the family tree. It was a set-up designed to protect people from falling through societal gaps-making sure that widows and orphans,for example, were provided for. Of course, the extent to which the reality reflected these values might be an open question. This leads us to Jesus' attitude to family. His comments

on family, as the gospels record them, aren't the kind of family-values-with-a-religious-gloss that we occasionally get around the religious edge of contemporary politics. On the contrary, instead of rushing to see his own family, he said: "who are my mother and brothers?â€| Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3:33, 35).
But this is not meant to be an unhealthy rant prompted by latent family issues, it's Jesus' acknowledgement that there are more important things than just sticking to our own. For all its emphasis on kinship, there's another important strand within Jesus' tradition-care for a stranger. Challenging and controversial, Jesus knew such priorities could spark conflict within families.

So, as important as creative work and family arrangements may be for facilitating care for older and younger family members, the problem with the conversation around the HREOC report is that it seems to have completely overlooked the other social problems that come with overworked, time-poor adults. If people are just squishing in time to supervise school readers and provide the after-school sports taxi, then where is the time for participation in broader community concerns? If we're all just hemmed in by the busyness of our closest kin, then people fall through the gaps.

Who hasn't wanted to stop and talk to the older woman we don't know but see daily on her pilgrimage to the shops, or to know more about the actual experience of asylum seekers living in our community, or to find out about the local council strategy for better bike paths- but when is there time for that?
If we're hoping for a better work-life balance, then how do we start developing an equation for this kind of balance? The conversation is only just skimming the surface when it talks about childcare, because we need to talk about how to structure employment arrangements to allow for social justice, citizenship, for befriending the stranger-and, frankly, also for a bit of a rest.

We may not be able to work out what particular work-family arrangement Jesus may have settled on. I suspect something pretty flexible, with an emphasis on working out how to put energy into what was most important. But we can say that he'd factor in some space-take the boat out, go up onto a mountain-to rest and pray. And then, all the while still looking out for his closest companions, he'd keep on with the work of the kingdom, proclaiming a vision of a world in which people do not fall through the cracks.

Alan Jones and the power of one

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Travel broadens the mind -so they say. But I had some difficulty thinking expansively on the plane home just after Easter. The season should have filled me with new thought that springeth green. But the lithe young fellow next me was thinking different territorial imperatives-his. So as his biceps shoved me off the armrests during the flight and his person shoved me out of way as soon as we landed, I found myself biting my tongue instead of smiling with reconciliatory goodwill.

When I bite my tongue I compensate the small gods of psychological necessity by breathing strenuously though my nose-it's a habit picked up from my Presbyterian father. But the lithe fellow couldn't hear my coded, suppressed fury because he was communing with his mobile the minute the wheels hit the tarmac. And as he disappeared up the aisle, thrusting a few more passengers into his wake, I was left with the bitter aftertaste of an opportunity lost. No human exchange-not even a mute smile-had come of our chance hour together.

The news I'd been reading (with difficulty, given the squash) in the Canberra Times provided on the plane was mostly of Alan Jones and the Australian Communications and Media Authority's findings on Jones' contributions to enlightenment during last year's Cronulla riots.

Acres of newsprint have already been devoted to the issue so I won't rehearse it here, except to say that Jones' reflexes on air were not unlike those of my aggressive travelling companion: assertive and territorial. A 'power of one' he may be, but Jones also makes a powerful appeal to the tribal in all of us.
When we retreat into the tribe we lose the chance to experience of the kindness of strangers.

After the miserable flight a kindly Punjabi taxi-driver took me home. We didn't have much language in common but it didn't matter. There was enough to exchange some road gossip-Punjabis are regular drivers in my neck of the woods, so we share a territory. Before Easter one Punjabi driver showed me where the speed cameras were on the Western Ring Road, so after Easter I reciprocated with first-hand experience of the streets and underpasses where police camera cars lurk. It turned out that we'd both been booked on the same downhill trap. Shared adversity is a great obliterator of difference.

My cabbie had a long spade beard and a black turban. The wary might have avoided a driver who looked so stereotypically like Osama bin Laden. I experienced him only as the smiling young man who now has three children at school in Australia and who was born near Amritsar twenty years after I lived in India-a fellow sufferer who was booked at 68kph where I was booked at 67kph! I shall carry his rueful smile in memory.

On the same day I shared a meal with the Polish-born Melbourne writer, Jacob Rosenberg, whose memoir, East of Time, has just won the 2007 National Biography award. Jacob's family all died in the Holocaust. On a perfect Melbourne autumn day he could remember the full horror of the experience-evil far beyond my imagining-and smile the smile of a man who does not seek scapegoats, who can laugh and tell the truth about evil and evildoers, who comes of a tribe but who is not locked inside a tribe.

At home again I reread a passage from Dreams of Speaking, a splendid new novel by the West Australian Gail Jones. In it she describes an incident in the Paris MEtro where the novel's protagonist, Alice, witnesses an assault on a young woman. Alice picks her up and wipes the blood from her nose with her own woollen scarf. The young woman shrugs off the help and limps away after the man who abused her. An old woman who has also witnessed the attack tugs at Alice's sleeve and murmurs to her in a language Alice does not know.

This is what happens next: "She may have been speaking Polish, or Yiddish; in any case, it was an expression of friendship and approval. Alice nodded, submissively. The encounter with the bleeding woman had left her with a giddy anticipation of despair. Random violence, no matter how minor, had this predictable effect: the shuddering sensation of watching the concussive recoil of flesh, the general collapse of civility, the reminder, above all, of graver, sorrowful things that exist beneath the hyper-shine and fast-motion of cities. Alice smiled at the speaking woman, and they waited together, side by side, for the next underground train."

While the train comes, the two women get on board together. The older woman pulls up the sleeve of her coat and shows her arm to Alice: "There, on her forearm, were blue tattooed numbers. The woman nodded at the numbers, then smiled sadly at Alice. She knew, Alice thought. She knew what all this meant. It was the barest of communications, a wordless understanding."

