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Government sincerity in NT communities requires questioning

AUSTRALIA

The most sinister aspect of the Federal Government's initiative in the Northern Territory is that it is exploiting the abuse of children in order to further undermine Aboriginal rights, with the explicit intention of seizing control of their land. These grossly intrusive measures will ultimately contribute to the continued disempowerment and destruction of Aboriginal people and their ancient cultures.

Having worked as a full-time teacher in a remote Aboriginal community I am fully aware of the social dysfunction that is reported regularly in the mainstream media. Minyerri, like so many other communities is entrenched in a sickening cycle of poverty and oppression. A sense of hopelessness and despair is everywhere: from the pathetic state of housing, to the violent shouts and screams of fighting in the middle of the night, to the festering boils and sores on the arms and legs of the eight year olds I tried to teach.

Such a scenario does not suddenly occur. It is the result of generational neglect by government. Aborigines out bush are the forgotten people: the ones we have chosen to ignore simply because they failed to [fully assimilate](#) .

Now though they find themselves at the centre of a heavy-handed military-style operation which the government claims is an attempt to help children who have been sexually abused.

The *Little Children Are Sacred* report clearly states, "There is nothing new or extraordinary in the allegations of sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory." These problems have been around for decades. Aboriginal leaders have warned politicians about the endemic problems of community life and the desperate need to provide adequate housing, education and health services.

Why is the government suddenly hell bent on assisting the people whose cries for help were reduced to whimpering whispers over years and years of inaction? Why now? What is the motivation for focusing so much energy on a problem that has been completely ignored in the past?

Each individual is entitled to their point of view. Perhaps this is a grand act of altruism, but more than likely, in my opinion, it is not.

If the government was sincere in its endeavors to alleviate child abuse then it would actively engage each community in the healing process. One course of action

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will not suit 60 different environments. Each community faces a different set of circumstances. It is imperative that the government works in conjunction with community elders to try to formulate courses of action that build on cultural strengths, fully incorporating the Aboriginal world view.



Tragically, the imagination of our government does not stretch this far. It is incapable of empathising with Aboriginal Australians and that is exactly why we are where we are now. It has stormed into these communities without any long-term plan and without consulting the people whose land they are seizing.

It is implementing bans on alcohol without uttering a word about the need to construct culturally sensitive rehabilitation centers for long-term addicts; it is forcing children to go to schools that are inadequately staffed and woefully resourced; it is restricting the only source of income that parents have to supply their large families with food and other essentials. Most importantly, it is taking control of communal land through the imposition of five-year leases.

How does compulsory acquisition of land have anything to do with helping abused children? It doesn't.

It does, however, tie in neatly with recent government proposals to store highly toxic radioactive waste at [Muckaty](#), Mt Everard, Harts Range and Fishers Ridge: all Aboriginal communities situated in the Northern Territory. If these proposals are approved then Aboriginal people will have nuclear waste (from Lucas Heights, and possibly European countries) deposited close to their communities. It is obvious this will have a profoundly negative impact on their way of life. Exposure to toxic waste is fatal. The waste dump may contaminate the water these people have to drink, the animals they hunt for food and the plants they use for cooking and bush medicine.

Acquisition of Aboriginal land also provides the government with the perfect opportunity to expand their uranium mining interests. The politicians will say they are creating employment for communities, but it is morally unacceptable to force people to desecrate the land that has nurtured them for thousands of years.

So on one hand the government is using the military to control the communities and ensure that children are no longer sexually abused, while on the other hand it is making plans to use the land on which these children live as a waste dump for highly toxic radioactive material.

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Support from the public for the government's radical intervention sadly reflects our ignorance and insensitivity towards Aboriginal cultures. The welfare of children and the empowerment of communities are not truly on the government's agenda. They have masterfully manipulated this situation to once again serve their own needs. The noose of Aboriginal oppression has been tightened a little more. It is a telling indication of the state of our democracy when the rights of society's most disadvantaged citizens can be further eroded without a murmur of protest from the majority of our population.

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Don't just do something, sit there and listen

AUSTRALIA

Mr Howard's initiative on Aboriginal sexual abuse has aroused a passionate response. Those who support the action generally see any questioning of it as damaging the children who have suffered. They accuse their opponents of just sitting there rather than doing something. The sentiments are noble, but they also reflect a moral anxiety. Experience suggests that when everyone wants to do something, the appropriate response is often, 'Don't just do something. Sit there'.

The most telling questions about the Prime Minister's plan focus on the involvement of the police and military in the absence of any broader strategy. It evokes the image of a war on sexual abuse and memories of Australia's recent attempts to address evils. Intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, and the Solomons come to mind.

The image of warfare is attractive to politicians and to the public. We have seen wars against poverty, against AIDS, against pornography, against religion and against atheism. The image of war identifies clearly an enemy that must be destroyed, evokes a vigorous and organised campaign to deal with it, and summons a nation to a shared national purpose in struggle. It banishes ambiguities and brushes away complexities.

The image of warfare also suggests strategies. For warfare you need soldiers, a command structure, a plan to identify enemy strengths and to neutralise them. You must send advance forces to take key positions, take and hold territory. The population for whom the war is waged must be made secure, and order restored. Finally, the army must withdraw, leaving in place an administration with sufficient strength to govern the occupied territory.

This metaphor of war is seductive, but it has two limitations. It is often invoked to endorse actions that form only the first and easiest steps of a strategy, and it is an inappropriate means to understand what is involved in many social evils.

The war against terrorism has illustrated both these limitations of the war metaphor. It provided the formula under which Afghanistan and Iraq have been overrun and occupied. The initial stages of the military strategy seem to have been



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effective, based on overwhelming military superiority. The opposing forces were routed and the nations occupied by the invading armies. The invading armies have physically held the ground they took.



But, as in so many invasions, little thought was given to the crucial later strategic steps. In neither country has the population been made secure. Nor has order returned to more than few cities. In neither nation can the armies be withdrawn without betraying the cause for which war was waged. But the continuing presence of the invading forces gathers recruits for the opposition to them. The military offer no hope that this position will change over ten, twenty or even fifty years.

Governments went to war against the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan seeking support from their people with the image of war as a quick, decisive and costless campaign. The image of war promised more than it could deliver, and no one was prepared for the reality.

More fundamentally, it has also been unhelpful to conceive the response to terrorism as a war. The problems posed by terrorism are not susceptible to a military strategy. Terrorists do not occupy territory; they live in other people's territories and continue to move freely even after the territory is occupied. Military action against terrorists inevitably leads to pressure on civil society, to innocent deaths, to increased hostility towards those who conduct the war, and to erosion of the values which nations aggrieved by terrorism wish to defend. The values defended in the war against terrorism are lost in the prosecution of the war. Abu Ghraib is shorthand for this fact.

