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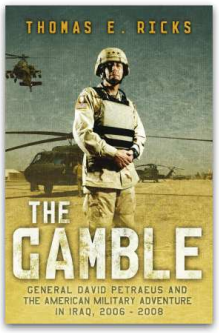
Beyond the Iraq fiasco

BOOKS

Kerry Murphy

Thomas E Ricks: *The Gamble*. Penguin, UK, 2009. ISBN 9781846141454. Online



Thomas Ricks is a senior journalist with the *Washington Post*. His first book on the Iraq war, *Fiasco* (2006), set out the background to the invasion of Iraq. The theme of each of his books is caught in its title.

Fiasco described the failed planning, poor understanding of Iraq and of its people after years of Saddam and sanctions, and the gung-ho attitude of the previous US administration. The result was the appalling violence seen in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. Thousands of Coalition troops were killed and wounded. Tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed.

Gamble is Act II — the surge. Ricks takes us through the process of how US policy changed in Iraq to make the surge possible. He was able to interview many of the key players, so providing his readers with the detail that helps them understand how the United States military made this significant shift in strategy.

General Petraeus and other senior officials, who sought to rethink the war and how it needed to be conducted, influenced the change most significantly. Petraeus was helped by a number of counter-insurgency strategists, such as Australian officer David Kilcullen. He was seconded to the Bush administration, and has now written his own book on counter-insurgency warfare, *The Accidental Guerrilla.*

Gamble describes the life of the United States forces in Iraq, and how the long war is slowly draining morale, money and power from the US. The book finishes with the election of President Obama and details the complexities faced by the new administration as it seeks to carry out its policy of withdrawing US forces from Iraq.

Maps and lists of characters and acronyms help the reader understand the story. Avid readers are able to study even the PowerPoint slides of the orders of US general Odierno!

General Odierno, like Petraeus, featured in *Fiasco,* where he was criticised by the author for his heavy-handed approach in Iraq. Whether the general read the book is not stated, but he clearly changed his approach. *Gamble* describes Odierno as one of the leading United States generals who has promoted the new strategy that he did not accept in 2006.

Part of the new strategy for the US is a recognition that success in an insurgency conflict is slow, and can only take place when the occupying forces

realise the important thing is to protect the Iraqi people, not to focus on killing the 'bad guys'. Ricks takes the reader through how this simple point was a factor that shifted the conflict from the disaster facing the US in 2006, to the improved, but still far from acceptable situation in Iraq in 2008.

One hopes the new administration with new policies will help bring further improvements, not just for the US troops, but for the long suffering Iraqi people.

Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday behind bars

POLITICS

Carol Ransley

Sitting inside a small, purpose-built cell within Burma's notorious Insein prison, democracy leader and Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi today turns 64.

Suu Kyi, no stranger to long periods of isolation, will most likely spend part of her day in meditation: a practice that she admits sees her through the most difficult times.

Like the hundreds of other political prisoners who suffer ill-treatment inside Burmese jails, she may also notice the little things that those on the 'outside' often overlook: birds chirping, the measured walk of an insect across a wall, the sound of late afternoon rains rolling overheard, distant city sounds — cars, horns and buses.

For the first time, rather than being under house arrest, Suu Kyi is being held on criminal charges. She faces the prospect of spending between three to five years behind bars in the former capital's central prison.

Just long enough, observers say, for the Burmese generals to keep her out of the way in the lead up to planned elections in 2010, and away from the transitional process that the elections may usher in.

Suu Kyi was due to be released on 27 May. However, the arrival of a strange and unexpected visitor, American tourist, John Yettaw, changed all that.

Yettaw made his second visit, this time in a much publicised two kilometre swim across Inya Lake to her compound, where she was held under house arrest for nearly 14 years. Observed by policemen who, according to Yettaw, threw rocks at him, he was able to elude security personnel and enter the compound.

Inside, he pressed Suu Kyi's two female assistants from her political party, the National League for Democracy. After initially asking him to leave, Suu Kyi agreed to let him stay the night due to his apparent poor health.

For the Burmese military authorities, having confined Suu Kyi for the maximum length of time under the terms of their own laws, Yettaw's visit was timely. Burma requires all non-family overnight visitors to be registered and forbids overnight stays by foreigners. Suu Kyi was charged with violating the terms of her house arrest.

Charged under Section 22 of the aptly titled 'Law Safeguarding the State from the Dangers of Subversive Elements', on 14 May she was ordered to stand trial in Insein prison. The charges and trial met with widespread condemnation from the international community. But Burmese authorities have continued to pursue the

case.

In Burma trials involving political prisoners (who currently number 2155) are notoriously short and often held in secret. Many political prisoners were last year sentenced to terms ranging from 10 to 65 years.

But as a small concession in response to international criticism, a number of diplomats and a handful of journalists were allowed to observe some parts of this trial. The regime has also uncharacteristically made some effort to see that court procedure and protocols are followed.

British Ambassador, Mark Canning told the BBC that 'all the paraphernalia of the courtroom was there, the judges, the prosecution, the defense. But I think this is a story where the conclusion is already scripted.'

Since the charges have been brought, two members of Suu Kyi's legal team have had their licenses revoked. The wife of another of her lawyers has been sacked from her job. Key witnesses, such as members of the police and security personnel on duty at the time of the alleged offence, have not been called.

Another key witness, Suu Kyi's personal physician, Dr Tin Myo Win, who met Yettaw on his first visit to her compound in 2008, is mysteriously absent from the proceedings.

After Suu Kyi's lawyers appealed to the Appeals Court to allow the testimony of key defence witnesses who had been banned from appearing in the case, the divisional court to which the case was remitted reinstated one of the witnesses.

But it upheld the ban on another two witnesses (both senior members of the National League for Democracy). The Appeals Court has agreed to hear an appeal against this decision. It is clearly in the regime's interests to prevent the League from using the trial as a political platform.

So, despite all the 'bells and whistles' of a Burmese court, Suu Kyi is unlikely to receive a fair trial and will most likely spend the next few years in prison, unless there is a dramatic turn of events. This is undoubtedly happening by the decision of the Generals.

Suu Kyi won't be able to hear from her cell the sounds of the latest Burmese military offensive, ostensibly against ethnic Karen insurgents along the border with Thailand. Some say this offensive has been made to deflect attention from the political activity surrounding the trial in Rangoon.

Whatever the motive, the offensive has attacked innocent Karen civilians. At last account it has displaced more than 600 families — mainly women and children. These people have been left vulnerable at the beginning of the monsoon season. The rains are already making it difficult to provide basic shelter, clothing and food, and leave them at high risk of contracting malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue fever.

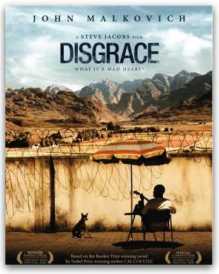
Suu Kyi's birthday behind bars may not be the happiest of occasions, but the day does give us pause to consider the magnitude of her personal sacrifice and the enormity of the obstacles ahead. It is also an occasion to reflect on what she continues to represent — Burma's only meaningful hope for lasting peace and reconciliation in a country deeply troubled and left derelict by decades of military rule and civil conflict.

South Africa's lesson for post-apartheid Australia

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Disgrace*: 120 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Steve Jacobs. Starring: John Malkovich, Jessica Haines**



Animal lovers will find *Disgrace* hard going. Dogs feature prominently, and suffer all manner of violence, both cruel and kind. Some are slaughtered senselessly by rogues. Others are euthanased with tenderness by those who see no better future for them.

Humanitarians will find it tough going, too. As in the J M Coetzee novel on which the film is based, the treatment of dogs stands as a kind of inbuilt, brutal fable reflecting the plight of human beings. *Disgrace* is a film about the shifting nature and misuse of power in post-apartheid South Africa. It paints a confronting picture.

