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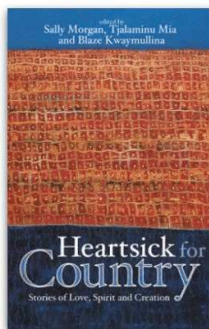
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Loving Australia's hard and soft faces

BOOKS

Toby Davidson

Morgan, Sally et al. (ed): *Heartsick for Country: Stories of Love, Spirit and Creation*. Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2008. ISBN 9781921361111



The recent Victorian bushfires have caused many Australians to ponder the nature of land, love, community and identity. Aside from the paroxysms of some in the conservative press, it has been a time of reflection with few instant answers.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press's new anthology *Heartsick for Country* is profoundly relevant in the current climate because its 16 Indigenous authors answer in a rich variety of ways the question of what it means to belong to 'country'. Their country is one whose ancient landscape and traditions of custodianship were violently disrupted well before the 2009 fires.

In some cases it is silent country. Worrima man and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Social Justice Commissioner Bill Jonas, for example, wonders what became of his ancestors at one of the early contact sites in New South Wales. And Nyungar lecturer Joe Boolgar Collard considers the colonial silencing of Indigenous environmental practices of fish stock replenishment and burning-off on pain of flogging.

Other country is not the stereotypical marriage of Indigene and 'land' in the soil-based English sense, but is composed by Indigenous cosmologies, skies, stars, oceans, rivers, dreams and cities. The final chapter even includes post-colonial interpretations of *Stars Wars* and *Star Trek* via the Death Star of Terra Nullius and Captain Kirk/Cook.

Above all, *Heartsick for Country* is about re-orientation: re-orientation to country and traditional knowledge within Indigenous peoples' lives. It also calls for a re-orientation of values and spirituality by all Australians, and for the conversations Australians must have in order to remove our dingy Age of Reason eyeglasses to see what is plainly before us. Award-winning author of *My Place* and Palyku woman, Sally Morgan, wishes Captain Cook had done this in the first place:

The Unknown South Land was supposed to be a place of untold wealth and beauty. So it was with our particular southern continent. But the kind of wealth and beauty the British desired was not immediately obvious here. Unable to read the signs, James Cook could see only too many trees and not enough paddocks.

Subsequent and enduring imperial motifs are deconstructed, as for example the explaining away of Indigenous people as 'nomads'. Palyku mother and daughter, Gladys Idjirrimoonya and Jill Milroy, suggest that it was actually the British who

not only travelled the world but became travellers in both their own and other peoples' stories. They 'dis(re)membered' them and so, like Cook, ignored the signs, the existing wisdom, before them.

Heartsick for Country is particularly generous, in some cases unprecedented, in sharing such wisdom. Oral histories, personal ancestries and traditional stories abound and contribute to a far more inclusive and uplifting experience.

Stories, such as Nyungar researcher Tjalaminu Mia's account of her encounters with woodachis ('little fellas') and a female Waagyl (rainbow serpent), take us into country undivided by the organisational imperatives of the English language. This country asks if its non-Indigenous occupants can ever pause long enough to read its signs from a non-Anglicised perspective.

Heartsick for Country asks not that we become Indigenous, but that we dare to consider Indigenous spiritual dimensions to be formally, legally, morally, psychologically, narratively and environmentally as valid as any other paradigm. Whether or not Australians can actually do this is a conversation that we must have. In the meantime this book is remarkable in its commitment to a holistic re-orientation of Australian language and value systems.

The book's wealth of stories of creation, love and yearning for place ultimately ask whether Australia is indeed 'the core of my heart, my country' as Dorothea Mackellar so famously put it. If so, then why do we consistently pillage it, from the first axe swing to buried uranium?

This is politically pertinent given the pro-development, pro-nuclear stance of the new WA Premier. But the contributors to this book are not limited to the West, and nor is its spiritual resonance. Increasing numbers of Australians are re-assessing their ties to country and coming to share, in Mia's phrase, 'a love for country ... both its hard and soft faces'.

Nicolaides free, but writers' persecution persists

HUMAN RIGHTS

Arnold Zable



[Harry Nicolaides](#)' release from a Bangkok prison, and return to Melbourne last Saturday brought to an end a harrowing six month ordeal both for Nicolaides and his family.

He should never have been jailed in the first place. The law under which he was charged, *lÃ"se-majestÃ©*, the crime of insulting the Thai monarchy, breaches article 19 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which guarantees freedom of expression. Thailand is a state signatory to the covenant.

While Nicolaides was pardoned, the law remains. On 20 January this year, the day after Nicolaides was sentenced to three years imprisonment, Giles Ji Ungpakorn, an associate professor at Chulalongkom University in Bangkok, and a contributor to [Asia Sentinel](#) and [New Statesman](#), was charged with the offence.

The complaint against Ungpakorn relates to his book *A Coup for the Rich*, in which he criticised the 2006 military coup which overthrew Thai democracy. He was given 20 days to respond to the charges, before Thai authorities decided whether his case would be referred to the courts for prosecution.

He could face between three and 15 years in prison if found guilty. Fearing the consequences, Ungpakorn, a vocal critic of the military, fled to London in early February.

[International PEN](#), one of a number of human rights groups that vigorously campaigned on Nicolaides' behalf, is concerned about the growing number of Thai citizens being charged under this law. Anyone can file a police complaint of *lÃ"se-majestÃ©* on the king's behalf. Unfortunately Thai cases do not receive a high level of attention. The Thai public is unable to judge the merits of the offences because the press runs the risk of being accused of repeating the crime by merely reporting it.

While the exact source of the accusation is yet to be determined, there is little doubt that Nicolaides was a pawn in the machinations of Thai politics. Members of the Thai military, police force and political elite appear to be using the law so that they will be seen to be currying favour with the Thai monarchy, and as a means of stifling legitimate discussion of the monarchy. The New York based [Committee to Protect Journalists](#) has pointed out that Thailand's Ministry of Information Communication and Technology closed down more than 2300 websites last month for posting materials deemed offensive to the monarchy.

According to International PEN, Harry Nicolaides' case was unusual. He was, it is believed, the first Australian writer to be imprisoned in another country because of

his writing. Most PEN cases concern writers imprisoned, harassed, threatened, exiled or murdered for the peaceful pursuit of their craft in the countries of which they are citizens. Several hundred writers languish in prison at any given time. International PEN is currently pursuing the cases of 600 journalists, novelists, poets and bloggers, imprisoned or harassed for daring to criticise their governments.

Many cases involve acts of extraordinary courage. Burmese poet and comedian Maung Thura, aged 47, popularly known by his stage name, Zargana, was sentenced in November last year to a staggering 59 years in prison after criticising the government for neglecting the victims of the cyclone that swept through lower Burma, now known as Myanmar, in May 2008, killing over 130,000 people.

Zargana has long been critic of the Burmese government. He spent time in prison in 1988 and in the early 1990s for his support for Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

Despite Chinese government promises, in the lead up to the Beijing Olympics, to honour the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which it is a signatory, more than 40 writers remain in prison on charges such as 'inciting subversion of state power' and 'publishing articles critical of the authorities'. Sentences range from three—20 years, with the majority serving sentences of over eight years.

There is particular concern about the rise of Internet writers being detained, most notably Shi Tao, serving a 10-year sentence for 'revealing state secrets' after having emailed his notes of a government briefing meeting.

On 20 January 2009, Stanislav Markelov, a lawyer for the independent newspaper [Novaya Gazeta](#), was shot dead in a Moscow street after leaving a press conference at the Independent Press Centre. His colleague, journalist Anastasiya Baburova who was walking alongside Markelov was also shot in the head, and later died in hospital.

Markelov had represented the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya before she herself was assassinated in October 2006. This month the four men accused of helping to organise her murder were acquitted by a Moscow court amid suspicion that those responsible for her death are still at large.

The release of Harry Nicolaidis is a cause for celebration and great relief. Yet it leaves many unanswered questions over the reason for his imprisonment, and also highlights the plight of many other persecuted writers. There is a need for an investigation into the circumstances of Nicolaidis' arrest so that in future the Australian government and the Minister of Foreign affairs do not again merely resort to the mantra that we cannot interfere with the judicial processes of another country.

Australian governments also need to be more concerned with the fate of

imprisoned writers in countries with which the governments are doing business. Many are courageous individuals who desperately require our representation and support.