Experience should make us resist the military metaphor and campaigns when addressing social evils. We should rather study the situation, seek an appropriate image of a concerted campaign to redress the ill, and then outline an appropriate strategy.

In the case of child abuse, policing and enforcement will be part of this strategy, but the military metaphor is totally inappropriate. The contested ground lies in intimate places — in families and human bodies. To take over and pacify this ground implies entering homes and investigating bodies. That is not impossible, but what trust, what rule of law would you leave on the scorched earth when you removed your troops?

To address evils that touch such intimate areas we need to find less crude

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metaphors than military ones. They lie readily to hand: partnership, community building, cultural strengthening. These include policing as one element, but can also encompass the complexity of relationships involved. They also involve consultation. They urge the Government, 'Don't just do something. Sit there and listen'.

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Apple's iPhone illustrates 'feature creep' scourge

MEDIA

The arrival of the iPhone is the latest example of the [upgrade cycle](#) that drives our consumer society. It promises the latest in features and technology. It is quite possible there has never been so much excitement over a phone before. The new features it promises, whether we need them or not, are the hook used to capture new customers. But do we need these features, and will we use them?



In a world in which we already have too much 'stuff', it is questionable whether we are really improving the quality of our life by persisting with the cycle of upgrades that manufacturers stimulate. The number of 'early adopters' out there — those people who have to have the latest and greatest — seems to grow exponentially.

Writing in the *New Yorker* in late May, James Surowiecki described a phenomenon he called '[feature creep](#)'. Feature creep is the stealthy (and sometimes not so stealthy) proliferation of extra functions on a given device. Mobile phones are a prime example.

Originally they were used to make phone calls. Then they could send text messages. Then they had cameras. Then infrared, Bluetooth, internet access, keyboards, a personal music player. Next, [according to Nokia](#), will be a Global Positioning System (GPS) installed in every device, so we know where we are, and can track our friends too.

The iPhone, as far as these things go, is actually not as feature-rich as some devices. Reviewers have noted that the iPhone has 'only' 16 functions. But will people actually use all 16 of these functions?

The build-up to the iPhone launch was overwrought. First there were rumours at [Macworld](#), Apple's annual gathering of developers. Then iPhone was announced in January by Apple CEO Steve Jobs at MacWorld. Then there was a pre-release build up. Then the 'final week' build up. Then, finally, exaltation!, as pictures emerge of ecstatic early adopters rushing into and out of stores.



Some critics declared that it was the near-perfect phone. Steve Jobs [declared](#), "[The] iPhone is like having your life in your

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pocket.” Perhaps for some people Nirvana is attained by having access to music and an address book at the same time. But if this is so, what does it say about one’s life? One wonders how long it will be before the “Man declares love, marries iPhone” headline appears in browsers and papers everywhere (with accompanying footage of said man listening to his betrothed as he walks up the aisle).

Surowiecki quoted a University of Michigan report that says, on average, Americans who have returned a product they found too complicated had spent an average of 20 minutes with the device before giving up. People are willing to pay for extra features, because they feel short changed if they don’t get them — whether they use them or not.

The second problem to arise from feature creep is directly related to the first. Once lured by the promise of extra functions, it is almost inevitable that new accessories will be needed. Manufacturers, as a rule, change the specifications, shapes and sizes of their products. This is arguably because little money is made on the handsets. That headset, second charger and screen protector all add up to a generous second pay day. According to a [Reuters/ZDnet](#) report, consumers spend around \$A1.16billion a year on accessories for iPods. The figure for mobile phones is around 30 times this amount.

Then there is the e-waste. Mountains of it. The waste generated by product turnover is increased by accessory turnover. Mobile phone chargers are the best example. When Nokia changed charger sizes, millions and millions of people were left with near-useless lumps of plastic. Some countries are now legislating against this opportunism — [China has mandated](#) that all new phones must use the same charger from July 2007.

While a frenzied ‘crackberry’ user (he’s the guy on the train developing a second set of thumbs) will swear by his ‘productivity device’, and a 15-year-old school student may treasure those happy snaps on her phone, for most of us these features are more than we will ever need. Do we really need to be on email 24 hours a day? Is it so important to be able to send photos wirelessly to each other? At what point do we say enough?

Feature creep, coupled with the advertising campaigns and hype which encourage consumption, perpetuates and sustains the upgrade cycle that is swallowing the resources of this planet. While the iPhone may be the best mobile phone ever made, do we actually need it?

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"One true Church" lessons for John Howard

EDITORIAL

Two years ago, observers were predicting that the papacy of Benedict XVI would be unremarkable. This was easy to believe when the bar for remarkableness had been raised so far by his predecessor Pope John Paul II. But within the past week, Benedict has grabbed the attention of the headline writers not once, but twice. At the weekend, there was the official announcement of the return of the Latin Mass, and then yesterday the reaffirmation that the Roman Catholic Church is the 'one true Church'.

However, as Paul Collins argues in this issue of *Eureka Street*, it follows that the bare bones reporting of the past week misses the real story. Bad headlines overlook nuance, and it is in Benedict's nuances that the reality of his positions lies. Those who rushed to judge him as hostile to Islam, after the arcane reference he made during last year's Regensburg lecture, got it wrong. In fact he displays extraordinary sensitivity to other religious faiths and Christian denominations.

Paul Collins suggests that his hesitation before confirming recently that he would come to Australia for next year's World Youth Day was really an demonstration of his empathy with Eastern Orthodox Christians, who are reviled by perceptions engendered by the recent phenomenon of papal "roadshows", that he is the *ecclesiastical ruler of the world*.

Similarly, the angle of most of yesterday's "one true Church" document reporting leaves the impression that the Vatican has virtually suspended ecumenical dialogue. In fact, the document stresses that the Roman Catholic Church remains seriously committed to dialogue with the other Christian Churches. Further, there is the assertion that it actually advances the ecumenical cause. This is echoed in the immediate response of the World Council of Churches deputy general secretary, who [said](#) : "the honest sharing of commonalities, divergences, and differences will



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help all churches to pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life”.



Howard's land grab: The (devil) is in the permit detail

Big brother is a widely respected American cartoonist (pictured as a straight talker). Speaking on behalf of her counterparts and women, she was ordered to stop writing when she described Howard's view on rolling back the "land grab".

It's all about laying cards on the table. There are lessons for the Federal Government, as it attempts to roll back Aboriginal land rights as part of its strategy to control sexual abuse in communities in the Northern Territory. Jonathan Hill, who writes in this issue of *Eureka Street*, is not alone in portraying it as a land grab. But he knows more than most white Australians, as he has spent most of the past 12 months working as a school teacher in a remote NT community. He links the "land grab" dimension of the Government's intervention to its plans to use the land as a waste dump for highly toxic radioactive material.