The narrative circles around two occasions of physical assault. The first entails the abuse by a poetry professor, David Lurie (Malkovich), of one of his students (Antoinette Engel) at a Cape Town university.

David is an ageing, malevolent Lothario, all too aware that his position of authority does all the work that seduction would otherwise do — the misuse of power in sexual relationships need not entail physical force. Later, after the relationship is exposed, David appeals to the primacy of desire to justify the damage he has done to his victim.

The second assault takes place after David, disgraced and banished from the university, arrives at the remote farm where his daughter Lucy (Haines) lives and works as a market gardener. Here, in the wild lands of the eastern Cape, David experiences powerlessness: he and Lucy are badly beaten by a gang of black youths. Lucy is gang raped.

David draws a dubious moral distinction between this shocking act and his own misdeeds. He is indignant. The attack becomes a point of tension between him and his daughter. Lucy refuses to talk about it with him, or to take legal action against the perpetrators.

Disgrace portrays a society where power has shifted, and where the citizens have yet to adjust. Apartheid has ended, but racism has not. Equality is still a theory. The characters' world has changed, and while the more pragmatic Lucy struggles to accept and understand the change, David rages against it. He is angry and afraid.

It's a confronting film, but not preachy. It has an almost poetic quality, and ends on an uplifting note. The cinematographer's attention to the textures and

colours of the South African landscapes suggests that there is beauty to be found in this story, as well as much ugliness.

Malkovich is captivating. Coetzee's Lurie is a difficult character to like, yet Malcovich finds depths of humanity amid his many foibles. He loves his daughter and, despite his womanising ways, cultivates genuine affection for Bev (Fiona Press), a middle-aged woman for whom he works at an animal welfare clinic.

Interestingly, *Disgrace*, an Australian co-production, also has an Australian director and producer in Jacobs. Indeed there is a mirror for Australia in the film. White Australia is guilty of its own brand of apartheid, and we, despite the best wishes and actions of many, are yet to resolve the injustices that have resulted.

Disgrace reminds us that reconciliation is more than words. There are challenges both internal and external that must be confronted, and power imbalances to be redressed. Much fear and anger have yet to be overcome.

Historical tensions visit women and the Church

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton

Visitations are usually awe-inspiring and terrifying. They go with thunderbolts, particularly when conducted by Head Office. So the news that the Vatican will conduct a visitation of United States female religious congregations was naturally received with some anxiety by many of its beneficiaries.

But in this case the style of visitation seems disarming. It follows a recent Vatican visitation of United States seminaries which passed equably.

It is to be conducted, not by Bishops, but by two religious sisters. Its terms of reference are broad and not loaded. The visitors are to look at the life of different religious congregations, examine their contribution to the church and society, and reflect on their future service of the church. The visitation website invites comments.

The questions posed, too, are of interest to the wider church, given the huge contribution made by religious women in the United States. In the last half century the number of religious sisters has declined greatly, the average age of the members has risen, and the future of many congregations is not assured.

None of these things, however, will completely allay anxiety. In their relations with the men who have authority in their local parishes or dioceses, sisters have always needed to defend their proper autonomy.

In parish convents the tension was handled ceremoniously. When Father came to celebrate morning Mass, he was invited to breakfast in the parlour. The place, the doilies, casters, saucers, plates, butter pats and thinly sliced toast were both a sign of welcome and a reminder that he was a guest whose writ did not run over the life of the community.

In their early years, too, many congregations struggled with local bishops over the limits of autonomy. Some founders, like Mary MacKillop (pictured), were even excommunicated. It is not surprising that ancestral antennae sense danger when male church leaders decide on visitation.

This visitation also takes place in a climate of lively conversation about the place of women in church and society and about the scope of the Second Vatican Council.

Discussion of the place of women often focuses on feminism. Catholics are divided between those whose instinct is to praise feminism for its unflinching advocacy of equality and freedom, and those who associate feminism with the extension of the demand for freedom to sexual morality and the transmission of

life, and associate equality with the denial of difference. The latter point has consequences for the priestly ordination of women.

Catholics also argue about the extent to which Vatican II endorsed radical change. It certainly encouraged significant changes to religious life, which have been welcomed by most women religious. For others the changes in the rules of religious congregations, in dress, in customs and the opening of a public role outside the Christian community explain why religious vocations have diminished and many religious have left their congregations.

They find support for their argument in the growth of some religious congregations that wear the ordinary women's dress of earlier times and follow a traditional rule.

These issues are important and need to be debated. Many women religious, however, fear that in the visitation a negative attitude both to feminist aspirations and to the changes brought about by Vatican II will be assumed as its starting point. They can find historical grounds for this fear.

Take, for example, the experience of Mary Ward in the early 17th century. In the previous century women's congregations had been reformed by the insistence on enclosure — the confinement of sisters to their convent — which safeguarded space for prayer and sobriety of heart.

Mary Ward saw the growing need of young women for education. She asked that her sisters be free from the obligation to sing the office and that they be able to go about as their work of spreading the faith and of education demanded.

Her work prospered, but she met resistance from within the Catholic Church. Like our own, it was a time of consolidation. A Papal Bull was dedicated to 'completely suppress and extinguish them, subject them to perpetual abolition and remove them entirely from the Holy Church of God'.

The Bull appealed to attitudes to women that were patronising and demeaning. It can be seen now to be driven by fear rather than by the freedom of the Gospel. It described Mary Ward's companions in these terms:

'Free from, the laws of enclosure, they wander about at will, and under the guise of promoting the salvation of souls, have been accustomed to attempt and to employ themselves at many other works which are most unsuited to their weak sex and character, to female modesty and particularly to maidenly reserve — works which men of eminence in the science of sacred letters, of experience of affairs and of innocence of life undertake with much difficulty and only with great caution.'

The example of Mary Ward suggests how easily women's desire to express the freedom and energy of the Gospel can be frustrated by cultural prejudice dressed as traditional wisdom. The visitation of the sisters in the United States calls for and offers an opportunity for a more confident engagement.

The parable of the dirty floor

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Since recalling the events of yesterday in their right order often requires significant intellectual effort, while those of last month recede serially into a cloudy jumble, it would be an act of unimaginable hubris to claim seriously to remember last February. What were you doing on 10 February, for example?

Well, for myself, I was preoccupied with an odd mark on one of the terracotta tiles of the kitchen floor — odd because scrubbing would not remove it and because it seemed to be coming up out of the stone rather than being a stain on the surface. Strange.

I know it was 10 February because, driven by some peculiar catastrophic dread, I noted my discovery in the diary. It's still there among other crucial observations and instructions like 'Buy more washing up stuff', 'Super funds manager — 11.15 am', 'Pay electricity bill TODAY', 'NB NB Super funds manager — today!' and so on.

Looking back on that page now, I see it was the 41st day and seventh week of the year and in Thailand the feast of Makha Bucha, which commemorates Buddha's teachings on the full moon day of every third lunar month.

Four months later, the stain has spread through three more tiles and taken on a streaky pallor. No getting round it: these are moribund tiles, a diagnosis cheerfully confirmed when I call in Sam — 'Carpentry and Building Pty Ltd. Winner of the HIA 2008 Custom built home of the year $200—$350k'.

Sam assures me the malaise, caused by damp from the kitchen sink, will spread unless expensive surgery and transplants are undertaken, though he phrases it differently: 'They're buggered. Rip 'em out.'

Gloomily, I tell Sam that since all lunar months are roughly the same duration as the synodic month of 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes and three seconds, I am losing three tiles every feast of Makha Bucha. He just looks at me and says, 'I'll send you a quote'.

I took no offence at his cavalier attitude because I made those figures up anyway.

