EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

8 May 2009 Volume: 19 Issue: 8

What sort of person would work for a dictator
Kerry Murphy 1
Why kids need their own ABC TV channel
Damien Spry 3
Getting smart, not tough, on bikies
Moira Rayner 5
Lessons in empathy for racist Australia
Tim Kroenert 8
Demerit points for bad poetry
Brian Doyle 11
On blaming God for swine flu
Andrew Hamilton 13
The tyranny of difference
Susan Hurley and Grace Yee 16
The questionable ethics of Australia's defence
Tony Smith 18
Getting a grip on swine flu hysteria
Michael Mullins 20
Confronting housing inequality
Ben O'Mara 22
Lively history of Quaker service
Paul Rule 24
Making friends with the Taliban
Herman Roborgh 26
Bad business goes beyond individuals
Andrew Hamilton 29
Animated Lebanese terror
Tim Kroenert 31
Sex and bridge
Frank O'Shea 33
Swine flu will hit poor countries hardest
Margaret Rice 35
Bringing Hamas in from the cold
Ashlea Scicluna 38
Indigenous rugby player blazes away
Barry Gittins and B. F. Moloney 40
Say g'day to ease Muslim-Christian tensions
Michael Mullins 43
Death, despair and global economic fallout
Gillian Bouras 45

Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Requests for permission to reprint material from the website and this edition should be addressed to the Editor.

PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

Tel +61 3 9427 7311
Fax +61 3 9428 4450
Eureka@eurekastreet.com.au

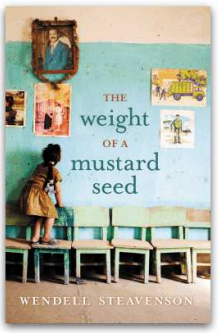
EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.
Volume 19 Issue: 8
8 May 2009

What sort of person would work for a dictator

BOOKS

Kerry Murphy

Wendell Steavenson: *The Weight of a Mustard Seed.* Text Publishing , Melbourne, 2009. ISBN: 9781921520068



What sort of person would work for a dictator, and why? These and other questions are considered in Wendell Steavenson's *The Weight of a Mustard Seed.*

The title comes from a verse in The Koran, that refers to weighing up just deeds on the Day of Judgment, even if the deeds are small like the mustard seed.

Steavenson went to Iraq as a journalist in 2003. On this and later visits she met the family of Iraqi General Kamel Sachet, who was executed by Saddam's orders in about March 1999 after years of service to Iraq in the military.

Sachet was a 'hero' from the Iran/Iraq war, having displayed bravery under fire as a young officer. He gradually was promoted to the rank of general but at the same time he clearly was more disenchanted with the rule of Saddam. As he tried to withdraw from active service, he became more religious and was an observant Muslim.

In the book, Sachetl's story comes from interviews by the author with family, friends and colleagues. This 'story of the story' has a life of its own as the war in Iraq becomes more violent and the insurgency develops. Sachet's sons become involved in the new war, with one seeming to get involved with Sunni insurgent groups in Baghdad, at the same time as Steavenson is trying to interview him and the family about his father.

The book is quite readable and is not heavy going like many other books about Iraq. We learn a good amount about Sachet, but by the end you wish there would be some way to ask him what he really thought of Saddam and that regime. Was his increased interest in religion partly due to the pressure of living under Saddam?

Living in the west under a democratic government, it is hard to imagine life under a dictator, and how you could be loyal to your country and its people without selling out to the dictatorship. This struggle has been written about in the context of Nazi Germany, but Iraq's story and experience are quite different to those of Germany.

Steavenson does well in presenting Iraqis and their story both under the Saddam regime and currently, without judging those who worked for the Ba'athist regime. It helps us to understand the rich and diverse cultures of Iraq as well as

the complexities of life there in the last 20 years.

Steavenson leaves it to others to judge General Sachet. I imagine that she would hope that the weight of the general's good deeds will be seen to exceed that of a mustard seed.

Why kids need their own ABC TV channel

MEDIA

Damien Spry

In the lead-up to the Budget, the Federal Government has announced a new ABC television channel dedicated to commercial-free children's programming.

ABC3 will include ABC Kids programs already being screened, and also new material. It aims to broadcast 50 per cent Australian content — good news for local TV production houses.

The UK, USA, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden have dedicated, publicly funded children's TV channels. We will hear more in the budget, but if estimates of $20 million for the new channel are accurate, ours will cost us about $5 per child per year. Usual 'tough economic times' concerns notwithstanding, that's not a lot!

But why do we need it? Aren't kids all glued to YouTube and Facebook? Is anyone under the age of 15 still watching TV?

Quality television for children is widely regarded as a good idea. Educational programs help kids learn. Studies suggest *Sesame Street* viewers perform better academically, even years after they have stopped watching.

And children learn much more than just spelling and maths from watching and discussing TV. Dramas and cartoons help them learn about the world and their place in it.

But not all children's TV is designed with their best interests at heart. Research from the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television suggests girls are under-represented. Most cartoons are designed for boys on the (shaky) assumption that girls watch boys' TV, but boys don't watch girls' TV.

When they appear, female characters, especially in cartoons, are often grossly thin or highly sexualised . While children are, to some extent, able to interpret critically the shows they watch, some female characters are commonly believed to inspire youth fashion and inform notions of beauty.

In addition, many children's TV shows make their money out of toys, DVDs, accessories and games. If there's a *Dora the Explorer*trinket my four-year-old niece doesn't want, I have yet to find it. Although commercialisation isn't bad in itself, it limits certain types of children's TV, especially quality drama and factual programming.

Australia's commercial networks screen children's TV because they are made to, not because they want to. Federal Children's Television Standards require commercial stations to show 130 hours a year (about 30 minutes per weekday) of

programming for pre-schoolers ('P' programs) and 260 hours of programming for primary school-aged children ('C' programs). This is under review but not expected to change significantly.

The Australian Children's Television Foundation has long argued that C programming fails to reach its intended audience. Poor scheduling and scant promotion are blamed for this. One reason the networks are unenthusiastic about children's TV is that the restrictions on advertising placed on P and C programs make them unprofitable.

Who can blame commercial networks for being commercial? But the result is that children, especially those aged 5—12, watch TV that is not made for them. They currently have no choice. No children's TV screens from 6—9pm, the time most children are watching. ABC3, we assume, will address this.

But are kids still watching? The evidence suggests Australian children still watch on average from 2—3 hours each day. This is about the same as in 1995. But some things have changed. Subscription television is now widely available, and makes up a significant amount of children's TV viewing. The audience is fragmenting.

Children now also consume, and increasingly participate in, 'new' media, principally through the internet and mobile phones. These are here to stay, and are intertwined with traditional media. YouTube has not completely replaced the 'boob tube'. Many children's programs have websites, Facebook groups, and mobile downloadable content. Look out for iPlaySchool, the iPhone application that tells stories through the 'square window'.

So ABC3 will not address all our concerns about, or take advantage of every opportunity promised by, the broader children's media environment. It would have been better to have introduced a dedicated children's TV channel 20 years ago, had it been possible.

But if ABC3 delivers programs that are of high quality, are appropriate to the ages of their viewers, and reflect the diversity of Australian children's lives, we should applaud and welcome it. Our kids need and deserve it.

Getting smart, not tough, on bikies

COMMUNITY

Moira Rayner

It's never a good idea to make law on the run.

Right after the murderous scrum at Sydney Airport that ended in a man's violent death the NSW Government rushed 'the toughest anti-bikie laws in the country' through Parliament.

These laws create new offences and give extraordinary powers to ban organisations and issue control orders against their members. It's an offence 'to associate' with other members on a police list of unknown size and origin. Based on the Commonwealth's anti-terrorism laws, they were introduced and passed in a single day without proper or adequate parliamentary debate.

On 30 April the NSW Parliament enacted even more draconian laws, prohibiting 'recruitment' to gangs, allegedly because bikie gangs were said to be targeting new members from 'street gangs'.

There has been a chorus of support from law enforcement officers in other states, and a chorus of objections from not only 'civil libertarians' (blackguarded as 'rights for crims' activists), but authoritative black-letter lawyers, including Nicholas Cowdery QC, NSW's Director of public Prosecutions.

The objections are both in principle — that the laws are an undue interference with ordinary civil rights — and pragmatic: that they will not deliver the desired result, because they are 'complex, expensive to apply, and not yielding the desired results'.

What are the desired results? Certainly more than shouting that beating a man to death in a public place is a crime, or that 'conspiring' to do it is unlawful. It already is.