There is an argument to be put that it is in the national interest that the Federal Government should legislate resume these lands to build radioactive waste dumps, and other purposes. Why doesn't the Government lay its cards on the table and put that argument? Such honesty could have the surprising consequence of advancing Aboriginal reconciliation.

East Timor's continued uphill battle to secure a future

INTERNATIONAL

A potentially unstable coalition government with few detailed policies and weak administrative ability is now certain to emerge after East Timor's first post-independence poll resoundingly rejected the party which had championed the country's long struggle for independence.

Results from the 30 June poll indicate that the ruling Fretilin party saw its vote collapse to around 29 per cent. This is less than half the vote it received in the 2001 poll. The newly-formed CNRT party led Mr Xanana Gusmao, the hero of East Timor's armed resistance struggle, came second with around 24 per cent of the vote. It is now vying with Fretilin for the allegiances of minor parties to secure a 51 per cent majority in parliament.

Whatever the composition of the coalition government, East Timor is now facing an uphill battle to secure its future and avoid a cycle of weak or failing governance. Dedication to creating jobs for a young and fast-growing population, and to improving administrative capacity so that the country can effectively spend its oil revenue, are the essential prerequisites for turning an unstable coalition into a



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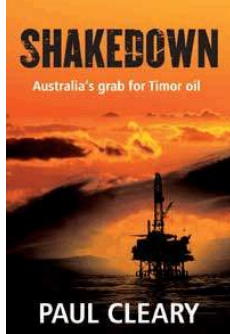
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strong and cohesive government.

The Gusmao-led CNRT has targeted the major weaknesses of the Fretilin government — its highly centralised and dysfunctional administration which made it unable to roll out programs to improve the lives of an impoverished and massively unemployed million-strong population. This poor performance was in spite of having the benefit of massive revenue from ConocoPhillips' Timor Sea oil and gas project.

After 24 years of violence and Indonesian occupation, East Timor had until last year been a success story in the difficult business of post-conflict reconstruction. It was seen as a model for Iraq and Afghanistan.

But the country lapsed back into renewed conflict in May 2006 after the Fretilin government mismanaged a minor dispute within the armed forces. A dearth of job opportunities, reflecting four years of economic contraction in per capita terms, created the conditions for renewed conflict. Australian and other international peacekeepers, which had left the country prematurely in 2004, were forced to return in May last year when warring armed forces factions put the country on the brink of civil war.



Mr Alkatiri's government succeeded in alienating the majority of the population with an authoritarian and undemocratic approach to government. He became infamous for making insensitive remarks, threatened to close down newspapers and tried to make defamation a criminal offence. His government was so ineffective that it was unable to spend the money it had available; about one third of the modest 2005-06 budget was unspent in a country with massive needs.

Mr Alkatiri's mismanagement outraged Mr Gusmao, who served in the largely ceremonial post of president from 2002-07. This is why the former poet, painter and pumpkin farmer shelved his retirement plans and overcame bad health to make an audacious bid for executive power. Mr Gusmao had used his moral authority to force Mr Alkatiri to stand down as prime minister last year.

Mr Gusmao's CNRT has the support of the powerful Catholic Church and is joined by a young and impressive Timorese, Mr Dionísio Babo Soares, a lawyer who has a PhD in anthropology from the Australian National University and worked recently on policy issues for the Asia Foundation in East Timor. He is also a popular musician

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and football commentator. But it remains uncertain as to whether Mr Gusmao or Mr Alkatiri can lock in the support of two key minor parties, the Democratic Party and ASDT-PSD.

Mr Babo Soares, who has been published widely on post-conflict reconstruction, said recently that in government the party would “enact immediate and swift reform” to decentralise government administration. Under the Fretilin government’s highly-centralised administration, even the smallest expenditures had to be approved by ministers. When ministers were travelling overseas, as was often the case, the business of government ground to a halt.

The new president, Mr Jose Ramos-Horta, who is closely aligned to Mr Gusmao, has vowed to be an activist president on economic management and, with the help of advice from a coterie of economists from the US and UK, has proposed popular fiscal measures to address poverty and unemployment. Mr Ramos-Horta has called for abolishing income tax for businesses and individuals below a threshold and making East Timor a free trade zone.

The former government was unable to strike the right balance between spending and saving. The challenge for the new government is to effectively administer programs to generate jobs and encourage private sector activity. There is an urgent need to circulate money in East Timor, where barter remains important. Handouts and expenditure should be targeted and they should be based on merit and mutual obligation. Veterans who made countless sacrifices during the Indonesian years are worthy of pensions. Mothers who shoulder the vast majority of the domestic work, and who are good financial managers, could effectively use a child endowment in a country where 40 per cent of children are undernourished. And public works projects to improve infrastructure and soak up some of the massive pool of unemployed youth would also be an effective target for public expenditure.

The creation of a rural credit bank to promote private sector activity would be another worthy goal for the new government, provided it is properly managed. In a country where the acronym KKN (which stands for corruption, cronyism and nepotism) is a common refrain, the new government could learn from the fiscal discipline established by the Fretilin party, while governing with greater sensitivity and effectiveness.

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Tariq Ali's Latin American "axis of hope"

FEATURES

South America

A few years ago, in Caracas, a school principal showed me a photo of herself and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. "Can you see how Chavez is leaning down so as not to overshadow me?" she said while recalling how members of the Opposition, during the April 2002 coup, had attempted to destroy the new Bolivarian primary school where she worked.

Each time I visit Latin America I experience a mixture of joy and rage over its abysmal poverty and the kaleidoscope of people's personal experiences, which are so often connected to political history.

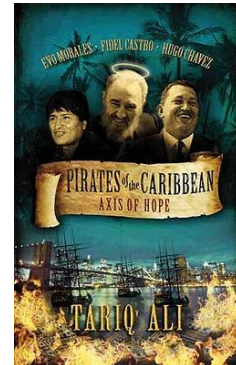
When the possibility to interview [Tariq Ali](#), author of *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope*, presented itself, I knew I had to take the opportunity. Ali's involvement with Latin America stretches back almost four decades. In 1967, as the world protested against the war in Vietnam, Ali was in Bolivia as a member of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, to observe the trial of Regis Debray as Che Guevara aimed to create a new revolution. Ali also [took photos](#) of "every Bolivian army officer in the region" for the Cubans, which on one occasion almost cost him his life.

The old rebel in Ali has not mellowed. When the left-wing army colonel Hugo Chavez won a landslide presidential election in late 1998, links between Caracas and Ali were soon established. Today he is a member of the advisory board of TeleSur — a TV network which is a joint venture between Venezuela, Argentina, Cuba, Uruguay, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Having conversed with Chavez on various occasions, Ali believes he is "a politician who speaks from the heart." In his view:

"He is not a politician who is manicured. He is not a politician whose speeches are prepared by public relations advisors. He doesn't have any spin-doctors, and so you have to take most of what you get, which is good, with the occasional over-the-top remark."

