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Life after suicide

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Tomorrow, Saturday 20 November, is the international memorial day for people bereaved by suicide. The two women featured in this video, Karen-Lee Johansen and Leigh White, have both had family members who took their own lives. Tomorrow both women, along with others who have lost loved ones to suicide, will take part in a memorial ceremony to be held beside the harbour at Balmoral on Sydney's north shore.

Johansen and White met each other in a group convened by the Salvation Army, and run by Dr Diana Sands, to help people come to terms with loss from suicide. Sands has developed a tripartite model, a three-stage process for people struggling with this particularly painful form of bereavement.

In the supportive environment of closed group sessions, Sands facilitates members metaphorically trying on the shoes of the loved one who has suicided, then walking in their shoes, and finally taking off the shoes and saying goodbye.

In this interview with Eureka Street TV, Johansen and White talk about their loss and bereavement, and the stigma, shame, guilt and bewilderment that are part of bereavement from suicide. They describe how Sands' program helped them deal with these crippling emotions, and led them to want to support others.

At the completion of the group process, Johansen and White, along with three other women, founded the support group Wings of Hope, which has just launched its website .

The statistics on suicide show how vital such support services are. Around 2000 Australians die every year from suicide. Males account for almost 80 per cent of these, and suicide is the cause of nearly one fifth of all deaths among men aged 20 to 34. About 100 school age children take their own lives every year.

The effects of these deaths ripple out to the deceased person's family, relatives, friends and colleagues.

Wings of Hope is testament to the fact that recovery and healing is possible even after the devastation of losing someone to suicide.

'Sheila' MacKillop boosts Catholic brand

RELIGION

Paul Collins

It's rare that you see people in the Roman Curia like Vatican Press chief, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, gob-smacked, but that's how he was when he saw the Australian media contingent for the canonisation of Mary MacKillop. At the press conference I attended there were a couple of Canadians and a few sundry others, and 35 media personnel from Australia.

But Lombardi was not the only one gob-smacked. So was I at the saturation media coverage.

Channels Seven and Nine, Sky, SBS, the ABC, *The Age* (representing Fairfax) and several other Australian newspapers covered the event. Channel Seven alone had 27 people from news and current affairs on the ground in Rome. Sky News had continuous coverage of the event from 4pm with a live cross to the actual canonisation ceremony from the Vatican.

7Two presented an hour-long Seven News Special from 6.30pm (in which I participated) and their *Sunday Night* program covered the miracles and associated stories with live crosses into the 7Two coverage. On Nine *Sixty Minutes* featured a story discussing the miracles.

ABC News 24 carried the canonisation Mass live, but with an inadequate commentary. Geraldine Doogue was in Rome for the event and *Compass* did a special on it. ABC News Radio did live crosses to Rome. The History Channel replayed their special *Blessed Mary* which curiously featured Alan Jones as host.

The next morning the radio and TV news programs gave the event extensive coverage. I was interviewed just outside the Piazza of Saint Peter's by none other than 'Kochie' (David Koch) on *Sunrise*. The Seven web page quoted me saying the canonisation 'confirms that women are very much part of the ministry of the Church and that in many ways the Church's foundations are built upon their work'.

I made sure I got that plug in!

So what is the significance of this saturation coverage? Commercial TV does not spend a lot of money on an event unless there is something to be gained. They must have assessed that Saint Mary touched a chord somewhere in the Australian psyche.

Sure, they treated it like a sporting event, but they had enough sense to realise that the main game (the liturgical event) lacked excitement, so they knew they needed a lot of 'fill' — back-up human interest stories, everything from miracles to the Mary Mac trinkets on sale in the Piazza.

The sporting analogy can be taken further. People long for heroes and heroines and much

of this has been focused on sportspeople, as well as those who gave their lives in war. Mary MacKillop fitted into that context perfectly. Here was a real heroine who gave her life in the service of others. She was a genuine battler who lived out and incarnated an ideal of Christian service to those at the margins.

So it's no wonder that the article on Mary MacKillop gets more hits than any other on the web page of the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

But even better than that, at least from an Australian perspective, she stood up to authority, to pretentious bishops. As a certain commentator said 'She was a real Australian sheila'. Even the inaccurate story that she reported a priest for sexual abuse added to her gloss.

But there is even more to it than that. Somehow the Mary event tapped into an unarticulated, inchoate, almost unconscious need for spirituality.

Monash University's Professor Garry Bouma in his *Australian Soul* (2006) argues that Australians are quietly spiritual rather than explicitly religious with an understated spirituality characterised by 'a serious, quiet reverence, a deliberate silence ... an inarticulate awe and a serious distaste for glib wordiness'.

I suspect that somehow Mary MacKillop touched this inner spiritual core, that she fulfilled the expectations people had of what a committed Christian should be like.

I'm not saying that commercial media worked this out for themselves. But they can be very good at tapping into what is really happening at a deeper level in the community, they can 'feel' the subtle undercurrents; can intuit unarticulated, even unconscious movements in the community.

Actually, I don't think the Catholic Church is as much 'on the nose' at present as is popularly thought. The majority of people don't have bad experiences of Catholicism and some of them know priests or laity whom they regard highly.

Yesterday it was reported that the canoniaation boosted enquiries at Australia's Catholic Enquiry Centre by 63 per cent in the past year. A total of 721 enquiries were received in 2010, and 27 per cent came in the month of the canonisation. And in my experience there is still a lot of interest in what happens within both church and Vatican.

All up I think the canonisation was a positive experience both for Australia and Catholics.

Anglicans and Catholics

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

The English Catholic Church is preparing to welcome five Anglican Bishops and over 40 priests under arrangements earlier made by the Vatican. Some time earlier, too, an English congregation decided to become Catholic. Some breathless commentators speculated whether this trickle would become a flood and lead to England again being Catholic.

But for Anglicans and Catholics more generally it was an opportunity to reflect soberly on the significance of these events, and indeed on the regular movement of members of each church into the other.

The heart of the matter is that people are involved in a significant personal journey. So they must receive the respect that is due to them. When church allegiance was more tribal and the identity of a church was often defined in terms of what it was not, those who changed churches received little respect. The churches which they left often saw them as traitors, and the church that received them saw them as trophies or as foreigners.

It is heartening that now people who leave one church for another are generally farewelled and received courteously, and wished well. In this case Rowan Williams spoke with exemplary graciousness of the Bishops who were leaving the Anglican Communion.

From one perspective, too, the procedures for receiving Anglicans into the Catholic Church embody respect for the people involved. They recognise the importance of spiritual and liturgical traditions within a person's faith and make space for them in the Catholic Church.

But these events do not simply touch on the individuals concerned. They also ask what kind of respect is due between churches. This is a complex question, because many churches see these relationships as asymmetrical.

The Catholic and Orthodox churches, for example, see their church as being exceptional and see other churches as lacking important qualities. In earlier Catholic theology, this was spelled out in terms of the Catholic Church being the true church and other churches as non-churches. This radical asymmetry made any relations, let alone respectful ones, very difficult.

In more recent theology, the Catholic Church has seen itself as embodying in flawed ways the full reality of Church. Other churches share in that reality to greater and lesser degrees. This gradated view of churches explains why the Catholic Church might be eager to enter into special relations with Anglican groups which share similar liturgical practice and doctrinal and moral views with the Catholic Church.

The acceptance that churches are linked by a common baptism means that, even if they do not see one another as equals, they must respect each other as family. In the case of the relationship between the Catholic and the Anglican churches, this means that when either side makes decisions that address members of the other church, the approach should follow consultation and communication between the churches.

In the Vatican's dealings with the Anglicans, the detail of how Bishops, priest and congregations should be received into unity with the Catholic Church was properly a matter for the Catholic Church alone. The establishment of a secretariate to reflect on such questions as the criteria for deciding whether people approved for ministry in one church should be accepted into Catholic ministry, and how the new group should relate institutionally to other groups within the Catholic Church, was an internal Catholic decision.

But respect would seem to demand that public announcement of special provisions for Anglican congregations and clergy were preceded by consultation and proper communication. It is clear from Archbishop Rowan Williams' response that this was not done satisfactorily. That the failure represented an older view of Catholic exceptionalism is suggested by the fact that the documents grounding the Vatican initiative maximised Catholic uniqueness.

