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Why Cardinal Pell was wrong about the Blake Prize

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Once again the judges of the Blake Prize for Religious Art have been innovative and courted controversy. In announcing the 2009 winner last Thursday evening, they steered away from traditional art and, for the first time, awarded the prize to a new media work, a piece of video art.

Entitled *Rapture (silent anthem)*, the ten minute video is by Sydney artist Angelica Mesiti . As the excerpt featured here shows, it depicts in slow motion, and without sound, the ecstatic faces of youth enraptured by music and the experience of a big concert. It was shot at the Big Day Out earlier this year in Sydney, with the camera placed beneath the stage looking back into the crowd.

In the judges' comments about the video, they 'praised it for its beauty, emotional intensity and technical virtuousity. An enigmatic work that operates on many levels, *Rapture* depicts the joy of being alive while also hinting at the darker aspects of religious emotion.'

At the opening of this year's Blake exhibition, I was thrilled to hear that this luminous, thoughtful, and highly accomplished work had won. But I have to confess to some biases. First, I am a member of the Blake Society, which makes me an enthusiastic supporter of the Blake Prize.

Second, for many years I made documentaries for television. While my works were never in the realm of high art, they gave me a love of video as a medium, and an awareness of its possibilities for artistic expression. For some years I have been hoping that a video artwork would win the Blake, and now it's happened.

And third, one of the documentaries I made a few years ago for the *Compass* strand, called *Chasing the Blake*, took me behind the scenes of the Blake Prize. (The documentary and a transcript are available on the *Compass*website.) It followed four artists through preparation and execution of their works, entry into the prize, judging, and the tension of the big night announcing the winner.

Also it looked at the history of the Blake Prize, and the passion, controversy and questions that have always swirled around it. Just what is religion, and what is religious art anyway? Is art that challenges religious orthodoxies, that is 'blasphemous', appropriate for the prize?

Once again this year, in the lead-up to the announcement of the prize, some church leaders weighed in on these questions. Catholic Cardinal George Pell and Anglican Bishop Rob Forsythe were quoted as criticising some of this year's finalist works as 'gross', 'anti-religious', 'lacking in depth', and reflecting 'our confusion about what is religious or spiritual'.

For those administering the prize, these questions came to a head, and were resolved way back in the early 1960s. There was an outcry over the winner of the prize in 1961, Stanislaus Rapotec's abstract work entitled *Meditating on Good Friday*.

After the fracas, some members of the Blake Society wanted to make a criterion of the prize that entries had to contain traditional religious iconography. This led to heated debate over the next few years and, thankfully, by 1963 it was decided it would be left to the artist to determine whether their work was religious.

This has allowed the Blake Prize to be very broad, embracing works that are traditional, comforting and devotional, as well as art that is prickly, cheeky, and iconoclastic.

Chair of the Blake Society, Rod Pattenden, argued in the *Compass* documentary that good art is often disturbing: 'Artists have a role in a culture perhaps to alarm us, to frighten us, to make us aware of things which we've become too comfortable with, and put aside into safe boxes.'

Also, spiritual and religious experience is not confined within the walls of churches, mosques, synagogues and temples. This year's winner of the Blake Prize attests to this.

The artist explained the inspiration for her work in last Friday's *Australian*: 'I was just interested in these notions of worship and ecstasy and transcendence and where they're actually found in a contemporary setting. I guess the work is just suggesting that extreme experiences, where one is lost in the moment, can happen outside of sanctioned religious spaces. It can happen anywhere, like a rock concert.'

Amen to that, and long may the Blake Prize allow exploration, questioning and expression of the religious impulse wherever it occurs.

Liberal Senator's immigration heroism

POLITICS

Kerry Murphy

On Wednesday, the Senate made two decisions which take immigration reform forward. The first was to pass the Abolition of Detention Debt Bill, the second was not to disallow the abolition of the '45 day rule' regulations.

In the House, several Liberals had spoken in favour of the reforms, but in the Senate, only Senator Judith Troeth supported these reforms.

Senator Troeth is one of a few Liberals who have spoken out against the harsher features of Immigration Policy under the Howard Government. She contributed to reforms in detention and opposed the harsher elements of the 'Pacific Solution'.

In her speech this week she spoke of meeting with people affected by the laws, and those who have studied the adverse social and psychological impact on asylum seekers. Her speeches in the Senate this week illustrate that the Coalition can consider another way to approach immigration policy, rather than just be 'tough'.

'The comment has been made that the more we 'soften' ... policies towards refugees the more we can expect a flood of refugees,' Senator Troeth said. 'And words like 'flood', 'panic' and 'hundreds of thousands of people arriving on our shores' are used all too often.'

'Australia received ... 4500 asylum claims. That is 0.05 per cent of the worldwide total, and almost all of them did not arrive by boat. So I challenge the theories of those who want to say that this is opening the floodgates. Firstly, that is an unpalatable concept to those of us who think about it and, secondly, it simply is not true.'

The Abolition of Debt Bill meant that no longer would those in detention be charged for their detention. In reality, very few ever were, and only about 2.5 per cent of the charges were ever recovered, as those granted protection visas as refugees had the debt waived. The Government argued it was costing more than the amount recovered to maintain the scheme. Senator Troeth agreed that the debts law had to go.

'Let us just do away with it,' she said. 'The law does not help. Even if it is never collected, the fact is that it is still a blot on our statute book and I for one will not accept that it should be in continuation. No advanced society should have on its books laws like this, and so I will be supporting the government on this bill.'

The other Senate debate was about the abolition of the 45 day rule. This rule

meant that if someone arrived in Australia with a visa and was immigration cleared, if they wished to apply for protection they must do so within 45 days of arrival or they would not have any permission to work on their bridging visa while their case was decided.

The rule was arbitrary and quite unfair. In practice it meant rushing cases to lodgment to meet the deadline rather than the benefit of more time to check the claims. A simple mistake by an advisor could have adverse consequences later for the asylum seeker.

Once again Senator Troeth's speech succinctly rebutted the claims of her Coalition colleagues and raised questions for the future of Liberal Policy in the area.

'Our vote on this regulation today will not change the country,' she said. 'It will not pave new highways, fix our hospitals or build more schools. But it will show that we are a nation of compassion by righting a wrong that is causing needless suffering to people in our country.'

Senator Troeth observed that it was 'not a mark of pride for this parliament that successive governments have devalued' the principles of compassion and concern for the unfortunate in the administration of Immigration Policy. 'The shameful burden placed on churches, community groups and benevolent individuals by this policy is incompatible with the indelible concept and revered national tradition of the fair go.'

The Liberal Party, she added, 'has a proud story to tell on immigration, but both parties over the last 50 years have written some bleak chapters too. We find our genesis in Harold Holt's dismantling of the White Australia policy and in Malcolm Fraser's welcoming of Vietnamese refugees that not only made Australia's migrant intake truly multiracial but turned the abolition of the White Australia policy into a practical reality.'

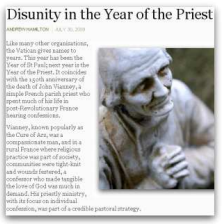
'Australia', she concluded, 'does not have to choose between strong, secure borders and compassion for those seeking liberty and freedom. We can have both.

Sadly, Liberal Senator Troth will retire at the end of her term. It is hoped that her replacement will be as articulate and humane in the Senate.

On stuffing up

SPIRITUALITY

Andrew Hamilton


Disunity in the Year of the Priest

An early Christian hymn speaks of Adam's 'happy sin'. Happy, because Jesus came to set it right. A happy sin is a striking idea, but it does resonate with experience. Actions that we later regret are often turning points in our lives. They make us ask what matters in life, and remind us of the gap that exists between our ideals and the messy reality of our lives.

I recalled this recently when I recognised that I had got the facts wrong in a *Eureka Street* article . I had to apologise because my erroneous assertion caused avoidable hurt. But it did have some good results. It led to a good conversation that I would not otherwise have had. I was also reminded that merely to write for a magazine with high ideals does not guarantee that you live by them.

Eureka Street does have high ideals. It tries to encourage humane conversation. That implies respect for the people who participate in the conversation and for those who are the subject of conversation. But it also implies a particular approach to the issues discussed in the magazine.

Eureka Street tries to focus on the human rather than the technical dimensions of public relationships, situations and issues. Its turns its attention to the impact on human beings of policies and events, and not to the personalities of those responsible for policy, nor to the abstractions that conceal its human reality.

That is the ideal. It is difficult to realise in practice. The particular challenges facing writers arise from the fact that effective writing depends on good technique.

It is impossible to represent the full human reality of any issue or to describe the impact on all the human beings affected by it directly or indirectly. So if writers are to help people to understand an issue and come to a reasonable judgment about it, they need to simplify it. They need to group and name the innumerable aspects of the issue, and schematise the reasons for taking different approaches to it.

And if they are to catch the imagination of the readers, they need telling images and stories that encapsulate the issue.

The challenge that arises from the need to focus on the technique of writing is that it may draw the writer's attention away from the human reality of the situation that is described. If a story forms a dramatic illustration of the writer's point, they are likely to see it simply as an illustration, so forgetting that the characters in the story are also human beings.

