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Politics stymie bushfire response

POLITICS

Paul Collins


Council ignored warning over trees

Historically, playing the blame game is one of the most predictable responses of all to Australian bushfires. It happens after every major event. Usually a government agency of some sort or a specific group of people is blamed for either what it did or didn't do.

Clearly the psychology of blame is operative here. Much of the attack is an expression of the usual need to find scapegoats and deal with a sense of loss. In the Black Friday fires of 1939 the Forestry Commission and the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works were accused of not being proactive in clearing forest litter and scrub. Nowadays 'extreme Greens' or 'city-based academics' of some sort are more likely to be blamed.

After the most extensive and long-lasting series of fires in the European history of Australia in 2002—2003, there were many attacks on those considered responsible for not carrying out preventative or hazard reduction burning. This became a touchstone that focused a range of other issues simmering away in rural communities.

How governments respond to this is important. In 2003 the governments of Victoria and the ACT initially offered help, but once their bureaucrats got hold of the process people had to go through complex procedures in order to get minimal assistance. The governments failed to deal with the emotional response of people who had lost everything.

In New South Wales the then Premier, Bob Carr, an old hand with a lot of experience, took a different approach. Aid was promised and delivered without a great deal of red tape; Carr made sure the Premier's Department dealt with everything. This prevented anal-retentive public servants from erecting an obstacle course for victims. I know, because I received some aid from NSW after a bush block and old house I owned were reduced to rubble.

Carr also funded a project that allowed people to tell stories of their experiences of the fires. This acknowledged publicly that people had been through terrible times. The project was launched at a social meeting at the National Parks headquarters in Jindabyne. It brought together locals and National Parks staff, who are often in conflict over land management policies. This built relationships rather than dividing people.

A House of Representatives Select Committee, chaired by the then federal member for Eden-Monaro, Garry Nairn, is a good example of what not to do. It was set up, in the words of the minority Labor report:

'... in a highly charged political atmosphere ... where the media is seeking the sensational story, the community is demanding answers and the politicians are seeking to apportion blame. These are hardly conducive circumstances for the rational evaluation of evidence, the setting aside of long-held prejudices and the development of practical recommendations.'

In retrospect, the Nairn Committee reinforced the blame game and, in the words of one submission, pitted 'environmentalists and academics, supported by inner-city residents not threatened by bushfires [who] advocate a hands-off approach to land-management, where 'natural' events like bushfires are allowed to run free', against 'rural people, fire fighters, foresters and land managers who are responsible for values threatened by bushfires'.

The latter want 'an interventionist approach, where steps are taken to minimise risks before fires start'; that is, to carry out preventative burning.

It is clear that the same kind of debate is already beginning after last Saturday's horrendous fires. An article in *The Australian*on Wednesday (pictured) pitted 'one of Australia's leading bushfire experts', Ron Incoll, and David Packham of Monash University, against Nillumbik Shire Council in which 'green groups' are seemingly influential.

I am not in a position to make any comment on this specific issue. But it is unfortunate that the bushfires are not yet out, but the blame game has already begun.

In fact, this debate has already become irrelevant. On Saturday we entered a new category of bushfire, the type that results from global warming. From all that I can see Saturday's wild fire had a velocity and intensity that far surpasses both Black Friday and Ash Wednesday. We are in a new era of fire and we are going to have to take a long, hard, rational and ecologically sensitive look at what has happened.

The proposed Royal Commission is a good way of doing this, especially if it is chaired by a person with the talents and objectivity of Leonard Stretton who ran the1939 post-Black Friday Royal Commission. Rather than scoring points and blaming people, we need to pull back and look at what has happened, putting - as Premier Brumby has said - everything on the table.

And that includes global warming.

When Leonard Cohen prays

ARTS

Tim Kroenert

I'm as sceptical of celebrity worship as the next person. But there is something to be said for being in the presence of the truly great — those who simply pulsate with genius and charisma.

Leonard Cohen is like that. You could sense it the moment he walked on stage on tuesday night. I could feel it, even from my distant seat.

The world of pop music is dominated by prettiness and skin-deep perfection. In that context, Cohen's greatness is not instantly discernible. When, in 'Tower of Song', he sings 'I was born with the gift of a golden voice', it would seem he doesn't mean the smooth glint of a wedding band, or the finely chiseled features of an ornate bracelet. He means nuggets, heavy and pliable, and dirty with the earth from which they've been plucked.

Not to everyone's taste. But the sound has served him well, and has the advantage of improving with the wear and weather of age. Cohen is 75, and those deep notes in 'I'm Your Man' still cause a delectable tremor in the guts.

The growl becomes him. Lurking in the all-around shadow of his trademark, narrow-brimmed hat, Cohen can still croon credibly about love, sex and beautiful women, without a trace of ick or sleaze. (He grinned evilly at the suggestive exhortations of one female audience member.)

His sense of humour is a trademark. Lately a Buddhist, Cohen explained how his latter years had been spent in 'deep study' of religion and philosophy. 'But cheerfulness keeps breaking through', he quipped.

The humour augments natural gravitas. On tuesday, he first prayed, and then sang, the lyric of his song 'Anthem' as a tribute to bushfire victims:

Ring the bells that still can ring

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

(Cohen, supporting artist Paul Kelly and tour promoter Frontier Touring donated $200,000 to support the bushfire victims.)

It was a night of hits and plenty of fan favourites. During nearly three hours of stage time Cohen drew from the breadth of his catalogue, old and new(er), with equal aplomb.

From his first album, the gospel lyric of 'Suzanne' fractured with the intensity of Cohen's rendition:

Jesus was a sailor

When he walked upon the water

And he spent a long time watching

From his lonely wooden tower ...

But he himself was broken

Long before the sky would open

Forsaken, almost human

He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

Six of eight tracks from (arguably) Cohen's best album, *I'm Your Man*, made the set list. He sang two of these during his encore, with the sublimely dark 'Take This Waltz' ('With its very own breath/Of brandy and death') a highlight of the night.

Cohen is often described as a poet as much as a singer. 'A Thousand Kisses Deep' ('And sometimes when the night is slow/The wretched and the meek/We gather up our hearts and go') was transformed into a spoken ode, to skin-tingling effect. Conversely, Cohen's most famous song, 'Hallelujah' (an ethereal ode to the orgasm: 'Remember when I moved in you/The holy dove was moving too') was a bit off, though predictably well-received.

Strangely, given Cohen's clearly impeccable memory for his lyrics, he displayed what appeared to be an occasional 'senior's moment'. Prior to intermission, he thanked his virtuosic band (among them three backing vocalists, a saxophonist and a transcendentally dexterous mandolin player), assigning each member a poetic, adulatory spiel. Prior his encore, to awkward applause from the audience, he repeated the process, word for word.

Still, the guy's human, and no-one could begrudge him the occasional lapse, be it age-related, or due to the repetitive nature of a world concert tour. It certainly didn't prevent the crowd from offering a string of decreasingly spontaneous standing ovations as, during the encore, Cohen skipped (yes, skipped) from the stage after every song, returning one more time for 'one more time'.

A final note. 'Hallelujah' is not only Cohen's most famous song, but also his most frequently covered song. Indeed, Cohen's version is rarely heard by comparison with the late Jeff Buckley's intensely beautiful and ubiquitous take on the song.

So it's interesting that one of tuesday night's most sublime moments happened when Cohen stepped away from the microphone, to allow two of his backing vocalists 'unfold' the musical prayer, 'If it be your will'.

The 'Webb sisters' — one with a liquid-crystal soprano, the other a contralto with a voice like warm timber — seemed to shock the audience into silence with the beauty of their rendition:

If it be your will

To let me sing

From this broken hill

All your praises they shall ring

If it be your will

To let me sing.

Such is the nature of greatness. Cohen's genius is not restricted to the body that presided on tuesday night. As with any great artist, his greatness is defined by what he leaves behind for others to carry or to be inspired or enlightened by.

To paraphrase 'Tower of Song', we'll be hearing from him long after he's gone: 'I'll be speaking to you sweetly/From a window in the Tower of Song.'