In a world of babble, and collapsing civilities, we might look for more such wordless communications.

The psychology of climate change denial

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In his Easter message, Cardinal George Pell said that Jesus did not preach about global warming. This is true. However, it is also true to say that he had said nothing of nuclear war, contraception or papal infallibility.
The cardinal is not alone, of course, in calling the phenomenon of global warming into question. John Howard is a very recent convert to the reality of climate change, and he still has sceptics in his cabinet. Another doubter is Michael Duffy, who writes a Saturday column in the Sydney Morning Herald and graces the Radio National airwaves each week.
Some of the global warming sceptics, among them a few scientists, are just contrary types-people who love to upset the accepted orthodoxy-while some genuinely question the phenomenon of global warming. I'm not a global warming sceptic. I accept that the evidence is overwhelming and that we need to take drastic action to avert a catastrophe that will impact on the next couple of generations. We have a profound moral obligation to them to act to lessen the effects of our prodigious use of fossil fuels.
I don't believe that it can be business as usual, that with a few adjustments we will be able to make it. The neo-rationalist economic model that we use is not sustainable into the future. It is this model that is responsible for the widespread destruction of the natural world, so to me it is inconceivable that we can somehow turn ourselves around while still operating out of the model which caused the destruction in the first place. We need a totally new approach.
However, we also need to be careful about rushing in and making predictions about what will happen in specific situations and places. If this was what the global warming sceptics were talking about we would take them more seriously. For instance, many people have predicted that the frequency and intensity of bushfires in south-eastern and south-western Australia will be exacerbated by the effects of global warming. The Council of Australian Government's bushfire inquiry and the CSIRO's Climate Impact Group have accepted this scenario.
There is a widespread popular perception, re-enforced by the media as it tries to reduce complex scientific information to understandable language, that global warming inevitably means that everything will be drier, that there will be less rain, and with the vegetation drying out there will be more bushfires.

But this is not necessarily true. It ignores the fact that global warming is a complex process. We used to call it â€˜the greenhouse effect' and in a greenhouse things are certainly warm, but they are also steamy and wet. So

warming doesn't necessarily imply less rain; in fact there will probably be marginally more rain at a worldwide level, and north-western Australia has been getting somewhat wetter since the 1970s. This will probably continue, and the tropics will move further south.

Weather is a contrary beast and while it is true that the south-east and south-west will probably get drier, it is impossible to predict precisely what will happen weather-wise at a local level. We also need to remember that predictions are based on climate models and these differ. As a result the conclusions also vary.

Global dimming is another uncertainty in this mix. This is the pollution from burning fossil fuels that gathers as a kind of ugly cloud that reflects the sun's rays and prevents some sunlight and warmth getting through to the earth's surface. While some think this masks the true impact of global warming, most scientists are more cautious.

So the problem we face is scientifically complex, the economic tools we are using are inappropriate, and the long-term consequences for local areas in terms of weather and events likes bushfires, largely unknown. Global warming sceptics would be more helpful if these were the issues they emphasized rather than just retreating into a psychology of denial, or a contrariness that is no longer funny.

Religious leaders also face a challenge here. These issues are not just scientific, but social and ultimately moral. The Catholic church has a sophisticated moral tradition and it is precisely this that we need to apply to the global warming complexities with which we are dealing.

Anzac Day celebrates humanity, not nationalism
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Essay
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When I was a boy, the school held a church service each Anzac Day. As I remember it, the cadets presented arms in the sanctuary of the chapel, and at the end a bugler played the Last Post. It was dramatic and moving. It also encapsulated the intertwining of churches and arms, of Anzac Day and religious symbolism.
These connections are natural. Like other battles in which many young people died, the military action at Gallipoli left relatives, friends and fellow Australians to find meaning in what had happened. They sought it in

many places: in Stoic acceptance of the absurdity and folly of war, in the classical tradition of the patriotic warrior, and in religious traditions.

Many of those affected by the Great War struggled to make sense of what they had hitherto taken for granted about their world. The young men who passed on to the next life had lived long enough to show promise and to be loved, but not long enough to give shape to their life's path. In their dying, they broke a web of relationships to family, to mates, to friends and lovers, to their local communities, and to their nation.
This is true of all wars. But aspects of the landing at Gallipoli made death particularly poignant and challenging. The soldiers died not in defence of their own land but in someone else's war, far from home. The action in which they died was of doubtful wisdom, and was inadequately planned and executed. In the event, the soldiers died to hold for a short time a few hills, a few valleys, and a tiny stretch of beach.
In response to the defeat some simply wept for the folly and the waste of the enterprise. Others looked for a higher meaning. Some drew inspiration from the bravery and generosity shown by so many of the soldiers. Others identified in Gallipoli a particularly Australian contribution to the war, and saw that it gave a distinctive shape to the Australian people.

Many people sought in the Christian tradition a way of understanding the significance of Gallipoli. This tradition is based on reversal. Both the Jewish stories that Christians inherited and the story of Jesus Christ find hope and meaning in catastrophic events that seemed to destroy hope. The people of Judaea were sent as exiles to Babylon, and Jesus was executed as a criminal. Yet these events became a seedbed for hope and meaning.

The meaning found was not simply personal, but also public. Out of the Exile came a people with a stronger sense of divine purpose and calling. From Jesus' death came a community united by a common faith in his saving death and rising. The events shaped a people.

Religious traditions also represent a worthwhile human life. Jewish, Christian and Muslim stories highlight the lives of martyrs. They die as witnesses to the truth of their faith and to the large hopes it holds. The martyrs are the foundation stones of a renewed and purified community.

When we are dealing with war, these religious themes of reversal, of community founding, and of the virtuous life offer resources. They allow the suffering and death of young men in a lost battle to be seen as an event that is life-giving. Their lives and war service can be seen as examples of faithfulness and virtue. The journeys and deaths of unnamed soldiers can be seen as the foundations of a renewed nation. From there,

it is a short step to make their nation’s cause God’s cause, so that they died, not only for king and country, but for king, country and God.