That is especially likely to happen when writers are involved in the situation that

they write about. They will then come to their writing with an abstract understanding of the groups and issues that they describe, and with a general view of how people in different groups might be expected to act. So any stories of people who belong to these groups which confirm their general view will seem plausible and will escape scrutiny.

So it is easy to be careless. But carelessness betrays the ideals we hold. Writers who advocate respect for the dignity of ordinary human beings above technical and abstract considerations find themselves disrespecting ordinary human beings because they are led by an abstract view and by the technical requirements of their craft. We are caught in a contradiction.

What good, if any, might come from such ruminations? Christian tradition records a raft of specials on offer to repentant sinners. The first is a firm purpose of amendment, or in more down to earth language, making sure it doesn't happen again.

A second is humility. In this case we recognise that high ideals of respect for human dignity are aspirations and not our achievements. Humility also means recognising that our writing always reflects our prejudices, and that the detached and omniscient view from above of issues in which we are involved is a chimera. We should aim at objectivity, but we never fully achieve it.

The third special on offer is sympathy. It is easy for writers with high minded ideals to disdain the standards of the popular media. Our own faults give us a sense of fellow feeling with other writers. We realise that we are all in the same boat, all human beings. So when others lapse, one's first thought is likely to be, 'People in glasshouses shouldn't cast stones', or in more elevated terms, 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

That, when I come to think of it, underlay the argument of my offending article. Pity it ended to the tinkle of broken glass.

Learning from suicide

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

In December 1996 my sister Jacqui killed herself. She was 50. Three years later our first cousin Andrew did the same thing. He was 33.

We do not want to admit that suicide has always been part of the human condition, but the first known suicide document is an Egyptian New Kingdom papyrus entitled 'Dialogue of a World-Weary Man with his Ba-Soul'.

Philosophers have debated the matter interminably, with many considering the act to be a paradox, for it is life's central issue: Wittgenstein considered it to be the pivot on which every ethical system turns, while Camus wrote that suicide 'is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art'.

When it comes to the matter of prevention, silence is a major problem. So is the fact of the sufferer's isolation in another space, in a land that remains foreign to the unafflicted, for the would-be suicide inhabits an ever-darkling plain that is swept by armies the rest of us know nothing of, whose powers we can only guess at.

And then even the armies disappear, I imagine, leaving the rubble of war, no man's land, and eventually the eternity of desert. No sign of green, no oasis, no hope. Then may ensue the weightiest of silences, Camus' silence of the heart, which has somehow to be broken. But in that breaking, other people's silences, other people's hearts, are broken, too.

*****

In 2006, 1799 Australians killed themselves, and for each of those deaths up to 50 people may have been affected. By contrast, road accidents claimed 1638 lives.

We hear a great deal about the alienating effects of city life, but approximately a thousand of the 2006 suicides took place in the bush, even while the nationwide incidence is decreasing. If you are a man aged between 18 and 44, if you live in a township with a population smaller than 4000, and if you are unemployed or an embattled farmer, you are in a high-risk category. Add the ready availability of firearms, and the potentiality for disaster is very great.

There are many more experts in the fields of depression and mental illness these days, and much more openness, but the stigma attached to these conditions still lingers. Country people, and men in particular, still cultivate the image of the strong, silent, coping male. Very often they self-medicate: dependence on alcohol has always been part of Australian bush life, with the choice, often enough, being between that of a slow death or a quick one.

If you are not an expert, how can you hope to prevent a suicide? Sad to say, many people, like me, become wise after the event. My sister had attempted to kill herself twice before, but so long previously that the family was lulled into a false sense of security; the same applied in the case of Andrew.

But no one is immune from this contagion; no matter when the attempts take place, the danger is always there. Another danger is the one the experts call impulsivity; yet another warning signal is that of extreme behaviour, especially in the areas of sex, substance abuse, reckless spending, and gambling.

Awareness is crucial, therefore. Any history of depression and/or mood disorder is always significant, as is the attrition of too many disappointments: in love, work, achievement and physical health.

Then there is the effect of so-called life events. Bereavement and the failure to cope with grief can be a trigger: Jacqui struggled for more than two years after our mother's death, but in the end could not cope without her mainstay. Grief over divorce or breakup can be another trigger: Andrew broke his heart over one lovely girl and killed himself when he had a row with another.

I should have worried when an emotionally fragile Jacqui started giving away possessions; a doctor told me later that euphoria is another sign of decisiveness, and Jacqui seemed unusually happy shortly before she died. She also fooled us all into thinking she was going away for Christmas; instead, she never left home.

Jacqui left no note, and for a long time I resented the plunge into endless silence and absence. I also blamed myself; still, perhaps regular phone calls and impromptu visits after work had postponed earlier disaster. But since this life-altering death, I have been very vigilant: those of us who live try to learn.

When youth violence incurs police rage

NON-FICTION

Ellie Savage

Late one Friday night, I took a taxi to collect a friend from an inner-suburban nightspot. He had been in a fight and had been 'pepper sprayed' by the police. Upon finding him wet and almost blind, I kissed his cheek in greeting and winced. The fumes from his skin burned my eyes and irritated my skin.

Half an hour prior to my meeting him, my friend, Ibrahim (not his real name), a young Eritrean man, had been waiting for a taxi on a busy street outside of a club, to come and meet me elsewhere. While he waited, four men, unconnected to him, were removed from the same club for fighting inside.

The men attacked Ibrahim and a scuffle ensued. By the time the police had arrived, Ibrahim had been quite severely injured, but continued to fight against his attackers.

On their arrival, the police sprayed Oleorison Capsicum foam in Ibrahim's face.

The foam is derived from chillies, and is about 300 times as hot. Upon being sprayed, Ibrahim's breathing shortened and his chest and stomach muscles contracted, rendering him incapable of standing. His eyes and skin burned intensely, and excessive mucus blocked his passageways.

Ibrahim was blind and incapable, reeling against the pavement, yet a young policeman plied his body flat on his stomach, pinning his neck to the cold footpath with a booted foot.

With his face forced flat to the pavement, he overheard the police laughing about their good fortune that evening. As it turned out, one of Ibrahim's attackers had 17 warrants for his arrest, and only by the chance of Ibrahim's random assault had they found him that evening.

After some casual questioning of the nearby security, they discovered that Ibrahim had been a victim. Their assumption that Friday night violence between five young dark-skinned men was a consensual brawl rather than a random assault was incorrect.

Without apology, Ibrahim was told to 'move on', to buy his own water with which to quell the burning of his skin, and to stagger alone and wet into the cold evening and try to get home.

Oleoresin Capsicum foam is a standard method of riot control. It is considered a humane alternative to more brutal methods of police control, like batons or guns.

I have seen other people sprayed, and their pain is unbearable to watch. They

whimper and shout like wounded animals, bent over, trailing around in circles. They cannot pacify their pain, but must wait until its affects lull. The foam is sticky and insoluble, and if the victim does not have the opportunity to bathe the foam from their bodies, it will continue to affect their skin. Victims can remain blind for up to half an hour after the assault.

When I found Ibrahim, I took him to a nearby pub for a beer to try to cheer him up. Afterwards, we stepped out onto the street to catch a taxi home. While hailing a taxi, the young policeman whose boot had earlier caressed my friend's neck, saw us, and scoffed, 'You're keen, aren't ya?'

We got in the taxi, both of us disturbed at how condescending and merciless the man had been to us.

Ibrahim's ribs and arms throbbed from his attack, and his eyes and skin still burned from the pepper spray. His dysfunctional body slumped in the back seat of the taxi. Outraged by what had occurred, I asked, 'What are you going to do?' but I knew how pointless the question was. There had been no obvious police misconduct; nothing illegal had occurred. 'There's nothing to do,' he responded. 'But I need a shower.'

The taxi driver overheard us discussing what had happened, and offered his condolences. 'Coppers are bastards, all of 'em,' he said. But that didn't really help.

Should Australia court the Russian bear?

POLITICS

Luke Fraser

Disasters attract crowds. They break down barriers too, although usually only fleetingly. There's nothing like a catastrophe — a fire in the warehouse at the end of your street, say — to bring the neighbours out in their pyjamas. People who would never acknowledge each other by day start sharing stories in the flashing lights of the fire engines. Hopefully nobody dies, of course. The danger past, everyone goes back to bed. And next morning? A small wave to the person next door on your way to work, perhaps; then a week later, nothing.

The global financial crisis has had a similar effect on world leaders. G8; G20; loads of important people, all with something in common to talk about! But how many of these relationships will last beyond the crisis and past the usual diplomatic pledges to 'learn from our mistakes and build closer bonds'?

Russia is one of the countries that Australia has been bumping into at these crisis meetings.

Russia is one of the 'BRIC economies' (Brazil, Russia, India and China) which are heralded as the emerging economic heavyweights. As such it isn't hard to imagine frantic requests heading backwards and forwards to and from our Prime Minister's office and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as advisers scrounge for interesting angles, to be deployed by Kevin Rudd as an icebreaker at his next meeting with Dmitry Medvedyev.