Bushfire TV

TELEVISION

Tim Kroenert

Last week I wrote somewhat glibly about the perceived 'hell' of life in suburbia . Turns out the word was better suited to my more rural neighbours. Since I wrote that column, Victorians living beyond Melbourne's suburban sprawl have experienced hell first hand, as the worst bushfires in Australia's history charred life and land.

For me, like for many living in the suburbs, interstate or overseas, the horror was mostly vicarious. I spent much of Sunday watching helplessly the increasingly horrific news reports. I watched with dread as the body count grew with alarming rapidity. And was disturbed by revelations that at least some of the fires were deliberately lit.

At such times, grief and anger are the various faces of a pair of dice spun in mid air. The way the dice topple can be affected in one way or the other by the tone and nature of media reports and by the public statements of influential figures.

When newsreaders announced that arson was involved, it prompted the dice to topple on the side of anger. The thought of a malicious hand in this saga sickened the gut, and quickened the desire for vengeance.

Doubly so when, during a live cross on Channel Nine's *Today* show on Monday morning, PM Kevin Rudd said of the firebugs: 'What do you say about anyone like that? What do you say? I don't know. There's no words to describe it other than it's mass murder.'

The PM wasn't alone in his anger. On Sunday, a new Facebook group appeared, with the name 'Get the fuckers who lit the Victorian bush fires Feb 7th 2009'. As the days progressed and the death toll rose, such sentiment seemed prevalent: the arsonists ought to be 'burned at the stake'.

(One acquaintance of mine proposed a more imaginative form of poetic justice; 'Lock 'em up for life, but first make 'em sit and watch while you burn everything they own.')

But there is a difference between justice and vengeance. Few would dispute that the victims deserve the former. Rudd's words seem to fuel a desire for the latter. They are probably inaccurate — 'murder' entails intent to kill, whereas in all likelihood the aim of the firebugs' compulsion was property damage, and not loss of life. That is not to diminish the seriousness of the offense. But there's little to be gained by such inflamatory statements.

Of course, for me and other such armchair critics, to whom the fires came no closer than the television screen, it is easy to take the moral high ground.

Easier than for the survivors of the Kinglake firestorm, those who were lucky to escape with their lives when many did not. Easier than for Marysville residents, as they survey the blackened carnage where their town used to be. Their height of emotion should not be easily dismissed or disparaged.

The vast majority of the media coverage has emphasised this aspect. The personal stories arising daily from such devastated, decimated regions see the dice fall the way of grief more often than anger.

This is helped when familiar faces are attached to the tragedy. It seems most people will have a story, often at a remove. For my own part, a colleague of my wife's lost his home — but, thankfully, not his life — at Strathewen, a town now known for the dire statistic of having lost 15 per cent of its population to the bushfires.

For those who don't have such connections, former Channel Nine newsreader Brian Naylor was the first familiar face to be attached to the tragedy. Grief was crystalised by the strange, heightened sense of loss attained when the famous die. It was heartbreaking to witness the obvious grief of Channel Nine news anchor Peter Hitchener, at the news of the dapper, well-liked Naylor's death.

At the time of writing, membership of the aforementioned Facebook group is 729. This compares with the group 'In memory of those who have died in the Victoria Bush fires and lost homes', which has 15,779 members. If that can be taken as a reliable indicator, then perhaps the dice are loaded, and for now public feeling, like the majority of the media coverage, is weighted towards grief and solidarity rather than anger and vengeance.

Putting the flame to blame

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton


smh.com.au
The Sydney Morning Herald
What ignites a yearning to burn

Through all the stories of the bushfires runs a disturbing thread. It is the gap between almost casual human actions and their consequences. This gap can burden us with terrible guilt or anger as in our imagination we relive and reverse the actions we or others have taken.

Examples abound. A fire officer encourages people to stay to defend their homes against possible ember attack or sends away a crew to an area of greater need. The wind changes and a firestorm takes lives and property. A couple decide to escape in two cars. One survives, the other dies. There is no match between these actions and their terrible consequences.

The same gap exists even between actions that are irresponsible and criminal and their consequences. For example, a compulsive fire lighter takes out his cigarette lighter and sets fire to a few leaves. The fire grows to a hundred kilometre front and many deaths. Even here there is a mismatch between the moral emptiness of the action and its consequences.

In her reflection on the Holocaust, the philosopher Hannah Arendt referred to the banality of evil. The Holocaust was carried through by ordinary people doing ordinary things like keeping records, locking train carriages, delivering poison gas. The gap between these ordinary actions and the barbaric destruction of human life and dignity that they enabled was immense.

The bushfires confront us with banality of another kind. We might call it the banality of fatality. Everyday decisions, properly made, turn out to have lethal consequences.

In the response to the bushfires a strong undercurrent of blame has run. This is natural. Many of us blame ourselves for what we and others suffer. If we had only acted more quickly, differently, intuitively, all would have been right with us.

Others of us, wisely, refuse to blame ourselves. But if we are not responsible for the disaster, then others must be. We blame the person who advised us to stay, the bureaucrats who forbid controlled burns, environmentalists who wish to preserve forests, the fire officers that withdrew their services, even the people who built their houses in bushland, or above all the arsonists who started the fires.

It is momentarily satisfying to find someone on whom to fix blame for the fires. But it is unhelpful to be fixated in blame because it ignores central aspects of our human reality on which our capacity to rebuild will depend.

To have to blame someone for great loss assumes that we can control our world and so ensure that we and those whom we love will be safe. If they prove to be

unsafe, someone must be to blame. This denies our vulnerability and ultimately our mortality. It is 'the great lie' of which St Augustine wrote eloquently. In fact our life is like dried grass on which sparks are always liable to fall.

If we see our lives as controllable, we have constantly to carry the burden of self-incrimination or incrimination of others for disaster. We then become preoccupied with ourselves and separate ourselves from others. This is not a great way to live personally. But in a communal disaster like the bushfires, it leads us to ignore the human resources we have at hand to help us meet our vulnerability and mortality.

When blame preoccupies us, we do not attend to the generosity, the strength of human solidarity, and the compassion that the bushfires initially evoke. It prevents us from accepting our own and others' vulnerability, and turns us away from rebuilding to picking over the ashes of the past.

In counselling against blame I am not arguing against the vital importance of reflecting on the fires, on what contributed to them, and on how we responded to them. We owe that to those who suffered in the fires and to those who will be threatened by future fires. It will be vital to consider forest management, the effects of global warming, the advice or commands given to residents under threat of fires, and ways of preventing arson.

These will be the business of the Royal Commission that Victorian Premier John Brumby has established. It can sift evidence in a dispassionate way without the pressure to identify guilty parties.

But in the meantime it is important for us to keep our eyes on the main game: the vulnerability of human beings before such destructive forces of climate and wind and fire, the relative importance of human irresponsibility and error evident in the fires, and the high importance of the extraordinarily ordinary courage, compassion and solidarity that people have shown.

These qualities are the soil in which the future recovery can grow.

When nature is the enemy

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

During one of the days of recent grinding and relentless heat, I suddenly remembered, in graphic detail, a scene from a very different place and time.

At Glyndebourne in 1996 my wife and I went to the splendid new Opera House to see Handel's *Theodora*. At the long interval — designed deliberately to allow the audience a leisurely mid-performance meal — we retired to our reserved table on the wide, curving verandah overlooking the svelte, embowered gardens and dined on all sorts of marvels and drank very good champagne.

What was especially English about it was that we did so in a freezing wind that unfurled long lashes of rain in under the overhang of the roof, just failing each time to reach our table and its load of goodies. We didn't get wet and spirits remained high, but it was a heavily overcoated, scarfed and bonneted meal.

We stayed that weekend in the nearby village of Firle — white cottaged, murmurous with birds and cattle distantly lowing; raucous and welcoming down the pub end, steepled and lit by a cold sliver of moon at the cemetery end. Firle, where the cricket pavilion is the best new building in the village, and where, as we entered the cacophonous pub on Saturday night, a bloke at the door reassured us: 'Don't worry, they're noisy but they're only cricketers.'