In a world replete with politicians who construct almost every detail of their public appearances, it is easy to forget that Chavez is schooled in another type of



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politics. Even for many *ChÃivistas*, however, the President does on occasion go too far in his public statements, which at times have caused unnecessary diplomatic clashes with other countries in the region.



When asked about the political situation in Venezuela, Ali states that the Chavez government is not:

"...nationalising everything under the sun. They are using their state power and the wealth of the country to transform it, to reduce disparities, while at the sometime saying to the local bourgeoisie, as long as you don't engage in coup d'Etats and try and topple elected governments, you can make your money provided you do it in the country under our rules and regulations."

A critical look at the Caracas administration will find that many of its policies are about re-directing the country's huge oil wealth. The aim is to empower millions of poor people through better health, education and job programs. In Europe after World War 2 such governments were labelled 'social democracies'. In Latin America, for various historical reasons, such policies as Chavez's are classified 'revolutionary'.

Venezuela's foreign policy has been bold. Ali argues that, "moves towards regional cohesion have never been as serious as this since the time of [Simon] Bolivar." He points to TeleSur and the forthcoming Banco del Sur (Bank of the South), which is another joint venture that involves Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay. Ali considers these ventures to be positive developments.

Given his links to Cuba, I was interested in exploring Ali's views on the island. While the author thinks the Cuban system needs reform, he considers the current leadership quite capable. The Cuban system certainly has many competent leaders. However, corruption on the island is widespread. In a recent in-depth paper on Cuba by Samuel Farber, the author noted that while some levels of consumerism have increased since 2000, in 2007 general corruption seems to have worsened. Farber [states](#), "Everybody I talked to agreed that law-breaking [has] become a way of life in order to survive in Cuba."

If the Cuban system were to implode, or be overthrown by external forces, the consequences could be drastic. Washington, and the large Cuban community in Miami would look to move in quickly, with a neo-liberal economic model in hand. Latin America and many Third world countries would also suffer, as it is unlikely a

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new administration would support Cuban doctors and teachers' much-needed international work. Another threat is that the Cubans follow China's economic path, which Ali considers would be a "tragedy".

Similarly, a major clash between Venezuela and the U.S. should not be ruled out. Ali notes that the US already has "plans to destabilise Venezuela" that "involve the utilising of Colombian [territory] and the Colombian regime to do it, which is the only hard core pro-US regime in the region." Were Washington to engage in new forms of intervention — and this should not be ruled out given [past actions](#) — the political scenario in the region could become very ugly with Chavez's high rhetorical style coming back to haunt him.

For now though, Ali's "Axis of Hope" seems to be moving from strength to strength. Recently, former Catholic Bishop Fernando Lugo Mendez has declared he will stand for the 2008 presidential elections in Paraguay. Known as "The Bishop of the Poor", [polls indicate](#) that Lugo Mendez is a "disturbingly credible threat to the Colorados" — the party, which has ruled the country since 1947. Were the Bishop of the Poor to become president, his first international visits may well be to Caracas and Havana. Tariq Ali might also be dropping by.

Tariq Ali photo © Marli White, 2007.

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Musharraf throws dice in bid to hold power

FEATURES

Pakistan

When tanks strolled into the Pakistani capital Islamabad to take on the radical Red Mosque clerics, many residents sighed with relief. The clerics had been brutally imposing Taliban-style social edicts on them for months. But as coverage of the spectacular news story dominated the domestic and international media, suspicions arose. It seemed all too convenient for Pakistani president General Pervez Musharraf to divert attention from his falling stature as a key ally in the US-led war against terror.

In January this year it was clear that female students from the adjoining Jamia Hafsa seminary broke the law by occupying the public children's library next door. It was a protest against the government's demolition of illegal mosques in the capital city. One of the elder students, who left the seminary on the third day of the siege, 23-year-old Ayesha Yousaf, said that the situation was still very much under control then.

This soon changed. The seminary saw a series of government negotiators arrive, from federal ministers to prominent religious scholars. Law enforcement was out of sight. Emboldened by the government's laid back approach, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, vice-president of Jamia Hafsa and his elder brother Abdul Aziz Ghazi, head of the Red Mosque, demanded enforcement of strict sharia law.

Vice patrol squads, consisting of armed male and female students, threatened video and music store shopkeepers, and kidnapped policemen and alleged brothel owners and prostitutes. The elder Ghazi brother claimed to have 100 suicide bombers up and ready to respond if an operation was carried out against them. Intelligence reports stated that militants had flocked towards the mosque and seminaries.

The breaking point was the kidnapping of six Chinese women accused of being prostitutes. China has been a great contributor to Pakistan's infrastructure expansion and the two countries enjoy a strong military cooperation. China serves as a counterweight to Pakistan's arch rival India. Pakistan apologised for the kidnapping, but China asked for better protection of its resident workers.

A week later, on Tuesday 3 July, security forces clashed with the militants of the



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Red Mosque. Both sides claimed to be retaliating. The next day the area was sealed, Black Hawk helicopters scanned the area and armed military forces with gas masks were heard firing throughout the day. The seminary for boys, Jamia Faridia, had been captured and the outer wall of Jamia Hafsa blown up. At least 20 people died.



The timing of the operation provoked suspicion. Why did the government not act when the library occupation began? Ayesha Siddiqa, author of *Military Inc*, suggested in the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* that the government could have cut off gas and electricity to the mosque, seminaries and library. The government could also have sealed the premises to prevent militants from flocking towards the mosque.

Musharraf, however, chose to appease the religious right. The general has relied on religious parties since he staged a bloodless coup in 1998. He ruled out seeking the support of the two most popular parties, both of whose leaders, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, are currently in exile. There are also rumours that the situation has been allowed to fester to divert attention from the suspension of the chief justice in March.

Musharraf tried to sack the chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, on vague charges of corruption. The chief justice had increasingly become a nuisance to the regime. He ordered the freeing of those arrested by Pakistan's notorious intelligence agency, the MI. With elections due at the end of the year Musharraf feared Chaudhry's resistance to his re-election.

The suspension sparked an unprecedented anti-Musharraf movement led by the secular lawyers of Pakistan. Chaudhry drew huge crowds at speeches throughout the country. On one occasion a pro-Musharraf mob fired on those rallying against the government. Nearly 50 people, many of them opposition workers, were killed on camera. As a result, the government decided to ban live broadcasts of the chief justice's rallies. But the damage was done.