It's not difficult in these days of financial, climatic, strategic and technological complexity to feel haunted by some sense of a larger force operating, causing havoc. In moments of profound misanthropy — an affliction that frequently overtakes me on days when I have to confront the manager of our frozen super funds — the disintegration of one's kitchen floor is easily enlisted as a microscopic sign of larger evils.

What was happening in the cosmos, I asked myself portentously on that 10 February day, that could explain obscure feelings of unease and danger? Well, as it turns out, a hell of a lot was going on up above.

At 16.55 universal time on Tuesday 10 February, the 900 kg defunct Russian satellite Kosmos 2251 , launched in 1993, crashed into the 500 kg American commercial satellite Iridium 33 , launched in 1997. The point of impact was 800 km above northern Siberia, and the two vehicles met at a speed of approximately 10 km per second.

Both satellites were totally destroyed and their wreckage clouded out into space like ballooning dust to add itself to the 3332 orbiting 'live' satellites and the 9698 countable items of debris already in orbit.

Even allowing for the accumulation of junk since Sputnik was the first to burst into that silent, ethereal sea of space, it beggars belief that any two voyagers ranging through those limitless wastes could even come close to each other, let alone collide.

When you look at and into the sky, even with the naked eye, you're looking at the vastest, illimitable prospect available to the human gaze, and there is, as we know, a huge amount more of it than we can see. The knowledge that in this infinite cavern of night and day two wandering travellers could smash into one another has to reorganise one's priorities. It makes my festering floor, for example, ludicrously unimportant.

And yet, if I don't do something about it, insignificant though it appears in the great scheme of things, the problem will deepen. Entropy will set in.

While the moon sucks the tides across the oceans and the sun waxes and wanes and storms rage in our skies and in deep space, we still have to get on with our lives, however dwarfed we recognise them to be when two satellites against all the odds collide; or when the full moon day of every third lunar month rolls around and Buddhists pray and revere their mysterious avatar; or when, for that matter, Easter — its timing governed by the moon and the vernal equinox — returns annually to remind us of the enigmatic Christ. Life rages on regardless.

'Hello. Is that you, Sam?'

Gaddafi's Vatican weirdness

POLITICS

Desmond O'Grady

The weirdness of Colonel Mu'ammar Gaddafi's first-ever visit to Italy was evident from the moment he descended from his jet plane at Rome airport last Wednesday. Not only did the de facto leader of Libya look like Michael Jackson in an ill-fitting, gold braided military uniform, but pinned to his chest he had a representation of Omar al Mukhtar, the Libyan resistance leader who was hanged by Italian colonial forces in 1931.

His visit was to celebrate the end of recriminations over the colonial era, but Gaddafi was underlining past misdeeds. He also lectured his hosts about democracy ('dispense with elections') and compared the American bombs on his tents in 1986 to the Osama Bin Laden attack on New York.

The trip was a consequence of the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi apologising for Italy's colonial misdeeds (Italy had Libya as colony from 1911—31) and giving $US 5 million compensation. Libya has promised to help Italy stem the flow of illegal African migrants.

The visit had a substantial business aspect: Italy imports a quarter of its petrol from Libya which is also a good market for Italian goods. Libya invests in Italian firms such as Fiat and is expected to boost its investments as a result of the visit.

During the visit, critics of Libya's denial of human rights contrasted with Rome soccer club supporters keen for Gaddafi investment. A few years ago his son was registered as a Perugia A-grade club player and was allowed on the field for five minutes at the end of an unimportant match.

Those annoyed that Gaddafi was given a free hand to criticise all and sundry, without anyone tackling him on the Libyan-sponsored Lockerbie plane bomb or the Libyan missile fired ineffectively against Italy, were pleased when Gianfranco Fini, the Chamber of Deputies President, cancelled the colonel's visit to the Chamber after he had kept everyone waiting for two hours.

The Libyan explanation was that Gaddafi was praying in the tent he had erected in the Doria Pamphili park, although his 400 camp followers, including female bodyguards, were in Roman hotels.

One Gaddafian pearl was that Islamic forms of government should not be criticised since the Vatican is a theocratic State. This took me back to the first Libyan-Vatican meeting in Tripoli in 1976, where a discussion was held between Vatican Islamic experts and theologians and their Libyan counterparts. Seated at the back of the hall before the discussion I spoke with a European resident in Tripoli. He predicted that Gaddafi would enter after the meeting began and sit at

the back.

So it was: he sat ever so humbly behind me. It was more dramatic than if he had appeared onstage. Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, the affable head of the Vatican Secretariat for Non Christians, streamed down from the platform, beaming, arms outstretched, entreating 'His Excellency' to replace him as chairman of the meeting.

Gaddafi did so. It looked like a mediaeval tableau of the Sultan and the wise men. Gaddafi was enigmatically silent until he cut through the cultural comparisons to ask 'what is the Vatican State?'

Monsignor Pietro Rossano, the secretary of the Secretariat for Non Christians, began a painstaking explanation with 'Rome is built on seven hills'. His point was that the Vatican was not a theocratic State, but recognised a separate civil sphere within its boundaries and international laws beyond it.

'So', said Gaddafi at the end, 'you haven't managed to establish a theocratic State.'

That evening all the Conference participants were invited to a reception at what had been the palace of Italo Balbo, the Fascist-era governor. When we lined up to meet Gadaffi, I found myself next to Stokely Carmichael, also known as Kwame Toure, self-styled Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party. It made the queue more bearable because Trinidad-born Stokely shared my passion for cricket.

After meeting the Colonel the guests left to allow a conversation between him and Pignedoli. I remained, standing against the wall among the guards. Perhaps the Libyans thought I was a Vatican guard and vice-versa.

What ensured was less a conversation than an examination. Pignedoli tried to convince Gaddafi of the utility of diplomatic relations with the Holy See but mute Gaddafi simply stared at him with intense eyes. In the meantime the Islamic and Vatican experts prepared and issued a statement which was considered so anti-Israel that it dented Pignedoli's chances of succeeding Paul VI.

By the time he reached Rome last week it seems that Gaddafi had forgotten the conclusion regarding the Vatican which he drew from the Tripoli meeting. Will he remember the undertakings he has made to help stem the flow of illegal African migrants from Libya to Italy, or ask more money before doing so?

My father's tools

POETRY

Tom Petsinis

Nails

I shake the tartan tin awake,
Struggle with its lid, rust-sealed, tight.
Arising from the nest of nails,
You take me by the heart,
Remind me with half a smile:
Luck's never found looking up.
A boy, eyes glowing still
From last night's thunderstorm,
You prospect the village,
Thinking as your pockets fill:
They're also from grandfather-God,
Like silver rain, lightning bolts.
Some go back fifty years
To Fitzroy's blue-stone lanes;
Others, extracted with joy
From hardwood boards and beams,
You tapped lightly on a brick —
A chiropractor of crooked spines.
Sitting on a home-made bench,
Tin on knees, you're looking for
A tack to close my gaping sole,
A brad for Mum's curtain rod,
A grey clout to keep evening light
Slipping our corrugated fence.
It's a decade since you died,
But they remain, a legacy of sorts,

Set by your galvanising touch.
I see you in the shape of my hand
Rummaging for the nail
That crucifies father to son.

Horse-shoe

1

Winter, no sign of dawn, you're walking to work.
The milkman's draught-horse is snorting steam.
You find it on the street, surprised by its warmth.
That night Mum suggests we leave it at the gate,
Together with the empty bottles filling our bones.
You prevail, saying fortune has her favourites.
On Sunday we point to the back gate, brick wall,
The trunk of the apricot tree, but you nail it secure
To the toilet door, open end up, for kismet's sake.
Leaving McKean Street, we pack it with the tools.
But village customs have no place in a newer home:
It's forgotten in the basement smelling of earth.