If you were sitting in a Sydney skyscraper, looking out over the harbour, chewing a pen, trying to think of some precedent for Australia's connection with distant Russia, you would have the answer sitting in front of you. At the northern foot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge is Kirribilli Point. But for most of Australia's white settlement, it has been known as Russian Point, for it was here that the first Russian ship, the *Neva*, dropped anchor in 1807, received with fireworks, friendship and a gala ball by Governor Bligh.

In the first century or so following that meeting, Russians developed a keen interest in Australia and her way of life, variously describing it as a 'working man's paradise', a 'key trading partner for the future', a leader in farming that could help Russia restructure her agriculture, and a land of egalitarian people even more sports-mad than the British: a sunny place 'where every farm has a tennis court'.

Most of all, the records suggest Russians admired a new people that had given the world 'the most systematic demonstration of democratic principles' anywhere, and a country which possessed 'the most democratic constitution in the world'.

During the First World War, the *Financial Review* even editorialised that Russia should supplant Germany as a strategic European post-war trading partner. But then came the October Revolution of 1917 and Russia's descent into social experiment. It put an abrupt end to bilateral relations.

Today, Russia faces great challenges. Just as in the mid-1980s, a sharp plunge in oil prices has exposed Russia's over-reliance on this plentiful resource, at the expense of making the hard and unglamorous efforts to develop a more sophisticated, diversified modern economy.

Russia's hundreds of banks are in dire need of better regulation. Petty corruption remains all too common. The denuded Russian agricultural sector needs expertise and technological renewal. The World Bank estimates that the crisis has pitched six million Russians out of a fledgling middle class.

These are facts, but not criticisms: Igor Stravinsky once said 'the right to criticise Russia is mine, because Russia is mine, and because I love her, and I do not give any foreigner that right'. His words give voice to a deep-seated part of the Russian soul. They are a cue to those world leaders who would seek to work with Russia most effectively.

Russia in the 21st century is, for all its faults, its own country. Others can press reset buttons; Australia might do differently. Australia can be a genuine partner in Russia's efforts to grow and diversify its post-crisis economy. Along the way, the southern land it so admired over 100 years ago will no doubt offer examples that Russia might benefit from, on its own terms.

Australia can benefit too: many of the areas in which Russia most needs a genuine partner are matters in which Australia has great expertise.

Australia's forgotten historical relationship with Russia has potential for building a shared future. Will it be realised? Will a relationship of depth and substance emerge?

Or when the fire is put out and the fire engines have left, will these neighbours head back sleepily to their beds and emerge the next morning without acknowledging one another?

Only Mr Rudd and Mr Medvedyev can answer that.

Nelson, Turnbull and other political sprinters

POLITICS

John Warhurst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THE AGE
Nelson too good a bloke for hard truths of politics
Tony Wright
August 29, 2009
REPORTERS travelling with Brendan Nelson to the chaos of Iraq recall him leaping out of helicopters, dust swirling in the heat, and watching with awe as he managed to remember the names of a dozen soldiers and all their particular tasks.
Dr Nelson, defence minister at the time, was to those soldiers and just about everyone who got to meet him in his

Leadership contest casualties leave large holes for parties to fill. That is becoming more and more obvious with the Liberal Party at the moment. Brendan Nelson's retirement raises the question of the consequences for the Liberals of his early departure.

Defeated Leaders of the Opposition are of two types: fragile and sensitive sprinters and robust and durable stayers. The sprinters rise quickly and briefly shine before losing their position and then leaving Parliament. Apart from Nelson, other recent sprinters are Mark Latham and John Hewson.

Hewson became an accidental Liberal leader in 1990. He had never been a minister, having only entered Parliament in 1987; though he had been a promising shadow Treasurer. Had he not become an unsuccessful Opposition Leader, defeated by Paul Keating in 1993, Hewson would have served in the next Liberal Government. He may even have become Treasurer in the Howard Government instead of Peter Costello.

Latham also became a sprinter after he lost to John Howard in 2004. First elected in 1994, he became Opposition Leader in 2003 and left parliament early in 2005. If Latham had retired gracefully to the Labor shadow ministry in January 2005 he would have subsequently become a minister in the Rudd Government.

Stayers remain in Parliament, reconciled to their more junior status, to serve their party even after losing the leadership. The obvious stayer has been Howard. But there are others.

Labor's present Minister for Trade, Simon Crean, was an unsuccessful Opposition Leader for two years from 2001—2003. He has demonstrated extraordinary staying power since he was first elected to the Parliament 19 years ago.

One of the consequences of leadership contests and party defeats is that they often inflict deep casualties on the leadership group. Nelson is retiring at 51 in his political prime after only 13 years in Parliament. He could easily have served his party in a senior capacity for another decade and still retired as a relatively young man.

One consequence of Costello declining the Liberal leadership after the defeat of the Howard Government was that Nelson became Opposition Leader for less than a year. Now less than two years into the new Parliament he is leaving politics altogether.

Yet under Costello Nelson would have served as a successful senior shadow

minister, probably in Defence or Foreign Affairs. Instead the Liberal Party has lost yet another experienced, but still relatively youthful, member of its leadership team.

That would be bad enough but the Liberals are facing yet another big leadership loss. Its current leader, Malcolm Turnbull, may turn out to be yet another sprinter, another consequence of Costello's withdrawal from leadership.

Like Nelson, Turnbull would have had to wait his turn if Costello had accepted the leadership. He would have been Shadow Treasurer. If Costello then led the Party to victory in 2010, both Turnbull and Nelson would have had to wait indefinitely for the leadership, but they would both have become senior ministers.

It is likely that the Rudd Government will be returned next year. If Turnbull remains Liberal leader until then, he will have the choice of either resigning after defeat or fighting to retain his position. If he is given a second chance, as Hewson was in 1993, he might face being deposed mid-term if Liberal fortunes do not improve.

Turnbull will probably resign from Parliament to pursue other interests if he loses the leadership. If he does this he will have served only about six years in Parliament despite rising to the heights of Opposition leader.

If this happens it will further damage the Liberal leadership team. The Liberals still hope for a Turnbull electoral victory. But if that does not occur then the party should urge him to stay on in a lesser role, like Alexander Downer did when he was deposed in 1995, possibly to serve with distinction in a future Liberal Government.

Science versus wonder

POETRY

Kathryn Hamann and Belinda Rule

Wonder

You talk of wonder and dusk
and the sun setting below …|
as if it were not
the Earth spinning on …|
Of colour …| as if more
than your visual cortex
translating wavelengths of light
and …| as I continue to inform you —
of the greater span of the snake …|
you point a cross
With your cervical vertebrae
upwardly inclined you speed
talk of stars …| and wonder
I explain how you are
deceived by your body —
for we look down
pinned by the force seen
as I drop this half-eaten
apple at your feet
And yet you talk of wonder …|
And I talk of the chemicals
crossing the synapses …| Of this
you remain wilfully unaware
Talking
of midnight …| and wonder
evidently unknowing

your midnight can
never be mine
…| of wonder and this
moment …| of being
and invite me to share …|
In exactly what??
As the constant in the measure of steps
I re-enter the house …| the equation
for the droplets on my shoes?
In your thoughtless version of time
you will come in eventually muttering
about a stiff neck …| That is predicative
and regression analysis of the current
data would appear to demonstrate
significance

—Kathryn Hamann

The night train

One day you will realise,
though you will not remember
which day, since the days are
in the end much the same,
but still it will be one day and not another,
it will be like switching on the lamp
in the night train, you will never
see the scenery for the reflection again.
And here it is. Wherever you go,
you will find yourself
already there — sitting
not in the centre, but at the end of the bench,
beneath the eaves, bag clutched in your lap.

The rain comes in sideways,
and your trouser cuffs are wet:
the dots have joined like ink.
It's unmistakeably you,
the way, having slept against the headrest,
curled around the bag,
your hair now stands up at the crown,
fronds of bedraggled fern;
the way your trousers bunch in the flex of the hip.
You must have alighted hours ago;
and when the light behind the clouds
went down beneath the chain link fence,
when asked — Are you alright?
you must have said —
I'm waiting for someone
to collect me. You're too polite to say:
no.
—Belinda Rule

Sex and secrecy close doors to good policy

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Last week, the community was considering whether the extra-marital sex life of former NSW Health Minister John Della Bosca should have a bearing on his suitability for high office. Whatever the result of that discussion, it's certain the revelations of his affair with student Kate Neil provided a further free kick for opposition leader Barry O'Farrell (pictured), who is now more assured than ever of victory at the March 2011 election.

But as the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested in an editorial on Thursday, an unprepared Liberal Government could be as bad for NSW as the discredited Labor Government.

'We don't know what O'Farrell and his colleagues stand for on too many important matters, and sometimes where the Coalition has made a stand — for example, on electricity privatisation and the publication of league tables for schools — it has appeared contrary to liberal principles.'

As we know only too well, the same can be said for the Federal Opposition, which is struggling to develop and agree on positions on some major policy challenges including climate change.

Policy development receives little attention relative to its importance to a properly functioning democracy. It's encouraging that Barry O'Farrell was present at last Tuesday's Sydney Institute 20th Anniversary dinner, and would have had the opportunity to swap ideas with past state political leaders including Nick Greiner, Bob Carr, Neville Wran and John Brogden.