Nudging through the flannelled fools towards the bar, it took only minutes for us to be identified as Australians, which gave rise to much cricket wit, many predictions, a couple of bets and a dare or two.

Though sliced up by far too many roads and menaced here and there by industrial and other incursions, the English countryside remains nevertheless one of the sleekest, most beautifully tended landscapes in the world. To Australian eyes its daunting constriction and sometimes prissy neatness are mitigated by breathtaking beauty, 'where every prospect pleases'.

Generations of Australian schoolchildren until well into the 1950s grew up with that English landscape, or some idealised version of it, dominant in their imaginations because those scenes were the main subject of the poems and stories they were given to read.

A distant world of hedgerows, barns, snow covered fields, smoke adrift in freezing air, spring arriving at last like soft brilliant shrapnel exploding through a grey land — these it seemed were the stuff of landscape, of Nature.

In comparison, the antipodean natural world seemed, until we learned to see it and understand its shy and withdrawn beauties, not landscape but simply terrain

and space: the huge and remote blue sky; a hot, dessicating gale blowing dust and the whiff of fire; small corrugated iron-roofed buildings squatting at the empty intersection of bush roads bursting out of one mirage and wobbling distantly into the next; curvatures of white beach edged with long slow surf and not a single soul for a hundred miles.

As for spring: no burst of energy down here, just Nature's shrug as the sun imperceptibly warms.

At least, that's how the comparison used to go. Climate change has redrawn that picture as profoundly as it is redrawing many other assumptions and expectations.

More and more, we are being forced to think of climate not as a phenomenon that ranges and alters across the hemispheres, helping them assume their separate identities, but as a vast and global event in which we are all rather helplessly taking part: floods and fires; unprecedented storms and snow and ice; murderous cyclones; wave after wave of heat; floods and fires ravaging simultaneously within a few hundred kilometres of each other.

None of them is apparently any longer confined to their time honoured places and seasons but bursting out of the ancient seasonal and geographical rhythms.

Like the financial storm but with potentially more catastrophic and irremediable effects, climate change is ubiquitous. Nature is no longer our familiar element and, as once was the case, our inspiration. It's running amok. With the passing of each season, whether in the north or the south of the globe, Nature is becoming the enemy.

What makes a firefighter

COMMUNITY

Moira Rayner

They're planning for about 300 dead. The magistrates, the coroners, the pathologists, the bureaucrats. Three hundred men and women and children. Hundreds and thousands more dogs and cats, cows and sheep, wombats, parrots, roos, rats, rabbits, snakes and horses. No ark from a firestorm.

Nobody here has been left untouched. That little boy performing conjuring tricks at a wedding in my family last January, he was so proud of where he lived: Kinglake. I call my cousin, heart in mouth. Mixed news: he and his mum Nicky are alive, but their old house burned to the ground. Now they're under ember attack in Healesville. Family friend Peter died in St Andrews defending his home. Her husband and in-laws are terribly distressed.

For me, the suffering and death are still at one remove. My housemate Myrna's brother and sister in law still have their house in Eaglehawk, but neighbours have lost theirs.

I've been working with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade on its recruitment, training and culture. Suddenly none of it seems as important as the human services firefighters deliver.

It is dirty and dangerous work. Jamie, my son-in-law, has been a volunteer firefighter for 14 years, working for no reward but service, and with nominal insurance cover, in the filthiest and most dangerous of conditions.

But the current fires beat anything that has desperately frightened me for him before. This time I've been afraid for them all. The more you know, the more reason to fear. Firefighters take safety seriously, but God sent a blizzard this time, not a blaze.

What makes a firefighter? I've seen middle-aged women — volunteers, who wouldn't pass the meticulous physical (a 'mini Olympics', or the 'beep test') or the exams you have to pass to get into the Metropolitan Fire Brigade — shepherding flocks of flame right alongside great big male firefighters, saving lives and property.

Emotional intelligence, self-control, perseverance, courage and stubbornness: not soldiers, but citizens, ordinary women and men, professionals and volunteers, juniors and olds, without discrimination.

What can I do, I think, that first Sunday morning, other than being a nuisance at an emergency centre, or a gawker?

So I fall gratefully into something practical that I can do, fostering survivors'

dogs and cats, collecting food, blankets, crates and carriers, leads and collars for those bewildered companion animals who survived but whose owners didn't, or whose family is missing or who simply can't keep them, having lost everything else.

I talk to coroners, magistrates and court administrators about those 300 expected dead. They'll need every part-time coroner, courts and administrative staff, court facilities and magistrates, transport and communication equipment, and every other resource available for the long, painful process that's about to start.

There are so few remains of some people that they will never be identified — there's simply nothing left. There's a backlog of unsolved cases in the notoriously under-resourced pathology labs, with the late demand for services brought on by deaths from the heatwave and, now, these firestorms.

My friendly public servant said she had gone to yesterday's briefing at the state coroner's court and came away, to her own alarm, shaking.

Nobody has been untouched. Last Sunday morning, they hired refrigerated containers, and housed them under marquees and behind screens, so that the truck drivers didn't have to see what some family members will have to see. They set up major family contact services and have now settled in for the long haul.

It will take many months just to work out who died and where. There are horrors to be faced, from the lumps you might notice from choppers — animal or human? — to the stories of those sad, narcissistic fire-lighters arrested in Gippsland, two in protective custody already. And more to come.

There isn't a workplace I know that doesn't have a staff member who has lost a house or who is still waiting for news about family which, sadly, is likely to be bad. My old staff member and her children are fighting ember attacks in Healesville. My newly married cousin's family is mourning Peter's death and the destruction of so much of their landscapes and memories.

I have friends still in the expected line of the fire near Beechworth, hoping that the fire is containable and that there will be little further damage. But the odds are not great.

Saturday was an inferno. The people on the front line have told me that it was like the fire bombing of Dresden. The fire could be 10 km away, and then within minutes it was at the doorstep. People tried to run, but were trapped in their cars — the fire was just too great. Whole towns have been wiped out.

I don't have the words to describe what it feels like. And I am at one remove from it all.

Asylum for an exile at home

POETRY

Kevin Gillam and Ben Hession

the necessary

the necessary leap,

hands in fiction, praying

earth. necessary

ponder, mind spent on

tessellating. necessary scent

of rosemary, blood and

order. necessary trust in

tome and tongue? necessary

stained wonder.
necessary still

Kevin Gillam

nyc.com.au

'And I will give to thee, and to thy seed after thee,

the land wherein thou art a stranger ...'

—Genesis 17:8

A new pretence of destination

this virtual asylum for an exile at home

speaking with anonymities your community
is at call and liberty, the she-gestalt

stands o.er an alien harbour.

Reconfigured AthenÃ©, shrouded

by freedom's glorious mystery,

her new clothes, machinery you interacted,

pressing on buttons of conceit, the 'put on' display

at your installation, touch typing each public countenance —

her body sculpted by binary coded DNA —
from the vanity of believers,
her GM flower grows,
on screen her field lies, the land of promise wherein
thou art a stranger — all flesh is glass —
resident at your a.dressing.
Ben Hession

Who cares about students

EDUCATION

Faitma Measham

Last week, graduate teachers faced their first group of students. In all likelihood, they'll soon discover that everything they've been told about teaching is true.

It's tough. It can be heartbreaking — if you care. Then again, if you're interested in becoming a good teacher, you would care.

This is a quality that doesn't get spoken about much when governments and unions talk about teacher performance and student achievement. It's certainly not part of Teacher Training 101.

Yet caring is not only embedded in teaching; it also distinguishes educators from technicians. After all, it is not simply an assembly-line job, where you churn and spit out graduates into the workforce and hope for the best. When you're dealing with young people on the threshold of the next stage of their lives, you're also dealing with fragile aspirations, unmet needs, broken connections. The appropriate, imperative response to all that is to care.

