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Conscience matters in gay marriage vote

POLITICS

John Warhurst

Depending upon the outcome of this weekend's ALP National Conference, it appears the Commonwealth Parliament will vote on same sex marriage next year using the conscience vote method. Julia Gillard is recommending this approach, while reiterating her personal opposition.

Let's be clear. Conscience votes - votes free from party discipline - are primarily an act of strategy by leaders, not recognition of parliamentary conscience. They do, though, inject humanity into the proceedings of Parliament.

There has been on average less than one a year in the Commonwealth and each state parliament over the past 50 years. Such votes are often closely associated with the moral and ethical issues that follow any departure from traditional Christian morality. Same-sex marriage is typical.

One of the earliest conscience votes in the 1950s concerned marriage and divorce law reform, but over several decades at both the state and Commonwealth level abortion law reform was the prime example of parliamentary legislation by conscience vote.

During the Howard years the votes concerned euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, the RU-486 'abortion drug' and cloning.

Conscience votes are usually offered in tandem by the government and opposition parties. To not do so, as Tony Abbott now proposes, is against the spirit of the exercise. Ultimately he will not be able to resist pressure to allow Coalition members a conscience vote.

Such votes are often accompanied by two other distinguishing features, private members bills and the participation of powerful, non-government lobby groups, as in this case.

The parties stand back, as Gillard is doing, because they don't know how to handle such issues, when opposition is rooted in deeply-held religious traditions and big church organisations. Gillard has already promised the Australian Christian Lobby that Labor will not change its policy during this term.

The object of allowing a conscience vote is to satisfy MPs firmly opposed to such changes and thereby to avoid MPs crossing the floor and perhaps splitting the party. This applies to both sides of politics, but especially Labor because of its collectivist, majority-rules tradition. The individualist Liberal tradition prides itself on being more

sympathetic to the individual consciences of its parliamentarians.

One criticism of conscience votes is that, if they are such worthwhile exercises in freedom of speech, they should be applied more widely to issues of public morality, such as international relations. But that mistakes the whole point of the exercise. Party leaders don't want to lose control.

The stronger criticism is that they let parties off the hook when they should be leading the policy debate. According to this criticism they are undemocratic, because parties owe a responsibility to their voters to take a stand and be held accountable.

This is the thrust of the argument by Finance Minister Penny Wong, against a conscience vote on same-sex marriage. She argued in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that 'a conscience vote is not a substitute for reforms to the platform which are long overdue', and that 'equality should not be a matter of conscience; it should be reflected in Labor policy'.

But a conscience vote does at least produce a formal public parliamentary debate. The character of these debates highlights the humanity and human experiences of MPs in a way that competitive party debates never do. Wong embodies such humanity, as a gay political leader arguing within her party for same-sex marriage policy.

In euthanasia votes, MPs often reflect on their own experiences during the illness and subsequent death of a family member. For some this translates into support for euthanasia, for others opposition. Likewise abortion law reform votes often see women MPs publicly reflecting on having experienced an abortion.

Any parliamentary debate on same-sex marriage will have the same human character. MPs will reflect personally and often painfully on questions of sexuality and gay rights within their family environment and among friends. Should same-sex marriage ultimately win out, such human stories will play a crucial role in that success.

From prisoner to religious poet

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

A paradox of mystical experience is that it is often in contemplating emptiness, nothingness and darkness that the seeker comes to an awareness of divine light.

For some years this has been the preoccupation of the poet featured in this interview. It is also the subject of his poem , 'Via Negativa, the Divine Dark', which won this year's Blake Poetry Prize.

Australian poet and publisher Robert Adamson spoke to Eureka Street TV at the National Art School Gallery, in Darlinghurst in inner Sydney. The interview, and reading of excerpts from the poem, took place against a backdrop of some of the finalist works from this year's Blake Prize for Religious Art.

In addition to the Blake Poetry Prize, Adamson recently received the 2011 Patrick White Award. The award worth $18,000 was established by White in 1973 from the proceeds of his Nobel Prize for Literature. It's given annually to an author who has 'made a contribution to Australian writing' but has not, in the opinion of the judging committee, 'received due recognition for that contribution'.