These are the possibilities offered by Christian symbols. How far are they drawn upon? In the personal tributes to the dead, such as epitaphs on graves, they were sparingly used. In public rhetoric, their implicit use was more expansive.

Many of the graves at Gallipoli carry simply the soldier’s name, the date of his death, and the details of his service. Many also bear an epitaph chosen by the family, and of these epitaphs, most are religious texts.

Some texts express simple grief and resignation. "The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away", for example. Other texts display hope in life after death, either through personal immortality, or through continuing memory.

Of the epitaphs, some express confidence that this death had a purpose. "Greater love than this no man has, than to lay down his life for his friends", for example. Again, there are secular parallels: "He died for king and country", or, "for his fellow soldiers".

These epitaphs are moving and modest. In them we see families grieving for a dead son or brother, and struggling to find meaning in it.

In the rhetorical attempt to find public meaning in Gallipoli, religious symbolism could be used to support such ideas as that the death of the soldiers was a sacrifice, or that the nation was born in the carnage of Gallipoli, or that this battle represented the heart of the nation. To have any plausibility, such high flying judgments rely on at least implicit religious grounding.

The difficulty is that the religious tradition does not support this use of religious symbolism. The tension is evident even in the phrase that is used as the epitaph on special graves: "Their glory shall not be blotted out". The epitaph is admirably inclusive. In its original context in the Book of Ecclesiasticus (44.13) the phrase praises virtuous men. The selection of famous men proposed, and the grounds for keeping their memory alive, give conspicuously little place to warriors and their virtues, and emphasise religious devotion.

The tension is much stronger in the case of explicitly Christian symbolism. Although the New Testament focuses on Jesus' sacrificial love and on the place of the martyrs, the significance of their actions lies in non-violence. The martyrs win their victory because, like Christ, they go unarmed and unresisting to their death. In the Book of Revelation the

tension between Christian faith and state sponsored war is even stronger. There Rome with its military power is seen as the beast. The martyrs are both its victims and its conquerors. If we were to look for contemporary images in times of war that reflect the place in Christian faith of sacrificial love and of the martyrs, we should perhaps look to conscientious objectors rather than to soldiers.

It follows from this that in the Christian tradition, at least, we should hesitate to describe Anzac Day as a sacred event. It is certainly not sacred in the sense that the cause in which the soldiers died was especially noble, or because the deaths of soldiers killed in war are more especially significant, or because this is a seminal event in Australian history.
From a theological perspective, it can be described as sacred only in a broad sense - because it is a human event, and all human events are places where God walks. It is also sacred because battles see humanity pitched between life and death, and because the death of so many young people provokes deep and difficult questions about human meaning and purpose.

Ultimately Anzac Day can be described as sacred only because all human beings are sacred. Each human being is precious in God's sight. So, the life and the fate of each soldier who died at Gallipoli matter. The nobility and generosity shown by soldiers under such extreme pressure also matter. The grief of those who loved them and who awaited their return matters. So does the common life of communities stripped of their young men and, with them, of their possibilities. In Christian symbolism, the poignancy and preciousness of each human life are crystallised in the death of Jesus Christ for all human beings. That grounds the sacredness of everything that touches humanity, of all ordinary human events.

If Anzac Day does not possess a unique but an ordinary sacredness, the proper response is to treat it with respect and with intelligence. The larger rhetoric of Anzac Day needs to be complemented by hard-headed reflection on what happened at Gallipoli. We can ask such questions as whether it was really in Australia's interests to fight in someone else's war. Was the generosity of young Australians manipulated by a government committed to war? Would the world's suffering of the last eighty years really have been significantly greater had the allies lost the war? Was the Gallipoli expedition planned and conducted with a seriousness befitting the preciousness of the lives at stake? These are not theological but historical questions. These questions help test whether large religious symbols are appropriately used in connection with a war. Before describing the soldiers' death in sacrificial terms, for example, we should have asked ourselves who was sacrificing whom.

From the Christian perspective any attempt to attribute large significance to Anzac Day and to wars is suspect. When we say that people sacrificed their lives for an abstract cause like victory or nationhood, we easily imply that their lives and deaths are given value only by the cause they serve. We lose sight of the preciousness of each human life, and equate human value with usefulness. Rhetoric about war is particularly vulnerable to this instrumentalising of human beings, because its core business implies that human lives are expendable.

Each generation will find new meaning in the celebration of Anzac Day. Many recent changes focus on human values. The practice of children carrying their ancestors' medals emphasises the human dimension of the event, and particularly the way in which anyone's death affects a network of relationships. By allowing the soldiers of other nations, particularly those of once hostile nations, to join the march, too, we recognise that war is a shared experience. The combatants share a common humanity. By emphasising this common humanity we more easily recognise the need for reconciliation with past enemies. These new aspects celebrate the human dimensions of war, and not the war-making of humanity.

More ambiguous are the recent nationalist emphases in the celebration of Anzac Day-the proliferation of flags, the singing of national anthems, and the desire to make Anzac Day emblematic of Australian values. These things diminish the real humanity of those who have died in order to allow another generation to inflate its image of itself. But good historians puncture grandiloquence and invite us to return to the human reality of the events that generated Anzac Day. Truth and modesty, after all, would be commendable Australian values.

The storycatcher charged with finding stories that matter
COLUMNS
Stateside
Published
16-Apr-2007

Dishes, mostly. And gobs of laundry. You wouldn't think three kids would have so much laundry, I mean how many shirts can three kids possibly wear, it's not like we live in the Arctic and they have to have twenty layers of fabric so they can go trap wolverine for pin money or whatever, but you don't know these kids, these are their mother's kids, and thus genetically far more attentive to graceful appearance than their dad, who looks like a dissolute wolverine. These kids are apparently ornate musical productions

with lots of costume changes, and the way they clean their rooms on Saturdays is to shovel all the clothes on the floor down the laundry chute at the bottom of which is their father, roaring.