Degrees of guilt in Nicolaides' Thai insult case

FILMS

Tim Kroenert



On 4 September 2008, I received an email from an acquaintance of Harry Nicolaides, a Thailand based, Melbourne journalist and sometime [contributor](#) to *Eureka Street*. Her tone was anxious. Harry had been arrested in Bangkok.

'He is not a criminal,' she insisted. 'He wants you to publish his story ... He is in a bad condition, physically and mentally. Please help.'

We acted immediately. Clearing the next day's edition, we contacted Canberra academics Nicholas Farrelly and Andrew Walker, experts in Thai politics and critics of the law (*lǎ̃'se majestǎ̃*, regarding insulting Thai royals) under which Harry had been arrested. Within a few hours they produced a terrific article that looked at the particulars of Harry's case and offered a critique of the *lǎ̃'se majestǎ̃* law.

'In Thailand, it is even hard to report the details of a *lǎ̃'se majestǎ̃* charge without fear of sanction,' they wrote. 'Hopefully foreign journalists will exercise their greater freedom to report on his predicament.'

That's what we intended to do. We prepared their article for publication first thing the following day. We hoped that, in our own way, we would be helping to spread good will regarding Harry and his predicament.

It wasn't to be. At 6.32 p.m. I received a second note from our correspondent: 'Please do not publish the article. If we say anything that offends the Thai government, it will not help Harry.' The sentiment was reinforced by a phone call from a relative of Harry's.

We hit the brakes. With only a mouse-click remaining to complete the process of publishing the article, we decided to abide by the request. We withdrew the article, a decision received graciously by Nich and Andrew, who later revised and published it on their [blog](#) .

Harry's story, which received much media attention in Australia, is now well known. He was sentenced, jailed, and recently pardoned. He has now returned to Australia.

All of which has what to do with this week's film review? Well, not a lot. Except that both Harry's story, and the film [The Reader](#), promote reflection on the nature of guilt.

Few would dispute that Harry was legally guilty. Those who travel are responsible for familiarising themselves with local laws. Harry, it seemed, had flaunted this one. Indeed, 'Harry doesn't want the press to condemn Thai laws,'

our correspondent insisted. 'He respects Thai law.'

On the other hand, morally speaking, Harry's guilt seemed 'small'. The charge was laid in response to a passage from a little-read book, written by Harry and published some years previously. *L'Assommoir* is 'a weapon used to defend the perceived honour of Thailand's royal family', wrote Nich and Andrew. Such a crime hardly seems worth stripping a man of his freedom. Harry's pardon would seem to vindicate the idea that his was a 'small' guilt.

In *The Reader*, too, guilt is multi-layered, and acquires varying dimensions, depending on perspective and context. The film portrays an affair between Hanna (Kate Winslett in her Oscar winning role), a middle aged, grouchy German tram conductor, and a 15-year-old boy, Michael (David Kross).

Viewers (those who have not read Bernhard Schlink's novel, or one of the many reviews, such as this one, that contain plot spoilers) might expect a dissertation on the ethical dimensions of such an affair. However the film treads a less predictable course.

Half way through, there is a time jump, and we rediscover Michael as a young adult, some time estranged from Hanna. A law student, he attends the trial of several former SS officers charged with the commission of a horrific war crime. Michael is shocked to discover that Hanna is among the defendants.

Legally, there is no doubting Hanna's guilt. But questions regarding degrees of guilt become key.

Hanna is accused of being not merely a participant in, but the ringleader of, the crime, which led to the deaths of 300 Jewish prisoners. A document alleged to have been written in Hanna's own hand is presented as evidence to implicate her. But Hanna is illiterate, and only Michael, unseen by Hanna in the courtroom, seems to know this.

And Hanna is too ashamed of her illiteracy to deny authorship of the document.

And so the distinction between being guilty and being responsible for the guilt of others determines Hanna's fate. In turn, the way Michael responds to his own knowledge brings guilt upon himself. Guilt is thus proven to be not only pliable but also communicable.

Following Harry Nicolaides' return to Australia, the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) published an opinion piece from a former colleague of Harry's, which implied that Harry's commission of *L'Assommoir* was a kind of morbid publicity stunt. That seems to be an ungracious criticism; on par with knocking the man, the moment he has regained his feet.

If there's a lesson to be learnt from *The Reader*, it's that those who do wrong remain human, regardless of the scale of their crime. Michael's personal atonement, as pursued during the latter part of the film, is bound up with his

recognition of Hanna's humanity, despite the monster that she has been.

Harry is no monster, and, guilty or not, he should not be made a cipher for implacable moral judgment. He has suffered for his 'small guilt'. He deserves his dignity.

Obama's challenge to the Church

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton



Like the rest of the United States, the Catholic Church bishops have had to deal with Barack Obama. His election was a political challenge to many of them. But his presidency also poses a deeper spiritual challenge.

During his campaigns for the Democratic nomination and then for the Presidency, the standard by which the most vocal Catholic Bishops judged Obama and the Democratic party was his position on issues of personal morality: on abortion, same sex marriages, and on the use of embryos for research.

Some bishops dramatised their focus on these issues by threatening to refuse communion to Catholic candidates who supported liberalising abortion. The majority were more circumspect.

The electoral support for Obama, including by Catholic voters, left the more aggressive bishops exposed. It also marginalised the Catholic Church in its capacity to influence the policies of the new administration, including on issues of personal morality.

The bishops responded by addressing a [letter](#) to Obama. In it they offered qualified cooperation and set out the criteria by which they would judge his policies. They reasserted the Catholic position on issues of personal morality, but also included issues of public morality, like war, poverty, and access to welfare and medical care.

But the deeper challenge that Obama would pose to the Catholic Bishops, and indeed to all church leaders, was adumbrated in his speech after being sworn in. His [speech](#) suggested that he may be more effective in appealing to deep spiritual themes than church leaders have been.

The content of his speech was properly public. He spoke of a nation in crisis that faced domestic and international problems. He called for a concerted effort to meet the difficulties. The virtues to which he called people were civic virtues.

But his powerful rhetoric was based in religious imagery. He described the journey of the nation, echoing the journey of the Israelites from Egypt into the Promised Land. He spoke of the trials of the journey, the virtue and faith of earlier generations of the American people, the present crisis, the opportunity for a new beginning, and the promise of the future. It was a powerful vision saturated in Biblical allusions.

His central point was to insist on the urgency of the times. He emphasised that 'this day' called for a change of heart, for setting aside old and tired attitudes and

embracing the new.

He dismissed those who have forgotten 'what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage. What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them — that the stale political arguments that have consumed us for so long no longer apply.'

In referring to 'stale political arguments' Obama clearly had in mind the policies and practices encouraged by the Bush administration. But his remarks also challenged the way in which many Catholics, including bishops, had engaged in public life.

They had commended life issues in negative and divisive ways, grounded them in large principles that spoke only to the converted, and appealed only to Catholic authorities. They sought to win popular support by isolating and ostracising their opponents.

Obama's challenge to all the churches, and not simply to the Catholic bishops, is to draw more fully on the resources of Christian tradition to present a large public vision in attractive terms.

This is the heart of Christian faith. Respect for human beings at the most vulnerable points of their journey is central to that vision. But it needs to be set within a compelling Christian narrative, not simply within a Christian philosophy. The narrative needs to stress both urgency and hope. Obama's 'this day', after all, echoes the powerful 'this day' of Jesus' proclamation.

Obama has done the churches a favour by stealing their clothing. He invites them to tell their central story in simple terms for a public audience, using the resources of imagery and rhetoric that the Scriptures provide. A simple and gracious vision, of course, also demands simple and gracious action in the public sphere.

Speaking as President, Barack Obama claimed that political and economic life could not return to business as usual. Whether or not his actions substantiate his claim remains to be seen. But he will be judged by how his administration lives by it.

He has thrown out the same challenge to the churches, including the American Catholic bishops, to stake their claim that the day of salvation is at hand, to find words in which to express it, and to be judged by how they embody this claim in the life of the churches.

The true history of religion on Radio National

MEDIA

Paul Collins



The public response to the [axing](#) of *The Religion Report* and other specialist programs late last year by ABC Radio National management was astonishing. Thousands of people came out to support the programs, particularly *The Religion Report*.

The response of the ABC was abysmal. As Dr Peter Pockley, founding head of the ABC Science Unit said in a letter to the *Financial Review*, 'ABC managers have failed to engage in public debate with their critics. Apart from some anodyne form letters which did not address the substantial issues, there has been no public response justifying the changes. The letters do not cite any ... evidence substantiating the axings. Managers have opted to bunker down.'

