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Seasons greetings to our readers

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Locked articles are a distant memory for *Eureka Street*readers. And we can say with confidence that our decision to make content free of charge has been a resounding success. Traffic to our website has more than doubled.

Until late last year, the majority of our articles was accessible only to paying subscribers. But in common with many other publications, we discovered that while readers were willing to make the shift from print to online, not enough were prepared to pay. Advertising is also problematic for publications with large amounts of locked content.

The other big development this year has been the switch from fortnightly to daily publication. Previously we published around 15 articles every two weeks as an online 'magazine'. Since January this year, we have published two articles each weekday. The daily 'rolling' publication has allowed us to reflect on events as they occur, and many readers have told us that they prefer to have the articles presented to them two — rather than 15 — at a time.

We have received only a few expressions of misgiving from readers who would prefer to pay for the content. Of course we would not expect to receive too many complaints, but we do know that some, and perhaps many, readers would be prepared to make a donation towards our production costs.

Our publisher Jesuit Communications has had two raffle fundraisers this year. There has been some increase in advertising revenue, but essentially our benefactors have carried the cost burden of our move to free access.

To this end, we will be establishing an online donation facility early in the new year. Those who prefer more traditional means of making a donation may send a cheque to Jesuit Communications at PO Box 553, Richmond 3121. Until our office closes for the break on Tuesday afternoon, you may also phone us with your credit card details on 1300 72 88 46.

Meanwhile, we hope you have a happy Christmas and a prosperous new year. We will be back early January with 'best of' articles from 2008, and new content from mid-January.

But you don't need to take a break from *Eureka Street*, you are welcome to browse our archive at any time. Just click the 'Archive' tab at the top of the page, or the set of thumbnail cover images above.

Feminist Christmas story

ES CLASSIC

Dorothy Lee

Feminist biblical scholars ask two fundamental questions of the [birth narrative] myths. First of all, they ask the literary question of how female characters are portrayed in the stories: where they are present and where absent, whether they are marginalised or diminished by the text, how seriously they are taken as human beings, as disciples, as leaders of early Christian communities.

Secondly, women ask how these biblical myths can be reinterpreted in a woman-friendly (rather than misogynist) way, regardless of how we may define the original author's or community's intentions. This may involve sometimes reading 'against the grain' in order to address directly women's concerns that are ignored or even downplayed by the narrative.

It is worth examining the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke with these questions in mind.

One of the purposes of feminist readings is to draw women from the margins, undoing the 'androcentrism' that subsumes females into the categories of males. Another is to challenge traditional 'malestream' readings that assume female characters conform to feminine stereotype. Both these moves are present in feminist readings of the birth stories ...

Matthew's story is, at first reading, a male-oriented narrative. The long genealogy at the head of Matthew's narrative confronts the female reader with a bewildering but highly focused litany of male sexual activity, fervently — if not feverishly — producing generation after generation of male offspring.

Joseph, rather than Mary, is quickly established as the central figure of Matthew's story, his dreamy yet powerful character modelled on that of his patriarchal namesake in the Book of Genesis.

In many ways, Joseph is an admirable character, his moral uprightness laced with compassion. All through the story of flight and exile, his dreams guide the narrative, and his goodness protects the mother and child. Although not the biological father of the baby, he becomes Jesus' adopted father through his paternal tenderness and care.

The contrast to this admirable portrait is Mary: she is given a passive characterisation almost from the start. Things are done to her, whether in the divine or human spheres. She does not speak; she takes no initiative, make no

decisions. Her faith is assumed though never made explicit.

The complementary roles of active, protective father and needy, helpless mother have probably given rise to later traditions of Mary as a young girl and Joseph an old man. Matthew's Mary seems the passive female in need of male guidance and strength, while Joseph strides forth as the guardian of dependent womanhood.

And yet, from a feminist perspective, that is not all there is to be said about Matthew's account. The genealogy which sets the birth narrative in its mythic frame is unquestionably a patrilineal catalogue, tracing descent only through the father. Yet intriguingly, it contains reference to four women from the Hebrew scriptures who make an unexpected maternal appearance in male paternal terrain.

First there is Tamar, the wronged widow of Genesis, who attempted to redress her wrongs by seducing her father-in-law, and was vindicated for her courage and daring.

Next is Rahab the Canaanite prostitute who courageously helped the Hebrew spies to enter the Promised Land.

Then Ruth the stranger and alien whose faith is commended in the book that bears her name, who supported her shattered mother-in-law with her friendship and hard work, and became the great-grandmother of King David.

Finally there is Bathsheba, the abused wife of Uriah who later married David, her abuser, and whose son Solomon came to the throne after his father, thanks (at least in part) to her astute political connivance.

These four women, female ancestors of the Messiah, prepare the reader for the role of Mary and for the altogether unexpected way in which the genealogy concludes. In the end, God bypasses the patrilineage and Jesus is born from the mother, without male assistance of any kind.

This is unusual, particularly by the lights of ancient understandings of biology: the father provided the seed, the mother was merely its incubator. Yet, for Matthew (and also, in this respect, for Luke), a woman is the sole guarantor of Jesus' humanity.

It is not dependent on male seed or male begetting or male initiative. Mary becomes the mother of the Messiah through divine intervention, while remaining a virgin, and thus joins the panoply of unusual and spirited Jewish women through whom God chose to work, sometimes in spite of the males in their lives.

When we turn to Luke and his characterisation of Mary, it seems at first that we are on stronger ground. Mary is unquestionably the hero of Luke's tale, closely followed by Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist and Mary's kinswoman. Both are the vessels of miraculous pregnancies and both are women of outstanding faith and insight.

Mary's positive response to the angel's terrifying message is a dynamic statement of faith. She is the first person in this gospel to hear the word of God and respond to it in relation to Jesus: the first to come to Christian faith.

Elizabeth, in contrast to her husband Zechariah, also shows remarkable faith. Under divine influence, she recognises Mary's identity as 'the Mother of my Lord' and celebrates, with Mary, the coming of God to redeem Israel.

Under the influence of the ubiquitous Spirit, Mary utters one of the major canticles of Luke's birth story, the Magnificat. On closer inspection, this is not a spontaneous outburst on Mary's part which can be understood in historical terms. It is close to the Song of Hannah in the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Samuel), another powerful yet vulnerable mother who showed great faith and received the gift of divine speech.

Using Old Testament language and imagery, Mary's Song outlines Luke's understanding of the gospel and the corning of Christ as a radical shift: one which exalts the poor and overthrows the rich and powerful. The shape of this divine gospel, according to Luke, is proclaimed from the beginning by a woman who represents faithful Israel's response to God's advent in Jesus.

Yet this is not the last word on Luke's gospel. Despite so powerful a beginning, women in Luke's later story seem to recede further and further. Subsequent female characters, unlike Mary and Elizabeth, are silent and quiescent, without the dynamic power of speech.

By the time we reach the Book of Acts (Luke's second volume), women have been almost entirely written out of Luke's vision of church history. Despite the evidence from Paul's letters that the early church included women as apostles, missionaries, teachers and preachers, Luke presents a church run almost exclusively by men.

The promise of Mary of Nazareth is not, it would seem, fulfilled. What begins as a positive presentation of women fails to carry its message through. In the end, it would seem, Luke himself loses courage and sells out on women's leadership and gifts for ministry.

Police shootings have many victims

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins


Forever young: family and friends farewell Tyler

Yet another police shooting occurred over the weekend. A junior officer fired several shots after a 48-year-old woman lunged at her with a knife at North Parramatta in Sydney.

The woman is in a serious but stable condition in hospital. But at least she is recovering.

Tyler Cassidy was not so lucky. The Melbourne 15-year-old was killed 11 days ago as he confronted police in a suburban skate park armed with two knives.

It is gratifying that there was no anger directed towards police during his funeral service on Thursday.

RMIT University criminologist Dr Julian Bondy expressed alarm at the earlier outpouring of distress and anger towards the police, particularly on internet social networking sites. Bondy was referring to descriptions of Cassidy as a 'soldier' in the 'war' against authorities.

Perhaps it is time to question the extent to which we should be proud of the anti-authoritarianism in our culture.

Clashes with police have played a prominent part in the 220 years since white settlement. We lionise Ned Kelly. We celebrate our convict heritage, and we take for granted justification of the Eureka Stockade uprising against police at Ballarat in 1854. There is even a proud and conscious echo of this event in the title of this publication.

We also had last week's defiant reaction of Palm Islanders and other Australians to the appeal court decision to overturn the coroner's finding that Senior Sergeant Chris Hurley was responsible for the 2004 death in custody of Palm Islander Cameron Mulrunji Doomadgee.

There are bad police, but there are also good police, just as there are bad and good citizens. All have the same right to justice. This is a more complex situation, and there is a strong case to argue for a royal commission. But Queensland Premier Anna Bligh had a point when she insisted last week that 'in our legal system people are entitled to seek an appeal and that's what's happened here and I think that reflects the health of our system'.

After the Tyler Cassidy incident, we received a letter from Phil Pyke, who was a Tasmanian police officer until 2007. He related his personal experience of what it's like for police to 'face the angry man', in his case a known criminal with a history of violence. The besieged criminal warned police that he wanted to die in a shoot-out with them. Believing the lives of officers were in danger, Pyke began to

pull the trigger.

While I was focused and apparently roaring at him as well, one of the officers from a second unit ran across from the other side, his weapon raised as well. This drew the attention of the offender who suddenly rolled his arm and dropped the coat — he had no weapon!

Pyke's point is that there's no clear-cut process in the decision whether to shoot or not. In the case of Tyler Cassidy, capsicum spray failed to subdue him. Pyke argues that media speculation 'pushes the debate into the court of public opinion without regard for those affected by the tragedy'. This also applies to the Doomagee case, and the other historical events mentioned above.