But I asked for these children, I begged for them, I prayed and yearned and was thrilled and delighted when they emerged from my wife one after another like a circus act, and I wrote lyrical sentimental muck about them when they were little, and now that they are lanky and sneering in ways I could never have imagined, I cannot retract the vows and oaths I swore when they were born, which were that I would expend every ounce of energy and creativity to be their most excellent and attentive dad, which I have tried to be for fifteen years, with middling success and a stunning amount of laundry and roaring. I got exactly what I asked the Coherent Mercy for, which was the chaos and hubbub of children, who are the most extraordinary creatures of all, and I have often thought that what I am here for, if I can get over the whole laundry problem for a minute, is them. Also I have often thought that the Coherent Mercy has a dark and devious sense of humor, and clearly relishes irony, and often gives you exactly what you asked for, which is more than you knew you wanted.

*

Also I am here for sunlight and hawks and the way dragonflies and damselflies do that geometric astounding zigzag thing in the air totally effortlessly which absolutely knocks me out and I have spent many hours staring at them in a trance, explaining to people that I am conducting a scientific project. They look at me oddly. And I am here to hear thrushes in late winter and to gape at osprey and to taste my way judiciously through excellent red wines from countries where the sun shines. And to shuffle humming through the rain, gentle and ancient and patient and persistent and holier than we ever admit. And to hear and foment laughter, the coolest sound there is. And to witness grace under duress; that more than anything.

*

I have often thought that I am the luckiest guy on earth, for any number of reasons, starting with being born American of Irish ancestry in New York, what a combination of swaggering cultural confidence and addiction to tall tales and the music of stories and the insistence that creative energy can jolt the universe, and then I was a middle child, balanced between the weight of expectation and too much independence, and I was a child of the middle class and so was fed and clothed and safe and educated and no one shot at me, and in college I woke up a little spiritually and mentally and socially, and then shuffled on into a life utterly absorbed by stories, their swing and cadence and bone and song, and a cool woman married me and I have had a sweet confusing painful delighted mysterious marriage that is different every eleven minutes which is riveting and frustrating and riveting, and we were graced with all these children, some of them twins who move so fast I am never quite sure how many twins there

are in the house at all , and I lucked into work that has everything to do with listening and hearing stories and catching stories and shaping stories and sharing stories, and at age fifty I conclude that I was born and made for stories, I am a storyman, I believe with all my hoary heart that stories save lives, and the telling and hearing of them is a holy thing, powerful far beyond our ken, sacramental, crucial, nutritious; without the sea of stories in which we swim we would wither and die; we are here for each other, to touch and be touched, to lose our tempers and beg forgiveness, to listen and to tell, to hail and farewell, to laugh and to snarl, to use words as knives and caresses, to puncture lies and to heal what is broken.

*

There are two words in the lore of Judaism, our parent stock, the branch of the human family that heard the words I Am Who Am (the bluntest syntax in the history of the world!), and these two words, tikkun olam, in the Hebrew, are easy to translate but hard to explain. My friends who speak the ancient tongue tell me the words mean repairing the world, that the universe when it was imagined into being could not hold the unimaginable infinity of the Word, and so it shattered into countless shards and shreds, and our job, the job of every human being, perhaps every living being of every shape and size, is to, by living intently and attentively, by being your truest and greatest self, work to repair and restore the broken gift. I think this is true, and by now, after fifty years, I am absolutely sure what I am supposed to do: sense stories, catch some by their brilliant tails as they rocket by, carve and sculpt them into arrows, and fire them into the hearts of as many people as I can reach on this bruised and blessed planet. That's all. That's enough.

*

A few days after the murders of September 11 a magazine editor called me and asked if I would contribute an essay to a special issue she and her colleagues were hurriedly making in the aftermath of September 11. Nope, I said. Three of my friends were roasted to white ash that day by that foul coward Bin Laden, and his crimes had already produced an ocean of empty opinion and windy rhetoric and witless commentary around the world, and the easy fatuous opinions enraged me, everyone so confident they knew what to say in the face of the unspeakable, and I refused to add to the babble, and would try to offer the only eloquent and apt thing that could or should be said in the aftermath of such horror, which is nothing. The only proper thing in your mouth at such a time is prayer, best said silently.

In the kitchen that night I reported this conversation to my wife and

daughter.

So what are you going to do? asked my daughter.

Pray.

But what are you going to do?

What do you mean?

Well, dad, you are always lecturing us about how if God gives you a talent and you don't use that talent that's a sin, and, you know, no offence, dad, but you only have the one talent, you say so yourself, and that's telling stories, so if you don't tell a story here, isn't that a sin? No offence.

In the next three months I wrote three stories, one for each of my friends, Tommy Crotty and Farrell Lynch and Sean Lynch, whose wives sleep alone and whose children are unfathered, and published them in magazines, and gave them to anthologies, and badgered newspapers and newsletters and parish bulletins and editors in other countries to reprint them for free, and copied and mailed them to as many people as I could think of, and put them in a book of essays, and I still don't think I did enough to mill my small peculiar gift into an arrow of furious hope against the dark arrogance of Osama Bin Laden, who is sure he knows the mind of God; and like every twisted soul who murders under the banner of heaven, he is destined for the deepest pit of Gehenna, where he will hear the sobs of children until the end of time. So even now, five years later, I still plot ways to rain stories down on Bin Laden in his cave, and eventually flush him out into the angry light, harried by stories like vengeful hawks.

*

When I was a kid I wanted in the worst way to be a pro basketball player, though even I had to admit that there didn't seem to be a whole lot of job opportunities for short skinny guys with ponytails and thick glasses. When I got older all I really wanted was to be loved by and to be in love with a fascinating woman. It took me a long time to realize that all women are fascinating and that being in love with and being loved by one was a wondrous gift but not a destination, a verb and not a noun; in fact I learned that being married to one was only a much deeper form of excitement and confusion than the series of muddled love affairs we engage in before we marry. Not until a few years ago did I realize that I was on earth not to be loved but to love. That's all. That's enough.