I wrote personally to the prime minister and seven weeks later received a letter from the Department of Communications. Every paragraph began 'I am advised that ...'.

The problem was that much of the 'advice' was wrong. I know because as former Specialist Editor of Religion I know the history thoroughly. The problem is that Mark Scott, managing director of the ABC, knows none of it. Originally a Fairfax manager, Scott has no experience in the electronic media, is besotted with technology and has little or no editorial and content experience.

It is time to tell the whole story because what has happened to *The Religion Report* is the tip of the iceberg and is part of a much larger picture. The real issue is about the future of a viable specialist unit covering religion in ABC radio. TV is another story.

This all goes back to the 1980s. Since then the religion unit has faced a war of attrition from secularist elements who see belief as a purely private affair with no part in public discourse. These elements came mainly but not entirely from within the ABC itself. The unit has survived and maintained its independence with support from the churches and religious communities.

In the early 1980s religious TV and radio were split. With the establishment of Radio National in 1985, the radio religion unit was placed under the management umbrella of Radio National, but was commissioned to produce programs for other networks. This arrangement was described at the time as merely a matter of administrative efficiency. The religion unit maintained its own distinct identity, editorial control and budget resources.

When changes to religious output on both Radio National and other networks were contemplated, the head of the religion unit was actively involved in

discussions regarding both the disposition of staff and the editorial content of programs. This has been made abundantly clear in a series of letters from management and the Board.

In a July 1993 letter to Cardinal Edward Clancy the then chairman, Mark Armstrong said: 'I can assure you that religious broadcasting is at the core of Radio National's output. We are proud of these programs and indeed a reflection of the public's interest in these matters is that we have growing numbers of listeners to our religion output.'

Essentially the present controversy has erupted because Dr Jane Connors, the current head of Radio National, and her executive group, have taken a decision to alter significantly the editorial and staffing arrangements of the religion unit without consultation with the executive producer of religious programs. Connors is operating on the assumption that the religion unit as well as its budget and staff are at the sole disposal of one network, Radio National.

This is inconsistent with past practice. It affects the capacity of the unit to maintain its output across other networks and maintain specialist depth. Most significantly it raises the question of whether the unit has any discrete existence, or is now simply a group of program makers within Radio National to be disposed of as its manager decides.

This decision is driven by ideology. It springs from a post-modern, secularist belief that religion is dying, is marginal to life and doesn't impact on the key issues that influence our world. When you point out that religion has become a central issue in post 9/11 politics, secularists shift ground and say: 'Well, it can be covered by general journalists in current affairs'. This is based on the belief that any journalist can do everything.

What has happened subsequently? A unique ecumenical group of religious leaders including the Anglican, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim and Uniting communities, with support from other religious traditions, got together and wrote to Scott on 15 December 2008 requesting a meeting. Scott didn't reply until 28 January 2009 and eventually met them on 6 February.

The religious leaders asked Scott that the ABC (1) maintain a religious program unit with appropriate staff, editorial and budget resources; (2) return a dedicated religious current affairs program to the schedule along the lines of *The Religion Report* under the editorial control of the religion unit; (3) that specialist religious journalists continue to be employed and supported by the ABC.

Scott's responses were totally inadequate. He put the whole issue on an even longer finger saying that decisions would have to wait until a new head of radio was appointed in the middle of 2009. So we're back to square one.

Two comments: clearly this matter will have to be taken up politically, especially with the ABC's triennial funding up for review very soon. And it would be ironic if a

discrete religion unit disappeared while a self-confessed, practicing evangelical Christian was managing director.

Against the waning of bushfire grief

COMMUNITY

Gillian Bouras



An Australian long resident in Greece, I keep my gaze steadily fixed on the Wide Brown Land, which has now been doing its worst with regard to fire and flood for longer than anyone cares to think about. Dorothea McKellar would surely agree that the terror has been very much outweighing the beauty of late. Even as I write there is a huge fire raging on Wilson's Promontory, and NSW and Queensland continue to drown.

I am an email addict, and so it is easy for me to keep my finger on that faraway Antipodean pulse. My friends in country and city post almost daily in order to keep me informed as to how matters are developing.

My brother, who has been working with the SES, tells me of things that do not occur to me, such as the eerie silence in the burnt-out bush: there are no birds.

But he also tells me of the quirks of Fate: no birds except for some chooks that had a miraculous escape, as did their owners, who later collected 40 eggs. (Were they hard-boiled, wondered my brother?) The conscientious slog put in by the police in their search for the missing. The comforting and efficient organisational skills of the auxiliary service people, who are doing a sterling job of keeping the workers housed, fed and watered.

At the end of a long email, my brother, who wept on his return home, wrote: 'We did nothing wonderful or heroic, but we helped, and that is why we went.' He and his team may go again, in several weeks' time, and no doubt the efforts of huge numbers of helpers will still be going on.

And yet, my other correspondents are now ruefully commenting on the less attractive aspects of human nature. When I wrote some days ago that we simply had to maintain our compassion, one friend agreed, but noted that the recriminations had already started, and that 'the knives are out'. Another castigated herself for her own creeping numbness, despite the continuing reports of suffering, sorrow and danger.

This is the way it seems to be, always; perhaps it is a harsh fact that humans can take only so much of the adrenalin rush, and thus have only a limited amount of sympathy to give, with not much left over for later.

Most people over the age of 50 have experienced bereavement, and it is often noted that when the crisis is at its height, suffering people show remarkable courage, while those near to them demonstrate great sympathy in giving solace. But when the funeral meats have gone, and when even the closest mourners begin to pick up the threads of their own lives, the bereaved person is left to face

the long haul, often alone.

The Greek way of death involves the ritual replaying of grief. Memorial services are held eight, and then 40 days after a death, and then again at six months and a year. Grief is renewed, and an adrenalin flow is almost forced, I think, but there is a noticeable winding down of both with each successive occasion.

The mourners gather once more to support the bereaved, and empathy reasserts itself; some acceptance of absence and loss also begins to take place as a result of the repeated process.

Somehow, traditional societies learned long ago what grief counsellors learned only recently. The Greek method allows people to reshape themselves after loss, so that they can carry on living.

At times of crisis, there is usually a strong and spontaneous reaction of generous fellow-feeling: there, but for the grace of God, go I. But it is only natural that the intensity should die away. The Greek process, it seems to me, accomplishes this diminishing effectively.

Human kind cannot bear too much reality, and both pain and memory have to be blunted, for psychic survival cannot happen otherwise. But sympathy and empathy should remain fresh, if at all possible. Maintaining the freshness of both is often hard work. But it is very necessary.

But really, it doesn't even have to be too hard. All we have to do is remind ourselves that we all bleed in the same way.

Westgate sister

POETRY

Margaret McCarthy

We are both middle-aged.
My span is widening,
as are your lanes.
I'm having my greys done;
you are being checked
for metal fatigue.
I wear jeans and t-shirts —
fashionable but modest.
You wear lurid,
yellow windsocks
to complement your grey,
all-weather foundations,
and you cover your street lights
with flowerpot hats
in a manner I can only call brave.
When it rains,
you cloak your figure
with a fine organza veil —
a negligee to tempt the silver sky.
In the post-rain sun,
the glass of car windows sparkle
in the headwrap of your tiara.
Your twin peaks lift and separate.
I watch you,
as if you were applying lipstick in the mirror, and
I see me
Only bigger, bolder, and beautiful.

Still, when young,
we were works-in-progress.
When your construction was in its tenth year,
I was seven.
I sat under you. I had no front teeth.
My fringe was tight across my forehead,
kept put with a single bobby.
My clothes were your hand-me-downs:
belt buckles, pressed nickel buttons,
metal zips that no longer slid
up along their track.
I was born whole, if immature.
Some days it pleased me that your progress lagged.
You had arrived adult-sized but in pieces.
You were unable to clap,
like a baby in a brace.
My teasing never slowed you.
Unworried by my completeness,
you leaned across, reached, stretching,
desperate to catch up.
It took a toll, your wiry fingers and bitten nails.
The lives spent for you.
The money.
And yet when your two steady hands finally met,
you looked, not as if you had grown up overnight,
but as if you'd always been that way:
mature, well-rounded, over-developed.
Your bend,
the curve of the famed siren with one rib removed,
makes you different from all the others of your kind.