We need to remind ourselves that a police shooting has many victims, including the officers themselves.

Zen Christmas

SPIRITUALITY

Sarah Kanowski

'Who is hearing?', is a question Zen practitioners are invited to sit with in meditation. One of the primary koans in the Zen tradition, it can open up our notions of self by drawing attention away from the mind into a more direct connection with the environment.

For me, what I usually hear when I sit in meditation with this question are aeroplanes and kids on the street, but for a few days recently I exchanged the sounds of the city for the rich silence of the bush: kookaburras, rain falling on leaves, buzzing flies.

Twenty years ago the Sydney Zen Centre built a retreat centre across the Hawkesbury River. A clearing in the bush with a meditation hall, a cottage, three pit toilets and three outdoor showers. It's a place to hold silent seven-day retreats. At this time of year, the property's wattle trees are in glorious golden bloom, their tiny pompoms turning up in the most unexpected places — the toilet floor, my sleeping bag, the incense bowl.

Silence has an honoured place in all spiritual traditions, and it is the principle around which monastic orders build their days. In Zen, silent meditation is the cornerstone of practice, and the opportunity to sit for extended periods is greatly valued for laypeople as well as for monks and nuns.

On my retreat, days started at 5am and continued until the last bell at 9pm, with rounds of sitting and walking meditation, chanting, and private interviews with teachers. The schedule feels alternately profoundly restful and, depending on the hour and my mood, somewhat akin to being incarcerated in a benevolent mental asylum.

Ritual structures the day, including the meal ceremony oryoki: three times a day servers bring trays of food into the meditation hall, we unwrap our meal bowls and then eat silently. When finished, we wash our bowls, dry them carefully, and place them beside our cushion ready for the next meal.

At my first retreat, I found meals the most difficult time to keep silent. Sociability is such a strong part of sharing food. But now *oryoki* is my favourite part of the day; an experience of being together in activity while respecting each other's inner life. And in quietness it is easier to give real attention to the food and to be grateful for it.

Surrounding the most ordinary of activities, eating, with ritual makes it newly beautiful. Zen draws most of its aesthetics from Japanese culture, which has a

great gift for this kind of daily ceremony, from the art of drinking tea to that of flower arranging.

In the West we are rapidly approaching our own peak of ritual behavior, Christmas. It is full of ceremony, though most are anything but meditative. All these celebrations with people and presents and food and drink and excess. I love many of these Christmas rituals and, as the youngest in a big family, am particularly loyal to them. But they seem at a painful remove from my days of silence in the bush.

This is such a frantic time of year for many of us, but then outside of the monasteries and retreat centres, daily life itself is always busy and full of chatter. Already, silent breakfast in a still-dark *zendo*, with mist rising on the mountains, has been replaced by a scramble against the clock, one greedy eye on the newspaper, one greedy hand reaching for the Weet Bix, our toddler clambering all over me and garbage trucks screeching by outside.

How to find the silence here? How to really hear what's in our hearts and in the world outside? We have built a culture which feeds on the human propensity for distraction. Our appetite for the internet, television, iPods and mobile phones shows a determination to keep silence, both outer and inner, at bay. No wonder we feel exhausted.

But even amidst all this noise there is a deep power within all of us to say, 'stop'. We can do that by carving out the time for daily prayer or meditation. Turning off the computer and taking a walk. Putting down the newspaper and really seeing those who sit at the table with us.

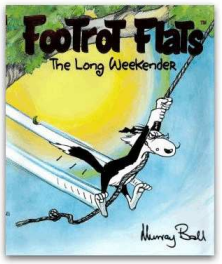
Perhaps my new Christmas ritual will be to try to find something of the spirit of *oryoki*in city streets and family life. Probably not over the Christmas ham and champagne, but there are still other spaces for silence in this celebration — watching the lights on a Christmas tree, or standing around that crib with its baby boy-child sleeping.

New Zealand's best export

BOOKS

Michael McVeigh

Ball, Murray: *Footrot Flats: The Long Weekender*. Hachette Livre, New Zealand, 2008. RRP $89.99. ISBN: 9781869711481



Life on a farm is life at its most basic, messy and unpredictable. There's the changing weather, the daily routine of caring for livestock, and the quirky characters that seem to thrive best in small, isolated communities.

For someone raised in the crisp, sterile environment of suburbia, the haphazard, organic life of the country seems incredibly foreign.

In *Footrot Flats: The Long Weekender*, New Zealand-based Murray Ball captures this foreign world as well as any cartoonist ever has. There are no clean frames in his cartoons. Each drawing is rendered with as much detail as necessary to convey that what we're seeing is a world caked in dirt and mud, and filled with the smell of sweat and animal droppings.

This book is, as the title suggests, a hefty hardcover collection of weekend comic strips featuring in newspapers around the world over the course of many years. As such, there is no overarching narrative, just glimpses of life as seasons pass from oppressive wet winters to hot, hard summer days.

Presumably, when they were first published, the seasons in the comic strips mirrored those of the outside world. Here, the vignettes come together in a broad tapestry of country life.

If there is a political subtext to *Footrot Flats*, it's lost in this context. What we're presented with is a simple world where rugby (this is New Zealand, of course) is played under pouring rain in winter, and cricket is played on dry grounds in the summer. A world where the main concerns are keeping the sheep safe long enough to be sheared, and (for the main protagonist, Dog) staying on the right side of the frightening and seemingly indestructable cat, Horse.

Life here leaves characters little time for introspection or philosophy. The few times politics finds its way into the strips, it's done in typically irreverent country style. In one, the decrepit old ram Ces is found hiding away from the sheep, being coaxed back by Dog, who says, 'For cryin' out loud Ces. Even if they were all militant feminists bent on revenge for years of male domination — let's face it, you'd be the last bloke they'd be after.'

Footrot Flats ran from 1976 to 1994 in comic books around the world. It's one thing that Australians could never steal from our nearby neighbours. While the concerns of the land might be the same all over the world, the Flats are undeniably Kiwi in character. It is one of the country's best exports precisely

because it portrays the country's people and lifestyle so authentically.

Newspaper's golden age

MEDIA

Moira Rayner


THE AGE
5% Cautious Rudd blinks on greenhouse action
THE AGE
ASIS chief quits over rap

Once, I had a column in *The Age*. Like Karen Blixen, who famously wrote about her farm in Africa, I remember that interlude a little mistily, and as rather better than it might actually have been. Writing weekly was a challenge, a drama and cause for satisfaction. I felt honoured to do it, and hurt when it was dumped.

Watching Fairfax dividends dwindle and editors change, at the same time as overseas bastions of the press, the massive Tribune Co. and the *New York Times*among them, sicken and die because of falling readership and rising online advertising, I have had cause to recall those lucky days.

Fairfax has been clear about its reasons — drops in advertising revenue in print, and lack of profitability online. Costs have to be cut and changes made. The old profits are likely never to be matched. The new CEO, Brian McCarthy, has quite a task ahead of him: how to save a business without losing the heart of a newspaper.

It is apparently old-fashioned to expect to be primarily informed and engaged by a newspaper. Yet that is what Melburnians loved about *The Age*.

I came in — and went out — at the turning point for that venerable organ. I'd been writing for a couple of years when we were given a new editor, Bruce Guthrie (he who was just dumped from the *Herald Sun* editorship and has sued his employer for $2.7 million).

Bruce created a new office of assistant editor, whose duties included managing op-ed, including me. Within a week, said assistant editor had judged that week's column to be inadequate and rejected it. Within two, he had shouted at me.

When this persisted, I objected to being bullied, and Bruce decided one of us must go, and it wasn't going to be his new right hand. So I went back to writing books and for *Eureka Street* and *The Big Issue*, and the right-hand man wrote a column in my spot for a few months, which I thought much inferior to my own, and after a while went the way of all bullies — working for another one, this time in politics (and that also came to a bad end).

I wrote for a different A/age virtually gone over the last few years of shifting style, substance and editors. We know that the credit crunch and shuddering financial markets will have a big impact on local media companies, which will worry their shareholders, but will also worry us freelance writers, journalists and contributors, and the old style journalists that the struggling papers are 'letting

go'.

As well, I fear for the quality of those lucky few who will continue to be on payroll.

I never claimed to be a brilliant writer. I learned by doing, as journalists do, though they won't learn that way any more, because Fairfax has cancelled its traineeship program. You don't learn about investigative work by doing a course. Seeking out facts and hammering out thoughts is part of the wordsmith's art.

Nor do you make a newspaper by paying politicians to review movies or pay peanuts to freelancers for truly big stories.

And what happened to the characters of my happiest writing days, when *The Age*set up the late Paddy McGuinness' column deliberately a couple of days before mine, so we could annoy and argue with one another. As then chairman of the board, Sir Zelman Cowan remarked during an old-fashioned afternoon tea for contributors, *The Age* wanted to contribute to the distinctive character of Melbourne.

The Age has not been what it once was for a very long time. Under the new leadership of the former CEO of Rural Press, the Fairfax Board will require it to go through an uncompromising corporate culture change, after the failure of board-approved Hilmer-style 'managerialism', rising debt and dropping earnings.

The board, of course, is where the problem lies, not the editors. And McCarthy will, obviously, have to consider whether or not running two completely independent newspapers in Sydney and in Melbourne makes sense any more. McCarthy's various colleagues in Rural Press clearly favour the idea of 'breaking down the silos'.

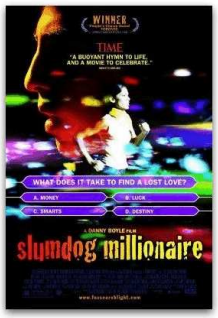
This former contributor, though, would beg board and boss to hasten slowly on that thought. The only reason *The Age* has survived is because the readership of Victoria still feel ownership of it, as a Melbourne paper. The *Herald Sun* ain't that bad, and will still be Melbourne's. Think about it.