Western officials secretly started to deliberate on Pakistan's political landscape after Musharraf's autocracy. A deal between the president and one of the exiled opposition leaders, Benazir Bhutto, has been the subject of much speculation. Musharraf's sincerity in the US-led war against terror was already subject to suspicion amongst western officials. The Talibanisation of Pakistan's border area with Afghanistan is increasing. The decay of Musharraf's power and credibility

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continues.

The operation against the radical clerics, however, has turned the tide for Musharraf, at least in western eyes. He has received messages of support from western allies. But in the eyes of the common Pakistanis the president has lost credibility, with no hope of its return. His continued tenure is in the balance. Musharraf is caught between his support from the west, the army and Pakistan's elite on one hand, and the strength of the anti-Musharraf drive amongst the extremists and the secular masses on the other hand.

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JI's Al Qaeda link a myth

FEATURES

The Region

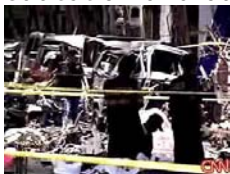
Many people have expressed amazement that Abu Dujana, one of Jemaah Islamiyah's recently captured top-ranking operatives smiled a lot when interviewed on television. "How could someone so full of hatred, come across so relaxed?" they asked.

How indeed! Revisiting our subliminally-formed mental picture of those in Jemaah Islamiyah can be helpful. Who are these people? Are they really so full of hatred? Who do they hate? And Why? Finally, how did Jemaah Islamiyah come into being?

Jemaah Islamiyah, which literally means 'community of Muslims', is believed to be a kind of reincarnation of Darul Islam, a Muslim group which formed a separatist state in West Java in 1948. This occurred during a turbulent time for Indonesia, as the Dutch tried to reclaim their East Indies colonies. Even after the secular Republik Indonesia was founded, Darul Islam managed to hold part of West Java until 1961. While later disbanded, the ambition to form an Islamic state based on Sharia law did not die altogether.

It is now believed JI was started in the late 1970s by Abdullah Sungkar who, with his close colleague Abu Bakar Bashir, had fled to Malaysia when General Soeharto and his New Order regime targeted hard line Muslims. In Malaysia they eked out a living by teaching religion, spreading their brand of Islam. Radical Islamists like Hambali, Mukhlas and Amrozi (the 2002 Bali bombing perpetrators) were pupils at this time.

After Soeharto's fall from power, Sungkar and Bashir returned to Indonesia, and resumed teaching in Ngruki boarding school in Central Java, a school they had founded before leaving for Malaysia. Not long after, Sungkar died of natural causes, but Bashir continued teaching. The network developed in this time through family, education and business connections.



Of over 3000 *pesantren*, (Islamic boarding schools) across the country, some 20 to 30 are believed to subscribe to Bashir's teachings, Ngruki being foremost among them. In Indonesia, especially among Muslim communities, these *pesantren* are known as JI schools. Like most *pesantren*, the JI schools begin



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taking students as young as eight years old, and these children are immediately exposed to a strict interpretation of Islam. According to Sidney Jones, the International Crisis Group's Program Director for Asia, the schools' physical education program includes weapons recognition and some military training.

Not all of these children have hard-line Muslim parents. Some send their children to the *pesantren* because they are the best available schools in the area. The children who have strict parents as role-models are of course the most receptive pupils. It is important to understand, however, that foremost in the minds of many of these students, and parents, is defending Islam, not killing non-Muslims, something which for some becomes necessary in their 'endeavours'.

This may explain why some Islamists come across as contented and relaxed. In their minds, they are defending their religion and helping fellow Muslims who are oppressed and victimised — something to be proud of.

Before extremists commit an act of violence, it is not easy to distinguish them from other Muslims, because in a community of Muslims numbering almost 200 million, there is a broad continuum from extremism to liberalism. It is not unusual to find that your friend has more extreme views about your shared religion, but that is as far as it goes.

Of the over 220 suspected terrorists arrested in Indonesia, journalists found disbelief among friends and neighbours to be a common thread. The suspects were often described as "polite, eager to help, caring," albeit "not interested in frequent socialising".

Recruiting often happens through private and family connections. It is not unusual to find that members of a particular cell are, for example, sons-in-law or brothers-in-law. Abu Jibril, a JI operative, supervised the creation of a JI cell in Karachi, Pakistan that consisted of his own son, Mohamed, and the siblings of several fellow JI members.

The JI network is generally self-funding, through small businesses run by tightly-knit communities, often run by women. The committed communities of JI do not necessarily make themselves known to non-JI friends and acquaintances. So in a multi-level marketing organisation, currently popular in Indonesia and other South-east Asian countries, there may be non-JI members who inadvertently help raise funds for JI operations — if those in the top echelons of the organisation are JI members.

Infiltrating JI through conventional methods is not effective because the cells are

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not necessarily linked. Only the top operatives of some cells know of each other, and then only to enable them to work together in a particular operation.

Akh Muzakki, a lecturer at the Sunan Ampel National Institute of Islam in Surabaya, has been researching the clandestine organisation. He describes it as having "a partially cut-off organisational structure". This means members of a cell, if captured, are not able to give information on other cells. As a result, most of the significant information about the internal operations of JI has been gathered from former members who have eventually disagreed with the hard line ideology.

JI has generally been described as linked to Al Qaeda. It is questionable how true this might be.

There may be ideological sympathy on the part of JI for Al Qaeda, but according to Sidney Jones there has been no direct affiliation between JI and Al Qaeda since 2003 (when the Australian Embassy bombing in Jakarta occurred). In fact, Al Qaeda's attention is certainly no longer focused on south-east Asia, where JI operates. Al Qaeda, it seems, has dismissed JI as ineffectual — after all, they keep getting caught.

The fear that JI has been receiving funds from radical Islamists all over the world is groundless. For example, it is worth noting the tension that has grown between hard line Islamist groups in Saudi Arabia and JI. JI's sympathy for Osama bin Laden's ideology has not endeared them to the Salafis in Saudi Arabia, who regard bin Laden as an heretic. So at present, JI is not on Al-Qaeda's priority list, nor is it on the Salafis.

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Gentle Benedict concedes papal roadshow must go on

THEOLOGY

When I was in Rome in February this year there was a fair amount of scepticism as to whether Benedict XVI would come to Sydney for World Youth Day in mid-July 2008. "He doesn't like travelling and it's too far to Australia", one well-informed journalist told me. Well, last week Benedict did publicly confirm that he's coming, but whether he'll get a run on the track at Randwick remains to be seen given the attitude of the local trainers. They want compensation for dislocation to the racing industry. That \$20,000,000 the Howard government recently gave the Sydney Archdiocese might really come in handy to help calm the Australian Jockey Club.



Actually, there was a deeper reason as to why the Romans thought Benedict might not come: he's made it clear that he thought tripping around the world wasn't the Pope's real ministry. He doesn't see himself as 'bishop of the world'. Instead, he has reasserted the traditional role of the Pope as bishop of Rome, the visible symbol of the church's unity and the touchstone of its orthodoxy, but not the omnipresent figure who dominates Catholicism.