Your graceful swirls are held by girders *en pointe*.
So fine is your connection to the earth
my arms would fit around your toes or
the top of your thighs if I were ever to hug you.
Tug boats, rubber bellied midwives,
know your territorial waters.
Ships sail between your knees —
and you let them.
I look on knowingly at your disasters.
I listen to your full orchestral detail
Of the short-fallings of the men who made you.
Inwardly, I'm thankful for my life of
selecting fabric softener,
ironing flat the heels of my shoes.
But there are times,
growing more frequent
as I pass through half-life,
when I want to fly up where you are,
above the flat industrial rooves,
and the mossy pitched tiles of home,
over the swimming pool tubs of oil
lining the river mouth;
drift as far as the geometric pattern cuttings of the docks
where the Yarra Yarra and the Maribyrnong
meet sleeve-to-bodice, tacked with cable fibres,
snipped in notches at the underarm.
I want, as you dreamed in our childhood,
to be blown about by high cross-winds,
to be wooed by the Spirit of Tasmania
and the occasional QE2,

to loosen my lips and kiss
the perimeter lip of the bay
without straining.

The language of fire

MEDIA

Philip Harvey

Melbourne had the strange experience, this February, of reading and listening to bushfire reports for five days while neither seeing nor smelling smoke.

1983 was a very different memory. On that Ash Wednesday night the metropolitan area was completely covered with strong eucalyptus smoke. Blackened leaves and twigs flew overhead, many still burning, to land in streets, on roofs and in gardens.

But this February, the senses felt an absence. The body lived with emotional responses but had no sensory backup connections. The winds kept blowing north. Everything was happening over the horizon. Melbourne lived the fires in its head.

When the mind has no sensory leads to interpret, words become critical. On the fourth day, Tuesday, Michael Leunig published a cartoon. It was a white rectangle containing just two things: the image of a tapering green gum leaf, and above the leaf five words, 'her beauty and her terror'.

The picture was primal. In the retreat of his mind Leunig asked for a line of poetry that helped somehow to fix what was happening everywhere around Melbourne. The green leaf represents beauty, but unstated and by implication the terror is the flaming leaf, literally a taper, falling wherever in ember attack.

Leunig knew that the line comes from a poem learnt by most Australian schoolchildren, Dorothea Mackellar's 'My Country'. By stripping the poem of its panoramic elation, we were confronted with the essence of Mackellar's vision. Again at breakfasts across Melbourne, the question was asked, 'How does Leunig get it so right?' Black humour and sentimentalism, typical Leunig features, were missing; the cartoon used the pure elements of the moment to make a notice. By week's end 'Her Beauty and Her Terror' was being used in headlines and articles like a talisman.

Effective words from leaders are part of the definition of statesmanship. Premier John Brumby's powerful warnings to stay at home on Saturday and not to drive in the country no longer sounded alarmist by Sunday morning.

The Prime Minister travelled quickly to Victoria. One of his prepared lines became the sentence of the moment, here and overseas: 'Hell in all its fury has visited the good people of Victoria.' It is a consolidated line. Kevin Rudd is half-remembering William Congreve's lines, 'Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned.' The verb 'visited' is unusual, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was thinking of its use in the King James Bible, 'The Dayspring from on high hath visited us,' words from Luke's Gospel often



heard at Christmas.

Rudd uses 'archaic' English to establish authority and meaning. 'The good people of Victoria' might normally be heard as ironic or even sarcastic, especially coming from a Queenslander. But in the context the expression served several purposes. It was an inclusive statement, all Australians are with Victoria and necessarily own what is happening. To say people are good means they are not malicious, the fires are not their fault. The manicheans and doomsayers in our midst will not have the day. Good people deserve our assistance in such circumstances. Rudd, too, is warning against the language of blame.

Malcolm Turnbull did not get off to a good start. He said he was at a loss for words about the bushfires. We all knew what he felt, no one was about to say they could adequately explain or describe what was going on. But leaders have to say something, not nothing.

His second attempt was to describe the fires as a 'terrible beauty'. Was he thinking of the transformative line in W. B. Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916' ('All changed, changed utterly/A terrible beauty is born')? Or was he just mangling MacKellar? Hard to tell. There is no arguable connection between the Easter Rising in Dublin and bushfire, and we don't know if he had seen the Leunig. But to give Turnbull his due, he was at least reaching after words to describe the scale of the disaster, its awesomeness.

ABC Radio kept up a permanent report of all the fires. Fire lines were described in exact detail. Lonely hills and remote road intersections in the bush became the focus of intense analysis. The names of familiar towns, mountains and valleys suddenly provoked surprise and concern.

When a distressed man rang through to say something very serious was happening at Kinglake, it was a new name to add to the watch list. Only later did Melbourne come to the realisation that within half an hour of that call, most of Kinglake had been destroyed. Like most people later, I sat asking, How fast is that? What does fast mean? What kind of fire are we talking about here? Fast?

The Dresden word 'firestorm' was accurate in terms of fire behaviour, but firestorm has become misused in the media simply to mean any big fierce fire. Kinglake was different. Witnesses said it was a fireball and who am I back in Melbourne but to respect their testimony?

The fire was like nothing in living memory. But 'fireball' made me think. The English vocabulary for bushfire is limited. My imagination could not get past flying meteorites in sci-fi movies, or the antics of that lunatic rocker Jerry Lee Lewis. I had to think deeper.

During the week people talked about introducing a fire grading system, Levels 1–5. What words would be employed for each Level? Total Fire Ban means what it says, but a fireball is not the same. One can only ponder on all the various words

for fire that must have existed in ancient Indigenous languages.

In the first week of the fires everyone started telling stories, to family and friends, but also to strangers in shops, on trams and trains, at work and over lunch. The Weather Bureau gave Melbourne its daily one word prediction for the next day. Sunny, Windy, Cloudy. Everyone dreaded another hot day. Showers appeared only in dreams.

But for Friday, the seventh day of the fires, the Bureau made a satisfactory call for realism. Indeed, it was a relief to read the change, just one word: 'Smokehaze'.

Corruption may undermine Khmer Rouge justice

POLITICS

Sebastian Strangio

On 17 February, a gaunt former school teacher walked into a packed courtroom in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, flanked by lawyers and lit by the flashes of the international press corps.

Amid the procedural banalities of the ensuing hearing, an observer could be forgiven for mistaking the momentous nature of the event: more than 30 years after its overthrow by an invading Vietnamese army, a senior leader of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime was sitting in the dock in a duly constituted court of law.



Kang Kek Ieu, better known by his revolutionary alias Duch, was the self-confessed chief of Phnom Penh's notorious Tuol Sleng prison, which oversaw the torture and eventual execution of as many as 16,000 'enemies' of the revolution. The court has also indicted a further four senior Khmer Rouge, who are set to face trial for the deaths of the estimated 1,700,000 people who perished under the regime during 1975–79.

But the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) — a hybrid court combining local and international staff — has set itself a mandate that goes far beyond the goal of rendering impartial verdicts.

According to its website, the ECCC intends that the trials will help 'ease the burden that weighs on the survivors', as well as 'strengthen our rule of law and set an example to people who disobey the law in Cambodia and to cruel regimes worldwide'.

But both these aims of judicial reform and historical catharsis vastly overrate the demonstrative power of international justice in the current Cambodian context.

Abstract norms of international justice have virtually no precedent in Cambodia, where in the 1970s a nascent modern judicial system was smothered in the cradle by the Khmer Rouge. Nominally independent, the judiciary today is in practice wholly subservient to the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

This reflects the nature of the one-party state and the piecemeal democratisation that has taken place since the UN-brokered elections of 1993. Despite the halting progress of the ECCC, politically-motivated shootings of journalists and trade union leaders continue to go unpunished.

Whether even a flawlessly impartial ECCC trial could reform such a system of engrained patronage is an open question. Indeed the opposite seems to be the case. Yash Gai, the former United Nations human rights envoy to Cambodia, wrote in *The Standard* on 8 February that 'the weakness and corruption within the

national legal system have infected the ECCC, instead of the ECCC influencing the conduct of local judges and prosecutors’.

International observers now recognise that corruption threatens to jeopardise the entire court process. Last week, the New York-based Open Society Justice Initiative released a statement [slamming](#) political interference and corrupt employment practices in the court, calling on officials to take ‘aggressive action to respond to the allegations of corruption’.

As well as being among the most corrupt in the world, Cambodia’s judiciary is also among the worst-funded. According to a 2008 report by the Centre for Social Development, a local legal watchdog, the court system received only 0.28 per cent of the national budget in 2008 — a total of just US\$3.3 million. The ECCC, on the other hand, has a projected budget of \$135.4 million for the trial of just five suspects.