Life as a game show

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Slumdog Millionaire*: 120 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Danny Boyle. Co-director: Loveleen Tandan**



Games that ask the player to answer a series of general knowledge questions are not tests of mental prowess *per se*. The most knowledgeable person in the world can falter, if asked a question to which they happen not to know the answer.

By the same token, someone with no formal education and very little general knowledge may find themselves victorious, if the right questions are asked.

Of course, the odds would be stacked against such a person, and for the right questions to line up would require something out of the ordinary. A miracle, perhaps.

Such is the premise for Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire*. At the outset, young Indian man Jamal has made it through to the final question on the Indian version of TV game show *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. An orphan from a Mumbai slum, Jamal is an unlikely victor. To gradually unpick the mystery behind his success, the film flashes back to pertinent moments from his childhood and adolescence.

Jamal (played at various ages by Ayush Mahesh Khedekar, Tanay Chheda and Dev Patel) crawls through faeces to get an autograph from his favourite film star. Later, he and his brother Salim (Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail, Ashutosh Lobo Gajiwala and Madhur Mittal) witness their mother's murder during a race riot. Orphaned, they are taken in and exploited by a Fagan-like benefactor. They flee, and soon take to grifting tourists at the Taj Mahal.

Throughout, Jamal draws hope from his love for childhood friend and fellow orphan, Latika (Rubiana Ali, Tanvi Ganesh Lonkar and Freida Pinto). The two would-be lovers are frequently estranged; while destiny repeatedly pushes them together, life, and the increasingly selfish actions of Salim, pries them apart.

A sense of the divine pervades the film — call it God, fate or a combination of both — as Jamal's memories of these experiences (shown through a succession of flashbacks), and bits of knowledge gleaned from them, fall in line with the questions he is asked during his game show appearance.

While Jamal's life seems driven towards ultimate good fortune, Salim's diverges to corruption. He is the closest thing Jamal has to a guardian, but he is not a selfless overseer. At times he alleviates his brother's misery, yet at other times he imparts it. His character follows the arc of tragedy, but his is finally a story of redemption.

Boyle makes a meal of such ironies. For example, Jamal learns from the various betrayals committed by his brother, to beware the motives of those who offer help. This is a tragic lesson for a young person to learn, yet it proves vital at a key moment during his quiz show appearance.

The UK director of films such as *Trainspotting* and *Millions*, Boyle brings a trademark visual verve and emotional energy to *Slumdog Millionaire*. He and Indian co-director Tandan revel in the locations and the authentic performances of the young cast. Khedekar and Ismail, who portray the brothers as wide-eyed children wise beyond their years, steal the show.

Turnbull's problematic leadership

POLITICS

John Warhurst

Brendan Nelson lost the Liberal leadership because he could not score highly enough in the opinion polls. Now Malcolm Turnbull's dismal December polls threaten to undermine his leadership too.

Nelson suffered from several problems. The first was Kevin Rudd's honeymoon period. The electorate, having rejected the Howard Government, was disposed to give the new government the time to settle in. Barring accidents the Rudd Government was always guaranteed the electorate's favour until about now.

The second was disagreement about his leadership. He was a compromise leader. The coalition behind him was fragile and his margin of victory was slender.

Turnbull can put these problems behind him. Rudd's honeymoon should now be over, though the global financial crisis may have extended the normal honeymoon period. The political tide still seems to be turning against Labor at the state level, especially in NSW.

There is still disunity about the leadership among Liberals and only grudging acceptance of Turnbull among several influential Opposition MPs, including Senate Leader Nick Minchin. Some of this surfaced in the shemozzle in the Senate in the final sitting week. But he is the party's best, and probably only, chance of victory in 2010.

Nelson's third weakness was his lack of clear policies. He was torn between loyalty to the Howard legacy and a willingness to try new directions. His final weaknesses were personal. He was too dull and insignificant, and sold himself poorly. He embraced opposition for the sake of opposition rather than to set broad, long-term policy.

Turnbull by contrast has the raw personality to succeed. He is capable and decisive. He also has an intangible quality that elevates him above the crowd. But he still has to fashion a winning persona that looks statesmanlike.

His wealth, alleged arrogance and parliamentary inexperience ultimately will not be problems. All are now commonplace enough in politics. Voters will judge him, as they did Rudd, not on his background and past record, but on what he offers them.

But he still has hurdles to jump. He needs a coherent strategy in response to Labor's mandate to govern and clarity of policy on a range of issues that straddle the Howard-Costello legacy. His decision to support the government's new

industrial relations legislation was a good first step. Clearly however some Liberals now believe that Turnbull has gone too far and is ditching too much of the legacy.

Clarity of policy must be personal and collective. His shadow ministers come from different ideological mindsets. The Liberals are a broad church. Turnbull's success will depend on shaping them into a tight team.

Personally he is a social liberal close to the centre of Australian politics. This is both a strength and a weakness for him. He was bitten early on when his outspokenness on progressive issues like gay rights apparently caused his defeat in the first Liberal leadership contest. He has since been very wary of exacerbating ideological differences within his party.

But he has been speaking out recently. Most notable was his keynote address to the national conference of the Australian Christian Lobby. He stated clearly that a commitment to freedom was the core of Liberal philosophy and that liberalism was central to his own life and to that of his party.

He avoided raising controversial moral issues himself, but, during question time made clear that he supported a woman's right to choose to terminate an unwanted pregnancy.

Turnbull is the most liberal Liberal leader for some time. He is very different from John Howard, the party's self-styled most conservative leader. He is more liberal than both Nelson and Costello, despite his recent conservative comments on border protection.

He is also more liberal than the centre of gravity of both the mass of ordinary Liberal Party members and his own parliamentary party.

That is not a problem for him while he looks like a winner. But the moment that he looks to be faltering with the electorate he risks losing the support of his party colleagues. He must retain the aura of a winner or his liberalism will become a liability with many of them. That is the dilemma that he will take with him on his Christmas holidays.

Scenes from a taxi

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

I'm not a supporter of the view that cab drivers are sources of homespun wisdom and arcane knowledge about issues of the day. My own experience of them over many years does not bear this out.

The cabbies I encountered in The Big Apple, for example, where the stereotype surely was born, were aggressive (towards other cabs, road users in general, pedestrians, tourists, the world) or sullen — except for one who talked in shouted announcements, as if we were travelling in a tractor and he had to overcome the engine noise.

His message, bellowed over his shoulder, was that pretty well the entire rest of the human race were *fuckin' lowlifes*, but he differed from his lugubrious colleagues in that he had one, much-repeated piece of good news.

Many times, he told me, he had picked up in his cab the writer, Kurt Vonnegut. The truth was, he said during perhaps his sixth or seventh reference to this famous passenger, that he — the cabbie — had actually given Vonnegut the idea for his novel, *Slaughterhouse Five,* and provided him with much of the story.

The slightest suggestion on my part of a failure to swallow this outlandish claim would, I could see clearly, enrol me among the lowlifes. So, what the hell, I just nodded and went through a revolting charade of being massively impressed until I could pay my fare and escape his mobile shrine to contemporary American literature.

I briefly considered yelling at him, from a safe distance, 'When Dresden was bombed, you weren't even thought of, you fuckin' lowlife liar, so how could you give Vonnegut his plot?' but anyway I didn't, partly because, well, that's not me, and partly because he would have driven straight up on to the sidewalk and crashed me through the steamy window of the bagel joint we just happened to be alongside at the time. This was New York, after all.

Australian cabbies are in general an amiable, diverse lot. They are not given to philosophy, though I encountered one spectacular exception who, once I was settled and we were on our way, said, 'If God is perfect and free from defect then he must exist because not existing would be a defect. Whaddya reckon?'

And when it comes to politics, their attitude is one of generalised complaint in the ironic Australian manner — or, even more attractive, in the blunt multiculturally Australian manner. As one cabbie put it to me recently, 'I am in kebs from ten years and what am I thinkink? Bastard government for me done nothink, that's what.'

These days, there's another echelon of cabbies — those who consider it unnecessary to know even a few words of English. A friend of ours, who had been working in India, staggered off the plane at Adelaide after 30 hours of flights and transfers, climbed gratefully into a cab only to discover the driver — an Indian — spoke no English whatsoever. Our friend directed him to the destination using his rudimentary Hindi.

Me, I lack the professional cabby's imperturbability.

'You're going to miss your plane,' I told my passenger, as I inched towards Departures through roadworks the other day. She betrayed no anxiety.

'The airlines will make allowances,' she said.

'If we hadn't stopped to do all that shopping, we might have just avoided —'

'It'll be all right,' she said.

How would the real cabbies — the ones who were trying to ferry passengers — handle this, I thought. Drawing on my experience of many hours alongside the hackney jockeys, I said, 'If God is perfect and free from defect then he must exist because not existing would be a defect. Wouldn't you say so?'

She looked at me quizzically.

'These roadworks have been here all day,' she said with cabby-like imperturbability. 'We would have been delayed even if I hadn't shopped.'

Japanese tourists began to descend from a vast, motionless bus immediately in front of us and I was about to point out that they'd decided to walk, as if that triumphantly proved some point I was making, when I realised they'd all got out to photograph the roadworks.

Their sudden appearance, however, caused a break in the crawling traffic and I adroitly nipped into the adjoining lane which took us slowly but smoothly to Departures. Just like that.

'It's the bastard government,' I said to my passenger as I hefted her luggage. 'From them you get bloody nothink.'

She looked at me. 'Are you all right?' she said. 'You're impossible when you get anxious.' As if I were Walter Mitty or some similar weirdo.

Somehow, despite years of tutoring by hundreds of cabbies, I couldn't establish, as they do, that easy, superior, don't-contradict-me-mate driver-passenger relationship.

But I suppose it's more problematic when you're married to the passenger.