This is not airy-fairy stuff. Studies on education consistently tell us that low teacher expectation of students tends to be the killer, not socioeconomic status. So there's something to be said for movies about real-life teachers who turn their recalcitrant class into miracle achievers. It does happen, and it happens when the emotional investment made by a teacher intersects with their students' own desires.

Unfortunately, caring means foregoing immunity from hurt. The movies do not entirely capture the injuries that are inflicted when students reject carefully prepared lessons, or perpetually wag your class, or verbally abuse you when you're trying to reach the heart of their inattention.

There are few other jobs where you get instant, unmediated, personal feedback from your clients. All day, every day. No wonder that, at least in Britain, they have found that stress levels of teachers are similar to those of ambulance workers and police officers.

How else would you explain the numbers? Over the 2004—2005 period, nearly 1500 Victorian teachers and principals left the job. Last year's survey by the Australian Education Union found that 47 per cent of beginning teachers do not see themselves teaching in ten years' time. In fact, based on current trends, many will leave within just five years of starting their career.

But there is another side of this equation. The paradox in caring, especially in professions like teaching, is that the very thing that makes you vulnerable can be a source of strength. Most students respect empathetic teachers even when the

relationship is adversarial. In challenging schools, where respect can only be bestowed, not earned, this is no small matter. It makes or breaks discipline policies.

Caring also means that you are willing to learn as much from what doesn't work as what works. It's easy enough to replicate successful strategies, but the impetus for improvement comes initially from the desire to learn. Although caring can leave you vulnerable, over time it does make you a better teacher.

Teaching is usually regarded as an autocratic role. But the things that impact on your efficacy are precisely the things that you don't have much control over — the quality of a child's homelife, the level of community support, the funding that is made available to your school, the politicisation of your curriculum. Sometimes, even the weather conspires to undermine your best intentions.

Thus, in an environment where little power is actually left to you, one of the things you do still have control over is how much you care.

For graduate teachers, this may bring little comfort in the months ahead. They will feel it impossible to care once they hit survival mode this week.

But they should know that people are right when they say that teaching is a rewarding job. The rewards may be far between, but they are genuine and cannot be devalued. Graduate teachers, too, will recognise them at the moments when they whisper to themselves, 'This is why I'm here'.

Pell's common interest with unions

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Cardinal George Pell told the Australian Workers' Union National Conference last week why quick action to avoid mass unemployment in the looming recession is so crucial to protect the wellbeing of so many Australians.

He said: 'Unemployment hits people hard; financially, first and foremost of course, but it also affects personal resilience, reduces participation, and increases isolation in the community.'

Cardinal Pell linked this with social capital, which he defined as the 'shared understandings and values [that] help us put our own issues aside and focus on the greater good'.

He quoted the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2006 Aspects of Social Capital report, which argues that people who are unemployed are likely to have less regular contact with friends or family living elsewhere and feel less able to ask them for small favours or help.

'They are less likely to take part in voluntary activities, and are also less likely to take part in social activities or attend cultural events.'

Cardinal Pell's comments about social capital have direct implications on current debate surrounding the Federal Government's $42 billion economic stimulus package.

The measures are weighted in favour of funds for social infrastructure, which would create immediate employment. The bulk of the money would be spent on schools, training centres, community housing, and ceiling insulation.

The argument against the package is focused on the need for careful scrutiny before the Parliament commits so such a large expenditure. But some business commentators are concerned that only 12.5 per cent of the amount is allocated to economic infrastructure.

ABN Amro Morgans analyst Michael Knox suggested in last Thursday's *Australian Financial Review*that investing in economic infrastructure 'has more bang for the buck than social infrastructure precisely because private sector businesses come in and multiply the original effect on the economy of the money spent by government'.

More spending on economic infrastructure would be expected to encourage business investment in projects likely to create employment in the medium and

long term (this was also the promise of Workchoices). But in the short term, many Australian workers and their families would be struck down by unemployment, and this would come at great social cost.

Humanity endures in bushfire tragedy

COMMUNITY

Andrew Hamilton

During the financial turmoil this summer, images of fire have abounded. The economy is said to be going into meltdown. Shareholdings turn to ashes. On the stockmarket, an inferno destroys value. The images always seem a little stretched, a little self-important. This weekend we have seen why.

Bushfires, the lives they take and diminish, the lands they leave blackened, and their unbelievable force, set the human activities which we usually regard as of vital importance, like banking, administration and politics, within their proper framework. In the face of a fire that in a couple of hours can run 40 km from mountains to sea, these are incidental occupations. In the face of the sudden and terrible death of about 100 people, financial troubles are put into perspective.

The central realities are the uncontrollable power of the fire and the spirit of the human beings who endure and engage with it. Science and crystallised experience count, but ultimately the moves that the fire makes and the success of the engagement are unpredictable. One house is taken, another is left. One family dies; another escapes.

Those who stay to endure the fire bring with them little more than their simple humanity. Courage, generosity, prudence, empathy, compassion and solidarity are words that come to mind to describe people's attitudes.

I was struck in particular by the exchange between radio reporters and fire service officers who reported on the fire fronts. The reporters, as is their job, invited the fire officers to make quick judgments for their audience. Was this person stupid who went into his property in shorts and thongs, or this family who tried to drive through a fire front? Was this bushfire worse than Ash Wednesday?

The officers would evade the questions. No one could know what necessity led particular people to do dangerous things. Fire fighters, focused on saving life and livelihood, would find it inconceivable to make comparisons of this fire to other fires. The officers' focus was on the heartbreaking human dimensions of the bushfires.

The simple human reality of the bushfires has been of a shared and simple humanity: shared struggle, shared loss, shared tears, sharing of small resources like food and blankets, sharing of accommodation. Those involved at the fire front have shared this directly; others vicariously.

The Governments have responded at the same level. Victorian Premier John Brumby showed himself to be properly overwhelmed by the destructive power of

the fire and by the death and suffering it brought to so many people.

He saw it as involving the Victorian community, and not simply individuals. He recognised the gallantry shown by those who were involved in facing and fighting the fires. He asked those not directly involved to keep those affected in their thoughts and prayers, to give help where possible, and to contribute to the fund.

And he promised modest but sustained help from governments. He spoke as a human being with a Premier's responsibility, not as a Premier who happened to be a human being.

This immediate sense of solidarity will inevitably be tested by the frustrations and angers that are natural to grief. People who are in everybody's thoughts in their immediate loss, slip from mind during the slow processes of their rebuilding.

But the first shock of these bushfires makes us ask instinctively what really matters to us as human beings. The stories of death and escape from death remind us that our lives are a gift, a vulnerable gift. The way in which people have faced and fought the fires is an enormously encouraging response to these questions.

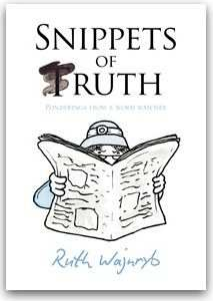
These things also judge the way in which we evaluate and address what matters in the metaphorical bonfires lit in the economy.

On Calvin, soaps and international Scrabble

BOOKS

Brian Matthews

Wajnryb, Ruth: *Snippets of Truth*. Drum Publishing, Sydney, 2008. RRP $24.95. ISBN: 9781921263361



Ruth Wajnryb — the author of this slim, nicely packaged collection of 'ponderings from a word watcher' — starts with several advantages. Not the least of these is her consonant-laden name.

Don't be appeased by the purely ritual nod to one vowel: Wajnryb is international scrabble territory (elite levels of competition allow use of names). Moreover, it's pronounced 'vine rib'.

With that sort of lead in, Ruth W. couldn't help being quirky and funny — anything to take the heat off the name and avoid having yet again to explain how to pronounce it. And quirky and funny she is.

This is the sort of book you dip straight into, and when I did I landed on 'Oz is Different — We Do Pedantry Better Here'. I was immediately won over. 'Toxic feedback' is an occupational hazard for columnists. You learn to ignore the simple aspiration of some readers to see you fed to sharks or eviscerated in public. But the pedants are harder to cop.