The astonishing fact is that, despite airline staff warning Sydney Airport that there was likely to be trouble on landing, there was no adequate police intervention. You might think that Sydney airport, an obvious terrorist target, would have contingency plans for threatened violence, but it didn't. In the time it takes you to read this, a man was murdered in front of families and children while the poor saps in uniform waited for reinforcements.

The legislation outlaws particular criminal organisations, rather than minimising criminal activity. Yet the thing about criminal gangs is that their activities don't stop at state boundaries. So we need an effective national approach to interstate or even international organised crime activities.

This need for a national approach — re-voiced by South Australian premier Mike

Rann, supported in principle by the federal Attorney General Robert McClelland last week — does not logically require the 'toughest' laws.

South Australia has its own organised crime legislation based roughly on the WA model enacted in 2003. Both emphasise effective policing. WA's Police Commissioner can apply for extraordinary powers from WA's Corruption and Crime Commission, authorising covert surveillance, assumed identities and other policing aides for particular cases, and power to issue notices to remove 'fortifications' to gang headquarters, a problem then, but not now.

South Australia's law gives proscription power to its Attorney General rather than WA's independent body who may also restrict contact between members of such organisations.

NSW is urging the adoption of its model, but Rob Hulls, Victoria's Attorney General, says that 'focusing on membership of bikie gangs, rather than the criminal behaviour of their members, is not sufficient to address serious and organised crime.'

Victoria first proposed national anti-bikie laws in 2000, and its own, measured response — coercive questioning powers, power to confiscate property, a ban on 'consorting' for the purposes of organised crime, legislated surveillance, controlled operations and other investigation techniques — has worked well.

But organised crime is exactly what it says, and therefore responsive to challenge, adaptive and resilient. Hence national organised crime policing initiatives must be constantly reviewed to see whether they are useful, and adapted to new developments.

Each state government has particular 'law and order' responsibilities, and continue to disagree on uniform anything. What is most likely to work is law enforcement officers working smarter, not harder, with the powers and resources they have.

The new police commander in NSW has had great success, in recent weeks, in doing just that. There has been a spate of arrests and charges over the shooting of Sydney crime boss Abdul Darwiche, drug hauls, and of four men allegedly involved at the Sydney airport fracas: they were followed to their cars by a 'concerned citizen', who told the police, who traced them and charged them with existing criminal offences.

Cowdery said the NSW laws offended against the rule of law, and he has to be taken seriously. The power to 'proscribe' organisations is not limited to 'bikie gangs.' They could include political, lobbying and protest groups. Thousands of ordinary people could be tainted by association.

Involving NSW Supreme Court judges 'administratively' (in the process of proscribing organised crime groups) yet 'judicially' (when dealing with individuals) imperils the essential separation of the judicial arm of government from the

executive side. And it isn't necessary.

Federal prosecution authorities have a poor track record in getting convictions under the model for the NSW laws, the counter-terrorism laws passed after the 2001 terror attacks in the US. It is time to reconsider them 'to better reflect the balance between the rights of the individual and the protection of the community'. As it is, biker groups have formed to challenge them in court, which is not the action of a bunch of gangsters.

No 'group' — of bikies or otherwise — can be assumed to be full of criminals. Men form friendships out of common and innocuous interests.

A few years ago I was at a bush festival that was gate-crashed by 'bikies', who roared up and down yelling 'yippee'. Far from (in the vernacular of the time) 'freaking out', the organisers invited them to sit down and explain what issues they had. We shared an afternoon sitting and listening to stories of the shared experience, of feeling 'on the edge' of mainstream society, and being judged outlaws by reason of looking different.

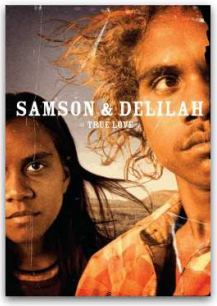
One big burly guy with a big beard and tatts, a huge Harley and a forbidding face teared up as he talked about his 'family.'

We had a lot in common then, and as fellow citizens, we still do.

Lessons in empathy for racist Australia

FILMS

Tim Kroenert



From a friend's porch in Larapinta, a suburban pocket west of Alice, we witnessed a domestic dispute break out among the family next door. At first it was a bit of shouting and shoving. When one man appeared on the scene wielding a golf club in one hand and an axe in the other, we called the cops.

More than 20 minutes elapsed before they arrived, by which time the dispute had subsided. We were perturbed. It could be the police were busy attending another call-out. But their laconic attitude gave the distinct impression they weren't all that concerned. We couldn't help but wonder if the response would have been different had it been a white family.

'The funny thing about Alice Springs is that it runs on a much more dangerous racism,' says Warwick Thornton, filmmaker and lifelong Alice local. 'I don't see any racism, because I'm Aboriginal. The racism is white people talking to white people. It's that latent racism you don't see.'

Thornton's debut feature *Samson and Delilah* is an ode to his town and its extremes. It's an ethereal love story between Aboriginal adolescents, that takes place against a backdrop of addiction, violence and displacement. Racism is not an explicit presence in the characters' lives, but it is there, like a foul breath that muggies the air around them.

Samson and Delilah are young teenagers from a remote community. Samson sedates the grinding tedium of his life by sniffing petrol. Delilah lives a somewhat more comfortable existence — her artist grandmother makes a reasonable living off her painting sales.

Soon Samson's cumulative boredom and frustration leads to a violent altercation with his older brother, while Delilah incurs blame and a beating from the local women when Nanna dies in her sleep. The two are outcasts, and they embark on a pilgrimage to the town, where they take up residence beneath a bridge on the dry bed of the Todd River.

Samson and Delilah barely speak to each other, except with gestures and body language. But a bond formed out of necessity grows into a love borne from the fight for survival. And just as their love remains largely unspoken, so do many of the film's salient themes.

The exploitation of Indigenous artists; the largely ineffectual but pervasive presence of Christianity, residual of the region's missionary history; the disinterest of white tourists, for whom the homeless teens are a nuisance or barely glimpsed

spectres; all are referenced briefly but matter-of-factly in the film. Thornton reserves judgement and lets the audience decide how to respond.

Other elements of Territorial life are conspicuously silent. The absence of Government foot-soldiers highlights how little the Intervention has benefited those it purports to help. The exclusion is intentional: Thornton told *The Big Issue* recently that the Intervention 'will come and go, and Aboriginal communities will be the same'.

And despite the role of addiction in the story — which proves to be both relentless and contagious, as Delilah, battered by the hardship of life on the streets, begins to share Samson's self-medicating — there's no mention of the low-aromatic Opal fuel, the introduction of which is, to date, the most radical attempt to combat petrol-sniffing in the Territory.

Of Opal, Thornton says 'it's worked, but it's made a darker side ... Now when grog runners take alcohol out to communities to sell, they take out jerry cans of petrol too.' In short, the Opal program has addressed the symptom, but not the root problems such as boredom and alienation. 'If as well as bringing Opal in you actually built a youth centre and created a diversionary program for these kids, maybe you wouldn't have a problem.'

On this, Thornton and the experts are of a voice. Chris Warren, who works in substance abuse prevention with an Alice Springs based council (who were, incidentally, part of an alliance that lobbied to bring Opal to the Territory), says a recent senate report on Opal ' strongly supports our campaigns to capitalise on the opportunity of Opal'.

'Opal has created a massive reduction in sniffing and related social disruptions and harms, which allows positive work to be done in a 'calmer' context. But it is widely acknowledged that this lull will not last as people develop alternatives in supply or substances ... Much work needs to continue and develop in demand reduction to prevent recurrence of petrol sniffing and/or substitution to other substances.'

Samson and Delilah's strength is its stark realism, balanced with an emotionally engaging story. Thornton's choice of non-professional actors Rowan McNamara and Marissa Gibson as the title characters underscores both. Aspects of their world are reflected in their characters', and they bring authenticity and youthful cheek to their roles. If empathy and understanding were Thornton's goals, his actors and story are up to the task.

Post script: Of course, Alice doesn't have the monopoly on racism. I recently wrote a letter to my local paper, to voice my concern that residents of a local suburb were protesting the construction of a healing centre for Indigenous people impacted by family violence. It seemed to me that their objections, based largely on fear of an increase of violence and crime in the area, reflected inherent prejudice, even ignorance.

If racism is a rash on the skin of society, both in Alice and to varying degrees across Australia, then empathy and understanding are the best salve going. And every Australian would do well to see *Sampson and Delilah.*

Demerit points for bad poetry

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Anyone who has endured brief infatuations with folks who thought they were poets has, ipso facto, suffered through poetry readings during which small quiet poets gripped lecterns like the steering wheels of vast ships, explained at incredible length the circumstances under which they committed their poems like raving sins, whispered their elephantine incoherent epic, and then, incredibly, explained at herculean length how the birds in the poem are actually symbols of revenge.