*

I am here to witness. I was sent to sing. I am here to catch and tell the story of the teacher who ran with a child on her shoulders out of the ash and fire of September 11. I am here to tell you that a man and a woman reached for each other at the high windows in the south tower and they held hands as they leapt into the void. I am here to tell you that a man carried a colleague eighty floors to the street and then went back in. I am here to marvel at a pope praying with his almost-assassin, to marvel at victims forgiving the murderers of their children in South Africa, to be riveted by all the thin bony nuns who have carried the church on their shoulders for centuries and hardly anyone ever shouted my god without those women there would be no church whatever whatsoever absolutely! I am here to hear all the stories of all the women who have bent every ounce and iota of their souls to love, which is pretty much all the women who ever lived. I am here to see unreasonable illogical nonsensical courage and faith. I am here to sing grace under duress. I am a storycatcher, charged with finding stories that matter, stories about who we are at our best, who we might be still, because without stories we are only mammals with weapons. I am here to point at shards of holiness. That's all. That's enough.

Drover's Wife echoes in computer data loss
COLUMNS
By the Way
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In Henry Lawson's great story, â€˜The Bush Undertaker', an old shepherd-isolated, eccentric, if not frankly rather mad-is collecting bones and other relics when he comes across a corpse. He can tell by the state of the boots that the man was a â€œsundownerâ€ . A rum bottle by his side tells more of the story. He concludes that he has stumbled on the mortal remains of his long lost mate, Brummy. He carries the body back to his shack with the intention of giving Brummy a decent burial but this weird funeral procession is stalked by what the old man thinks must be â€œa flockâ€ of goannas but which he later realizes is simply one determined "thunderin' up-jumped" predator following the body.
Like the drover's wife in another famous Lawson story, the old man resolves to sit up all night to watch for the goanna. Eventually he shoots it as it comes crawling over the ridge pole: and he watches it die in "violent convulsions" on the ground just as the drover's wife watched the snake burn in the fireplace after she and her children had killed it. With

this mystery solved, the old shepherd turns to the task of burying Brummy but can’t work out what kind of ritual would be in order.

> "Theer oughter be somethin' sed", muttered the old man. "Theer oughter be some sort o’ sarmin." He buries Brummy, muttering now and then, "I am the rassaraction", then, with the job done, he hesitates, trying to remember what â€œoughter be" said. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his hands out from his sides and a little to the front, drew a long deep breath, and said with a solemnity that greatly disturbed [his dog] Five Bob: â€œHashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy-an'-an' in hopes of a great an' gerlorious rassaraction!" Then he collects his gear and walks wearily away. And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush-the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird.

The old man knows that buried back in his past is a formula, a way of behaving about the dead and their burial, and that this ritual is connected in some way to the supernatural. But he can’t remember either the form of the ceremony, or its gestures, or its words. The desperate attempt to remember produces fragments which are deeply moving and yet at the same time are parodies of the larger, solemn picture he cannot reassemble.

The drover's wife, though much more rational than the shepherd, is as cut off from the ceremonies and rituals of the past as he is. "All days are much the same to her; but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-trackâ€|She does this every SundayThere is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet." She knows that Sunday some time in her life has been different and special. She clings to the memory of significance and re-enacts a version of it which has been emptied of that significance. In trying to do it from flawed memory she parodies its original: there is nothing to see, no one to meet, no other soul.

The trouble with losing something that you can only really retrieve by reconstructing the whole experience is that the temptation to try to remember detail by detail is almost irresistible. This is the wrong option. Not only is memory fallible and feckless, it doesn't have a deep structure. It flies about, latches on to this and that, raises the dust of distraction, darts into side issues, becomes panicky, conflates, flatters, distortsâ€|

Well let me come clean. Last week in a moment of shocking suddenness which no expert so far has been able to explain, I lost ten thousand words-about three weeks work. It was not just the actual wordage: I had devoted a lot of thought-sometimes of the agonized and desperate variety occasioning communication failure and domestic tensions-to working out how to solve problems and undo knots that this narrative of mine kept throwing up, and how to get words round these resolutions that would be-if I may modestly

put it this way-not half bad. Now with all of it gone, I can’t stop myself trying to remember what I said-a fatal attraction, because I can’t possibly recall detail or sequence and will produce only a ghost of the original.

'They' reckon that everything you write or record or save on a computer is retrievable. It is there somewhere. The ghost in the machine. The "thunderin' up-jumped goanna" haunting my lost and funereal words. I hope they’re right.

ChÃ¡vez embraces Christian socialism
INTERNATIONAL

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Throughout Latin America a rich tapestry has long existed when it come to Catholics who have fought with the poor and challenged the establishment. The Brazilian Franciscan Friar Frei Betto, MonseÃ±or Ã“scar Romero of El Salvador, and Father Camilo Torres who left the order in the mid-1960s and joined the Army of National Liberation (ELN) in Colombia are all examples of this coming together of politics and theology. Marxists, Christians and left-wing politics mix in this region like in few other places.
With this in mind, it is interesting to follow relations between the Catholic Church and the incumbent President of Venezuela, Hugo ChÃ¡vez FrÃ-as, who is himself a believer. Although time will show to what extent ChÃ¡vez's proclaimed "Socialism for the 21st Century" will differ in practise from socialist or reformist regimes of the last century, there are some things that can be said about the man and his government with some assurance.
For a start, much evidence indicates that the ChÃ¡vez administration is genuinely engaged in a series of ambitious policies aimed at reducing poverty and forging Latin American integration. Secondly, if President ChÃ¡vez is sincere about his religious beliefs, his stance is certainly not out of kilter with the actions of countless Catholics throughout Latin American history who have also run into conflict with Church authorities.
Regarding the first point, a brief look at the practices of past Venezuelan governments highlights why Venezuela needs the radical change currently underway. In the past, previous administrations in Caracas were all too keen to sell the US cheap oil under market value while they in turn siphoned state profits through PDVSA, the state-owned oil company. According to one Business Week report last year, the country today, "is a

far cry from the 1990s, when Venezuela welcomed the big oil companies to invest in marginal fields at a time of low prices." Having negotiated new joint ventures, the report notes that "ChÃ¡vez has sharply hiked royalties and taxes on these operations to an effective take of more than 80%" while the revenues themselves are spent on, "lavish programs for Venezuela's poor, from monthly stipends for needy students to rice-and-beans subsidies for the barrios."