Zimbabwe's disappeared

POLITICS

Oskar Wermter

Jestina Mukoko (pictured) used to be a television presenter. Then she left and became director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project which has been documenting many atrocities and crimes of Mugabe's regime. Maybe she had become tired of telling all those outrageous lies day in, day out on behalf of government propaganda, maybe her professional conscience woke up and longed to tell truth, nothing but the truth.

Last week she was abducted by a group of armed agents, consisting of seven men and one woman, with some more manning a fleet of vehicles. She was taken in her nightdress, not allowed to get her medication, her glasses, anything. She has not been seen since. Police have been silent, courts reluctant to take any action.

Who is responsible? The secret police? Gangsters acting on behalf of the 'ruling party'?

Many more have been 'disappeared' and remain missing. The regime is as hostile towards the opposition (who won the march elections) as ever.

South Africa wants the 'unity government', as envisaged in an agreement in September, set up as soon as possible. But how can there be unity where there is blind hatred, torture and murder? Would it not be better if South Africa insisted that the regime produce all its abducted, tortured, maltreated opponents? Or have they all been murdered?

The agreement promised that the rule of law would be reestablished. But the regime, its police and even the courts have as little respect for the law as ever. They break their own laws without hesitation. Police don't touch anything declared 'political', even murder.

Where promises are broken, how can there be trust? Would it not be better if South Africa denounced this lawlessness and criminal behaviour? Especially in view of its own excessively high crime rate which may yet deter the world from coming to South Africa for the Soccer World Championship in 2010.

Medically speaking, cholera should be a thing of the past. Any cholera outbreak today is due to a breakdown of public health in times of war or social decay.

The president claims the cholera epidemic is over, the minister of information blames the British for it, like for anything else that goes wrong in this former British colony. Priests visiting cholera treatment centres to pray with the seriously ill and dying tell a different story. The faithful too: they see desperately ill people being taken on wheelbarrows (ambulances are not running or too expensive) to

the clinics.

The 'ruling party' does not know public service, working for the common good, caring for the poor and the sick without discrimination. Its number one priority has always been to stay in power, never mind the cost. The 'comrades' and 'war veterans' and 'liberation fighters' were never concerned about the nation as a whole, but only about the 'party' and its supporters. Who does not belong to the 'party' is guilty of treason.

Sewage runs along our streets, women and girls fetch water in contaminated streams since the water taps have run dry, power cuts leave people in the dark, government hospitals are closed, there is hunger and famine in a country that used to be highly productive, with food security never a problem. Maintaining, extending, modernising public services has not been a priority.

Africa must no longer tolerate leaders of failed states. Negotiating towards compromises is the essence of politics. It presupposes good faith, honesty. But you cannot negotiate with tyrants. There is no compromise with autorcrats who insist on total power.

In 2009 the Catholic Bishops of Africa will meet with the Pope in Rome for their second Special Synod, on 'The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace'. Since the politicians lets us down, the Church has to give a lead and teach the continent about good governance and sound principles of serving society.

A frugal Christmas story

ECONOMICS

Margaret Rice

I went to my first Christmas party this weekend and although it was fun, it triggered a sense that the silly part of the season is about to hit. Something comes into the air about now — a fraught pre-Christmas anxiety, as I and the rest of the city attempt to manage layers of pressure that have become part of the pre-Christmas period.

We circle the car park that little bit longer as tempers fray and blood pressure rises. We then battle and jostle with the crowds as we struggle to the finishing line, ticking off all the items on our Christmas list. We forget something and then have to face it all again.

We order turkeys, we order ham, juggling all of this with all the projects and reports that bosses or clients want completed by the end of the year.

In all the bustle and rush we forget what Christmas is really meant to be about: an opportunity to contemplate the transformative power of the divine becoming human among and for us.

And this year there are additional stresses. The global financial crisis is starting to have its effect, impacting on communities everywhere. In my local community, the hair dresser has felt it already and she's worried about keeping her staff. 'People leave it longer between colours,' she explains.

One of my daughters, Rachel, lost her part-time job as a nanny last week. Her loss is slight compared to her employer's, a young mother who works in the finance industry. She said to Rachel: 'I'm sorry I didn't give you more notice but I wasn't given any notice myself,' her voice catching as she choked back tears.

She will have more on her mind than the usual pre-Christmas madness as her young family faces an uncertain New Year.

Let's hope Prime Minister Rudd's $10.4 billion stimulus package and the further infrastructure spending recently announced will actually generate 75,000 new jobs in time for her family and others in the same position to feel the benefit soon.

But at the same time, let's hope that while we focus on the economy and doing our bit to spend it out of recession that we don't forget the bigger economic and environmental problems we all know are brewing. At a personal level, we still need to find the balance between doing our bit of spending to save the global economy and collectively snubbing consumerism.

Self-denial can still help make the world a better place. If enough people consume less, we will slow down energy consumption and with it global warming.

At a personal level, I'm letting the environment rather than the financial crisis dominate my Christmas planning. This year we imposed a $10 limit on presents within the immediate family. At first my three daughters were horrified — despite all being students and on budgets.

They complained that you can't get anything for anybody for $10. But then they realised that the challenge made it interesting and fun.

It's a strategy that has gone a long way to puncturing my pre-Christmas stress. I can avoid the carparks and queues. To add to the pleasure, I will buy locally and I will buy Australian.

There are other things that we can do to maintain a helicopter view of the financial and the environmental crises. One is to think of those outside the financial capitals of the western economies who are suffering much more than we are. It is predicted that around the world, 100 million additional people will fall into poverty this year because of the impact of the financial crisis.

The major aid agencies all allow us to buy a Christmas gift and support a third world development project at the same time.

And back home, we could spend our share of the $10.4 billion stimulus package on things that help ease our energy consumption, such as awnings on our houses, or solar energy panels.

As individuals in the future we might invest in sources of renewable energy and companies that do site rehabilitation. Energy technology is a high-risk investment now, but as demand grows, returns will start to grow.

We can help our children resist unblinking consumerism. When banks offer them credit cards we can suggest debit cards. We can agitate for 'take back legislation' that would mean we can return old mobile phones with their valuable components to the point of sale.

If we can shed the commercial layers of Christmas, and give permission to those around us to do so, not only will we avoid pre-Christmas stress but we will create a calmer tempo to bring to Christmas Day itself, leaving ourselves open to reflect on its meaning.

What the people don't know

POETRY

Jeff Klooger

The Department Knows

The department knows everything
and promises nothing in triplicate.
Atop a mountain of documents, the minister for all that lives and dies
surveys his kingdom with an eagle's eye

and an artichoke's heart. Absently, he twirls
the ends of an equation: those desperadoes in their plywood boats,
the public with their mortgages. He is too quick
to wait for those comparisons that journalists
and soppy, half-wit do-gooders will try
to hang him with. The human costs are hidden
beneath a million backyard pools, forgotten
over beer and blackened snags.
Suppose the numbers don't add up?
He can live with that. He has friends
or people who owe him, which is even better.
If the curtain falls (and surely it must one day)
he will slip away with barely a nod,
sinking into an obscurity reserved for those
no-longer famous but merely well-to-do.
For now though, matters await decision,
machines of power whir and tick beneath his hands.
Far from here, small, round faces stare unblinking,
cans and bottles spread like sacraments.
Who watches? Who sees? The department
sees everything, counts the fists

that land wherever pain blossoms. Only a little blood, perhaps,
but marks and bruises can last a lifetime.
In parts like this, forgetting is a life-long task;
elsewhere it's a blessing bestowed on those most guilty,
evidence melting like chalk marks in the rain.
It's just as well there is no God. If there were,
who'd dare to pray? Each morning
before the dirty work, we humbly beseech His grace
and wisdom. Forgive us our sins, we pray,
today and again tomorrow. Our hands make signs
we neither mean nor understand, then we turn back
to the business that never ends
as long as money moves, as long as we dare
tread the carpet of burning coals, keep our nerve, balance
the government's will and the party's folly.
The minister knows what the people don't know
can't hurt him, makes him strong. The people don't ask,
but pay their bills, complain and vote, have no choice,
are overworked and entertained remorselessly.
Boats sink, but only strangers drown;
the banks are kept at bay another month;
pink petrol haze clouds all regret;
the minster makes a speech, the department plans.

Confessions of a videogame junkie

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Ben O'Mara

So this is Christmas. Another year has passed and again Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft are doing battle for our precious dollars in the mighty entertainment behemoth that is the videogame industry. You too can strap on a plastic guitar to be a rock star in *Guitar Hero*, become an interplanetary hero blasting away an alien horde in *Halo 3*, or ply your trade as an up-and-coming thug in *Grand Theft Auto 4*.

Now more than ever, as the realities of our changing economy hit home, the digital lives we create in videogames seem far more appealing.

Last week, I almost caved in. I found myself wriggling through a Christmas rush at a local shopping centre, rationalising the potential purchase of a new Playstation 3.

Yes, I admit: I was once a videogame addict. In the 1980s I spent untold hours in front of the television playing *Last Ninja 2* on my Commodore 64. Ten years later I upgraded to a PC, and to fighting the beasties of *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Diablo* as I chugged down too many coffees, Mars bars and packets of salt and vinegar chips.

Later, I progressed to a console and played *Wipeout* and *Tekken 3*endlessly on the first evolution of the Playstation. Even now, running five nights a week, I blame my portly body on my former addiction to these digital gaming pleasures.

A new Playstation 3 costs almost $700. This is a considerable chunk of cash. If you factor in other expenses like games (around $100 a pop), extra controllers, hard disks, broadband access and online gaming fees, then time spent hacking and slashing a few digital cronies can prove very costly indeed.

It makes you wonder how much it's really worth to play virtual tennis when you can walk to the local park to kick around a footy for free.

Such pricy gaming technology tends to be a very exclusive form of entertainment. Only those with enough cash can afford to experience the eye-popping visual candy of a next generation gaming machine.