At which point many members of the audience are contemplating the latter, and imagining a world where poets actually do have to get poetic licenses that require them to swear they will not suddenly use French phrases in their poems, personify favorite body parts of lovers, or write poems in which birds represent anything but birds.

Wouldn't that be cool? A world that would require poetic administrative staff, men and women who would design and inflict licensing exams, and take poems out for test drives, and revoke privileges on grounds of obscurity (busted, Wallace Stevens!), and flag down poems that don't meet clean-language standards.

Imagine a raft of inspectors, wearing shoulder patches with Les Murray's gnomic smile, as well as a corps of poetry injectors, citizens responsible for bracing up the boring — adding a little wit and lilt to traffic signs, repairing droning political sermons, running retreats for ministers whose homilies have no heft, spicing up newsletters and manuals, and sponsoring annual switch days during which poets run cities and policemen write poems with schoolchildren.

Think of the advantages of a world with poetry inspectors and injectors: no Hallmark card ditties, no one pretending to be influenced by Rimbaud (pictured) ever again, the admirably clear and piercing Wislawa Szymborska an honored guest on television every week, a small sharp poem on the front page of every newspaper every day.

Imagine the youth of Australia competing hourly for the coolest arrow of a text-messaged poem, and Kevin Rudd opening his weekly press conference quoting Judith Wright ...

A more musical and rhythmic world, perhaps — certainly a world with more of the electric darts to the heart that great poems can be.

For poetry at its very best is the greatest of literary arts (not the greatest of arts, mind you — that would be music, or brewing beer), the one with the most power and passion in the least amount of space, the one that tries most gracefully

to find the music in words, that delves deepest into the wild genius of language, that takes the sounds we make with our mouths and uses them as keys to the deepest recesses of the heart and head.

It is entertaining, at least to grinning essayists, that the price for poetry's occasional unbelievable power is the incredible ocean of self-indulgent, self-absorbed, whinnying, mewling muck produced and published annually (though not in *Eureka Street*, of course) under the tattered banner of the Poem.

But it is an ancient and useful human truth that every real feat is built on a mountain of failures. For proof consider your short-lived early love affairs, especially the one with the poetess, what was her pen name, Willow? Rainbow? Wislawa Szymborska?

On blaming God for swine flu

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton

It was reported last week that an American priest had told a Canberra Church that swine flu was God's punishment for sin. The report seems to have been a beat-up. The reporter's 'usually reliable source' proved to be the usual tendentious and unchecked source.

But stories about preachers who attribute disaster to divine punishment for sin have been in the news lately. And they have a long history.

Danny Nalliah (pictured), of Catch the Fire Ministries, attributed the Victorian bushfires to God withdrawing protection after the passing of abortion laws. In Austria, Gerhard Wagner withdrew after being nominated Auxiliary Bishop of Linz. He had claimed in a newsletter that Hurricane Katrina was a punishment for sexual permissiveness.

This line of preaching has drawn fire since Jesuit missionary Gabriel Malagrida was exiled from Portugal in the 18th century for preaching that the Lisbon earthquake was God's punishment for sin. Voltaire famously ridiculed the argument.

For Christians the issue is complex. The idea that God might use natural disasters to punish people for general sinfulness or particular sins is repugnant. But at first glance the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, do seem to represent God as doing just that. This tension bears reflection.

On examination the Scriptures are more equivocal about attributing disasters to a punishing God than might appear. They certainly represent the popular view that God uses natural events as rewards and punishments for individuals and nations. But in their representation of God they also stand at an angle to this view.

In stories like the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, the great flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah, God threatens annihilation but relents and spares humanity. When it comes to bargaining, God is a soft touch.

The prophets display the same complexity. They attribute disasters like military defeat to sin and the abandonment of God. But this sin has to do with misrule that crushes and impoverishes ordinary people. The disasters suffered by the nation are not simply inflicted from without but result naturally from a corrupted polity. And within this bleak picture, God is still presented as wanting to restore the people to prosperity and happiness

Two Old Testament books, in particular, subvert the popular nexus between sin, God's punishment and disaster. In the Book of Job, Job's comforters press him to

acknowledge that his sins caused his calamities. The reader knows that Job is correct in refusing this connection. In the book of Jonah, too, the grumpy prophet finishes up furious that yet again God has chickened out of delivering on threats of destruction.

The New Testament also subverts the popular account of a judicial God. Its central message is that God loves sinners, that in Jesus God joins and dies for sinners. This view certainly insists on the catastrophic character of human sin. But God's response to it is anything but punitive. Jesus, too, refuses to blame the death of people in a building collapse either on their own sin or that of past generations.

The Scriptures then represent a prevailing view of a God who uses natural and military disasters to sanction bad behaviour. But they also undermine this view by describing God as concerned above all with relationships and as acting more as lover than judge. It is this image of God as lover that should control the way we speak of God's response to sin and involvement in disasters.

By these criteria it is not only unreasonable but also doubtfully Christian to attribute disasters to sinfulness in general. It is even more questionable to attribute them to particular sins.

The principal difficulty arises from the consistent movement in Scripture to define God in terms of relationship and not in terms of abstract theories of retribution. A God whose abiding disposition is one of love, and whose consistent focus is on the individual person and on their good, could not consider disasters an appropriate recompense for evil doing. Disasters are impersonal and indiscriminate. They kill the innocent whom God loves.

This becomes clear if we imagine a God sending the plague on a nation whose parliament has legalised same sex unions. It would be impossible to believe this God had the personal and special love for the poor, sinners and excluded of the world, as does the God we know in Jesus Christ. For the plague would generally spare the wealthy legislators who were well-nourished, could buy medicines and lived in hygienic surroundings. It would target precisely the poor people for whom Jesus had a special concern and who had no say in the legislation.

Another difficulty in attributing disasters to God's intention to punish sinners is that it assumes that you know the mind of God. The Old Testament prophets could claim this knowledge. But Christians have no warrant for making such a claim. Dreams and apparitions simply underline the point.

The more precise the knowledge claimed, the less credible becomes the claim. If a meteor struck the Sydney CBD, for example, how would you know whether it was to punish the practice of contraception, the pressure to legalise same sex marriages and abortions, galloping secularism, disregard of the environment, discrimination against asylum seekers, crass consumerism or the greed of banks?

The idea that we might know the mind of a God who sends disasters as punishment for particular sins is sub-Christian and sub-rational.

The tyranny of difference

POETRY

A verb's lament

I often wonder why
it's cool to say
tear up instead of cry.
Suit up. Then add a tie
to start the day.
I often wonder why.
Next bus to work. No lie,
when this is said I may
tear up instead of cry.
But worse, when flying high
I'm told: de-plane. Dismay.
I have to wonder why.
You pig out, bulk up and mortify
me, until, okay,
I tear up, and want to cry.
But wait, the dictionary I hold high.
Palm it, you say.
I now know why
you tear up, and I cry.

—Susan Hurley

English mittens

It was afternoon and I was nine:
there appeared a white wicker bassinet
in the corner of the bedroom
by the window where the sun shone
in the mirror
Our mother was sitting

on the pink candlewick
like a cake decoration
My sister and I tiptoed into the room
and peeped into the bassinet
The new baby had his eyes closed
and a pale blue hat on his head
His hands were bound in white mittens
When we asked, 'why?' our mother replied
'So he doesn't scratch his face and cry'
In our Chinese the word for scratch is wah
and the word for cry is hook
so if the baby wah-ed his face
he would hook
I looked at my brother's face:
the folded eyes, the barely nose
flat cheeks glowing like a sixty-watt lightbulb
and that's when it came to me
that's when I knew
that even if we spent the next hundred years
carving roast lamb on Sundays
buttering white bread
and boiling Brussels sprouts
we could never be them
nor they us
because if someone were to hook
an English baby's face
he would 'wah!'
— even if he had his mittens on

—Grace Yee

The questionable ethics of Australia's defence

POLITICS

Tony Smith

Various criticisms have been made of the Defence White Paper . One interesting criticism is the notion that defence planning should be based on a thorough analysis of the likely strategic environment in the coming decades. Planning must be based on such assumptions so that policy can be directed towards valid aims.

Apparently the major assumption behind the Government's priorities is a perception of growing Chinese domination of the Asia-Pacific region.

It is interesting, however, that no consideration seems to have been given to the ethical assumptions behind Australian defence, and to questions such as the kind of defence Australia can justly employ, what sorts of weapons and personnel this kind of defence requires, and in what circumstances the military should be deployed.

