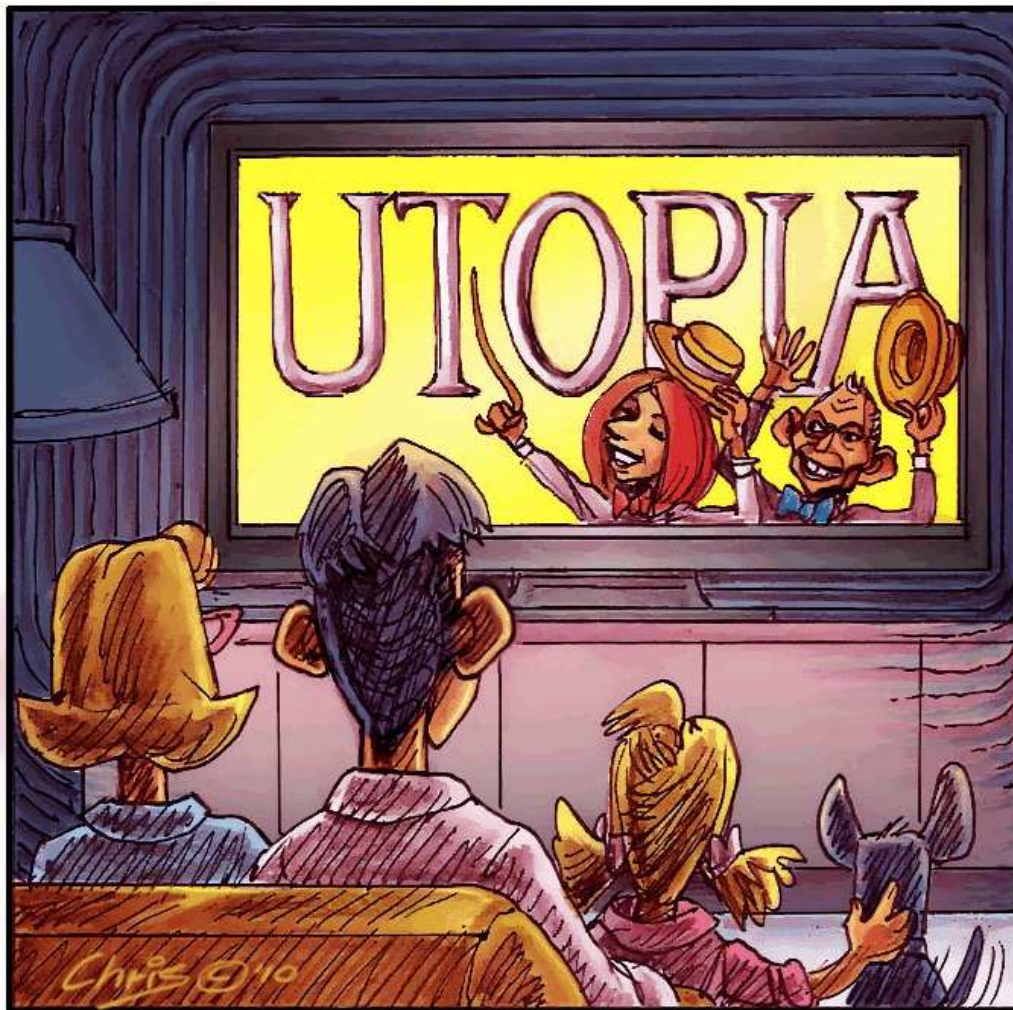


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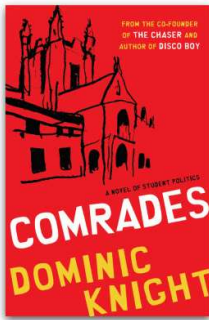
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Inside the student politics bughouse

BOOKS

Ellena Savage



Dominic Knight: *Comrades*. Random House, 2010. ISBN: 9781863256407. [Online](#)

University student unions are cesspools of toxicity, sociopathy and tedium. I should know — I'm a student politician.

Well, technically. Editing the student paper at my university counts me in attendance at Students' Council Meetings and requires my (admittedly amateurish) 'political negotiations' for preference deals around student election time.

Dominic Knight should also know, as a former editor of Sydney Uni's auspicious publication, *Honi Soit*. His second novel, *Comrades*, adds to the incredibly (and understandably) small canon of Student Union-themed literature. And although there is only so much student politics one can handle in a lifetime, reading it I couldn't help but think, *He beat me to it*.

And did it well. Unfortunately for former and future student paper editors who had plans to write this novel, I can't imagine the market for the genre could handle much saturation.

As you might expect from Knight, a *Chaser* original, satire takes centre stage in the novel. The characters, place and simple narrative are vessels by which Knight's droll one-liners are carried. Don't let this deter you — campus politics is a gold-mine (or rather, a land-mine) of hackneyed characters, and Knight's comedy works here.

Comrades traces the intensive period of student elections at a fictional 1999 Sydney Uni SRC from pre-selection to post-election, chronicling every drama in between: back-door wheelings and dealings, the trials of indeterminate electoral regulations, shit-sheets, and a guy whose election platform is playing 'Oh Yeah' by Yello.

For anyone involved in the process, student elections are utterly consuming. It's almost understandable that students do the insane things they do (think defamation, lying, backstabbing, harassment, intimidation and, occasionally, violence), thinking it will better their chances of winning an office-bearer or councillor position; the whole thing exists in a space-time vortex from which it apparently becomes impossible to remember the happenings and social graces of the real world. In his acknowledgements, Dom thanks 'the mysterious figure who dumped thousands of copies of our *Honi* edition that profiled the Union Board candidates in the Victoria Park pond, an act which tops even imitation as a sincere form of flattery'.

Comrades' characters are stereotypical hacks of varying denominations (if they didn't resemble real student politicians, this might have been a problem). Our hero is Eddie Gough Flanagan, the idealist Labor Left incumbent President of the SRC (who is 'hardly a member of the proletariat on whose behalf he liked to speak').

His faction's presidential candidate for the election at hand is Sunita, a machinist law student whose campaign strategy is 'Whatever it takes'. Sunita's equally ethnic, equally female ('This election is going to be run on identity') opponent is the lovely Pema, a half-Tibetan 'trottie hottie' who is far too human to survive the bughouse of student politics.

Minor but vital characters in the landscape of campus politics are Eddy's careerist Labor girlfriend Rosie, who recently moved on to Canberra to play with the big boys, as well as Sunita's boyfriend Chris, a National Union of Students hack who challenges Sunita's 'Whatever it takes' philosophy. A not-quite-a-Young-Liberal is also involved so as to pad his CV and better his chances of winning a Rhodes Scholarship.

One fabulous minor character is Fabian who appears on behalf of Resistance. He says 'Yay' and 'like' a lot. Knight describes the idea of a Resistance president thus:

Protesting against whoever was in power was in their DNA ... If Fabian was put in charge of the SRC, perhaps he'd develop a political auto-immune disease, and start organising rallies to protest against himself?

Much of the story takes place at the Mothership — the student sharehouse from which the campaign is run and where apparently half the Labor-Left caucus (who, 'being middle-class socialists, are a bit self-conscious about drinking chardonnay') reside. The place is a hotbed of hackery, but a fairly apt depiction of how students ought to live — well, those who don't need to pass their subjects to have a good time.

Knight's characterisations are at times unkind, but not undeserved. Many young people attracted to student politics are, like adult politicians, attracted to power. And when they manipulate others in an effort to assume power they, like everyone, open themselves to criticism. For the most part, students inhabit the economic and social peripheries, and in a time when most students need to balance work and study with their other responsibilities, and alongside the constraints of VSU, student representation is as relevant as ever.

Many of *Comrades'* characters are endowed with an unlimited sense of entitlement, but Knight allows each one to explain herself in her own words. And while sometimes he teeters on the verge, I don't think he quite falls into the kind of amoral cynicism that often surrounds discussion of 'young people who think they can make a difference'.

Knight's success is the balance he strikes between sardonic parody and a genuine reverence for those whose political conviction outweighs their pessimism. *Comrades* is a fine satire, and while it might only appeal to an exclusive band of campus politics survivors, it meets all

expectations.

Hope for a stitched-up government

POLITICS

Andrew Hamilton

The interregnum has ended with a government stitched together. Many of us will charitably wish it well, but sensibly refrain from putting our own money on its survival. But we should be grateful for the fortnight we have been given for reflection on Australian political life in the light of the election result.



The result showed conclusively only that neither major party attracted enough support to govern in its own right. But the increased support for minor parties and independents and the increased informal vote suggested that many people were alienated by the campaigns of both parties.

Among the publicly articulate, at least, there was also evidence of alienation from the way in which politics is now conducted in Australia. It seemed to be narrowly focused on winning elections and then forcing through populist policies. Many saw in the parliamentary charter of conduct, to which both major parties committed, a symbol of the need to do things differently.

But beyond good parliamentary processes, many people argued that political parties must recover a view of what matters in Australia, articulate this view of Australian society, and develop strategies that will help build such a society.

This view of political life sees it as about more than winning power, managing and self-promoting in a way that ensures being returned to power. It assumes, too, that government is about more than forcing through policies that increase Australian wealth without regard to how society benefits. If political parties focus on what matters, they will recognise that the good society has many aspects, that other views of what matters need to be taken into account, and that good government involves far more than economic management.

This understanding of politics has large consequences. It refuses to accept that politics are defined adequately by political processes. The larger goals shape processes. In particular, there needs to be consistency between the vision that underlies the goals, and the processes by which these goals are achieved.

In organisations that defend the dignity of marginalised people, for example, the working relationships between those working in the organisation and the relations between it and other organisations must also be characterised by the same respect that they demand be given to the marginalised. Processes characterised by bullying, deceit and passive aggression are intolerable because they corrupt the goals for which the organisation exists.