If misinformation and lack of reporting on the ChÃ¡vez's government's policies to reduce poverty abound in the press, confusion also exists when it comes to the man's religious beliefs. On this point, President ChÃ¡vez's overly rhetorical style certainly shares some responsibility for the misrepresentation of his views.

His performance last year at the United Nations is a case in point even if his chutzpah caused such "loud" and long "applause" in the General Assembly that "[UN] officials had to tell the cheering group to cut it out", as noted in The New York Times on September 21. Such performances, although cheered at home, debase the Venezuelan President as he can be boxed in the same league of leaders who view the world through a prism of 'good and evil' ; for example, George Bush and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Serious interviews with President ChÃ¡vez, such as that of Barbra Walters recently on the American ABC, show a much more cultured and reflective leader. Speaking at the Pastoral Action Center in New York in 2005, President ChÃ¡vez stated his admiration for Jesus Christ because, "He confronted the religious hierarchies. He confronted the economic power of the time. He preferred death in the defence of his humanistic ideals, and fostered changeâ€|"

Speaking with Chilean sociologist Marta Harnecker about his close encounter with death during the April 2002 coup-the soldiers assigned to execute him refused to carry out their orders-President ChÃ¡vez said, "I began to recite my prayers with my crucifix. I was ready to die with my dignity."

Maybe due to his close brush with death or the fact that the late Cardinal Ignacio Velasco signed the 'Carmona decree', which dismantled the country's democratic institutions by 'Dictator-For-a-Day, businessman Pedro Carmona, ChÃ¡vez bitterly condemned Velasco's stance during the two day coup. Monsignor Roberto Luckert-also an outspoken opponent of ChÃ¡vez-was going to hell, according to the President, to which Luckert responded that if that was the case, ChÃ¡vez is 'going to hell, too'. As if the flames were not hot enough, US televangelist Pat Robinson in August 2005 called for ChÃ¡vez's assassination.

Recently, however, events have taken a turn for the better with ChÃ¡vez stating that: "The Catholic Church, its priests at all levels, (should) take a step toward the forefront of the debate...You are welcome in the debate on building socialism, our socialism." In return, the Venezuelan Episcopal Conference has called for a "style of socialism that upholds

free speech, tolerates opposing views and respects religious education."
Given the international importance of Venezuela these days and that ChÃ¡vez is a Christian, perhaps it is time for Friar Frei Betto to conduct another marathon interview on religion, as he did with Cuba's Fidel Castro in the mid-1980s.
Whether this will happen remains to be seen, however, another comment can be made with some confidence. That is that in Latin America, the land of the possible, priests can certainly become radical social activists while presidents can also believe in God and put in place policies which benefit the poor. The latter are however a more rare breed than the former.

National Indigenous TV set for launch
MEDIA
Television
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The National Indigenous Television service will go to air in just two months, fulfilling a long-held dream. Inaugural broadcasts will be transmitted to a potential audience of 220,000 scattered over remote areas of the Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland and western New South Wales. These will be carried on the second satellite channel of Indigenous run and Alice Springs based commercial broadcaster Imparja.
But will the NITV service live up to its working name and reach beyond remote Australia? For the management team recruited to run the new broadcaster it is a case of start small and grow step by step.
The broadcaster's new Chief Executive is Pat Turner (pictured), an Arrernte woman from Alice Springs with an enviable 28-year track record in the federal public service. This includes roles as deputy secretary in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Centrelink deputy CEO and Chief Executive of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
She was on the verge of retirement in Alice Springs when the job came up. At her first press conference in Sydney as CEO she confessed "I was really intrigued once I understood what was involved in this initiative and I thought, 'Well there's a challenge.' Indigenous Australians have advocated for a distinct Indigenous television service for over 25 years."
It is an astute appointment by the inaugural Board given the negotiations needed with the Federal government to ensure the new broadcaster's continuation.

In late 2006 Communications Minister Helen Coonan allocated $48.5 million to be spread over four years for the establishment of a National Indigenous television service. It is unclear what will happen to funding

after four years.

However, Pat Turner is grateful that Minister Coonan has championed the service's establishment and cannot wait to showcase Indigenous programming, raising it from almost invisible current levels. "For Indigenous Australians, particularly our children, we do not see Indigenous faces on the screen. And the stories we do see are framed by news values of conflict and negativity."

Another crucial appointment is that of Paul Remati as NITV's Director of Television. Remati's most recent position in a 25-year career was as Head of Television at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

"Our mission for NITV is to celebrate and reflect the richness and diversity of Indigenous Australian cultures and deliver innovative, entertaining content to audiences throughout Australia and around the world," Remati said at his first public appearance in the role.

The new broadcaster wants to do this through acquiring and commissioning content from the expanding numbers of Indigenous industry creatives. Children's programming is a high priority, as is promoting and retaining Indigenous languages, one of which dies each year. The issue of language revival is so critical that the Board includes a representative of the national body for community-based Indigenous language programs.

Beyond the four-year funding issue key questions remain about Federal government policy on Indigenous TV: Remati is reported to have told the recent Australian International Documentary conference that "We've been told that we're not a broadcaster, but a content aggregator."

During the service's implementation phase this was a regular refrain from Canberra, begging the question of whether the service will ever be funded to deliver a full service rather than merely produce programming for other television broadcasters or content distributors. SBS experience confirms that discrete Indigenous programming attracts few national advertisers. Getting more Indigenous programming on television screens, and attracting Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers, requires an Indigenous version of a full service as happens in other countries.