Ruth Wajnryb's ironic deferral to outraged literalists sees her opening sentence amended — with a nod in the direction of Stan 'Elderly Man River' Freberg — to: 'To quote (but slightly amend) L. P. Hartley's words, "America is another (metaphoric) country. They do things (sic — excluding grief) differently there".'

Columnists need voracity — though not always veracity — and a wide, increasingly lateral, range of reference. Wajnryb is obviously a voracious reader and has a mind which may very well be like a steel trap on its day but which, more to the point, notices, draws in and retains absolutely everything and anything that might serve the columnar art immediately or in an imagined future.

Einstein, the Bible, billboards, a dictionary load of words, amiable inventions ('happsicle', 'apocalisp' — look them up: page 73), bullshit, *Time*, time, Schopenhauer, TV 'soaps' and much else are all grist to her mill — I resort to the clichÃ© deliberately so I can add, Wajnryb-like, that it was probably first coined by the Protestant Theologian, Calvin, in a 1583 sermon on Deuteronomy: 'There is no lykelihoode that those thinges will bring gryst to the mill', he said memorably.

In less sure and heavier hands, Wajnryb's relentless pursuit of lexicographical meanings, provenance and mutations might jar, but she has a light touch in which irony, an implied self-deprecation, a satirical bent and an unerring eye for the odd,

the ridiculous and the pompous all stand as effortless defences against the kind of laboriousness into which this sentence, well-meaning though it is, has quietly drifted.

Ruth Wajnryb's snippets of truth are more often gems than snippets and, as for truth, well, as Calvin might have said: 'There is som lykelihoode but what the Hell'.

Between the Department of Immigration and a hard place

MULTICULTURALISM

Caz Coleman

For three-year-old Sanara, justice is a big word and an even bigger concept. In the past six months Sanara's mother and grandmother have both attempted suicide and her grandmother has recently been diagnosed with a secondary cancer.

Her family has no income, cannot access Medicare and relies on a few charities to provide food, clothing and housing. Each family member receives $33 per week from Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, to spend on basic necessities.

Sanara and her family are stuck between systems. Their care seems to be no-one's responsibility. When Sanara's mother was admitted to hospital for the second time, the hospital staffer responded by saying, 'this is an immigration matter, not ours'. Yet when a Department of Immigration official heard Sanara's story she accused the family of using the threat of suicide as a way of manipulating the Minister for Immigration.

Justice for Sanara's family has become a point of debate. For some justice demands the removal of the family back to their homeland. For others it demands that it be given the chance to make a home in Australia. For a few it demands that Sanara and her family receive health care and basic services in order to help them to accept the reality that they must return to their country of origin.

For Sanara it is relatively simple. Whatever the outcome of her immigration status, she wants food in her belly more than once a day, a house that is safe and secure, and for her mother and grandmother to get the help they need today. But none of her desires is granted.

Raimond Gaita has claimed that justice must be founded on a recognition of our common humanity and the understanding that every human life is precious. He argues that the application should incorporate a space of listening that treats everyone with respect.

This view of justice has interesting implications for asylum seekers and former asylum seekers in Australia. Certainly it argues that Sanara and her family are not justly treated. Not only the deprivation of an income and of adequate health care, nor just the poverty of the situation or the distress of the family, but also their deeper deprivation of identity, of dignity, and of common humanity, show that they are being unjustly treated.

Is this fair? Does fairness apply only to those who have progressed to a certain point vis-a-vie their status in the eyes of the political system? Is it fair to allow a child of three to live in long term destitution in Australia, to withhold from her

family the health care they require because they do not have a permanent status in this country? Is it just to allow Sanara and her family to live lawfully in the Australian community, but to exclude them from access to basic life essentials, food, housing and income?

Some would appeal to American philosopher, John Rawls, to say that it would be just. They draw boundaries that sharply delineate between those who are 'in' and to whom justice and fairness applies, and those who are 'out' and to whom justice and fairness does not. Might it be more humane to look to a model that provides a minimum standard to all who lawfully reside in our community?

Late last year the Department of Immigration released a draft paper that examined the basic conditions for asylum seekers in Australia. It focused on the denial of permission to work for asylum seekers at various stages of their protection application process. It proposed some promising changes.

Under these changes, Sanara's family would have permission to work and therefore to access Medicare. However, Sanara's father would receive no employment support, nor would he be eligible for income support if he could not find employment. This is bittersweet news for Sanara's family. They would be offered an opportunity but denied the resources that would enable them to take it. The destitution they face would be perpetuated.

If this situation persists under the changes, children like Sanara will continue to suffer from what could be seen as state-sponsored neglect. They must have access to resources if they are to care responsibly for their child.

Among the 4000 current or former asylum seekers who live in Australia lawfully and in destitution are hundreds of children. It would not be impossible to provide adequate food, housing and income support for this group. Many families would not require ongoing support. Others would require only employment support to help them generate a family income.

This need could be met by our current infrastructure. But it would require listening to and respecting the common humanity of all those within our midst.

Post script: After five months of advocacy Sanara and her family were finally accepted into the government funded Community Care Pilot. However, many more families remain vulnerable in the community without access to an income and appropriate healthcare.

Hindu's message for religious unity

RELIGION

Constant Mews

Barack Obama's inaugural address evoked another great speech, also given in Chicago, in 1893. Swami Vivekananda delivered it to the first Parliament of the World's Religions. That event, originally intended to be one of a series of conferences marking 400 years since the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, was a stunning success because it brought together so many religious groups.

Vivekananda's ringing call for an end to 'Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism' made a strong impression on an audience of 7000 people. Some see it as the beginning of the global interfaith movement.

Yet Vivekananda's vision was never realised. Nationalist bigotry, just as dangerous as religious sectarianism, tore the world apart in a way that he could scarcely have imagined. But within academic circles, the study of world religions did develop, pre-eminently at Chicago.

Only in 1993, following a proposal from two Chicago-based monks of the Vivekananda Vedanta Society, was a new Parliament of the World's Religions convened. It was not intended to pass laws to create a world religion, but rather to be a place where people could talk to each other.

In the face of many obstacles, the Parliament re-assembled in 1999 in Cape Town, and then reconvened in Barcelona in 2004, establishing a five-year rhythm for the meetings.

According to the founding document of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions, the goal of the meetings is 'to cultivate harmony between the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its other guiding institutions in order to achieve a peaceful, just, and sustainable world'.

From 3—9 December 2009, Melbourne will host the Parliament. Its theme is: 'Make a world of difference: hearing each other, healing the earth.'

Chicago, Cape Town, and Barcelona all experienced periods of great repression, and so understood that religious bigotry has to give way to dialogue and understanding, In the United States, South Africa, and Spain, too, religion has historically helped shape public discourse. Movements of religious dialogue have also challenged the way individual religious traditions have buttressed the power of particular groups in society.

The differences between these cities and Australia may lead us to ask whether Australians will see this Parliament as an event of global significance and an opportunity to challenge insular attitudes, or whether the Australian habit of

considering religion to be primarily a private affair will lead them to see it as yet another talk-fest, unlikely to change lives.

In Australia, public debate about religion is often bogged down in petty arguments. Religious conservatives may complain about a loss of traditional values, while die-hard secularists may distrust any claim to divine authority and ignore the complexities of religious traditions.

The major problem is not so much bigotry as insularity. The Parliament in Australia offers an opportunity to join in dialogue and open a public conversation within religions, between religions, and between believers and non-believers.

Australia may not have experienced the same issues of civil unrest as the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, but its treatment of indigenous peoples and of the refugees who have sought to come to our shores is just as shameful. The Parliament recognises the significance of its being held in a nation with spiritual traditions that go back tens of thousands of years, based on the land.

At a time of both economic and ecological crisis, the world has lost its sense of balance. Participants at the Melbourne Parliament will celebrate these indigenous traditions and reflect on how they may help religious and cultural traditions more generally reconnect to the planet on which we live.

In the late 19th century, Vivekananda railed against ectarianism and bigotry. Here in Australia, in the early 21st century, the challenge is that of insularity generated by a society in which religion is treated as a private rather than a public matter. We must learn to become comfortable in encountering religious difference and exploring common values, without stereotyping other people's beliefs.