Coherence between goals that are inspired by a vision of Australian possibilities and the

political processes through which they are implemented is also needed in national politics. The financial crisis showed the risk of a childish view of conceiving the good of society as constituted by increased wealth, and of conceiving government as making firm and virile decisions to free markets and so manage this kind of prosperity. Firm decision making led to the destruction of prosperity and the weakening of society. The processes of avoiding consultation, monsterring opposition and bullying critics are consistent with shallow goals, but not with a focus on a richer society.

What should matter to our political parties is a vision of a good Australia and the development of strategies to deal with the challenges that we face in realising this vision, like responding to climate change, to our mineral wealth and to changing patterns of communication. These goals can be met only through processes that encourage conversation and cooperation between people who differ in their views of human society.

The current changes to parliamentary process do symbolise a better way. They make communication possible and enable more than token participation in the formulation and scrutiny of policy. They may be driven by the needs of the new Gillard Government, but they make it hard to regard the business of government as simply the imposition of executive will, and underline the need for persuasion.

Conversation and committees are helpful in refining vision and its implementation. They can also question whether the policies of the ruling party correspond to the human reality of Australian society. But they are no substitute for having a strong view of what matters. Nor can they supply a view of what matters.

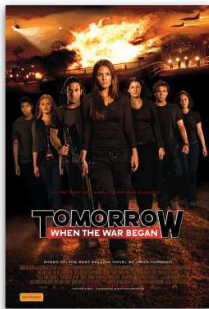
It is a large hope that either of our two major parties, which were so happy to do whatever it took to win, no matter what the cost to human lives and ethical values, will recover a deeper sense of what matters. But the weakness of the Government means that these larger questions about politics cannot be suppressed.

Not just war as teens fight back

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Tomorrow, When the War Began* (M). Director: Stuart Beattie. Starring: Caitlin Stasey, Rachel Hurd-Wood, Lincoln Lewis, Deniz Akdeniz, Phoebe Tonkin, Chris Pang, Ashleigh Cummings. 104 minutes**



When I was in high school, it seemed as though everyone was reading John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* series. Its claim to fame, like the *Harry Potter* books some years later, was that it was being read even by people who hated to read. I *was* a reader, yet I came to Marsden's books late, and enjoyed the first three or four books in the series. There were seven all up, so I obviously didn't enjoy them that much.

The premise concerns a group of teenage friends from a rural Australian town — including local golden girl Corrie and her boyfriend Kevin, ditzy, girly Fiona, obnoxious but loyal Homer, straight-laced religious girl Robyn, enigmatic Chinese boy Lee, and sharp and strong-willed farm girl Ellie — who find themselves running and, eventually, fighting for their lives when Australia is subjected to military invasion.

Their town, it seems, is a strategic hotspot for this invading army of indeterminate origin (they are Asian in appearance, and a radio broadcast refers to them simply as 'coalition forces'), who have landed at a harbour not far beyond the fringes of the town.

When the invasion takes place, the teenagers happen to be on a camping trip, in a beautiful isolated valley — named, with unsubtle irony, 'Hell' — and thus elude capture. Their parents are not so lucky. Book and film detail the youths' transformation from scared kids to guerilla soldiers fighting to protect their home.

The film is faithful at least to my decade old memory of the first book in the series. It comes complete with an in-built disclaimer for diehards who will inevitably be disappointed: an in-joke where two characters regurgitate the truism (not necessarily true) that films are always inferior to the books on which they are based.

Tomorrow, When the War Began is a competent action film and a bona fide action franchise in the making, although it may leave discerning viewers questioning the plausibility of some of its action sequences. More than being simply targeted at teens, the film seems tailored for year ten English curriculums: this is an issues-heavy film.

Teenagers commit extreme acts of violence, but the film is more *All Quiet on the Western Front* than *Kick-Ass*. Each character is tested by, and responds to their situation in different ways. The characters voice implicit moral concerns about the right to kill in self-defense, and

rationalise why it might be right to take up arms.

Chief among the grapplers is Ellie (Stasey) who, in a desperate act of survival, is the first to spill 'enemy' blood, and is profoundly affected by this: the soldiers she kills is a young woman not much older than her.

Later, when Ellie is confronted by a mural depicting an encounter between Captain Cook and a group of Aboriginal Australians, she is momentarily arrested. The question of what is going through her mind at that moment is one that's tailor-made for high school exam papers.

The character of Ellie is iconic to fans of the books; Athena come to rural Australia. It is initially difficult to accept the nymph-like Stasey as a tough and resourceful farm girl. She is famous most recently for a half-decade stint on a popular TV soapie, which has led some people to describe the film as '*Neighbours-with-explosions*'.

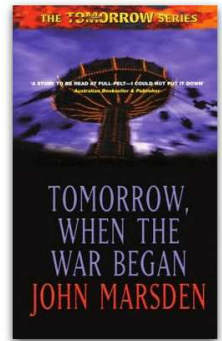
To her credit, Stasey handles several difficult, key dramatic scenes very ably, and in the end she effectively evokes Ellie's arc from innocent youth to war-hardened spiritual leader.

Australian invasion anxiety in adolescent fantasy

HUMAN RIGHTS

Tony Kevin

John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* and its six sequel novels were published in the years 1993–99. They belong to the corpus of young adult reader adventure fiction, which has been part of the European writing tradition since the great novels of Alexandre Dumas, Sir Walter Scott and R. L. Stevenson. Young protagonists fight ruthless enemies against great odds, surviving by dint of their courage, resourcefulness and loyalty to family and comrades-in-arms.



John Buchan's five Richard Hannay novels, which I read as a teenager, refined and modernised the genre. Buchan is relevant here, because his patriotic adventure fantasies had a serious purpose: to entertain and inspire the British Empire soldiers in the trenches of the Great War. In exciting stories like *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1915) and *Greenmantle* (1916) Buchan's protagonist offers a reassuring vision of a noble British hero fighting bravely against dark forces.

Marsden's work is disturbing because of the way it blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Most adventure fiction takes place safely in remote past eras, as in Rosemary Sutcliff's brilliant *Eagle of the Ninth* series of adventure novels, which are set in Britain in the twilight years of the Roman Empire. But Marsden's heroes are contemporary Australian teenagers, forced to confront something which would be truly terrifying. Like *The War of the Worlds*, the *Tomorrow* series is scary because it begins in normal life.

Marsden himself has said he wanted to shake young Australians out of their complacency. The deliberately jumbled tenses of Marsden's brilliant first title convey an unsettling sense of dread. The novels are starkly savage, but believable: this is really how it could be, Marsden is telling us.

I wonder what young Australian readers take away from these novels — and now, the [film](#)? They are, clearly, something more than escapist fantasies. They convey value messages, calling on young Australians to cherish our country, not to take it for granted, and to be prepared if necessary to fight — to kill and die — for it.

My problem here has to do with context. What sort of Australian readership was Marsden aiming for? No one suggests (then or now) that Australia should put out a welcome mat to any armed invasion. But the underlying xenophobic flavour of the books — against an unspecified regional invader, and therefore potentially against any regional country or group of countries — is somehow morally disturbing in our generous and tolerant multicultural nation.

For 200 years, 'White Australia' and 'the yellow peril' had been defining ideas in the emergence of Australian nationalism. By the early 1990s, Australians were adjusting to a multicultural society at home and a new more benign vision of our engagement with our region. But many were still uneasy about Indonesia, and also unsettled by Indochinese boat people arrivals which peaked in the 1980s.

Malcolm Fraser stopped the Indochinese boats humanely, by supporting orderly flows of migrants from refugee holding camps in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. China still seemed a threatening neighbour: the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre was a fresh memory.

The generation of boys who grew up reading the *Tomorrow* series in the 1990s were by 2001 young men manning Australian Defence Force border security vessels, deployed to deter and repel Middle Eastern boat people. I remember the widespread fear and loathing occasioned by this 'unarmed invasion' of boat people.

Adolescence is a time when values are being tested and consolidated. Books matter. I wonder how much the *Tomorrow* series might have had to do with the entrenchment of such attitudes in impressionable youths? Or did the books simply tap into a vein of xenophobia and invasion anxiety that has been present in mainstream Australia since European settlement?

What do I say to my children about *Tomorrow*? Do I commend this entertaining survival story of Australian teenagers going bush, guns and bombs in hand, to defend our country against armed invaders with whom there can be no dialogue or accommodation? Do I say — implausibly — that this is really just light entertainment, an escapist fantasy of teenage empowerment, not to be taken too seriously? Or do I attempt a serious evaluation, as I would evaluate Buchan's or Sutcliff's adventure fiction?

For me, Marsden's work definitely merits serious evaluation. And I enjoyed the movie, which vividly brings the first book to life in an entirely contemporary setting: my teenage daughters loved it and were inspired by it too.

As I admire Buchan's ideologically flawed but brilliantly conceived Hannay series, and Sutcliff's haunting evocations of Roman Britain's long rearguard struggle against barbarian invaders, I applaud Marsden's inspiring and believable vision of a brave band of young Australians who will not give up their country without a fight.

Let's take this movie (and the books) seriously, and talk with our kids about the complex questions they raise about war and peace: because our kids will certainly see the movie, and be affected by it.

Embracing the new paradigm

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Welcome back Julia, now do it differently

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

The first book I wrote was called *Rooting Democracy*, which is why having a sense of humour is a bit risky if you want to sell a political book, because that's at least one reason my heartfelt outpouring of political and democratic hopes of the 1990s didn't get onto school readings lists. Of course I meant 'growing the society we want', but of course the title was a tease.



Published over ten years ago (and now sadly out of print) the book, co-authored with Jenny Lee, focused (with prescience) on why Australians were even then profoundly disillusioned with politics and politicians, why Parliament wasn't working to keep executives in check and sensitive to the real needs and wishes of the people, and what we could do to repair these grievous lacks.