As the report rightly noted, the disparity in funding raised the question of whether the ECCC is ‘a relevant model for local courts, as insufficient funding surely must impact the ability of national courts to render proper justice’.

Whether the court can deliver ‘healing’ is a more subjective question. In many cases, the open wounds left by the Khmer Rouge era have yet to be staunched, with thousands of known murderers living in the same villages as the relatives of their victims.

A [recent survey](#) conducted by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, found that the majority of Cambodians still harbour feelings of hatred towards these former Khmer Rouge members. Nearly half of the 1000 respondents said they were uncomfortable living in the same community with former Khmer Rouge members. More than 70 per cent said they wanted to see former cadres suffer in some way.

At the same time, however, 85 per cent said they had no or little knowledge of the ECCC, and a scant 5 per cent could name the five accused leaders.

Prince Sisowath Thomico, an outspoken member of Cambodia’s royal family who lost his parents and eldest daughter to the Khmer Rouge, said he had no faith the process would provide any more than cursory justice for their deaths. ‘I don’t believe ... that the tribunal will give me justice,’ he told me in November. ‘And millions of Cambodians will have the same answer.’

To be sure, bringing war-criminals to justice is an important aim for the international community. But in Cambodia, a post-conflict society that as yet lacks the political and economic underpinnings necessary to support Enlightenment notions of justice, such institutions may simply slump into the contours of existing corrupt practice. Or, perhaps worse, they may remain incomprehensible to those in whose name they have been set up.

The experience of the ECCC in Cambodia sounds a warning about saddling

international war-crimes tribunals with an unbearable weight of expectation.

Coalition lone dreamers fuel Rudd dictatorship

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Regrettably Friday's inaugural United Nations [World Day of Social Justice](#) passed quietly.

The observance was adopted unanimously by the 192 member states of the United Nations during their November 2007 General Assembly. To achieve a 'society for all', the governments committed to a 'framework for action to promote social justice at national, regional and international levels'. They also pledged to promote 'the equitable distribution of income and greater access to resources through equity and equality and opportunity for all'.

The international Union of Superiors General of Catholic religious orders asked in its [message](#) for the World Day: 'What has your government done to move this commitment forward?'

Underlying the UN resolution creating the World Day was the overarching need to hold governments accountable for what they do or don't do. This is an absolute requirement in achieving a society that is 'for all' rather than for the pleasure of governments themselves.

In the context of the corrupt regimes the UN has in mind, the notion of a 'Rudd dictatorship' is obviously far-fetched. But as state voters in New South Wales know all too well, arrogant and self-indulgent government can and does arise in apparently advanced democracies such as Australia.

This occurs most often when the government becomes conceited because the opposition is distracted, or incapable of challenging the government in parliament or in the polls.

Our Federal Opposition is indeed in bad shape at present, making conditions right for the emergence of the said Rudd dictatorship.

At the beginning of last week, deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop announced she was giving up the role of Shadow Treasurer after it became clear she had consistently failed to challenge the government on economic management.

The public was then led to believe that opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull had been unsuccessful in his bid to replace her with the Coalition's 'best person for the job'. Publicly visible disunity, and a further front bench resignation, ensued.

Self-indulgence is also at the root of the Opposition's failure, if we accept that Julie Bishop's original appointment as Shadow Treasurer was not on merit, but part of a sweetheart deal to secure her vote for Malcolm Turnbull as Liberal Party leader.



As it happens, the largely ignored United Nations Day of Social Justice, and the task of the crumbling Federal Opposition, are not entirely unrelated. For both, holding governments accountable is the name of the game, or perhaps dream.

The Union of Superiors General message for the World Day of Social Justice quotes the words of Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx: 'What you dream alone remains a dream, what you dream with others can become a reality.'

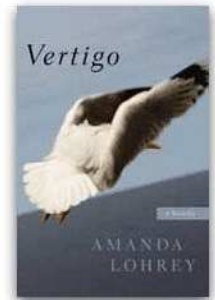
It appears that the Federal Opposition is a bunch of lone dreamers, when good government 'for all' Australians requires collective dreaming.

Living with Australia's beauty and terror

BOOKS

Tony Smith

**Lohrey, Amanda: *Vertigo*. Black Inc, Melbourne 2008.
ISBN 9781863953191**



The Victorian bushfire tragedies suggest that Dorothea Mackellar was right. Except for works by Indigenous people, Australian literature has one deep and abiding theme — the continent's 'beauty and her terror'.

A writer's concern might seem to be primarily psychological or social or political, but the constant motivation is to interpret the ways in which living in this place of contrasting landscapes and climates influences the human condition.

Amanda Lohrey's novella *Vertigo* addresses this question directly but its subtleties should not be overlooked.

Luke and Anna, editors of corporate and legal documents, have portable skills but modest incomes. Life in mortgage-obsessed Sydney threatens to make them, especially Anna, 'anxiously acquisitive', corroding her good will towards the world.

That most acidic of beasts, envy, had a fang-hold on her heart. She was past 30, she was in a spiritual impasse and she needed to find a way out of it.

When she develops asthma — 'an invisible vampire' — they decide to go bush into 'a mysterious limbo, a potential space waiting to be filled'. Readers of Lohrey's 1995 novel *Camille's Bread* will not be surprised at how skilfully Lohrey evokes lives in limbo.

As they drive 'the boy' materialises more often than he had in the city. The reader shares their quest to deal with this apparition and to understand what he represents.

They happen upon the hamlet of Garra Nalla by a river and lagoon near the sea. This is a place of beauty, with flowering gums that make a 'palette of pinks and orange and gold' and she-oaks that provide 'a subtle blur of fine filaments ... drooping to the ground in wispy canopies'. Garra Nalla has escaped development because a rip on the beach claims lives regularly.

They pack a sophisticated espresso machine, but otherwise they adapt quickly to their old weatherboard house: preoccupied with saving water in an area that has experienced seven years of drought, cooking on a fuel stove, becoming involved in their neighbours' lives.

Luke delights in identifying birds and when one, fearless, stares back at him, 'a current passes between them, a soundless exchange of energy'. Luke is ecstatic

because he feels so at home.

Anna experiences greater doubts. The boy becomes elusive. She decides to plant casuarinas, against the advice of Gil, a neighbour, who calls them a fire hazard. She-oaks propagate after fire: 'Australia, it seems, is a land of phoenix trees — fertile in extremity.' When Luke teases her about trying to 'design' a random layout, Anna admits that while it can never be bush, 'we can meet the bush halfway'.

When the fire comes, possibly ignited by forestry management, Anna wonders whether the smoke will aggravate her asthma. Conditions deteriorate gradually in the heat and wind and they take the usual precautions, blocking downpipes, storing water, soaking towels.

Soot and embers soon announce the urgency of the situation as the power fails, despite their neighbour's assurance that fires 'never reach the coast'. But this one does. Homes are burnt and lives threatened.

As Anna and Luke face this crisis, Lohrey draws together the numerous themes she has packed into this densely rich novella — the boy, the limbo and the quest to belong. 'Dawn brings an eerie, smouldering calm', but far from being cloudy or grey, Lohrey's prose is bright and sparkling. In the fire's aftermath, the people of Garra Nalla rally to support one another and, inevitably, to reassess their values and priorities.

In contrast to the shallow sentimentality which often underlies tabloid television coverage of tragedy and natural disaster, Lohrey's sensitive writing explains much about our relationship to the bush. Perhaps it is difficult for outsiders to understand, but rebuilding devastated communities must be a national priority. Like the plaques in small town halls honouring fallen soldiers, this project is embedded in the national psyche.

US halts orphans from Vietnam

HUMAN RIGHTS

Sarah Nichols

It was another humid day at the orphanage when we noticed a van pull up outside. We were playing with the children in the cement playground, an enclosed area protecting us from the sun. Through the dimness into the bright light of the entrance we saw that a group of Americans had arrived to collect their adoptive Vietnamese babies.



The potential parents emerged, some holding video cameras, laughing and talking nervously. Six babies whom we, as volunteers, had been playing with, feeding and generally 'watching over' were leaving. And 20 minutes later, after a rushed ceremony and a few brief conversations, they were taken away to their new lives.

A couple of months later another group of children were going to be adopted and we gave ten-year-old twin boys extra English tuition to prepare them. They were very thin boys and, like most of the children, had hair lice and black, gappy teeth. Their American adoptive mother sent me photos to show them the wealthy, middle class lifestyle which would soon be theirs.