2

For years it was a mere dead-weight on my desk,
Restraining unpublished poems from following me
In the rush to my infant daughter crying for milk.
One day, thinking of you, I understood a truth
Silvered by retreating roads, shot with nails of light:
Spurs prod flesh forward by pointing to the past.
And there I am, at the window, scared of the night,
Watching the bearded rider entering the village square,
Circling the fountain, sowing the cobbles with stars.
The dead forgive the living thundering to the post.
Curved for motion it quickens my plodding heart,

And I'm racing toward you, redeeming your luck.

Builder's string

Hold tight, you shout, and pluck a note —
A call to prove my worth and growing strength.
Its end tied to my forefinger,
I resist your manly pull, the cutting pain.
The edge of the garden-wall defined,
You wind it deftly on a stick in figure eights,
Like Mum spinning her wool —
I rub the pink impression from my skin.
And it's remained like that ever since:
Sleeping through an Imperial Age,
Dreaming of guiding stones, aligning bricks,
Stilling gravity with a bit of lead.
Taking the knotted end as before,
I drop the spool onto the garage-floor and tug,
Delighting in its bounce, turn, twist, kick —
Unwinding in a Macedonian dance.
Hold tight, I shout, from the letterbox,
But my daughter can't see the point of our game:
My joy in restoring length to string,
Here, mid-way between father and child.

Tin-snips

Your one-year memorial's on Sunday
And I'm making a candle-holder for your grave:
Halving a tin of virgin olive-oil,
Folding back edges into harmless hems —
When the snips' light-blue handles recollect
A clear sky, narrow yard, that boy of ten.
If we'd stayed in the fenceless village

I'd be setting out with a water-bottle made of oak,

Whistling at belled sheep, goats, cows —

But here, in Fitzroy, I keep pigeons instead.

Retaining your feeling for livestock,

You miss your card-game at the Macedonian club
To cut and cuss this corrugated sheet,

Clip chicken-wire woven like Mum's crochet,
Build a new cage for my growing flock.

Alone, having seen how homers are made,

I hold the stray between my knees

And trim its flight feathers with your heavy snips.

It will beat hard, without lift, for weeks,

Then take its bearings from our apricot tree.

We've set our candles in bricky's sand,

Chanted prayers, burnt incense, spilt red wine,

Shared cinnamoned wheat in sustaining your soul.

The years darken a child's remorse,

Like the moss on your dove's extended wings.

The rich list of Australian politics

POLITICS

John Warhurst

The listing of Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull in the *Business Review Weekly*among Australia's richest 200 people with $178 million caused a passing political stir. Despite the fallback position that Therese Rein's wealth is measured at $50 million, Turnbull, the Member for Net Worth (not Wentworth) according to *BRW*, still does not appear to be comfortable discussing the subject.

He could retort that in politics, economic success in life should be a plus rather than a minus. Senator Bill Heffernan took this line when he hijacked Laurie Oakes' interview with Turnbull, accusing Oakes of running a 'bullshit' line of questioning.

Heffernan has a point. In our community, however, a suspicion of extreme wealth remains, whether we call it envy or the tall poppy syndrome.

What can the position of Turnbull and of the top 200 tell us about wealth and politics? First and most obviously, that the extremely wealthy almost always get involved, like Turnbull, on the conservative side. That might not be rocket science but it needs to be said.

Among the other 199 names on the *BRW* list, some have direct links with politics. Ted Baillieu, the Victorian Liberal Opposition Leader whose family wealth ($463 million), is a junior version of Turnbull. In explaining his wealth to the Victorian electorate he has faced the same problems as Turnbull.

There is also Clive Palmer, the fifth wealthiest Australian with $3.42 billion, whose son, Michael Palmer, stood for the Queensland Liberal National Party at the last state elections. Clive Palmer is a big political donor to the Liberal Nationals and has come under sustained attack from Queensland Labor because of it.

These three, all on the conservative side, seem to be the only ones directly involved with parliamentary politics. But others are interested. Among the very rich, Frank Lowy (second wealthiest at $4.20 billion) set up the Lowy Institute for International Policy. His company Westfield is a big donor to both sides of party politics.

Andrew Forrest of Fortescue Metals, once Australia's richest man, is trying, with Federal Government help, to create a major Indigenous work-experience and employment training program. Luca Belgiorno-Nettis makes a considerable investment to the newDemocracy Foundation to encourage greater citizen participation in politics.

Dick Honan, the largest ethanol producer, is a prominent lobbyist for ethanol in

petrol. The Howard Government funding he received was linked in public reporting to his company donations to the Liberal Party.

Other familiar names, most but not all on the Coalition side, include republican businessman Lindsay Fox, sports event promoter and former Liberal Party Treasurer Ron Walker, former Reserve Bank board member and big Liberal donor Robert Gerard, former Mayor of Toowoomba Clive Berghofer, and Sir Graham McCamley, founder of the Cattleman's Union of Australia, once a pushy pressure group.

But many on the list avoid the public spotlight altogether. If they are to be found in the media they will be more likely to appear in the business pages than the political news. That may be a reason why they are not interested in entering politics or even donating to a political party. Cynics might say that they have all the power they need without becoming a politician; they would rather be the organ grinder than the monkey.

It may seem surprising that the presence of almost all of the extremely wealthy on one side of the political divide doesn't make Australian politics one-sided. There are several explanations. Trade unions support the Labor Party financially. Some companies and wealthy individuals do too, either as an insurance policy or out of a genuine commitment to encouraging balanced democracy.

And of course, many of the most wealthy have no interest in politics at all and keep their money well away from the conservative parties.

Cousins, Chaser and the court of public morality

EDITORIAL

Andrew Hamilton

What do footballers who give photographers the bird, comedians who make jokes about sick children , boat owners who bring asylum seekers to Australian shores, cooks who swear, and cricketers who drink, have in common? They are all made part of morality plays that share an identical plot.

The play begins with a report of bad behaviour and a short period of silence for the heavy clouds of opinion to gather. This is followed by an explosion of judgment. As the judgment is amplified it leads to outrage and universal condemnation. Those who refuse to join in are usually themselves condemned.

Then the clubs, sponsors or organisations with whom the offender is associated confirm the condemnation. The National leaders may also rise in judgment. The offender apologises and is condignly punished. The curtain falls, only to rise again with a different set of characters.

The frequency and stylised quality of these performances might be attributed to the media finding that firestorms are profitable. But the media usually intuit and respond to public need. So we might ask what it is in the public mood that is discharged by these rituals of sin, exposure and expiation.

Perhaps the key lies in the air of anxiety that attaches to each scandal. More always seems to be at stake than someone behaving badly. There is an unspoken fear that the barbarians are at the gates, and that if something decisive is not done this kind of behaviour will become endemic. Our moral world may be irrevocably changed.

The atmosphere is redolent of the primary school playground. A boy does something unacceptable, something brazenly naughty. Another child says, 'Look at that boy!' The cry is more than an invitation to look at something interesting. It expresses excitement that rules are being so spectacularly broken, but also anxiety that the network of rules that offer protection are so easily torn.

Then the teacher intervenes by telling the boy that he should be ashamed of himself. Order is reimposed, the boy apologises and some minor punishment is imposed. If the matter is important the school principal may make a pronouncement about it. So is anxiety allayed.

Perhaps a similar moral anxiety is disclosed and discharged in the public rituals that surround behaviour deemed inappropriate. If so, it would not be surprising. The ways that our culture provides for us to think about reality are undeveloped and externalised in much the same way that children's moral thinking is. So we

might expect it to generate the same anxieties.

In our culture personal morality is commonly identified with what the individual chooses. Public morality is identified with the balance of consequences of particular actions. These are thin criteria, neither of which offers us assurance that our own moral world and security will enjoy protection. We are at the mercy of a world shaped by others' freedom and others' calculation of consequences. This precariousness generates the same kind of anxiety that children have.