Before Labor's election in late 2007, Kevin Rudd expressed some interesting ideas about Australian politics. One was that the Australian electorate approached the Labor Party as though it were a Babushka doll.

A Babushka is a Russian doll traditionally built in multiple sets fitting one inside another. Rudd envisaged the outer layer as international security built upon the US alliance.

According to the Babushka theory, voters needed assurance about Labor's support for the alliance before they would even consider the inner policies on other matters such as management of the economy, social welfare, health, education and the environment.

The current emphasis on China suggests the Government is addressing a change in underlying policy. Rather than emphasising the importance of the US alliance, it is arguing that Australia needs to be self-reliant. This change of posture seems both to be correct and to contain the potential for efficient planning.

Whenever ethical use of a military force is considered, the notion of defence always implies 'self-defence'. While any state would be grateful to receive assistance in an emergency, the idea of external protection has obvious problems, not least of which is the potential for loss of sovereignty.

So, even though the White Paper proposes increased defence spending, if self-reliance is achieved then the policy does appeal on ethical grounds.

The US alliance has involved Australia in too many disastrous enterprises with

flimsy justifications and little public support, All Australians should welcome an approach that ensures future Governments can make decisions based on consideration of the circumstances and not be tied to courting favour with a great power.

But while the White Paper has some encouraging aspects, the ethical underpinnings of Australian defence have barely been considered. There has been no community debate about the ways in which a military force can be used morally. This is just as important as predictions about the strategic environment.

There has been a vacuum in this area of policy. The Anzac tradition is so sacrosanct that it is rare for anyone to question matters of defence lest they be thought unpatriotic. It seems a matter of national identity that we lurch from one crisis to another, and young people line up to pay the price for lack of forward planning.

Because defence involves great secrecy, many people, for lack of information, simply trust governments' decisions in this area, even though they are cynical about government motivations in most other policy areas.

Ironically, when a crisis occurs, thousands of Australians express opinions about defence ethics. They march to object to participation in wars and to dissociate themselves from such commitments. Debates then rage in parliaments, the community and the mass media.

In these circumstances, meaningful dialogue is unlikely because critics of current policies can do little more than react to the agenda set by government.

When troops are being committed discussions about defence paradigms are esoteric and barely relevant. Debates centre around the current emergency and not the larger questions. Once troops are in action, many Australians postpone their dissent on principle so that the troops can feel supported.

Paradoxically, when the emergency is over, the media seems to have little interest in continuing discussion of community attitudes to defence.

Australia should be self-reliant in defence but not to the exclusion of the possibility of multilateral cooperation. While a just defence posture might require Australia's military force to be able to operate at some distance from this country, we need to have a thorough debate about the basis of deployment.

The military should be used only for reasons of self-defence and when operating under clear United Nations mandates. It should not be exploited as an agent of political ambition. These are debates we have not had. We need to have them as soon as possible.

Getting a grip on swine flu hysteria

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's instinct is probably right when he suggests the secret to avoiding influenza H1N1 (formerly swine flu) is 'for all Australians to engage in the simple practice of washing their hands with soap on a regular basis'.

The message is that the government is putting required prevention measures in place, and it's up to us to play our part by acting responsibly as individuals.

It's likely that the real enemy is not the bug itself, but the fear generated by irresponsible media reporting that includes headlines such as 'Apocalypse bug!' and 'Killer virus'. This leads to a communal irrationality which recalls the counter-productive Grim Reaper AIDS awareness campaign of the 80s. We need to remind ourselves that we are talking about a potential human catastrophe, not a horror movie.

Hysteria hijacks our perceptions of reality, and paralyses our normal human instincts. It causes us to focus on ourselves and not think globally.

The tragedy is that we may not notice those who are really threatened by the crisis. That is, people in parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa, India, and China, where there are large populations and virtually no pandemic response strategies. It is here that the World Health Organisation's (WHO) warnings of a pandemic that kills large numbers of people could well hold true.

The *Herald Sun*'s Andrew Bolt seizes upon the WHO's advice that 'all of humanity is under threat'. He then admonishes the WHO for inducing panic: 'Get a grip, people. You're embarrassing yourselves.'

The fact is that Bolt is falling into the same myopic trap as his Australian media colleagues, whom he is legitimately criticising for fear mongering. He takes the WHO's conclusions about the predicament of the world as a whole, and criticises them as if they were intended to apply to Australia in particular.

The result is that those who believe Bolt will do nothing because the WHO is wrong, while others will do nothing because they are struck with fear.

Caritas Australia's Rome-based parent body has issued a 14 page set of guidelines for planning and response to the current pandemic influenza. They give us a calm but realistic perspective on the crisis which suggests that, as with most humanitarian emergencies, H1N1 is likely to have a greater impact on the poor and vulnerable populations of the world.

'The World Health Organisation predicts that overcrowding, malnutrition, and

poor access to health-care services in some settings are likely to lead to higher morbidity and mortality rates.'

The document is written for Caritas and its partner organisations, which already deliver a wide range of health and social services to such populations. They are well placed to play an important role in the event of an influenza pandemic.

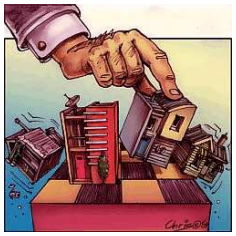
The document's underlying message is that these organisations must continually reference quality information from bodies such as the WHO, and not act upon media headlines.

Quality information, such as that in the Caritas guidelines , and on the WHO's website , could help us all to adopt a global perspective, and 'get a grip' on the constantly shifting prognosis for a world that is coming to terms with H1N1.

Confronting housing inequality

COMMUNITY

Ben O'Mara



Not long ago, as the property market boomed, and housing prices soared, I bought my first home. I scrimped and saved, and with a little help from the folks, somehow managed to buy the low budget version of the Australian dream: a cosy little two bedroom flat in West Footscray, just 15 minutes from Melbourne.

I thought I was the luckiest guy in town.

The thing is luck played only a small part in me becoming a home owner. Not everyone can afford their own home. Being white, middle class and in a relatively secure job does wonders for putting a roof over your head. This position of privilege also helps to explain a particular way of thinking when it comes to home ownership.

My original motivation for getting out of the rental market was to give uncaring real estate agents the finger. Ultimately, however, I decided to buy my own place because I thought it would be 'financially strategic' to make a long term investment. West Footscray made sense — I was a single guy on a relatively modest income and could only afford to buy in cheaper areas.

This attitude towards housing, while no doubt sensible and mature in a financial sense, is problematic because it contributes to a wider process of gentrification that supports more privileged members of society.

This in turn places increased pressure on people, families and communities from lower socio-economic and/or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds looking for a place to live, or struggling to maintain the status quo in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

The effects of gentrification are far reaching. In inner city suburbs of Melbourne such as St Kilda and Fitzroy, there is a history of displacement that occurs when wealthier classes buy up cheaper housing areas.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute's positioning paper, 'Gentrification and Displacement', identifies a complex tangle of factors that can reinforce inequalities during the in-migration of affluent households to poorer and lower value areas of cities like Melbourne and Sydney.

It isn't just about rich people moving into poorer areas, it's also about the flow-on effects of this process. When richer neighbours move in, this can lead to a reduction in the amount of affordable housing in traditionally low income areas due to rises in rent and house prices; decreased access to essential services and employment close to the city for disadvantaged groups who relocate; and negative psychological impacts on those who are displaced from their social networks of

support.

For migrant, refugee and emerging communities, such as the Sudanese, Vietnamese and Pacific Islanders, the process of gentrification is compounded by other challenges relating to language, culture and race which make settlement and forging a life in Australia difficult.

The Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternative's study Refugee Access and Participation in Tertiary Education and Training and evaluation project The Relocation of Refugees from Melbourne to Regional Victoria both identified significant problems refugees face in securing housing.

Private rental housing is often too expensive. Residences can be inadequate for family/community needs, and housing not closely located to social support networks and employment makes it difficult for people to remain connected to their community and sustain a job.

Combine these problems with a lack of information and awareness around housing and renting options, and the cost of relocation or finding a place to live due to gentrification can be steep.

Our understanding of the Australian dream of owning a home is bound up in a process of gentrification. This has the potential to further undermine the precarious housing situation of many people and communities. It is a mindset we must treat with caution.

Importantly, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has identified a gap in Australian research around gentrification and issues related to displacement. Initiatives such as this will help to address the complexity of providing affordable housing for all Australians, and to inform appropriate Commonwealth, State and Local Government approaches and interventions into housing markets.