Across the Tasman, two-year old Maori TV broadcasts to four-fifths of New Zealand's population of four million via UHF and the entire country via the digital platform. It was attracting an average of around 400,000 viewers a month as of April 2006.

Then there is the issue of network branding. The Federal government

insisted that the Service's initial transmission should be via Imparja's second satellite channel. The Federal government underwrites Imparja and this move may be seen as offering a bang for taxpayers' dollars. However, it creates difficulties for the new broadcaster in initially differentiating its service from its well-established distributor.

Having said all that I'll be celebrating when the new service goes to air, even though I won't be able to see it until it jumps on to platforms I can access in the big smoke.

South Africa no longer deserves to host 2010 World Cup
SPORT
The World Game
Published
16-Apr-2007

South Africa has forfeited the right to stage the 2010 football World Cup. By supporting and sustaining the holocaust unfolding in Zimbabwe, the Government has aligned itself with the ranks of evil. It is one thing to refuse to intervene when cruelty is rife in a neighbouring country, quite another to fuel it with sympathetic words, pathetic policies and required resources. President Mbeki has repeatedly defended his friend in Zimbabwe at international meetings and before his electorate.
Doubtless he is protecting his left flank, but his refusal to condemn Mugabe's murderous regime and willingness to supply it with free electricity, fuel and food used for political purposes paints him as either a knave or a fool. At best he has fallen under the spell of a cunning man prepared to kill every enemy and to destroy the country in his charge in order to sustain his invidious regime.
It is inconceivable that a prestigious football event can be held in a country that holds hands with wickedness, a country trying to turn back the human tide of misery that pours in every day from Zimbabwe, risking the crocodiles in the Limpopo and the guards at Beit bridge, in a desperate attempt not so much to find a better life as to survive another week. Nor are these refugees merely the flotsam and jetsam of a floundering nation. Many of them are teachers, bankers and other professionals reduced to despair by an engineered economic collapse.
Meanwhile the African National Congress (ANC) claims it cannot interfere in the affairs of another state, an opinion that thankfully does not extend to Darfur or the Democratic Republic of Congo. Everyone pretends that recent elections in Zimbabwe were legitimate. Of course it is a lie.
Nor is there any sign of improvement. Last week Southern Africa

Development Community (SADC) said that it supported the government and people of Zimbabwe. Astonishingly the 'leaders' concerned managed to keep a straight face whilst uttering these oxymoronic words. The Zimbabewean government and people have been at war for 6 years. Mbeki was appointed as mediator between the SADC and Zanu PF. It is an astonishing choice. Mugabe has been running rings around him for years.

Accordingly FEdEration Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) has no choice but to find a new location for the tournament. Some argue that sport and politics must be kept apart, holding them partly responsbile for the current collapse in sporting ethics. However the ANC cannot complain. Indeed, they argued strongly in favour of sport and politics being brought together whilst trying to bring apartheid to its knees. Presented with the current barbarism in Zimbabwe they will surely understand the outrage and the conviction that sporting links must be broken not just with Zimbabwe but also with its closest ally. After all, the point of boycotts is to make an impact. Mugabe stopped caring about anything except himself a long time ago. South Africa cares about its position in the world, and its role in Africa.

President Mbeki and his cohorts must accept some of the blame for a viciousness designed to keep a sick and spiteful old man in power. Mbeki has bought into the anti-colonial furphy. Doubtless he is contemplating some distant vision of an African renaissance but millions are dying or fleeing and a fine country is turning into a cesspit. Mbeki's influence is clear. He has persuaded Mugabe to hold the next Presidential election in 2008 and not 2010 in order to avoid clashing with the World Cup.

Mbeki's discrete diplomacy has been a dismal failure and his reputation has not survived his association with the old warhorse to the north. The common man came to him and was met with aristocratic disdain. He says that he feels Zimbabwe's pain. It is not Zimbabwe that is in pain, but the men and women who have been betrayed by its ruler.

Brutality is rife in Zimbabwe. Mugabe will kill and scare as many opponents as he can before the 2008 elections and will then argue that the vote was not rigged. Recently 15 men and one woman bashed Sekai Holland, a brave woman protesting about her government. Her beating, carried out by drug-crazed youths supported by the dreaded and ubiquitous CIO, was merely the latest example of the nastiness of the regime Just in case the rage expressed in this column seems too raw let me quote from the latest medical report on this indomitable woman:

"Sekai has had further operations to put pins and a plate in her broken arm, they have reset her broken leg (that had pins and plate inserted in Harare), and has had skin grafting on one leg to repair flesh destroyed by a whip used by her torturers. She is in excellent spirits in spite of her injuries, knowing what an impact this appalling brutality has had on the outside world, and that she faced down the 15 men and one woman who brutalised her without once begging for mercy."

Bear in mind that Sekai Holland's case is known because she is known. Imagine what is happening to the more obscure of God's creations who speak out against tyranny. Recently a journalist was abducted and killed. Another was sacked for asking an awkward question at a press conference. Opposition activists are being hunted down by CIO agents driving around in cars, hiding behind dark glasses, consumed by evil, pouncing upon those daring to defy tyranny. Local outrage is needed. Sometimes it is heard, though seldom on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) which has become a tame mouthpiece of the government. Meanwhile inflation rages, starvation and sickness are widespread, repressives rule and Africa fiddles. And it is all Mr Blair's fault? Mugabe has been in power for 27 years.

The only course of action available to the rest of the world is to take the World Cup away from South Africa. Otherwise the grim prospect will be faced of an educated, warm, fundamentally decent people being forced back across the border to face further savagery even as Brazil and France play the beautiful game in a well furnished stadium. It is situation intolerable to those those who care more about humanity than political theory, those who refuse to be misled by silver tongues and demagoguery. It is a state of affairs inconceivable to those who care about sport.