The consumerist nature of videogames requires a reality check. Cheaper forms of multimedia technology, for example, can be used in positive and interactive ways that don't cost the earth. They also have the potential to enrich our lives far beyond the immediate thrills of gaming for entertainment.

As researchers at the Inspire Foundation and ORYGEN Youth Health have found

, the internet, access to broadband and the use of mobile technology provides great opportunity for the improvement of the mental health of young people experiencing social, economic and cultural marginalisation.

The relatively low cost of the internet has been important for newly arrived and migrant young people as a means of staying in touch with family and friends they have left behind in their homeland.

The Youth Research Centre's *Young People, Wellbeing and Communication Technologies* report, commissioned by VicHealth, identifies 'digital storytelling' as an overlooked way of using multimedia technology to include, engage and strengthen young people.

Combining digital and face to face interaction, it uses increasingly affordable technology, such as digital video cameras, to produce micro budget films that create spaces for new voices. In this sense, young people have the chance to harness the power of digital technology for their own political, social and creative agendas.

Videogames aren't evil. They're fun, creative and part of the cultural landscape of our times. They create artistic and employment opportunities and provide new avenues for storytelling and creative expression.

In 2007, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image showcased a selection of winners and nominees from the Sundance festival for independent games, a refreshing taste of DIY gaming culture working innovatively with conventional genres and formats.

Sometimes videogames are even a safer way to exercise — you don't need to head out on the streets after dark to get fit with a Nintendo Wii.

Interactivity, and the combination of media formats like film, animation, sound and music, have always been videogames' strength. This mode of interaction and communication can be applied in non-commercial and socially constructive ways for marginalised, disadvantaged and other 'fringe' communities, such as engaging with youth in migrant and refugee communities where communication that is visual, oral and aural is preferred.

When Christmas rolls around, however, and we are tempted to splurge on a sleek and shiny videogame console, our money might be better spent elsewhere. For the cost of a Playstation 3 we could buy a cheap digital camera, pay for broadband access and then shoot and upload our own stories instead of living through the costly pop and fizz of commercial gaming products.

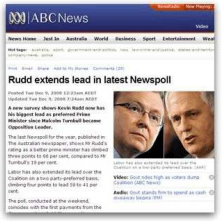
That way the worlds we create and inhabit in virtual spaces could be intimately bound with the world we live in on a day-to-day basis, and multimedia technology can continue to address real social issues and problems, not just the entertainment needs of a select few.

And if the gaming bug does bite, there are plenty of free games available online. Not to mention *Galaga* on the arcade machines at the local pub — for about a dollar a session. That's what I call a cost effective digital fix.

Rudd's random acts of political kindness

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



As Prime Minister Kevin Rudd ends 2008 and his first year on a high, it seems he's every bit the trickster his predecessor John Howard was. We're heading into one of the worst recessions in living memory, yet the government leapt to a six month high in last week's Newspoll. Rudd's rating as preferred prime minister has also risen three points to 66 per cent.

It's no coincidence that the polls were taken as many Australians received $1000 cash bonuses in their bank accounts from the Federal Government's $8 billion economic stimulus package. This is part of a succession of quick fix solutions to problems of great magnitude, attempted by both the Howard and Rudd governments.

The $8 billion was designed to protect jobs and businesses, by stimulating spending. It was also intended to make up for the inadequacy of entitlements and pensions paid to the needy. It's more likely an expensive exercise in wishful thinking that won't make up for the lack of social welfare policy foresight.

Catholic Social Services Australia (CSSA) Executive Director Frank Quinlan said last week that the current system is 'full of anomalies born of random payments and bonuses that arise out of political whim and historic accidents rather than good social policy'.

He was launching a CSSA position paper that calls for the establishment of an independent Entitlements Commission that would set and review pensions and other income support payments on an annual basis.

The paper shows that Indigenous Australians, unemployed people, sole parents, people with disabilities, and older Australians who rent privately, are regularly unable to pay for items like utility bills and prescription medicines.

Random lump sum payments will do little to help those without an adequate regular income to meet recurring living expenses such as rent, food and utilities. The government would correctly say that they were not meant for this purpose. However the allocation of such funds should be overseen by a body that is not subject to sudden or short-term political machinations.

The CSSA paper says that even though governments have acknowledged that income support payments should be sufficient to support an adequate standard of living, there is no defined standard of adequacy.

If the payments regime is not structured to address such a standard, it will be

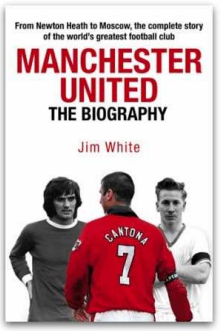
subject to short-term and other more easily perceived and measured needs, and political opportunism.

Marketing the Manchester myth

BOOKS

James Massola

White, Jim: *Manchester United: The Biography*. Little, Brown, 2008. ISBN: 9781847440884



Football books are funny things — you never know what you are going to get.

At one end of the spectrum you have photo-montage hagiographies such as *David Beckham: My World*. These are best left to style-conscious, Gucci-tracksuit-wearing chavs with an over-developed interest in hair products and body art.

Sport and clichÃ©s seemingly go hand in hand, much to the reader's detriment. But for every half-dozen *My Worlds*(available in a bargain bin near you), there are football books that stand out for the quality of the book, and the perspicasity of the subject(s). *Ajax, Barcelona, Cruyff* by Frits Barend and Henk Van Dorp, and Jimmy Burns' *Barca: A People's Passion* are standouts in the genre.

Jim White's imaginatively titled *Manchester United: The Biography* is not. This history of 'the most popular club in the world' is workmanlike, rather than inspired.

White ably traces the history of his subject, but at no time does he ascend to the heights achieved by Burns. There is common ground here, too: Manchester, the subject of Engels' famed study of the working class in England; and Barcelona, the home of Spain's Anarchists.

But whereas Burns' book is rich with sociopolitical context — Barcelona the club petitioned the Castillian government for Catalonia's independence in the 1930s — White's book takes a stab at something similar, and falls short.

There is a sense of the club's origins in the proletariat, but this thread drifts away as the book progresses — perhaps as that 'class' supporter has also done, as English football has been corporatised and fans' wallets increasingly cannibalised.

The author seems to have cribbed a list of important events from the plethora of other books about the club, and having done so, assiduously ticks the boxes — and exercises little imagination or flare in the process.

And when White does get creative, it doesn't work. Chapters are topped with over-written vignettes from recent United matches, the relevance of which to the ensuing chapter is often unclear. These would-be Nick Hornby moments, in which White makes clear his personal connection to the club, are awkward rather than endearing. Whereas Hornby's masterful*Fever Pitch*takes the reader on a journey in

which it's impossible not to, at the very least, barrack for Hornby barracking for Arsenal, White's introduction rings hollow.

It's not all bad, though. The chapters on the mythologising of the famed 'Busby Babes', the promising young team that perished in the Munich air disaster in 1958, are excellent. White separates fact from fiction — or, more accurately, from the marketing hype that came later. The portrait of a team ripped apart is moving and well presented. His interpretation, in subsequent chapters, of the impact of '58 on the club's brand, and the manner in which some argue it has been exploited, is spot on.

Similarly, the chapters on Busby's later, equally storied team — the European cup-winning team that contained the 'holy trilogy' of Bobby Charlton, Dennis Law and George Best — is excellent, as are the chapters on the rise and rise of (now former) chairman Martin Edwards, who made the club the global brand it is today.

Again, though, White drops the ball when it comes to the club's most successful manager, and arguably most important figure, Alex Ferguson. White is deferential to the point of blandness when it comes to analysing the Scotsman. Yes, we know he has won rather a lot of trophies, and yes, we know he has a bit of a temper — so what?

This feels like a book that was written in a hurry, or at the very least, edited in a hurry. A case in point: the author seems obsessed with the size of Busby Babe Duncan Edwards' thighs. White's 'mentionitis' is so pronounced I checked the index in the back of the book to see if thighs were accorded their own entry (they aren't).

This is a light-and-breezy, easy-to-read book. It kept me turning the pages, but I couldn't recommend it to anyone but new Manchester United fans, who will enjoy the book and learn a lot.

Given that there are approximately 200 million people in that category, the book will doubtless be a big success — a fact that will not have escaped the publisher's mind.

Why the Melbourne Model is failing students

EDUCATION

Ben Coleridge

Anyone walking under the arch of the gateway John Medley Building at the University of Melbourne is met by a large blue sign with white letters exhorting the reader to 'Dream large'. This slogan for the new 'Melbourne Model' evokes broad horizons, new pursuits, diverse opportunities and a dynamic university experience — everything, one imagines, that a university should offer.

But tertiary education in Australia has of late been plagued by a raft of difficulties, most of which are well known and many of which stem from poor funding. The University of Melbourne's well publicised adventure seems to encapsulate some of those difficulties.

The Melbourne Model emerged in the context of a sector under pressure and is an attempt to reposition the University of Melbourne according to an American pattern which emphasises life experience and high quality postgraduate education.

Its vision is attractive: a tertiary model where students gain a wide ranging undergraduate education to be followed by more specialised postgraduate studies. Indeed the Melbourne Model envisages the ultimate transformation of the whole Australian tertiary sector.

However, that exhortation to 'dream large' has in practice come to convey irony, to both staff and students. While the Melbourne Model rhetorically espouses flexibility, so far it has often been experienced as inflexible. Some students have begun to think of it as a strategy to disguise retrenchment and diminution.

Consider, for example, one particular facet of the Melbourne Model degree and how it has operated. Each undergraduate student must take one 'breadth' subject — a subject outside their chosen faculty — every semester. This element of the degree is designed to broaden academic horizons.

It would be no bad thing to encourage students to broaden their educational frame of reference. But stroll around the Parkville campus and ask a few questions, and a common theme emerges: among first year students there is a sense of being academically channelled, constrained to take subjects that do not engage them and that in reality impede.