Adamson, 68, has indeed made a substantial contribution. As well as authoring 21 books of poetry and three acclaimed autobiographical prose works, he has written a play, and, with Dorothy Hewitt, a two part opera. He has won numerous prizes for his poetry and prose.

He was born in Sydney, and grew up in the affluent lower north shore region. Both dyslexic and rebellious, he had a troubled youth and young adulthood, and even spent time behind bars. It was, in fact, while in jail that he discovered poetry and his ability to write.

Adamson is an esteemed editor and successful publisher of other poets' work. He has been poetry editor for various literary journals and edited *The Best Australian Poems* in 2009 and 2010. He also helped establish the publishing companies Prism Books, Big Smoke and Paper Bark Press.

For much of his adult life, Adamson has lived and worked on the Hawkesbury River, and is best known for poetry inspired by this waterway.

'I am lucky to have the actual Hawkesbury, I love it, it's beautiful, it is the world flowing through my life, full of birds, fish, mangroves, mud and stars,' he has written. 'And yet it's not the river I try to write, my poetry's landscape is darker. I'm writing about the internalised landscape.'

This clever use of his external environment to express the ebbs and flows of his inner life is evident in his poem that won the Blake Poetry Prize.

Of 'Via Negativa', the Blake judges said, 'The poem beautifully manages the movement between the immediacy of the present and difficult concepts such as time, suffering and the existence and nature of the soul; between the trivial ordinariness of the world and the large abstractions; between what can be knowable and precisely observed and what remains unknowable and concealed.'

Voyeur God comes to sordid Sydney

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***X* (MA). Director: Jon Hewitt. Starring: Viva Bianca, Hanna Mangan Lawrence, Stephen Phillips, Eamon Farren, Peter Docker. 85 minutes**

A late night taxi hoons along a Sydney street. Its passengers have witnessed a murder, and fled. One, Shay (Lawrence), is a teenage hooker, in the midst of her first hellish night on the job. The other is a high-class call girl whose retirement plans have been disrupted by the night's violent turn.

As Holly (Bianca) stares through the window at the anxious, shadowy shopfronts blurring past outside, she sees the metre-high scrawl of a single word in a store window: RUN. Moments later, just as the wisdom of this ominous sign is sinking in, it is reinforced by a second, further along the street: NOW.

By this stage of the new Australian film *X*, we've already seen plenty of it s sordid face. Now we get a sense of its numinous depths: this succinct message of warning seems telegraphed to Holly from some place far removed from her ordinary reality. It becomes clear that there are mystical dimensions to this 'erotic thriller' that allow it to transcend such generic labelling.

Which is not to say *X*'s human realities are not also profound. From the outset it pointedly contrasts its two central characters, who are prototypes of the sex industry. Shay has entered it from a place of desperation; from an abusive stepfather and a junkie mother who has recently died, into the clutches of predatory men, in the hope she can eke out a more bearable living on the street.

Holly, on the other hand, has lived a glamourous lifestyle, funded by her services to wealthy clientele over the course of a decade. She knows the dehumanising nature of her work, but she has luxurious dreams and has seen her career to date as a means to an end. She has accumulated her own small fortune and, when we first meet her, she is on the brink of retiring to a new life in Paris.

The film portrays the events leading up to Holly's accidental encounter with Shay, and to the murder of one of her clients by a crooked cop called Bennett (Phillips). It then follows the two women's flight (and fight) for the their lives among the drug-sex-and-violence-addled witching hours of Sydney's seedier bars and backstreets. It is thrilling, and at times both graphic and gratuitous.

But *X* returns to that sense of something *beyond* the women's dire human existence. At one point Shay befriends Harry (Farren), a taxi driver who aspires to be a Vegas

magician. He hynotises her: his twirling golden charm blurs in close-up against a field of black, juxtaposed with images of his and her gaping eyes. Cinematically, the effect is mystical. For Shay, it's a too-brief moment of lightness.

It can't last. In *X*, mysticism is momentary, magic a mere reprieve. Things get worse for Shay and Holly as the sadistic Bennett and Holly's deadly lover (Docker) bear down upon them. To their credit, both Shay and Holly value compassion and self-sacrifice even (or especially) in the face of peril. In this *X* contains some hope that *humanity* can survive, even when sometimes human life does not.

