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## Islam's voice of reason

VIDEO

*Peter Kirkwood*

If Sherene Hassan is any indication, leadership of Muslims, in Victoria at least, is in good hands. Vice-president of the [Islamic Council of Victoria](#), Hassan is articulate, a good communicator, and committed to open and reasonable dialogue with the broader community.

Still, there are some in the community who don't want to hear what she has to say. She was recently snubbed in a media forum in a very demeaning way (more on that later).

*Eureka Street's* interview with Hassan is sponsored by the [Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-Religious Dialogue](#) at the Australian Catholic University, and was recorded at the [Common Dreams Conference](#) for religious progressives held at Melbourne's St Kilda Town Hall in April 2010.

In the interview, Hassan talks about the tragedy of 9/11 and how it prompted her to take on a leadership role in the Muslim community, about some of the problems facing Muslims in the West and how they might be overcome, and possibilities for change and adaptation in Islamic theology.

This mother of four and former chemistry and physics teacher, was enticed to run for election to the board of the Islamic Council of Victoria by her friend and mentor, Waleed Ali. She quickly made her mark on the Council, and is now one of its official spokespeople.

It was in this capacity that on the morning of Mother's Day this year she was invited to take part by telephone in a radio forum on Melbourne's 3AW. The program's presenter, Darren James, and two panelists in the studio, Nick McCallum and John-Michael Howson were discussing a provocative opinion piece called 'Ban the Burqa' by conservative Liberal Senator, Cory Bernardi.

In his piece, the Senator [described](#) the full body covering (rarely, if ever, seen in this country) as 'un-Australian', and representative of 'the repressive domination of men over women, which has no place in our society'. Howson, and the majority of callers to the program, agreed, while McCallum countered that 'it's un-Australian to dictate to people what they wear and what they must think ... and that is what you're trying to do.'

Hassan was called by 3AW to take part in the program, and was put on hold. After 20 minutes waiting to contribute to the debate, according to a [report](#) on the incident in the ABC's *Media Watch*, she was told by the 3AW producer, 'actually John-Michael is refusing to speak to you and does not want you on air'.

Shortly afterwards, a caller to the program commented that they should include 'the Muslim perspective of this story'. McCallum answered that 'we did actually try to have someone on, but John-Michael?' At which point Howson took up the story and, referring to Hassan without naming her, said, 'Well it was another propagandist coming on. We know what we're going to get ... They are well skilled propagandists who come on at a moment's notice.'

Hassan never got to air her views, and, in commenting to *Media Watch* about the incident, she said, 'In my 40 years as a Muslim woman, I have never felt so oppressed.'

The day after the *Media Watch* report, Derryn Hinch, in his editorial spot on 3AW,

[lambasted](#) Howson and the station for what happened to Hassan: 'What is unacceptable is what went on behind the scenes that day. And I am ashamed it happened on 3AW. Crude, insensitive and blatant censorship, purely because a woman, a Muslim representative, an invited guest, was banned from being heard just because she disagreed with JMH.'

It's a shame she wasn't allowed to take part in that debate because, as this interview shows, her voice is one of intelligence, calm and reason, and so well worth hearing.

## Hello Israel, might we talk about your nukes?

### POLITICS

*Nicholas Taylor*



The Rudd Government has joined international efforts to pressure Israel into signing up to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and to help form a zone free of nuclear weapons in the Middle East.

While the Israelis have not in over four decades declared their possession of nuclear weapons, all expert analysts know they have around 100—200. This is one core reason why Israel remain outside the NPT and international safeguard regimes.

Last week at the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference in New York, Australia was among 189 states who agreed to press Israel to [join](#) the international nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime, and to attend a UN-sponsored conference in 2012 about a denuclearised Middle East. For Iran and the Arabs, led by Egypt, it appeared a sweet victory. For Israel it is nothing but a proposition.

The prospect of a denuclearised Middle East, as utopian as it may appear, was tabled at the UN by Egypt and Iran in 1974. Despite early resistance from Israel, the negotiation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone remains the only non-proliferation initiative to have been accepted by all members of the region, including Israel, since 1980. Because of the political and geographical climate in the Middle East, many states now argue a region free of WMD (chemical, biological and nuclear weapons) is the only way forward.

So why has it taken 30 years?

Crudely put, Egypt, Israel and Iran have competing reasons for promoting the idea. Egypt sees it as a way of removing Israel's nuclear superiority. Israel maintains that lasting peace agreements with its neighbours are a prerequisite to any formal negotiation. Iran uses it to exert pressure on Israel's policy of nuclear 'ambiguity', and to deflect attention from its own non-compliance with international safeguards.

There are precedents. Since the Antarctic Treaty in 1951, presently more than 100 states that comprise almost the entire southern hemisphere are stitched into a tapestry of individually agreed nuclear-weapon-free zones.

For its part, Australia has long advocated serious negotiations that will lead to such a zone in the Middle East. But in my view, over the three meetings held in 2007, 2008 and 2009 to prepare for last week's conference, it has changed its focus from Iran to Israel. At the 2009 preparatory meeting, Australia's representative John Sullivan called on Israel to 'join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon state'. He did not mention concerns about proliferation in Iran, which had dominated his government's two earlier statements to the treaty body.

Predictably the United States sparred with Iran throughout the conference. But during the 2009 preparatory meeting, it carefully exerted pressure on Israel, without making it clear that it would demand that it register as a non-nuclear-weapon state (as is required by the treaty).

Following the NPT review conference last week, the US delegation said it 'strongly' and 'deeply regrets' the consensus reached at the conference which led to Israel being singled-out as it has been. The Obama Administration chose to ignore this issue in its 2010

Nuclear Posture Review, released earlier this year.

As in the three preparatory meetings, China stood alone. It opposed vilifying either Israel or Iran, preferring to facilitate some form of official dialogue between the international community and the region. And yet it is the United Nations, supported by Russia, the US and the UK that will lead the preparations for the 2012 conference that will seek to negotiate a denuclearised Middle East.

There remains much to do if such dialogue is to take place.

Of the 44 ratifications needed for the treaty to ban nuclear testing to have force, neither Iran, Egypt, nor Israel have signed. In fact, Egypt has linked its ratification to Israel's status in the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty. Israel has been active in the talks but has expressed disappointment at its role in the international system.

Despite relatively peaceful relations, this tit-for-tat game played between Egypt and Israel when ratifying treaties about WMD is sadly quite common. Egypt alone has ratified the nuclear treaty. Israel has only signed the chemical weapons treaty. Iran has ratified all three major WMD treaties, but has been heavily criticised for its lack of cooperation, especially in relation to the NPT.

In the Middle East, an estimated ten states have some form of WMD capability. The weapon most commonly used to deploy WMD — medium to long-range cruise and ballistic missiles — have proliferated throughout the region for decades. In the words of Mohamed El Baradei, former head of the international body that verifies compliance with the NPT, 'The use of nuclear weapons by any region like the Middle East means the destruction of the entire Middle East'.

Of the 35 or so countries with missile ranges of over 150km, more than a third are located within the Middle East, where they have often been used. But all three states remain outside the two international bodies that attempt to control the trade and production of missiles.

Despite this sombre picture there is some hope.

When Libya voluntarily handed over its WMD capability in 2003, it was the first case in the Middle East where a state had done so without regime change or a move towards democracy. Libya was moved by fear of isolation and further international pressure.

Now the international community has indicated that it is losing patience, I have some small hope that Israel too may do the unexpected, and bring its nukes to the negotiating table. Israel have the trump card in this; may Iran and the Arabs respond in kind. Relations in the Middle East are tense enough without the need for WMD.



## Tasmanian Church's reverse missionaries solution

### TELEVISION

*Tim Kroenert*

There is a serious premise at the heart of ABC1's *Compass* documentary series *The Mission*, but for the most part it has been dressed as gimmick.

Tasmania's Hobart Catholic Archdiocese is in crisis. Its priests are ageing, and their numbers dwindling. The congregations are, too — and dramatically so. The solution? In the words of the unofficial series tagline: 'Missionaries in reverse'.



Three Nigerian priests, Fathers Felix, Christopher and Kene, are sent as missionaries to Australia's island state. After overcoming a fear that they will die from the cold, and enduring a month of 'enculturation' (they speak fluent English but struggle with Strine), each is posted to a remote corner of the state.

The young priests see their three-year sojourn as mission in the literal sense; they are there to bring religion back to a land that, in their eyes, has lost its way. To them we are the 'other' to be helped and pitied. They are perplexed by miniscule congregations, which strangely surge only at Christmas and Easter. When Christopher attends the final Mass at a remote parish that is to be closed, he is visibly depressed, and horrified to learn that things are really so dire.

Writer/director Varcha Sidwell makes a meal of juxtaposing the priests' Nigerian experience of Church — marked by thousands-strong congregations, colour, youth and vitality — with that of Tasmania, where sparse handfuls of glum-looking, elderly parishioners rattle their way dutifully through Mass in nearly empty churches.

The contrast is vivid, but the point is superficial, particularly in the early episodes. Often, cultural differences are played for comedic effect (Felix is bemused to witness competitive wood-chopping and ferret racing; Kene sneers at a proffered sample of Vegemite) more than to explore the complexities of the missionary experiences.

The third and fourth episodes are more contemplative. Christopher has trouble shaking patriarchal attitudes that, while usual in his home country, do not wash with the female receptionist at his parish. Felix struggles to understand why one young Catholic couple would want him to marry them on the beach, and not in a church.

*The Mission* may be superficial but it's well-meaning, and it does attain moments of profundity. Most poignant is Father Kene's visit to the remote Big Dog Island in Bass Strait, to go mutton-birding with a mob of Aboriginal Australians. He visits an old chapel on the island — a 'sorry' place, he is told — that stands as a symbol of white missionary history and, by extension, of the broader impact of colonialism upon Indigenous culture.

Kene is moved, perhaps to reflect upon points of difference and similarity between the historic missionary experience and his own, though the documentary does not pursue this line of thought.