Conversations among my fellow students often revolve around the trials of timetable clashes, poor academic advice and limited options. One friend described feeling as if they'd been thrust into a corner with no room to move.

Students' negative experience of breadth requirements and the new model in general stem chiefly from a lack of subject options and limited staffing. In the context of the Faculty of Arts the changes have been dramatic. The once proud

Philosophy department has been whittled away, Renaissance studies are not on offer in 2009 and the Political Science and English departments are offering a woefully limited array of options.

The widespread subject cuts and continuing reductions in staff numbers have eaten away at students' plans and in effect have rendered the new breadth component impotent. With so few subjects to choose from, horizons seem to be shrinking rather than expanding. It becomes increasingly difficult to 'dream large'.

What is more, talented teachers seem to be jumping ship. Three of my subject tutors stood out as interesting, intelligent and energetic young people. They were in the midst of completing PhDs or further research in different fields, but they were all leaving to take up research or other positions in Japan, the US and India. One told me that he would work here if he could, but there were too few university research positions in Australia.

His was the same complaint as my friend's: boxed into a corner with limited options other than to leave.

All this contributes to an atmosphere of doubt among students on campus. It is difficult to accept the line that our degrees are being enhanced when, according to our experience, they are being steadily eroded.

Great universities buzz with dynamism and exploration; undergraduates are stimulated, pushed to think independently and critically, or so I have always imagined. I cannot say that my first year at the University of Melbourne has been characterised by dynamism. Instead, things seem to be standing still.

The question is begged: in the cause of delivering a 'broad education', will the University of Melbourne end up specialising in nothing more than mediocre undergraduate degrees?

The Melbourne Model is here to stay and it has to work for the sake of reform of the whole tertiary sector in Australia. But all Australian universities must learn from this experiment that depletion is a road to nowhere.

The Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Glyn Davis, himself has admitted publicly that there comes a point at which funding is so thin that 'the quality of what you can offer students ... begins to suffer'. As students, we have had first hand experience of this frightening trend.

If the Federal government is squeamish about keeping Australian full-fee university places (a key source of funding for universities), then it needs to allocate extra funding to the tertiary sector itself. If it does not, subjects (and staff) will be axed, the paint will peel off lecture room walls, rankings will drop and talent will flee.

No one wants that to happen. We want our universities to be dynamic hubs of research, study and student activity. If there was ever a time for a coordinated

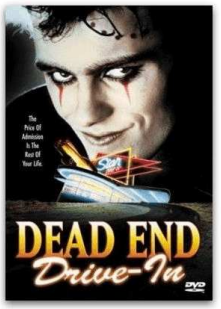
and well funded education revolution, it is now.

Crabs, cars and Peter Carey

DVD

Tim Kroenert

***Dead End Drive-in* (1986): 88 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Brian Trenchard-Smith. Starring: Ned Manning, Natalie McCurry, Ollie Hall**



Of the so-called Ozploitation films of the 1970s and 1980s — those taboo-busting, low-budget genre flicks that crowded drive-ins and flipped the bird to Australian cinema's venerable New Age — few would feature 'social commentary' as a selling point. But then, few have the distinction of being based on a Peter Carey short story.

Indeed, for most of its running time the 1986 film *Dead End Drive-in* transposes with almost slavish literality the events of Carey's early short story 'Crabs'.

The story, in both Carey's text and the film, takes place in a post-apocalyptic near-future, and concerns the plight of protagonist Crabs (in the film, Jimmy 'Crabs' Rossini, played by Manning), who becomes stranded at a movie drive-in after the wheels are stolen from his vehicle. Such thefts are common — committed, if not by prowling, reprobate gangsters known as Karboys, then by corrupt cops looking to augment their salaries.

A community of castaways has sprung up on the lot — people resigned to the fact that they are not allowed to leave on foot, and cannot drive out in their stripped vehicles. Crabs and his girlfriend Carmen (McCurry) are the latest members of the community. But while Carmen is happy to adapt to their new lifestyle, Crabs isn't willing to just settle in. He hopes that he might one day be able to obtain new wheels, and drive to freedom.

Often, short stories make for strong film adaptations, as there is not an abundance of plot to be negotiated. By the same token, the best film adaptations adopt as their starting point the essence of the source material, to which the filmmaker applies their own distinctive vision.

Trenchard-Smith certainly brought his own vision to the project. The aesthetic is a kind of *Mad Max*-lite; all hotted-up vehicles, harsh industrial landscapes, B-grade acting and over-stylised punk fashion. But this film is an example of how literality of translation can result in the sacrifice of the story's essence. The film is fun on its own terms, but much of the nuance and irony that lend 'Crabs' its magic are simply lost.

'Crabs' can be read as an allegory for the nature communities; how they adapt and then become accustomed to their environment, to the point of institutionalisation. The drive-in is an oppressive location, bounded by high,

electrified fences. And yet the castaways, essentially prisoners, come to jealously own their prison, resenting, for example, the arrival of a truckload of Asian migrants, whom they regard with hostility and fear.

In *Dead End Drive-in*, the need to substitute pictures for words proves problematic. For example, consider this: Crabs' brother Frank is a tow-truck driver — a revered and well-paid profession at a time when car collisions occur frequently. There is fierce competition to be the first to reach the scene of an accident, and if the accident was severe enough the tow-truck driver, as one of the first people on the scene, will get his face on the news.

In Carey's story, this is communicated in a single sentence: Crabs, envious of his brother's trade, imagines 'himself driving at 80 mph with the lights flashing, arriving at the scene first, getting the job, being interviewed by the guy from 3UZ's Night Watch'. A lot is left to be read between the lines.

There's no reading between the lines in the film. We witness Frank, with Crabs along for the ride, burning rubber in his monstrous tow truck. We see him screech to a halt at the scene, and engage in a shouting match with another driver and a waiting police officer about who arrived first and therefore has claim on the wreckages. All this while the collision's bloodied victims dangle from their mangled vehicles.

Finally, after the ambulance and news crew arrive (simultaneously), Crabs and Frank, armed with oversized spanners, find themselves fending off a gang of Karboys who've arrived to try to pick the car carcasses clean.

Such seedy spectacle is typical of *Dead End Drive-in*: it's darkly comic, vaguely satirical, glib, and over the top.

The film's greatest diversion from the story also marks its most notable thematic difference. Carey's climax, an exercise in magic realism, underscores the story's allegorical nature: Crabs, having had the epiphany that the only way to escape the drive-in is 'to be a motor car or vehicle in good health', decides to become a tow truck.

By the power of his will, he transforms, and drives to freedom, only to find the outside world is dark and deserted. Despondent, he returns to the drive-in, but discovers that he is locked out. The tension, then, is between the desire for freedom, and the need to belong — in Carey's story, a difficult tension to resolve.

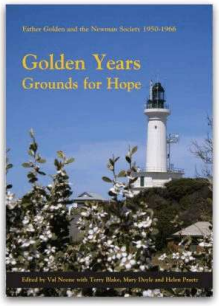
Besides the practical difficulties of reproducing this ending on film with a low budget, it simply doesn't fit with Trenchard-Smith's visual or thematic aesthetic. Instead, in *Dead End Drive-in* we get a bona fide action finale; a car chase, blazing weapons, and explosions, as Crabs blasts his way to freedom.

It's an unadulterated celebration of rebellion — of breaking loose of the conformities of society.

How to talk to students

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton



One of the features of post-war Catholicism in the English speaking world was the growth of student chaplaincies. It reflected the expansion of universities. In his early comic novels the English writer, David Lodge has traced the path of young Catholics through the chaplaincies into the later years.

A recent book on the Newman Society at the University of Melbourne, *Golden Years*tells the Australian version of the story. It focuses on the charismatically uncharismatic Jesuit chaplain, Jeremiah Golden, and allows over 70 former members of the Society to reflect on what engagement in the Catholic group meant to them at that time and in later years.

These later years saw the second Vatican Council, the aftermath of the Labor Party split and the Vietnam War, the Papal condemnation of contraception, and the dissolution of the Catholic subculture that nourished the Newman Society.

The rich detail of accounts like this, coming in the aftermath of World Youth Day, raises large questions about how churches might be involved with students and what students and the churches themselves might hope to gain from the exchange.

The Newman Society experience certainly does not encourage the churches to hope that students involved in church programs will carry their commitment smoothly into their adult years. Those who describe their participation in the Newman Society reckon that few of their contemporaries have persisted in any active participation in the Catholic Church.

Although the texture of what it means to be an Australian Catholic has changed drastically over 60 years, the withdrawal of educated Catholics from a strong allegiance remains striking. This would be true, too, of other groups like the Student Christian Movement.

A more elusive but perhaps also more significant thread that runs through this earlier experience is the importance of good conversation. Conversation encourages churches and students to focus on what matters. Students can connect with one another, explore the practices and the content of their faith, and ask what matters to them in the world they are entering.

They can also help their older conversation partners find a language and space to speak of these things. That presupposes, of course, that the conversation is well-informed.

The shape of conversation depends on circumstances. Fifty years ago

conversation among Catholic students took place in a favourable environment. The students came out a Catholic sub-culture in which they had predominantly associated with other Catholics. A sizeable number would naturally seek to be connected with other students of a similar background, and be open to exploring the meaning of inherited faith and practices in their adult world.

It was unexceptionable, too, for this conversation to be associated with a deeper involvement in traditional religious practices like weekly Mass and daily Rosary in the university.

The quality of conversation was also shaped by circumstance. The politicisation of Catholic life as a result of the Labor Party split affected student conversation, too. It became tempting to judge the value of conversation by the attitudes and associations of the participants.

Much has changed now. Conversation among young Christians generally cannot assume that the participants have a strong sense of the structure of what may have been taught and practised in church and school. Nor will Catholic groups be a natural form of association for many. Any form of continuing conversation will be affected by the fact that most students work part-time. They will find it harder to find space for demanding reading.