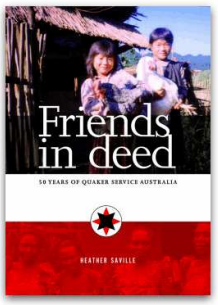
As the economic climate darkens, and interest rates drop, we need to find ways to ensure everyone can afford a place to live, not just those looking for a bargain during tough times.

Lively history of Quaker service

BOOKS

Paul Rule

Heather Saville: *Friends in Deed: Fifty years of Quaker Service Australia*. Quaker Service Australia, Sydney, 2009. **Order online**



I have long wondered why a comparatively small religious body, the Society of Friends or Quakers, have been so prominent in peace, welfare and aid.

Through Quaker friends I have some inkling of the spirit of concern and opening towards others that leads to prison visitation, involvement in the aftermath of war and care for the poorest. But I sought in vain for more precise answers in the history of Quakers' involvement in aid and development projects over the last 50 years.

The closest we get is a quotation from Mark Deasey's 2002 James Backhouse lecture:

'If we acknowledge the indwelling presence of God in every human being, we inescapably acknowledge that we have an obligation for the wellbeing of others, whether this be through meeting immediate needs (or) seeking to change the order of the world...'

Perhaps my question is the wrong one. We should rather ask why the majority of Christians do not seem to feel this overwhelming sense of mission; why work for social justice is an optional extra not a mainstream activity for all. Or perhaps our involvement is too remote: we contribute money but not our hearts and minds.

The variety of projects initiated or facilitated by Quaker Service Australia in India, Africa, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Australian Aboriginal communities, as described in a lively and people-oriented style by Heather Saville, is extraordinary.

Saville answers the obvious questions. Can small-scale projects such as those of QSA bring about the changes we all want to see? What are the consequences of partnerships with governments? Do women as well as men profit from the projects? And can aid projects be effectively organised from the outside?

There are constant themes. QSA projects have tended to be small-scale, rural and focused on food and water security. Critics of such a concentration are having to reassess their views in light of climate change and the global financial crisis. Small-scale technology, solar power and permaculture may be the destiny of all of us.

Other themes will be familiar to those involved in overseas aid: the need for

local partners, the necessity to hand over completely as soon as possible to avoid dependence, the careful spelling out of obligations and expectations from the beginning and the prescription of major female participation.

The strength of the book lies in the human detail. Key activists, from activities as diverse as developing kitchen gardening, HIV/AIDS education or basic village-level health care, are given a voice in long statements. Four years of interviews and archival research has produced a persuasive justification for the expenditure and volunteer efforts of the organisation.

Most interesting are the chapters on Vietnam and Cambodia. The Quakers used their international links and their reputation for being disinterested and apolitical to sidestep such problems as the US embargo on helping these countries after what Saville rightly calls 'the American War' in Southeast Asia.

Always the schemes were responsive to local conditions. A school cannot function if the children come hungry, so give them breakfast from the produce of the school garden. If AIDS has wiped out much of the male population, women must be trained to take over traditional male roles.

At times the proliferation of acronyms gets a little annoying, but as anyone involved with NGOs (there I go too) knows this is unavoidable, and a three page list at the end of the book is a help. It is also a reminder that successful aid programs require much cooperation from planners, donors, field workers and participants.

And when the money ran low QSA was able to appeal to the international Friends network. This, along with the motivation provided, is a key advantage of religion-based organisations.

Saville is rather coy about the precise nature of internal dissensions in the QSA and the reasons for its shift of headquarters from Hobart to Sydney, which are referred to several times but not commented on. No doubt the fact that she is a former convenor, and that many of the events are recent, makes her reluctant to comment.

The result is that her book is much more a history of projects than of an organisation. But the projects are the *raison d'etre* of QSA and no doubt some future hiatorian will fill that gap. Meanwhile we have a more than adequate treatment of a work that all Australians should know about and can be proud of.

Making friends with the Taliban

RELIGION

Herman Roborgh

Popular accounts of present-day Pakistan often present Muslims there as uniformly intractable and intolerant, and Muslim-Christian relationships as uniformly hostile. All is seen through the lens of the Taliban.

This is a distortion. The history of Jesuit involvement in Pakistan suggests a more complex picture, reflecting the diversity among Muslims there.

Jesuit involvement in the region goes back to the 16th century when the Mughal Emperor Akbar invited Jesuits to engage in religious debates. This set the tone for later engagement.

In 1961, a Swiss Jesuit, Fr Robert Butler, came to Lahore where he gathered important books on Islam written in the Islamic languages (Arabic, Persian and Urdu) as well as books and international journals on Islam and Christianity written in various European languages. The library in Lahore became a basis for scholarly contacts between Fr Butler and various Muslim intellectuals throughout the following decades.

After Fr Butler left there was less opportunity for scholarly dialogue with Muslims. A new approach had to be found. It lay in the development of personal relationships, which is the foundation of all dialogue.

The Jesuits opened two schools for the Urdu and Punjabi-speaking people of Lahore. About 40 per cent of the children who attend these schools are from Muslim families. Some of the teachers are also Muslims.

By interacting on a daily basis, Christians and Muslims, whether they are teachers or students, are learning how to respect and care for one another. The everyday contact that students enjoyed as Christian and Muslim playing and studying together, and the respectful interaction of their Christian and Muslim teachers forms a good basis for subsequent relationships. The history of Islam in Pakistan supports this open and tolerant attitude.

The Muslims of Pakistan today are by nature moderate and respectful of varieties in religious interpretation and practice because they have adopted the form of Islam that the holy men and women (Sufis) had preached to them many centuries ago.

These wandering Sufis had taught them the spiritual depth of the Islamic faith and had provided them with a living example of the beauty and simplicity of their faith. Consequently, the great majority of contemporary Muslims in Pakistan reject the interpretation of Islam that the Taliban are trying to impose upon them.

One can only understand the rise of the Taliban, however, if one remembers the history of their beginnings as a wave of opposition against foreign invaders from Russia several decades ago. Today, the Taliban are reacting to the lawlessness and corruption that has prevailed in Afghanistan ever since the defeat of the Russians.

They are resorting to their own extreme interpretation of Islam in the hope of restoring the rule of law in Afghanistan as well as in the northern areas of Pakistan.

The Taliban are receiving continued support from some sectors of society in Afghanistan and even from some individuals in Pakistan because these people are losing confidence in the ability of the civil government to create a safe and secure environment for them based on the implementation of the law.

With nowhere to turn except to the Taliban for help, more and more people are turning their attention to Shari'ah law, in the hope that its harsh punishments will deter the lawbreakers and stem corruption in society.

The efforts of foreign powers to subdue or even to exterminate the Taliban by sending more troops into Afghanistan are only encouraging more young volunteers across the border in Pakistan to take up arms and to join the struggle of their besieged brothers in Afghanistan. Military intervention from outside the country is alienating the local people from the efforts of these foreign troops to bring peace and security to their society.

Military action in Afghanistan and in the northern areas of Pakistan should be replaced by political dialogue between the various parties in the dispute.

In the present context, there is no question of religious dialogue with the Taliban about different interpretations of Islam. The extreme form of Islam we are witnessing in Afghanistan and in Pakistan is a response to political and social realities. A political dialogue will make a difference to the present conflict provided it takes account of the social and political context in which the Taliban are gaining popularity and growing in strength.

All forms of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, including theological exchange, depend on the trust and friendship established by regular meetings and conversations between Christians and Muslims. More trust could develop between Christians and Muslims in Pakistan in these difficult times if they could find ways of moving out of the relative isolation of their schools and housing estates to build more relationships of trust and friendship.

Both Christians and Muslims in Pakistan need to move beyond the assumptions and stereotypes that continue to dominate the thinking of many people on both sides of the religious divide. If Christians, for instance, were more informed about the variety of ways that their Muslim brothers and sisters understood Islam, they would be less inclined to make sweeping statements about the Muslims living all

around them.

Similarly, if Muslims in Pakistan could appreciate that Western nations act more frequently out of national and political interests, rather than out of Christian convictions, they would be less inclined to condemn their Christian co-citizens, who have no knowledge of the political maneuvers of Western (so-called Christian) governments. Forums of communication in Pakistan would provide an opportunity to correct misunderstandings of this kind.

Christians and Muslims, who tend to live in separate enclaves and compounds, need to take an initiative by attending each other's feasts and functions. Without a basis of trust and friendship, there will be little scope for deepening communication through exchanges of a more intellectual or spiritual kind.

Society in Pakistan will benefit from courageous citizens who are willing to overcome apathy and fear without waiting for the initiative to come from the other side.