During 2009 many events will be held. They will include a series of monthly public conversations, held at various venues across Melbourne, on questions that will be raised at the Parliament. As with all such major events, its outcome will depend on the imagination and good will of those who wish to participate and contribute towards it.

How to escape the hell of suburbia

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Revolutionary Road*: 119 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Sam Mendes. Starring: Leonardo DiCaprio, Kate Winslett, Michael Shannon, Kathy Bates**

The dog wakes me at 5am, and as for sleep, that's the last of it.

It's not his fault. No doubt a cat has wandered in to the yard, and is taunting him, sitting just beyond the fence, beyond his reach. He's curious and protective; who could begrudge him a bit of yapping?

By the time I've got up, walked outside and shooed the disturbance (it *was* a cat, licking its paws, indifferent to the din), I'm awake, so I decide to start work. I switch on the home PC and take a seat.

'Bloody suburbs!' I muse, as I begin to type.

I've recently seen *Revolutionary Road*, a film in which the (1950s American) suburban locale provides an eerie backdrop.

Winslett and DiCaprio portray April and Frank Wheeler, a young couple with marriage problems. They are indeed both fine performances, that capture the nuances of a marriage empty of love, strained by responsibility and the expectations of society, and sickly with the conviction that they are too exceptional for life in the suburbs.

It's the latter that most aroused my attention. The apparent mundaneness of life in the suburbs seems ever ripe for satirical exploitation. It's a theme that always interests me, because I was raised in the 'burbs, and still live there.

Not coincidentally, *Revolutionary Road* comes from the director of another fable about the decimation of the American dream that, on its release in 1999, stuck sharp in my then late adolescent mind. I had become disillusioned with what I perceived as the hollowness of life in suburbia. *American Beauty*, in which suburbia is a purgatory characterised by empty obsession with stuff and niceness, affected me.

In *Revolutionary Road*, never mind purgatory: suburbia is hell, barbed with tedious career obligations and the demands of parenthood, awash with too-bright light that leaves the skin looking transluscent, and populated with overly-cheerful, deluded demons such as the Wheelers' real estate agent Helen (Baker), for whom a pretty couple in a pretty home is a picture of heaven.

The Wheelers want to flee. The film revolves around their elated plans to sell up, pack their children, and move to Paris, leaving dullness and tedium in their wake. Their acquaintances respond with envy, contempt or clumsily feigned

approval. The Wheelers thrill to all three reactions.

They do find one sympathetic confidant, in Helen's son John (Shannon). While Helen is 'upright' and 'decent', John is forthright to a fault and resistant to social expectations, and has thus been called 'insane'. It says much about the world in which the Wheelers' 'revolutionary' decision was made, that John is their sole barracker.

But for the Wheelers, there is no escaping hell. That truism regarding plans 'of mice and men' squirms beneath the surface, so that even dreaming becomes another torture.

Of course, suburbia is not a malicious force. On the other hand, soured love and the failure of communication is poison for a marriage.

Before the title card has even been displayed, in *Revolutionary Road*this theme is laid bare. The audience is presented with two juxtaposed scenes. The first: a party, and the first meeting and instant attraction between two idealistic youths, Frank and April. The second: a theatre, and April's awful performance in an amateur play.

After the play, Frank (now some time April's husband) is condescending, despite his wife's crushed spirit, and this degenerates to an aggressive altercation, almost to violence. From the outset it is clear: suburbia is not the villain, but a scapegoat upon which to blame an unhappy life. Frank and April are each other's antagonists.

As an adult living in the suburbs, I'm no longer so concerned about supposed mundaneness. It is not suburbia, but disproportionate love of, or dependence upon, its trappings and comforts, at the expense of relationships and community, that is the root of evil.

The dog is barking again. Calmer now, more robust — just clearing his throat. It's light outside, and the neighbourhood is stirring. My wife will be up soon.

I stretch, and spy a cobweb in the corner of the ceiling. Daddy long legs. He never hurt anyone. It's only the attitude you bring that makes a harmless spider seem something to fear.

After the Gaza slaughter

POLITICS

James Dorsey

Conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has become a fixture of the Middle East. Israelis can live with that as long as they retain military superiority and American backing, and are able to instil the fear of God in their opponents. Israeli leaders take Hizbollah's decision not to broaden the last Gaza war with rocket attacks on Israel as evidence that their strategy is still valid.

Yet as Israelis go to the polls next week for an election in which Benjamin Nethanyahu (pictured), a hard line believer in Israel's strategy of overwhelming capability and force, is the front runner, that strategy may have run its course.

Many Palestinians and Arabs have lost faith in the feasibility of the two-state solution involving a Palestinian state alongside Israel. They despair in the wake of the Gaza war and 21 years of failed peacemaking based on Palestinian concessions to Israel. They see no alternative to the two-state solution beyond continued resistance and steadfastness that offer little prospect for building normal, prosperous lives.

If there is a sliver of hope, it may lie in demography. Demographics could constitute a greater threat to Israel than Palestinian rockets or terrorism, and may be the wrench to break the cycle of death and destruction.

It has already motivated Israel's partial withdrawals from occupied territory, even though Israel refused to surrender control and empower Palestinian government. It also persuaded Israel to pay lip service to the two-state solution, although it did not demonstrate the boldness and vision needed to make that happen.

The figures speak for themselves. Although Jews will remain a majority in sovereign Israel, in the next decade they are projected to become a minority in the area between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. As long as Israel remains in the West Bank and Gaza, this demographic forecast will pose a threat to the country's Jewish identity.

Nethanyahu has warned that if the Palestinians living inside Israel's pre-1967 border cross the 20 per cent threshold, the Jewish nature of the state would be in danger. Fear of the demographic threat persists, despite some studies that suggest the threat may be less than imminent.

Demographics leave Israel with a choice: to encourage Palestinian immigration, pursue a policy of attempting to break Palestinian will, or seek a political accommodation that meets enough of the aspirations of both parties.

While Israel retains all three options, memories of the Gaza war are likely to focus on the human rights aspects of Israel's military conduct as well as its policies in the occupied territories. That may help spark debate in Israel on whether accommodation will in the end be its best option.

Discussions mediated by Egypt throughout the Gulf War offer a sliver of hope. Throughout its history Israel has professed that it seeks full-fledged peace with its Arab neighbors. Ceasefires were agreed after violent confrontation in a bid to give peacemaking a chance.

In the Cairo talks, Israel appeared willing to settle for less. For more than a decade it rejected Hamas' call for a ten-year truce. This was Hamas' way of seeking accommodation with Israel without surrendering its refusal to recognise Israel or drop its insistence on the Palestinian right to armed resistance. In Cairo, Israel was opposed to such a truce; Hamas, emboldened by its survival in Gaza, dropped its proposal in favor of a one-year truce at best.

The question facing the Obama administration is whether it should lower the sights of immediate peacemaking and seek to negotiate a long-term truce rather than definitive peace. This would rest on the hope that an end to violence and repression over a longer period of time would generate the vested interests needed to negotiate a final settlement.

If the Obama peacemaking effort sought more limited goals, it would give the dynamics of an armed truce time to do their work. The questions to which peacemakers would need an answer would be different and less complex than those they confront now.

Currently, peacemaking tries to bring together parties who either don't want to talk to one another, or whose goals are mutually exclusive. A long-term truce would prove to Israelis that non-violent coexistence and security are possible, and demonstrate to Palestinians that they are being allowed to build a national existence of their own with a promise of political, economic and social development.

That would reduce their urge to risk tranquillity and prosperity for violence. It would nurture a majority that would no longer see militant confrontation as the only way of achieving reasonable national goals.

On not beating cancer

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Finally, this morning, enough — one too many journalistic references to someone's 'beating' cancer, as if cancer was an opponent to be defeated, an enemy to be conquered, a battle in which courage often wins the day.

It's a lie. Cancer is to be endured, that's all. The best you can hope for is to fend it off, like a savage dog, but cancer isn't defeated, it only retreats, is held at bay, retires, bides its time, changes form, regroups.