It may be surprising to note how many young Catholic adults are attracted to devotional practices. But the context is very different from 50 years ago. These practices do not link conversation with something familiar. They explore something new and striking. But for many it provides an experiential context for conversation. For many others, the context is provided by their commitments to the poor and marginalised.

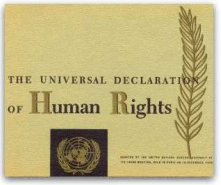
An informed conversation that engages young people within churches is now more difficult to encourage. It also remains precarious because from within the churches there is much pressure to politicise it. The value of the conversation is often seen to lie less in the search for truth than in entering and articulating defined positions. Participants will be expected to associate themselves with parties in the church that are recognised as truth-bearing.

Past experience suggests that if the Spirit is in conversation, the paths which it inclines people to take are uncontrollable. So are the benefits the conversation gives churches and young adults.

Maintaining the UN's moral gold standard

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan



Today we mark the 60th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Reflecting on the anniversary earlier this year, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney observed:

'Since it was framed, the Declaration has succeeded in creating an international moral consensus. It is always there as a means of highlighting abuse if not always as a remedy: it exists instead in the moral imagination as an equivalent of the gold standard in the monetary system.

'The articulation of its tenets has made them into world currency of a negotiable sort. Even if its Articles are ignored or flouted — in many cases by governments who have signed up to them — it provides a worldwide amplification system for the "still, small voice".'

Nowadays it is fashionable to postulate that the Declaration was a peculiarly western, individualistic conception, emphasising rights rather than responsibilities. It was not. Though Eleanor Roosevelt and Australia's H. V. Evatt oversaw the declaration's passage, Frenchman RenÃ© Cassin, Chilean Hernan Santa Cruz, Christian Lebanese Adam Malik and Chinese Confucian Peng-chun Chang also contributed to this truly international undertaking.

Early in the drafting process, they consulted religious and philosophical greats such as Teilhard de Chardin and Mahatma Gandhi. Even Aldous Huxley made a contribution. It was the Jesuit palaeontologist Teilhard who counselled that the drafters should focus on 'man in society' rather than man as an individual.

The drafters knew any catalogue of rights would need to include words of limitation. Article 29 of the Declaration speaks not just of rights and freedoms, but also of duties, morality, public order and the general welfare:

In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

So from the outset, the declaration envisaged that individual rights could be limited not just by the individual rights of others, but for the preservation of public order and for the general welfare of persons in a democratic society, and also for morality — presumably to maintain, support, enhance or develop morality in a democratic society. Sixty years later, these limitations are often overlooked.

Two years after the declaration was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly,

the Council of Europe decided that 'one of the methods by which that aim is to be pursued is the maintenance and further realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms'.

The European Convention for the Protection of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms was open for ratification. Since then many countries have enacted their own bills of rights in constitutional or statutory form. Australia is now one of the few pluralist democracies without its own home grown bill of rights.

On Monday, human rights lawyers gathered in London to mark the 10th anniversary of the UK Human Rights Act. Professor Dominic McGoldrick, a self-confessed 'fan of the Act', claimed that it has 'changed the way we think', allowing judges and parliament to play a role in arriving at a 'fair punt between a particular individual and a particular community'.

Professor Conor Gearty thinks the Act has allowed judges to reassert their power in their areas of special competence, pulling Parliament into line when it gets too populist in trampling the rights of unpopular minorities like asylum seekers and prisoners.

Meanwhile, across town, Gordon Brown's Justice Secretary Jack Straw, who had introduced the UK legislation for Tony Blair in 1998 was sounding warning notes that the law does not get the balance right:

'I fully understand that (people) have concerns about the Human Rights Act. There is a sense that it's a villains' charter or that it stops terrorists being deported or criminals being properly given publicity. I am greatly frustrated by this, not by the concerns, but by some very few judgements that have thrown up these problems.'

The Tory Leader David Cameron took the opportunity to weigh in, calling for 'a homegrown British Bill of rights' rather than the Human Rights Act which faithfully replicates provisions from the European Convention on Human Rights. Lawyers like McGoldrick concede that the UK law is presently very unpopular 'with the man in the street' and with the tabloid press, but he insists:

'It may well be that, in practice, the people who have had most need of its protection are rather out of the ordinary; but that does not alter the fact that it is there to protect us all as we go about our everyday lives.'

Sixty years on from the UN General Assembly's proclamation of the Declaration, democracies such as Australia and the UK are still seeking the best means for providing a fair punt between the individual and society, and for determining the law and policy on big ethical questions about which there is no community consensus.

Victoria and the ACT now have statutory bills of rights. Other Australian jurisdictions do not. As the UK does some fine tuning of its ten-year-old law, the time is ripe for Australians to conduct a national conversation about how best to

provide the fair punt for all, making the State attentive to the still, small voice of conscience, especially when the unpopular villain is being demonised in the public square.

Talking turkey for a clichÃ©-free year

NON-FICTION

Tom Clark

Lately, friends and clients have been asking me what we can do about the growth of clichÃ© and platitude in everyday language — at home, at work, and in the media.

I want to suggest an approach that has generated some very satisfied customer responses from organisations I have visited. Feedback from these Fortune 500 firms frequently shows people are fascinated to learn the fundamentals of formula-free phraseology.

The '12 Evasions' program is as simple as reading a calendar. For each month of the year, nominate a hackneyed phrase, then do everything you can to avoid speaking that phrase — substitute a synonym, discuss a different angle on the issue at hand, talk about a different topic, make turkey noises, or even just go silent.

Once that month is over, you can use the phrase as often as you like, for the rest of your life, because you will be back in control of that phrase. And that's the aim: we have to control our language; not let our language control us.

This program fits particularly well with a 'new year's resolution' format. That means it is best introduced at your end-of-year strategic planning retreat.

Feel free to use the following list of phrases I have developed for 2009 — although naturally I expect payment of a certain consideration for the intellectual property.

January — 'perfect storm'

This was voted the most overused vacuous phrase in the USA for 2007, so clearly there is a need to rein it in. It's not as popular in Australia yet, so it makes a manageable starting phrase for your team's campaign.

February — 'journey'

At a wedding I went to recently, the celebrant was moved to explain that the couple's premarital travels together had been 'like a journey'. Wow! This is a madly, badly overused term.

March — 'singing from the same songsheet'

Contacts in the public service have been shocked by this clichÃ©'s meteoric rise in usage. Its metaphoric resonances, however dimly remembered, remind us that what we say should aspire to beauty.

April — 'going forwards'

I know a lot of us will find this phrase a hard one to kick, but by now we have

had three months of preparation. It's time to assert our ownership of all those sayings we just don't think about when we say them.

May — 'in terms of'

This is a truly hard-wired product of the linguistic autopilot. If we can remember our commitment to ourselves and our team-mates before we say it, we are most of the way towards achieving the aims of this program.

June — any form of the word 'enhance'

Don Watson brought this killer platitude to our attention back when the Y2K bug was getting discredited, but it remains strong in Australia. The challenge to public and corporate sectors alike is to discuss your organisation's new budget measures without it. That is why we tackle it in June.

July — 'a red hot go'

NSW premier and linguistics expert Nathan Rees has uttered this phrase one too many times. Now it's time to for us all to spend some time without it. A month should suffice. Then, if we say it again in August, or during the footy finals, we know it will be because we mean it.

August — any form of the word 'impact'

Grammar has really lost out in our surge to cutting-edge innovate this abstract noun! Uses as a transitive verb, as lead metaphor in a checklist, and as reference-lite time-filla have proliferated rapidly. Try 'affect' (verb), 'effect' (noun), and 'thingwaybob' (blank noise) as alternatives for a month.

September — 'innovate,' 'innovation,' and/or 'innovative'

Can an organisation do anything new without these polysyllabic platitudes? September will provide a great opportunity to find out.

October — 'hospital pass'

Traditionally only an issue in rugby country, this metaphor has been steadily spreading into Australian football jurisdictions for several years now. The challenge with giving this one up is that we might have to describe what we actually mean.

November — 'silos'

Good for cereal crops, a pragmatic approach to workmates who hate each other, but somehow this term has come automatically to mean a bad state of affairs.

December — 'at the end of the day'

Thematically appropriate for a month of 'closure'. Mark McCrindle tells us that Australians found this the most irritating clichÃ© in 2008. Expect to be so good at the 12 Evasions Program by now that you'll have no trouble batting away one of the most inane prefabrications in phraseological history. For just that one month,

of course.

Terrorism trial's legacy of fairness

HUMAN RIGHTS

James Montgomery

In his landmark ruling in the course of what was known in Victoria as the terrorism trial (Ruling 20 of R v Benbrika [2008] VSC 80), the trial judge Justice Bongiorno found that the 12 accused were being subject to an unfair trial because of the whole of the circumstances in which they were being incarcerated and transported.

Justice Bongiorno then proceeded to outline the minimum conditions which would be necessary to remove the unfairness and allow the trial to continue. These included a change of prison from Barwon Prison to the Melbourne Assessment Prison, removal of shackles, restrictions on strip searching, treatment as normal remand prisoners and the provision of 10 out-of-cell hours on non court days.

Justice Bongiorno described the conditions edured prior to his ruling, in addition to the daily trip from Barwon in shackles, as oppressive, involving incarceration in the most austere conditions in the Victorian prison system.

Barwon prison was built as a high security facility for sentenced prisoners and not for prisoners on remand. The transporting of the accused every day to court from Barwon involved strip searches, shackling, and up to an hour in the van prior to movement.

The day began at 6.00am. They would arrive at court between 8.50am and 9.30am, and arrive back at Barwon between 6.00pm and 7.00pm, with lights out at 9.00pm. In between the accused were expected to participate in one of the most complex criminal trials ever conducted.