He would be deeply aware that it is precisely this kind of 'ecclesiastical ruler of the world' syndrome that most annoys the Eastern Orthodox because they see it — correctly in my view — as heretical. For Benedict XVI the views of the Orthodox are very important.

What we are watching is the transformation of Joseph Ratzinger, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith inquisitor, into Pope Benedict, pastoral leader. His apparent hesitancy to rush into things and make strong decisions may well be explained by his care to draw people together rather than alienate them. The predicted purge of dissenters and progressives has simply not occurred. Even the CDF's warning about the writings of liberation theologian, [Jon Sobrino](#), was carefully and almost respectfully worded. No sanction was imposed. It was described by theologian William P. Loewe of the Catholic University in Washington as "more nuanced ... and certainly gentler" than the CDF treatment of Sobrino's Jesuit colleague, Father Roger Haight, in the previous papacy.

The only individuals dealt with severely during this papacy have been abusive priests such as the Mexican founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Marcial Maciel

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Degollado.

Another significant sign came a fortnight ago when Benedict quietly reversed the changes of John Paul II to the conclave rules for the election of a pope. In 1996 Pope Wojtyla suddenly and for no apparent reason changed the rule first established in 1179 requiring a two-thirds majority of cardinals to elect a pope. Pius XII made this two-thirds plus one. This rule ensured that there was reasonable unanimity among the cardinals about the person elected.



John Paul decreed that an absolute majority could decide on the next pope if, after 33 ballots, no one was elected. What this allowed was a small majority hanging out for the required ballots, and then forcing their candidate through over a large minority. It was a recipe for disaster. Benedict has gone back to the traditional method because it eventually ensures the possibility of real consensus. While it may seem insignificant, it clearly indicates that he thinks of himself as a traditional pope, unlike his predecessor who was actually quite 'revolutionary'.

One area where Benedict XVI has intervened decisively is in the appointment of bishops, which he personally supervises. He looks for men of some intellectual and spiritual quality although he doesn't always succeed in finding them. Benedict has personally taken charge of the appointment process and no longer leaves it up to Giovanni Battista Re, the cardinal prefect of the Vatican's Congregation of Bishops who, in the last years of the John Paul II papacy had *carte blanche* in the matter of episcopal appointments. This led to a considerable number of mediocre appointments and a couple of disastrous ones.

[Many were critical](#) of Benedict after the Regensburg lecture on faith and reason. They accused him of insensitivity to Muslims after his arcane reference to the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1391-1425). But he quickly recovered from this over-reaction to a bit of academic showing-off and visited Turkey with religious sensitivity and diplomatic aplomb. He has now restored the independence of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, which supervises relations with Muslims and appointed an experienced diplomat as its president, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran.

I am not suggesting Benedict is some type of 'progressive'. He's not. He is profoundly and deeply traditional. His [restoration of the Tridentine liturgy](#) for a tiny but vociferous group in the church reveals his sympathy with this form of

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traditionalism. Meanwhile priestless parishes multiply and the Eucharist and sacraments (whether in Latin or Swahili) are denied to increasing numbers of the faithful.

But it is easy to forget that being traditional has its advantages. It means he knows his place in the church will not turn the papacy into an endless roadshow, while still understanding that in the modern world the pope has to travel to events like World Youth Day.

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Ten poems: From Woman in Bushfire to man in Sea of Tranquillity

POETRY

Woman in Bushfire

High over her a `copter is
Pouring pylons of water,
Transient stands
In shifting fire.
She dwindles,
Becomes a tiny tot
Drizzling the gutters
Of her doll's house.
J. K. Murphy

The Horse Races

The sound of the horse races is my father's music.
The names of the horses are his worlds.
They are pregnant with prophecy,
live in short breaths
and green fingered gasps.
They die away at the turn,
worlds die away,
it's simpler than you'd think.
Jennifer Finlay

Cheek to Cheek in Omeo, early 1970s.

the locals thronged to the young farmers' ball
after supper they dimmed the lights in the hall
so the brylcreemed and perfumed and sleek
could try to be daring and dance cheek to cheek
but our generation's idea of a ball
was not family orchestras in the town hall
for we would slink down to livingstone creek
kick off our levis and swim cheek to cheek

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Geoff Baker

Hidden by ambition

We make love
Dress the kids
Eat and shower
Sweep and clean
Deep in life's fog
Little knowing
That this is it
It's simple
It's special
A soft dream
Hidden by ambition

[*Bruce Shearer*](#)

To listen to this poem, [click here](#) .

The Ways of It

You could
take other paths
or just stay put
throw back a ring
or choose to wear it
flick the forked tongue
or keep your counsel
You might
act differently next time
if there's a next time
You have
or you haven't
done this or done that
Do you leap
or linger
Lerys Byrnes

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Hawaiian Stilts

When you see those birds,
Stilted and statuesque in the rushes
And know that they have journeyed
From Alaska,
You suddenly understand
That your flights,
As uncomfortable as they are,
Are minor miracles,
Theirs are grand,
Delicate and durable
Their legs would never fold
Into the sliced space
We are asked to inhabit:
Nature eludes artifice.
Peter Gebhardt

Silence

How easily this word can be
traumatised by the simple
addition of a ...æd...
Terry Veling

Unusual Partners

Beer and didgeredoo
juxtaposed on Smith
sun shining
People in buses arriving to shop
cautious window banking and safeway
brimming with a diverse air
nocturnal buskers
daytime players
the soft windy hollow of the instrument
against raw life in the street

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Rose Heard

Rush Hour

On the South-Eastern Freeway
a semi-trailer has rolled into the sky
splintering the sun
blocking the entire highway
with traffic stopped
and backed up to the sea
no one
is going
anywhere
three large crosses on the hill's bank
set by the local council
for a safer Easter on the roads
stand now
for seasons lost
and the time it might take
in getting home.

Jeff Guess

Full Moon

Garrotted by insipid convention
perturbations excite momentarily
creating only futility and exhaustion,
escape a distant hope, tormenting,
unbearable, crushing life and moral fibre.
Candescent brilliance offers reprieve,
transfixed by visions of crater and time
investigation of solace, place continues,
beauty and truth interchangeable
in the Sea of Tranquility.

Neil Hooley

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History rises amidst film's humane depth

FILM REVIEW

Comedy

Lucky Miles: 105 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Michael James Rowland. Starring: Kenneth Moraleda, Rodney Afif, Sri Saccpraseuth, [website](#) .

Lucky Miles is an outrageous buddy comedy set in the Western Australian wilderness; a film where mismatched characters face down communication difficulties and personality clashes to work together and overcome obstacles.