There is an image, deep within *X*'s dying moments, where dawn is glimpsed through shredded clouds. One cloud in particular, dark and pregnant, is locked in battle with the burgeoning rays. For the women at the heart of X, this is the perennial conflict writ large: hope at loggerheads with desolation. If there's a God in their world, he simply watches, rather than watching over.

Moral madness of Melbourne abortion horror

HUMAN RIGHTS

Lyn Bender


Herald Sun
YOUR CLUB'S NEW STARS
REVEALED: Medical bungle kills healthy baby
MUM'S TWIN HEARTBREAK
PRINCESS PERFECT

When it comes to grasping the right to life of any unborn or even unconceived living being, we are a dramatically split society. We celebrate conception, and, with compassion for the infertile, support IVF programs. We also sanction, at a conservative estimate, 80,000 terminations a year.

This dichotomy was tragically brought home by the ghastly medical error that occurred last week at Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital. A decision was made to terminate, at 32 weeks gestation, one unborn twin, who was diagnosed with congenital heart problems. In a horror medical error, the 'wrong' (healthy) twin was killed. An emergency caesarian was then performed to terminate the surviving twin.

This case is troubling, and the trauma and grief to all involved must arouse our empathy. We may also ask why a decision would be made at such a late stage of gestation to terminate a foetus.

The event highlights the extent to which medical advances allow us to decide who shall live and who shall die; who we shall mourn and who we shall discount. On what basis do we decide? Do we need to re-examine our views and values regarding the taking, denying or promoting of new life?

Late term abortions present us with a particularly shocking paradox. At 23 weeks we may place a premature newborn in intensive care to fight for its life, or terminate another foetus who may indeed have survived to full term.

These decisions are made not only in consideration of health or emotional needs, but are influenced by socio-economic factors, social constraints and many other pressures and medical possibilities, including the rejection of disability.

The debate about abortion has reflected another split. On one side are those who champion the mother's right to choose. On the other are those who elevate the rights of the child.

Leslie Cannold, president of Pro Choice Victoria, and Margaret Tighe, veteran founder of Right to Life Victoria, personify these opposing positions. Cannold argues unflinchingly in favour of the pregnant woman's right to choose. Tighe argues on behalf of the unborn child, declaring that we must protect the rights of the vulnerable unborn above all other considerations.

The community vacillates between these views and often practices a form of denial. 'We' (society), by attitude and by law, discount the 'equality' of the unborn. We make it a lesser entity.

Ending a pregnancy becomes a 'decision', rather than an almost insoluble dilemma between two opposed sets of rights: those belonging to the already-born, especially the mother, and those of the voiceless unborn being.

In my view we can only come close to an authentic place in this moral quagmire by affording equal rights to the foetus.

Many will be horrified and see this as a promotion of the old order, of the enslavement of women to the birth-life cycle. But to say we should award human rights to the foetus is not to say we may not sometimes decide in favour of termination. However we must afford the foetus the right to be heard.

It is especially true for a foetus that could survive outside the uterus, albeit with medical intervention. If our decision rests on pretending that the unborn child is just a cluster of cells, or that some can be deemed fit and others unfit for life, we run the risk of a kind of moral madness.

I am not writing this from lofty heights. I had an abortion at age 30, which I deeply regret. The prevailing wisdom was that this was not a person, and that to have a baby in adverse circumstances was irresponsible. Had my unborn child been given the status of an equal being I may have been able to make a different choice.

It is time that we face up to the inconvenient truth and grant rights to the unborn. This may be the last unexplored frontier in the implementation of human rights.

Tribute to the non-defeatist graffitists

NON-FICTION

Philip Harvey

Graffiti is grouse. I delight in the chunky overlaps of New York decoration applied to the surfaces of my city. I enjoy the Escher-like detail that artists exhibit when, cans in hand, they are confronted with a developer's bland exterior. I marvel at the ornate hieroglyphic badging left on underpasses and bus stops by black marker pens. I moon over expressions of love brushed hastily onto corrugated fences beside railway lines, or sun my thoughts with the bizarre slogans left in bluestone backlanes by nimble youths in search of meaning.

Not all graffiti is of the same calibre, a swathe of it slapdash at best, or as excessive as a eucalyptus, but it never ceases to catch the eye and prompt feelings of companionship with anonymous makers. This is both protest and celebration, signifier and signified, public evidence and popular artform.