It's not the only time *The Mission* leaves interesting questions unprobed. One of the Tasmanian priests is cynical about this missionary 'experiment', and his pessimism segues into open conflict with Christopher. He is concerned that the time and energy spent on this 'stop-gap' would be more usefully channelled into encouraging more Australians to become priests. His valid questions are treated merely as stubborn grumblings.

Felix, Christopher and Kene are disturbed that many Catholic parents send their children to Catholic school but not to Mass. This is contrasted with the structured religious lives of children in Nigeria, where one seminary has had to restrict its intake numbers to 90 per year — meaning some 800 are turned away. We may not agree with Kene's injunction that children should 'have no rights', but his underlying point about individualism is not lost.

The Nigerians' experience of vocation is comprehensive. It is normal in their country to enter the seminary as a pre-teen and emerge as a priest 17 years later. Christopher remarks with pride that: 'Even my mother calls me Father'. His words contrast with the lament of one Tassie priest, that Felix insists on calling him 'Father' rather than 'John'. The impression is that the Nigerians have a reverence for their vocation that is not replicated in quite the same way by their more casual Australian counterparts. This inference probably sells Australian priests short.

*Episode 2 of The Mission airs at 10.05pm, Sunday 6 June on ABC1. Episode 1 can be viewed [online](#).*



## Rudd's risky fear of Beijing 'bastards'

POLITICS

Brian Toohey



Kevin Rudd is not like an earlier generation of political leaders who feared that impoverished Asian hordes would pour down and eat our lunch. His worry is that their offspring can now afford to come armed with the latest weapons and *steal* our lunch.

His solution, however, is much the same. We must 'populate or perish', and also revive the doctrine of 'forward defence'.

Rudd doesn't use this dated terminology, but the substance of what he says is often redolent of the 1950s and '60s. When interviewed on the ABC last October about a projected population increase to 36 million by 2050, Rudd said he made 'no apologies' for believing in a 'big Australia' because it would be 'good for our national security'.

With opinion polls showing that voters want a much slower rate of growth, Rudd now soft peddles this belief, but has not backed away from his claim about its importance to national security.

For 40 years prior to Rudd, Australian defence planners and intelligence analysts gave little weight to population. Countries with smaller populations have shown they are no pushover. For much of the cold war, Sweden's population was only 7–8 million, but it had a formidable air force and could mobilise an army of 800,000 in a week. Despite a population of only 7.5 million and a smaller defence budget than Australia's, Israel has the strongest conventional military forces in the Middle East.

To an extent not seen for decades, Rudd is basing defence policy on a fear of change in Asia. He is reviving the doctrine of forward defence — that it is 'better to fight them up there than down here'. The doctrine was put to the test during the Vietnam War. The communists won, but the fears about the threat to Australia soon evaporated. Vietnam now hosts visits by US warships and is happy to buy Australian exports.

Coalition governments abandoned the forward defence doctrine in the late 1960s in favour of the direct defence of Australia. All subsequent strategic analyses concentrated on developing a force structure primarily designed to deter or defeat an attack across the approaches to Australia. This always contained elements that could be deployed much further afield, such as currently in Afghanistan.

But Rudd is going much further, radically restructuring the navy so it can fire missiles into our biggest customer.

Rudd's fears centre on claims that Chinese prosperity poses a 'strategic risk' to Australia, despite the tremendous advantages for our economy. He has never explained why China would undertake the immensely difficult task of attacking Australia, when it would be much easier and cheaper to keep buying our commodities. He also ignores the likelihood that the combined power of India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Australia and the US will outweigh that of China for many decades.

Apart from his concern that a strong economy allows China to buy more weapons, Rudd's

anxiety appears to be motivated by little more than a hunch about the behavior of the Chinese leadership in the 2030s–40s.

On 9 September 2008 Rudd delivered a sanitised version of his views to the RSL's national congress. A few days earlier, he gave a more candid exposition during a non-attributable briefing for senior News Ltd journalists. 'I don't trust the bastards,' he said, referring to the Chinese leadership. Therefore the 2009 Defence white paper would, he said, unveil a massive Australian military build up.

The white paper revealed that the Government would equip the navy with long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles for attacking land targets far from Australia. Previously, the navy never even had short-range land attack missiles. Now it will possess an independent forward defence/offence capability that the air force lacks because of the limited range of its fighter planes.

The Tomahawk's 2500 km range, plus the long range of the navy's proposed new fleet, means it will be able to attack targets in most parts of the globe. In the opaque jargon of the white paper, the Tomahawks 'will act as a hedge against longer-term strategic uncertainty'. Defence officials acknowledge privately that this is code for saying that their job will be to hit targets in China, if needed.

The paper said the navy's six large Collins Class submarines will be replaced by 12 much bigger boats, armed with Tomahawks. Based on calculations by Australian Strategic Policy Institute analysts, they could cost around \$40 billion compared to \$9 billion for a proven design for smaller, highly capable German submarines. Tomahawks could also be fitted to other vessels in the future, including eight new 7000 tonne frigates (double the size of the ones they will replace) and three big new air warfare destroyers.

While key passages in the paper painted China as a potential threat, it did not see anything drastic occurring before 2030: 'Australia will most likely remain, by virtue of our geostrategic location, a secure country over the period to 2030.' It is absurd then for Rudd to claim a special insight into how untrustworthy and dangerous China's leadership will be after 2030, to the extent that Australia must prepare now to hit it with Tomahawks.

No one knows what will happen in China or the US more than 20 years from now, regardless of whether they speak Mandarin or English. Some fear that US leadership, egged on by domestic extremists, will lash out militarily if America's power declines in Asia. Meanwhile, China's economic power could collapse, leaving it as no more than a military minnow compared to the US. (The International Institute for Strategic Studies in London calculates that the US military spending is currently over 10 times higher than China's.)

Perhaps China will pursue Confucian ideals about harmonious international relations. Alternatively, it might become an expansionist power that seeks to conquer parts of Asia and all of Australia, though its prosperity and prestige is more easily assured by taking advantage of mutually profitable trade and investment opportunities.

The white paper says the 'pace, scope and structure' of the modernisation of China's forces is concerning everyone in the region. Not really. The US Defence Secretary Robert Gates says he's not bothered. If he were, he would not be cancelling production of the F-22 fighter, the US plane best suited to air-to-air combat against the Chinese air force. The CIA assesses Beijing's military stance as defensive. Australian intelligence agencies agree, despite being subjected to intense pressure from Defence to back the white paper's hawkish stand.

It might seem prudent to start now to prepare for what might occur after 2030. But

defence planners over the last 40 years have argued it is possible to do this without nominating an enemy in a distant future.

In discussing a serious assault on Australia, the 1994 white paper said, 'Military capabilities on this scale cannot be developed in secret ... On the basis of these judgments, rather than on any attempt to predict the future, we are confident that we would have sufficient warning time to adapt and expand our own forces to defend Australia against a major attack of this sort.' The 2000 paper echoed this assessment.

Nor did these planners consider it prudent to start buying expensive weapons systems to project power far to our north, when that capability may turn out to be irrelevant, while diverting resources from more pressing needs.

Moreover, one of the most influential planners from this period, Paul Dibb, has criticised the current provocative assumption that Australia should contemplate firing Tomahawk missiles into a nuclear-armed China with no apparent consideration of the possible repercussions.

Prime ministers since the late 1960s have accepted that there is nothing abnormal, or necessarily alarming, about changes in power over time. Rudd is the exception, fretting at great cost to the nation about a nebulous 'strategic risk' posed by an unknown set of bastards in Beijing sometime in the 2030s or '40s.

## Buenos Aires' hotel revolution

NON-FICTION

*Monica Jackson*

'Are there any croissants?' a large, middle-aged woman with blonde hair and heavy make-up asks the waiter behind the breakfast counter of the once-exclusive Hotel Bauen in downtown Buenos Aires.

'Well, if there aren't any it's because people don't appreciate them,' the waiter replies, pointing to the messy tables and chairs in the dining room. 'They throw them around, they tear them.'

'Well,' says the woman glancing at her watch, seemingly uninterested, 'I need three croissants.'

'Yes. I have ordered more and they'll arrive soon,' the waiter says. A few moments later he adds: 'I hope.'

Welcome to Hotel Bauen, a hotel that was 'recuperated' from its owners by sacked employees who now run the place under a workers' co-operative.

Once a symbol of the wealth being bandied about during the excess of the 1980s and 1990s, the tired old hotel of today is far removed from anything that spells luxury. But what it has lost in shine, it has more than gained in charm as people from all walks of life — from the remotest parts of the country, of all colors, origins, sizes and economic status — come and go.

In front of its worn façade you are less likely to see a limousine than a run-down bus pelting out black smoke. Guests are more likely to be poor people from rural areas than to be clad in expensive furs. Some will have left their small village for the first time. They are clearly overawed by the big smoke. Others are guests of the hotel while receiving medical treatment at a Buenos Aires hospital.

The story of the hotel begins in the middle of the last military dictatorship (1976—1983) when entrepreneur Marcelo Iurcovich obtained government funding to build the 20-storey hotel in time for the 1978 FIFA World Cup. Apparently, none of the funding — which included US\$5million from Argentina's national development bank — was ever paid back. After later obscure business deals the hotel was sold and declared bankrupt on 28 December 2001.

The timing of the closure could not have been worse for the 60 workers who were the remnants of a once 200-strong workforce. They lost their jobs just as the Argentinian economy collapsed, unemployment reached unprecedented levels, Argentina was embroiled in food riots, general strikes and road blockades, banks closed, and people lost their life savings.

After being unemployed for three years, Marcelo Duarte, a former bell boy at the Hotel Bauen and a small band of other former employees took matters into their own hands, broke in and reclaimed the hotel. They were shocked at what they found.

'There was nothing left,' Marcelo said. 'They had taken everything and the place was filthy.'

The process of 'vacuuming' — where the owner of a bankrupt company strips the building of all assets, moves them to a new operation and begins trading again, debt free — was



widely practised. The owners of the hotel took the beds, the linen, the televisions, even the floor tiles.