Tellingly, Justice Bongiorno found that 'neither Corrections Victoria nor the Crown has ever placed any evidence before this court in any form to justify either the accuseds' classification or their treatment which is, in terms of this trial, intolerable'.

Psychiatric and psychological evidence was placed before the court which concluded that the accuseds' capacity to conduct their defence and concentrate on daily court proceedings was diminished by their prison conditions.

These conditions, in the words of Dr Douglas Bell, a forensic psychiatrist employed by Forensicare (the government provider of psychiatric services), 'would be likely to impact to a significant extent on the cognitive mental functions that would be required to attend to the trial process'.

In other words an accused cannot get a fair trial if his conditions of imprisonment affect his capacity to concentrate in court, understand the evidence

and give instructions to his lawyers.

This is the first time a trial judge has challenged the executive to alter the conditions of an accused during a trial. While Justice Bongiorno recognised that it was not for the court to order any specific alterations to the terms of the accuseds' detention, he made it clear that if the trial was to proceed, his minimum alterations should be met, or the trial would be stayed and bail hearings listed.

The Accused were moved to MAP, the minimum conditions were met and the trial proceeded without many of the problems that had bedeviled it to that point because of the accuseds' health. Four of the accused were acquitted by the jury and a fifth was granted bail when the jury proved unable to reach a verdict.

Those acquitted have no legal recourse for the period and conditions of incarceration. Three years in the conditions as described by Justice Justice Bongiorno and acquitted — such is the price to be paid to maintain your innocence, plead not guilty and run a trial.

Were the accused to be punished prior to the outcome of the trial and irrespective of the jury verdict? To an objective observer it might seem that there was a presumption of guilt upon arrest for terrorism offences and punishment to commence immediately.

Fortunately in this case the independence of the judiciary prevailed, Ruling 20 was made and the fairness of the trial process in this respect was upheld.

This ruling has added another category to what constitutes an unfair trial. The accused are entitled to prison conditions that are humane and acknowledge the foundation stone of the criminal justice system — the presumption of innocence. In dealing with the conditions of remand prisoners and how these conditions affect the running of a criminal trial, Justice Justice Bongiorno has asserted the power of the court over the executive.

In this context it is unprecedented; in combination with the Victorian Charter of Human Rights, the conditions in which remand prisoners are held can be challenged and monitored by the courts. A trial cannot be fair if the accused are medically unfit to follow the proceedings because of their conditions of imprisonment.

Hopefully the prison authorities have taken note and this point will not have to be litigated again.

Dementia's wings

POETRY

Kathryn Hamman

Is

Time an Aunt
in the Wodehouse sense?
Was Spenser, ignorant of his Sun's
inner life, wrong to process Mutability
so she could be found to be less;
an unable alchemist?
Does, in truth, this Titaness toss a ball
that endlessly unravels? We race — as if
we were able to catch a chameleon thread.
For she — in dilation or contraction — is
most surely the very flesh of Time. She —
that infinite variety of garment; the rhetoric
of colour speaking the insubstantiality of sky.
She is the pungency as fruit blasts
releasing life.
Or rather, do I find myself
forcing Time to be visible as
a kind of ever-ageing child?
one I discipline upon
the straight and narrow:
a natural for the pressing
forward — that necessary
onward ho?
And yet, if death be the final
act of birth, is Time like
every good mother

relieved
at the last to let
this kicking child
go?

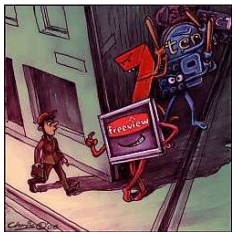
Weeping in the place of my father

You are the city that recognised
no temple but yourself in which
to worship
those precious sparkling walls of intellect
Dementia has snuggled you under
her wings smothering all but
the distrust
you thought was yours to hold or release
Shall I go down and trouble
you with my touch? you as yet able
to bar
the gates — as you always have from yourself
If I were to offer words — they would
twine coil twist and strike
me
who seduces with serpent embrace
Any hinted tears are those fabled
ones belonging to the crocodile
the beast
who will ever misplace its name
Away — as night demands
the search for streets I have savaged
from sight
my wingless weeping would gather you in.

Freeview shackles digital TV

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



The Federal Government last week passed legislation for a timetable to switch off the old analogue TV transmitters that are being replaced by digital technology.

Digital TV was introduced back in 2001, but takeup has been slow because the benefits have not been obvious to most consumers, and some need help with the technology. Recently the free to air TV networks launched Freeview , which is a marketing campaign that aims to help consumers make the switch to digital TV.

On the face of it, there's nothing wrong with Freeview, which appears as simply an information campaign. But it is funded by the industry, and works by steering consumers towards buying 'approved' TV receivers and set-top boxes, which carry the Freeview badge. Manufacturers conform to a set of specifications to earn approval.

All digital receivers receive all channels, but to access enhanced features such as full electronic program guide (EPG), users will require Freeview.

Freeview chair Kim Dalton — who is also the ABC's Director of Television — calls them 'appropriate technical standards'. This implies that the approval is about protecting the consumer from poor quality equipment and unscrupulous manufacturers.

The reality is that it is just as much about limiting what the technology can do, in order to protect the revenues of the commercial TV networks.

The specifications have not been made public. But industry insiders are saying they include a prohibition on the 30-second skip function that is now common with the recording and time-delay features of digital TV products currently on the market.

This prohibition will make it more difficult for consumers to avoid watching advertisements. In other words, it looks after the interests of the commercial TV networks, against those of the consumer.

Further evidence of the restrictive rather than enabling nature of Freeview comes with confirmation that full EPG information will be made available only to Freeview-approved devices.

Government protection of the big business interests of the commercial TV networks, against those of smaller operations and the public, has long been a part of Australia's media landscape. Kerry Packer is no longer with us, but the networks' lobbying power continues to hold sway.

Last week, the Greens spoke out for the small but vital community television sector, which is being left out of the digital TV equation (currently it uses analogue channel 31 in most capital cities).

Away from Canberra, there is clear evidence that the big networks are determined to bully and eliminate small operators, with the long-running court battle between the Nine Network and the independent small business operation IceTV , which had found a market in adding value to the networks' electronic program listings.

There are many things that Federal Communications Minister Stephen Conroy could do to show that he is not intimidated by the commercial TV networks. Scrutinising the Freeview approval specifications to ensure they are in the public interest would be a good start.

Australian republicans' Ireland envy

POLITICS

Frank O'Shea

When people as oddly matched as Bill Hayden and Barry Humphries suggested some years ago that the push for an Australian Republic was an Irish plot, they were probably guilty of slander on the Irish people.

However, it is a benign slander and one which most Irish would regard with a measure of contentment. The fact that it was not true would be only a minor irritation to our general satisfaction at causing disruption to the even tenor of comfortable colonialism.

After all, when Ireland declared itself a republic 60 years ago this month, it did so without the awkwardness of a referendum or even much of the grandstanding which such a popular measure might have afforded the politicians of the day.

Not only that, but the decision to declare a republic was first announced, not in Parliament, not even in Ireland, but at a press conference in Canada by the travelling Taoiseach (prime minister) of the day, John A Costello.

At the time, Ireland was still a reluctant and barely practising member of the Commonwealth, which explains why any person born in Ireland before 1949, including this writer, is entitled to carry a British passport.

King George VI was officially Irish Head of State, a situation prudently hidden from most of the world and one which caused only occasional discomfiture.

For example, when Ireland appointed an ambassador to the Vatican, the letter of appointment was written in flowery Irish by Taoiseach Eamon De Valera (pictured) and then sent to the king for his signature. Only after His Majesty had removed a careless reference to his inherited title as Defender of the Faith was the letter signed and the ambassador able to take up his position as Irish representative in Rome.

Similarly, ambassadors from overseas countries presented their credentials, not to the Irish President, but to the King.

You might wonder how Ireland could have a president if it was still part of the Commonwealth. It had something to do with Dev placing the poor governor-general of the day in a small semi-detached in a Dublin housing estate and then ignoring him, but that's another story.

The Irish president at the time was Sean T. O'Kelly, an inoffensive and reputedly parsimonious veteran of the War of Independence, with a fondness for good whiskey and good company, preferably female. He signed the Republic of Ireland Act in December 1948, but its formal enactment was held over until a

more significant day in April the year following: Easter Monday, the anniversary of the Easter Rising.

De Valera and his Fianna Fail colleagues absented themselves from the celebrations, except for the Solemn High Mass at the Pro Cathedral. Going off in a political huff was all well and good, but one has to have an eye to eternal priorities.

Meanwhile in London, the Labour Government of Clement Attlee bowed to Unionist pressure to introduce the Ireland Act, the ultimate veto on any change in the status of Northern Ireland and an unpardonable act of betrayal of a minority group of citizens.

'It is hereby affirmed ... that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part thereof cease to be part of ... the United Kingdom without the consent of the Parliament of Northern Ireland.' Did ever an act of parliament store up such misery for its subjects or such future problems for its originators?

Unlike India, which became a republic in 1949, Ireland decided to sever all links with the Commonwealth. There were moves in some quarters to punish what was perceived — indeed, rightly — as an act of ingratitude by taking it to its logical conclusion and declaring Ireland a 'foreign country' and any Irish people living in Britain 'aliens'.

The efforts of Australia's Deputy Prime Minister H V Evatt and the New Zealand Prime Minister Peter Fraser were crucial in hosing down these moves and obtaining for Ireland the status of most-favoured trading nation and retaining for its citizens the preferential treatment which they had long enjoyed.

And now as our leaders exercise their brains to think of a decent excuse to raise the question of a republic, and a suitable referendum likely to win national approval, they must occasionally cast an envious glance at the Irish experience, in which a little old-fashioned pedantry obviated the need for any referendum at all.