Luckily I live in one of the great graffiti cities of the world, though not all city councils in Melbourne look upon it benignly. In my local area of Heidelberg the council has had some of the most restrictive and punitive attitudes toward graffitists or, as the authorities call them uncharitably, vandals. Unsurprisingly, this seems only to encourage the graffitists to greater heights of daring and expression.

We know why they do it: to resist boredom, to challenge conformity, to strike out at a world that is not listening, to leave a mark when all other avenues are closed.

Illegal it may be, but I harbour a quiet pleasure at seeing dull square buildings of grey concrete slabs, all this post-modern philistinism, scintillatingly covered with outlandish swirls of colour and a signature resembling a space probe. These members of the new Heidelberg School bring life to the neighbourhood: they are aching to be seen and to be known through their work.

Occasionally I find myself on the squashy Johnston Street bus through Collingwood and in heavy traffic have sat stationary gazing at the 1984 wall mural on the Old Tech Building. The image conjures all sorts of ideas. A centipede with a computer head is being ridden by a couple of cowboys, prophetic of the American last frontier of the digital revolution. This beast has the two forepaws of a sphinx: the dumb gaze of the computer screen that would tell us 'everything' but still leaves us alone pondering the riddle.

A mass of outlined figures could be tumbling or dancing or skating. Maybe they are the chance group of Facebook friends the computer brought together into a shaky alliance.

Sometimes they remind me of the public pool on a summer afternoon. Another time they are the passengers on the bus, if only we could break free of dailiness and be thinking of something more energising than 'Is this my stop?' Thrown together, only to be thrown apart again. The mural conjures different responses each time. Soon the bus gets moving, again, but the ideas remain.

Actually this is a celebrated mural in Melbourne. It was painted by Keith Haring, a now famous American artist, who died in 1990. Fame confers a credibility not instantly given to the new Heidelberg School. Art curator Hannah Mathews has written that the mural 'celebrates Haring's key themes: life, vitality and the power of joining together to face an unknown future'.

An unknown future is in fact the reality of the mural itself as different parties argue over its proper preservation . The Victorian Government would spend one million dollars to stabilise the mural and preserve it as is. But others dispute the wisdom of this course of action, saying it ignores Haring's own directions, which were very simply that a professional signwriter repaint the original image in consultation with an arts conservator.

When you consider that he created the original in one sitting over one day, the extensive attention given to keeping it permanently in its weathered state for posterity seems a waste not only of public money but of collective intelligence.

It is plain as day that Haring's work should be preserved according to the directions left by the artist. It means everyone, graffiti devotees included, can continue to see the work, which won't happen if it is preserved in a worn-out state like some peeling antique fresco. Distressed furniture, it ain't. The artist understood better than his 21st century protectors that his work has to be seen and as anyone can tell you, that means a new coat of paint every ten years or so.

This situation prompts another issue too, the propagation and promotion of local mural art. The Government can spend over a million saving a Haring when across the street, or over the hill and faraway, similar, even better works are going up on walls all across Melbourne.

Some councils order the men in overalls with their canisters of grey spray paint to start the cover-up at nine in the morning. Bright and early, they are. New artists are slapped for even having an imagination.

But other councils have developed programs to get their abstract expressionists and super-realists to cover lone hoardings and abject carparks with the full grandeur of their inner worlds. While salvaging the Haring is a decent project, to be done with minimum fuss and cost, what tempestuous, idiosyncratic and sublime works wait to be exhibited, at very little expense, from our own non-defeatist graffitists?

Jobs lost to the office evolution

COMMUNITY

Paul O'Callaghan

The recent debate about expanding employment for people with disability would make you think that easy access to welfare benefits was the main problem. In reality, the major barrier is a lack of job opportunities. Despite a strong economy and low unemployment rate, employers and the labour market are still the major barriers to moving people from welfare to work.

Consider the Australian public service's performance as an employer of people with disabilities. Despite strategies designed to boost employment of people with disabilities, the public service has gone backwards. In 1986, people with a disability made up 6.6 per cent of public service employees. Today it is around 3 per cent.

According to the Australian Public Service Commission, the decrease in the number of ongoing employees with a disability over the past year has been the largest in more than a decade.