In such a world bad behaviour by others has a disproportionate importance. It threatens my security and the safe space in which I can be myself. So it is important that moral standards be reinforced. This must be done externally because the moral framework offers no necessarily shared values.

In a democracy this is best done by public opinion and by authoritative assertion. The ritual of naming behaviour, shaming offenders, forcing unanimity, exacting confessions and penalties, and inviting strong judgment from national leaders fits the bill.

All this is pretty harmless at a day to day level. But it has its dangers. It suggests that the necessary corollary of the cult of individual choice is social control. Instruments of social control like the rituals of naming and shaming do not respect the personal dignity of those they touch. And they are invoked only in the interests of majority groups.

The dignity of those who are not like us — asylum seekers, Indigenous Australians, comedians — will not be protected.

Ryan Report: crimes of the 'human' Church

RELIGION

Julian Butler

The drama that surrounded the death of Richard Pratt showed the manner in which the desire for simplicity can distort reality. It seemed beyond the capacity of the media, and of many public figures, to acknowledge that Pratt, although a man of extraordinary generosity, also committed immoral acts that defrauded many people.

The inability to see that a single person is capable of committing both good and bad confines us to a morality painted without any shade of grey. This can only hurt our society.

Just as individuals are capable of both good and bad, so are institutions. Take the Irish Commission to Report into Child Abuse, known as the Ryan Report . The report details abuse in Catholic educational institutions in Ireland from as early as 1914 through to 2000. Most of incidents reported occurred between 1936 and the 1970.

The commission heard evidence from 1090 witnesses; 90 per cent reported having being abused physically, and about half reported having suffered sexual abuse, along with neglect and emotional abuse. These witnesses identified over 800 individuals, religious and lay, who had abused them physically and/or sexually in a religious environment.

The report's publication was ten years in the making and was dogged by many problems. The first chair of the commission, Justice Mary Laffoy, resigned in 2003, claiming that the lack of cooperation from the Government had rendered the commission powerless.

Justice Sean Ryan was then appointed but there was further delay when the Christian Brothers asked whether it was constitutional for the Investigative Committee to make findings of abuse against Brothers who could not properly answer allegations. The success of this action meant the final report did not name a single perpetrator.

During the course of the commission, only the Rosminians sought to understand abuse; other Congregations sought to 'explain' abuse. It became evident that some members of the Church, and sections of civil society, fail to understand that the abuse suffered by so many in the 'care' of religious institutions must be fully acknowledged.

The Pope was reported to be 'very distressed' by the report after meeting on 6 June with the Archbishops of Armagh and Dublin. The Vatican has, however, made no statement beyond official spokesman, Fr Federico Lombardi, commenting

merely that this was 'a matter for the local church'.

But this matter goes beyond any local church. Eventually the Vatican will have to stand in solidarity with the victims of these crimes. The Roman Catholic Church makes the claim of being a universal church, and so its successes and failures must be understood within that dynamic. Like individual persons, the Church is capable of acting well and badly. To separate indivduals from the church diminishes the responsibility of the whole body.

The catalogue of sins laid out by the Ryan Report, but known long before, must be acknowledged in full. It would be wrong to deny that these are acts of the Catholic Church. It would also be wrong to respond to them simply with detached moral indignation. These barbaric acts occurred alongside self-sacrificing work and love within the very same Church. Instances of care and tenderness do not lessen the evil of abuse. Nor does the abuse cancel out the instances of goodness.

This reality is difficult to confront. It is antithetical to the simplistic accounts presented by the media and public figures. To ensure that such crimes never again occur, it is necessary to hold together in our minds the whole complex reality of an often tragically human Church. To minimise the evil of abuse would withdraw the Church from proper judgment. To ignore acts of quiet dignity within the Church would undermine the standards by which it should be judged.

The decline of Christianity in Australia and America

RELIGION

Peter Kirkwood

You often hear clichÃ©s and truisms contrasting the place of religion in America and Australia: 'The USA is a very Christian country, and Australia is very secular'; 'While Americans wear their religion on their sleeve, Australians have a natural aversion to public displays of religion, and to religion in politics.'

But in the Rudd/Obama era there are new parallels and convergences with regard to religion in the two countries.

First, to the political leaders who are pivotal in setting the tone for engagement between religion and politics. Both Rudd and Obama are publicly practising Christians, and acknowledge the place of Christianity in forming their centre-left political views. Rudd is the first Labor leader since the bitter split in the 1950s to eschew the party's aggressively secular tradition, and openly acknowledge the importance of Christianity in his thinking.

In a 2005 interview with ABC TV's *Compass*, Rudd, still in opposition, said this came at the risk of being seen by his Labor colleagues as 'some slightly besotted God botherer', but he didn't want God to become a 'wholly owned subsidiary of political conservatism in this country'.

Rudd described himself as a Christian socialist, and said it was important for 'Christians in politics not to cherry-pick the gospel, but to understand its complete dimension, including the social dimension'. He went on to say that 'given what's happening on the political right in this country, and in America, it's important that people on the centre-left of politics begin to argue a different perspective from within the Christian tradition'.

These words could easily have been uttered by Obama. He was brought up in a non-religious household, and it was only as a young adult community organiser in Chicago that he embraced Christianity, primarily because of its emphasis on social justice. 'I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change,' he says in his book, *Audacity of Hope*.

Since taking office, he's been at pains to confirm the pluralist polity of America, and that Christianity does not have a privileged position. Raising the ire of conservative evangelicals, at a press conference on his recent visit to Turkey he said, 'We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.'

Sentiments Kevin Rudd would heartily agree with.

But the convergences don't end with the political leaders. Statistics reported in

the recent Easter edition of *Newsweek*magazine caused a stir in America. In bold red letters on a black background, typeset in the form of a cross, its provocative cover read 'The Decline and Fall of Christian America'.

Written by the magazine's editor, Jon Meachem, the article analysed the results of the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) published in March this year, and built its argument around two startling statistics.

Firstly, since 1990, the number of Americans claiming no religious affiliation has nearly doubled from eight to 15 per cent, matched by similar decline in the percentage of Christians.

The numbers of unaffiliated in Australia are slightly higher. Our 1991 census revealed this as 12.9 per cent, and in the latest census in 2006 it had grown to 18.7 per cent.

Secondly, the biggest decline in US affiliation was concentrated in the north-east, the Christian heartland of the country. This massive decline in the area where Christians first settled and founded the nation caused many conservative Christian leaders to claim America has become a post-Christian country.

But as Meacham argued, this is overly alarmist: 'While the percentage of Christians may be shrinking, rumours of the death of Christianity are greatly exaggerated. Being less Christian does not necessarily mean that America is post-Christian.'

In his presentation of ARIS, Meacham outlined just how Christian the country still is. Some 76 per cent call themselves Christian (in Australia, 64 per cent are Christians). The largest Christian group is Catholics, making up 25 per cent (almost identical to Australia's 25.8 per cent).

The statistic highlighting the major difference with Australia is the massive conservative evangelical base in the US; 45 per cent of American Christians, or 34 per cent of the total adult population, define themselves as 'born again'.

In Australia, in the 2006 census, only 1.1 per cent described themselves as Pentecostal, but 'born agains' also reside in other denominations. In a survey conducted for Sydney's Centre for Public Christianity, 15 per cent of 2500 respondents identified as 'born again' — significant, but much smaller than the percentage in the US.

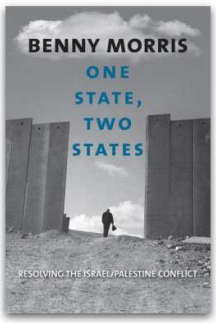
So, after widespread disillusionment with Bush and the Religious Right, and the landslide election victory of Obama, the religious pendulum has swung. The perceived place of Christianity in America is suddenly very different, and with the shift, maybe it's not so different to Australia.