For the next seven months, the workers spent day and night cleaning the hotel. They enlisted the help of other co-operatives to sew curtains and bedspreads, provide tiles, furniture, light fittings and timber frames.

The hotel finally opened for business — illegally — in 2004 and began to secretly rent out some of the 200 rooms, at first to members of other recuperated enterprises and trade unions. It now operates openly, but still not legally, with a staff of 142.

It is one of 186 'recuperated' enterprises throughout the country which have been occupied by workers after the owners shut up shop and dismissed the staff. They employ some 10,000 people.

Like most 'recuperated' enterprises, the ownership of the Hotel Bauen is in limbo. In strict legal terms, the owners may have the legal titles to the property, but the workers have the popular power and, according to many people, the moral right. Some argue the hotel was built not just with government money but with 'dirty' money, stolen from the people by the dictatorship of the time and given to its wealthy supporters.

They see the owners of these recuperated enterprises as conspirators in the Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s, during which at least 30,000 people, mainly workers and students, were 'disappeared'.

'Our vision is that there is more to work than money,' Marcelo says. 'Here everyone is a human being first. Each person is responsible and has a level of commitment. We are not employees, but *compañeros*.'

So next time you stay in Buenos Aires, check out the Hotel Bauen. If you stay there, chances are that only one of the three lifts will operate, and that it will get stuck half-way between floors. But don't panic. The minute you press the help button, a flurry of people will appear to help you out, each with their own technique of wedging the doors open.

And while the carpets are worn out, the bedspreads washed too many times and the curtains in bad need of replacement, your every wish will be met by the nicest people you are likely to meet. The waiters may complain about people wasting croissants, but they will also pile up your plate and ask if you want seconds.

## Freedom Flotilla and Israeli 'pirates'

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Binoy Kampmark*



The attack by Israeli forces on a flotilla carrying humanitarian supplies to Gaza might have left more than 10 activists dead. The survivors, mostly Turkish, have been taken to Ahshod, where dozens have been hospitalised. Others have been imprisoned or deported. The attack by elite commandos was conducted in the dark and in international waters, a situation which has prompted accusations of piracy.

The language used by Israeli officials to justify the attack is strong. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described scenes of clubbing, mobbing, beatings and stabbings, and gunfire. The aid organisations sponsoring this effort were said to be fronts for jihadist causes, stacked by 'suicide' activists. According to Deputy Defence Minister Danny Alalon, 'The organisers are well known for their ties with global Jihad, al-Qaeda and Hamas. (Their) intent was violent, their method was violent, and the results were unfortunately violent.'

Alalon has claimed that the flotilla was smuggling arms. The civilian activists on board apparently sought to 'lynch' the commandos, who were there to 'pacify' rather than 'disperse' the crowd. The troops seemed to have been deployed in reckless fashion.

The arguments by Israel in justifying the attack, along with their overall stance on the blockade of Gaza, have proven tenuous. The blockade is a de facto occupation of the territory, asserting control over the land and halting vital aid. The position is even more extreme than that of the previous Olmert administration, under which a lone ship, with supplies, was allowed to reach Gaza.

While the standard views are repeated with each crisis (that terrorist states — Syria and Iran — are supplying militants to mount rocket attacks on Israel), the humanitarian premise is woefully neglected. The amount of material and food provided is inadequate, precipitating a humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip. Building materials such as cement are disallowed. Occasionally, Israel will dispense with strictness and show a tempered quality of mercy, but given the destruction of homes in Gaza and the need for building materials, that quality is thin.

The Israeli position suggests mistrust of the countries from which the flotilla departed, notably Turkey, who, the accusations suggest, did not search the ships adequately. The crisis is set to get more extreme. Turkey has condemned the attacks as piracy. Turkey has long-standing military and economic association with Israel; Israel now risks losing a vital partner.

The reactions in Israel have been varied, but even those lukewarm to the activists have admitted that the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) may well have been lured into a trap. Restraint gave way to aggression. In the opinion of Yossi Melman of Israel news service *Haaretz*, 'The flotilla organisers wanted deaths, casualties and blood and billows of smoke. And that is exactly what Israel gave them.' Then, the dark message: that the entire conflict Israel faces with the Palestinians is not one of justice or of logic but of 'consciousness, emotion and gut-feelings'. Other methods might have used that would have prevented casualties: sabotage, for instance.

A pessimistic Gideon Levy, *Haaretz's* Cassandra in residence, describes the Israeli establishment as having climbed new summits of propaganda — that tainted information is being disseminated: that there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza; that the occupation has ended; that the flotilla constitutes 'a violent attack on Israeli sovereignty'.

The activists have been reckless in their own way (peace gestures can themselves be seen as provocative), and have indeed promised more flotillas to run the blockade. But Israel is no underdog in this power game, however much the IDF might purport to be. Branding activists as terrorists and denying the human situation in Gaza will not help an Israeli cause that is proving more alienating the longer it persists. If there is an inquiry into this incident, it will have to be wide ranging and international.



## Australia in Crisis Group firing line

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Eve Lester*

Why do we find the Government's and the Opposition's immigration policies despicable? Let us count the ways.

The Government's decision in April to suspend the processing of claims for asylum in Australia made by people from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka is a reaffirmation of the resoundingly condemned policy of mandatory detention. The decision to reopen the Curtin 'hell hole' (pictured) and to resurrect disused miners' accommodation in Leonora, a dusty 832 km drive east of Perth, is a cynical response to political, not logistical requirements.



Meanwhile, spinners for the right suggest boatloads of 'huddled masses' are arriving in unmanageable numbers. But the numbers don't add up. Australia is a minor contributor to refugee protection. The UNHCR's most up-to-date figures indicate that Australia is host to just 0.6 per cent of all asylum seekers with cases pending. And Australia's resettlement program meets the protection needs of just 0.07 per cent of the world's refugees.

The Government policy perpetuates a deliberately constructed illusion that Australia is 'full' when our most remote detention centres are overcrowded. The perpetuation of this myth shows that the Government's failure to repeal the excision of parts of Australia from our so-called migration zone is cynical, not just cowardly.

But the most despicable aspect of the policies is the suggestion that conditions in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka have somehow changed for the better. This is crass dishonesty. The Edmund Rice Centre has documented human rights violations perpetrated against rejected asylum seekers who have been returned to both countries from Australia, most recently in respect of returnees to Sri Lanka. This should shock us all, for this represents the most fundamental breach of Australia's international protection obligations.

Credible independent reports suggest that the security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated over the last year. In Sri Lanka, the fate of Tamils (and anyone who dissents) in 'post-war' Sri Lanka is clear. A recent report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) [documents](#) how events in that country have been marked by widespread unlawful detentions, disappearances, attacks on journalists, threats to politicians, extrajudicial executions including of those who were trying to surrender, attacks on NGOs and intimidation of the UN.

The ICG has called on countries, including Australia, who turned a blind eye to the violations when they were happening during the height of the conflict, to take positive steps to ensure proper international investigation of war crimes by Sri Lankan government forces during the closing months of the civil war. This includes granting asylum or other protected status to witnesses and acting to preserve evidence of war crimes, particularly by allowing officials to cooperate with credible investigations.

Instead, perfecting the art of parochial self-serving navel-gazing, the Australian Government takes steps to ensure that possible victims and witnesses are locked up indefinitely to discourage other victims and witnesses from 'sully' our shores.

Although the Immigration Minister has since urged caution in returning asylum seekers connected to the LTTE, this does not embrace all those at risk; and the recently announced

Opposition policy spares not even a moment's reflection on conditions in Sri Lanka or Afghanistan.

The Rudd Government has demonstrated the utmost in non-leadership. In turn, this has enabled the cruellest excesses of the Howard era to inveigle their way seamlessly back into the debate through Tony Abbott's new 'border protection policy'.

The Government and the Opposition alike must know that their policies are wrong and immoral. Too scared to acknowledge this, they instead vacate the field of argument to the worst of the populist tabloids and shock jocks. Labor renews the legitimacy bestowed on them by Kim Beazley's famous backdown in 2001 and the Coalition triumphantly re-embraces Hansonism.

Sadly, the shame that flows from Australia's mainstream parties' latest turn to the dark side in their attitudes to asylum seekers seems likely to endure.

## **She who must be obeyed**

POETRY

*Victoria Beaumont*

### **Desktop**

*Old Irish Marginalia*

Me and my cat Pangur work at home all day.  
He keeps mum, I have too much to say.  
I bask in the glow of my computer screen  
While he romps about, indifferent as a teen.  
Whether at this or the other end of April  
It is cosy and timeless at our Windows sill.  
He toys with the mouse, dreams of microsoft meals.  
I'm the one left knowing just how things feel.  
Though I can't figure out how he gets where he climbs  
My method employs post-modern paradigms.  
He always manages to find what he finds  
While I try to remember what's on my mind.  
Cool as, I bend paradoxes like a shot.  
He curls up in shapes that are celtic, not.  
My thesis will soon be old hat as a tricorn,  
While Pangur's work is why he was born.

### **She Who Must Be Obeyed**

*Horace Odes 2, 8*

You know who you are. If any of your untruths  
Went punished, if even once harm came,  
A tooth turned black or your mane  
    Betrayed grey streaks,  
I'd believe you. But facts are, you make phoney  
    Promises 'upon my soul' while your looks  
Shine more than ever to win then break  
    The hearts of our youth.  
It's an advantage to swear on a mother's ashes,  
The deepening silence of the night,  
The cold signs up above — all the powers

That are free of death.  
But I've seen the movie too: Venus laughs,  
Likewise your facebook girlfriends, and inhuman Cupid  
Forever sharpens arrows on a stone  
    To draw fresh blood. *Five stars.*  
Worse than that, all who grow up free to choose  
Find they serve you, nor can former love interests  
Be disloyal to your tyranny  
    Despite frequent threats to leave.  
Mothers are afraid for their sons,  
Costly ex-flings fear losing everything,  
And young girls work to hinder your progress  
    With their new husbands.