Respect also normally demands reciprocity. This is germane in deciding whether congregations and other groups that move from one church to another should retain the use and ownership of their churches and other property. Under this principle, Catholic groups which decided to associate with the Anglican church would have the same rights to property as Anglican groups who wished to become Catholic.

Predictions that massive numbers of Anglicans will become Catholic seem far-fetched. Certainly, the Anglican communion was divided by the ordination of women as priests, and is sharply divided by proposals to ordain women Bishops and to ordain as Bishops men in openly homosexual relationships. But only some of those opposed to these initiatives would feel any attraction to Rome.

The response of the Anglican Church in Sydney to the ordination of women, for example, has been to explore the possibility of instituting lay celebrants of the Eucharist. Those attracted to this proposal would not find a natural home in the Catholic Church. So the number of Anglicans who might be expected to become Catholic is relatively small.

Harry Potter's dark days

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part One* (M). Director: David Yates. Starring: Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Ralph Fiennes, Alan Rickman. 146 minutes**

Forgive us now for what we've done

It started out as a bit of fun

Here, take these before we run away

The keys to the gulag

—'O Children', Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

This is the first half of the final instalment of the film series based on J. K. Rowling's phenomenal fantasy book series — otherwise known as the one where things get really dark.

Gone entirely are the quidditch matches, the schoolroom slapstick, the minutiae of life at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. *Deathly Hallows* is a dark and violent quest story to rival *The Lord of the Rings*. Its moments of respite are bittersweet at best, epitomised by the sight of two teenagers, alone in the woods and in the world, dancing to a gloomy Nick Cave ballad (quoted above) that crackles from a radio.

The Harry Potter kids are growing up, and growing up is rarely easy.

Anyone who has read the books or seen the previous films (and the filmmakers reasonably assume that anyone watching this has done so), should recall that the sixth instalment, *The Half-Blood Prince*, contained one major plot development, and much important plot detail. The former was the murder of Hogwarts' eccentric but wise headmaster, Albus Dumbledore (Michael Gambon), by the sinister Severus Snape (Rickman).

The latter mostly concerned the nature and history of the mythical horcruxes, a set of dark talismans that are bound to the mortality of boy wizard Harry's (Radcliffe) nemesis, Lord Voldemort (Fiennes).

Where *The Half-Blood Prince* was exposition-heavy, *Deathly Hallows* is much more action driven. It concerns Harry's quest, accompanied by his best friends Ron (Grint) and Hermione (Watson), to locate and destroy the horcruxes, believing this to be his best chance of defeating Voldemort. Ultimately this leads to the series' two biggest action setpieces, including the climactic and brutal Battle of Hogwarts.

Part One of the film adaptation leaves most of the larger-scale action for *Part Two*. Mostly it deals with the early stages of the quest, and on the growing frustrations and tensions among the trio. They are hunted, harried, and all but flying blind. They leave behind a world that has come under the grips of Voldemort and his Death Eater underlings, and where Harry, as the 'chosen one' prophesied to destroy Voldemort, is ever in danger.

They are tested physically and mentally, and their faith in each other is stretched taut. Gawky Ron's inferiority complex regarding the heroic Harry comes to a head, despite indications that romance is finally blossoming between him and perenial overachiever Hermione. The youths carry a radio, which utters an endless litany of names of wizards who have been murdered by Death Eaters. Bleak stuff.

The Harry Potter saga is a coming-of-age story, and *The Deathly Hallows Part One* finds the young wizards taking fearful strides into adulthood, unprotected by parents, teachers or mentors. They embrace responsibility through necessity. The 'keys to the gulag' have been handed to them; it's up to them to determine if the world they inherit will be marked by corruption and evil, or generosity and love.

Parents of young children should be warned: *Deathly Hallows* has its scary moments, among them a hand-to-hand battle with a giant snake. Magic exists here less as a source of colour and wonder, and more as a tool employed for pragmatic purposes — to conceal campsites from bandits who lurk in the woods, for example — or for outright self-defence.

Like many fictional 'chosen ones', Harry is an allegorical Christ figure, although we won't see the ultimate fulfillment of this until the climactic moments of *Part Two*. Likewise the saga's most poignant character arc, that of Severus Snape, who is barely glimpsed in *Part One*. Redemption is a key theme throughout the Harry Potter saga, but we are yet to see how effectively it will be resolved on screen.

The Deathly Hallows Part One is only half a film after all, and the extent of its achievement can not be fully judged until we see its conclusion next July. On its own it is nonetheless pacy and compelling, and contains nice stylistic choices; an animated sequence that tells the wizard-world fairytale about the titular 'Deathly Hallows' — three artefacts that together give their possessor power over death — is particularly memorable.

Aung San Suu Kyi and the limits of hope

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas

My refugeeness

HUMAN RIGHTS

Kim Huynh

Australia seems divided over boat people. There are those who condemn them as immoral, threatening and un-Australian. Accordingly we have to 'Stop' and perhaps even 'Bomb the Boats!' (as was emblazoned on the T-shirts of two anti-boat people protesters).

Others view boat people as the ultimate underdogs, tortured souls who have been made more worthy by their suffering. The bumper stickers and placards of these advocates proclaim, 'Refugees Welcome!'

Both accounts deserve careful scrutiny. Boat people are, after all, people. There are good and not so good ones; none of them are angels or devils. However because they are human, they are also marked by experience. I like to refer to this legacy of persecution, hardship and displacement as 'refugeeness'.

While the notion of refugeeness is broadly applicable, I first observed it close to home. My parents' earliest memories are of being terrorised by French and Viet Minh forces during the First Indochinese War. They endured poverty and disease. Both were torn away from their homes and loved ones by war.

But these experiences were not all negative. From their dislocation Mum and Dad fashioned radical perspectives on the world. They came to believe that the West offered ideas and technologies that could be fruitfully adopted in and for Vietnam.

My father would harbour a modern sense of can-do-ism and irreverence for tradition throughout his life. It was his vision of a new and better world along with the conviction that his sons had no future in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, that drove us on to that horribly overcrowded boat in 1979.

Mum and Dad's refugeeness — their capacity to make something practical out of practically nothing — also proved valuable after we escaped. During our ordeal in a Malaysian refugee camp they assembled lamps out of loose threads and cans, sieved rice flour using mosquito nets, and maintained our hut with a knife and spoon (both of which are still in the cutlery draw).

Yet my parents' victories were by no means absolute. The stress of secretly organising our escape, of knowing that one wrong move or twist of fate could lead to our demise, also had a lasting impact. To this day they have an instinctive distrust of the state that transcends ideology.

During the months preceding our departure, my parents contracted insomnia so that I have never known them to sleep for more than five hours at a time. Even when he is at rest, my father's fists are clenched. The sound of waves or the sight of an empty suitcase evokes in my mother an unsteady dismay.

Despite their contentedness in Australia and the fact that they return to Vietnam regularly, my parents are still burdened by the loss of their homeland.

Refugeness, then, has is pluses and minuses. I refer to the creativity and resourcefulness that comes with having one's ears close to the ground and eyes fixed on the horizon as a 'seismic outlook'. The less positive aspect of refugeeness, which incorporates a misanthropic dread and profound pessimism about the human condition, can be regarded as a 'phobic outlook'.

I often detect seismic and phobic dimensions in displaced people who I encounter in everyday life and my wider explorations. There's a strong seismic flavour, for example, to Albert Einstein's endeavours. His 'obstinate sense of detachment' (as he put it) was very much linked to his genius. Being apart from others was a prerequisite for his imaginative leaps.

Similarly, the great Italian author and Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, prized the resourcefulness and adaptability that he acquired in the camps. Amazingly, he calculated that the sum total of his experiences as a deportee made him 'richer and surer', 'taught him many things about man and the world' and were thus 'clearly positive'.

The Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss reacted to his dislocation in a far more phobic way. Strauss became convinced that Nazi thinking was 'instructive for Zionists' in the sense that if Jews were to survive they had to accept a world that was defined by conflict, prejudice and deception.

There is an unmistakeable phobic refugeeness in Roman Polanski's life and films, both of which are underpinned by cruelty, alienation and the absurd.

I have also detected a vein of refugeeness in me. If so, it would make sense to nurture my seismic side while curtailing the phobic outgrowths.

It perhaps follows that Australia should select 'good boat people' and reject the not so good ones. But it may not be desirable or even possible to vanquish some elements of refugeeness in order to favour others. Moreover, decisions about who deserves asylum should not turn on whether there are more positives than negatives in saving someone's life.