We even talked up the bounty offered by independent MPs, never dreaming that one day the nation would tell party Tweedledum-and-Tweedledee strategists where to shove their patronising and platitudinous campaigns. And I say this with the righteous anger of one who has been a true believer, a battler and an idealist, betrayed by the pusillanimous promises and prevarications if not betrayals over things that matter, like eradicating the misery of our Indigenous people, acting with compassion and humanity to asylum-seekers, and getting out of wars.

But a sense of humour is entirely desirable when Greens sprout and they, and once-scoffed-at 'rubes', have to be taken seriously by two-party preferring reporters, or pollsters in bureaus where they crat; and they can take their own sweet time to choose how best to make their mark in political life after years of being scorned and ignored; and when Messrs Wilkie, Katter, Oakeshott and Windsor get to change the rules that would have them consigned to irrelevance. 'We will decide who comes to this government, and the circumstances in which they come,' is more or less the message.

Which did not sit well with those who, like Melbourne radio station 774's Jon Faine, are irritated at the messiness of democratic negotiations: he wondered on-air why they don't they have a system in place to sort out their differences, like a party whip. That's precisely how we got to this dire strait. Someone equally scoffed-at said something of the kind before John Howard adopted it as his own inhumane refugee policy. Which both sides adopted, disgracefully, during this campaign.

Three Independents, belittled as 'The Three Amigos' but riding into the sunset nonetheless, have won the trust of their electorates and — through fate, factions and fat-heads on both

sides of the aisle — been able to exercise a little, meaningful power about how Parliament should work in the future.

This may not last, now that the decision has been announced. In 1999 the Victorian ALP's Steve Bracks team formed a minority government having ousted the invincible Kennett, with the support of the regions and three regional independent members, to whom it promised to save the Snowy, reinvigorate Parliament and review the role of the upper house.

As fast as they could, the new government used its incumbency to do without them; the Snowy didn't get saved, and (the government will ignore this at its peril) the very regional activism that ousted the Kennett radicals has been gradually relegated to irrelevance along with the independents who helped them get it.

Then, as now, I felt more than a frisson of respect for blokes who were not afraid to tell an interviewer or a voter, without weaselling, exactly what they believed in, how poisonous their previous experiences of two-party politics had been, what they wanted for their constituents and, in their view, what was for the 'common good'. The fact that they took their time means nothing to me.

I joined the *Crikey* live blog of the Windsor/Oakeshott press conference on Tuesday, and it was as close to a 'town hall' tea party as I've had since the 1970s, the best thing about this bloody awful election thing: the groans, the cries, the 'get on with it' pleas and the snips and snappings and 'please God, let it be over' that unfolded before my happy eyes, before the final realisation that of *course* they would tell us what they valued and how they came to their decision, because this was what parliaments are about — talking these issues through, not making announcements.

And this is what politics is about: listening to other people and trying to understand where they 'come from' and where they're going to, before the almost anti-climactic realisation: that Julia Gillard was not going to be yet another extremely short-term first-woman-Prime Minister, as has so often happened in other nations.

Laugh! It's either that, or studying for the priesthood; another place where independents and women are not particularly welcome.

I'm torn between delight that we still have Australia's first woman prime minister and one who managed to persuade half the electorate and even half of the Indies that she can run a stable government without patronising or pissing into their tents; and incredulity that this feisty, clever, lively and humorous woman could have almost allowed the Sussex Street Pygmalion to turn her into a puppet.

Welcome back, Julia. The Lodge is yours, though your throne has a sword over it. Playing it safe was incredibly risky and nearly cost you not only power but the principles that thrust you to it. Now, do it differently: 52 per cent of the population and the parliament has high hopes of

you.

Political farce aboard the *Starship Ostracise*

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews



It is the weekend of the big storms. Rain hammers on the roof. I'm home alone with only one task: 'Turn the oven off when you hear the timer.' So I have no choice but to watch the AFL footy final on TV. Sydney's charismatic Brett 'Captain' Kirk is dominating against the Blues.

A quick channel surf brings only interviews with 'the three Independents' or a doco about sound effects on *Star Trek*, so it's back to the game, lulled by the crackling fire and the rhythm of the rain ...

I gaze around the flight deck of the *Starship Ostracise* whose mission is to boldly go where no other starship has gone boldly or otherwise. It is stardate four thousand eight hundred and ninety point six three, or numbers to that effect. I never could get the hang of that system.

My name is Quirk, Captain Quirk. My brow is dark and a small muscle on the left side of my face is rippling beneath the tanned skin. I am concentrating on a report, just handed to me by the jaw-droppingly beautiful Lieutenant Yoo Hoo Hoo, which says we are heading into the *Nebulae Policii* — a force field of nebulous policies.

I am also deliberately grinding my teeth. The resultant quiver of jaw sinew is called 'acting'. Occasionally I lighten the end of an episode with a weary half smile.

'Position, Mr Zoo Loo?' I bark.

'We have an inter-galactic chronicity of five thousand cycles, Captain, and our cosmic format is PS/2 and compatible.'

My frown deepens. I do the muscle trick.

'But where exactly are we, Mr Zoo Loo?'

'I have no idea, Captain. We are surrounded by haemorrhoids and they are cutting off our passage.'

'He means asteroids, Captain.' It is the silky, insinuating voice of the Vulcan, Mr Schlock, that intrudes. 'The haemorrhoid,' he continues, 'is swollen venous tissue near the anus — in humans, that is. My relentlessly logical intelligence, uninfluenced by emotion, tells me that it would be very unlikely for us to encounter such phenomena in deep space. The asteroid, on the other hand, is a ...'

'Thank you, Mr Schlock.' I pass a tanned hand across my frowning brow. 'Mr Zoo Loo, tell McScotty and Dem Bones to report immediately.'

‘Why, Captain?’

‘Mr Zoo Loo, I want them on the Flight Deck because, well, they always come to the Flight Deck. We desperately need McScotty’s bluff, Caledonian good humour, and we need Dem Bones to throw a huge tantrum about some obscure matter of cosmic medical principle. Don’t we? Right! Now — Mr Schlock, check the ionic crystal reading and have a nameless extra come in with a purple foaming fluid in conical glasses which is what we drink under stress instead of coffee in this part of the illimitable future.’

‘With respect Captain, I do not think it advisable for ...’

Before he can embark on another tedious and invariably correct analysis, Lieutenant Yoo Hoo Hoo grabs me in a tight embrace. The ‘smart’ chip in her bra vibrates and the thinking fabric tightens up so quickly there’s scarcely time to withdraw a roving hand. Her breath comes in hot gasps from her purple mouth. She’s been overdoing the galactic ‘coffee’.

‘Jim,’ she whispers, even though my name is Quentin. Her hands curl round my neck, down the back of my tight-fitting Star Trek T-Shirt, but just then Dem Bones bursts through the hissing door.

‘Warp speed four, Captain,’ he shouts, ‘or I’ll kill myself. This is a matter of galactic principle.’ He throws himself randomly round the Flight deck.

‘What is the cause of your perturbation?’ says Schlock serenely.

‘Nothing special, Schlock, you cold blooded, heartless humanoid apology. I just spend every episode in a delirium of anger.’ Realising he has stopped shouting, he adds, ‘Aaaaargghhh’ at the top of his voice.

‘Captain!’ screams Mr Zoo Loo, ‘We’re receiving unintelligible messages from the Nebulae.’

Lieutenant Yoo Hoo Hoo leans forward seductively so she can read the tape: ‘Gillard offers Katter trip to Russian Space Station’.

‘You are number one with me, Jim,’ breathes Yoo Hoo Hoo.

‘I am not a number, I am a free man,’ I reply mysteriously, but our voices are drowned out by a persistent beeping sound. The specially engineered Windsor-Oakeshott Thrusters have split and the *Ostracise* is going into reverse. Beep, beep, beep.

I wake. Back on Earth, the Swans have scraped home. With the Saints having already qualified, the universe — at the remote margins of which the *Ostracise* no doubt continues its lonely voyage — can for the moment at least resume its equilibrium.

Well, not quite. A loud beeping noise has pursued me from deep space and there is a strong smell of burning coming from the kitchen. Only one thing to do.

‘Beam me up McScotty, for God’s sake.’

In search of she who waits

POETRY

Various

Life is a franchise

Light is a pheromone

to lost moths on the outside of their life.

Hers was a beacon she shared,
hung her collection

on the clotheslines of friends,

lent herself in pieces.

They ironed them for themselves.

Her shine was a soul exposed,

didn't trade in secrets.

They kept theirs in handbags

to pay the travel forward,

a barter in gossip gave kudos.

False teeth castanet the dark.

Naivety is not a take-home message.

This open life was sheared

and sprinkled on their alphabet,

by wearing her as themselves

they stole her story.

She wraps her spirit and hides its shadow

rubs her footfall from its trace

learns to behave in numbers

sews zips to tongue

and staples a need to share with others

ties knots on fingers to remember this mantra
anonymity is the safest gift I give myself.

—Susan Adams

Poem

'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day I can hear her breathing.'

—Arundhati Roy

So here I am
on the road out beyond my little garden
of oleander and ivy and rusted doors.
Away from the porch with its still rocking chair
and dimpled cushion
where the wise old woman no longer sits
away from the tissue paper blossoms
and dense leafy vines and pungent fruit.
Away from the small vicious creatures with their
peacock feather scales.
Away from you and our life of impossible futures
and from this tomb-like stillness of a garden that
doesn't grow.
And so I tread
with my small backpack and its many pockets
stepping not towards, but away from
a war that can never be won
and a life and a faith and a love that have come
unhinged.
In search of she who waits
somewhere,

on a dusty stump
or parched rock.
Somewhere far from here on the road inside myself
patiently fanning flies
and hoping that I'll have the heart
to travel on and not look back.