It's not that senior public servants don't want to employ people with disabilities. But, as in other workplaces, technological change is reshaping the demand for skills. Just as automation has transformed manufacturing and agricultural workplaces, information and communications technology has transformed office environments.

If you walked into a public service office in the early 1980s, you'd see typing pools, tea ladies, bustling mailrooms and whole floors full of people doing routine clerical work. You'd see senior staff whose office equipment consisted of a desk, a chair, a phone and a collection of pens and pencils.

By the mid 2000s the typists and stenographers were gone. Almost everyone is typing their own documents, operating a computer and working the photocopier. Much of the routine paper handling has been automated and there are few clerical jobs for people without post-school qualifications.

People with disabilities were disproportionately employed in low level positions and most of those positions have gone. On top of that, senior positions have become multiskilled, which increases the chances that the job includes a task that a person with a disability is unable to do.

Technological change is good. It makes improvements in living standards possible. But as US researchers Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee explain, change produces losers as well as winners. 'There is no economic law that says that everyone, or even most people, automatically benefit from technological progress.'

People who find themselves squeezed out of the labour market because their skills are no longer in demand have a higher risk of ending up on disability payments. As businesses exposed to technological change close down, move offshore or update their equipment, they shed workers.

While disability may not be a problem for an employee with highly valued skills, when new technology and work practices destroy demand for those skills the person is forced to compete for unskilled work. Many of the other applicants will be younger, fitter and healthier. Not surprisingly many people with disabilities end up withdrawing from the labour market.

The Government's solution is to intensify the competition for jobs by making disability payments harder to get. In January next year, it will change the eligibility conditions for the Disability Support Pension and start directing more people onto Newstart Allowance.

For a single person the pension pays $344.50 a week. while Newstart pays only $243.40. That means savings for the Government, and poverty for people who can't find work.

While there are programs designed to help people search for work and learn new skills, there's nothing to address the demand side of the problem. Public service departments are not creating jobs designed around the experience and abilities of long-term welfare recipients. And the Government is not demanding that private sector employers do so either.

All the responsibility lies with welfare recipients. They must adjust to the labour market and compete for work. The reality is that many people can't easily adjust and compete.

It isn't fair to place the responsibility on those who bear the brunt of technological change. In a decent society there's an unwritten social contract between winners and losers. Change drives growth, and those who benefit from growth have a responsibility to reach out to those who are harmed by it.

If governments can't find a way to create job opportunities for people displaced from the labour market, then they at least have an obligation to pay a decent level of income support while people are looking for work. $243.40 is not a decent level of income support.

While in the longer term the best solution is to invest in people's ability to learn new skills and adapt to change, in the short term, people who can't work still need to pay the bills. Condemning jobless Australians to poverty isn't a job creation strategy. It's a cop out.

Truth drowned in river system's fight for life

ENVIRONMENT

Charles Rue

Confrontation and misleading statements seem to be the weapons of choice for irrigators responding to the Murray-Darling Draft Plan.

The NSW Irrigators Council's October newsletter makes this clear. It says that last year they managed to raise the ire of the public against the guidelines that preceded the Plan, even leading to public burnings of the guide. It suggests that a similar negative strategy will be required this time.

On ABC radio, CEO of the National Irrigators Council Tom Chessan made spurious suggestions about building more dams and the like. On another program, Riverina farmer Michael Kettlewell claimed 'the environment will always survive. It has been doing so for millions of years. It dries up, dies and then gets reborn. Communities and towns do not ... once they die, they're gone.'

The truth is that without protecting the ecological health of rivers, communities will not survive. That is the proper order. Caring for communities means caring for the land and water on which they depend.

The tactics of irrigator councils play on people's fears. Members of these organisations need to select leaders who are more balanced in what they say and do. Distorting the truth to favour one's own group is to act with bias or even duplicity. This can pit irrigator farmers' rights against fellow farmers' rights, as happened with floodplain farmers and those in the Macquarie marshes.

Getting the facts right is a pathway to making good choices and acting with integrity. Getting ecological facts right is also fundamental to understanding the history of river systems and the varied forms of life they support. Ignorance is not bliss.

The 2004 statement 'The Gift of Water', by the Catholic Church's 11 bishops with dioceses in the river catchments, is instructive. Parish priests in the Basin might make copies so that their parishioners are not misled by the hype promoted by some irrigator lobbyists and financial manipulators. Schools can prepare their students to deal with the bias and misinformation they might hear.