The seismic and phobic qualities of refugeeness can thus be imagined as two sides of the same ever spinning refugeeness coin. The point is not to bet on heads or tails, but rather to explore the history and symbolism of the inscriptions and to underline the value of the metal.

Swimming in ink

NON-FICTION

Vin Maskell

It's like swimming in ink.

A streetlight casts a shadow ahead of me as I step into the shallows but I am soon in the water's darkness, out of the light's reach.

Twenty metres from the shore and I'm waist deep in the ink. The red, green and orange lights of the shipping channels blink in unison in the bay, guiding the fishing boats and the cargo ships that are only discernible by their long-distance lamps.

To the south, orange dots mark the arc of the bayside suburbs while much closer are the streetlights curving around this little metropolitan beach, splashing pools of yellow and white on the footpath and the road between the life-saving club and the fishing ramp.

There is a swimmer out in the deeper water, beyond the yellow buoys. I can neither see him nor hear him but know he is there because his bike and his clothes are in their usual spot by the footpath.

He is out there, a fellow water man, in the real dark, in the blue-black ink. I am just here in the shallows, for I am not a swimmer. I go for a dip, not for a fair dinkum swim. Call it a type of baptism, or a wake-up dip, but don't call it a swim.

There are silhouettes of joggers now, of walkers and their dogs. On the road a flurry of cyclists, headlights and tail-lights flashing. You can't see their lycra, but you can hear their voices, urging each other on.

A Japanese woman stops by one of the streetlights and reads a few pages of a book, a book in which the ink set on the pages some time ago.

On my way here I passed a slowly moving car, its driver tossing newspapers onto driveways, the ink on the pages having only dried a few hours beforehand.

The first inks were possibly invented by the ancient Egyptians and Chinese, perhaps by mixing water with berries. Indian ink may have been used in about 400 BC, made with burnt bones, tar, pitch, and other substances.

As the woman walks to her next reading post I stop procrastinating and lunge into the water.

In daylight hours I usually swim with a snorkel, for I've yet to figure out the knack of breathing when swimming. But donning a snorkel would be ridiculous, comical, here in the

half-hour before dawn.

It is surprising, though, what one can see, in the sunshine in summer, when swimming near either of the two rocky groynes that protect, like parentheses, this little beach: zebra fish, puffer fish, jelly fish, star fish, stingrays, sea urchins. But no cuttlefish, although you'll find their chalky backbones washed up on the shore.

The Roman writer Cicero apparently wrote that ink made from a cuttlefish pouch was used in his time, about 50 BC. The cuttlefish, and its cephalod cousins the octopus and the squid, eject a black inklike fluid when in danger. And the squid possesses a transparent internal shell known as a pen or quill.

I open my eyes under the water and just make out the blurs that are my hands. No separate fingers, just clumps of flesh at the ends of my arms.

A foetus in a womb.

I swim about 50 metres, then I stop and stand, panting, in the stillness, soaking up the moment so that I can draw upon it later in the day, seated in an office block in the city where the only water comes from a tap, and the only blinking lights are those of unanswered telephones and overworked inkjet printers.

The reader has now made her way further along the footpath and stands, eyes down.

The deep swimmer has silently emerged and is by his bike, drying and dressing.

With my breath back I lunge into the ink again.

In the office in the city an inkjet will spray black words on white paper, words that, while English, can seem quite foreign. In 1941 George Orwell wrote: 'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms — like cuttlefish squirting out ink.'

The German writer Goethe may have been thinking similarly in 1819 when he wrote 'Modern poets mix a lot of water with their ink.'

I move through the water as best I can, arms, legs, lungs, eyes, mouth all trying to move in unison.

I always thought I would be one to use fountain pens, that I would write in a steady rhythm. But the Platignum nib seemed to scratch the paper rather than glide across it. The ink eked rather than flowed. I was clumsy with the pen and the ink, just as I am clumsy with my body and the sea.

The first modern fountain pen was created by a water man in 1884, a Lewis Edson Waterman, of New York. While quill and steel pens had to be dipped in ink, the Waterman fountain pen was the first to hold its own ink within a self-contained reservoir.

My fountain pen, most likely given to me by my parents, ended up at the back of a drawer in my study, with paper-clips and receipts, with floppy discs and staples, with letters, hand-written in ball-point pens, from long-time friends.

Having managed to swim a little more without taking in any water, I walk to my towel. I half-expect to be dyed black or blue, and for my nails to have a gothic hue. I expect my red swimming cap to be stained purple.

But no, the day's first light has crept up behind me without fuss or fanfare, without warmth or shadows, and I am still my pale self.

By now a car would have slowed by my house. A newspaper would have landed on my driveway.

In 1952 the Sheaffer pen company produced the Sheaffer Snorkel fountain pen, described as 'the world's most complex fountain pen filling system ... unlike its namesake the pen was designed to take fluid in rather than stay free of it.' If I ever try writing with a fountain pen again, maybe I'll try to find the Sheaffer Snorkel. Or a Waterman.

The streetlights have blinked off. The constellations of boats and ships and bayside suburbs have faded. The joggers and the walkers and the next wave of swimmers are all three-dimensional. The herd of cyclists complete another lap.

The swimmer from the deep rides home. The reader from Japan closes her book.

I pull on my shoes, tie my laces. Pick up my towel.

The ink has is again evaporating into the sky, or seeping into the wet sand, back down into the inkwell of the sea.

One day at Villawood

COMMUNITY

Ben Coleridge

'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me.' Matthew chapter 25, verse 40

'Well, Stephanie, nobody likes children in detention, but bear in mind that the decision in I think all cases for them to be brought to this country is not made by the Australian Government ... I mean, I'm sorry for the children, but that is not the fault of the Australian Government.' John Howard, 2005

Not so long ago I was at Villawood Detention Centre for a day visit accompanying some people who visit there each week.

There are three stages of security at Villawood. Stage 1 is the most secure. Stage 3 is slightly less oppressive and houses families with children. It is surrounded by razor wire. Inside the wire are small cabins where families live. They look like small suburban homes and appear to contain all conventional comforts — televisions, couches and kitchens.

It was a windy day and we sat for a couple of hours in the doorway of one home, talking with its occupants. They brought us drinks and biscuits. We talked about anything and everything, but our conversation was laced with uneasy references to our surroundings.

One younger man told us of his distress: he had not heard from his family in his home country for months. He told us that he was so glad our group came to visit, because we were the only 'good' Australians he had met. Without the weekly visits by the people in our group, he would have thought that all Australians wished him ill. He had been (and was still) entertaining thoughts of suicide.

As the conversation wound down, a ball was produced. Soon enough there was a group of children in the yard and a soccer game was about to begin. First we had to decide the teams. I asked one small boy, whose family was from Sri Lanka, which country he wanted his team to be.

'Australia,' he yelled back.

'What, really?' I said, 'what about Brazil, or Argentina?'

'No way! We're Australia! And you guys can be India!'

With that the game began. India was soon brought to its knees by the vigorous Australian team.

Weeks later on a beautiful spring day I was walking in a local park in Melbourne. A group

of children from the nearby school were having physical education class in the park and were kicking balls around, running hell-for-leather across the lawn. It struck me then that both these groups of children are equally in our care: both embody our future.

Both groups were full of life, happy to be playing games in the sun. But one group of children was behind razor wire, escorted to an ordinary local school every day by detention centre guards who picked them up and took them back when school was done.

A comforting voice inside my head murmured: 'Well, circumstances are complex, you have to take all the factors into account, you have to be reasonable.' This voice counselled me to avoid sentimentality.

But for all its soft persuasiveness, the voice could not distract from the stark contrast. In this case, that there was one group of children playing at the park, while another played in a jail yard. And that in that Stage 3 jail yard there was an adult who thought of death.

'Complexity', I decided, 'can sometimes mask fundamental truths.'

The two quotes at the beginning of this article embody different poles in the debate about our treatment of asylum seekers. One is characterised by 'moral heroism'; it is an active position which sees a deep value in caring for the vulnerable. It can be readily derided because it does not licence 'pragmatism'.

The other is characterised by 'obligation;' it is a passive position which implies we have a 'duty' to respond in 'reasonable' terms, but no more. It does not licence empathy or imagination, fellow feeling or creative thinking, about how we might respond to these contemporary challenges.