## Coalition's new nasties for asylum seekers

EDITORIAL

*Andrew Hamilton*



The Coalition's new asylum seeker policy is best described as a work in regress. It returns to the policy it put into practice when in government, adding new nasties that make it look tougher. The policy failed asylum seekers and Australian interests then and, if implemented, it would fail them again.

The core elements of the new policy are to reintroduce processing of asylum seekers outside Australia and to reintroduce temporary protection visas which excluded family reunion. A restriction on benefits would also be reintroduced. In addition those on temporary protection visas would be compelled to work, and efforts would be made to prevent asylum seekers from landing on Australian territory.

Offshore processing was harmful to Australia's interests previously because it depended for its effectiveness on the cooperation of other nations, but undermined the basis for cooperation. It expected other nations to receive those found to be refugees. Other nations sensibly believed that the protection of these refugees was Australia's responsibility by virtue of it having signed the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

The system also harmed Australia's interests because it corrupted administration. The judging of refugee claims was outside the rule of law and was arbitrary. Immigration Department officers acted as the moral equivalent of people smugglers, enticing uninformed and vulnerable asylum seekers to leave Nauru. According to Phil Glendenning, many who returned were killed on return to Afghanistan.

Even more important, prolonged detention is a cruel punishment for asylum seekers who, under the Convention, are guiltless in seeking protection in Australia. Patrick McGorry memorably described detention centres as factories for mental illness. They cause long term damage to people. Prolonged detention outside Australia, as in deserted areas of Australia, exacerbates the damage while keeping it out of the media. It does now to asylum seekers what the 'dark satanic mills' did to workers in the 19th century.

Temporary protection visas do little more than create anxiety, put lives on hold, keep husbands separated from wives, parents from children, and place more costs and burdens of review on the public service. Nor usually do conditions change in a short time for those who have been granted protection. Like prolonged detention and the exclusion of asylum seekers from income and the right to work, these visas are morally obnoxious because they are designed to make asylum seekers in Australia suffer, so that their suffering will deter others.

Pushing asylum seekers away from Australia's borders sounds attractive to those who like the sound of tough policies. But where do you push people to? If you are pushing people back on to someone else's land, the cooperation of the other nation will come only at a heavy cost, if at all. If you simply push people away, you will have to deal with the bad publicity that comes with their death.

In the late 1970s the Thai army initially pushed Cambodian refugees back on to Cambodian minefields, but was eventually forced by public opinion to desist. And the refugees still came because they faced even greater horrors in Cambodia.

To criticise the policy of the Opposition is not to endorse that of the Government. The

suspension of visa processing, the prospective relocation of asylum seekers to harsh, isolated detention camps and the pressure to view Afghanistan and Sri Lanka as safe places of return, are unconscionable.

But the Coalition's policy on asylum seekers is worse. It appeals to prejudice about asylum seekers and not to the truth of why they come, to the truth of the relatively small burden they are to Australia. It is based on the systematic disrespect for asylum seekers, and not on respect for their humanity. It is designed to appeal to human baseness, not to human generosity.

It is also incompatible with the way, the truth and the life on which Christianity, and so Catholicism, is based. So as both an Australian and a Jesuit sponsored magazine, whose interest is in public life and whose moral centre is both Christian and Catholic, we deplore this policy.

## Julia vs Kevin

### POLITICS

*John Warhurst*

The clamour for Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard to become prime minister has been fuelled by the recent Newspoll that shows she is very close to Kevin Rudd as preferred prime minister. For many it has become almost a *fait accompli*. But when and how might it happen?



Gillard has all it takes to be an excellent prime minister. But she is right to deflect attention from calls for her elevation, whether it is immediate or during a second Labor term. If leader of the opposition is the worst job in politics then, for an ambitious person, deputy prime minister can also be extremely frustrating.

The historical record is on the side of leaders of the opposition. In recent times Rudd, Howard, Hawke, Fraser and Whitlam have come to the job from being opposition leader. The natural order of things is for the opposition to beat the government at an election and for its leader to then become prime minister.

There have been few if any smooth transitions from deputy to prime minister. One reason is that deputies are often not ambitious and are deputy for that reason. Another is that it is just too difficult to topple a prime minister.

Paul Keating fought Bob Hawke to the death from his position as treasurer then backbencher. Eventually he narrowly deposed Hawke in his second challenge. Keating was exhausted when he finally got his dream job.

Twenty years earlier John Gorton was toppled by his deputy, William McMahon, in March 1971. This happened after a poorer than expected performance in winning the 1969 federal election and subsequent destabilisation by Fraser. The vote was tied in the party room and Gorton effectively stood down.

This is the type of scenario implied by advocates of Gillard for PM. But it is a rare case. Furthermore, McMahon was defeated at the next election. He had inherited a poisoned chalice against a newly confident opposition leader, Whitlam. Is that really the scenario that Gillard supporters want? Can it be confidently assumed that she would revive a faltering Labor government by taking over mid-term against a rampant opposition?

If Labor wins the next election, Rudd will be entrenched for another term. If the Coalition wins by any margin Rudd will probably step down and Gillard is likely to become opposition leader.

If Labor was to win very narrowly, then the Gorton scenario might come into play. But the big difference is that the Gorton-McMahon challenge came at the very end of two decades of Coalition government. A Rudd-Gillard challenge would come early in a Labor ascendancy.

Gillard would have the confidence that stems from public popularity demonstrated by opinion polls. She had more support than Rudd among the anti-Beazley forces in 2006. She is regarded as a minister who has performed well in a super-sized portfolio. The strength of her parliamentary performances in the bear pit is widely applauded.

But would her colleagues destabilise a second term Labor government to install her? That



is highly doubtful, especially given her place on the Left within the factions. Rudd, whatever the size of his victory, might have seen off yet another opposition leader and would have an impressive number of scalps to his credit. He could point to Howard who squeaked back into office in 1998 before embarking on a long career as prime minister.

Gillard is caught in the terrible position of knowing that her best chance of becoming prime minister might be from opposition. This would mean Labor losing in 2010 and rising from the ashes in 2013 under her leadership. That is a risky proposition.

## Bushfire commission's climate denial

### ENVIRONMENT

*Tony Kevin*



One way we deal with the unthinkable is to pretend it isn't there. On the basis of its published proceedings so far, the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission seems to be ignoring the relevance of climate change as a major causal factor in Black Saturday. Yet the Commission's first Term of Reference was to inquire and report into 'the causes and circumstances of the bushfires'.

So far, the Royal Commission is addressing Black Saturday as if it were just another major bushfire in the series that includes Black Friday in 1939 and Ash Wednesday in 1983. The Commission is examining how particular bushfires started and spread, and how particular agencies and individuals responded to these emergencies.

The opening statements of the Chairman and of Counsel Assisting did not refer to climate change. Public hearings are due to end this week, yet no scientific witnesses have been called to testify on how climate change contributed to Black Saturday's unprecedented ferocity.

Yet it was already clear to the public in the days after the fires that Victoria was in new climate territory. A feature article by Michael Bachelard and Melissa Fyfe in *The Age* [reported](#) climate scientists' views that these were 'fires of climate change'.

The article set out the science behind the Bureau of Meteorology's warning on 6 February that 7 February was in danger of becoming the worst day in Victoria's history; in many areas, Forest Fire Danger Index values were predicted to be a terrifying 150 to 180. By comparison, Ash Wednesday in 1983 had a FFDI value of 102.

The *Age* journalists drew on the expertise of Professor Neville Nicholls, a distinguished climate scientist who spent 35 years as a senior researcher at the Bureau of Meteorology. Black Saturday was Melbourne's hottest-ever day — 46 degrees. The fires were spurred by fierce winds and unprecedented heat on the day itself. But to understand the intensity of the fires, one must consider that even the deepest wettest mountain gullies had been cured bone-dry during preceding weeks of unusual heat.

Because these gullies burned too, there was nothing to slow down and contain the fires.

Climate change played a major role in Black Saturday's severity. These fires came after the state's longest-ever 12-year drought, a string of the hottest years on record in the previous decade, a 35-day dry spell for Melbourne (the equal second-longest in history), and one of the most severe heatwaves on record.

The January 2009 heatwave — with record-breaking jumps in average local temperatures of more than two degrees in places — was so extraordinary that Nicholls described it as 'mind-boggling':

The crucial thing linking Black Saturday to climate change is the preceding three-day heatwave, rather than the really hot temperatures on the day of the fires. By then, the situation was already primed. It is beyond reasonable doubt that global warming and the enhanced drying effects on Victoria's mountain forest country exacerbated the severity of this tragedy.

Nicholls lodged a detailed written submission to the Royal Commission. Other submissions addressing the climate change dimension of Black Saturday were lodged by climate scientist Professor David Karoly, and by the Australian Conservation Foundation. None of these were called to testify.

Nicholls' conclusions were:

The unprecedented drought of the past 12 years, the unprecedented three-day heat wave of late January, and the unprecedented high temperatures on 7 February, must all have contributed to exacerbating the bushfire situation on 7 February. In turn, there are strong grounds for concluding that human-caused climate change, specifically the enhanced greenhouse effect caused by increased atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide, contributed to each of these three unprecedented meteorological features. The obvious conclusion is that human-caused climate change exacerbated the bushfire situation of 7 February, even though it did not 'cause' the bushfires.

Climate models, and our understanding of the climate system, lead us to expect even stronger warming, perhaps with further rainfall declines, over the next few decades, leading to increased frequency of days with extreme bushfire risk. Any actions taken to reduce fire risk in the future will, as a result, need to be more extreme than might have been considered a sufficient response if the climate of southern Australia had not been expected to continue warming and drying.

Why didn't the Commission want to explore further in its public hearings such powerful scientific analysis and warnings, centrally relevant to its mandate? One might ask whether the Commission plans to set climate change issues aside: to refer to them, but essentially report on Black Saturday as just another big bushfire.

Royal Commissions are independent of politics. So it must be a coincidence that, under federal and state governments determined to downplay climate change as a clear and present danger to Australians, and to pursue policies which worsen it, this Royal Commission seems disposed to shrug off climate change science too.