The Institute is best known for the 60 policy forums it conducts each year. In her address to the gathering, Governor-General Quentin Bryce identified what is perhaps most important in the Institute's contribution to policy development on all sides of politics. She described the Institute as 'an important gatherer of people and ideas; an agent for discussion about the things we care about; a forum for thinking aloud'.

The role of quality conversation in policy development may also be inferred from the speech given by Sister Pat Murray at Thursday evening's Sydney launch of the book *Loreto in Australia.*

Her address — which was titled 'Daring to imagine, willing to risk: keys for social transformation' — alluded to the fact that social change usually begins with a traceable conversation among just a few people. She attributed this idea to American organisational consultant Margaret Wheatley , who helps dysfunctional organisations identify and achieve their goals.

It's crucial that such conversation does not occur behind closed doors. That is the way the factional system has always functioned in Australian politics.

The Centre for Policy Development's executive director Miriam Lyons employs open-source software development as a metaphor for good policy development. Open-source software uses code that can be seen by all users and developers, who in turn contribute to its improvement. Its transparency/participation/collaboration model is set against the secrecy at the core of software development at corporations such as Microsoft and Apple.

Political leaders energised by 'open-source' conversation will speak to the electorate much more effectively than those who derive their inspiration from behind the closed doors of either the faction meeting room or the bedroom.

What Indigenous Australians really need

INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Myrna Tonkinson

There are many convergences between two recent reports on Indigenous affairs, starting with their having been issued on the same day.

First, Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma released the final report and recommendations of the Committee that the Rudd Government had charged with developing a model for a national representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Just a few hours later, the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples, Professor James Anaya, issued his preliminary findings after a ten-day visit in which he focused on the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention).

Both reports added fuel to the ongoing debates about rights and responsibilities of Aboriginal Australians. Both stress rights, partnership and respect, and invoke the authority of the UN. Both have engendered controversy.

Anaya infuriated a number of commentators, notably current and former Ministers for Indigenous Affairs, Warren Mundine and *The Australian*newspaper, by declaring, albeit in polite language, that aspects of the Intervention are racist, and in breach of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Given his role, Anaya could hardly have been expected to approve the discriminatory aspects of the Intervention. His remarks are embarrassing for a country that prides itself on being a good international citizen, but are not fatal. More problematic are the proposals put forward in Calma's Report, entitled 'Our future in our hands — Creating a Sustainable National Representative Body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples'.

This is an ambitious document, based on extensive consultation with Indigenous people. It sets out detailed plans for the structure, funding and operation of a national representative body. The Report stresses 'mutual respect' and advocates 'genuine partnership' between the proposed representative body and government with 'shared responsibility ... [and] ... respect for human rights'.

Calma's Report states that the Steering Committee was guided by Article 18 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which stipulates that indigenous people 'have the right to participate in decision-making in matters that affect their rights', and this participation should occur through representatives

chosen by them.

This sits well with Anaya's view that the Australian Government should take into account the Declaration — which it has recently recognised, though not ratified — when framing and evaluating legislation, policies, and actions.

However, the hostile response to Professor Anaya's suggests many influential players are in no mood to consider UN Conventions and treaties, or international scrutiny, as they drive and develop policy in Indigenous affairs. This atmosphere does not bode well for the Calma recommendations.

There are further problems. Anaya critiques the duplication, lacunae and the failure to consult and to establish partnerships that have been evident in past representative bodies and approaches to addressing Indigenous disadvantage. This simply reaffirms the obvious need for improved structures and methods of delivery.

But a body such as that proposed by Calma is far from guaranteeing that result. It is not clear to me how the recommended structures will ensure effective communications between government and the widely dispersed and very diverse Indigenous communities, or how they will improve the delivery of services, obviate duplication etc.

Perhaps rather than the brief of coming up with the criteria for a new representative body, Calma and the Steering Committee should have been asked to propose ways of improving consultation, partnership and effective delivery of services such as housing, education, health.

Among the Western Desert communities in WA's Pilabara which I know best, the intricacies of UN conventions and the pros and cons of representative bodies do not loom large. They are increasingly aware of being part of wider national Aboriginal, Indigenous and Australian aggregations, but their focus is primarily local and regional.

People in these locations are dealing with pressing issues, both positive and negative: frequent (often premature and preventable) deaths and the necessary funerals; over-crowded, often unsuitable housing; new ways of obtaining funds, including a new and thriving art industry, jobs caring for their land, royalties, training and job opportunities from mining companies; asserting their wish to stay on their own lands, speak their languages and continue certain cultural practices while recognising realities of change and attempting to modify aspects of their behaviour.

Like many Aboriginal communities they are also grappling with a plethora of seemingly ever-changing policies, agencies, programs and personnel.

If Calma's plans can address some of these issues without introducing new cumbersome structures and the inevitable frustration and disappointment that accompany their failure, he will have achieved much.

Why green Catholics are not communists

ENVIRONMENT

Neil Ormerod

As various commentators have indicated one of the significant features of the recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* by Pope Benedict XVI is its explicit mention of environmental themes.

The Pope's contributions are not startling or unusual. He emphasises the importance of stewardship over all creation, the grave duty to hand on to future generations something worth having, the dangers of consumerism, the squandering of resources and the deep interconnections between human existence and the rest of creation.

Two significant elements are his linking our concern with the environment with the larger issues of respect for life, creating a new 'seamless garment' of social teaching; and his constant concern for the impact on the poor of environmental degradation. These are welcome and timely observations.

Interestingly this new development in social teaching is not in tune with some of the Pope's natural constituency. Many conservative Catholics have shown scant regard for environmental issues and publicly expressed scepticism in particular about global warming. For them environmentalism has become the new communism.

Indeed environmentalists are sometimes called 'watermelons, green on the outside, red on the inside'. They are painted in extreme terms as 'neo-pagans' and anyone showing concern for the environment is tarred with the same brush. The parallels with the Church's attitude to communism in the '50s and '60s are clear. Anyone with an interest in social justice was suspect then, as those with environmental concerns are now.

Things changed a bit for the former when Paul VI issued his encyclical on development issues, *Populorum Progressio* ('On the development of peoples'), which the *Wall Street Journal* referred to as 'warmed up Marxism'.

Now with the issuing of *Caritas in Veritate* perhaps environmentalism will be less anathema among conservative commentators. With the Pope showing tinges of green it will be less difficult to attack those interested in protecting the environment.

But the question has arisen, just how green is the pope? In a recent article on the Acton Institute website, commentator Samuel Gregg has responded , 'not so green', concluding that 'Benedict's 'greenness' turns out to be rather pale'.

He rightly notes that Benedict upholds the priority of human life and grounds his environmentalism in the Christian notion of stewardship. In this regard Benedict is no different from the majority of Christian environmentalists who do the same.

Again he rightly notes the Pope's insistence on the interconnectedness of being, as do the majority of Christian environmentalists. He also rightly notes that 'the phrases 'climate change' or 'global warming' appear nowhere in *Caritas in Veritate*'.

However he places special significance on this lack of reference to climate change and global warming:

'Benedict has been careful not to prejudge the science of this complex subject ... As someone who has labored ceaselessly for the priority of truth over ideology, Benedict knows that neither international organisations nor public opinion determine the truth about climate change and its causes. That's a question for science, and many reputable scientists dispute aspects of the prevailing tenets of climate change to which some environmentalists seem religiously wedded ... As anyone who has studied his life and thought knows, Joseph Ratzinger has never been intimidated by political correctness.'

In hermeneutic circles this is called 'reading the silences', seeking to make sense of what is not said as well as what is said. It is a fraught strategy always subject to the emergence of further evidence.

Well, now the further evidence is in. In a recent general audience (Wednesday 26 August 2009) Benedict explicitly expressed his support for discussion on 'the urgent issue of climate change' to be dealt with at the United Nations.

In this context a number of references to his encyclical make clear the link between this 'urgent issue' and the matters raised therein. Taken together with the Vatican's own efforts to be carbon-neutral, these do not look like the words and deeds of a climate change sceptic. Far from being pale green, he looks almost emerald green!

It is interesting to trace the history of the environmental movement from its iconic beginnings with the publication in 1962 of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, through its fringe status in the '60s and '70s, as it gradually become more and more mainstream.

While there have obviously been extreme positions which romanticise and divinise nature, the fact remains that human existence is and always will be biologically grounded and so dependent on the proper functioning of the biosphere for its own continued existence.

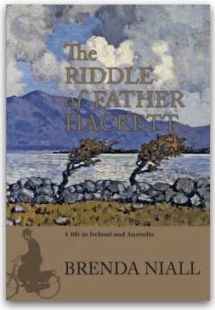
As Benedict rightly points out, our failure to respect our environmental limits impacts on us all, but most of all on the poor. To ignore those limits is to fall prey to the temptation of the serpent in the garden, 'you shall be like gods'. But we are not gods but 'earth-beings', the play of words evoked by the name Adam. It is the archetypal temptation, to which one would think Christians would be most attuned.