The community debate on mandatory detention and the treatment of asylum seekers has generally hovered between these two poles; opinion has been tugged one way or the other by competing voices.

Recently, the pendulum swung in the direction of moral heroism, but not too far from reasonableness. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen has announced that over the next eight months more than 700 children and their families will be moved out of detention centres to live in the community (under supervision).

It is moral heroism in the context of the Australian debate. But it is also a decision based on a realistic assessment of the effects of detention on individuals and especially children.

It recognises that, regardless of how materially comfortable the prison conditions might be, if you take human beings who have not committed a crime and deprive them of freedom, the contradiction wedged at the heart of their imprisonment will drive them mad. Take children and imprison them and their lives will bear its mark.

I understood this when I walked out of Villawood. It was awkward. Although we had been

companions in soccer, tea and conversation, my friends and I were free to leave, while our hosts were not. And as they watched us leave, those words sounded quietly in my mind: '*whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers ...*'

Refugee poems

POETRY

Various

Cargo? ... notes for another way

with 50-something women at the helm
an armada of small craft and a network
of long-haired young men, texting
dates_coordinates_times, a naval officer
let's call her Jane, and an old man leaning
into his walker, a stay-at-home dad, a couple
of farmers and an albatross — keep track
of the next boat spotted in the Timor Sea.
at dusk, an ad hoc flotilla sets out to intercept
the 'cargo', bypasses Christmas Island, sails
or motors south to near Geraldton, where
a church van and an elderly citizens bus —
eight members of the CWA on hand
with tea and fruit and scones —
greet the new arrivals. the local pool
provides shower facilities and an Aboriginal GP
and a white nurse, both Jack, offer medical
assistance, inoculations, and jelly beans for the kids.
half a dozen interpreters arrive.
dark falls early. a welcome to country
follows — chatter around a campfire, a taste
of bush tucker. families disperse
to their billets, as country closes

round them all, not swallowing Korah and his sons
but adopting kin. the local school is in on it
and the market prints its own currency.
a collection of old bikes turns up from Perth.
in a place big enough to get lost, community
gardens appear at every camp. the elders
& the country & the ochre earth, the unfamiliar
scrub & the chameleon kindness of air — camouflage
the visitors, with only the surveillance of owls.

Anne Elvey

Illiterate

Newspaper's black lines a web to avoid;
Sorry mate, I forgot my glasses,
what's the address it says down there?
Dole form a fortnightly exercise
in tactical evasion, camouflage
of well-tried tricks thrown over a lack
as gaping and dark as any man-trap.
Parents didn't read; teachers flicked
him too soon to the too-thick basket
where he has waited,
exiled from others' thoughts,
these twenty long years or more.
Refugee from the widest continent
of knowledge, erased from words,
can no-one cast a spell for him
to right himself;

to write his own tale?

P. S. Cottier

Go and open the door

'Go and open the door'

Miroslav Holub 1923-1998

Go and open the door,

stare at the bright blue sea

for boats

struggling southwards from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan.

Feel the rippling fear of refugees

wondering if supplies will last

or a hand reach out
or turn and lock the door.

John Collard

Aung San Suu Kyi, refugees and bikies

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The weekend's big news was the release on Saturday of Burma's democracy hero Aung San Suu Kyi. Because it was so stage-managed by the Burmese Government, it's hard to describe the release itself as a step forward for human rights. More significant perhaps was reporting of how she faced her captivity.

A London *Times* report published in *The Australian* on Friday depicted her at peace with herself and her God. It said she rises early and spends hours in Buddhist meditation, before listening to the news on her shortwave radio. After a meeting with her last year, the British ambassador described Suu Kyi as 'composed, upright, crackling with energy'.

No doubt her attitude and spirit is what has the potential to carry the people of Burma forward. Availablity for political office is secondary.

Meanwhile Thursday was a momentous day for justice and human rights in Australia. Politicians, effectively engaged in mob rule by proxy, were humiliated. Separate High Court judgments upheld the legal rights of the Sri Lankan refugees M61 and M69, and South Australian bikies , in the face of fiercely determined political will.

Former prime minister John Howard was not mindful of the law and UN protection obligations incorporated into Australian law when he declared before the 2001 federal election: 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.' He knew he had the support of the people, and this was soon demonstrated by the election result.

It was support of the people that mattered. His Labor successors had the opportunity to reverse the thinking. They could have declared: 'The law will decide who comes to this country …|'. They did not, and indeed they could act to frustrate the legal rights recognised by Thursday's judgment.

Last year South Australian premier Mike Rann admitted he had a personal axe to grind against motorcycle gang leaders: 'I am determined that criminal bikie gangs won't run our pubs, our clubs, or run our streets.'

Thursday's High Court judgment ruled unconstitutional a provision in Rann's anti-bikie laws that allows the Attorney-General to use secret evidence to pass judgment on individuals on the basis that they are members of an organisation such as a bikie gang that is involved in

'serious criminal activity'.

Like federal politicians promising to 'stop the boats', Rann managed to cultivate fear in people, declaring that motorcycle gangs 'are involved in everything from murder to rape to extortion to kidnapping to running protection rackets'.

Popular fear is political gold.

It could be instructive for Australia's leaders to remind themselves that cultivation of fear among the people is essentially what keeps totalitarian leaders in power. Arguably it makes little difference whether the people fear invasion by boat people, rape and pillage by bikies, or intimidation by the police or military. The promise by corrupt, ambitious, or even well-meaning leaders to deliver them from fear is irresistible. The law can't do that, it can only treat all people equally.

Burma is the totalitarian regime most on our mind, following Suu Kyi's release and the sham election earlier this month. Suu Kyi has worked out that passive resistance based on interior strength is the best way to overcome the attempts of political leaders to intimidate her. After years of being cut down by authorities, she not only survives, but flourishes.

It's likely that she also holds fast to the maxim that political leaders ignore the law at their peril. No doubt she'd have taken heart if she heard on her shortwave radio last week that Australia's politicians had learned that lesson, even if it was clear that the leaders in her homeland would take much longer.

Shopping as communion

COMMUNITY

Sarah Kanowski

My young daughter and I caught a bus into the city to do some shopping. A seemingly mundane errand was transformed into something magical. Meeting the world through her curious eyes made me stop and see things afresh: a top hat in a shop window, 'just like in that storybook'; a stained-glass parrot peering over a door frame; a creaking grille lift with pulleys and a handle.

Weaving in and out of stores and crossing streets, we passed back and forth under the sky, feeling the weather change, the day shift. Staying connected with the real world this way made it a very different experience to the kind that might be had in a sealed and modulated shopping mall.

We were there to take shoes to be re-soled, purchase a new watchband, and replace a cracked tea cup. A neat fairytale set of three tasks. Visiting the cobbler was a particular delight — a rare encounter in the modern city with real craftsmanship skills, and a father and son happy to answer the questions of a chatty three-year-old.

The trip, and Eva's excitement, reminded me of outings I had made as a child, coming from country Queensland to visit my grandmother in Brisbane. Always beautifully-groomed, Nana would put on an especially good 'town' dress, dust her skin with face powder, and spray a little *eau de cologne* behind her ears. Our ritual trip to Darrell Lea for a miniature bottle of rainbow-coloured sweets was one Eva and I repeated.

Our Saturday adventure got me thinking about the role of shopping in our lives, a role that grows, triffid-like, in the approach to Christmas. Was my enjoyment nothing more than middle-class nostalgia? How did this leisurely trip compare with December's jostling in the supermarket queue, besieged by piped carols?

It seems right to be dismissive of the ridiculously elevated place shopping has in our culture, part indulgent leisure activity, part fantasia of a ready-made store-bought identity. The mass of credit card debt and our vast social inequity is evidence of consumerism gone mad.

But if my experience is any guide, then our caution about consumerism can easily slide into something else; a false division of experience into grubby materialism versus pure spirituality.

It is salutary to remember that trade is an old, old human activity. Buying and selling has shaped history. Alongside goods, new ideas and practices get exchanged, leading to the creation of remarkable civilisations from Baghdad, to Shanghai, to New York.

On a more domestic note, much of our modern human interaction takes place while shopping. Like it or not, that is where many of us encounter the world beyond immediate family, friends and work colleagues. Shops are an important field of social interaction.

More than that, our experience of shopping exemplifies that the secret of real communion lies in approaching all of our life, 'secular' and 'spiritual' alike, with an open heart.