But the film also has a brazen finger plunged into more than one hot political pie.

It traces the ordeal of three men — Iraqi Yousif (Afif), Cambodian Arun (Moraleda), and Indonesian Ramelan (Saccpraseuth) — whose destinies become entwined after they are abandoned on a remote stretch of WA coastline by Ramelan's devious people-smuggler uncle (Sawung Jabo).

Set in 1990, the film resonates with the echoes of recent history: September 11 and the furphy of border security; the 'children overboard' and Tampa fiascos; even the Federal Government's recent totalitarian intervention into indigenous Australia.



This topicality borders on prophetic, when you consider the film was conceived seven years ago, well before any of these events occurred. "When I started working on this film I wanted to imagine what was going to be relevant in seven years time," says co-writer and director, Michael James Rowland. "I was trying to find a metaphor to speak to the world about things I thought would be front page news." "I'd read Thomas Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* about globalisation; he talks about how telecommunications and global markets are making us come in contact with each other, and how it's great because we're all going to make a buck. I felt what he was saying was true, but that a lot of little people are going to miss out." "So the film's genesis is not a reaction to Tampa or September 11; it's about people who hitherto had nothing in common with each other, coming in contact with each other and, under a certain amount of stress, hoping to resolve problems."

Rowland admits the journey from *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* to *Lucky Miles* was not the route most people would have taken to explore the potential

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conflictive aspects brought about by our 'shrinking world'. "I came across several true stories — for example, in the early 90s, 40 people from southern China were abandoned on the remote WA coast. Two weeks later one turned up on a cattle station...they got him help, did a search and found the other 39 people." "I became interested in people who get dropped off on the coast and walk into the desert looking for the West, but find nothing but desert. How do they communicate their hopes and expectations to each other through a second language?"

When events such as September 11 and Tampa did occur, it seemed Rowland and co-writer Helen Barnes had shown great foresight in terms of choosing a complex metaphor for the 'shrinking world' that would be both relevant and timely. "History rose up around us," Rowland agrees. "I'm kind of intellectually proud that we were able to pick the trend."

During their time researching the story, Rowland and Barnes spent time developing the film's thematic layers and sense of authenticity by meeting, hearing the stories and sharing in the lives of refugees now integrated into Australian society.

As a result of this personal insight, Lucky Miles is a deeply humane film, bursting with humour and empathy. It's also extremely moral, although Rowland insists he and Helen deliberately steered clear of didacticism.

"We take these three characters and put them into the great Australian myth of Burke and Wills — the story that's writ large across our continent, where you walk inland and get your arse kicked by the desert," he says. "We put them through that journey, and by the end of it, they've ceased to be three men emblematic of a situation or nationality; they've become full characters, full of ordinary humanity. If the audience goes on that journey with us then we're really proud of them." "We're not trying to teach the audience stuff they don't already know. We're trying to entertain and tell a story, but not to say, 'So therefore...|' We've got a lot of faith in the audience to figure that out."

That said, Rowland says if the film leaves audiences with a sense of empathy — "the most creative emotion" — then it's played a part in smoothing the creases in globalised society. "The film is saying that whatever is going to be front page news, sporadically, for the next 10 years, is going to be all about because the world is shrinking and, in the absence of compassionate connections, people feel threatened

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and react accordingly." "But it acknowledges the humanity in the characters' dilemma, and follows the story through to a breakthrough that suggests that among the conflict there may be still good outcomes...compassionate connections." "I don't see any of the big problems in front of us, from free trade agreements to climate change, that would not benefit from us making connections with people we're currently strangers with," he concludes. "In fact I think it's the way forward."

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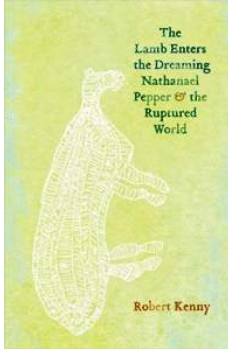
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Evangelical Christianity enters the dreaming

BOOK REVIEW

Non-Fiction

The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World, by Robert Kenny. (Melbourne: Scribe Publishers, 2007), [website](#) .



If you only read one work of Australian history in 2007, make it this one. *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* is a powerful attempt to get to the heart of questions central to Australian identity, through the story of one extraordinary man.

In early 1860, at a tiny German mission in the Wimmera region of Victoria, a young Wotjobaluk man named Nathanael Pepper converted to Christianity. After a vision of Jesus sweating blood in Gethsemane, Pepper declared his experience to the missionaries and began evangelising his people in their own language.

In Melbourne, prominent citizens crammed into an overflowing hall to hear reports of these events. Accounts of Pepper's conversion were reported in the local and national press. A pamphlet on Pepper circulated through evangelical groups world-wide. In literate Victorian circles, Nathanael Pepper was probably a household name.

A hundred and fifty years later, Robert Kenny became intrigued by this story. Why, he wondered, did Pepper's conversion matter so much to the missionaries and their supporters? And what did it mean to Nathanael and his people? In answering these questions, Kenny has written a profoundly important book about the nature of culture and identity, about Christianity and its place in Australian history, and about science and faith.

Many historians have examined interactions between Aborigines, settlers and missionaries during the colonial years. *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming* stands out for its lyrical prose, original approach and passionate engagement with broader philosophical questions. It is difficult to do justice to such a complex book in a brief review and I will only mention a few central themes.

In the first place, Kenny takes religion seriously. He wants to interpret, in something like their own terms, both Pepper and the



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Australian history, particularly that of

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Moravian missionaries who evangelised him. The Moravians were the crack troops of the Protestant missionary world, setting a high standard for self-sacrifice and perseverance. In Victoria, they found themselves in the thick of a larger battle being waged between evangelical humanitarianism and settler violence. The Melbourne Argus newspaper published editorials celebrating the 'inevitable' decline of the Aborigines and condemning missionaries as troublemakers. Pepper's experience provided the Moravians with powerful evidence for their claim that Aborigines shared 'one blood' with all humanity.

More radical is Kenny's attempt to understand Pepper's experience. Here he enters into informed speculation. Given what we know of indigenous cultures before invasion and of Aboriginal responses to early encounters with the invaders, he asks us to imagine what the incursion of settlers might have looked like to Aborigines.

Kenny's brilliant insight is to place the settlers' animals at the centre of this picture. In the totemic world of the Dreaming, the settlers' domesticated animals, which destroyed Aboriginal land with their grazing and hard hooves, may have appeared to be dangerous sources of power for the settlers. Aboriginal raids on settlers' cattle — in which animals were often killed but not eaten — were used by settlers as evidence of Aboriginal 'barbarity'. Kenny interprets them as a coherent tactic aimed at destroying the invaders' power.