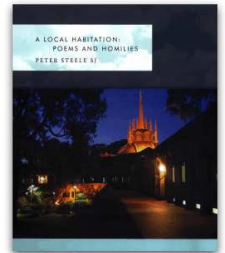
The possible awful truth — that Victoria's cool mountain ridges and valleys may be drying out as a result of climate change, to the point that their rich forest ecologies may no longer be sustainable, and that such ferocious bushfires may be nature's way of transitioning these areas to a hotter, drier climate — might be a truth too much to bear. Maybe that is why the Royal Commission seems not to want to go there.

## The wild mind of Peter Steele

### BOOKS

*Morag Fraser*

Forty-six years ago, I knocked on Peter Steele's door in the Melbourne University English Department and asked, in my convent innocence, if he would explain Jonathan Swift to me. I might as well have asked him to corral the wind. But now, a lifetime later, I still remember being struck by the man's courteous patience. He seemed to take my puzzlement seriously and did his best to untangle it. But I also remember a spark, a glint — I was not so naïve as to miss that — a shimmer of wit that almost subverted the serious courtesy. And I thought, there's a wild mind at work and play here, and I will have to run prodigiously fast even to catch at its stirrups.



And so it has proved: it's been a long, vigorous, and exultantly grateful following.

But it's been more than that. To read, to grasp Peter Steele, you have to grow up, not just bask — though that's an abiding and surely allowable pleasure because he is a poet, a writer of such brimming praise, a hunter-gatherer of all that might beguile a human. His mind is 'a dulcet google', as Chris Wallace-Crabbe puts it in his poem celebrating Peter's 70th birthday, and published in Peter's book, *A Local Habitation: Poems and Homilies*.

And yet, that dulcet mind takes you with it into places to confront, to daunt even a brave soul. 'If you write poetry,' Peter says in his introduction to *A Local Habitation*, 'it's part of your own freedom, a freedom which the poems offer to share.' Yes, and the freedom his writing heralds and shares is, for the reader who is game enough to accept the offer, an initiation into habits of moral acuity and exploration — if we can weather it, if we can bear the freedom, the vulnerability and the responsibility that comes with it.

There are some lines in one of Peter's earlier poems, 'At Tim Healy's Grave' (published by John Leonard in *White Knight with Beebox: New and Selected Poems*, 2008), lines that might flesh out my groping abstractions. Tim Healy, as many of you will know, was a Jesuit priest, onetime President of both the New York Public Library and of Georgetown University, where Peter himself has often happily lived and worked. A formidable man. Here are the lines I mean, from the first stanza of Peter's 'At Tim Healy's Grave':

We make a pair of sorts: me in my long  
 coat, and you in your long silence —  
 not that you'd long keep mum in any world:  
 And from the last stanza:  
 A good man with a phrase yourself, you urge  
 'a savage probity', coupled  
 with an open heart.

That's such a tall order: the coupling of 'A savage probity' with an open heart. One without the other — maybe. I can imagine that. An open heart — yes. And history is littered with savage probity. I'm Scots Presbyterian enough to be acquainted with a long list of its exemplars. But savage probity coupled with an open heart? That's such a vulnerable state of

conjoined being — rindless, unprotected.

Peter is quoting of course, not exhorting — he so rarely does — and in the context of a long Jesuit friendship that allows for — almost mandates — wryness. But the words ring nonetheless.

And throughout *A Local Habitation*, with its 53 poems and 62 homilies for the seasons and occasions they resound. They are a ground bass to the book's delight. And sometimes they are the melody.

What a great thing to have done, to have put together this antiphonal work, with its poems and homilies talking across at one another, threading in and out and through as Peter's worlds strand, plait and unplait again into their distinctiveness. In the poems and in the homilies, he moves constantly between the street, and the sacred, between the conundrums of scripture and the graffiti of pell-mell life. The poems begin with a 'Reverie in Lygon Street' (that is the poem's marvellous title), and in his sharp, lavish way, he itemises what seizes his eye, a supermarket cornucopia:

The eye, they tell us, learns by little hops,  
so good luck to the mind. I'm gawking  
now at the avocados, now at garlic,  
a sucker as ever for the cabbage in  
its ostentation, for the blushing apples to which  
the maddest George devoted a corer  
as golden as his dreams, for the jokey banana ...

And he ends his list with an ominous cadence: 'and the mandrake called tomato'.

Then come books (this is Lygon Street, remember), and books, repositories of the word, are also there, like fruit, to be picked, or picked off, vulnerable to predation. Here comes the picker, Hitler, to command the poet's attention, his 'savage probity', in the second stanza:

For the canting psychopath flaunting a lousy haircut,  
books in flames were just a beginning,  
but lit the way to our kind's extermination,  
blackened heart by heart. And if,  
as we know, most of us, courtesy of the pages  
retrieved from rags or the skins of beasts  
or sodden or beaten reeds, the hectoring killer  
has comrades of a kind, the soul  
hangs at times between hope and despair, language  
bringing its wounded self before us  
to say that words are mummery in the face  
of the sword and the drone; and yet, and yet  
we know and they do not.

What do we know? That love is stronger than death? Is it? Look at the homily for Advent 2009, on page 41: Peter there invokes the poems called Laments, written by a 16th century Polish poet, Jan Kochanowski, and occasioned by the death of his daughter: ‘... there, certainly,’ Peter writes, ‘the intersection of love with death, the battle between them, is transparent. True, in such a case, poetry rescues something from that encounter: but it also engraves, with sharp edges, something of the cost.’

This interweaving, this moire patterning of poetry and prose is the structural device of *A Local Habitation*. We see the same mind, the same man questing, testing himself in different modes, asking questions, resurrecting dead men and women that we might think anew about them and what they mean to us. In another Advent homily, ‘The Potter’s Work’, page 44, Peter writes this: ‘For much of my life I have been trying to teach people about poetry, and one of the points I have stressed to them is that poetry is often a way of sorting through people’s mixed feelings.’

Now look at mixed feelings in the poems that make up Peter’s virtuosic sonnet sequence of dramatised moments from the gospels. Take ‘Malchus’, for example. Remember him, the guard (from Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 22) in Gethsemane who has his ear cut off by the impetuous Peter?

Bull at a gate in the garden, Peter’s out  
With a stubby blade, and slashes in the dark  
At the nearest of the looming figures — a lout,  
and a slave with it, obedient to the bark  
Of the officer bloke, to whom he’s a waste of space,  
Named though he is for a king. And now it’s first  
Blood to the partisans of peace in the race  
To the hooked wood, the dangling and the thirst.  
The stuff that crusted where the severed ear  
Had been returned stayed with him through the night  
And half of bloody Friday. He could hear  
As well as ever, though he made a sight  
For his mates to see while he talked about the stroke  
And how the man commanded when he spoke.

Or another, where mixed feelings are weighed, and new life breathed into old skins. This is ‘Prodigal’, (again from Luke Chapter 15).

Sick of his father and his brother’s claim,  
He lit out for the country, walking tall  
As though impossible to halt or tame:  
Others, he knew, were riding for a fall.  
Out there he sluiced money every way,  
Good as his word, but only for a while:

Pigs at their pods became his only stay,  
Expert in how to slobber and defile.  
Back home his father, now a yearner, saw  
The white nights through and fed the calf a treat,  
Paced at the gate until his feet were raw,  
Kept sandals, robe and ring beside his seat,  
Hoping, the boy returned, by some wild chance  
The brooding heir would join them in the dance.

Pair those sonnets with any of the homilies, and you will see the recurrences, the patterns of thought. Look particularly at the three homilies on 'The Eloquence of the Body', 'Spittle', 'Hearing', and 'Seeing'. What they share with the poems is an incarnational grittiness; they are down to earth, as Peter so often insists we must be to save our souls. For a poet, as for a homilist who wants to hold his listener, that grittiness, that solid conjuring is an imperative as well as a gift. And Peter has the gift, as we say, in spades.

Listen to the way he conjures this local habitation in the poem, 'Dome: Newman College':  
So much consigned, you never tire of this:  
at blackbird call, to stand at the rim  
of Griffin's dome, a world of sleep behind you,  
and see a habitat come home  
for us as for the dead.

You can see Peter, can you not, standing up there, as he has for decades, never shy of wonder.

And it is a wonderful thing to see, to hold this poetic and homiletic record of Peter's long time at Newman, and elsewhere, but principally Newman College, which has been what a university college, indeed a university, ought to be: hospitable, authentic in its prophetic role, a haven for honest enquiry, for debate, for fellowship, for freedom to think, to make, to commune. The photographs, historical and contemporary, in the volume are never merely illustrative; they are a testament to a long tradition of scholarship and friendship, to brotherliness — Peter's word.

I love particularly the several images of Peter with the other two musketeers ordained with him, so long ago, Andrew Hamilton SJ and Brendan Byrne SJ, concelebrating Mass, grinning for the camera (pages 81 and 114). And I've never heard any one of the three say a single unqualified good word about either of the other two. All for one and one for all has, in their case, a Jesuit translation and interpretation all its own. But I never want to hear a good word from them because the truth, the love, lies in the silent interstices of their deflecting utterances. Peter is one of the best exponents of humility I know. And little wonder: he's been tutored, or battered, by the best.

There is so much in here. I could talk for days just about the pithy joy to be had from Peter's parentheses, his digressions, his interlinear commentary. Here's the briefest snatch, from a homily on the Our Father, through the perspective of the Son who taught us the prayer: 'He sounds like us,' writes Peter, 'which of course is exactly what he is — one of us, only more so, if I can put it in a rather Irish way. And speaking of the Irish, I read recently



that, during the fierce fighting in Belfast some time ago, it was a common view that the best long-range snipers in the city were teenage girls.’ (Pages 128–129)

Peter tells us elsewhere that his father taught him the habit of looking, remembering and then trying to make some sense of the apparent randomness of what he saw. And he does, and because he does, so, in our way, can we.