One day, however, we arrived to find a thin, graceful looking woman sitting and talking with the twins. It turned out that she was their 'birth' mother, who had trekked from her village in the mountains to the orphanage to say goodbye.

Through an interpreter, she told us that, being single, she could not afford to look after them. At first she had agreed to let one be adopted, but when the adoptive mother pursued both children, she had eventually resigned herself to losing both. She told us she did it so they could have a better life. She gave the boys a letter she'd written, explaining why she did it, and asked them to return one day.

Later I learnt that it might not have been her idea to send the boys away in the first place. She may have been approached and encouraged to by orphanage staff. In 2007 the USA Embassy conducted a thorough investigation and found that the way children came to be put up for adoption was being adversely affected by financial arrangements between adoption service providers (ASPs) in the USA and orphanages.

The donation agreements between ASPs and orphanages are private and negotiable. Some orphanage directors admitted there was a strong financial incentive to maximise the number of children available for adoption. The USA report states:

If the ASP funds a \$10,000 project and the per-child donation is set at \$1000,

then the orphanage would be required to refer ten children ... Should the orphanage not have ten children ... the orphanage director is required to find the additional children to complete their side of the agreement.

Two orphanage directors have confirmed to consular officials that they are feeling pressured to find more children for their orphanage to 'compensate' ASPs for their donations.

A child can be classified as an orphan in two ways: by relinquishment (the parent or parents sign off all rights to the child), or by abandonment (the child is found abandoned and a search fails to locate their parents). Since 2005 the number of 'abandoned' children has suddenly increased. Some orphanage officials admitted that desertions were being staged to conceal the identity of the birth parents.

In the cases of relinquishment 75 per cent of the birth parents stated that, in addition to receiving payments for food, medical care and administrative expenses, they also received money for placing their child in the orphanage. On average this was 6,000,000 Vietnamese Dong, which is the equivalent of 11 months salary.

Most of them stated that they had not previously considered giving their children to an orphanage. Many were also told their child would visit frequently, would return at a certain age, or would send money from the US.

In June 2008 the USA Adopted Children's Immigrant Visa Unit declared that there would be no new adoptions taking place between the USA and Vietnam. Their report found 'cases have frequently been tainted by corruption due to weaknesses in the Vietnamese adoption system':

We will continue to encourage Vietnam to join the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoptions and undertake measures that will advance Vietnam's ability to meet Hague obligations.

While it's positive that fewer children will be removed unnecessarily from their families, it leaves the children currently in orphanages in an environment that would be considered unacceptable by Australian standards. Hygiene and nutrition are poor, and most of the children suffer emotionally from not being in a family.

The worst case I saw was a two-year-old boy who, for months, was unresponsive to any interaction, showing extreme psychological stress.

Months after I left Vietnam, one of the adopting mothers I had met sent me an email. She attached a new photo of her son who looked happy and well cared for. He has opportunities now that he didn't have before. But will it ever be possible to say whether having a privileged life was worth the cost?

Weddings, addictions and embarrassing afflictions

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Rachel Getting Married*: 113 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Jonathan Demme. Starring: Anne Hathaway, Rosemarie DeWitt, Mather Zickel, Bill Irwin, Tunde Adebimpe**

Idiopathic hyperhydrosis an embarrassing and unpleasant affliction. Discussion of it does not constitute polite conversation in any but the most intimate of social circles.

I discovered this from experience. Even technical-sounding explanations featuring phrases such as 'overactive sympathetic nervous system' and 'inordinate quantities of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine' do little to stifle the listener's distaste.



So I'll spare the details. Suffice it to say that by the time I arrive at the cinema complex, after a ride on a tram packed and muggy with smelly sports fans (the city is crawling with Australian Open tourists), and a short jog through the 39-degree heat (a strategy against tardiness), I am icky, sticky, and more than a little self-conscious.

I'm here for a screening of the finely observed domestic drama, *Rachel Getting Married*. As the film commences it occurs to me that perhaps my obvious but unmentionable discomfort gives me some insight into the central character.

Kym (Hathaway) is the flaky sister of the titular bride (DeWitt). Her affliction is more serious and debilitating than mine: she's a recovering addict, home from rehab to help celebrate Rachel's nuptials.

There's a superficial niceness to the proceedings that, with the arrival of Kym, seems smeared with a sickly sheen. From the time of her return to her family home, amid a hubbub of guests and preparations, Kym is the proverbial leper, object in equal parts of pity and repulsion.

Yes, I reflect, mopping my brow. I know how that feels.

On the subject of embarrassing afflictions, here's another: I get motion sickness during movies. That's a shameful admission for a film reviewer to make, although it only occurs during films with shaky hand-held camera work, or if I am sitting too close to the front.

Rachel Getting Married has the former — director Demme approaches the everyday interactions between family and friends, and the preparations for the celebration itself, with a realist, almost documentary approach. An effective cinematic technique, certainly. But, for me, conducive to queasiness.

To make matters worse, due to my lateness and the resultant lack of spare

seats, I have found myself sitting not only too close to the front, but off to the side in an oddly oblong cinema, so that the screen is nauseatingly close at one end, dizzyingly distant at the other.

My proximity to this looming parallelogram has a psychological as well as a physiological impact; it heightens the film's emotional distortions. Kym's father, Paul (Irwin) is over-protective of Kym, and fond to a fault; overcompensation, perhaps — it could be that he feels responsible for his daughter's ill-chosen paths.

Meanwhile, Kym and Rachel are close as sisters can be. Yet Kym's self-centredness, and Rachel's long harboured hurt and anger towards her sister, scar the warm bond they share.

Even Kym's newly commenced sort-of love affair with nice guy Kieran (Zickel) has its dysfunctions — not only is Kieran a member of her 12 Step support group, he is also, coincidentally, best man at the wedding.

Ugly revelations are to come. There is tragedy in this family's history, connected to, but far greater than, Kym's struggle with addiction. This is the stampeding elephant in the room. It means all the superficial niceness is churning and darkly gaseous underneath.

I know how that feels, too. My own discomforts are exacerbated by the length and detail Demme applies to the film's backdrop, the wedding — an annoying, bohemian-lite affair, with a tumble of musician and artist friends pitching in, and a spontaneous, *a cappella* Neil Young cover at the altar by groom Sidney (Adebimpe).

I like Neil Young, but that gesture is one slice too many of pungent cheese. By the time the closing credits arrive I am well and truly ready to depart.

Don't get me wrong; *Rachel at the Wedding* is a good film, with strong performances, particularly from Hathaway. But it is uncomfortable viewing, and I've had all the discomfort I can take for today.

Why we forgot the Apology

INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Myrna Tonkinson

The first anniversary of the National Apology to the stolen generations and other Indigenous Australians passed with little fanfare last week.

The muted recognition of the anniversary was undoubtedly partly due to the tragic bushfires in Victoria, which continue, understandably, to monopolise the country's attention and emotional energy.

But the lack of major celebrations may also reflect the fact that the momentous event of February 2008 has not been followed up by significant developments in Indigenous affairs.

Despite the widespread, though by no means unanimous, approval of the Labor Government's move to make the Apology its first Parliamentary action, no one would have expected that much measurable improvement would occur quickly. Although the Apology was important, its immediate effects were symbolic and psychological, rather than material.

In her 2008—9 [Budget Statement](#), Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, undertook to implement policies that would 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in 'living standards, life expectancy and education, health and employment'.

These gaps are chasms, Most people who know about the conditions prevailing among much of the Indigenous population understand that measurable results will take time. Many of those who feel Australia has an obligation to right wrongs, however, feel widespread impatience and disappointment.

Some blame 'welfarism' and dependency, argue that the Government should adopt a tough love' solution, or locate in the private sector Indigenous Australians' best hope.

Others argue that the complex and seemingly intractable problems that beset Indigenous Australians require acknowledgement of historical abuses, of continuing social exclusion and of systemic inequality. They also require a suite of responses, including ensuring that Australia's Indigenous citizens enjoy equal rights.

Labor's continuation of many of the measures adopted by Howard's intervention is contentious. Vocal opponents in Alice Springs, Yuendumu, Katherine and the Top End are challenging the measures.

Others adopt the 'stop whinging and get on with your life' position. They feel



Aboriginal people should now stop expecting the state to do things for them.

This view is reminiscent of calls by some people in the US for black Americans to acknowledge that, with the election of Obama, racism is dead. So they should take responsibility for their own conditions, despite glaring evidence of the enduring effects of their past subjugation and exclusion.