On a recent trip to north western NSW I was impressed by the evolving way in which farmers are going about their business. Ecological awareness has led them to adopt low impact tilling and reduce fertiliser loads. They have decided to live as 'stewards', with respect and within creation's constraints, and not be uncaring

'masters'. They have spent money to make the necessary ecological changes.

Getting the finances right is essential to the sustainable farming that underpins sustainable communities. Bean counters who demand increased profits each year do not know farming. Weather can be a great teacher of humility for people who indulge in the pride of control. Over thousands of years many irrigation based cultures collapsed in such pride.

It is folly to presume that investments can be fine-tuned to the point of counting on average water availability every year. Wise planning considers that the amount of water available for farming will in all likelihood be well below any calculated average.

The bean counters also need to be watched when it comes to water trading and increased ground water allocations for mines as outlined in the Draft Plan. Many traders have made tidy sums already. One wonders if financiers lobbied for the increased allocations of ground water, which will be a windfall for mine expansion and coal seam gas explorers.

'No' can be a valid response to a planning application. Not every financial dream can be acted on if respect for other people and the environment is taken into account.

The city cousins of rural communities share the responsibility for growing a good outcome from the Draft Plan. Manipulative farming investments often originate in the cities. Past investment mistakes need to be acknowledged, and new ventures supported financially. Consumers, too, need to take responsibility for the food and fibre they consume.

When it comes to creating solutions to any problem, Catholic Social Teaching is strong on the need for dialogue and cooperation. These are necessary if the common good is to be achieved. Confrontation is the way of the bully. It is short-sighted and self-interested.

The Draft Plan wisely sets long term goals and allows time for them to be achieved: 2750 GL for the rivers over seven years. It may have been even wiser to set the long term goal at the near-4000 GL believed scientifically to be required to ensure a healthy Basin. But at least the Draft Plan has got the order right, in looking first to the rivers, which support the farms, which support the communities.

Trying to be the 'winner' in discussions and decisions about the Murray Darling Basin will do no one any good. Dialogue and cooperation will help us to discern a way forward. It will be a work in progress, evolving as we keep rivers-farms-communities together in our vision. It will lead to a good outcome for future generations, and a source of renewed life for us here and now.

The Pope in Alice: 25 years on

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

On this day 25 years ago, 12 of us Jesuits were privileged to join thousands of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders who met with Pope John Paul II at Alice Springs.

Two nights before, we had camped at Uluru. On the way to Blatherskite Park, where the Pope was to speak, I was invited to accompany a busload of people from Kununurra and Turkey Creek in the Kimberley because they did not have their own priest with them. The community leaders gave me a red T-shirt which depicted their Dreaming. We all wore yellow headbands and waited patiently for the Pope's arrival.

He had been delayed by the breakdown of his Mercedes Popemobile, which was unsuited to the hot conditions. Workers resorted to throwing iced water over the engine but failed in their attempts to get the vehicle running. Eventually the Pope arrived on the park's Caterpillar Dreaming track in the back seat of a plain white Australian Ford sedan, which was more becoming than the foreign vehicle.

There had been months of planning and negotiation about this meeting on the Yipirinya Dreaming track. People came from all over Australia.

There had been some consternation early in the planning because the offices for the papal visit had been donated by a major mining company. But Aboriginal leaders were assured that the Pope's message would not be qualified because of the generosity of the corporate sector.

A week prior to the visit, there was unresolved conflict between the Church's national advisory committee of Aborigines and Islanders preparing the visit, and the local Aboriginal community. The committee wanted only Aboriginal and Islander children to have access to the area where the Pope would be welcomed. But they heeded the call of the local Elders with the result that Alice Springs children of all races who shared in the local Dreaming were permitted to participate.

The Alice Springs Mayor said, 'It's wonderful. The Aboriginal people are doing the right thing. It's not the locals that have caused any problems. It's people from the south who wanted to segregate the races.'

The tension between the local church community and national Aboriginal church leaders evaporated by the time the Pope kissed the tarmac at Alice Springs airport. He was welcomed by eight traditional owners who greeted him in Arrernte language.

Among the group were the late Wenten Rubuntja and Charles Perkins.