Mortality sounds though this book of Peter’s. As it must. But hear how it sounds, how we are eased towards it. This is Peter’s poem called ‘Rehearsal’:

Upright again, fritters of mint in my fingers,  
I’m given pause in the kitchen patch  
by the cars’ whine, the loud harrumph of lorries  
that round the stand on Two-Tree Hill  
and hustle past the boneyard.  
I’ve taken leave of the Cliffs of Moher, the unsmiling  
campus guard at Georgetown, the fall  
of Richelieu’s scarlet enclosed by the London gloom:  
I’ve watched my last candle gutter  
for dear ones, back in Paris,  
sung, as with Francis, the spill of an Umbrian morning,  
each breath a gift, each glance a blessing:  
have said farewell to Bhutan of the high passes  
and the ragged hillmen, to the Basque dancers  
praising their limping fellow,  
to the Square of Blood in Beijing, to the virid islands  
that speckle the Pacific acres,  
to moseying sheep in Judaeen scrub, to leopard  
and bison, a zoo for quartering, and  
to the airy stone of Chartres.  
But here’s the mint still on my hands. A wreath,  
so Pliny thought, was ‘good for students,  
to exhilarate their minds.’ Late in the course,  
I’ll settle for a sprig or two —  
the savour gracious, the leaves brimmingly green —  
as if never to say die.

And finally, and fittingly on this feast of the Ascension, another green poem, which rises, and rises, in lyric ecstasy. This is ‘From the Chinese’ (for Michael Ryan).

‘If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing

bird will come.' A prayer of sorts,  
charm for the good one, murmured into the wind,  
day by tossing day.

There they go, a skyful at random, trying  
the blue acres, miming the risen:  
shearwater, brolga, avocet, tern, rosella —  
bugling, whistling, calling.

'A bird does not sing because it has an answer,  
It sings because it has a song,'  
Happy at sixty. Good for the company, bless  
The blackbird on your bough.

And bless you Peter, blackbird, humble sparrow if you will, but eagle in your exhilaration  
of our minds. Thank you.

## Stoning death by male ego

### FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Stoning of Soraya M (MA)*. Director: Cyrus Nowrasteh. Starring: Shohreh Aghdashloo, Mozhan Marnā<sup>2</sup>, James Caviezel, Navid Negahban, Ali Pourtash, David Diaan, Parviz Sayyad. Running time: 114 minutes**



There is a story in the Christian Gospel in which Jesus intercedes on behalf of a woman who has been sentenced to death by stoning. The woman's crime is that she has been 'caught in adultery', although we are given no details as to the circumstances.

The story makes the universal point that no person is sinless — 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,' Jesus famously declares, and there are no takers. But a more pertinent interpretation is that he is correcting a specific injustice that has resulted from acute social gender inequality. The woman's guilt, or lack thereof, is secondary: as a woman she is powerless, and Jesus' words and actions empower her.

In *The Stoning of Soraya M* we see another such inequality at play, in an (almost) modern-day provincial Iranian setting. But unlike the Gospel story, there is no saviour present who is willing or able to intercede and prevent the injustice from taking place.

It is rare that a film causes seasoned critics to weep, but *The Stoning of Soraya M* is such a film. It is essentially one long setup for its violent climax, which would make for tedious viewing, if not for the omen of the film's title, and the abiding sense of horror at the mundane circumstances from which the threatened climax eventually arises. We hope and pray that the inevitable will be diverted. But *The Stoning of Soraya M* is relentless and, when the end does come, we find ourselves feeling as helpless as the victim buried chest-deep in the sand. Her experience becomes ours. No wonder we weep.

Precocious widow Zahra (Aghdashloo) is both storyteller and the film's moral centre. She relates her bleak tale to a travelling journalist (Caviezel, the actor who played Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*, here reduced from saviour to witness). Her niece Soraya, Zahra tells him, has fallen victim to the machinations of her brutish husband.

We see the story in flashback. The villainous Ali (Negahban) wants to divorce Soraya (Marnā<sup>2</sup>) so he can marry a 14-year-old girl. But Soraya, fearing this abusive man yet certain he will not support her and their daughters if she allows him to leave, refuses the divorce. So Ali plots to frame her for adultery, and colludes with the village religious elder (Pourtash) and mayor Ebrahim (Diaan) to ensure that she is convicted and executed. Bolstered by religious rhetoric and fuelled by the insidiousness of village gossip culture, the task proves all too easy.

Zahra is spittingly righteous. The powerful men of the village call her a troublemaker, but really she is the truth-speaker, the prophet, scornful and disruptive of their patriarchal order. She knows her God is great, and that the men's appeals to his word are fallacious. When she folds her headscarf across her pursed lips it is a gesture of contempt, of defiance, not of submission. Ultimately her defiance is in vain.

The men's actions are shown to be against God's order. At a decisive moment in the lead-up to the stoning, Ebrahim asks God for a sign to indicate that he should put a stop to

the proceedings. At that precise moment, a travelling carnival, complete with dancing monkeys, rolls into town. God could not have offered a more apt assessment of the nature of the occasion. But Ebrahim chooses not to see the sign; instead he allows the sadistic circus that is the trial and execution of Soraya M to proceed.

Once the stoning begins, it does not let up. Be warned: this is gruelling stuff; the moment threatened by the film's title executed in agonising, visceral detail. The only respite occurs when Hasham (Sayyad), Soraya's pliable employer who was bullied into testifying against her, at least finds strength to not participate in her murder. It's futile mercy: the others redouble their bloodthirsty attack. By the end we pray for death to finally relieve Soraya.

*The Stoning of Soraya M* is adapted from French-Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam's 1994 non-fiction book of the same name. It is a condemnation of a barbaric practice that occurs in some places under the auspices of Shariah law. In the case of Soraya M the custom is shown to be less about violence inherent to the teachings of Islam and Shariah than about the egos and self-interest of brutal and bullying men.

## Funerals for criminals and abusers

### APPLICATION

*Andrew Hamilton*

In the last month Catholic funerals have led to controversy. Many Catholics complained that Carl Williams was allowed burial in a Catholic Church. And some victims of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church expressed anger that bishops and priests in robes glorified the funeral of a priest who had been charged with sexual abuse of minors, but who died before the case could be brought.



These negative responses to different funerals may reflect a changing understanding of funerals in the Catholic Church, aligning it more closely to the approach of the broader society.

A generation or so ago, Catholic funerals emphasised very strongly the relationship of the dead with God and their salvation in heaven. People prayed that God would forgive their sins and receive them into everlasting life. The funeral liturgy consoled the family by encouraging their hope that the dead person was with God, and by allowing them to experience the solidarity of friends united with them in prayer. The virtues and the human foibles of the dead person may have been mentioned, but not emphasised.

Central to Catholic funerals, too, was the reality of God's judgment. It was not taken for granted that all the dead went to heaven. Furthermore, those who were repentant, but whose lives were sinful, faced a painful spell in purgatory.

Catholic funerals continue to include prayer for the dead, whose relationship to God and life after death remain central. But the mourners pray less that they be forgiven their sins and enjoy eternal life. That is taken for granted. The celebrations focus more on remembering their life, thanking God for the quality of their lives, and consoling the living by recalling the dead person's life. These are important and good things to do.

These changes make Catholic funerals more like non-religious funerals. They also focus on the life of the dead, so reassuring those who grieve them. The central part of funerals is usually the eulogy by friends and family. Eulogies have become more numerous, representing the dead person from as many angles as possible. It is not uncommon for video and audio tapes of the dead person to be played, reminding and committing to memory.

The focus on the life of the dead person makes funerals of notorious malefactors problematic. When all involved in the funeral see themselves as sinners, brought together to pray for God's mercy upon another sinner, it will seem natural that public sinners should have a church funeral which is widely attended.

But if funerals are seen only to commemorate the life of the dead, to praise their virtues, and to commend them to shared memory, those who attend may be seen to endorse the quality of the dead person's life. They come, not just to bury the dead, but to praise them. If the funeral evokes the virtues of a scoundrel whose life was publicly scandalous, those who take part may seem to be complicit in a lie. Church officers who celebrate the funeral or make the church building available may also be seen as reprehensible.

From this perspective it can be even more problematic for bishops and priests to robe for the funeral of a priest charged with sexual abuse. They may already be seen as complicit in

praising those whose lives have been scandalous. But in addition, bishops and priests can then be seen as officers of the company whose lax governance allowed the abusive priest to thrive. So if they attend in the regalia of their office, they may be seen to make a public statement that the company looks after its own, and that solidarity with officers of the company matters more than the suffering of those who have been abused within it.

These reflections on Catholic funerals suggest the need for conversation about funerals that addresses two different audiences, a Catholic and a public one. Within the Catholic Church it is important to communicate effectively the Christian understanding of death. Death is not the end, but a point of transition in the continuing relationship with God. Furthermore we die as sinners whom God loves and accepts as companions through Christ's death. These convictions form the canopy under which our affectionate remembering of the dead person's life and our consoling of one another are properly enacted.

From this viewpoint it is inconceivable to deny anyone burial within a Christian church on the grounds of unworthiness. Those who seek to do so confer an undeserved worthiness on themselves, and underestimate God's love for each human being irrespective of their actions.

Christian funerals, however, are also public events that are read in a public language. Christians need to reflect on how funerals for people who are known to have abused their office in the Church will be seen by those without faith, as well as by believers.

Within the Christian community splendid ceremonies with processions of robed bishops and priests may heighten the sense that the dead person is precious in God's eyes and may evoke God's mercy. But those whom a dead priest has abused and the wider society are as likely to see in the celebration an enactment of power and defiance.

In such funerals it may be better to draw on the resources of Catholic liturgy that allow people to gather to seek forgiveness, express grief and pray for conversion. Plain dress, an unornamented church, honest prayers and periods of silence can express respect for the dead person and our shared need of God's mercy. A one-style liturgy does not fit all circumstances.

## A meditation on milestones

NON-FICTION

Emily Millane



I've got death on my mind today. And Edith Piaf playing on an old scratchy record. It seems laughable to have just turned 27 and to be thinking about death. But there you have it.