In both cases, the success of a visible few is used as a stick to beat the many for their enduring disadvantage. Sometimes the successful join the detractors in vilifying their less fortunate kindred.

Unquestionably many successful Indigenous people are to be found in academia, public service, business, the arts and the professions. Some share the frustration and impatience of other Australians who believe it's time for Aboriginal people to move on, to take responsibility for their destinies, to stop being victims.

But success in a competitive environment is never attained single-handed. Even a cursory examination of the people our society deems successful shows that they had varying degrees of advantage.

Perhaps the most potent form of advantage is to be born into successful families with the means, motivation and models to attain high goals. For many Indigenous Australians, these advantages do not exist. They must find alternative pathways to what society deems success.

The health gap which government intends to close is emblematic of the size of the challenge. The health of the Indigenous population is woeful. To close that gap requires not only improved medical services, but that we find ways to undo inter-generational health problems such as the impact of poor nutrition on maternal health and on the vital organs, growth and development and immune systems.

Another gap, which Minister Macklin does not mention, is the lack of knowledge, understanding and trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

During the week of the anniversary of the National Apology, Reconciliation Australia released the [results](#) of a survey conducted in mid-2008. A large sample of Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians took part in the survey, which among other things examined the two groups' attitudes to each other.

Despite many shared values, the survey found low levels of trust from each groups towards members of the other. This finding, after years of efforts by organisations like Reconciliation Australia, and by high profile individuals from each group, points to a need for much effort, on many fronts, for the foreseeable future.

Let us hope that by the 10th anniversary there will be much to celebrate, with many significant milestones reached between now and then.

The crash of the can market

ECONOMICS

Julian Butler

On Smith Street, an archetypal inner suburban street, rain fell on the corrugated supermarket veranda.

It was about a month after the sub-prime market collapsed. Underneath the verandah the regulars, and others in need of a meal, sipped hot soup or munched on sausages. From behind the BBQ I asked one of the regulars if he had collected any aluminium cans in the past week.

'No, not this week.' He glanced up.

'The rain?' I suggested.

'Nup,' interjected another bloke, 'no point anymore.'

'Yeah,' continued the first, 'scrap dealer says China doesn't want aluminium now.'

We were at a St Vinnies' soup van on a street that brings together an eclectic mix of bohemians, disadvantaged and homeless. It is a hub for drug users, residents of surrounding housing commission flats, as well as a large Aboriginal community.

A number of the van's regular clients collect aluminium cans. They then sell them on to a scrap dealer who has them melted for recycling.

This is by no means the easiest way to make a buck. Although they can collect cans from many places, they have to lug them home (often on the back of a push bike), sort them, and transport them again to the dealer.

Usually this work supplements the welfare income they live on. The extra income allows for a few luxuries, but, more importantly, they get a sense of fulfillment from their work. Collecting and selling the cans requires knowledge, expertise, connections.

No longer, though. The financial crisis meant that the demand for raw materials dried up. So the dealer halved the price he offered for the cans.

This is a small illustration of the interconnected world in which we live. In so much of the debate surrounding the recent market collapses and economic stagnation, 'Wall Street' and 'Main Street' have been cast at polarities. This belies the more complex reality of the connection between the financial centres of the world and my mates on Smith Street.

Open, global markets offer the best opportunity for prosperity for all people around the globe. Any and all solutions in what the Prime Minister has described



as a new epoch, must strive for transparent, well regulated markets with a social policy that integrates into them as many members of society as possible. This is the best hope, indeed the only sustainable model, for those living in poverty in the developing and the developed world.

To attempt to insulate the men at the soup van from the tumults of the market would equally exclude them from the range of benefits the market provides. Correctly regulated markets offer the fulfilment and satisfaction of the aluminium can market on a vast stage.

In this context Kevin Rudd's proposal for twenty thousand new units of social housing is economically sound and, therefore, compassionate policy. It gives hope to the human heart, and stability to the economic individual.

The government will also need to provide services to entrench this new, relative, stability. For 'stability' in social housing is always shaky. A full range of adequate services must surround people to encourage them to deal with social, psychological and emotional issues. From here they can be supported into the job market.

This is no easy process. It is a road strewn with evidence of human failing. Yet, if this truly is a new epoch, the imperative to act is here, now. The imperative is to bring more people into a market that has provided so much — not simply materially, but socially too. More leisure time, communication, choice and flexibility.

Markets must be judged on the support they provide, not to abstract ideas, but to individuals throughout the world. Governments must be held responsible for ensuring these markets are open as well as transparent and well regulated. They must also be held responsible for providing the opportunities and benefits of these markets to all their citizens.

My friends on Smith Street want to start buying and selling cans again. There are many like them who, with the right infrastructure and support, would jump at the chance to engage in employment and consumption in the market from which so many have benefited. The cross bench parties must continue to demand the provision of these opportunities from Rudd and his government.

Ash Wednesday 1983

POETRY

Marlene Marburg and Grant Fraser

Ours

There are no shoes, no walls or boundaries.

Hot, black feet stand equally
on the ashen face of earth,
where mountain ash last week
made worship easy. Today
spindly charcoal arms reach
from embers to a clear blue sky.

All looks well in Doncaster,
but thirty minutes north east,
a fire licks with legion tongues,
feather and fur, possession
and possessor. It mocks,
spitting fire four kilometres down wind,
random as the massacre of Hoddle Street.

There is nothing to be done but
bare the soles of feet and stand
fearful on the earth and urn,
listen to a lone, dull voice;
the cry from somewhere in hot breathless smoke.

Five persons huddle
in the front seat of a ute, disconnected
from everything that doesn't matter.

My God, this country holds the souls
of only those who can stand in ash and flood,
and who feel chaos draw the deep shared moan.

Marlene Marburg

Ash Wednesday 1983

On Ash Wednesday 1983, sixty-eight Australians died in terrible bushfires

We steer thus,
In bleak lines of silence
With eyes abashed,
Tilt our faces to austerity,
Are dusted with the death print
'Dust thou art...|...|..'

But on this Ash Wednesday
Dare we whisper Satan's name
When words are edged with flint,
And a small, dry cough
Might prove incendiary;
When a spasm of flame
Might ignite the instant
And go wildly on the palsy of the wind,
So that a shock of parrots thunders forth,
Spewing slipstreams of fire,
A vomitus of barbary sparks;
So that our lungs are cooped with ash,
And we are stopped,
Left gesturing
In the frail Dresden of our hands.
In the aftermath of ash,
Through bleary black-fangled hills,
Shall we steer now, like rickety sheep,
Smoke expiring from our stricken backs,
In hope that the fire,
Dying to our own height

Might prove measurable
In this hushed artifice of dust.
Grant Fraser

[LISTEN: Live reading by Grant Fraser](#)

Higher education's dirty little secret

EDUCATION

Andrew McGowan

The [Bradley Review of Higher Education](#) had prosaic terms of reference. But it had one one matter of principle to address. The Rudd Government's brief included a focus on social inclusion, specifically on supporting and widening access to higher education, including participation by students from a wide range of backgrounds.



The resulting [Bradley Report](#) is caught between discontent with the inequities of the system and fatalism about what prevents Australian universities from doing better for students from marginalised backgrounds.

It sets a bold target of 20 per cent of students coming from a low socio-economic background by 2020. Yet the specific recommendations regarding social inclusion equivocate between bucking and merely tweaking the elements of a system which, the Report itself admits, has not worked.

The Report airs the dirty little secret that changes to Australian higher education over recent decades have done little to change the profile of those who participate. Neither the abolition of tertiary fees nor, conversely, the introduction of the HECS scheme has made a significant impact.

Yet despite its own critique, the Bradley Report focuses on issues such as adjustment of the existing failed income support systems. Although programs such as Austudy and Abstudy have certainly become less and less effective, the recommendations will only restore a system unable, even at its earliest or best, to change the profile of Australian student populations.

This failure, if it is fair to call it that, might lie in what the Report and its terms of reference did not ask: whether our crowded and under-resourced campuses are themselves really capable of achieving social inclusion, or whether they have become mechanisms for the Darwinian triumph of the already-privileged.

Although the Australian universities of the past were elite institutions, they were also places where students might be formed through inspiration, challenge and the building of relationships with mentors and peers. They were small enough, or at least sufficiently well-resourced, for such relationships to be possible. Their most shining moments, inside and outside classrooms, happened when knowledge was catalysed by community.