Irish radical Jesuit's life down under

BOOKS

Val Noone

Brenda Niall: *The Riddle of Father Hackett: a Life in Ireland and Australia*. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 2009. Online



Brenda Niall, one of Australia's best biographers, has written a highly readable and surprising life of William Hackett (1878—1954), the Jesuit priest who was pressured out of Ireland to Australia in 1922 for his involvement with republican armed forces during the Civil War.

Until now, Australian writers have remembered Hackett as the founder of a remarkable Catholic library in Melbourne. Niall adds to that memory an extraordinary range of fascinating context, colour and nuance.

Growing up in the 1930s in what she calls the Catholic enclave around Studley Park Rd, Kew, in Melbourne's inner east, Niall first knew Father Hackett as 'a charming old man' who was a friend, and patient, of her doctor father.

'Hackett would take an armchair by the study fire and talk happily about books, people, places and ideas, enjoying a good cigar and scarcely noticing that the baby of the family, not yet walking, was expertly untying his shoelaces,' she records.

A few years ago, when she began to consider writing a life of Hackett, Niall had the good fortune to discover that, soon after Hackett's death, Fr Doug Boyd had collected a remarkable set of letters and papers, all in one place, the Australian Jesuit archives. Letters between Willie and his sister Flo are a special resource in Niall's attempts to unravel the riddles of Hackett's personality and behaviour.

This passionate biography mixes the private and political in an account rippling with insights into Hackett's family, friends and career as well as into some key events and people in 20th-century Irish and Australian history, religion and politics.

There are excellent photographs including one of a letter to Hackett from Free State leader Michael Collins, one of the last Collins wrote. The result is a rare combination of personal memoir and public history.

William Hackett was the fourth of nine children of a well-to-do doctor and his wife in Kilkenny, who sent several sons to Jesuit schools. He joined the Jesuits, adopted a generally austere and ascetical lifestyle, studied in Ireland, France and Holland, taught in Limerick and Kildare, and from 1915 on gave his energies to being a publicist for the republic.

Then, most exceptionally among Jesuits, he supported the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War. By way of background Niall shows that Willie's father had, at some cost, taken Parnell's side against the hierarchy around 1890.

Hackett supported the Irish army of national liberation in a number of ways. One of his activities discussed in this book is his attempt to stir consciences in England, for example, by taking Quaker visitors to sites of Black and Tan atrocities.

This book contributes to the ongoing clarification of the bewildering events of 1916—23 in Ireland and their Australian connections. For instance, Niall sheds new light on key figures in the early 20th-century campaign for Irish independence such as Erskine Childers. Hackett was a personal friend of Childers, sharing with him clandestine activities in defiance of the British government; and, later during the Civil War, of the Irish Free State and the Catholic bishops.

His letter to Mollie Childers after Erskine was executed by the Free State is one the book's gems, as indeed is the moving declaration of hope by Erskine junior sent to Hackett. For Niall, it is 'perhaps ... the gift of hope, which best defines William Hackett'.

Niall identifies love of the Irish landscape and the Irish language as key factors in Hackett's increasing radicalisation. The latter brought him close friendship with Padraig Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh. In 1922 Hackett drew a sympathetic response from the order's leader for his plan for a new Jesuit school in which Irish would be the first langauge.

Hackett's nationalism was of an upper-class bent and it occurs to me that, further to what Niall has recorded here, a key if mostly unnamed opponent in his life's work was the Catholic-Marxist republican leader James Connolly of 1916 fame.

At the height of Hackett's republican involvements, the Jesuit provincial offered him at the age of 44, it seems, a choice of silence or appointment to Australia: he chose Australia. He felt some would call his leaving Ireland and its political struggle cowardice but he saw it as sharing 'in the anguish of Ireland's true sons by enduring death and exile'.

In contrast to, say, the famous 1960s Colombian priest-guerrilla, Camilo Torres, Hackett chose obedience to his Jesuit calling above his political involvements.

The second half of the book covers Hackett's three decades in Australia. After a short time in Sydney in late 1922, Hackett worked in Melbourne until his death at 75 in 1954 as a result of being hit by a car in Cotham Rd. From 1923 until 1934 he was based at St Ignatius parish, Richmond, during which years he concentrated on starting the library in the city.

He then had a term as rector of Xavier College Kew (from which he was sacked by provincial John Meagher), and lived in Jesuit communities at Brighton,

Hawthorn and Belloc House. At one point he criticised the philosophy of self-advancement that meant students at Xavier were 'making their way into the upper middle class on the back of the Jesuit vow of poverty'. Hackett had trouble managing finances and gave highest priority to his library work.

Niall brings out the important and long-term impact of Hackett's founding and developing of the Central Catholic Library in Melbourne. She includes fresh information about the Campion Society and the emergence of the Santamaria movement. Hackett was the first chaplain to the Movement and Niall notes that, around 1949, Bartholomew Santamaria asked the Jesuits to appoint a replacement, which they did not do.

Niall devotes a chapter to Hackett's friendship with Archbishop Daniel Mannix, some 15 years his senior, and reports Hackett's resentment at having to be 'the court jester' to 'the prince' during the older man's summer holidays. Niall quotes Mannix as calling Hackett 'a snob' but also as saying that Hackett was 'the father of Catholic Action in Australia' and that 'he was dear to me'. Reading between the lines of this section I was left with the thought that Niall would be well placed to write a future work on Mannix.

The book also has a section on Hackett's friendships with three Australian prime ministers. Hackett liked Robert Menzies best and was pleased when he defeated Ben Chifley in 1949.

Niall respects Hackett's Jesuit vocation as the centre of the riddle of his life. However, it is possible that some spiritual part of Hackett died in accepting the appointment to Australia. In a 1923 note to Hackett, Mannix wrote about their mutual feelings of exile from Ireland, 'I am sorry that I was out when you called. You will come another time and we shall sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep, when we remember Sion.'

This mention of Sion and Babylon is an echo of the ancient Hebrew poet and prophet Isaiah. Did Hackett, moving from the company of de Valera, Pearse and Collins to that of Santamaria and Menzies settle into the mindset of Babylon, with mixed feelings about its fleshpots, and, despite protestations of Irish radicalism, and forgetting Isaiah, make too much accommodation with Babylon?

In the first decade of the Movement, while Hackett was chaplain, that organisation, in its enthusiasm to oppose the Communist Party of Australia, supported the Dutch in its war against the independence movement in Indonesia. Did the presence of communists in the Indonesia liberation forces blind Hackett to recognising in southeast Asia the same old story of empire, which he opposed in Ireland?

From the founding of Belloc House in 1952, it took a couple of decades before Jesuit prophetic voices such as John Harte on Vietnam or Mark Raper on East Timor or Frank Brennan on Indigenous issues (Niall mentions him in her conclusion) would challenge the Australian establishment.

Congratulations to the National Library of Australia for publishing this wonderful 320-page book with an elegant cover by Andrew Rankine. To me, the use of ragged right typesetting, extra paragraph spacing and no indent on the first line of paragraphs has given the text an uneasy or unfinished feeling. And, by the way, I see that in the introduction Jonathan Swift has wandered into the wrong century. Such minor criticisms aside, it is a fine and exceptional book.

How to take the UN Indigenous report card

INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Binoy Kampmark

When the statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Human Rights on the situation in the Northern Territory was released last week, there was a howl of protest. Professor James Anaya's 11-day tour of Aboriginal communities did not leave him with a positive impression. He found a compelling 'need to develop new initiatives and reform existing ones — to conform with international standards requiring genuine respect for cultural integrity and self-determination'.

The dyke of discontent duly opened. Warren Mundine, former Labor Party President and prominent Aboriginal activist has suggested binning the report, much like 'other' reports from that same office.

Jenny Macklin, in her role as Indigenous Affairs Minister, was more than a bit put out by the statement. She told ABC News: 'For me, when it comes to human rights, the most important human right that I feel as a Minister I have to confront, is the need to protect the rights of the most vulnerable particularly children and for them to have a safe and happy life and a safe and happy family to grow up in.'

Shredding or, in this case, binning a report from an international organisation is irresistible for hardnosed policy makers in the frontline of combating Aboriginal misery in the Northern Territory. Anaya is not himself being dogmatic. His statement is a sober, obvious reflection that programs are not duplicated, and that such matters as the Closing the Gap campaign, the Emergency Response and other government initiatives be achieved in partnership with local indigenous institutions.

He pays, as he should, respect to international human rights norms that place the Indigenous community in a prominent decision making role. Words like 'autonomy' and 'self-determination' should not be a species of rhetorical flotsam. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples, he argues, should directly participate in the 'design of programs and polices at the national level, within a forum that is genuinely representative of the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples'.

He urges a 'holistic' approach in dealing with the problems of Australia's Indigenous peoples. None of these suggestions should upset the Rudd Government.

Anaya also encourages the deed more than the word. Reconciliation is not merely gnosis but praxis — action must be taken to pursue its objective. He is mindful of this in the context of the intervention. He cannot quite understand how the Emergency Response could be 'proportionate' in infringing rights. Rights may be violated in certain policy contexts that can be justified in the name of the

'public good', but one should always be wary of such assertions.

He recommends reinstating the protections offered by the Racial Discrimination Act.