—*Cara Munro*

The lover of my soul

We have an assignation, my lover and I.
We'll meet at the crossroads.
I'll recognise him immediately —
Beautiful, quixotic, and funny,
Delight in his eyes.
And he me — I'll be carrying my heart in my hands.
I'll step out of the slack skin of old age
And slip within his white overalls.
Transfigured, entwined, we'll begin The Dance
Whose steps I've practised in the quiet of my room.

—*Vivien Arnold*

Forgotten Jewish refugees demand recognition

HISTORY

Philip Mendes

To date, international concern with Middle East refugees has focused primarily on the approximately 700,000 Palestinian Arabs who left Israel during the 1947–48 war. Far less attention has been paid to the nearly one million Jews – known as *mizrahim* – who left Arab countries in the decade or so following that war.

Most moved to the newly created Jewish State of Israel where today they constitute the majority of the Jewish population, and often lean towards the hawkish side of the political spectrum.

As with the Palestinian Arab exodus, explanations of the causes of the Jewish exodus are highly contentious given their links with contemporary political agendas. Historically, two polarised views have prevailed. The Zionist or Israeli position attributes the Jewish exodus almost solely to Arab violence or threats of violence, and the Arab or anti-Zionist position assigns responsibility to a malicious Zionist conspiracy.

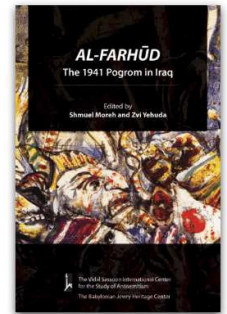
In my opinion, the Jewish exodus is best explained as a complex combination of push and pull factors. The pull factor was the growing influence of Zionism, and the attraction of many Mizrahi Jews after 1948 to the idea of living in Israel.

Another factor, which was not specifically about Arab-Jewish relations, was the general Arab post-colonialist resentment of foreigners which led to their gradual exclusion from social and economic life as the Arab countries attained their independence. For example, many Jews appear to have left Egypt because of economic factors such as loss of jobs and livelihood, rather than specific anti-Jewish persecution.

Nevertheless, a considerable number of Jews – perhaps the majority – seem to have left as a result of either systematic harassment, or direct expulsion. Some communities felt obliged to leave over time due to ongoing government discrimination and popular hostility. Others were expelled en masse as in the expulsion of 120,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel in 1951. Many experienced outbreaks of serious anti-Jewish violence.

It can reasonably be concluded that Jews in the Arab world were driven out as a direct and unapologetic retaliation for Jewish actions in Israel/Palestine.

But one of the most serious outbreaks of racist violence took place in Iraq in June 1941. The Farhud (or pogrom) resulted in the deaths of 179 Jews and several hundred injuries. In addition, numerous Jewish properties and religious institutions were damaged and looted.



A newly edited book by the Israeli academics Shmuel Moreh and Zvi Yehuda (*Al-Farhud: the 1941 pogrom in Iraq*, Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2010) sheds new light on the causes of the Farhud.

The authors note that the Iraqi Jews were a well-integrated community who could date their heritage back to the destruction of the first temple in 586 BCE. Following the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1920, Jews were prominent in professional and commercial life. Overall, Jews viewed themselves as Arabs of the Jewish faith, rather than as a separate race or nationality.

Nevertheless, anti-Jewish feeling was reflected in both official and popular actions including discrimination and occasional violence during the 1930s.

Matters came to a head with the pro-German military coup of April 1941. The coup leaders were quickly defeated and exiled by a British army occupation, but their departure was followed by the farhud which was perpetrated by Iraqi officers, police, and gangs of young people influenced by religious and nationalist fanaticism.

These groups rejected the presence of national or religious minorities in the Arab world, and regarded the Jews as a fifth column sympathetic to the Western powers.

The anti-Jewish rioters were influenced by a number of factors. One was ongoing incitement by a group of approximately 400 Palestinian immigrants residing in Iraq. These Palestinians were led by the extremist Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Husseini, who would later collaborate with Hitler's Final Solution.

Another factor was the anti-Jewish propaganda distributed by the German Nazi envoy in Baghdad. In addition, there was the cynical political decision by the British Army to delay the timing of their intervention to restore order lest they be labelled as friends of the Jews.

The most significant finding from the many Jewish memoirs cited in this text was their terrible sense of betrayal. Many of the killed and injured were attacked by local Muslims whom they personally knew. Others gave jewellery and money to their neighbours in trust who then refused to return the property. But conversely, many recalled with gratitude the bravery of their Muslim neighbours who acted to save their lives.

Today, the Jewish refugees are increasingly demanding recognition of the injustices they suffered. They definitely do not want to return to the Arab countries, but they want some form of compensation or redress for their loss of homes and livelihood.

Both the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) and the US House of Representatives have passed motions (in 2010 and 2008 respectively) demanding that the Jewish refugees from Arab countries be granted the same rights as those of Palestinian refugees.

In my opinion, the two exoduses are not identical in motivation and cause, and should be

considered separately. However, I do believe that the Arab League would make a significant contribution to Israeli/Jewish-Arab reconciliation if they formally recognised the positive role that many Jewish communities previously played in Arab life and culture, and apologised for the intolerance that turned them into refugees.

The politician who can't be bought

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



Newly-elected Tasmanian independent MP Andrew Wilkie is basing his quest for power on ethical conduct. There's nothing new in this. As we have been reminded many times, former prime minister Kevin Rudd promised to address climate change because it is 'the greatest moral challenge of our generation'. His failure to do this cost him his job and his party majority government.

Wilkie's point of difference appears to be that he quickly follows his words with action. In 2003 he resigned from his job at the Office of National Assessments and blew the whistle because he believed the Howard Government was deceiving the Australian people. He said it was falsely claiming that intelligence reports supported claims Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

Faced with a difficult decision last week, he did not disappoint those who welcome bold principled action. Tony Abbott offered \$1 billion to build a new hospital in Hobart, as part of an attempt to gain his support. Instead Wilkie opted for \$340 million from Jullia Gillard, which was only enough to renovate the existing hospital. He considered Abbott's offer an extreme example of pork-barrelling. Gillard's winning \$340 million was much more equitable, as it formed part of a \$1.7 billion package spread over a range of hospitals around the country.

Wilkie said afterwards that it was 'quite intoxicating' to have been offered that amount of money, but 'I'm smarter than that. We need to make sure this is not just an instance of pork barrelling.'

Many other politicians would have just taken the money, and indeed Wilkie has some explaining to do to his electorate after turning down a brand new \$1 billion hospital. But as we know from the electoral backlash Rudd suffered after retreating from the climate change moral challenge, voters do care about matters of principle. Wilkie has also made it clear that he cares about the treatment of asylum seekers and wants to see an emissions trading scheme, so it's quite likely we could see action on those fronts.

His role is more that of an agitator rather than a leader. Although the imminent decision of the three country independents could return him to obscurity, it's just possible that he could prompt Abbott, Gillard and others to adopt a form of leadership that gives all of us ownership of the difficult decisions that face us as a nation. It is in the nature of many Australians to want a better world, and they've been let down by leaders on many fronts. As John Menadue said recently in a [paper](#) for the Centre for Policy Development:

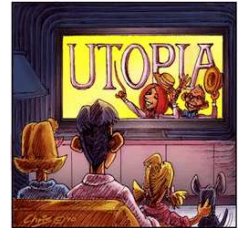
‘We don’t need charismatic or authoritarian leaders to make the ‘right’ decisions for us. We need adaptive leaders who can help us all support necessary but hard decisions. We need leaders of such quality across our whole community who can appeal to the better angels of our nature.’

Utopianism could fix politics

POLITICS

Colin Long

A Frenchman once wrote: 'There are no ideas without utopia'. But utopian thinking seemed to perish in the ruins of the 20th century: in Pol Pot's killing fields and the Soviet gulag. The resulting understandable disillusionment with utopianism had two unfortunate consequences: an obsession with pragmatism and an inability to recognise new forms of dangerous utopianism hiding beneath a veneer of common sense. In both cases the result has been devastating for our political culture.



To be labeled a 'utopian' in contemporary politics is to be dismissed as irrelevant. A politician's primary virtue is 'pragmatism'. This has led to an unhealthy scepticism towards people with ideas or vision. We are now cursed with a political system based on the inertia of pragmatism when we desperately need new ideas to deal with challenges that call into question all our long-cherished ways of doing things and of seeing the world. The most important single explanation of the failure — on a global scale — to do anything meaningful so far about the threat posed by climate change is a lack of vision of how our world could be better.

The stubborn adherence to modern consumer capitalism — despite the growing evidence of its economic and environmental failures — is clear evidence of an inability to envisage something better. Of course this has something to do with the failure of the great communist experiment of the 20th century. But to think that there could only be two options — industrial capitalism or Soviet-style communism — is a failure of vision in itself.

There is, of course, a difference between utopian thinking and unrealistic thinking, although in popular parlance they are often confused. 'Utopian' is often used dismissively or insultingly to describe someone with views that seem unrealistic or impractical. But claims about utopianism are always ideological and political and seldom based on a true assessment of practicality. For instance, those arguing for social and economic equality have often been dismissed as utopians whose ideas allegedly founder on the reality of 'human nature'.

On the other hand, our entire economic system is based on the clearly impractical and unrealistic belief that never-ending growth is possible, despite the physical limits of a closed system. Yet adherents of this view — most mainstream politicians, economists and nearly everyone else — are considered to be 'pragmatic' and realistic. This can only be the case because the meaning of utopia is politically and ideologically defined. If impracticality were really the defining quality of utopia, believers in modern consumer capitalism based on unending growth would be the true utopians.

Australia's political culture has long been anti-utopian. Our constitution is little more than a free trade agreement between former colonies, while politicians of the big parties outdo themselves to appear ordinary (I've never understood why one would want an 'ordinary' person to do the extraordinary job of running a country). For much of the time such anti-utopianism has been healthy, helping us to avoid the turmoil of some other countries. But it now represents a major threat to our long-term future.