Recently my local supermarket introduced self-serve lanes. Instead of handing our items to cashiers, we scan them ourselves, and insert money into a flashing slot, before packing our things into bags. Cheerful 'transition staff' keep watch over the lanes, helping confused shoppers navigate the new technology.

Beyond the poignancy of witnessing people doing a job intended to make their original ones redundant, this 'innovation' depresses me. One less opportunity for the kind of civility than makes a society tick.

The conversations we have when buying groceries may seem insignificant — a 'hello', 'how are you?', a comment on the weather or the football result. But these brief, spontaneous interactions go a long way to keeping us human. They are how we maintain a connection with the world outside of ourselves, and can be a real life-line for those kept at home by old age or young children.

The assumption is that if we make things like shopping more efficient then we free up time to do the real things in life. But what are these *real* things? This is the deep question: where are we rushing to get to with all our efficiency? Because that is where our life is — exactly there, in the saying hello, exchanging a smile, remarking on the weather.

The community we all crave is at our doorstep — where we shop, when we catch the bus — if only we would see it.

There is real value to be found in shopping, as Eva and I discovered together. It comes not from purchases made but from the unexpected moments of communion. This is not a present that needs to be wrapped: the gift of connection and conviviality is available for free right there at the cash register.

Asylum seeker decision tests Government sportsmanship

HUMAN RIGHTS

Kerry Murphy

A litmus test for the health of a democracy is what a Government does when it loses cases in the highest court in the land. In Australia, there is a history of both Labor and Coalition governments legislating away a loss by changing the law so they win the legal point in the future.

Sometimes this may be a genuine reform, but the experience of those working with refugees is that Governments do not take kindly to defeats in the courts and want to limit or prevent access to the courts in the first place.

Differences in policy are likely between Governments and advocates, but to ensure justice, the process should be transparent. Governments do not like their decisions being subject to judicial scrutiny, but this is an essential part of our democracy.

For some time there have been attempts to legislate away from the rule of law in refugee processing, by trying to minimise judicial review of decisions on asylum seekers by the executive. The excision provisions introduced in 2001 meant cases would be processed in a legal vacuum, by ministerial discretion, rather than be subject to the law.

The decision in the High Court regarding two Tamils called M61 and M69 challenged that position. The High Court found that the Government made errors of law in these two cases.

The so called 'refugee status assessment' (RSA) process for excised asylum seekers who are in detention around the country mimics parts of the onshore protection visa process. Applicants are provided with representation, they are interviewed, an assessment is made, and a review is possible.

The review is done mainly by former Refugee Review Tribunal members. Curiously these 'reviewers' are subcontracted by a company called Wizard People. Until now, the officers looking at these cases did not feel bound by the more rigorous RRT procedural fairness requirements. So assessments were made which, if done by the RRT, would have been overturned by the Courts for jurisdictional error.

Legally, you can only be detained while your case for asylum is being considered or arrangements are being made to remove you. The High Court found that for the detention of excised people to be lawful, there must have been a process underway to consider whether people met the refugee criteria.

This process must also comply with the laws of procedural fairness and other laws. It cannot be done in a 'law free zone'. It was in the process of considering the claims that the

High Court found errors of law.

In the cases of M61 and M69 adverse assessments were made based upon country information that was not given to these applicants to comment upon. The High Court found unanimously that in the process of the 'review' these failures were errors of law.

The first consequence of the decision is that many cases will need to be reconsidered. This will take some time and, unless alternatives to detention are established, more detention centres will be needed to cope with the increasing numbers of people detained.

The Government has an opportunity to take the middle ground and release people into the community while this process is undertaken. That will free up the detention centres and also must be cheaper than keeping thousands of people detained for long periods.

The hardline approach would be to re-establish the 'Pacific Solution' (which was neither pacific nor a solution) and try to escape possible judicial review.

The response by the Government will tell us how willing the minority Labor Government is to accept that these decisions should be made in a legal process where asylum seekers are given procedural fairness and are subject to the rule of law.

Meaning amid wedding chaos

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Does 'life imitate art'? Surely it's the other way round. But perhaps I haven't been looking closely enough.

On 2 October this year I was strolling through Melbourne's Treasury Gardens and then past Parliament House and on up Spring Street. It was a luminous, first-day-of-spring kind of late afternoon. The sun, for the first time in months, was warm, the sky vast, blue and high. People in the parks were lounging or dozing or kissing and, in the city streets, straggling along in laughter-filled, ragged groups.

At first, I didn't notice what was really going on. Wandering along in my own particular elegiac daze, I marvelled at what seemed to be a convention of stretch limos.

Usually you see just one or two. But here they were, parked at curbs adjacent to grassy slopes, or in convenient spots near the Parliament steps, gleaming with polish, each with a grey-uniformed, peak-capped driver in respectful alert attendance or flicking a cloth idly across the dustless duco.

Bizarrely, it reminded me for an instant of funerals — the long, hearse-like cars, the uniforms, the waiting — but these were happy funerals and, suddenly, looking across to the lawns and up to the top of the Parliament steps, I saw it all again in different terms.

There were brides everywhere: on slopes of lawn; bathed in spangles of light fragmented through over-arching branches; on the top steps; on the bottom steps, as if just having made a grand entrance down a huge staircase. Dazzling, mostly in flowing white or cream, they posed and smiled and looked down and up and across as a photographer puppeteer pulled his invisible strings.

And milling around uncertainly, their bridesmaids: squeezed into blues and purples and golds, some sashed and hatted, some svelte and curvaceous beneath a precarious tower of hair, others sweating, bulging and secretly vowing to return next week to the gym.

At the edge of each knot of resplendent women stood the groom. Uncomfortable in a suit or a constricting collar or a slightly askew bow tie or colours they'd never worn before and would never wear again if they had any say in it. Many of the grooms looked curiously grumpy. Wasn't this their day of days? What was going wrong here?

Well, one thing that had gone wrong was that a wedding carefully planned to miss the AFL Grand Final by one week had been stymied by the drawn game the previous week. For that

reason at least these grooms would never forget their wedding day.

As I walked from one bridal group to the next, threading through casual onlookers and guests and families — fathers of brides strapped into once-a-year suits, desperate for a drink and worrying about the speech; mothers of grooms behind their smiles aghast at what this new force in their boy's world had made him wear — I had a strange sense of familiarity. Where had I come across all this before?

And this was where life began imitating art.

Philip Larkin's wonderful poem, 'The Whitsun Weddings', tells of the poet's train journey to London during which, at station after station, friends and families farewell the Whitsun brides and grooms on their honeymoon. 'At first' he doesn't notice 'what a noise/The weddings made/Each station that we stopped at ...' But as the wedding parties draw his attention, he looks more closely.

Struck, I leant

More promptly out next time, more curiously,

And saw it all again in different terms:

The fathers with broad belts under their suits

And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;

An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,

The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,

The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

Yes,

...the wedding-days

Were coming to an end. All down the line

Fresh couples climbed aboard ...;

The last confetti and advice were thrown,

And, as we moved, each face seemed to define

Just what it saw departing: children frowned

At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;

The women shared

The secret like a happy funeral;

While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared

At a religious wounding

Remembering the poem, I strolled on, buoyed up somehow by this sense of life's resilience, its dogged faith in repeated ceremony, the way it gave itself meaning no matter what kinds of chaos, disappointment or unforeseen blows intervened.

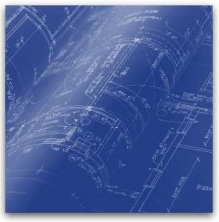
The drawn Grand Final had sent a tremor through a thousand wedding parties; recriminations threatened, tempers shortened; brides wept, in-laws interfered, grooms said the wrong thing then made a mess of their apology; and the Saints lost again.

Like Larkin as the bridal train rolled into London, I was moved and heartened by 'this frail/ coincidence of weddings/ [which] stood ready to be loosed with all the power/That being changed can give'. And 'there swelled/A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain'.

A plan to overcome poverty

POLITICS

Frank Quinlan



During this year's anti-poverty week the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin said: 'Reducing poverty is a major challenge and requires all governments, non-government agencies, business and the community to work together to address it.'