Bad business goes beyond individuals

COMMUNITY

Andrew Hamilton

Many business dealings have recently been given personal faces.

The judgment against the James Hardie board over a statement declaring its provisions for victims of asbestos to be fully funded focused attention on the then chair of the Board, Meredith Hellicar. The illness and death of Richard Pratt focused attention on his collusion in price fixing and on the case brought against him by Graeme Samuel of the ACCC. The BrisConnections circus has focused on the faces of Nick Bolton and Trevor Rowe.

The focus on individuals risks losing sight of the social implications of the way business is conducted. It is easy to lose sight of the larger issues in seeking to blame or praise the individuals whom we identify with the companies. Worse, the personal focus makes it easy to assume that such things are an excusable or inevitable part of doing business.

In fact each of these cases is an object lesson in why larger economic principles, until recently regarded by their devotees as self-evident, are untenable. In particular, they show that it is naÃ¯ve to place one's trust in the efficiency of the markets and to decry regulation.

They also show that it is absurd and wicked to limit the responsibility of company boards to the interests of share-holders. These conclusions should be self-evident, but the response to the recent cases suggests that the conventional and self-serving wisdom waits for its day to return.

There is nothing more efficient for a business, nothing more profitable in the short term for shareholders, than to have a monopoly or to collude with one's competitors in fixing prices. It is not surprising that in Samuel's estimation, a good deal more goes on that can be brought to light.

The business version of trustworthiness — the handshake that is one's bond — makes collusion virtually indetectable. It successfully channels resources from the community to businesses and undermines the trust that the community can place in business.

Although the tributes to Pratt as friend and philanthropist are properly generous and heartfelt, it is a pity that his friends at times have defended his reputation by vilifying Samuel or minimising the seriousness of collusion. The tacit acceptance of price fixing suggests why markets need regulation and why regulation will be opposed.

The focus on Meredith Hellicar in the James Hardie affair has also lost sight of

the larger issues involved. The central issue has been seen as the duty of boards and their chairs not to deceive their shareholders or investors. People have then asked whether it is appropriate for the then members of the Board of James Hardie to be appointed directors of other companies.

The discussion has virtually ignored the duty of a company to make proper provision for the employees whose health has been ruined by the conditions under which the company employs them.

That is surely the central issue in this affair. The press release was part of a plan to exempt the company from its obligations to its employees. There seems to be no public discussion whether collusion in such a plan by board members of a company should disqualify them as board members of other companies.

There is little to be said of the devil's brew of self-interest, calculation, conflict of interest, deception and bad process that is BrisConnections. But if this is the efficiency of the markets at work, and if this is an example of how executives and boards of large companies work, and if those involved are appointed to other boards and public offices, then restoring trust in our financial institutions and big companies will be a big ask.

Participants in the market have social responsibilities, as do executives and boards of companies. The loss of face by individuals in business shows how important it is for society to persuade or direct businesses to discharge these responsibilities.

Animated Lebanese terror

DVD

Tim Kroenert

***Waltz With Bashir*: 90 minutes. Rated: MA. Director: Ari Folman. DVD website**

During one scene in *Waltz With Bashir* (*Vals Im Bashir*), a trauma specialist tells a story of an Israeli soldier who, in order to cope with the horror of the 1982 Lebanon War, rendered his experiences as a film inside his head. Through the lens of his 'camera', he was able to view the scenes of battle and slaughter with awe and marvel, but not fear.

Waltz With Bashir itself achieves something similar. Part documentary and part animated saga, it revolves around the Sabra and Shatila massacre of more than 800 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians in 1982. Documentarian Ari Folman witnessed the aftermath of the massacre as a 19-year-old Israeli soldier, but has repressed the images of his direct involvement.

He sets out to interview former comrades and other experts and witnesses, and in so doing is able to reconstruct the sequence of events, as well as his own memories of them. Innovatively, the film blends animated versions of these interviews and conversations, with vivid, animated recreations of each character's wartime anecdotes.

The surreal visual style and episodic structure reduce the real events to an artifact, which provides space for reflection, while adding intensity. The artifact is more than the sum of its parts. As much as it is a broad comment on war and its consequences, *Waltz With Bashir*is also an exploration of the nature of memory and of the place of morality during and beyond war. The audience becomes vicarious witnesses to the horror.

When it comes to adult images and themes, animation has an interesting effect. Like the 2008 film *Persepolis*, which portrayed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, the animation in *Waltz With Bashir*soothes the revulsion of scenes of graphic violence, while also lending them a grotesque beauty, that is at once magnetic and unsettling. There is also a practical benefit too. Folman is able to recreate scenes of which no footage exists.

Such scenes — of a soldier fleeing into the sea after he is abandoned mid-battle by his regiment; of another soldier spraying bullets into the air and 'dancing' in the street while snipers snipe from above; of Folman himself, a teenager, warbound, seasick and vomiting off the side of a boat while his fellow soldiers party — are recreated with an engaging dreamlike quality. 'Reality', dreams, memories and hallucinations blend into a seamless montage.

There is a twist in the tale of the aforementioned soldier, who reduced the war to a film in his head. Eventually, inevitably, his camera 'broke'. This occurred when he was confronted with the startlingly horrific scene of a yard full of massacred horses. Suddenly, the war was real. He became a victim of 'trauma'.

Similarly, *Waltz With Bashir* doesn't let its audiences off with a safe fantasy. During its closing moments, the stylistic animation gives way to archival video footage. Ultimately *Waltz With Bashir* is a confessional, and Folman is compelled to take us with him into the full, hard reality of the massacre and his complicity.

Sex and bridge

SPORT

Frank O'Shea

You rarely hear the call 'Anyone for bridge' these days. It went out with leisurely sea voyages and the private clubs of nomadic politicians. Besides, rubber bridge, the gambling form of the game, has gone out of fashion, and an innocent invitation to a stranger to 'join me for a rubber' might easily be interpreted as a different proposition altogether.

I learned to play bridge between university lectures a lifetime ago. I played indifferently then and have not progressed much since. I suppose my standard is about equivalent to a golfer with a 14-handicap, respectable but easily intimidated, allowing enjoyment but only rare excellence.

I am blessed with a regular partner who is a much better player — three-handicap, say — and who has the admirable and, in our partnership, necessary quality of refusing to take herself, her partner or the game too seriously.

I recently re-read Charles Lamb's famous essay on Mrs Battle and her views on whist, one of the parents of the bridge game. His heroine 'took and gave no concessions. She hated favours. She never made a revoke, nor ever passed it over in her adversary without exacting the utmost forfeiture.'

Mrs Battle's modern descendants gather in clubs all over the country every night of the week to pit their wits against each other in a pastime that makes no concession for age or gender. The role of referee or umpire is taken by a person known as the Director, blessed with a thorough knowledge of the rules, and the ability whenever a violation occurs to give an adjudication which rivals in length and complexity a High Court arbitration.

One of the great contributions that the game of bridge has made to civilisation is that it brings out the worst in people. In recent times, the word partner has taken on a meaning away from the card table, implying that two people are living together in a permanent or semi-permanent sharing of bond, board and bed.

The theory is that if they can put up with each other in such close proximity, there is a chance that the arrangement might be successful in the longer term. That's the theory; in practice, it is just an excuse for ... well, you know what I mean.

How much better, less expensive and less stressful on parents it would be if the couple in question were to form a bridge partnership. If that lasted more than a year, there is a sporting chance that they are compatible.

Should there be any such people reading this, I assure them that if they can find a person of a gender appropriate to their taste who can execute a Reverse Squeeze or a Scissors Coup at the bridge table, there is every chance that they may be able to carry out equivalent manoeuvres in a loving relationship.

Of course, once they get married, they must give up their bridge partnership. Marriage tends to bring out previously hidden kinks in people's character and there are few things as disedifying as seeing such imperfections brought to the light of day at the card table.

You rarely find husband-and-wife bridge partnerships. Even the great US husband-wife pairing of Ely and Josephine Culbertson ended in divorce. For most married couples, their conjugal state is much too important to be put in jeopardy by a wrong guess.

Perhaps I should explain. In bridge there is a thing called a finesse: it involves determining which opponent holds a particular card, and since there are only two opponents, it is a simple 50-50 guess. In such a position you guess, or rather I should say, I guess, happy to be right half the time.

Good players would not do anything as vulgar as that. They 'make an inference' or 'take a view' or use some obscure piece of information that escapes the ordinary mortal. They may still get it wrong of course, but much less often than the rest of us.