It may well be that the boy who survives an early cancer lives a long and lovely life, without ever enduring that species of illness again, but the snarl of it never leaves his heart, and you'll never hear that boy say he defeated the dark force in his bones.

Use real words. Real words matter. False words are lies. Lies sooner or later are crimes against the body or the soul. I know men, women, and children who have cancer, had cancer, died from cancer, lived after their cancer retreated, and not one of them ever used military or sporting metaphors that I remember.

All of them spoke of endurance, survival, the mad insistence of hope, the irrepressibility of grace, the love and affection and laughter and holy hands of their families and friends and churches and clans and tribes. All of them were utterly lacking in any sort of cockiness or arrogance. All of them developed a worn, ashen look born of pain and patience. And all of them spoke not of winning but of waiting.

There is a great and awful lesson there, something that speaks powerfully of human character and possibility. For all that we speak, as a culture and a people, of victory and defeat, of good and evil, of hero and coward, it is none of it quite true. The truth is that the greatest victory is to endure with grace and humour, to stay in the game, to achieve humility.

I know a boy with brain cancer. He's 16 years old. He isn't battling his cancer. It's not something to defeat. He is enduring it with the most energy and creativity and patience he can muster.

He says the first year he had cancer was awful because of the fear and vomiting and surgery and radiation and chemotherapy and utter exhaustion. But he says that first year was also wonderful, because he learned to savour every moment of his days, and because he met amazing people he would never have met, and because his family and friends rallied behind him with ferocious relentless humor, and because he learned that he was a deeper and stronger and more inventive

and more patient soul than he had ever imagined.

He also learned about fear, he says, because he was terrified and remains so, but he learned that he can sometimes channel his fear and turn it into the energy he needs to raise money for cancer research. Since he was diagnosed with cancer he has helped raise nearly $100,000, which is a remarkable sentence.

I met a tiny frail nun once, in Australia, while walking along a harbour, and we got to talking, and she said no one defeats cancer, cancer is a dance partner you don't want and don't like, but you have to dance, and either you die or the cancer fades back into the darkness at the other end of the ballroom.

I never forgot what she said, and think she is right, and the words we use about cancers and wars matter more than we know.

Maybe if we celebrate grace under duress rather than the illusion of total victory we will be less surprised and more prepared when illness and evil lurch into our lives, as they always will; and maybe we will be a braver and better people if we know we cannot obliterate such things, but only wield oceans of humor and patience and creativity against them. We have an untold supply of those extraordinary weapons, don't you think?

Poems about Gaza

POETRY

Anne Benjamin and Deborah Ruiz Wall

Reflecting on Gaza

Anne Benjamin

I

on a night
sharp with winter ice
burning skin —
Israel swears revenge
Hamas swears days of wrath

II

before the bombing
choked of necessities
grim survival —
women scrounge for money
to buy vermin-riddled flour

III

in houses
close to the target
windows shatter —
a sixteen year old girl
dies from cold and fright

IV

phosphorus
above empty streets
arches —
politicians promise
vengeance will bring peace

V

after the bombing
they dispatch supplies
medicine and food —
a doctor waits
beside children's corpses

VI

morning comes
red with haze and fire —
swirling in the dust
from Gaza and Israel
children play together

Lament over Gaza

Deborah Ruiz Wall

It crushes my heart to watch
injured and lifeless children
in Gaza — collateral damage
or sheer madness?
'Land is life', my Indigenous mentors
proclaimed, but I see its antithesis
now when tortured eyes conjure
bipolar images of stories retold
over and over by diasporic tribes
where past, present and future
coalesce in a war of retribution
so that in Palestine: land equals death.
Talk is not cheap, the war machine
that silences the whispering from beyond
our earthly dreams, will keep us all in chains
— away from reaching the fullness
of our humanity, away from

our oneness with the sanctity of all life.

My friend Justice Kirby

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

I have been asked to reflect on Michael Kirby who is fond of signing letters to me: 'Your Protestant friend'. After 35 years, he is no longer a judge. He is no longer 'Your Honour', 'the Honourable Justice Kirby'. A lover of titles, he has just published his latest chapter in a book reminding readers that in 1983, 'in the last federal list of Imperial Honours, I was appointed to the Order of St Michael and St George'.

He has always loved form, manners, tradition and due deference. Yet he has long thrived on conflict and change. His output is prodigious and will continue to be, and yet his humble self-doubt is no artifice. He is fond of saying, 'Occasionally progress is only attained by candid disclosure of differences, by planting the seeds of new ideas; and waiting patiently to see if these eventually take root.'

In recent years, I have had the privilege of dining with him in Chambers at least annually, surrounded by photos and trophies of his international and national activities, marking a passionate commitment to human rights. At the end of each lunch, the judge's associate would be summoned to take the mandatory photo which would then arrive in the post with some recent speeches as a memento of the event.

Yesterday Justice Kirby published his last dissenting judgment as a justice of the High Court of Australia. While his fellow justices basically upheld the legal validity of the legislative scheme underpinning the Howard Government's Intervention in the Northern Territory, Kirby found that the laws were suspect and that Aborigines should have their day in court. There was nothing surprising in either the majority decision nor in Kirby's dissent.

But by his last day on the Bench, Kirby had exhausted both his power of persuasion and his charm with his fellow judges. Kirby observed:

If any other Australians, selected by reference to their race, suffered the imposition on their pre-existing property interests of non-consensual five-year statutory leases, designed to authorise intensive intrusions into their lives and legal interests, it is difficult to believe that a challenge to such a law would fail as legally unarguable on the ground that no 'property' had been 'acquired'. Or that 'just terms' had been afforded, although those affected were not consulted about the process and although rights cherished by them might be adversely affected.

The mild mannered new Chief Justice Robert French, who was after all the first president of the Native Title Tribunal and who made special mention of the traditional owners at his swearing in as chief justice, felt compelled to observe:

The conclusion at which I have arrived does not depend upon any opinion about the merits of the policy behind the challenged legislation. Nor, contrary to the gratuitous suggestion in the judgment of Justice Kirby, is the outcome of this case based on an approach less favourable to the plaintiffs because of their Aboriginality.

To some, Kirby's words will stand as a definitive, cogent moral judgment against the High Court for decades to come; to others they will sound like the indulgent musings of an unworldly prophet in the wilderness.

Prior to delivering his last judgment, Kirby the fervent monarchist broke with High Court tradition and convened his own farewell ceremony after 13 years on the High Court Bench, replete with TV cameras. On the High Court, farewells are convened by the Court only for Chief Justices. Other judges simply retire. No doubt Kirby thought that he owed it to his many admirers that the occasion be formally marked.

Kirby has always been a respectful traditionalist and a ruthless reformer. This polarity may well hold the key to his failure to be more persuasive with his fellow judges while enjoying a messianic status with law students and those lawyers who delight in his dissents.

Holding together the contradictions, he has always worked tirelessly and prodigiously. I remember him arriving at Georgetown Law School three years ago. He flew in from a conference in Iran, spoke three times at the law school in the one day, had breakfast at the Supreme Court next morning, and then flew home to sit on the High Court immediately on return. No wonder he ended up in hospital for heart treatment a few days later.

In 2000, he visited Riverview, a Jesuit school in Sydney. The boys invited him to speak about judicial activism at the 'Hot Potato' club. He thought that topic too political and was then invited to speak on social justice. He came and spoke on homophobia.

I gave a speech making some criticism of his visit to the school and of his remarks to the boys. He graciously wrote a private critique of my speech and then invited me to lunch. As ever we had a delightful conversation canvassing issues of law, morality and religion.

Meanwhile he had submitted for publication his account of his visit to Riverview. I later wrote to him saying:

Your publication of 'Riverview: A Modern Morality Play' in Quadrant *did cause some concern in the circles in which I mix ... In future it may be necessary to tell the boys that anything they say could be taken down and used in evidence!*

Though there will continue to be a difference of views between us on the appropriateness of church teaching and on the requirements and refinements of the church-state separation, I trust we can maintain our respectful dialogue in

good humour and with good grace.