In this context, the Christian emphasis on the Lamb of God could have been deeply meaningful to Aboriginal hearers — though not necessarily in the ways that missionaries intended. And so, Kenny brings us the story of Nathanael Pepper — a deeply moving account of one man's response to the physical and spiritual rupturing of his world. While Kenny has sympathy for the missionaries, Pepper is the hero of this story.

Pepper's identification with Christianity is seen not as a capitulation to colonisation, but as an embrace of a belief system that offered hope and power in a context of oppression, violence and disease. As Kenny points out, Pepper was not the first or last Aboriginal person to distinguish between the gospel and the destructive workings of the colonial regime. Though missionaries failed Pepper, the gospel message was very quickly out of their control and being interpreted in new ways in the indigenous church.

In the final section, Kenny uses Pepper's story as the basis of a passionate argument about culture and identity. He attacks a cultural relativism that sees culture as the ultimate ground of human identity and interprets any cultural change

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as a violation of the individual. This, he contends, can easily become the basis of a new racism. Though himself agnostic, he condemns Western historians for scapegoating Christianity for past sins more rightly attributed to science and reason.

Whether or not you agree with Kenny — and his description of cultural relativism sometimes verges on caricature — the question of how we interpret cultural change is a crucial one. More than that, Kenny opens up rich new possibilities for understanding the physical and spiritual encounters that make up our common past. This task is as important now as it has ever been.

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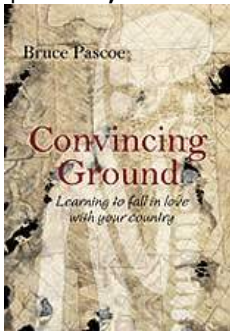
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Further challenge to historical record on Aboriginal massacres

BOOK REVIEW

Non-Fiction

***Convincing Ground: Learning to Fall in Love with Your Country*, by Bruce Pascoe. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2007, 302pp., Paperback, RRP \$39.95, ISBN 13 978 085575 549 2, [website](#).**



No society should tolerate child abuse. Drastic measures are sometimes appropriate to break cycles. However, the uniformed force assembled by the federal government to occupy Aboriginal communities carries much lead in its saddlebags. One lump is the suspicion felt by Aboriginal people about the intentions of the government. This is a government, after all, that abolished the elected Indigenous assembly ATSIC. Another lump is the scar tissue that has covered Australian race relations since frontier times. The dishonesty and denial surrounding the dispossession of the Indigenous people ensures that government actions evoke scepticism and cynicism.

The image of uniformed, white officers appearing in Aboriginal communities, supposedly to restore order and protect children, gives eerie timeliness to Bruce Pascoe's cry from the heart.

The 'Convincing Ground' on Victoria's western coast was the site of a massacre of Aboriginal people, following a disagreement with whalers. The title captures the irony central to Pascoe's thesis, as it reflects the invaders' perception of the incident as a victory in the debate over land ownership.

Pascoe argues that there has been no meaningful discussion of ownership, because the frontier was pushed not by genuine settlers but by speculators engaged in a land scam. The Aboriginal people happily granted the first whites *tanderrum*, or right of passage, a right they traditionally gave other clans. When the whites stayed, the indigenous people could well have assumed that this meant acceptance of Aboriginal lore.

Most stories about early contact used euphemisms to disguise violence. The reports of those who led genocidal 'reprisals' against the Wathaurong and other clans sold the myth that Aboriginal people had disappeared or withered away before

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an awe-inspiring superior civilisation.

The accounts of the few humanitarians who condemned the killings look more critically at the records. Hints are found that admit the existence of a full scale war. Pascoe draws on oral histories of Aboriginal people and on archaeological evidence, particularly the remnants of stone houses, to debunk myths about Aboriginal people being primitive and unsophisticated.

Pascoe aims to correct the historical account, not just for the sake of justice and fairness, but also because our future will be tragic unless it is based in truth. He argues that this land offers great hope and opportunity to those who learn to love it, but that denial of its true history prevents us from enjoying its bounty.

He relates numerous examples from recent political controversies — the Wik legislation, children overboard, the sinking of the SIEV X, invasion of Iraq, abandonment of equal opportunity in education, water and salinity — to the failure to recognise the importance of truth and honesty and to heed what the land tries to tell us. Pascoe attributes depletion of natural resources of soil and sea to failure to respect the indigenous approach to population growth, consumption and land care.

Pascoe notes the survival of mistrust in the racist attitudes he experiences and observes. Many people who claim to love Australia betray their hesitancy through their treatment of Aboriginal peoples and cultures. At one extreme are landholders who destroy Aboriginal remains and cultural artefacts. At the other are left liberal social activists whose writings sometimes demonstrate a paucity of understanding that results from ignorance of this country's true history.

Pascoe predicts a bright future should we learn to love our country. He sees a "Hague of the south. A clearing house of peace...everyone's uncle rather than some people's sheriff."

To love this land, we must overcome the culture which has hidden our history. You cannot pick a few convenient pages from this history, but must have "the whole book, every Australian leaf of it".

We must correct the impression that the only real Aborigines are desert nomads. We must avoid further destruction of Aboriginal languages, which can so adeptly describe a range of hills as 'a bandicoot jump' and a mobile phone as a 'yarna larka'.



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Pascoe tells the prime minister bluntly that “the only thing that can restore the living standards of Aboriginal people is equity in the land over which they were once sovereign. Not slabs of land, but equity in the life of the nation”.

Convincing Ground is a brave book. Because he gives such a personal account of the frontier and its continuing influence in Australian affairs, Pascoe risks being attacked by those who feel threatened by his uncompromising stance. Because he mentions some Aboriginal leaders in a positive way, he might well be dismissed by others. Because he makes such strong claims for Aboriginal society, for its longevity, democracy, wisdom and peacefulness, he will be criticised for idealism. But while artists, musicians, poets and playwrights have obliquely offered alternatives to white interpretations of race relations, Pascoe has laid down some direct challenges to the historical record. The best outcomes would be if other writers exercised similar courage in other regions, and if mainstream historians adapted their methodologies in recognition of the force of Pascoe’s arguments.

The federal government seems reluctant to read the ‘whole book’ of Australian history. To shield itself from inconvenient truths about the treatment of asylum seekers, it cited privacy concerns to exclude media from detention centres. That rationalisation will not do in Aboriginal communities, where privacy is so obviously violated. The entire nation has not just a right but also a responsibility to know what is happening there.

Creating local police states perpetuates historical injustices. This tactic sits firmly in the tradition of colonial paternalism which holds that the indigenous people do not deserve their children, their cultural systems or their land and so must live our way, or else disappear. Without their Aboriginal identity, they would have no claim to this land, which could be used productively — for weapons testing perhaps or nuclear waste disposal. What a foolish mob we are to reject the wisdom offered by this land and the people most intimately integrated with it.

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