There can be no doubt that poverty in Australia is a substantial problem and that it is increasing, despite our economic prosperity. Using quite a stringent standard of assessment, a study commissioned by ACOSS and conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW in estimated that:

... the number of Australians living in poverty is increasing. Approximately 2.2 million people, or 11.1 per cent of Australians lived in poverty in 2006 — the latest date for which statistics are available — compared with 9.9 per cent in 2004 and 7.6 per cent in 1994.

In 2006, this test counted single adults living on less than $281 per week — a very tough existence by most community standards.

So we have a major problem that can only be overcome by relevant governments, business, and community and non-government agencies working together.

'We need a plan,' I hear you say.

The idea of developing a national plan to overcome poverty is not a new one. This year, Anti-Poverty Week in October marked eight years since the Australian Senate established the most extensive inquiry into poverty in more than 30 years.

That inquiry eventually made 95 recommendations including that 'a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy be developed at the national level' after 'not longer than a 12 month period of consultation', and that 'a statutory authority or unit reporting directly to the Prime Minister be established with responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring a national anti-poverty strategy'.

Eight years on we are still waiting for such a plan.

Currently, we have national plans for such things as defence, conservation and management of sharks, national broadband, combating pollution of the sea by oil and other noxious and hazardous substances, continence management, recovery of the south-eastern red-tailed black cockatoo, and many more.

We have national plans to overcome problems we identify as being important. A good plan will include a thorough assessment of the problem; the identification of interventions that are most likely to impact the problem; the allocation and coordination of the resources required to make the interventions; ongoing evaluation and reassessment of the necessary interventions; and monitoring to determine progress.

It's time we had a national plan to overcome poverty.

But the Senate's recommendations did not stop at the implementation of a plan. The Senate recognised that there is a need for us to monitor progress, and report it annually to Parliament. Implementing such a recommendation would mean Anti-Poverty Week could comprise more than simply aspirational statements about a general desire to overcome poverty.

Annual reporting to Parliament would serve a number of purposes. It would report progress on agreed indicators, and could review indicators to ensure new kinds of disadvantage were identified and addressed as they appeared (the recent emergence of a digital divide is an example of a relatively new indicator).

Annual reporting would also send a message to the community, including those living in poverty, that poverty matters, and that we are trying to do something about it.

If we had started eight years ago, it is likely we would be seeing significant progress by now. Many of the problems associated with poverty are intergenerational, and the strategies that will overcome them must also be intergenerational.

Our current interventions are short term and ad hoc. Currently the longest government funding agreements in social and community services offer three years of funding; 12 month agreements are much more common. These programs are funded by a multitude of departments working largely in isolation from each other at all levels of government. They are supplemented, and often subsidised, by philanthropy from various sources.

None of these interventions takes place within an overarching or coordinated framework, and funding cycles often see successful pilot programs fall by the wayside.

This year's Anti-Poverty Week could have been a celebration of the beginning of our success. Instead it marked another year of lost opportunity.

Teen depression nightmare

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Loved Ones* (MA). Director: Sean Byrne. Starring: Xavier Samuel, Robin McLeavy, John Brumpton, Richard Wilson, Jess McNamee. 84 minutes**

Good horror films aren't just about gore. More important are the ways in which the story preys upon the audience's fears, and the filmmaker's skill in creating atmosphere and using other cinematic tools to evoke a rising sense of dread.

Central to this is sympathy for the characters: as with any dramatic narrative, if you don't care for the characters in a horror film, you won't care what happens to them. It's the task of the script and the actors to make sure you do.

The Loved Ones is gory, but it is also an effective and memorable horror film, by all of the above criteria.

It might be a stretch to describe this decidedly twisted film set in country Victoria as a meditation on loss and grief. But these themes do play out throughout the film. They are universal human realities that allow us to sympathise with the central character, Brent (Samuel), during the increasingly horrendous ordeal he is subjected to.

Even before the ordeal begins, Brent is not loving life. His father was recently killed in a car accident; Brent, on his L-plates, was driving at the time. During the months since, Brent has declined into a drugged and depressed daze. He carries a razorblade on a chain around his neck, and the self-inflicted wounds on his forearms both reflect his current emotional torment, and foreshadow the as-yet unknown physical torture that is to come.

The ordeal Brent soon undergoes awakens his survival instinct, which for the borderline suicidal teen translates neatly into a renewed will to live.

It begins innocently enough. Brent turns down an invitation from an infatuated fellow student, Lola (McLeavy), to parter her to an impending high school dance. It's not an unkind refusal; Brent simply already has a date. But, like the villain of high school horror classic *Carrie* (a major reference point for this film), Lola's socially awkward exterior masks a disturbed interior. She responds with violence.

The snub leads her, like the antihero of another horror classic, *Misery* (also a major reference point), to kidnap and torture the object of her infatuation, Brent.

Many of the torture scenes, occurring in a rural home decked in gaudy school dance paraphernalia (this is Lola's twisted teen-dream fantasy, after all), are graphic and disturbing,

although writer/director Byrne offers the frequent respite of comic relief.

But *The Loved Ones* contains a poignancy that helps it transcend the deservedly maligned 'torture porn' genre. It is clear that Lola is a product of lifelong abuse from her beloved Daddy (Brumpton), himself quietly deranged. From *Frankenstein* onwards the most pitiable monsters have been those who are not to blame for their own monstrosity. Lola's gleefully girlish sadism occasionally reveals glimpses of childlike fear, and even desperate love. We fear her, but feel sorry for her, too.

A comedic subplot involving Brent's stoner mate Jamie (Wilson) and his emo dance date (McNamee) is fairly puerile and segues heavy-handedly with the themes of the main storyline. More effective are the earnest fears of Brent's mother and his girlfriend, Holly (Thaine), distraught at Brent's disappearance. Ultimately Brent's best reason to live is that he is loved.

Aborigines and the Constitution

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas

Football hero's homeless grace

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Recently a man in my town took up residence on the town football field, in a small tent in the northwestern corner, near the copse of trees.

He had been a terrific football player some years ago for our high school, and then played in university, and then a couple of years in the nether reaches of the professional ranks, and then he had entered into several business ventures, but these had not gone so well, and he had married and had children, but that had not gone so well either, and finally he took up residence on the football field, because, as he said, that was where things had gone well, and while he knew for sure that people thought he was nuts to pitch a tent on the field, he sort of needed to get balanced again, and there was something about the field that was working for him in that way as far as he could tell after a few days, so, with all due respect to people who thought he was a nutcase, he thought he would stay there until someone made him leave.

He had already spoken with the cops, he said, and it was a mark of the general decency of our town that he was told he could stay a while as long as he didn't interfere with use of the field, which of course he would never think of doing, and it was summer, anyways, so the field wasn't in use much.

He had been nicknamed the Hawk when he was a player, for his habit of lurking around almost lazily on defense and then making a stunning strike, and he still speaks the way he played, quietly but then amazingly, and when we sat on the visiting team's bench the other day he said some quietly amazing things, which I think you should hear.

The reporter from the paper came by the other day, he said, and she wanted to write a story about the failure of the American dream, and the collapse of the social contract, and she was just melting to use football as a metaphor for something or other, and I know she was just trying to do her job, but I kept telling her things that didn't fit what she wanted, like that people come by and leave me biscuits and sandwiches, and the kids who play lacrosse at night set up a screen so my tent wouldn't get peppered by stray shots, and the cops drift by at night to make sure no one's giving me grief.

Everyone gets nailed at some point so we understand someone getting nailed and trying to get back up on his feet again. I am not a drunk and there's no politicians to blame. I just lost my balance. People are good to me. You try to get lined up again.

I keep the field clean. Mostly it's discarded water bottles. Lost cell phones I hang in a plastic bag by the gate. I walk the perimeter a lot. I saw coyote pups the other day. I don't have

anything smart to say. I don't know what things mean. Things just are what they are. I never sat on the visitors' bench before, did you? Someone leaves coffee for me every morning by the gate.

The other day a lady came by with twin infants and she let me hold one while we talked about football. That baby weighed about half of nothing. You couldn't believe a human being could be so tiny, and there were two of him. That reporter, she kept asking me what I had learned, what would I say to her readers if there was one thing to say, and I told her what could possibly be better than standing on a football field holding a brand-new human being the size of a coffee cup. Everything else is sort of a footnote.

If you stay really still at dusk you can see the progression of what's in the sky in order, which is swallows, then swifts, then bats, then owls, then lacrosse balls, and when the lacrosse guys are finished they stop by to say hey and to tell me they are turning off the field lights. Real courteous kids, those kids. If the world to come is going to be run by kids who play lacrosse, I think we are in excellent hands.