Milestones and measurements. Like the millimeter markers on a ruler they tell us where we got to. The points we made it past, and the ones from which we stopped short. Do we focus on milestones because they console? What, if anything, does console in those last shadows of life?

I just finished reading Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*. The touching, raw moments of one woman's procession to death gave rise to a well of memories. Some of this remembering was personal, other memories were appropriated to feel like my own. After all, don't we try to steal what morsels of wisdom we can, from wherever and from whomever, to make up a picture of what we don't understand?

In our moments of reflective candour, we can probably admit to ourselves that the urge to 'do something' — or, to have done something — is the source of some anxiety. Or, at least, a bit of needless comparison. The subjectivity of what it means to 'do something' is obvious, and I don't intend to try to argue for any one of the 'somethings' here.

Admitting it to someone else? Another matter entirely. Even if they're long-held friends, who have shared the same milestones as the years blow in and out.

There are the milestones that seem to figure more highly when the time comes to measure up. The degree, the job, the house, the marriage. But the millimetre milestones are no less real. The first time you're really let down, or fully comprehend the mortality of the people you hold close. These milestones don't usually rate a mention in the grand story of a life. But they are the chinks in a life well-lived.

We keep a loose adherence to milestones because we need to keep track. Just as we need to keep time. Otherwise we can't decipher one day from the next. 'Progress' might be a construct but it's a real one. Did the French *philosophes* ever conceive that their noble little idea would be so fundamental in 2010? They probably did, such was their faith in their absolute correctness. Along with liberty, fraternity and equality, revolutionary thinkers like Rousseau were convinced that humanity necessarily improves with the passage of time. Imbued with reason and rationality, each generation inches towards a higher existence.

Milestones are the arbitrary roadhouses on our respective roads. One person's marriage is another person's train wreck. One woman's family is another woman's career, because we still haven't displaced the reality that, in the ways that matter, women still have to choose. Does it matter if we don't reach our milestones? Which, if any, will give us solace when the end comes?

Sociologist Francesca Collins [considers](#) that in modern Western societies milestones, and journeying more generally, are a secularised version of 'God's will'. She argues that journeys allow us to 'make sense of the utterly unfathomable without resorting to God or some sort of compensation in the afterlife'. Perhaps milestones are a substitute for a higher redemptive force. Perhaps they're not. Either way, they are omnipresent as we muddle through the days.

I suspect, however, that the beauty of the quiet moments between people is greater than most milestones. It is worth more than the anxiety over whether we have lived a full life. Whether it's a softly spoken confession to a friend, or the instant you meet someone's eyes in mutual acknowledgment of a moment just passed, or the lightest touch of a person's hand on yours when you each know the precise meaning of that connection. These are the things that stay with you.

Maybe, more than marriage or property or children or career, these are the true milestones.



## Arresting Mexico's borderland femicide

### HUMAN RIGHTS

*Ellena Savage*

Ciudad Juarez, on the Northern border of Mexico, is one of the world's fastest growing cities. It also has the highest murder rate in the world, which can be attributed to the ongoing 'narco-war' — the clash between conflicting drug cartels — that dominates the city's culture and economy.

But alongside the narco-violence, another distressing trend has emerged: an increase in gender-motivated violence against young working women. Almost all these cases have been met with impunity for the perpetrators.



Since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed in 1994, Juarez has attracted over 3000 foreign-owned assembly plants which in turn have drawn an onslaught of migrants seeking work. But there has been no improvement of infrastructure to coincide with this population growth.

The NAFTA, like many unequal trade relationships, relies on the inability of the Mexican government to protect its people due to deep and systemic corruption; government corruption and a culture of poverty are bedfellows. By virtue of ineffectual government, the Mexican working class are made available for unfairly cheap labour.

While the official body count of women since the introduction of the NAFTA is 400, local activist groups estimate more than 5000 have been killed, most of them factory workers aged 12—22. If their bodies are found, they typically show signs of torture and sexual brutality. International award-winning journalist Lydia Cacho blames the lack of safe transportation for factory workers; working women are made desperate by their need for transport.

Because of the impunity, Mexican media outlets and academics are beginning to lose interest in the femicides. Although Walkley-winning journalist [Colm McNaughton](#)'s radio-doco [La Frontera](#) mentions the femicides, it downplays their significance. In his effort to cover every angle of internal and external abuse that concerns the borderlands, McNaughton tactfully avoids analysing the sexual homicides.

In his blog, McNaughton accuses the media of sensationalising this issue without attempting to explain it. 'With a few notable exceptions, media reports from the region focus on a single issue: such as the macabre killing of women in Juarez or the increased military presence on the border.' This is probably true. But the 'single issue' of femicide is emblematic of the extent to which the vulnerability of human life has been devalued in Juarez.

Where the most vulnerable members of society are not protected by their state, community or culture, or in fact are targeted for their vulnerability, these abuses show us how vast the borderland crisis is. By focusing on these women, we are able to understand the extent to which the value of human life and kinship-ties have eroded in 16 years under the conflicting pressures of free trade, narco-trade, parliamentary and military corruption and deep misogyny.

We should strive to understand the contexts that permit such a vast disregard for life. But to request explanation verges on the inhumane.

McNaughton mentions a 'change in gender relations' in Juarez due to the number of women working in the *maquiladoras* as one destabilising factor. This is indisputable. In line with the most unabashed patriarchal viewpoint, a woman working outside of the home is comparable to a prostitute — a stance that, from a very traditional moralist perspective, permits her sacrifice.

But we must be careful to not identify women in these circumstances as essential victims. Their victimhood lies in their abuse, and not as a quality they possess for being female and working-class. If we assume the disempowerment of the victims, we rationalise their deaths. Feminist Adriana Martinez writes that in rationalising the Juarez femicides, we succumb to the idea that 'The women are being sacrificed to redeem their men for their inability to provide for their families, their social emasculation, if you will, at the hands of the American corporations'; that femicide can be excused as 'morality based' and globalisation-related.

If we are to analyse the Juarez and borderland femicides with any compassion, we need to focus on the human experiences that make up the narrative of the borderlands, and argue for corporate responsibility within the geo-location of their labour profits, which trickles down to us as consumers. The free movement of trade without a free movement of profit, people and privilege isn't beneficial to any social organisation.

## Enemy volcanoes

POETRY

*Ouyang Yu*

### Translation, half or complete

English, by comparison, seems reticent  
Or in our logic, only half-cooked  
For when we describe a damning situation  
As hot fire and deep water they are content enough to admit  
To deep waters; similarly, a sea change is only partly what a sea  
And mulberry field change means if it really means  
Anything. Hence a sea of people is what  
A mountain and sea of people could be reduced to  
Although someone in the 1940s did the reductionist trick  
Of turning a remark by someone born in 551 BC into this  
Like-English brevity: *Not know death, how know life?*  
Most of the times when shadows are caught in one  
Wind is lost in another which might have been otherwise arrested  
And if one is equipped with a glib tongue  
The other retaliates with *that* and something else: an oily mouth  
While the historically short one understates  
The tall one exaggerates, matching urgency  
With wind wind fire fire

### Volcanoes

Volcanoes are real  
They are enemies  
They revel in being  
Hated and in resenting

Some volcanoes are dead bigtime  
Be careful: Don't go near them  
The dead volcanoes are not dead, not just dead, not yet  
They spit  
Others are still alive, jealous of each  
Other, happily unhappy, ready to kill  
Always ready to burst, the quiet ones only  
Quiet till the use-by date screwed in their hearts  
The dead volcanoes never die  
The live ones hardly live  
Their beauty is their eruption  
Its with its own death/life  
Putting volcanoes in this anthology  
I have a sense they are erupting again  
Each taking their time  
These poets, this me

### **Oil**

One of the keywords that remains relevant  
to this day, out of their seven  
even though one was fictively described as oleaginous as if it were a bad thing  
and another one ends up leaving the premises having enough of it  
walls throughout the world are still covered daily if the collector is not  
powerful enough to gather it all. this doesn't sound like poetry nor  
is it meant to be but given his meals are well-oiled his words  
often appear so, too. off lebanon, a beached shuttle crab in oil  
is gazing at the world out of its beady eyes whose balls are  
the only thing unspoiled by the world's need for well-oiled

meals. it is said that when hardened paintings done in oils  
are as hard as steel. the writer once gave one a touch and found the truth  
to be true. good oil is untranslatable, not even directly  
nor is add oil. most of the times, though, translators are not necessary  
people get by heroically, with oil. the sea is now one meter taller  
because of the overturned  
desire. still, no-one drinks it like tea, oh, yes, they do  
if it comes to petrol. in solomon islands, they are considering the coconut  
substitute. in ancient china, human oil was used to light the lamp  
still a good oil as many continue to die into the 21st century  
a check online can not disprove the human oil lamp nor prove it  
which raises issue with the germination of a thought making one wonder  
if it is a memory an imagination a hearsay or rhetorical device  
and what has that got to do with the mind or the possessor of the mind  
where such things are produced. if one wants to know whether he needs  
to wash his hair he just has to wipe his palm on it and remove it to see  
if it is dry or shiny, shiny meaning oily. in melbourne magistrates court  
you can still see many instances of such shininess, deliberately produced  
in your childhood, the best thing to shine your hair, not shoes, is your hand  
holding an oil twister. after you eat it you clean the oil off it by staining  
your hair with it so that your hair shines and your hand needs no  
scrubbing

## My debt to a wandering priest

### THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan



On Sunday hundreds of people gathered in Penola, South Australia, to commemorate a park to the memory of a remarkable priest, Julian Tenison Woods, who travelled Australia extensively in his all too brief life (he died before his 57th birthday).

Speakers at the event attested Woods' great contribution to science, to Catholic education in South Australia, and to the development of the Sisters of St Joseph. I went to acknowledge his relationship with the Jesuits, his concern for the plight of Indigenous Australians, and his contribution to the fledgling church in remoter parts of Australia where new migrants were doing it tough trying to live a life of faith and service.