We have just been through an election campaign in which the large, old parties were almost entirely bereft of ideas. On the most important issues facing the nation, indeed the world — climate change — we have had a Prime Minister who vaguely recognises the problem but resists doing anything about it, and an opposition leader who trivialises it to a question of tax. There is no doubt that an adequate response to climate change is difficult, that abandoning the religion of endless growth is profoundly unsettling to a society used to continual expansion of appetites, consumption and demand.

But the fact that no adequate response is forthcoming from the old parties is not just a failure of will in the face of a difficult task: it is a symptom of a deep anti-utopian malaise, an inability to imagine a better society.

There are several reasons for this. First, those who benefit most from the status quo — the political and economic elites — want us to believe that we live in the best possible world, and that to challenge it is to risk havoc, instability, social and economic breakdown. But they say this purely in defence of their own interests. Let us not be confused about this. The mining industry's propaganda campaigns against action on climate change and a resource tax demonstrate clearly that its interests will always trump the broader interests of the community — even if it means hastening environmental destruction, climate change and long-term economic and social harm.

Second, we live in a society in which techniques of propaganda and attitude manipulation have been raised to unprecedentedly sophisticated levels. The advertising industry is essentially an enormous propaganda instrument for the preservation of consumer capitalism. The effectiveness of this propaganda lies in its apparently voluntary nature. We allow it into our houses and our lives almost every time we turn on the TV, open a newspaper, catch a train, visit a shop, walk down the street.

Third, our political system is almost designed to prevent change. One inevitable result of this is the gradual morphing of the two major parties, so that if it weren't for the Greens we would live in something approximating a one party state, with a factionalised ruling party. The nature of our political system — its short-termism and emphasis on pragmatism rather than vision — especially the disproportionate power it gives to swinging and disengaged voters, means that the major parties have lost the will to devise policies and go out and explain and defend them. Instead, with the aid of opinion pollsters and focus groups, they try to guess what 'the people' (actually swinging voters) think. As a result they appear to be opportunistic,

vacillating and uncertain. That is to be expected. Most of the time they are not trying to sell something they really believe in, but something their consultants tell them 'the people' want.

The big problem is that after so many years of this parlous state of affairs the old parties don't believe in much more than the exercise of power itself.

Australia could do with a good dose of utopian thinking.

Art prize tests religious convention

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Brisbane artist, Leonard Brown, is winner of the annual Blake Prize for Religious Art with a work titled *If you put your ear close, you'll hear it breathing*. It's a painting of subtle colour variation and interesting texture, with repeating patterns designed to express the inner stillness and silence of mystical experience. Brown's faith journey has traversed Catholicism, Anglicanism, and most recently Eastern Orthodoxy and threads of these three Christian traditions inform his work.

The Blake has never been far from controversy, and this year's prize, announced in Sydney last night, is no different. The work of Sydney artist Rodney Pople, which was highly commended by the judges, is a provocative painting dealing with clergy sexual abuse.

Entitled *Cardinal with Altar Boy*, its setting is the interior of a beautiful baroque church, and it portrays a headless prelate dressed in ecclesiastical finery, with an altar boy in his lap. The boy's genitals are vaguely visible through his white surplice. The pose of the couple is reminiscent of the Pieta, of the Virgin cradling the crucified Christ.

The Blake Prize was established in 1951, and is named after eighteenth century eccentric English poet, mystic and artist, William Blake. On the [homepage](#) of the Blake Society website, it's described as 'the oldest prize in Australia dedicated to spirituality, religion and cultural diversity.'

In explaining its controversial nature, Chair of the Blake Society, Rod Pattenden, says in his statement about the prize on the website, that in contrast 'to art prizes that are awarded for distinct subject areas such as landscape or portraiture, the Blake has always invited a much more open, personal and idiosyncratic response, so much so that it has earned the criticism, ire, and sometimes applause of the critics and public alike.'

There are four categories in the prize. Most important is the main Blake Prize worth \$20,000. The other prizes, the John Coburn Emerging Artist Award, the Blake Prize for Human Justice, and the Blake Poetry Prize are each worth \$5000.

The video above features interviews with the three winners of the visual art prizes, and their works, and some shots of Rodney Pople's highly commended work.

The John Coburn Award was won by young Melbourne artist, Michelle Sakaris. Her work, entitled *Font*, is an enlarged photo of — believe it or not — an aluminium egg cup. But the way

it is framed, positioned and lit makes it resemble a gleaming brass baptismal font, or a gold chalice. It lifts and transforms this mundane item into the realm of the sacred and iconic.

And the Human Justice Prize was won by Sydney based artist, Fiona White, for her very confronting painting called simply *Age 36*. It depicts the true story of Aboriginal man, Ronald Mitchell, who was tasered by police in Warburton, Western Australia, in July 2009. The taser hit him between the eyes, and, because he'd been handling petrol shortly before, he ignited in flames, and was severely burned.

As in previous years, the finalists in this year's exhibition encompass a wide variety of genres and content. There's everything from traditional artworks with devotional content, to pictures, sculpture and video art that question and confront conventional notions of religion and spirituality. This is its appeal, that it examines the important and deep questions in life from multiple points of view. Long may the Blake Prize be comforting and alarming, prickly and soothing, revealing and confounding.

Churches standing up to 'pro-Israel' politicians

POLITICS

Antony Lowenstein



The Australian Jewish News (AJN) was outraged. Its editorial in late July [condemned](#) the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) for a resolution calling on Australians to [boycott](#) Israeli goods made in the occupied Palestinian territories.

The AJN wrote that the move contributed to a global campaign to 'delegitimise' Israel and lent 'credence to the perception of an apartheid state.'

Executive Council of Australian Jewry president Robert Goot, in a letter to the National Council of Churches' general secretary, alluded to the Churches' alleged complicity in the Holocaust. The motion 'revived painful memories for Jews in Australia of earlier times in Europe when churches allowed themselves to be swept up in the tide of popular prejudices against the Jewish people.' Any moves to end West Bank settlements, illegal under international law, were framed as unbalanced and biased against Israel and Jews.

Relations between the Jewish and Christian establishment remain strained despite meetings with representatives to calm the atmosphere.

The Zionist establishment was equally offended by the resolution calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land and cessation of terrorist acts on all sides.

The NCCA's move is in fact remarkably level-headed and fits comfortably with a growing global movement to increase civil pressure on Israel to reverse its colonisation program.

The boycott, divestment and sanctions ([BDS](#)) campaign is a loosely-connected collection of church groups, activists, Jews, Christians and Muslims determined to act where political leaders have failed. There is no united vision, no definite prescription to solve the conflict and no hierarchy or leadership. Its overall goal is to bring justice for the Palestinians who have been living under occupation for decades.

Susanne Hoder, a member of a 'divestment task force' set up by the Lawrence-based New England Conference of the United Methodist Church, recently [told](#) the *Boston Globe* that after first visiting Palestine in 2004, 'I was shocked. I came back with a clear sense that as churches, we shouldn't be sitting on the sidelines.'

It should be noted that the NCCA is only calling for a boycott of goods produced in the illegal Jewish colonies, not a wholesale boycott of Israel itself. It is a position supported by the US-backed Palestinian Authority and is already having a noticeable [effect](#) on the settlers'

bottom line.

The response from the organised Jewish community in Australia and beyond has been apoplectic, [accusing](#) pro-boycott groups of anti-Semitism and spreading 'anti-Israel propaganda'. However, as [explained](#) by American Zionist leader Mitchell Plitnick:

'The pro-Israel, pro-peace movement should be embracing the boycott of settlement products. The reasons are both ideological and practical. Ideologically, we need to draw a distinction between Israel and the settlements, and we need to make opposition to the latter as uncompromising as support of the former... | Boycotting settlement products and civil action to divorce Israeli businesses from the settlements are acts that are very much in Israel's interests and can effectively promote peace. But if we leave such actions only in the hands of those who do not care or are openly hostile to Israel, we are abdicating a powerful tool.'

Increasingly the NCCA is [joined](#) by churches across the world. In particular the British Methodist Church agreed this year to a resolution that called for a boycott of goods from Israeli settlements. Christine Elliott, the Church's Secretary for External Relationships, said in an official press release that, 'The goal of the boycott is to put an end to the existing injustice. It reflects the challenge that settlements present to a lasting peace in the region.'

Dr Stephen Leah, a Methodist preacher and member of the churches conference, told the *Electronic Intifada* that Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement render impossible the sort of inter-faith meetings that critics of the Methodist motion say they support. It is a view shared by growing number of key unions in Australia who just this year resolved to [boycott](#) Israeli goods from settlements. The Australian Jewish Democratic Society has been [condemned](#) for similar moves but has [defended](#) itself in a recent statement.

Opponents of any kind of BDS remain in denial about the current state of Israeli politics. This includes threats to institute laws to [pressure](#) all citizens to pledge loyalty to a Jewish state, fascist [leanings](#) of the Netanyahu government, the ongoing siege on Gaza and expansion of West Bank settlements.

BDS is growing, like the surge against apartheid South Africa decades ago, because Western leaders refuse to acknowledge what they are backing. Being 'pro-Israel', understood as in the declarations of Barack Obama, Julia Gillard or Tony Abbott, is simply code for doing nothing.

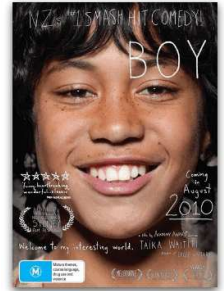
Toppling the idyls of youth

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

Boy (M). Director: Taika Waititi. Starring: James Rolleston, Taika Waititi, Te Aho Aho Eketone-Whitu. Running time: 87 minutes

This Kiwi coming-of-age comedy won the Audience Award at the Melbourne International Film Festival, and it's not hard to see why. It is an accessible and idiosyncratic film with the heart and social conscience of *Once Were Warriors* and the endearingly offbeat comic sensibilities of *Napoleon Dynamite*.