Getting to know Indonesia

HUMAN RIGHTS

Stephen Minas

Gareth Evans once said that 'no two neighbours anywhere in the world are as comprehensively unlike' as Australia and Indonesia. It sometimes seems that the gulf between Australian perceptions of Indonesia and the reality of that country is just as wide.

To be sure, much of the old hostility is gone. The 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, coming as it did soon after the Bali bombings and the East Timor transition, was a circuit breaker for the relationship. The Howard Government responded quickly, effectively and with Opposition support. Australian people gave generously. Australian aid workers and experts were well represented in the massive, multinational recovery effort which followed.

But the old stereotypes still break through. Take a Liberal campaign ad that this year attempted to rekindle old fears of invasion from the north. In it, a red arrow labelled 'Indonesia' points menacingly at the heart of Australia, together with other arrows labeled 'Sri Lanka', 'Iran', 'Iraq' and 'Afghanistan'. The voiceover from Tony Abbott: 'We've got to take stronger measures now' to 'stop illegal immigration'.

Crass, puerile but also telling. How many other nations could Australia's alternative government so offensively depict? How many foreign heads of state could be depicted in a cartoon in an Australian newspaper, as Indonesian President Yudhoyono was, in an act of sodomy?

And for all the decent reporting that's regularly done, Indonesia tends to appear in the tabloid press and on commercial TV in the most unflattering of lights: as a source of a 'flood' of asylum seekers arriving by boat; as a hotbed of Islamic extremism and terrorism; and as a state which imposes heavy sentences, including the death penalty, on Australians convicted of drugs charges.

It creates an unbalanced impression. Australians will know about the bombing tragedies but probably not about the sustained success of Indonesia's counter-terrorism program. Nor the fact that violent extremists are a small, shunned minority.

One Indonesian, a professional in his 30s, told me how much he hates terrorism, because it wrecks lives in Indonesia and shames his country. Does anyone seriously believe this is not the view of the vast majority? The reality is that Indonesia is no better represented by a grinning zealot like Amrozi than America would be by Timothy McVeigh (tellingly, both killers at war with their own government).

In addition to being unbalanced, the standard fare on Indonesia is too narrow. In focusing

on a set of problems of obvious Australian concern, serious effort to understand Australia's most important neighbour is foregone. Contrast this to reporting on China or the US, where usually there is no Australian angle.

This is a misjudgment, not only because of Indonesia's importance to Australia but because positive things are happening there quickly.

Take the campaign to end the widespread practice of *pasung* — confinement of people with mental illnesses — as a revealing example. Such people are often literally tied down and can be kept immobile for years on end. In June the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on a social affairs institution in which *pasung* is practised and where conditions were particularly awful.

After reading the article, a psychiatrist from the Directorate of Mental Health, Dr Eka Viora, contacted the institution's director. What followed was a delicate negotiation to improve the patients' lot.

The director, Suhartono, stressed that his centre had a 'special treatment' for mental illness and that he did not want a hospital to 'interfere' with it. Suhartono was nevertheless persuaded to let a hospital team inspect the physical health of his charges, who were found to be suffering from malnourishment, skin problems and other complaints.

Eventually the centre agreed to let the hospital treat the patients' physical problems. Dr Viora's work with the centre continues.

And it's not an isolated case. The government of Aceh province is well advanced in locating people in *pasung* and providing treatment and support. The goal there is to eliminate the practice by 2011.

Doctors across the archipelago are working to free people from restraints. Nurses work with communities to identify cases of *pasung*. The national government has set a deadline of 2014 to eradicate *pasung*. The Human Rights Commission, newly invigorated, is working on the issue.

It is one case among many which shows how Indonesia is changing, developing and making the difficult progress toward better conditions for its people.

Achieving a deeper, wider understanding of Australia's complex neighbour would take genuine effort. It's an effort worth making. Indonesia's ambassador in Washington, Dino Djalal, recently set out the reasons why America should care about his country. They are also good reasons for Australians:

Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world ... Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. There are more Muslims in Indonesia than in the entire Middle East ... Much of the air that you breathe now comes from Indonesia because we have 30 per cent of the world's tropical rainforests, and we have been providing free environmental service to

America and to humanity.

Perceptions in Australia lag behind the reality of today's Indonesia. There are many reasons to catch up.

Supermarket and cemetery conversation

POETRY

Brendan Ryan

Saturday Morning

Footy talkback.
Interviews with local players
their names linked to memorable games,
who their father played for.
Their brief wisdoms, more potent than sound bites,
are the closest we get to God on Saturday morning,
where my father eats All-Bran with prunes,
my mother fusses around making tea
almost dancing to the rhythms of the callers' voices,
Some of who are women and like her
fanatical, reverent and well-informed. Footy is religion
in a house where the radio is in the shape of a football.
Saturday morning, always loaded with expectation —
peeling back caked mud from my footy boots on the back doorstep,
my brothers handballing to each other in the kitchen,
jumpers on the backs of chairs, footy socks
that hadn't been washed since training.
Each of us measuring the world by last weekend's scores.
A kind of muddy folklore
like my mother's posters of Pat Rafter still stuck on the laundry door.
After all these years, the commentators' voices
haven't changed, haven't strayed

from the common language of screamers, big man advantage,
of kicking into the breeze — words without the baggage
of Federal government initiatives.
My parents read and munch quietly
the radio keeping them in the moment.
Noting news of another funeral to attend,
hands blindly reaching for sugar, toast,
passing the milk jug — their act of communion,
until my mother carries the radio into the bathroom.
My father and I read on
expecting the other to say something.

Conversation at a cemetery

A small rise overlooking the town
and further off, the mountain
that hovers into view. Up the back
in a dry spot shadowed by a gum tree
is where my parents will rest. *This is the place*,
he says, near the gravestones of friends —
farmers who died too early,
farm accidents that claimed children,
funerals he was too busy to attend.
Now he has the time to organise his own attendance.
Five years before he wouldn't have stopped
to consider the cracked clay on this rise.
It was simply a place to be passed each day
on his way to the farm. Reading the mossy dates,
old names that have come back into fashion,

some part of him has opened up, allowed him
to accept the death I am fighting against.
Here, people either died young or lingered,
their dreams and worries becoming our history.
He likes to be around young people
who talk of doing things, who are not sick,
who don't know of another person quietly dying
in a country street. He is proud of the money spent
on an ashphalt car park, a new sign hammered into gravel.
The place has got a bit of life about it.
We pause at the headstone of a recent death.
Flowers on polished granite, a district's grief
resting with the dates. The simple finality
of my father's words —
this is the place I will be buried.

Supermarkets

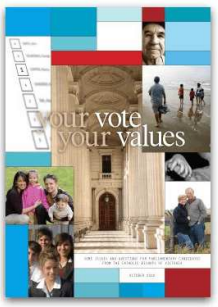
At 3pm, women in ugg boots stride purposefully
in. A fight breaks out near the automatic doors.
Older women loiter by their Commodores,
sons and daughters on edge: track-suited
piercings, bubby-fat paunches, litre bottles of Coke
swinging. Scowls, nervous glances, the man
who was picked stands alone, smoking.
An elderly busker strums and wails to Johnny Cash.
The trolley collector has a loud voice, possibly
a handicap. I've seen him with his elderly mother

following her like a puppy as she works down a list.
He murmurs, smiles, shouts at co-workers,
who think he just wants to be recognised.
My daughter can't cope unless she prowls the aisles
with a bacon and cheese roll. Only the brave
venture forth the day before public holidays.
At the IGA, the woman at the check-out
peppers her speech with *Darl*. Her friendliness,
the way she packs my plastic bags,
greets me two days later — a connection
Facebook can't provide;
the smirk that follows mutual acceptance
of weather, gravel roads, our lot in life —
hunting for sesame seeds, swearing we've seen
the photo of the man on the notice board
management would like to talk to.

What Catholics expect from politicians

POLITICS

Andrew Hamilton



Recently Victoria's Catholic Bishops distributed to parishes their advice to voters in the November 27 state election. Entitled *Your Vote, Your Values* , it was quickly portrayed as an attack on the Greens, given its focus on euthanasia.