Israel historian's two-state backflip

BOOKS

Shahram Akbarzadeh

Benny Morris: *One State, Two States.* Yale University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-300-12281-7



Can the Palestinians and Israelis live together? This is the fundamental question at the heart of Morris' book. The answer, according to Morris, is no. The alternatives, for the Jews and the Palestinians to live under one roof in one state or in two separate national states, are, he argues, unworkable and ultimately detrimental to Israel.

Morris starts his book with a brief survey of the growing literature on the binational state proposition. This idea has been explored and promoted by authors such as Tony Judt and Virginia Tilley in response to the ethnic and religious mix of today's Israel, and the pertinent question of economic viability for the future Palestinian state that is expected to emerge on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Proponents of a 'secular and democratic binational state' have taken issue with the Zionist vision of Israel as a Jewish state for obvious reasons. What about the rights of the Arabs who live there?

Morris acknowledges that taking the Zionist dream to its logical conclusion would entail removing the Arab population from Israel. This was indeed advocated by early Zionist leaders. David Ben-Gurion, who later became Israel's first Prime Minister, is quoted by Morris: 'With compulsory transfer we [would] have a vast area [for settlement] .... I support compulsory transfer. I don't see anything immoral in it.'

Although this idea has become less and less acceptable in Israel, it is still seen as the way forward by a small minority represented by the Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beitenu party.

The recent proposal to introduce a loyalty bill is aimed at Israel's 1.5 million Arabs who regard the 1948 creation of Israel as a day of catastrophe, not of jubilation. Two national narratives are colliding here and the Zionist camp is hoping to use the state machinery to suppress the contending view.

Morris is renowned as a historian of integrity and impartiality. His scholarship on the birth of Israel and its impact on the Arab population was a direct challenge to the established view in Israel.

In his seminal work *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*and subsequent publications, Morris documented a counter narrative which gave voice to the dispossessed Palestinians. Morris saw the rise of Palestinian nationalism as

directly linked to the assertiveness of Zionists in Palestine.

These were courageous points to make when those representing conventional wisdom rejected responsibility for the flight of Palestinians from their homes in 1948, even denied the existence of a 'Palestinian nation'. They prefered instead to use the term Arab (a generic term that down-played differences between Arab-speaking people).

With this background in mind, it is shocking to read Morris' present book. He seems to have come full circle. Not only does he reject the idea of a binational state for Jews and Palestinians, he also rejects the idea of a Palestinian state. Instead he advocates the joining of the Palestinian territories with Jordan.

Morris' argument for the rejection of the binational state is first and foremost based on the demographic dynamics of Jews and Arabs. This is a familiar argument. Any attempt to accommodate the two people within a unitary state would make the Jewish population a minority that would be at the mercy of the majority Arab population.

Morris is highly sceptical about that proposal and rejects the 'secular democratic binational state' formula as a smokescreen for a deliberate attempt at disenfranchising Jews.

This is a disappointing and a revealing book. It marks a significant revision in Morris' position. His earlier concern with the Palestinian national narrative has given way to an overarching concern with the promotion of the Jewishness of Israel. This comes at the expense of Palestinian national aspirations.

Morris' shift reflects a shift in Israeli public opinion following the failure of the peace process and the growing violence. Morris represents the almost universally-held opinion in Israel when he accuses the Palestinians, even the Fatah leadership in the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, of still dreaming to push the Jews to the sea.

This book reveals a deep-seated sense of anxiety and mistrust that will hamper any future attempts at peace.

Life of a 'geologian'

EULOGY

Paul Collins

The first time I visited Thomas Berry I was hopelessly late. The reason was a massive traffic jam on the Henry Hudson Parkway going north from Manhattan. As a naive Australian, inexperienced in the ways of New York traffic, I blithely thought that I would drive straight to my appointment with no impediments.

But I had forgotten something that Berry has often argued. We are in the dying phase of industrial society, and many roads — like the Henry Hudson — are falling apart. Traffic was banked up for miles and I was close to apoplectic by the time I reached Berry's Riverside Center. He was very forgiving.

Thomas Berry died on 1 June aged 94. He was Catholicism's most significant thinker in ecological theology, the Teilhard de Chardin of our time. Berry's thought didn't span mere centuries, but millennia and aeons.

A cultural historian and anthropologist of vast erudition and vision, he was a polymath in the truest sense. Much of his early writing is to be found in the periodical, *Cross Currents*. His first major work on ecology was *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), followed by *The Universe Story* (1992). In 1999 he published his most comprehensive book, *The Great Work*.

He was born into a Catholic family of 13 in 1914 in Greensboro, North Carolina. He said that the great determining element of his early life was his experience of the natural world. He joined the Passionist order at 20.

As a student he read the Chinese, Hindu and Buddhist classics. Much later he learned to read classical Chinese and Sanskrit. He was ordained a priest in 1942. He never did much ministerial work in the conventional sense. He went to China as a missionary in 1947, but had to leave with the advent of the Communist regime.

Acquainted with the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin since his student days, Berry realised that a Christian need not be alienated from the natural world. By the 1970s his study and reading had given him an extraordinary historical and cultural context for understanding what was happening to the world.

'I started off as a student of cultural history. I am primarily an historian. What I have to say are the probings of an historian into human affairs in a somewhat comprehensive context ... The more I gave to the study of the human venture, the more clearly I saw the need to go back to the dynamics of life itself. I was progressively led back to the study of the earth community, including its geological and biological as well as its human components. I call myself a geologian.'

Religion, he argued, was meant to provide an interpretative pattern, a way of making sense of ourselves and the cosmos. But it has failed. 'The greatest failure of Christianity in the total course of its history is its inability to deal with the

devastation of the planet.' Christians have sensitivity to suicide, homicide and genocide, 'but we commit biocide (the killing of the life systems of the planet) and geocide (the killing of the planet itself) and we have no morality to deal with it'.

'Religion', he concludes, 'is absorbed with the pathos of the human.'

Our theological view of God is incomplete if we do not take seriously the fact that it was God who made the world and is therefore profoundly related to it. 'If we lose the splendour of the natural world, we lose our true sense of the divine.' The only solution is to shift Christian faith out of its sin-redemption myopia into a whole new ecological context.

He considers that science has also failed in helping us interpret the significance and meaning of the natural world.

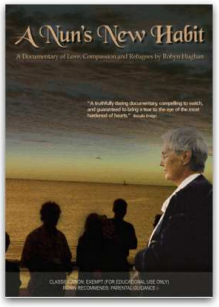
'The supreme irony is that just at this moment when such expansive horizons of past, present and future have opened up, humankind is suddenly precipitated into an inner anxiety and even into a foreboding about themselves and the meaning of it all. Unable to bear such awesome meaning, men reject themselves as part of the world around them, the past as well as the future ... We are beset by a sense of confusion and alienation ... Contemporary men have no spiritual vision adequate for these new magnitudes of existence ... To create such a skill, to teach such a discipline, are the primary tasks of contemporary spirituality.'

Eventually Berry returned to rural North Carolina. It was there that he died last week, one of the most significant Catholic thinkers of the 20th century.

Good habits of an activist nun

FILMS

Tim Kroenert



In the parable of the Good Samaritan, a stranger offers his time, effort and money to help a man who would have been thought his cultural rival. The story evokes the Christian imperative to 'love your neighbour', and the idea that 'your neighbour' includes all the downtrodden, regardless of their cultural, political or religious heritage.

Sister Carmel Wauchope, an Australian nun of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan, lives up to the reputation of her order's namesake. Outraged by the conditions faced by asylum seekers in detention in Australia, she has spent her latter years visiting these young men, and advocating on their behalf.

'Sister Carmel is inspirational,' says Robyn Hughan, director of *A Nun's New Habit*, a no-frills documentary about Sister Carmel's ministry to the residents of the now closed Baxter Detention Centre near Whyalla.