Its hero, known to friends, family and teachers simply as Boy (Rolleston), is an 11-year-old Maori youth living on a rural property at Waihau Bay, New Zealand, in 1984. He is a young boy with grown-up responsibilities: when his grandmother goes out of town, she leaves him as the man of the house, responsible for looking after his bother Rocky (Aho Eketone-Whitu) and assorted younger cousins.

Boy's mother, we learn, died some years previously, and his father, who abandoned them, is lately in prison. None of this does anything to dampen Boy's exuberance for life (brought to bear with irreverent charm by talented first-timer Rolleston), or his hero worship of his absentee father Alamein (Waititi, also the film's writer and director).

When Alamein does return, suddenly and unexpectedly, with a couple of seedy mates in tow, Boy is determined to hang on to his heroic preconceptions. Despite all evidence to the contrary.

Boy adheres to a coming-of-age formula where childhood is a place of blissful ignorance that is gradually toppled by knowledge and experience: knowledge plus experience equals growing up, and growing up is painful. The film reinforces this by harking to a more idyllic time and place that are, respectively, past and remote. These innocent environs are impinged upon by ill forces borne by damaged adults: the violence and drug cultivation perpetrated by the father of Boy's friend; the alcohol and anarchy that Alamein brings to Boy's world.

Even Boy's fanaticism for Michael Jackson, a running gag throughout the film, provides more than period detail. It foreshadows the scars that the passage of time can leave upon things we hold dear. In 1984 Jackson is at his artistic and popular peak: pre-surgery, pre-child abuse allegations and all the other things that later marred his public persona. Boy's worship is, for now, pure. As an audience watching in 2010 we know the purity is transient.

In fact Boy's Jackson-worship epitomises his youthful idealism. Even a barroom brawl is transformed in Boy's head into a version of Jackson's 'Beat It' music video, although the

violent reality breaks through eventually.

Boy projects Jackson's charisma and cool onto Alamein, which is partly why he has trouble seeing the man's perennial lameness. Alamein is the leader of a three-member biker gang, is prone to ill-fated attempts to vault *Dukes of Hazard* style through the window of his car, and wants Boy to call him Shogun (as in 'samurai warrior') instead of Dad. Yet Boy regards the man with wide-eyed wonder — this is his father, after all.

The film has a lot of heart. Like *Napoleon Dynamite*, it regards its most eccentric characters with affection. 'Weirdo' (Waihoroi Shortland), a kooky and maligned local scavenger, turns confidante and advice-giver to Boy's eccentric and neglected brother Rocky. Even Alamein, who bears comparison to Napoleon Dynamite's obviously uncool uncle, is pitifully pathetic despite his villainy. He, like Boy, just has some growing up to do.

But *Boy* is, above all, incredibly funny. From its opening monologue, where Boy introduces himself, his life and loves (including half a dozen references to Jackson), it hits a lively, witty pace that barely lets up. Rocky's quirky outlook, epitomised by his belief that he has telekinetic powers, is a highlight of the film. It's humour with purpose, though: even Rocky's idiosyncracies, we learn, have roots in grief.

No equal voting opportunity

POLITICS

Moira Byrne Garton



The High Court challenge to 2006 Electoral Act amendments brought by activist lobby group GetUp! during the election campaign succeeded in adding thousands of otherwise ineligible voters to the electoral roll. Post-election commentary reports the increased informal vote. It highlights the contrast in the Australian electorate between those fighting to exercise their right to vote, and those fighting not to vote.

Here's another contradiction: some citizens cannot be placed on the roll at all. Excitement surrounding the election and the resultant hung parliament contrasts with the continuing disenfranchisement of a significant number of Australians with intellectual disabilities or mental illness.

According to section 93 of the Electoral Act, a person meeting age, citizenship and other requirements of enrolling to vote cannot enrol if they are 'of unsound mind ... incapable of understanding the nature and significance of enrolment and voting'. Section 29 of the Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to 'exercise any power under a Commonwealth law to discriminate against another person on the grounds of...disability...', yet the Electoral Act remains unchanged. It remains to be seen what would happen if it were challenged.

The focus of many of the Australian Electoral Commission's initiatives are (like most disability initiatives) focused on physical disability. Although the AEC's latest disability action plan appears also to consider those with intellectual, psychiatric, sensory, neurological, and learning disabilities, legislation does not provide them all with a vote.

To be fair, the AEC is making strides by providing information and assistance to a number of diverse and possibly marginalised electors. An inquiry into electoral accessibility for people with disabilities by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission a decade ago provided the impetus for a number of them.

Mobile polling teams bring portable booths to electors unable to visit a polling place, in some hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and remote areas. Some stationary polling places are selected based on accessibility, and publicised accordingly.

Early votes, available to all citizens, are useful if managing work commitments or travelling arrangements. But more importantly, early votes benefit potentially disenfranchised voters: those ill, infirm or approaching childbirth (or caring for someone who is); in hospital; in prison

or detained; unable to attend for religious reasons; or regional electors more than 8 kilometres from a polling place.

The AEC respects community diversity by providing electoral information in 21 languages, and a telephone interpreter service. At polling booths, trained staff provide assistance to voters if the managing polling official deems a person unable to vote without help.

Voters can also nominate any person (excepting political candidates) for support. A friend, relative, or party worker can help complete, fold and deposit the ballot paper. If no-one is nominated, the official in charge will assist, with scrutineers able to be present while ballots are completed.

Strategies permit special category electors, including those going overseas, in prison, with no fixed address, or unable to sign their name, to enrol and apply to become a general postal voter.

Finally, recent changes enabled voters who are vision-impaired to cast a truly 'secret ballot' by telephone for the first time - a milestone to be celebrated. Australia's Disability and Race Discrimination Commissioner, Graham Innes (pictured voting on 5 August), was one of them.

All these strategies promote inclusion in the Australian electorate. But electoral accessibility overlooks those with intellectual disabilities or mental illness. They remain disenfranchised.

No doubt the families and carers of people with such disability or illness consider their interests when casting their own ballot. They also frequently make decisions on behalf of their ill or disabled family member. Even so, every citizen affected by government policy should have a vote for the candidate or party who will represent their interests and provide the best policy outcomes. Similarly, it is reasonable that families choose the most appropriate political representative for that person.

Even someone vested with Power-of-Attorney cannot vote on an elector's behalf. Powers-of-Attorney are not mindlessly granted and entail significant expense, usually by the representative closest to the person. It is unlikely to be misused any more than other potential faultlines within the electoral system. Checks and balances are always necessary, as for example by requiring proof of identification from the carer at a polling place.

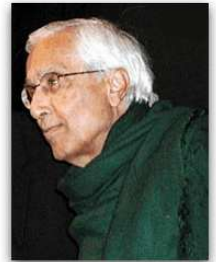
Disability issues are receiving more public attention. South Australia elected a 'Dignity 4 Disability' representative, with disabilities, to its Legislative Council. The Rudd Labor government initiated a Productivity Commission inquiry into a long term disability care and support scheme. It received many submissions. Concerned citizens would welcome similar progress in electoral matters.

Man of faiths

EULOGY

Peter Kirkwood

Last Thursday, at 4.15pm local time, in the beautiful village of Tavertet in the north of Spain, a great man died. Other theological luminaries have called him 'a pioneer of inter-religious dialogue', 'one of the world's most important philosophers of religion', 'a true spiritual giant of our times'. While the man himself eschewed such epithets, and such descriptions of holy men are often exaggerations, in his case they are patently true.



Raimon Panikkar was born on 3rd November, 1918 into a family of mixed race and religion. His mother was Catholic, from Catalonia, the north-east region of Spain, where he grew up, and his father was Indian Hindu from Kerala in the south of the subcontinent.

It was not only his mixed ethnic and religious background which prepared him for his profound inter-religious journey. He had a formidable intellect and was a polymath. He gained three doctorates: the first in philosophy (1946); the second in science, in chemistry (1958); and the third in theology (1961), with his doctoral thesis becoming his first well known book entitled *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. He spoke some dozen languages, and wrote his many books (around 60 titles) and articles in six of them: in Catalan, Spanish, French, German, Italian and English.

In 1955, as a young Catholic priest, Panikkar went to live in India, not as a missionary, but as a pioneer in the wave of Western Christian academics who went to study Eastern religious traditions. He lived and worked in a number of centres in India, including its holiest city, Varanasi. There he lived at Hanumanghat right on the banks of the Ganges, where his house overlooked the riverside terraces that are used for cremations, and the sacred river itself.

He mastered Sanskrit and Pali, the ancient languages of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures. He embarked on a huge work of commentary and translation of the oldest and most central of these, the Vedas, a task that took ten years. It resulted in an acclaimed book of 1000 pages, highly regarded even by Hindu scholars, called *Mantramanjari: The Vedic Experience*.

In 1967 he was invited to become Professor of Comparative Theology at the prestigious Harvard University in the USA, and he taught there till 1972. He then moved to the University of California at Santa Barbara where he remained till 1987. During this period, he frequently visited India, and was in demand as guest lecturer at universities in the UK, Europe and Latin America. In 1987, on his retirement, he returned to live in Spain, in Tavertet in the mountains outside Barcelona.

His journey amongst the great world religions was not just an academic exercise. It profoundly affected, and, in turn, was guided by his personal beliefs and spirituality. He may have had the head of a rigorous scholar, but at heart he was a mystic and contemplative. In him, these two modes of being and experiencing the world merged into a harmonious and productive unity.

On his return to Europe after many years absence, when asked about his faith pilgrimage, he answered with this now famous and often quoted reply, 'I left as a Christian, I found myself a Hindu, and I return a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian.' This statement of his own multiple religious belonging is just one of many challenging insights and ideas that he wrote about with passion and eloquence.

Perhaps his three best known books that express his core theology are *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (1978), *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics: Cross-Cultural Studies* (1979) and *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (1993). Together they describe the emerging pluralistic world in which we live, and provide a cogent framework for dealing with it in a productive way.