Ignoring Anaya's well-reasoned statement will not be disastrous for Australia. The judgments of international organisations are often blithely ignored. But refusing to at least pay respectful lip service to Anaya's statement continues a long tendency, instituted by the Howard Government, of ignoring international advice, convention and protocol.

That position comes close to that of such anti-treaty figures as John Bolton, former US Ambassador to the UN and staunch anti-internationalist. Such a rigid strategy of reducing treaties and recommendations to scraps of paper can trash pronouncements that might have some merit.

Wisdom does not always begin at home. There are times when it helps to have an international body condemn an obnoxious law or practice. Objective distance, and one attained from sources outside the problem, can also shed light on local conundrums. Too often, the Indigenous communities of Australia have had no other forum than an international one to air their grievances and express their grief.

The Intervention is discriminatory, insofar as it targets a specific social and historical problem associated with a particular people. It is a distasteful response to a distasteful problem. That would seem to be stating the obvious.

The onus is, as it always has been, on the government authorities to demonstrate the effectiveness of the Intervention and how it will benefit the Indigenous population. Some within the Indigenous community have agreed with it. Some haven't. The jury is out and circling. We still await the verdict.

When parenthood is a mixed blessing

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

Don't ask Ana Kokkinos stupid questions. That was my big mistake. *I loved your new film, but this friend of mine, he reckons it's, like, voyeuristic, and that it exploits downtrodden characters for entertainment purposes. What do you reckon?*

Kokkinos bristles. She's no stranger to tackling 'edgy' subject matter (her previous film, *Book of Revelation*, concerned the plight a man who was gang raped by a group of women), and she doesn't do so glibly. If you want to challenge her, you've got to do better than that.

Her answer, 'I disagree', is swift and prickly as a whack with the rough side of a brush.

Fair enough. It's true that *Blessed*, which follows a day in the lives of an assortment of teenagers and their mothers, weighs disproportionately on working class angst. But like the play it was based on (which comprised four separate story strands each written by a different writer), it imbues its characters with a sense of dignity, and leaves the viewer with a feeling of hope.

'One of the things that attracted me to the play was the idea about the connection between mothers and children,' Kokkinos recalls. 'Once we hit on that as an overall theme, we were able to bind the stories together with that idea in mind.'

Act one focuses on the children. Roo (Eamon Farren) is making a quick buck starring in a solo porn film. His sister Trisha (Anastasia Baboussouras) and her friend Katrina (Sophie Lowe) are busted by the cops for truancy and shoplifting. Brother and sister Orton and Stacey (Reef Ireland and Eva Lazzaro) are runaways from an untenable home life.

In act two we relive the same day from the mothers' point of view. Roo and Trisha's widow mother Gina (Victoria Haralabidou) is increasingly anxious for the wellbeing of her wayward son. Bianca (Miranda Otto) is a flaky single mum, who loves her daughter Katrina but is stymied by a sense of inadequacy and lack of fulfillment.

'Kids at a certain age are in conflict with their parents,' says Kokkinos. 'They don't understand their parents, and in some ways they are self-obsessed.

'What we discover is that while these relationships are severely tested, all of those children, on some fundamental level, need the love of their mothers. I find that a really powerful and uplifting and incredibly hopeful element to the film.'

One of the more understated storylines concerns an adult Aboriginal man, James (Wayne Blair), who, after the death of his elderly (white) adoptive mother, Laurel (Monica Maughan), is visited by childhood memories of his biological mother's attempts to see him. It is, of course, an oblique comment on the Stolen Generations.

'James doesn't sit comfortably in the black world or the white world,' says Kokkinos. 'He had two mothers, but no mother at all. It's about the Stolen Generation. It's about a man who has a range of unresolved issues about his black mother and his white mother.'

Most epitomising the film's themes of motherly love, loss and redemption is Rhonda (Frances O'Connor), mother of Orton and Stacey, who in Kokkinos' words 'is unable to give her kids what they need ... but in fact her love for those children is so powerful'.

'It's a remarkable achievement for an actress to take us on a journey where we set out thinking she's one kind of person, and she takes you to a completely different place,' says Kokkinos. 'Frances was very committed to giving Rhonda a very visceral presence.'

O'Connor is a standout in a film that contains many strong performances. Notably, Lowe, who was terrific as the lithe title character in *Beautiful Kate*, proves her versatility as the more bogan-ish Katrina. The fact that the actors bring such depth and emotional truth to the characters is one reason why the 'voyeuristic' tag just doesn't suit.

Kokkinos cites a favourite scene, in which Trisha, while detained at the 'cop shop', becomes outraged when a police officer tells her and Katrina they are 'trash'. 'You can't say that,' Trisha retorts. It's an assertion of dignity: 'We are worth something.'

In another scene, Tanya (Deborra-Lee Furness), wife of the unemployed and resentful Peter (William McInnes), watches her son Daniel (Harrison Gilbertson) as he sleeps. It's 'a stolen moment' that doesn't last; after Daniel awakens, an argument breaks out of the hurtful kind that can only take place between mother and teenage son.

'This is a set of characters who are dealing with everyday issues, ordinary people dealing with things in everyday life with great humour, joy and dignity,' says Kokkinos. 'These are very real stories. They're the kind of stories that you can find happening out there in the suburbs. And it's a very contemporary take on these questions.'

John Della Bosca and the 'aphrodisiac of power'

POLITICS

Tony Smith

On the day that a Victorian Labor Cabinet Minister was rescued from the alpine region into which he had wandered for his pleasure, a New South Wales Labor Cabinet Minister resigned in regret over the way he took his.

NSW Health Minister John Della Bosca announced that he was resigning because a formerly secret liaison was about to become public. While Della Bosca expressed regret about the bad decisions that he had taken he suggested that he simply had no choice but to take his 'medicine'.

Even casual observers of New South Wales politics must appreciate that there is nothing new about a minister resigning because of personal indiscretion. Keen followers of the dramas that develop around the parliamentary 'bear pit' in Macquarie Street also know that historically, scandal is one of the inevitable prerequisites for a change in government.

While there is no doubt that the Rees Labor Government would have required a minor miracle to secure re-election in 2011, the affair surrounding John Della Bosca has probably ensured that the party will be so thoroughly routed that the 'rump' can look forward to decades on the Opposition benches.

While the details of the minister's liaison with a young woman have provided some excitement for the tabloid media, it is the effects of the affair which are of political interest. Many middle aged males might have affairs with younger women and in most cases regret making bad decisions, but someone as politically astute as Della Bosca must have realised that the context made his behaviour potentially disastrous.

Many middle aged males are susceptible to having their egos flattered when women appear to find them attractive, but in the case of politicians, it is possible that the dangers involved make such affairs irresistible.

When I interviewed NSW MPs a decade ago, they gave interesting responses to the idea of the 'aphrodisiac of power'. Twice as many males as females agreed that power is an aphrodisiac, while twice as many females as males disagreed.

Much of the fiction involving MPs, such as Edwina Currie's *A Parliamentary Affair* set in the British House of Commons, or Camilla Nelson's *Perverse Acts,* set in Canberra, emphasise the hothouse element of our representative assemblies. Why is it then, that Della Bosca thought he had committed a sackable offence?

Presumably Della Bosca wanted to minimise damage to his party. This was not the first time that his private affairs have been made public. The media and the

NSW Opposition had already targeted him over rowdiness at a restaurant and a traffic offence that was compounded when he allegedly abused a reporter. This time, he must have realised that he would be a sitting duck for all who wished to take advantage — and they are lining up to do so.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported that 'rung at their home' late in the night, Della Bosca's wife became angry, and the ABC announced that it had a cameraman outside their home. *The Daily Telegraph*was instrumental in precipitating the scandal as it was publishing the woman's story. Apparently she expected no fee, because she was angry about something.

Some media reports have been so rushed and poorly considered that they presented conflicting claims about which positions Della Bosca was resigning.

It is highly likely that the media and Opposition would continue to attack Della Bosca if he did not resign. But should ministers or other MPs be expected to behave with greater propriety than expected in general community mores? Do MPs, a representative lot, simply reflect society's standards or should they lead?

Well, Della Bosca's behaviour seems to be quite different from that of the MPs who held wild parties, harassed staff or were charged with sexual abuse. Of course ministers must set an example in the way they treat their staff, but harassment or undue pressure does not appear to have been an aspect of this case.

Public interest in the behaviour of politicians should centre on the question of how they carry out their responsibilities. If a health minister had an affair with an executive of a pharmaceutical company, then there would be immediate cause for concern that a conflict of interest might occur. The minister might be compromised and vulnerable to corruption. If a minister were liable to be blackmailed because of indiscretions, this would also be problematic.

In the Westminster system, the premier is the final arbiter of such ethical questions, and he or she usually has many factors to consider in deciding whether to ask for or accept a ministerial resignation.

The succession of scandals in NSW has created an impression that the government lacks discipline collectively. There seems to be an ethos now that our parliamentarians treat their offices as personal property and have little dedication to public service. Whether the minister was able to carry out his responsibilities effectively or was distracted is difficult to decide but the media have definitely made their minds up on this question.

It is highly likely that most voters have also decided, and many must now wish the four year terms were not fixed.