A Catholic nun ministering to these mostly Islamic men, Sister Carmel is motivated by compassion that recognises not only their common humanity, but also the commonalities, rather than differences, between their faiths. 'She has the ability to make people feel really special,' says Hughan.

Through interviews with Sister Carmel, her friends and family, and former detainees, Hughan traces the threads of compassion and the sense of justice that have run through Sister Carmel's life, and sets this against a potted history of our detention laws.

Hughan is an advocate in her own right. She first met Sister Carmel during a visit to Baxter in the early 2000s, while working as a researcher for the SBS television series, *Tales From a Suitcase — The Afghan Experience*.

'I interviewed 30 or 40 refugees for the program, the majority of them boat people,' she recalls. 'I was horrified when I listened to their stories and realised what was happening — families and children in detention, in the middle of the desert.

'During that time I was going home and crying myself to sleep. So many of them had had their families killed and tortured. You'd think we'd be more compassionate to people who have been through so much, instead of locking them up in centres where they're so isolated and have no contact or hope. I just find it appalling.'

Hughan felt compelled to do something. Talking to Sister Carmel, and observing how this extraordinary nun operates — gentle as a counsellor, firm and tireless as

an advocate — she knew she had found a subject whose story would help to shed light upon the emotional and psychological impacts of mandatory detention.

'When I first met Sister Carmel, I just connected with her,' says Hughan. 'I wasn't brought up in a Catholic family — it was anti-Catholic as much as anything. So it was interesting for me to stay in a convent and spend time with Sister Carmel and the other sisters.

'I went in wondering why anyone would want to be a nun. I came out fully understanding why, and thinking how lucky they are to be such special people in other people's lives.'

My conversation with Hughan takes place not long after former Telstra boss Sol Trujillo's notorious sleight against Australians' attitudes to people of other races. There have also been a spate of beatings against Indian students in Melbourne and accusations of apathy against police and politicians. Is Australia, I ask, a racist country?

'There are elements of racism in Australia that, given a trigger, are brought out,' she reflects. 'It depends on our leaders. If you start demonising people and calling them queue jumpers or not treating them like human beings, then that racist element is there.'

A Nun's New Habit arrives at a time when offshore processing of asylum seekers continues to occur at the Immigration Detention Centre at Christmas Island, and when an influx of boats bearing Asylum Seekers to Australian shores has awoken a seemingly dormant paranoia about border protection.

While the timing of the film's release is perfect, that's more providential than premeditated — funding difficulties meant the hour-long film took four years to complete.

'I'm happy that it's there for now,' says Hughan. 'It's very easy for people to forget the circumstances that arose earlier in the 2000s, and for refugees or asylum seekers to be once again demonised as they were before.

'People need to be reminded of who refugees are, the pain they've suffered, that we need to be kind and show humanity,' she says. Any Good Samaritan would surely agree.

Daughter of the disappeared

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

It is a sad fact of life that children sometimes disappear. So do parents, of course — still, by the time you are 55, you expect your parents to stay put until the Grim Reaper comes scything. My father, however, is missing. At least to me he is, although he lives somewhere in Melbourne — I just cannot discover where.

Dad will be 88 next birthday, and, according to the little trickle of information I do have, has a much impaired memory. Although I'm told he does remember me, his eldest child. I think now that he went missing, in a very real sense, soon after the death of my mother. My parents had known each other for over 53 years, and had been married for 50. My mother died not long after their Golden Wedding.

Five weeks after the funeral, the meats scarcely being cold, Dad met the woman who would become his second wife. His focus then turned away from his offspring, and became fixed on the new woman and her large family. I remember thinking what an irony it was that his favourite play was *King Lear*, but he had clearly forgotten it, for he protested that his children were not as happy about the match as his wife's eloquent offspring were.

I pointed out to him that we were indeed happy he had started a new life; we, however, were still stuck with our old ones. I also asked him to think about the fact that his wife had been widowed 15 years when they met. Time counts: there is a great difference between 15 years and five weeks.

Time really got the bit between its teeth more than seven years ago, when I flew out from Greece at a day's notice: it was almost certain that Dad was dying after an operation for cancer and two heart attacks. But he didn't die; he just died to me. After brain injury brought on by hypoxia, he became convinced that all I wanted was to lock him in a nursing home, throw away the key, and then make off with his money and property.

The coolness over the phone and face-to-face was almost more than I could bear. My attempts to communicate the way we used to ended in failure, every one. And so I found myself teetering, about to fall into an abyss of grief caused by this complicated bereavement: mourning the living is often worse than mourning the dead. And that it should have come to this. That my father, who was also my teacher, should prefer me to stay away.

It was as if his paternal emotions had been kidnapped. Malign influences had seeped into the cracks that brain damage had caused, and in his darkened mind had flowered, in the manner of the belladonna deadly nightshade, into a rich and poisonous paranoia. Some essential coding that had previously enabled him to combat these influences had gone missing. As he himself had disappeared.

Late last year I thought my luck had turned, for Dad fetched up in a respite care place where an old friend also happened to be. *Get in touch*, urged John. *He says he wants to see you.*

I had already planned a trip Down Under, and so wrote an innocuous card care of John. I did not say I was coming. Yet, a few days after my arrival, Dad was spirited away to an unknown destination, and the person who has his power of attorney turned a deaf ear to my entreaties to be able to see my father for almost certainly the last time. A court order established Dad's address, but I was not permitted to know it.

Since then he has been spirited away again. And try as I might, there seems to be no way I can find him, even though in my present despair, all I want to know is that he is being well cared for.

Once long ago, when I was an uncomplicated schoolgirl leading a straightforward life of study, singing, sport and church attendance, I ran a race. I was a good sprinter, and often won in competition, but on this occasion, running in a championship, I burst through the finishing tape almost into my waiting father's arms.

Somebody took a photo. Like my father, though, all the photos have been lost. Fortunately the image is still safely stored in my head: two short, dark, intense people joined by blood and in a close embrace.

But now, in Australia, blood counts for nothing, and I have been forced to give up long-distance running.

Why we're losing the war on racism

MULTICULTURALISM

Saeed Saeed

When discussing racism, the response is as important as the accusation. The slow response from police and our political leaders to the recent spate of Indian-bashings demonstrates what can occur when racism is tackled passively. It also shows just how difficult and complex this fight is.

Racism is a purely subjective and visceral beast. You feel it in the gut first before it can be rationalised. And that's if you are lucky.

For Indian International student Sourabh Sharma, it came in a hail of punches and kicks as he was assaulted on a Melbourne train. Passengers watched helplessly as six youths kicked him to the head while screaming racial insults.

Another student, Sravan Kumar Theerthala was stabbed with a screwdriver in a party in Melbourne's north and remains comatose in intensive care.

The police believe the attacks were motivated by opportunism. But to deny that racism played a part is a severe miscalculation. The students, who feel victimised, say the police are out of touch with their concerns. The crimes escalated into a diplomatic incident that risks the country's $15 billion a year international student trade.

The police are not totally to blame. They are a symptom of our society's immaturity when it comes to discussing issues of race.

While it was in power, the Howard Government spurned no opportunity to yank the ethos of multiculturalism from our collective conscious. During those dark years we saw our former prime minister steadfastly deny any concerns of racial tensions, especially during the flash points of Hansonism and the Cronulla Riots.

The results are a generation of youth starved of effective leadership when it comes to tolerance, and a society whose default position is near hysterical denial when any accusation of racism is levelled at it — whether from a former cashed-up CEO or from Indigenous activists .

It can also be displayed in the idolisation of a 19-year-old Gold Coast waitress, Clare Werbeloff , who shot to fame on the back of racist stereotypes broadcast on television.