The statement, however, was more complex and interesting than that description suggested. Its stated aim was to help voters make up their mind in a principled way on salient issues. It refrained from endorsing or condemning any party. It began by stating the central principle which governed its treatment: the Christian understanding of each human being.

From this starting point, the document moved to the different areas of life in which human dignity is at issue: the family, education, health and community. On each of these areas it proposed questions that Catholic voters might profitably put to candidates. In all, it suggested twenty five questions.

Within the Catholic vision of human dignity, respect for life in its beginnings and endings has a high priority. So it is natural enough that questions about human life, including those associated with war, abortion, euthanasia and capital punishment should also have a high priority. For state governments the most contested issues are abortion and euthanasia. So voters were encouraged to ask their representatives directly how they would vote on euthanasia and on their attitudes to abortion and freedom of conscience. The latter two questions took up issues raised by Victorian legislation passed in the previous Parliament.

In the bulk of the statement questions were raised about housing, support for children, education, health care particularly of the elderly, treatment of offenders, policies concerning drug use and abuse and about religious freedom.

The Bishops' statement raises interesting questions. First, the perennial question about the propriety of church leaders buying into election campaigns. In this case the Bishops' intervention seemed unexceptionable. They directed their writing to Catholics, proposed questions for them to reflect on and to direct to candidates, and refrained from indicating how Catholics should vote.

After the Federal election campaign in which both parties were strongly criticised for avoiding any discussion of principle or of policy, the intervention of the Bishops should not only be tolerated. It should be applauded. Contributions from any group that lead to

discussion about the moral dimensions of government policies and about the kind of society that they further should be encouraged.

The second question raised by the Bishops' statement is whether it is right to expect politicians to give answers to questions about social policy when their answers can be used as the basis of personal attacks. This has been said to happen in the United States where campaign issues are reduced to one determinative issue.

The Bishops' statement, however, makes it clear that voters should consider the many dimensions of human dignity that are reflected in different policies. It is hard to see why candidates could justifiably claim to be unfairly pressured when asked to state their position on issues crucial to their constituents. Indeed, if the practice of expecting candour on policies was to spread it would put under strain the unhelpful pressure in Australia to follow slavishly the party line.

The third question is whether the Bishops have posed the right questions. In my judgment, all the questions they pose touch on principles that are important to the construction of any society. Most flow clearly from a Catholic view of human dignity and of its implications for society. I would have liked to see the questions about education, which are all concerned narrowly with Catholic schools, to have included questions with a broader focus on the education of all Australians. Perhaps, too, in the light of the focus on euthanasia and on care for the aged, it may have been helpful to have sought a commitment to increased funding for hospices for the dying.

Of course, there could have been other questions. Respect for human dignity, too, should be reflected in political processes as well as in party policies. The public, if not all politicians, began to recognise this during the Federal Election campaign. In the state election campaign the issue has re-emerged in the general revulsion at the disgraceful campaign of innuendo directed against Mr Brian Walters. In future elections the Bishops may profitably draft questions that would invite candidates to dissociate themselves from any personal attacks launched from within their own party on the character of candidates in other parties.

Perhaps, too, electors should be encouraged to ask whether particular parties and candidates would provide competent government. Competence, no less than good intentions, is required if governments are to contribute to human flourishing.

The merit of the Bishops' statement is that it encourages reflections like this, and has the potential to contribute to a more informed electorate.

Islamic values could control bank greed

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Shadow treasurer Joe Hockey stuck his neck out last month when he challenged treasurer Wayne Swan to stand up to the banks. He put a strong set of reform proposals on the table and spruiked them in the media.

Hockey pointed out that Reserve Bank minutes showed the banks had overstated increases in funding costs. He said the government should be protecting home buyers and small businesses from the banks' predatory practices. At the time, Hockey was portrayed as a fool by the government and the banks, and even his own party leader Tony Abbott appeared to distance himself.

Since then, we've had the surprise interest rate rise on Melbourne Cup Day, and the Commonwealth Bank's decision to take from its customers nearly double the amount of the Reserve Bank increase. Now Hockey is being rightfully lauded, and the tabloid press has launched a campaign against the banks' corporate greed.

On Friday, the *Daily Telegraph* was pointing the finger at banks when it reported survey findings that 'almost 300,000 Australians say they are too poor to celebrate Christmas this year, while another 1.8 million will postpone it'. The paper urged its readers to get online with its blogger Tony Abbott to work out how to 'get the banks under control'.

One way of getting the banks under control could be to study Islamic banking, which repudiates the principle of charging interest. Instead, under Sharia banking, the bank might enter into a partnership with the home buyer or small business owner, in which they share the profits.

Last year the Vatican's semi-official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* urged Catholics to take a sympathetic look at Islamic banking: 'The ethical principles on which Islamic finance is based may bring banks closer to their clients and to the true spirit which should mark every financial service.'

Such thinking about banking shares common ground with the Grameen Bank, the microfinance entity that was founded in Bangladesh to make small loans to the poor that require self-discipline rather than collateral.

Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi dismissed Islamic banking in comments he made last week, because 'Sharia or Islamic law is incompatible with Australia's Western values'.

It could well be that he is right, and Islamic banking is indeed incompatible with Western values. But Western values that uphold a banking system that treats its customers with disdain

— as the Commonwealth Bank did last week — need to be questioned.

If Australians are not convinced that their banks are looking after them, a study of Sharia banking could lead us to adopt some of its values. This could prove to be as effective in eradicating corporate greed as changes in government regulation.

Tony Abbott's missing moral core

POLITICS

Neil Ormerod

Tony Abbott has been in public life for a long time. Some of us remember his forays into student politics in the 70s; his stint in journalism with the *Bulletin*; his public flirtation with the priesthood; and now his meteoric rise to leadership of the Liberal party and to a hair's breadth from the prime ministership itself.

It has not always been pretty, but it has always been entertaining — usually comic and at times tragic. During the whole episode of the supposed 'love child' with his university girl friend, he managed to maintain a quiet dignity, particularly in the face of the final revelation that the child he thought he had fathered was not actually his.

But there is something I find deeply disturbing in the way he carries out his public role. Charming and disarming as he can be, I find myself wondering wherein lies his moral core. Not long after his election as leader of the Liberal Party, Abbott was trying to explain away statements from his past claiming that he sometimes makes 'unreliable statements' in the 'heat of discussion.'

At that time I thought that the way to get a handle on Tony Abbott was to realise that he was like a high school or university debater. He would say anything to win an argument, confident that there would be no consequences to his actions.

Abbott is a natural debater, able to argue whatever position he feels will advantage him at the moment. And it's not about logic or coherence, but about thumping the table the loudest. Further it does not seem to be about some moral vision that he holds to, providing a consistent pattern of thought.

When the election was on a knife edge, Abbott was arguing that the party with the two-party preferred majority should form government, rather than the party that could form a majority on the floor of the House. Yet media commentators soon pointed out he had adopted the exact opposite position in the recent close elections in South Australia.

For me the low point in his recent performances was his attack on the proposed military tribunal established to investigate possible war crimes by Australian troops in Afghanistan. This was an issue with some populist traction. An online petition attracted thousands of signatories. But the implication was that Australian troops should not be subject to the rule of law in their military engagements.

He went so far as to imply that the Australian government should intervene in the process, in clear violation of the separation of powers between government and judiciary. He seemed

to demonstrate no faith in the military tribunal to find these soldiers innocent, if in fact they were innocent. And if they were proven guilty he would have been seeking to protect war criminals.

Although it was a popular stance, he was in effect attacking fundamental bases of our social and political system. I'm still amazed at how lightly he was treated by the media on this issue. Imagine the outcry if he had suggested that a priest accused of sexual abuse should not have that claim tested in court because we should support priests who are working for the good of the community! Certainly Australian troops are doing a great job in Afghanistan, and their morale is being affected by the proposed tribunal. But Abbott's stance would license lawlessness.

In the end this stance had less to do with the the case than with his need to reassert himself after his own dissembling in offering reasons why he would not accompany the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, on her visit to the troops in Afghanistan. When his 'jet lag' excuse was exposed and he came out flailing, hoping to land whatever blows he could on Gillard. The moral consequences of his stance were of lesser importance than his need to score some immediate political points.

Much is made of Abbott's Catholic faith, but it seems to me that the rule book he plays from has more in common with Machiavelli. Machiavelli famously concluded:

Therefore it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it according to the necessity of the case.

In the end everything can be sacrificed to gain and maintain power.