What should be clear however is that Della Bosca's career disaster is open to many interpretations. Unfortunately quite conscientious work by MPs attracts little interest, while scandals have a ready audience. When politics suffers like this, so too does the quality of our democracy.

Lessons from Greek and Australian 'quench-fires'

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

I suppose, while having my three sons, fortunately not all at once, I pushed the button labelled lawyer/doctor/architect/bank teller/safe occupation like mad. To no avail, of course, for they are all action men, and Alexander, my youngest, is a fire-fighter.

At the very time that the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission was in the Australian news, Greece was battling huge wildfires. Again. Last week, exactly two years had passed since 76 people died in the Peloponnese, which in August 2007 blazed inexorably from end to end. This time Attica had its turn, with fires raging on the outskirts of Athens. When the conflagration was at its worst, ash was falling on the island of Kythera, two hundred miles away.

In 2007 Alexander, then newly trained, had a narrow squeak while defending a village in the Taygetus mountains. And so my heart sank when I learned of the Attica outbreak. It was 36 hours before I received word that he was all right after fighting on the dangerous site of Pendeli for 24 hours. How can anyone keep going for 24 hours? I asked his older brother, my Army son. Rotation of duties, was the laconic reply.

The recipe for Greek summer disaster had remained the same: extreme heat, gale-force winds, and not enough care. On the day in 2007 that Kalamata's mountain was invisible under a pall of smoke, I saw three people throw lighted cigarettes to the ground. Greece does not have a total fire ban policy; nor does it have an orchestrated strategy for fire prevention: scattered piles of litter and uncleared tinder-dry expanses of land are simply features of summer here.

And there is certainly no equivalent of a Royal Commission.

The fires in Attica stretched nearly 50 km NE of Athens and, despite the efforts of 2000 Greek fire-fighters, soldiers and volunteers, and water-bombing aeroplanes sent by France, Italy and Cyprus, nearly 100 square km of forest and brush were burned out: an environmental disaster. Two hundred houses were destroyed, but by some miracle, such grace, nobody died.

Australia and Greece resemble each other in many ways, which helps explain the appeal that Greece has for travellers from Down Under: both countries have a very different look from the stitched, neat, over-embroidered and over-organised one that much of Northern Europe wears and bears.

But when it comes to the incidence of fire and the coping with it, there are some differences. There are many eucalypts in Greece, for example, but the fire areas usually consist of forest and maquis. And while the occasional act of arson takes

place in Australia, it is usually agreed that such acts are those of disturbed persons. But here it often happens, and it is common knowledge, that fires are started by unscrupulous would-be property developers.

And in Australia it would be beggaring belief to see TV film of black-clad, white-masked, and very elderly nuns directing feeble garden hoses against the fires threatening their convents. But that is what happened last week; in-between times said nuns tried to ensure that sacred relics and treasured ossuaries were made safe. Blameless lives, being sorely tested.

Blame. There's a lot of it about in every culture: humans do not want to believe that some things simply happen. I noticed, while reading about the Royal Commission, that the Victorian authorities have been criticised for shortcomings in communication, and for the inability of the centralised fire control to cope with the fast-moving situation as it developed on Black Saturday. Then there was the difficult matter of keeping the public informed while avoiding panic.

The point was made that some properties are indefensible; this is the case in Greece, too, although ancestral imperatives rather than lifestyle ones often decide the matter of settlement.

Alexander went off duty, and then moaned about inefficiency and lack of organisation. He was disappointed. But I suppose disappointment about desperate endeavour is part of hindsight, really, for there is always the thought that more and better efforts could have been made. But surely every fire is unique? Thus it makes specific demands on those fighting it, from which demands, it is hoped, experts and others can learn.

While fires rage, fighters are the most important people in their country. In 1940 Britain had Spitfires, wrote a friend during my time of worry. Now Greece has Alexander and his mates: Quenchfires.

Australian and Greek Quenchfires did their best.

Lying in the confessional

POETRY

Brendan Ryan

Tour of duty

St Brendan's, where I learnt to hold a plate
beneath the tongues of locals. Robed
in surplice and cassock, eyeing off the congregation,
I saw what ritual and prayer does to faces,
how a district organised itself into rows, favoured pews.
The priests had little doubt who they were talking to.
The essence of ritual is returning.
The farmers and their families
were as religious as their milking.
The altar where I learnt to ring a bell, balance
the cruets. Christ's feet were always bleeding
as babies crying were carried outside,
away from the smokers who would politely enter
at the Consecration, then leave after Communion,
roll cigarettes and lean against weatherboards.
What happened outside Mass affected a community —
men clustering into conversations
girls comparing weekends or rushing
to wait in cars for fathers, while the priest
smiled into farmer's confidences.
Everybody suddenly became polite:
mothers fussing, laughing at his jokes.
A three metre concrete square attained the life of a party:
the quiet brooders, the listeners, the elevators,
the show offs, the weekly pious.
Within an hour we were leaving

for World of Sport and The Sunday Press.

True confessions

The red velvet curtain parting
miniature wooden door sliding back
a man's face able to be smelt.
Bless me father for I have sinned
My sins are lying, being rude to a sister,
eyeing off women in Mass.
Is there anything else?
Pure and impure thoughts
desires I can't talk about.
A monotone absolution, my mood
lightening as I raced through
The Act of Contrition.
Relieved, almost giddy to get through
I join locals kneeling before candles on the altar,
the women who stay longer.
I want to be contrite —
It appears to be the done thing.
My sins have been heard
a part of me has been released —
rehashed, reheated, pre-loved.
Like others, lying in the confessional
became a duty — inventing sins to keep the peace,
to assuage the guilt that never leaves —
I'm happy now, but can I be happy later on?
The first of many contradictory Catholic beliefs.
The distance in the man's voice
rattling through cool absolving words.
Were the priests cheated too, as I was?

Or did they come to trust a congregation
by the stories told in confession?

Getting a walk in

A police siren undermines the quiet
approaching knock-off time. Lone figures
enter wide streets; harried, faces down.
Families after a spell at the park —
prams overloaded with tissues, a squashed sandwich.
Children hopping between the footpath cracks
between conversations. That enviable time
of heightened telling, of a voice emerging
from the chrysalis of watching others.
Light in their eyes, as they interrupt, repeat, stammer
whack each other with sticks,
parents lugging their cheer down familiar streets.
Of course I am watching all this, pulled along
by a dog whose curiosity has the better of her.
She bristles at humans, yelps at dog smells, together
we eye-off the Federation-era houses —
lawns, rope swings, remnants of a sandstone fence,
a tangible history with a clinical leaf-scattered edge.
A cypress hedge hanging over the footpath affords shelter,
earthy smells of paddocks and the airy spaces
memory takes you to —
Granny living on after her husband.
Quiet hours of washing clothes,
wiping down the gold-flecked laminex table
while a budgie frittered in its cage. I was sent to escape
the infighting of school holidays. Poking around in her garage,
the airiness of grease smells, boxes of screws and nuts,

the red and cream Humber she drove out to the farm to deliver ten icy poles.
Eternal summer light blanching her north facing wall
as I kicked a ball fighting boredom, retreating inside my head.
Recently, I returned but misplaced her house —
painted and fenced off, another hold on the past haunted by loss.
Passing my old school, its reduced grounds
so much larger in my mind, as with the fights,
of kneeling before a teacher to apologise.
Molly sniffs at the door to the senior wing
already boys from my class have died.
First headlights, sun lifting the sheen on a Give-Way sign.
Throughout this walk, Molly has marked her territory
scratched and flicked back grass as other dogs will do.
I remember too much. The openness of streets —
a chasm teenagers could fall into.
Here, a single act reverberates.
A friend's mother dropped dead in her bathroom.
Her death carried by word of mouth
is talked about for weeks,
becomes the need for those still able to
get a walk in before darkness falls.

Shariah's threat to beer in Malaysia

POLITICS

Simon Roughneen


ABC News
Muslim model facing cane gets Ramadan reprieve

Grabbing a beer along Kuala Lumpur's Jalan Ampang last week, it would be difficult to imagine that sharia law applied to 60 per cent of Malaysia's 27 million people. Tourists and local revelers bar-hopped along a strip that pounds to the usual dance, trance and RnB. All lubricated by beer flowing like water, with poured-into-the-dress waitresses peddling shots of vodka and tequila by the tray-full.

So you might be forgiven for thinking that I, an Irishman, am in my element. The food is great, the beaches are fantastic, and Kuala Lumpur features two of the world's most spectacular vertigo-inducing urban landmarks — the Petronas Towers and the KL Tower — both among the world's tallest buildings.

Still, all's not what it seems in this slickly-marketed, 'moderate Islamic' tourist magnet.

Western media is fond of latching on to lurid examples of sharia-mandated punishment, not least when these apply to women. On cue, last week saw headlines about a 32-year-old woman named Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno, who was sentenced to be caned for drinking beer in public.

However, the courts seemed to waver as the sentence was due to be carried out. Thirty minutes after picking Kartika up, officials turned back and she was brought home. At first they said the punishment was suspended until after Ramadan, but this was later changed to an indefinite suspension pending sharia court review.