A good summary of the significance of Panikkar comes from the late American theologian Ewert Cousins. He argued we are in a period of deep change in religion, and used the term 'mutation' in history to refer to times when there is a quantum leap forward. He saw the era of globalisation since World War II as bringing about such a mutation into a 'global matrix of cultures'. He saw Panikkar as being at the forefront of this transformation, that he was already living in this new future.

Among those who have made the transition, some become mediators of the future for the others who can make the passage. These mutational men may return from the future to draw others from the past across the abyss of the present and into the mutational world of the future. I suggest that Panikkar is such a 'mutational man', one in whom the global mutation has already occurred and in whom the new forms of consciousness have been concretised.

I had the privilege to meet Panikkar three times in his latter years. The final occasion was in 2008 when I made a [documentary](#) for ABC TV's *Compass* that followed Aboriginal elder, Joan Hendriks as she attended an inter-religious conference in Venice marking his ninetieth birthday. The film portrays him at home in Tavertet, gives a flavour of what he was like as a person, and shows how he was revered by those who knew and loved him.

Though frail and in his nineties, Raimon Panikkar worked right till the end. His last book, *The Rhythm of Being*, an updated version of his acclaimed Gifford Lectures that he delivered in 1989, was published just weeks ago. His funeral will take place on Friday, 3rd September, at the Benedictine Abbey of Montserrat in the mountains west of Barcelona near his final much loved home in Tavertet.

Natural disaster and human greed in Pakistan

HUMAN RIGHTS

Simon Roughneen

On the road in from the airport, the water shimmered under the moonlight as men, women and children sat in the dark near the would-be lakeshore. During the day, river dolphins can usually be spotted in the nearby river. Idyllic, you might think. But this dusty and ramshackle town is at the front-line of one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters in living memory. Usually there is no water lapping up at the roadside, and the only people there would be those out for an evening snack after the daytime Ramadan fast. But since torrential monsoon rain sent the Indus River spilling onto towns and farmland the length of Pakistan, an area the size of Italy has been deluged.

In downtown Sukkur, I spoke to Ashraf, who said he had left his family at the outskirts before coming into town to buy some food. 'We managed to gather up some of our possessions before the waters came, but we did not have much warning. Our home is under water completely. I have enough money to feed my children for another couple of days, that is all.' Like a few more flood victims I encountered, he had to pay three times the normal price for a bus to the city, as opportunists capitalise on people's desperation, to make a quick rupee.

Nature's unwitting cruelty was followed, here and there, then, by man's calculated greed. The last time a natural disaster hit this country, 80,000 people died in thirteen seconds when an earthquake rocked Kashmir. This time, the death-toll is much lower and the disaster is unfolding slowly over many weeks. But the impact is vast — running the entire 1976 mile length of the Indus River from the mountainous north of Pakistan, where that 2005 quake hit, to these flood-prone plains in the south.

Everywhere cases of diarrhea, cholera, skin diseases, as well as malaria and dengue — with mosquitoes proliferating amid the floodwaters — are growing. Almost 5 million people now have no access to clean water, an irony seemingly lifted from Coleridge's line about 'water water everywhere and not a drop to drink.'

17 million acres of land is under water and, out of the mind-boggling 20 million people thought to be affected by the floods — around 800,000 remain beyond the reach of aid workers or the Pakistani army, cut off by the rising waters that dissolved bridges and submerged roads. This disaster seems as vast as the swollen country-long lake that the Indus River has become, but the real human suffering and loss can be obscured by or sanitised into mere statistics — with people's lives traduced by the actuary-level numbers required to account for such vast destruction.

The name Sukkur is derived from the Arabic word for intense, according to some historical accounts that date the place-name to Umayyad conquerors who marched east to this region

over a millennium ago. For aid workers trying to help the displaced who are now — for want of a better word — flooding the town, the epithet seems apt. Brian Casey worked at the forefront of relief operations in Haiti after the recent earthquake and in Burma after the 2008 Cyclone Nargis — with Irish NGO GOAL. He says that the extent of the slowly-unfurling crisis in Pakistan comes close to these massive disasters. ‘People are hungry, people are getting sick, and we don’t know yet how much worse things will get as the water rises in places. And at the same time we have to think about how to help people rebuild homes and farms once the waters recede.’

Outside the city, Nizam Ud Din Bharchood of Pakistani charity ‘Hands’ takes me to a string of ad-hoc campsites along the highway. At one, around thirty women and children lolled under trees in the dust-infused forty-degree heat. ‘Some of these people are here almost three weeks without shelter, without regular food or water’, he says. ‘The men have gone into the city to see if they can get work somehow.’

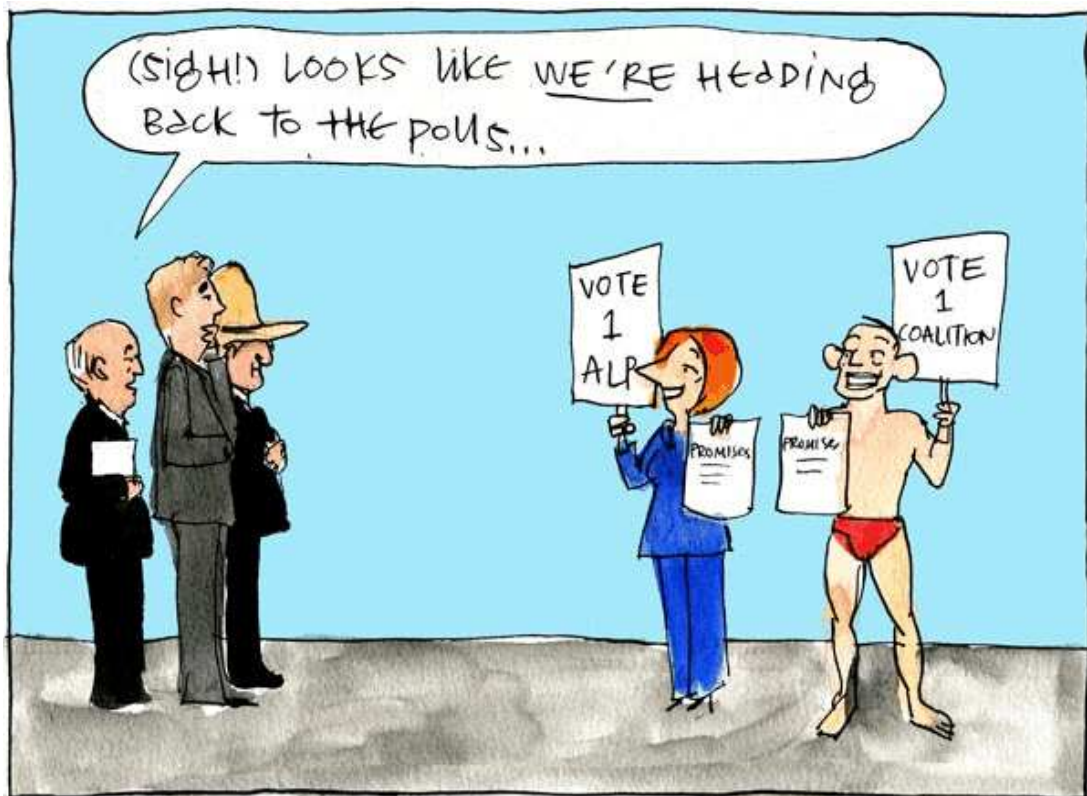
Hands has been helping out with food and medicine since the start of the flood, and is partnering with GOAL to reach more people. Back to numbers again, and these are rising in tandem with the still-swelling waters in an odd sort of *danse macabre*, 4 million Pakistanis are now homeless, and another 600,000 are threatened down-river in this southern region. This means they might have to flee as well with two more weeks of monsoon rains expected.

Mohammed Ramza had less than a day to pack up with his family, and move, along with all his neighbours, to the roadside outside Sukkur. ‘Our homes were destroyed, we managed only to save a few animals’, he said, pointing to a half-dozen goats sitting in the shade, their ears tugged-at by a trio of giggling children, none of whom are more than five years old. Ignoring maternal admonitions to leave the animals alone, they compete to play up for the foreigner’s camera, some temporary respite from their still-unfinished ordeal.

Independent thinking

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Father James Chesney and Ireland's religious war

RELIGION

Frank O'Shea

Cardinal William Conway, Primate of all Ireland, was supposed to attend the Eucharistic Congress in Melbourne in 1973. But events in his own backyard meant he needed to stay at home. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Willie Whitelaw had presented him with a quandary: what to do about a priest in the diocese of Derry.



The priest was Fr James Chesney, whom the local police wanted to question about a role he was alleged to have played in a set of three explosions in the small village of Claudy at the end of the previous July. It is a mixed community of about 400 people and there did not seem to be any strategic or other reason for the attack — not that either side needed much by way of reason for what they were doing.

The police had a suspicion that Chesney was involved in the planning of the explosions which had resulted in the deaths of nine people and horrific injury to many others.

Conscious of not inflaming religious passions, the chief constable asked Whitelaw for his advice; the latter discussed the matter with the Cardinal who was aware of rumours about Chesney.

The net effect was that the priest was never questioned by the police — in fact, he was able to provide them with an alibi for an IRA man whose car had been seen in Claudy on the morning of the bombing. Instead he was transferred to a diocese in the Irish Republic, close enough for him to cross frequently and at will in and out of the north. He died of cancer eight years later at the age of 46.

So, here is the situation. A priest who may be a senior member of the Provisional IRA is not questioned by the police. Instead there are three-way discussions involving the RUC, the British Government and the Cardinal Primate, as a result of which the priest is transferred to a nearby diocese in the Irish Republic.

A cover-up? A conspiracy? The Police Ombudsman seemed to think so in a report released last week. The British government reacted by saying they were 'profoundly sorry' that Fr Chesney was not properly investigated.