Woods' early attempts at religious life took him to the Passionists and the Marists. Only after migrating to Australia and deciding to seek out his brother in Adelaide did he make sustained contact with the Jesuits — at Sevenhill in the Clare Valley. Fr Tappeiner SJ accompanied him on the path to prompt ordination.

He befriended Fr John Hinteroecker SJ who, like Woods, was a very European naturalist. These two made scientific expeditions together and maintained contact until Hinteroecker died in 1872.

In later years Woods became suspicious of Jesuit spirituality which he thought diluted the original vision of poverty and obedience of the Sisters of St Joseph. But he always held the Jesuits he knew in high regard.

During his ten years at Penola, Woods encountered the plight of Aboriginal Australians in the 19th century colonial Australian bush. During his last year there, the *Border Watch* sent a correspondent to report on the situation in Penola. The correspondent reported on the three major grievances of the local community as expressed by Woods. The main complaint pertained to the mail delivery service. The third — education — Woods would later address once he was transferred to Adelaide as Director of Catholic Education for the colony.

But the second grievance concerned 'the state of the aboriginal population, which I am assured is a disgrace to a Christian community'.

By way of follow up, Woods wrote a lengthy letter to the editor about the treatment of Indigenous Australians. 'Your correspondent has called attention to the sad state of the natives in this district,' he wrote. 'Well I say most conscientiously that a more hideous crying evil does not exist among Christians. These poor savages, often degraded and diseased by the vices of — shall we call it civilisation — are left to die in our midst of starvation.'

Although he claimed that ‘the blacks will be degraded no matter what we do, because they are savages’, he noted that ‘if they were degraded before, we have degraded them more’. He implored the ‘good Christian people of Adelaide’ who ‘wish your names to go down to posterity with something better than execration for your treatment of this fast-fading race’ to ‘do something for them in the name of God’.

His first major biographer, the Jesuit George O’Neill wrote in 1929: ‘[Woods’] experiences with the aborigines were, however, not numerous or remarkable’.

When Woods was no longer welcome in the south, he came and conducted many scientific expeditions and parish missions in Queensland. He passed through Maryborough on about 10 occasions between 1872 and 1881. In Maryborough there happened to reside an Irish widow Annie Brennan, who had arrived there in 1863 on board the David McIvor with her five children, including Martin, then aged 11.

In February 1881, Woods conducted a parish mission in Maryborough over many days. Family folklore has it that he got Martin Brennan, now aged in his late 20s, off the grog and back to church. Martin was my great-grandfather. My grandfather was then born almost four years later.

The effects of the mission must have been long lasting as my grandfather was named Frank Tenison Brennan, as am I. I can only presume that ours is not the only Catholic family in Australia owing an inter-generational debt to the peripatetic priest scientist who always combined scientific inquiry with sacramental service in the most remote parts of the country.

Four generations on, I am delighted to pay tribute to ‘this creative, enigmatic and sometimes controversial figure’, Julian Tenison Woods. Biographer Sr Margaret Press RSJ says of Woods: ‘He was a man of his times, yet beneath the outwardly recognisable exterior of Victorian gentleman-scholar-missionary can be clearly recognised those timeless qualities which belong to the Kingdom.’

May Tenison Woods long speak to us at the interface between science and spirituality, with a passion for justice and a surety ‘that better days are in store’ for all, including Aboriginal Australians and new migrants like Annie Brennan and her kids seeking a fresh start.

## In Thailand, the land of snarls

### POLITICS

*Simon Rougheen*

Standing amid the burnt-out ruins of southeast Asia's second biggest shopping mall right in the heart of Bangkok, it becomes clear that the Land of Smiles has become, for now at least, a land of snarls.

Although some media have been accused of hyping-up the situation — or of being oblivious to the fact that the rest of Thailand has not yet been embroiled in the surreal violence hitting Bangkok in recent weeks — what took place in the capital in recent days was unprecedented and brutal.

With over 50 dead and hundreds wounded, amid an increasingly polarised political situation, the uncompromising quashing of the anti-government redshirt rally by the Thai army may have sown the seeds for more conflict later on.

The redshirts can point to the government and army as brutal killers, firing on unarmed protestors and acting to support an unelected government, which they previously helped manoeuvre into power. The Government and yellowshirts (anti-redshirt protestors who took to the streets in 2006 and 2008 while redshirt parties were in government) can point out that the redshirts were not peaceful protestors, that they sheltered or tolerated a violent black-clad armed faction, and that they laid waste to the shopping heartland of the city when they failed to get their way.

'The army wanted to kill us all,' claimed one woman as she boarded a bus leaving Bangkok on Thursday. Trying to access the burnt-out remains of the rally site, I was told by soldiers that 'terrorists' lurked inside, and wanted to kill foreign journalists.

There is right and wrong on both sides, and both stand guilty of half-truths and demonisation of the other. The recent violence and increasingly-shrill stereotyping will only sharpen a cultural and class-based mutual loathing.

The redshirts have adopted the slur *phrai* — which more or less means 'hick' — as a defiant and ironic appellation, much as inner-city blacks in the US call themselves 'nigger'. *Phrai* more or less rhymes with *khwai*, Thai for buffalo, another of the insults screamed at redshirts by yellowshirt rivals in recent weeks. But the redshirts have plenty of wealthy nouveau-riche types among their number. Former Thai prime minister and de facto redshirt leader Thaksin Shinawatra is a former telecoms billionaire for example.

On 17 March, redshirts pushed through police cordons to carry out their 'blood spilling' protest, dousing Thai PM Abhisit Vejjajiva's front gate with blood donated by thousands of the demonstrators. Redshirt leaders played up the class card that morning, pointing out the PM's



allegedly-extravagant house in an up-market area of Bangkok. The residence, as it happens, is nothing special, no more so than any decent-sized middle-class house in a Sydney suburb.

Yellowshirts had good reason to regard Thaksin as corrupt, and everyone had reason to be concerned at his centralisation of political power, the brutal 'war on drugs' that saw over 2000 extrajudicial killings, and his paranoid restrictions on media.

Their answer was to take to the streets for months in 2006 — nothing illegitimate about that. But it gave the army an excuse to oust Thaksin in a coup, citing 'instability'. But then a redshirt, Thaksin-linked party won the next elections, leading to more yellowshirt protests, as they could not accept the result. Yellowshirts occupied Government buildings and the country's airports in 2008. But rather than face a crackdown, their action contributed to a managed removal of the redshirt party then in government, and its replacement by the current administration, which is supported by the yellowshirts. The double-standard continues to enrage redshirts.

The yellowshirts, encompassing many old-school Bangkok bureaucratic and business elites, see themselves as urbane, educated sophisticates, On 18 April, the night five grenades exploded in Bangkok's main banking district, yellowshirt protestors carried placards sniggering at the redshirts as 'uneducate (sic) people'. The delicious irony of such hubris would be funny, if it was not so serious.

This superiority complex means they feel entitled to subvert the democratic process, not least as they and affiliated parties cannot compete with the redshirts in a one-man, one-vote system. Little wonder then that a key and long-standing yellowshirt demand is to have a proportion of the legislature nominated, rather than elected.

As redshirts left Bangkok on Thursday, boarding buses laid on by the Government, many said that they will be back. How and when remains to be seen. Their stronghold is in the rural north and east of the country, culturally closer to Laos and Cambodia than Bangkok, and these demographics mean the redshirt-aligned parties will be favourites to win any free and fair election in Thailand.

While the recent fighting and political rallies were confined to central Bangkok, the final days before the 19 May crackdown saw flashpoints spring up across wider swathes of the city, blocking off many main highways, diverting traffic and prompting a slow-down of business elsewhere. Late in the week, an ethereal and unreal quiet fell on a usually bustling, non-stop city, which is under a 9pm—5am curfew, as is much of the rest of the country. Whether the rest of the country remains quiet for long, seems unlikely.

## Confronting Aker's and Australia's gay fear

### EDITORIAL

*Michael Mullins*

On Thursday morning, it appeared that widespread homophobia in the Australian community had become a thing of the past. AFL legend Jason Akermanis failed to gain traction when he [argued](#) that it would be in everybody's best interests for gay footballers to remain in the closet.



He was testing the water to see if it is still possible to uphold the old cultural taboo that shamed gay men and women. It wasn't, and Akermanis was ridiculed. It seemed decades of work to affirm the human rights of gay men and women had borne fruit.

But on Thursday evening, homophobia [resurfaced](#) as an ugly force to be reckoned with. NSW Transport Minister David Campbell resigned from the ministry when he learned that Channel 7 was about to show pictures of his visit to a gay and bisexual men's 'sex club' earlier in the week. It needs to be asked why this was considered a more salient reason for him to resign than his oversight of the bungled CBD Metro project, which cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars and delayed a solution to Sydney's transport bottleneck.

If homophobia no longer existed, the media would have treated the Campbell story as just another incidence of marital infidelity. This should be considered to be of doubtful news value, given the regrettable reality that at least half of Australian marriages are affected by infidelity at some stage.

On Friday morning, it was claimed by Channel 7 news director Peter Meakin on ABC Local Radio that Campbell had presented himself as a 'family man', and that his hypocrisy was consequently 'in the public interest'. But pressure for politicians to depict themselves as 'family-friendly' is itself a product of homophobia.

The story's distorted insight into what goes on inside gay men's sex clubs fed a prurient interest, not the public interest. It is worth reflecting that, like legalised brothels, such clubs may provide some public benefit. The taboo against homosexuality ensures much sexual activity between men is pushed underground, into dangerous and illegal settings like public toilets and parks. The clubs offer a legal and comparatively safe place for gay and bisexual men to meet in a context in which there is promotion of safe sex and even personal responsibility. The [code of practice](#) at the venue Campbell visited stipulates that patrons and staff must be 'treated with respect'.

At a media conference on Friday morning, NSW Premier Kristina Keneally referred to the secret Campbell has lived with for more than two decades, declaring that it is 'appalling that

we live in a society in which he has to keep that secret'. Gay and bisexual men and women will always be part of a social minority. Their ways may not be understood by the heterosexual majority, but that is no reason to pressure them to live underground, or a life that amounts to a lie.