To return to Mrs Battle. She believed that cards 'are a sort of dream-fighting; much ado; great battling, and little bloodshed; mighty means for disproportioned ends; quite as diverting, and a great deal more innoxious, than many of those more serious games of life, which men play, without esteeming them to be such.'

The next time you watch a sporting contest between opposing teams who dislike each other — Australian and Indian cricketers, say, or Collingwood and any other football team — you may regret the loss of that word innoxious from the language.

Swine flu will hit poor countries hardest

POLITICS

Margaret Rice

When Nicola Roxon, the Federal Minister for Health gives rolling press conferences about flu, there is one thing we can be sure of: the new outbreak of swine flu is no ordinary flu.

By Tuesday morning the World Health Organisation had raised its pandemic alert level up to four out of a possible six as new cases emerged in Europe, America and Australia.

We need to be careful not to panic.

So far, this outbreak of swine flu has crossed the species barrier and it has spread quickly from human to human. It appears to have mixtures of human, bird and various swine subsets in its make-up. Most people who have caught it have only had mild cases of flu.

However, of the more than 1600 Mexicans who have caught it, more than 150 have died. What is alarming public health experts is that among those who have died are apparently healthy adults.

The difference between the Mexican and all other cases is a variable that has not yet been properly explained.

But it may be that the Mexicans were not as fit as others confirmed with the disease. It's a common pattern during a disease crisis; people in the majority world tend to be more vulnerable to more serious levels of illness and so die in higher numbers.

We fear the pandemic because of the Spanish flu of 1919. In that pandemic between 20 to 40 million people died worldwide, more than the number killed in the First World War. It was one of several times last century when swine flu crossed the species barrier, but it was the most serious.

Since then public health officials have been expecting another outbreak on the same scale. The more time passes without one, the more they worry that it is getting closer. Every time swine flu crosses the species barrier and turns up in humans, they become extremely nervous.

The consequences of an outbreak of swine flu in America, at Fort Dix, New Jersey, in 1976, are still discussed in medical journals. Out of fear of another horrendous pandemic, American health officials reacted quickly. Before long, a massive flu vaccine program was begun, with the goal of avoiding the scale of the 1919 losses.

The program was not abandoned until 25 per cent of the population had been vaccinated. Epidemiologists and others still discuss the futility of the exercise,

observing that a pandemic was never likely. Instead, 500 people developed Gillian Barre syndrome, a nasty neurological disorder as a side effect, and 25 of these died.

There have been other outbreaks of swine flu and scientists have noticed that the pace of outbreaks is increasing, while more sub-types are emerging.

Swine flu is not the only disease to cause such anxiety. In 1997 in Hong Kong there was a serious outbreak of avian (bird) flu among humans. Even though only 18 people became ill, six died, suggesting this strain was particularly deadly. In response, all Hong Kong's poultry, about 1.5 million birds, were killed.

In 2003, the world braced itself for an avian flu pandemic, as reports of human deaths emerged from Europe and several South East Asian countries. This came hot on the heels of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak, which damaged many South East Asian economies as tourism and commercial travel dwindled.

According to an Asian Development Bank report prepared by Jean Pierre Verbiest and Charissa Castillo, three aggressive steps were put in place to suppress the outbreak of avian flu in Asia: massive culling of chickens on a widespread scale, monitoring of humans, and the introduction of disease prevention measures at airports.

The impact on South East Asian economies was immediate and devastating.

Of course not to do anything would have been unacceptable. But it was the poorer farmers of the South East Asian countries who were affected most dramatically. They had fewer financial reserves and fewer government subsidies to cushion the blow, as all their livestock and therefore their source of income was destroyed.

A paper by the South Asian Regional Centre for Graduate study and Research in Agriculture noted that, typically:

'In Vietnam, they experienced a 17.5 per cent loss in their total poultry production, equivalent to over 44 million birds. Citing the World Bank study, losses range from 0.3 to 1.8 per cent of Vietnam's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Moreover, 29 million birds or 14.5 per cent of the country's poultry population died, resulting in a radical 1.5 per cent loss in their GDP.'

As it turned out, the consequences of the threat of avian flu turned out to be far greater than the disease itself. In the end, the pandemic did not eventuate. This was because of a combination of the dramatic bird cullings and an element of good luck. While avian flu crossed the species barrier from animals to humans, it moved from human to human only very slowly.

Rich countries stockpiled enough anti-virals during the avian flu scare to minimise the effect on their citizens if the swine flu hits. Poor countries have no

such luxury. Rich countries are working on vaccines, which could be available in six months time. Once again, rich countries will be at a distinct advantage over poor countries.

Those countries which produce flu vaccines and anti-virals have had a little shot in the arm this week. Amid the general gloom of stock markets flattened by the global financial crisis, medical companies' stocks have risen since Monday, particularly those which produce ant-virals.

ABC TV's commentator Alan Kohler sagely noted on Monday night that an Australian company's share price had risen by 82 per cent because it produces one of the most promising modern anti-virals. Again, there are winners, but only in rich countries.

As the world holds our collective breath, hoping that this flu will peter out quickly, let's spare a thought for those poorest countries, which will take the losses the hardest.

Bringing Hamas in from the cold

POLITICS

Ashlea Scicluna

Last week, the BBC reported that leaders of Israel, Egypt and the Palestinians have been invited for peace talks in Washington. The talks offer hope, but the road ahead is always going to be difficult.

The swearing-in of the new Israeli government has ostensibly diminished hopes for Palestinian statehood. Back for a second shot at the Prime Ministership, Benjamin Netanyahu has been tight-lipped about how he will approach his Palestinian neighbours. Less ambiguous is the new Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, an outspoken ultra-nationalist, known for his anti-Arab policies and strong support for Israel's illegal settlements.

Israel's 32nd government in 61 years of existence does not inspire confidence in long-term peace prospects. But its willingness to break bread with the Palestinians must be matched by Palestinian readiness. And Israel is hardly alone in its leadership woes.

In July it will be two years since Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip, leaving its rival, Fatah, in control of the West Bank. Despite being elected in a free vote, Hamas is internationally condemned as a terrorist organisation, which leaves Fatah President, Mahmoud Abbas, as the only internationally acceptable avenue for negotiating with the Palestinians.

Accordingly, any agreement reached would represent territorially just over half of all Palestinians (to talk of allegiances is more complicated). If it were not involved, Hamas would most likely regard such peace as illegitimate.

Hamas would then effectively hold veto power over any peace deal. A single act of violent disapproval would be enough to bring a hard-won agreement to its knees.

If this is the likely outcome of peace negotiated between Israel and Fatah, then it may be futile to pressure the Israeli government to commit to peace talks. Even if Israel were to have a revolutionary change of ideology and meet with Hamas, the two warring Palestinian factions would still have to be reconciled.

Leadership has long been a problem for the Palestinians. Never having had the chance to develop as a state, they lack the structures of governance and leadership normal in international states. The absence of a basic state structure is related to the violence and hopelessness that pervades Palestinian life. Without legitimate avenues of expression and overarching authority, there is little order or progress.

Although Israel may be tempted to sit back and observe Palestinian disunity with smug righteousness, the peace on which its own security depends rests upon a resolution to the bitter Hamas-Fatah divide. It must then do everything in its considerable power to facilitate unity and the development of governance structures. If it does not do so, it will inevitably be asked whether it is truly interested in peace.

The United States too can encourage a merger of the two Palestinian factions. In the wake of Hamas' electoral victory of 2006, the US supported and funded Fatah. Together with the international community, the US effectively pushed Hamas to the periphery.

In hindsight, such policies have been catastrophic. Rather than seeking to destroy Hamas, the US ought to encourage a unity government with Fatah, that would bring Hamas into the mainstream.

Both Hamas and Fatah face difficult choices about the power balance in a unity government. They need to integrate each other's political platforms, establish a timetable for elections and secure international support and legitimacy.

In an interesting move, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister, Salam Fayyad, declared his resignation in early March, to take effect as soon as a unity government is formed. Ostensibly, Fayyad's intention is to inspire confidence and goodwill among the rival factions. But his motivation may be more complex.

Fayyad enjoys the backing of much of the international community. Without him at the helm, the United States in particular may be unwilling to lend its support. Fayyad may have resigned out of a desire less to step aside than to illustrate his indispensability.

The task would be hard enough if it involved only the Palestinians. But their work, which is indispensable, will be complicated further by the familiar meddling of foreign powers.

Until a cohesive Palestinian government can be formed, peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority will forever be dogged by the question of Gaza and its unpredictable leadership. An agreement negotiated with only one of the Palestinian territories will raise hopes and expectations. The inevitable failure of such an agreement will threaten the regional stability it aimed to secure.