Asylum seeker dreams
BOOK REVIEW
Fiction
Published
16-Apr-2007

Nights in the Asylum by Carol Lefevre. Vintage Books, 2007. ISBN 1741665337. RRP $32.95. website

In Nights in the Asylum, Lefevre handles themes of grief and loss, displacement and memory with authority and confidence. As the title might suggest, the novel concerns characters at low points in their lives. However the book is saved from being a dark novel by moments where care and love bring positive change: an asylum seeker is given asylum, a grieving mother is comforted and a victim of domestic violence is sheltered.

The opening chapters introduce us to the main players in the drama, all of whom are fleeing loss. Miri, in mourning for her dead daughter, picks up Aziz who is fleeing from a detention centre. She also rescues him a second time from a racist incident that has the potential to develop into full-scale violence.

Miri and Aziz end up in Havana Gardens, the once grand house of Miri’s

grandmother, herself an exile of sorts from Cuba. This setting carries unconscious resonances with Agatha Christie's manor houses where mysterious crimes involving weekend guests from the city occur. However the decaying mansion built for Miri's grandmother is in the parched red soil red of an unnamed large Australian outback town. The specific location is less important than the way Havana Gardens provides a sufficiently isolated capsule in which the people we come to know most intimately can play out their drama unobserved.

It is at Havana Gardens that we meet the third of the main characters, Suzette, who is on the run with her baby from her violent husband. Now the stage is set. Aziz, Suzette and the baby stand to lose the most if they are discovered. Miri is able to show herself publicly and act as messenger for the others. A cast of subordinate characters fills in the background to the major characters' tragedies and gives their own take on the novel's themes.

There is the waitress, Chandelle, who is prepared to let bygones be bygones as long as it suits her, but who is plagued by the sort of questions that afflict us all: "What if this was all there was? What if this was the length and breadth of the world, her life, forever and ever?" There is Miri's husband whose behaviour, as much as her daughter's death, causes her to flee. There is the vet who can turn his hand to illegal medical treatment. There are even a couple of young people whose presence and dialogue add variety and levity to the novel. Maybe the 'extras' list could have been culled - but for every reader who enjoys the minimalist approach another prefers a larger canvas.

The novel's chapters present the point of view of a particular person (and are conveniently headed with the person's name). It is an effective technique which brings to mind Thea Astley's The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow. It allows us access into the mind of Aziz who speaks so little English that we can know him only through his thoughts.

We come to know about the hardships of his life in Afghanistan, his memories of his father and sisters and the details of his time in the detention centre. He is also able to tell us first hand about the terrible sea voyage he endured to get to Australia. This is modelled on the tragedy of the SIEV X, the Indonesian fishing boat that sank en route to Christmas Island in October 2001, killing 353 people. The sections of the novel that detail Aziz's hardships from his own point of view are among the strongest. Equally effective are the very sensual scenes involving the growing closeness of Aziz and Miri, something that transcends verbal language.

Photography is a motif that links various sections of the novel. This motif is employed in the climactic final section, entitled 'Undated Photographs'. Nine short numbered pieces, more like prose poems than

narrative, are used to great effect. Impressionistic pictures are displayed with light, colour and facial expressions providing clues about the outcome for each of the characters. Lefevre is too careful a writer to present a happy ever after ending, or propose neat answers to Chandelle's thought about her future, "What if this was all there was?" What the photographs appear to offer are images of the better life that could be possible for the characters.

Nights in the Asylum is an engaging and well-plotted novel that will offer readers new ways of thinking about personal and topical issues.

Sun shapes the ordinary
POETRY

Published
16-Apr-2007

Angle of the sun

after â€˜Chinese Screen and Yellow Room', Margaret Olley

A yellow gleam bends walls open
inside replenishes its fruit
a quiet exhaling slips through day.

Breadth of flowers-welcome! extend!
Sun shapes the ordinary, an open drawer.
Hands perfect long silence and blue walls.

Or afternoon's lateness raises light
moves day's weight, an instant circles
near motionless, books half hidden.

Intercept shape! catching that can.
Forms steep and soften, green, white
in the window's presence, brush flowers
as though they are slow, erasure

is never complete, curves are wild props
and what is collected, never stillâ€|

Breathless in season

The glistered heat becomes banal
as names shimmy on the memory shrine.
I attempt a wishful clarity that orients
the heart, tho' my two-bit memoirs decline,
retreat or erupt as if sudden interior bacchanal
could work amnesia or prevent
struggle with hills. I want to survey
clouds, in hope rain would bestow

its soft sting, or something braver
than logic's need to know,
that useless regret cease its parley,
or I'd act beyond my own behaviour.
A fear of nothingness begets unrest
and breath that never was, now expressed.

To a patron saint

GeneviEve, you know
I don't believe the candles
and the bells. But you've been
lying there a long time.
You'd know something about
body ache and the ridiculous
of blood, which left you
long ago. I'm mobile
full of 21st century death
and lies. You'd perhaps still ken
the weather.

GeneviEve, it's cold
and my lungs
tell me stories of the old death.
Thank you
for the chair beside you.
Its discomfort is so authentic
like the damp of nave
and chapel house. The rue
outside is real.

I'm not sure
how to have these words
their aspirates
swell far into my chest
breath of the brain bit

that rehearses. Perhaps
I'm getting ahead of myself.
Make sure no-one's listening.

GeneviEve, if I could ask.
For what we do not have-
protection without force
and something
lighter
to breathe in.

Saint-Ã‰tienne-du-Mont. 30, rue Descartes, Paris. Feb 2005

From A Calling of Ways
6. The Wandering

Sometimes-to stop
and raise air, difficult praises
at the waterfall, foot of a mountain
a path turning in its lines
and exchanges, the sought
seeking itself and another
those things I learned to tell
at edges, contours in
and outside the doubter's way.

Within clarity's blue shadow
is a dark pulse, a testimony
what the world offers in its imitatio
and journeys.

Sometimes-to stop
and raise air, on the road
not quite celebration
but in acknowledgement
of wandering, a calling
of ways, name it what you will
or what is offered:
sea, track, last rise
caldera, journeys and gift.