And we have. He has done a power of good and will continue to do so. The nation is more tolerant and respectful of human rights thanks to his labours. The churches are more critically reflective of moral teachings on sexual ethics thanks to his plaintive pleas for love and mercy. We have not heard the last of the nation's most iconoclastic and eloquent monarchist.

'Michael, may your retirement be blessed, and anything but a retirement. Looking forward to our next lunch. Your Jesuit friend, Frank.'

Dissident bishops and the case for church unity

EDITORIAL

Andrew Hamilton

Pope Benedict's decision to lift the excommunication of four dissident Bishops has caused controversy. It has largely focused on the anti-Semitic statements made by of one of the four Bishops, Richard Williamson (pictured). Church authorities on all sides have since scrambled to disown Williamson's attitudes.

But the Pope's decision also raises wider questions about the unity of the Catholic Church. These bear on a current conflict within the Catholic Church in Brisbane.

It is a challenge for any church to ensure that its faith and life remain authentically Christian. The life of the church includes its liturgical practices, moral convictions and relationships with other groups. It is an even greater challenge to see that this faith and life are shared across the church.

In Catholic theology the controlling image of unity is that of the Apostles gathered with Peter. In the continuing church, the Bishops represent the Apostles, and the Bishop of Rome represents Peter. The Bishops ensure that there is unity in the faith and life of their local church and its congregations. The Pope is responsible for serving the unity in faith and life of the universal church in its various manifestations.

Both the excommunication of the four bishops and its lifting should be seen against this background. They were ordained in 1988 by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, a noted missionary. He was disaffected by the Second Vatican Council. In particular he saw its opening to other churches and religions, as well as the changes it introduced in liturgy, as not truly Catholic.

He opened a seminary for like minded candidates, and in 1970 formed the Society of Saint Pius X for priests. His local Bishop saw this as divisive, and ordered the seminary closed. This decision was ratified by Pope Paul VI.

When Archbishop Lefebvre continued to ordain priests, despite being forbidden by the Vatican, he was suspended from celebrating the Sacraments. In 1987 he decided to ordain bishops to maintain the Society after his death. In the Western church this requires the permission of the Pope. Its breach led automatically to excommunication.

The disciplines that Archbishop Lefebvre ignored and the excommunication of the bishops were designed to safeguard the unity of the church in its faith and life. The decision of the Pope to lift the excommunication reflects a desire to restore unity. From his perspective it is a generous initiative, a circuit breaker, to heal division.

The gesture does not re-establish the unity in faith and in life between the Catholic Church and the followers of Archbishop Lefebvre. That was damaged before the 1988 ordinations. But it opens the way for conversation about what restoration of unity might involve.

Pope Benedict's initiative raises questions about what unity in faith and life involves in practical terms. If the congregations under their bishops are received back, will an anti-Semitic bishop be permitted to head a local church? May they deny that the liturgical practice of other congregations is really Catholic?

Will acceptance of some documents of Vatican II be optional? If so, the unity of the Church would accommodate much more divergence than has hitherto been understood.

That would also affect what Bishops could expect of groups within their own churches. In Brisbane Archbishop John Bathersby has been in conflict with the clergy and congregation of St Mary's, South Brisbane. It houses a very active and committed congregation, many of whom do not feel at home in other congregations.

The overt causes of conflict between the Archbishop and the parish are liturgical practices and formulae that are not approved and the promotion of a book that the Archbishop believes to be unorthodox. The conflict has been inflamed by the ill-disposed who attend the church in order to complain to Rome about it.

Underlying these issues is the responsibility of the Bishop to intervene where he believes that unity in faith and life within the diocese and with the universal church are at stake. The Archbishop does not believe that this principle has been accepted in practice

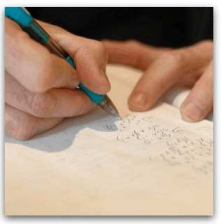
Archbishop Bathersby's task will certainly be much more difficult if the universal church receives into communion groups that do not accept as legitimate the liturgical practices and attitudes to non-Catholics that a Council has endorsed. It will be even more difficult if denigration of Jews is seen as compatible with acting as bishop.

The opposing claims of unity, identity and local autonomy in churches, as in societies, always need to be negotiated. The negotiation is always delicate, because in any dispute what each side prizes is precious. Pope Benedict's generous gesture, together with the projected acceptance of dissident Anglican congregations, has put into play the understanding of what unity entails.

Taking maths out of the equation

EDUCATION

Frank O'Shea



Top buttons open, tie at an angle, occasional glances to the top desk. Reminds you of a dog off the lead, swift glances to check that his master is still there. Enough of simile — or is it metaphor? Fingers poking at calculators to multiply 7 by 3, to add 15 and 8; pens in mouths or twirled expertly between second and third fingers; glances at wristwatches — how much time left in this lesson?

Tom has no idea what to do, looks around in the hope of inspiration from the bowed heads of his classmates. 'Come up, Tom.' Tom is a big lad, second row of the scrum, too much time with his head stuck up a ... Never mind. Concentrate, you're the teacher.

He reminds you of the lad from Tangmalangaloo — knocks the benches all askew, upending of himself. Is that another simile? 'Sir, what does "solve the equation" mean?'

Oh God. You have been doing this for three weeks and he has never missed a class. But you explain it to him again, the rote set of steps that mysteriously rolls out an answer.

'Is that the answer, sir?' 'Yes, Tom, now you do exactly the same with the next two and come up again when you have done those.' But why are you sitting down anyway? Shouldn't you be moving around, looking over shoulders, pointing at little errors, whispering encouragement, monosyllabic hints?

But then the thought comes: is this any way to spend your life? Will it matter to Tom in ten years time that he cannot solve a quadratic equation? Will it matter to any of them?

Actually, it probably will, because someone has decreed that 15-year olds should be able to do this and if they cannot, they will fail. Well, not fail, that word has gone out of the school vocabulary, but they will be guided into a stream that says hod carrier, professional footballer, backbench MP.

Tom comes up. He has done what you showed him and got the answers. He is smiling. 'I can do this now, sir.' There is no bravado in that, just genuine pleasure. A small triumph, the one that explains why you love this job. Tom may not have many more classroom victories that day, but right now he is happy.

These are earnest kids: keen, wanting to succeed. And society has told them that to succeed they must be able to solve a quadratic equation, draw a parabola, find the vertex, state the axis of symmetry. This city has two million adults. How many of them ever heard of an axis of symmetry?

You used to teach Latin. For a while you taught computer programming: Assembler, BASIC, Pascal, Comal. But no one learns programming any more and that knocked the fun out of computers. So there's your life: Latin, Assembler, quadratic equations. Just as well you were not paid for any output useful to society. What do they call it now? Value adding.

There are calculators that solve quadratic equations but they are not allowed in schools except a few progressive ones in Victoria. They will do calculus for you too — you can't get inside the door of an American university without calculus.

Meanwhile, there are high schools in Australia which don't have a mathematics teacher for their junior classes. But that's all right because they don't call it maths any more. They call it problem solving and get the PE teacher or one of the science staff to teach it.

So here's a suggestion for those struggling with the national curriculum. Forget maths as a universal subject. Offer it as an option in high school to be taken by those with some ability in dealing with abstraction.

Then have it taught by properly qualified teachers, people who actually like mathematics, are inspired by it, regard Euler and Hamilton and Riemann with the same kind of reverence that their colleagues in English regard Shakespeare and Eliot.

We have inherited an assembly line model of schools — everyone of the same age learning the same material at the same time. Never mind that many are bored: they made sense of algebra the first time they met it, and now must wait for their slower classmates.

We are not talking about a few here: up to one third of the students of any unstreamed class are bored. Ah yes, streaming, we can see where you are coming from: you want us to go back to the elite of A, B, C, D, E, F classes. No, I don't. I would like to see a school with only A classes, where the talents a student has can be developed to a standard of useful excellence.

Henry Ford invented the assembly line, and now the CEO of his company is prepared to work for a dollar a year. There must be a metaphor there somewhere. Or is it a simile?