Before you get too comfortable on your high horse, assured in your conviction about appropriate church-state separation, there is another side to this story.

Throughout more than 30 years of killing and maiming in Northern Ireland, the media, the

governments of Britain and Ireland and politicians of every hue maintained that this was a political conflict. On one side were people who wanted the Brits out and a united Ireland; on the other side were those who saw the union with Britain as part of their birthright.

Though virtually everyone on one side was from the Catholic community and those on the other side belonged to one or other brand of Protestantism, nobody dared to call it a religious war.

For the record, after Claudy, five coffins went to one graveyard and four to the other — which way is irrelevant, they were all equally dead.

Now consider what would almost certainly have happened if this priest was questioned and charged with involvement in the bombing. The DPP appeared to consider that a conviction was unlikely. A court case would have inflamed both sides, the Catholics roused to anger that one of their priests had been victimised, the other side having their secret fears of priest-rebels confirmed.

Whatever its outcome, a public court case would have made every priest a legitimate target for the terrorists on the Unionist side, every Catholic church and school a possible mark.

The Provisional IRA have never been noted for logical reasoning, but neither have the other side — in that month of July alone, loyalist paramilitaries killed 22 civilians. It would take only one tit-for-tat attack to turn the conflict into what many suspected it was but no one was prepared to say: a religious war.

So there you have it, moral theologians. The next time you lecture to your seminarians, explain how Aquinas or Liguori or Rahner would have dealt with this dilemma?

The angel's telling smile

POETRY

Various

Necropolis 1917

They came from the centre surrendering to heroism
We retrieving their light when they no longer can
Remember a time before innocence dreamt itself
Dust on his dungarees mending a rabbit fence
With sun-kissed stains on his leathered complexion
The tableland sits down to a long afternoon's lunch
Spinifex settling into the loam above a dingo's bones
Besides the slit-throat reeds retiring into their bushland brine
Ghost rhizomes slowly probing vegetable memories where
Scones and tea form an endless procession of domestic suns
An inch-worm prophecy settling down to the bottom of
A young private's name prefigured in a foreign constellation
Where the whistle sounds that magnesium bright moment
Gun-shy generals, gazing up at the grid locked skies
Write his death warrant to be replayed at the band rotunda
Reminding us Saturday is for cricket and Sunday is for God
Tongue-tied it's enough to just listen to that music
Though we can't surrender in dance let the band play on

—*Michael Healey*

The Cathedral at Reims

1.

In the front of the great assertion that is Reims,

one Angel smiles.
He is Gabriel, delicately boned, familiar,
he has turned towards the Virgin
who stands in her long solemnity,
amongst the sober prophets,
and the proper saints.
His is a telling smile,
one that might not easily be disregarded;
one small, infecting verb of grace
to animate the prophets, kings and holy folk
to truly rise
in this celestial curvature of stone
that human hands
have only just begun.

2.

There is a frailty along the valley of the Marne,
as if the voices of the Angelus
were deafened by the wind;
as if the stealth of the invader
still ghosts the greening valley
as quiet as a panther's loathing.
But, by the craft of those ancient,
marvelling hands,
the long patience of the Cathedral stands,
with its tall neighbour belfries,
the Good Samaritan
and the wounded man,

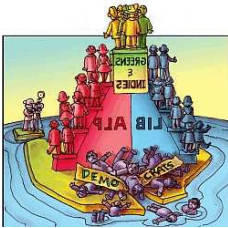
and the pealing of its bronze, heraldic bells.

—*Grant Fraser*

The perils of holding the balance of power

POLITICS

John Warhurst



The election result has already anointed winners and losers. They will only be confirmed by the final minority government outcome. The early winners are the balance of power holders, the rural Independents in the House of Representatives and the Greens in the Senate.

The Independents have hit the jackpot in terms of popularity and potential power. They have generated an amazing level of euphoria among the media and within the general community about their merits as individuals and as MPs; merits it must be said that were not previously recognised so enthusiastically.

They can now put demands to the major party leaders knowing that they have great leverage. These demands can range widely over what I have called the three Ps: policy, pork-barrel and preferment. To that list can be added a fourth P: Parliament.

They have already generated a range of interesting ideas about reform of Parliament and possible new public policies, capitalising on widespread public disillusionment with the party political system.

Sitting on large majorities in their own electorates they speak from a position of personal security. But they know that that security can always evaporate if they neglect or anger their own constituents.

An even bigger danger facing the Independents is that they are raising expectations about a 'new politics', like others before them, that may be eventually dashed. Kevin Rudd was one who suffered from raising expectations with excessive hyperbole about great moral challenges. This happened too with the Democrats who promised to keep the bastards honest.

Some of their ideas, like limited parliamentary reform, are practical, but others, like grand coalitions, are naive. The forces behind the status quo are strong and the public is fickle. If the Independents fail to deliver they might eventually suffer a backlash.

The Australian Greens' vote share has risen to new heights despite considerable opposition, including a vigorous last-minute attempt to scuttle them by a coalition that included sections of the media, the mining magnate Andrew Forrest on economic issues, and church magnate Cardinal George Pell on social issues. Like minor parties before them, the Greens, with limited resources to fight back, were hit hard but survived.

Notably the Greens represented an alternative to the major parties on issues like climate change, asylum seekers and refugees, same sex marriage, and the war in Afghanistan.

On some of these issues, like climate change and same sex marriage, opinion polls suggest they represent majority public opinion. On others, like asylum seekers and Afghanistan, their policies may only represent minority opinion, but they are contested issues on which debate should not be closed off.

Already a more open debate on the military commitment to Afghanistan is on the agenda.

The Greens too have scored by winning the balance of power in the Senate from next July. When that happens, it will generate the same hyper-publicity as is now enveloping the Independents. It will be the new Greens team on the front pages. The Greens too will have their opportunity to influence government policy (whether Abbott or Gillard) and, if they wish, to attempt to reform the operations of the Senate.

Not only do the Greens share similar opportunities as the Independents but they, in time, will come to share the dangers. They must satisfy rising expectations, among their members and supporters especially, while maintaining their core values.

That will not be easy as the Democrats found to their peril and eventual demise. The Democrats did their most productive work under Hawke-Keating Labor, and split and ultimately perished under a Howard Coalition government. The Greens too will be more relaxed, but still alert, under a Labor government, but may have to cross swords with a Coalition government.

This is an exciting time in parliamentary politics. However, history contains some sobering lessons for both the Independents and the Greens. They have to steel themselves for extensive negotiations and carefully manage the rising expectations that their success has created.

Why we're slow to help Pakistan

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Two weeks ago the United Nations [declared](#) the massive floods in Pakistan had affected 13.8 million people and eclipsed the scale of the devastating 2004 tsunami. Pakistan government and UN officials appealed for urgent relief efforts. Then UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon inspected the affected areas and was [shocked](#) by what he saw, as Pakistan's disaster was being described as the worst in living memory.



'A heart-wrenching day for me and for my delegation. I will never forget the destruction and sufferings I have witnessed today,' he said. 'In the past I have visited scenes of many natural disasters around the world, but nothing like this.'

Estimates of the number affected are now being put at 20 million, and the crisis is deepening as torrential rains continue to fall across the country. The biggest fear remains potential epidemics of waterborne diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera and hepatitis. Malaria outbreaks are also a concern, particularly in areas that remain cut off from the outside world by the flood waters.

But compared to previous emergencies such as the Haiti earthquake at the beginning of this year, international assistance has been slow to arrive.

There has been little clear explanation of why this is so. There is no doubt that potential donors are put off by reports of extremists meddling in relief efforts, though it's likely they are simply human beings helping others in need. Nevertheless they are seen to be exploiting the devastation for political purposes, attempting to win the hearts and minds of flood victims.

There are also 'credible' reports that Pakistani militants may target foreign aid workers involved in flood relief efforts, and consequently many people in western nations don't want to know about the disaster.

It seems that what could be discouraging us from reaching out to help the flood victims is the failing war effort in neighbouring Afghanistan, especially with the mounting number of deaths of Australian military personnel.

When thinking of the long-term, it is certainly relevant to consider the geo-political circumstances that affect the region's prospects. But for now, it is very unhelpful to link flood relief in Pakistan with eliminating political extremism from Afghanistan.

Media [commentaries](#) are understandably asking what Australia is doing in Afghanistan. They quote military analysts such as Hugh White, who believes the objectives we've set

ourselves are unachievable, and that ‘we will leave Afghanistan in a few years with Afghanistan looking very much the way it does today’.

That is hardly relevant to flood relief and attempts to prevent human catastrophe on a grand scale. It is true that the commentators themselves do not always link the Taliban to flood relief. But the problem is that the Australian public is being delivered a profoundly misleading subliminal message that is discouraging us from contributing to relief appeals for Pakistan flood victims.

We apply talk of the Afghanistan war as a wasted effort to Pakistan flood relief, which is somehow also a wasted effort because the Taliban are in the vicinity. Worse, the Taliban could use our aid to score propaganda victories. We do need to ask whether we care more about political points scoring or helping Pakistanis at their hour of need.

International relief initiatives are always hampered by politics, but the media usually manages to keep images of human suffering at the front and centre of their coverage of these emergencies. Such reporting is very effective in helping to ensure the success of the aid agencies’ relief appeals.

However in the current emergency, images of flood victims have so far been less prominent than analysis of the geo-political context of the unwinnable war in Afghanistan, and news of the Australian casualties.

It’s debatable whether media organisations have a moral obligation to show images of human suffering specifically for the purpose of kick-starting relief efforts. But they do make a profound difference to the success of humanitarian assistance when they do.

Australians have also been preoccupied with the election stalemate. But endless vision of politicians trying to work out their differences inevitably becomes tiresome, and a turn-off for TV viewers.

It’s to be hoped that we will indeed forget politics for a while — at home and abroad — and think about the part we can play in helping Pakistanis through their crisis.