Prime Minister Rudd displayed much needed backbone when it came to the National Apology, but no matter how heartfelt the apology was, the decision to offer it was in line with the national mood. Tackling racism is not seen as a vote winner. It requires stern leadership to delve into places in which we as a society

are not comfortable.

President Obama displayed this through his landmark 'race speech' after the scandal involving his former pastor. Delivering his address during the middle of a divisive election was not politically savvy, yet it is now acknowledged as one of the key turning points which propelled Obama to victory.

Kevin Rudd also needs to take the lead when tackling this scourge.

Fighting racism involves the mother of all hearts-and-minds campaigns. Anti discrimination programs are only effective when followed with strong political backing and vice versa.

The AFL realised this and their expansive anti-racism strategy has been effective because it was articulated and pushed from the top down. The AFL is now a totally different league from what it was 15 years ago, because they realised that anti-discrimination is one never-ending season where complacency is defeat.

Off course the AFL is a billion dollar industry and its anti-discrimination push was also designed to protect its assets. However, unlike our political leaders they had the insight to acknowledge that racism is bad for business.

Under Howard it was merely a chapter in his ongoing culture wars and its ramifications had no economic bite. What the Indian student crisis shows us is that the stigma of racism, bred by those Howard years, could now lead to real damages to our economy and international standing.

The recent announcement by Victoria's Attorney General Rob Hulls to push for tougher sentences for hate crimes is one positive step.

However, for it to be viewed as something more than a response to the international backlash, our leaders and police officers need to have a frank and open conversation about racism without being nervous or defensive.

Only through this will our society evolve and live up to its multicultural ideals. By choosing to ignore it our defence of our country's much touted tolerance will sound increasingly hollow at home and abroad.

Torture is a dirty word

POETRY

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

Voices from outside the cemetery

Very well then, comrade, and if our time has gone
we still have gesturing that can be made,
stuccoed upon the reef:
the merely personal whistles like a wren
or trills our nerve-ends with a few volts.
But, busy enough, sloping under a little
clump of errant bluegums here
when the day's grown aromatically warm,
that reminiscent perfume just about
rips out my heart.
Very well then, or not, an age has passed
stranding on a gritty reef all those
who rode a plank raft of ideals,
working to protect the little fish,
when there still was a secular god.

The dirty word

Walking under winking wattle
that burns the winter away
resist the paradoxical way
in which the viridian tide of pleasure
makes one taste of death.
But if we fail to murmur death
we cannot hear the sound of blood,
nor touch those random victims who
cry out from the very moment
when the electrodes are applied;

for torture is the dirty word

and some are trying to clean its face.

There can be nothing quite like

hypothetical fear to rouse
the deepest human nastiness.

If the cut worm has any sense

it will not forgive the plough,

but let's not hear the word, revenge:

a dragon that must feed on

all the pornography of shame.

The most expensive bananas in Thailand

POLITICS

Harry Nicolaides

Despite the best efforts of his jailers, Behnam Moafi, an Iranian-Swede born in Tehran in 1968, refuses to die.

He is serving a 22-year sentence in a Thai prison for extortion, blackmail and armed robbery — a crime, according to Fair Trials International , he did not commit.

After eight years of abuse, torture, hunger, solitary confinement, malnutrition, illness and conditions that would push lesser men into insanity, Benny, as he is known to the inmates of Klong Prem Prison, has earned a Thai law degree and learned to play a traditional Thai musical instrument. Preparing his own cases, he has also launched over 130 legal actions against prison officials, police officers and lawyers.

Through several changes of government, a political *coup d'Ã©tat*, and great social upheaval, Benny has learned a great deal about Thailand. Indeed many of its dissidents, former leaders and ruling elite have ended up in his prison cell.

This month, he lodged a request to have his case re-heard, taking advantage of an obscure loophole in the Thai penal code that allows for this type of review only once in ten years.

Benny has faced far worse odds and has nothing to lose. However, if the ruling is handed down in his favour, several officers of Thailand's revered judiciary, senior government bureaucrats and the Bangkok-based, foreign chanceries of several different countries will be shamed before the world community.

Benny Moafi was arrested by Thai police on 14 September 2000. He was implicated in allegedly beating, robbing and kidnapping a Syrian national in the room of a Bangkok hotel. In an effort to help two Iranian families in a dispute with a third man, Benny found himself accused of using a gun to rob and intimidate the Syrian national.

Relying solely on the testimony of the Syrian, the court found Benny guilty of charges including possession of a handgun. Strangely, the Syrian waited 14 days after the alleged crime before lodging his complaint, and longer before he revised his statement to include the gun.

While Benny is currently at Minburi Special Prison, a detention centre on the outskirts of Bangkok, over the last eight years he has served time in more than six different prisons and 17 different compounds. He has been transferred every time

he exposed corruption or abuse in the prison system.

He also campaigned for the rights and privileges of other prisoners. His most recent challenge to the director of Bangkok Remand Prison over the extortionate price of bananas sold to inmates saw him swiftly banished to the smaller, isolated correctional outpost in Minburi. This has not stopped Benny from continuing to write his letters to the NGOs and human rights organisations he hopes will one day help him.

Sabine Zanker, head of the legal team of Fair Trials International, always looks forward to hearing from Benny. 'His letters are always a pleasure to read. He is upbeat even in the darkest hours, resourceful, knowledgeable and won't be intimidated. While working on his own case, he has also always an open ear for his fellow prisoners and stands up against the authorities on their behalf.

'During my eight and a half years here at Fair Trails Abroad I have seen a number of people who have risen to the occasion, and he has shown strength of character, dignity and compassion during most difficult times. Benny is a prime example of somebody whom prison made an even better person.'

While Benny has shown great humanity and compassion towards others, the same cannot be said about his own government. Sadly, the Swedish embassy has so far shown little sympathy towards his plight. Indeed they have never attended his hearings.

Lucia Trenkler, a Swedish lawyer who is in close contact with the people looking into his case said, 'Swedish authorities are making great efforts to help Benny, but the final decision must be made on the Thai side.' For Benny it seems Thailand has already made its decision and Sweden has forgotten him.

The inmates on death row in Klong Prem Prison remember Benny well. Contrary to the UN's International Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners, leg-irons and chains are typically used for restraint and punishment in Thai prisons. By submitting an appeal to the Supreme Administrative Court on behalf of several prisoners, Benny was successful in having the chains removed.

Benny is also well known to the judiciary of Bangkok's criminal courts. Summoned to a court appearance he was, as is the local custom, ordered to remove his shoes and socks before entering the courtroom. Despite threats and intimidation from court officials Benny resisted. He was eventually forced to remove them.

Standing before the judge he made an impassioned plea in Thai asking the judge if he was considered a human being. The judge,

impressed by Benny's eloquence and his command of the Thai language, made an exception and allowed him to put his shoes back on. After this precedent hundreds of other prisoners did the same.

But Benny has had little luck in having his own case reviewed on appeal. He notes that in the Thai legal system you are guilty until proven innocent. In the hearings to date he has been thwarted by long delays, endless postponements and, as reported by Fair Trials International in their own independent investigation, dubious findings.

His efforts to have his case heard have also been hampered because the witnesses that could corroborate his story returned to Iran shortly after the alleged crime took place. His Thai lawyer, Mr Worasit Piriyawiboon (who has dedicated himself to exposing what he firmly believes is the wrongful conviction of an innocent man), recently travelled to Tehran to have statements made by the witnesses.

These affidavits, finally validated by Iran's foreign ministry, have now been submitted with other documents to support the current request for a re-trial in Thailand.

It has been a long journey for Benny. He has come to know the system well. 'In this system, you pay the police and you are gone. If you don't pay the police, you pay the prosecutor. If not, you will have to buy the judges and lawyers. Those with no money are sentenced and sent to the monkey house where they pay the custodians of the prison. The most expensive bananas sold in the whole kingdom of Thailand are those sold in prison.'