Next came an announcement by the Ministry for Information, Communication and Culture that Muslims could not attend a concert by the Black Eyed Peas, scheduled for KL on 25 September. The gig is part of Guinness' 250th Anniversary celebrations, but because the Irish brewery giant sponsored the Peas' appearance, the authorities deemed it in contravention of the sharia legal system and its alcohol prohibitions.

Malaysia follows a dual-track justice system. Sharia laws apply to Muslim in all personal matters. Non-Muslims — mainly Christian Chinese, Hindu Tamil/Indian, Sikh and others — are subject to the civil code.

For ethnic Malays — who are also defined as Muslims — the sharia system often clashes with the civil courts, and often the former takes precedence. However, the sharia issue has affected other faiths.

The *Catholic Herald* newspaper has squabbled with the authorities over the right to use the word 'Allah' in its Malay-language editions. It claims that this is the

word for 'God' that Christians of the region use.

In 2007, the sharia courts deemed illegitimate the conversion of a Christian convert from Islam named Lina Joy. They took precedence over their civil counterpart in this case.

As Malaysia's independence day approached on 30 August, the authorities wanted to maintain law and order, with a veneer of piety to fit with Ramadan, which started on 21 August.

But there may also be political factors. Malaysian politics has been in turmoil for at least two years. The long- ascendant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) has seen its quasi-absolute rule dissipate. UMNO is the dominant force in the multi-ethnic National Front coalition that has governed uninterrupted since independence,

In the 2008 elections the Front lost its two thirds majority in parliament for the first time. Since the the opposition coalition led by Anwar Ibrahim has chipped away at the Front's majority, winning by-elections here and there, and seeking to persuade government MPs to defect to his side.

Anwar tries to spearhead what Malaysians call 'New Politics', reflecting an aversion to the cronyism and media-suffocation that has been the UMNO/Front hallmark for decades.

Non-Malay and non-Muslim minorities — Chinese and Indian Malays — have been at the forefront of this, along with Malays who have tired of the old system. Chinese and Indians want an end to the pro-Malay discriminatory policies in business and education, which are aimed to boost the socio-economic standing of Malays.

On 1 August, 10,000 Malaysians protested, ostensibly against a a colonial era law that allows detention without trial for up to two years, but also against the slow pace of reform in general. The demonstration was broken up by riot police, in contravention of Malaysia's freedom of speech and assembly laws.

The UMNO-led government does not know how to react to these demands, and is in a similar bind with other opposition requirements, which relate directly to the caning and Black Eyed Peas cases.

The cuckoo in the opposition nest is Malaysia's only Islamic party, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). PAS is allied with Anwar's party and the Chinese secular Democratic Action Party. After UMNO, PAS has the second largest membership of any party in the country, and its rise has sparked some clumsy, and inflammatory UMNO responses, with $dagger-wielding speakers at party conventions pledging to defend Malay (i.e. Muslim) rights.

Dr Dkulkefly Ahmad, a PAS lawmaker for the Kuala Selangor constituency, spoke in Singapore recently. He implied that PAS is divided between those who

want to take the party in a more pluralistic direction — it has over 50,000 non-Muslim Chinese members — and those who want to take a more hardline approach.

How this plays out will directly affect politics and society. At a time when the UMNO is struggling to meet minority and reform demands, it does not know whether to confront PAS or to adopt its rhetoric. Talibanisation seems far-fetched, but many Malaysians are concerned about the direction the country is taking.

East Timor needs justice before reconciliation

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

We go to great lengths to commemorate the bloody conflicts that occur frequently in our history. For good reason. Remembering the violence that followed East Timor's independence vote ten years ago could indeed be the key to the country's stable future. If accompanied by the delivery of justice for crimes committed, it could lead young East Timorese to use peaceful means — rather than violence — to settle differences.

East Timor's leaders have tended to fix their minds on economic and social development, without firm acceptance that effective progress is only likely to occur in a climate in which justice has been delivered for past crimes. The reasoning has been that East Timor remains one of the world's poorest countries, and feeding the population would be a better use of scarce funds than paying for tribunals.

Early in his term, former President Xanana Gusmao pushed for reconciliation, as Nelson Mandela had done in South Africa. He was opposed by the Catholic Church and others, who insisted on the priority of justice. Yesterday current President Jose Ramos Horta declared that a reconciliation tribunal would not be set up.

Recently *The Economist* observed that a culture of amnesty prevails in the country, and there is little evidence that it has helped stability. 'On the contrary, Timor-Leste has seen gang warfare, a mutiny by part of the army, and an assassination attempt on Mr Ramos-Horta.'

Last week's Amnesty International report said policies aimed at reconciliation had 'demoralised victims and not delivered them justice'. The London-based Catholic advocacy organisation Progressio said on Thursday that long-term development will be 'seriously hindered' if justice for past crimes remains undelivered.

There would be several paths open to the East Timorese Government to provide justice for the victims of past crimes. One is to hold a plebiscite to give the people an opportunity to say whether they want an ongoing process of reconciliation without a special tribunal. It's arguable that the government is behaving in a very high-handed way in relation to these vexed matters and that it should give the people the opportunity to say what they want done.

Whatever the East Timorese Government opts for, Australia cannot expect that our views will receive a special hearing. Indeed our attempts to push for justice for the sake of stability would be perceived as a promotion of our own self-interest, to avoid having a failed state on our doorstep. This is consistent with our attempts to maximise revenue from oil in the Timor Sea, and now our lobbying to have the processing plant in Darwin rather than Dili.

The humiliation of Caster Semenya

SPORT

Catherine Marshall

In the wake of Caster Semenya's victory in the women's 800m track event at the world championships in Berlin recently, debate has erupted with a velocity that would leave the runner herself in the dust: is she a man or is she a woman?

Conversations have bristled with aspersions and slander. Could a womanly being ever be housed within that rippling, muscular carapace? Was it really a female that hurtled bullet-like towards the finish line, leaving the crowd gasping for breath before it found its voice and began booing the unknown 18-year-old South African runner? Is it fair that an athlete who clearly fails to comply with the prototype of a real woman — she doesn't even possess breasts! — be allowed to compete against those who have obediently ticked all the aesthetic boxes?

These urgent interrogations will be laid to rest by the results of gender verification tests. But the pressing issue is not whether Semenya is male, hyper-androgynous, or, as she claims, 'entirely female', and hence entitled to her gold medal. More burdensome by far is the ferocious public response to a predicament that clearly called for maturity and restraint.

Like participants in a ghastly Milgram torture experiment, onlookers treated Semenya with predictable cruelty, thoughtlessly following the leader as they heaped contempt upon the vulnerable young woman caught unwittingly in the headlights.

It was only when she arrived home to a large and impassioned crowd of supporters that Semenya finally tasted the glory that had failed to materialise in Berlin.

But even here, common sense had been abandoned, this time in favour of nationalistic fervour and the predictable claim that the controversy was the result of racism. (The fact that the black-skinned Usain Bolt had thrilled the same Berlin crowd with his own brand of athletic prowess was conveniently ignored.)

And even before Semenya had stepped off the plane, supporters were laying claim to her hotly contested gender, with placards insisting that 'Caster is 100 per cent woman'.

In an abstract sense, the public humiliation of Caster Semenya is tainted by politics. After all, she represents a nation of people that, having once held a high curiosity value amongst imperial interlopers, are now politically irrelevant and easily dismissed.

But beyond the relative fatuity of politics, the debacle touches a nerve inflamed

less by race than human dignity and the conditional way in which we apply it. With her flat chest, sonorous voice and neat cornrows, Semenya is a round peg resolutely resisting the square hole into which society would pound her.

Disregarding her dignity, much less the psychological trauma afflicted on her by the experience, we have behaved like a group of bullies in year three, passing Pavlovian judgement and exposing our acute resistance to those we cannot categorise.

Clearly, our society is not as capable as it thinks it is of broadening its definitions — and its collective mind — to accommodate the range of people that are born into it.

While gender testing is not new, the public nature of the Semenya inquiry has prompted difficult questions to which there are no ready answers. Can we measure a person's gender at face value, or is an examination of their endogenous features crucial to determining who they are at their very core? Should intersex athletes be disbarred from competition, exiled from those securely confirmed as either male or female?

Quoted in the UK *Times* online, gender testing expert Professor Kath Woodward confirms that gender is complex and gender verification not necessarily straightforward. 'More people than we imagine do not conform neatly to the genetic and physical criteria that mark the two sexes,' she says.

Consequently, women with female chromosomes might present with masculine traits, while male chromosomes might not prevent a girl from morphing into an unconventionally petite and beautiful woman. Perhaps it is this primordial mystery of where each of us falls along the gender continuum that has fuelled the voices of dissent.

With these facts, such as they are, at the forefront, it is essential that prudence prevail when we consider how far we are willing to go to determine the gender of our athletes, and which factor holds more sway in determining a person's gender: chromosomes, hormones, social stereotyping, self-awareness or arbitrary testing by sporting bodies.

For Caster Semenya, time alone will tell whether her gender identity and athletic career are strong enough to withstand the events at Berlin, or whether the track where she won the 800 m will loom large as the place where the world passed its own judgment on who she was.