If the reality of the university as a community of scholars was once taken for granted, it was left behind in a rush to expansion we must now view ambivalently. Growth in university places theoretically gave access to a larger, and hence more diverse, group of students. But what they had access to has itself changed more

than the profile of those who have come.

As a result we have all the university places we need for relatively privileged students who can survive in the mega-university. But the under-privileged find their own exclusion has gone unscathed or even been reinforced. Once desirable but exclusive venues now risk being theoretically accessible but uninspiring places. Though they impart knowledge and skills competently, they ultimately confirm existing capacities without creating new ones.

A bleak and bland consensus about the social vocation of higher education has been common to both sides of politics for a long time. Although the Howard Government's recent neglect of university funding may have been a bad example, it was not unique.

The Dawkins reforms are sometimes too simplistically condemned without acknowledgment of their genuinely mixed legacy. But they, like the more active and quite gratuitous VSU agenda of late, undermined the capacity of Australian universities to be places where students could acquire something more profound than vocational skills and have outstanding rather than merely acceptable experiences.

To address the wide funding shortfall, which Bradley recommends and which Minister for Education Julia Gillard must address, will only take us to the point where we must ask more profound questions about inclusion. The Report raises few of these questions. Its one genuinely revolutionary possibility may lie in its recommendation that funding should follow students to whichever public or private institution attracts them.

This prospect may leave some aghast, and others predicting further rationalization and economies of scale. Yet in a more diverse educational economy, someone may ask again how a university education could be both inclusive and transformative.

A renewed emphasis on community and pedagogy would be expensive, would certainly have to involve private as well as public funding, and would not be the desired or necessary path for every Australian tertiary student. Yet with greater room for differentiation and choice, some institutions might construct new and different forms of educational experience to engage and support highly capable students from more diverse backgrounds, equipping them for Australia's and the world's challenging future.

Recovering the possibility that university education will be transformative, and that community may be a means to this end, would be the most revolutionary thing this reform could bring.

Fatal firestorm's distant witness

COMMUNITY

Bronwyn Lay

I sit in my room in France and the distance between here and there has never seemed so great. It's a time of grief and open tears, and it's very difficult to be away from home at a time like this.



No doubt it's harder on the blackened ground, particularly for those who have lost loved ones, homes and whole communities. But these are the moments where, as a nation, we realise who we are, what defines us, and how much we need each other. I sit outside that circle. As the internet bursts into flames and heavy snow falls outside my window, I sit with my family and watch infernos rip through towns.

I want to get on a plane and go home. Not because I have any special skills to offer, or have loved ones to say goodbye to, but because this is a moment that defines us and makes us realise what we face collectively. This is when we turn to those of us who have suffered and hear what they have been through.

On the day of the National Apology the emotion was palpable over the seas. Then I realised that there's something different about being there, standing on the same dirt as your fellow countrymen, facing the same national stage side by side. It cannot be replicated on the internet or television. Because it is the slow conversations that unravel during and after the event — the sharing in the kitchens, playgroups, work places and on the street — that make the tragedy and collective sorrow real and understood.

But that event was welcomed. This is different.

My sister sent me an email on 8 February after coming back from our parents' place in the bush. She'd been crying for hours and said 'I drove back from Mum and Dad's this morning and this may sound weird but it was like everyone in all the cars in the traffic were all thinking the same things. We were all in shock and mourning together, and were connected. It was so quiet and calm.'

My friend in Melbourne was in the supermarket and people commiserated down every aisle. One woman yelled into her phone, 'I know the Red Cross are there but I just want to get in my car and go help'.

My sister went to give blood but couldn't get past the crowds of people thronging to donate. At moments like this an invisible connectedness arises in public spaces between neighbours and strangers. The sober act of focusing on someone else's suffering mixes in the air between strangers, until an unquantifiable, collective compassion helps the healing.

It's not the same here. People listen to me talk about the bushfires, shake their

heads, and ask if I know anyone in danger. There is compassion, and they say they can't imagine what it would be like.

And that's the kernel of difference. I can imagine. I remember Ash Wednesday. I have lived in the bush where my father fought fires from the roof of our house. I have driven through decimated towns and know the combustible qualities of gums.

Naturally my French friends don't recognise that the father who lost his child sounds just like my brother, or the house razed looks like my parents' place, or have memories of that beautiful town in the hills which is now rubble. They don't have friends in Healesville, cousins at the Whittlesea Community Centre or know people living alone in the Yarra Valley, and they don't know what CFA really means.

But they know the value of human life because regardless of nationality we all have families and loved ones we can't imagine losing.

So I connect via the internet and listen to fathers break down as their daughters are rescued by their brothers. I see women weeping on the roadside with nothing but the clothes on their back. I see red and outside it's white. I turn off the computer. Not to deny the outpouring of stories, but because my need to connect feels contrived. I am not there, and 'watching' without helping seems vicarious. All I can do is hope, pray and give something material.

At a time like this we are reduced to the bare bones: simple grief for what has been lost. I have never been prouder of my people, nor as sad for what they are enduring, and it doesn't really matter whether I am here or there. What it's about is making sure that the connections built in the past few days sustain those who need them, and there are plenty of people on the ground to do that.

Other countries have civil wars, despotic governments and lethal levels of class difference as their Achilles' heel. Ours is a tough landscape that, when ignited, is unforgiving, riding over us as if we never existed. It's that revelation of smallness, that humility before such indiscriminate power, that binds us. We share the same dirt and know that 'there but for the grace of god go I'.

We all know this truth regardless of how far we travel from home.

No winners in St Mary's standoff

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Brisbane's Archbishop John Bathersby has informed St Mary's South Brisbane parish priest Father Peter Kennedy that he will be replaced, with effect from Saturday 21 February. The archbishop judged that, under Father Kennedy's leadership, the parish has placed itself 'out of communion' with the Catholic Church.



This is a sad event because, at a time of falling and ageing church congregations, St Mary's is one of Australia's most vibrant and deeply engaged parishes, especially in its commitment to social justice. It is also a haven for many who do not feel welcome in other Catholic congregations.

It is also sad that Father Kennedy and the congregation discerned that their best course of action was to decline to accept the directions of the archbishop. The unfortunate consequence of this is an end to their work for inclusiveness at the grass roots of the Church.

Father Kennedy (pictured, centre) [told](#) the parishioners on Sunday 8 February that he had decided against setting up another church if he and the parish were expelled from the Catholic Church. Previously he had vowed to do that, and the nearby Trades and Labour Council had even offered space for him to lead the liturgical celebrations of his so-called breakaway church.

In stating that he does not wish to be a 'cult leader', and that he is 'over running a breakaway church', Father Kennedy demonstrated his inclination to maintain the Catholic identity of his own ministry. This sets him in a hard place, for which he deserves sympathy.

The personal focus of the Catholic identity of local congregations from early in the history of the Church has been the Bishop. Bishops have a similar relationship to the Bishop of Rome — the Pope — as do congregations to their bishop.

This implies that the local Bishop has general responsibility for ensuring that what is promoted and practised in local congregations is consistent with the faith and practice of the universal church. Catholic congregations and their parish priests have no option but to accept the responsibility of their bishop and to negotiate the requests he makes of them, or to appeal to the Bishop of Rome.

This of course is not the only understanding of church identity current among Christians. Many churches that came out of the Reformation, particularly, give much more autonomy to the faith of the local congregation. The emphasis they place on the faith of the individual, and on consensus within the congregation, fits more easily with the attitudes of contemporary Western culture.

It is understandable, then, that a congregation with this understanding would

be intransigent in the face of a bishop's demands. But it is hard to see how it is consistent with Catholic identity as this has been understood.

The conflict does not seem to leave either side with much room to move. But we might hope that there would be space for conversation and negotiation, even at this late stage.

Father Kennedy's move back from his preparedness to lead a breakaway church offers some hope, and could prove to be a good point for cooling off and for conversation. Negotiation would mean concessions by the congregation on issues that the Bishop regards as central to Catholic identity, and acknowledgment of the good things that have been done in the congregation.

It may also be important to recognise the external aggravations that have made this dispute so intractable and fierce. These include the apparent tolerance of reactionary dissident groups within the Church, compared with the harshness often directed at liberal Catholics. There is also the activity of 'spies' (like those who reported St Mary's to Rome).

These issues are not peripheral. Indeed they are central for those who feel — and are — excluded by the Church. But to focus on them solely loses sight of what is essential to the identity of the Catholic Church as we have known it.

Written in collaboration with Andrew Hamilton