While Netanyahu's aversion to the land-for-peace formula and Lieberman's dismissal of the Annapolis process are concerning, they do not represent the most significant hurdle. Were the Israelis in any position to embark upon a new round of talks they may as well be talking to themselves. Only once the Palestinians present a united front can the crucial question be put to Israel — are you willing to make peace?

Indigenous rugby player blazes away

POETRY

Etched in ochre

He was flying up the guts,
hair and legs and arms ablaze.
Tacklers flew and flew again,
failing to disturb his crazed
run of passion — damn the angles —
this guy just ran, straight and hard.
No pure pace, no sheer strength;
yet his straight path was not barred.
In my mind it's etched in rustic watercolours,
ochre fired in my reckoning with magic:
rugby league plus boy inspired to
break the line and break
the other players' opposition, too.
Fends aplenty were dispensed
and blows that could end in a blue.
Maybe he emerged transcendent
due to his beleaguered State —
maybe Aboriginality
provoked his heart to rate
faster, and with more demanding
efforts, than those he espied.
Perchance self-esteem then blossomed,
running under Queensland skies.
All I know is that young man
could break the line, could run
and keep the other team
from closing down his destination; his belief.

Ochred in imagination,
on that dusty, rain-dry ground,
I believe unspoken passion
earned him glory, joy profound,
reflected in his shambling passage
up and past the vantage-line.
Chris, if Chris his name in fact was,
caught our spirit as his shined.
—Barry Gittins

French Chic Ballad

Once upon a time a French Chic ran and she was the fastest
But a slender black princess ran faster, stealing her crown.
It was decided they should meet at the princess's home;
Wherefore a psychotropic Olympic crowd sat and waited
For they were used to screaming records down by seconds,
And it came to pass, such a local darling the princess was
Perceived not fragile, for she had to win at all costs because
That's how it is, deep below the Equator's formless stare,
At bronze crusted heroes, triumphant under Aurora's glow.
The Chic was aged before voyeurs, and it looked all over
For the ageless princess felt a younger, stronger passion
So the manipulated meeting was to be vehemently staged
To settle for once the world champion left able to stand
In a quick race around a wide hypnotic circle, just once
Before a crowd who would obsessively will for one winner.
But the Chic went strangely mad before this fatal meeting
She, paranoid and harassed, reversed and went off the show
And ran away hot drenched in tears, looking most fearful.
What really caused this act of aggression, no one will know
The princess duly won the race and wore the public's crown.

Biased witnesses released their stunted passions and laughed
At the fleeing Chic, tarred and feathered in media disgrace
Thus was borne an uneasy glory, this strange little farce.

Say g'day to ease Muslim-Christian tensions

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins


Daily Telegraph
Churches attack Muslim proposal for new school

Leaders of some Christian denominations at Camden on Sydney's south-west fringe have joined forces to oppose a bid by the Quranic Society to build an Islamic school.

It came as a shock to many Christians committed to interfaith dialogue to read that Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary officials expressed their views in a letter sent last week:

'Our concern is the Quranic Society inevitably advocates a political ideological position that is incompatible with the Australian way of life. This includes promoting Quranic law as being superior to national laws and regarding followers of any rival religion as inevitably at enmity with it.'

Until now, Christian opposition to the school has been confined to more extreme elements. In December 2007, the Rev. Fred Nile explained at a protest rally that he opposed the school because Islam opposed Christianity.

Last Thursday, local opposition to the school was further buoyed by a separate statement of support from the General-Secretary of the Baptist Union of NSW Alan Soden, and the Principal of the Baptists' Morling Theological College Ross Clifford.

They stressed that they are 'committed to living in harmony with people of all faiths and no faith', and that 'the Baptist Union of NSW acknowledges the place of multifaith dialogue and encourages warm personal relations between members of all religious groups'. But they declare:

'Australians absolutely oppose all form of seditious activity. No politician or community leader would want to be associated with decisions that could lead to a religious-based legal system overriding or operating in conjunction with Australian law.'

The problem is that their argument appears to be based on an assumption that Camden's Quranic Society is predisposed to promoting such seditious activity. When contacted by *Eureka Street*, Mr Soden conceded his suspicion, warning that Australian Muslims could follow those in the UK in attempting to introduce elements of Sharia law into their communities.

It is in fact arguable that partial adoption of Sharia law within Muslim communities in western nations could be desirable. Indeed last year the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams controversially accepted its inevitability.

It seems that the Baptist Union, and the Camden Christian leaders, could make

a better contribution to harmony in the Camden community by taking positive steps to find out what the Quranic school actually plans to do.

They could encourage opponents of the school to meet with the Quranic Society, and perhaps get to know them socially. It is ironic that the residents' attempts to 'preserve the Australian way of life' involve turning their backs on the iconic principle of saying g'day to newcomers.

It is only after establishing such positive relations that members of the Camden community will be able to know and understand the real purpose of the school. It's true that there is a concerted effort on the part of numbers of Muslims to introduce Sharia law. But in the case of the Camden school, it's likely that fears about a preoccupation with Sharia law are as fanciful as the idea of their local Catholic school wanting to see Canon Law replace Australian law.

Death, despair and global economic fallout

COMMUNITY

Gillian Bouras

From my distant vantage in Greece I am attempting to follow what has been described as the BrisConnections fiasco, in the course of which investors in the Brisbane Airport Link Tunnel lost a whole heap of money.

Now the Macquarie Group has offered a lifeline of sorts. But the spokesman for the Australian Shareholders' Association, Stuart Wilson, has said that the 'lifeline' might cover the bulk of investors, but 'not the bulk of desperate investors'.

Thing is: the meaning of the word 'desperate'.

Time was when I would weep at the drop of a hat. But I'm old now, and have inevitably toughened up. Get hard or get hurt, as the saying goes. It's not as simple as that, however, for most people wobble back and forth in the space between those two points.

And so I burst into tears recently while watching recent television news. In the United States, a man had shot his five children, and then himself. He probably had no investments beyond the most precious one of all, but was clearly in an extremity of desperation.

My immediate thought was that this truly dreadful happening was the result of a time of great trial. Poorer Americans, in particular, are suffering badly, with tent cities springing up everywhere across their great land.

Despair and economic Depression go together, and this sort of annihilation of family is by no means uncommon: there have been other cases already in the States, and history records many, many past instances.

My paternal grandfather, for example, was born in a township on the Murray River in 1893. Wool prices had declined, property values had fallen, banks were failing, business was at a standstill, and jobs could not be found.

Then, as now, Depression brought its hardest suffering and misery to those least able to bear it. Not far away from my grandfather's township, and not long after he was born into comfort and prosperity, a farmer killed his three children before turning the gun on himself.

Decades ago, when I was a blithe young spirit, I had as a colleague another blithe young spirit. A privileged lad, he was also complacent. He soon left the world of teaching and went on to succeed spectacularly in the world of business. The poor, he was fond of proclaiming, are so because they don't work hard enough.

Even at the age of 21, going on about 14, I felt there was something wrong with his statement. You can work hard all your life and still not achieve financial security. You can be a good, clean-living citizen who keeps all the Commandments and who pays every last cent of tax, then invest in schemes like BrisConnections that go very wrong. You can suffer greatly because of the fickle finger of Fate.

Bad things happen to good people. Who are often at the mercy of the clever and the greedy.

As a child being raised in a religious household, I was much preoccupied with the notion of the Unforgivable Sin. I was terrified I might commit it unawares, because I really had no idea what it was — a white lie here and there did not seem to fill the bill. I was told that it was the sin against the Holy Ghost, which pronouncement left me no wiser. I wondered eventually whether despair might be IT?

But now I do not know what is forgivable and what is not. What I do know is that recessions and depressions come at appalling human cost, and that often, those responsible for such downturns, via greed and power play, suffer least. The threatened and the poor appeal to the stronger, often in vain.

It is at this stage that the most vulnerable enter a very different space, one unknown, mercifully, to most of us. The would-be suicide is stranded in silence on a kind of no-man's land: no sign of green, no oasis, no hope. I can imagine thus far: what I cannot imagine is making the decision to deny hope and future to your own children, to deny your own immortality.

I suppose, decades ago, I would have condemned such acts outright, for they are, after all, the direst breach in nature. Now I try to understand people like the despairing American, while feeling great sorrow at the thought of needless and youthful death. I hope and I fear for those who have suffered because of BrisConnections.

But I'm only human, and so I want the greedy, the fat cats of every stripe, to have at least a few sleepless and haunted nights. I want them to understand, if they can, that Death eventually lays his icy hand on the kings of economics and finance, as well as on the heads of innocent children.