Protocol dictated that the Pope could not be attired in the Aboriginal colours. But Vatican rubrics gave way to local custom when he was presented on the Dreaming track with a crocheted stole and beanie in black, red and yellow. Being the consummate performer on the international stage, John Paul graciously received the gift and wore the accoutrements for some distance along the track.

Then Louise Pandella from the Nauiyu Community at Daly River made her way to the barrier and handed her baby Liam to the Pope. The Pope held Liam up to the cameras which captured one of the iconic shots of John Paul II. When I rose at 4am in Minneapolis 19 years later to watch the papal funeral, the major US television networks used the photo several times during the course of the broadcast.

Along the track, the Pope met the nation's most respected Aboriginal leaders, who presented him with a shield inscribed with an aspirational message. The director of the Alice Springs based Central Land Council, Patrick Dodson, who had left the priesthood, respectfully stood in the background to spare His Holiness any embarrassment.

The Pope received numerous other gifts including a copy of the 'Our Father' in the local language of the Stradbroke Island people, who had been the first Indigenous Australians to receive Catholic missionaries.

While the Pope was still on the Dreaming track, I was approached by a throng of international media who asked my opinion of the Pope's speech . Not having heard it, I was in no position to answer. They had read copies on the papal jet once they had taken off from Darwin and regarded the comments on land rights as very hot news. For many of the international journalists, this was to be the big story of the visit.

At the end of the track, the Pope made his way up to the stadium while storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. Behind him was a mural by Wenten Rubuntja depicting the Caterpillar Dreaming and the mountain gaps around Alice Springs.

As the Pope completed the lengthy speech, he took a large gum branch, reached into a clay coolamon which later would be used in the Alice Springs church for baptisms, and blessed the people with water.

It was at that moment that the lightning sounded and the heavens opened. All of us in the crowd were convinced that grace and nature were one and indivisible at that moment in the red centre. The *Centralian Advocate* reported that 'as an electrical storm was threatening the gathering of about 4000 people, most of the thunder was coming from the podium'.

The Pope later confided to Bishop Ted Collins, 'I think the people prefer meeting

me rather than listening to me. But I had to say it all because otherwise it could not be published.' The mainstream media picked up the Pope's remarks about land rights, self-determination and reconciliation.

But he put even more demanding challenges to the Australian Church when he enunciated the place of Indigenous Australians in the life of the Church, and when he outlined the relationship between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture and religious tradition.

No one would claim that the Pope's speech was a catalyst accelerating the positive developments and putting a brake on the negative reversals in Australian Church and society these last 25 years. But it still embodies the most noble shared aspirations of Aboriginal Catholics and those wanting to see Aborigines take their place in the Australian Church.

The speech undoubtedly painted too rosy a picture of the role of the missionaries, glossing over the failings, including assimilationist mindsets and the evil of sexual abuse. Only recently has the Church come to appreciate its failings in adopting assimilationist methods such as removing children from their families and placing them in dormitories, and in using English exclusively rather than local languages.

The speech gives too optimistic a reading of the prospects of Aboriginal Australians taking their rightful place in the Church without the likelihood of Aboriginal priests or bishops in the foreseeable future. And it too simplistically glosses over some of the disconnection between Christianity and some of the core beliefs and practices of traditional Aboriginal religions.

It has been very helpful to have the Pope offer the encouragement that there need not be any conflict between Christian faith and Aboriginal culture. But Aboriginal culture is often founded on religious beliefs which find and express God's self-communication outside of Christ and the Church's sacraments.

I recall a funeral of a well respected Aboriginal leader in the Kimberley. After the church service, the Elders took the body for a ceremony which was no place for the priest or other outsiders. No participant presumed the religious business had been confined to the church and that all that occurred thereafter was purely cultural. The body and its bearers moved seamlessly from one religious world to another, the bearers and the onlookers respecting the sacred space of each world.

The abiding grace of the Pope's speech is incarnated in those words in which he reverenced the Aboriginal identification with country and the daily Aboriginal reality of suffering and marginalisation. He touched the deep Aboriginal sense of belonging, embracing the hope in their suffering. He conceded in the spoken word and by his charismatic presence that the Dreaming is real, sacramental and eternal.

He retold the story of Genesis in Aboriginal voice. He relayed the calls of the post-exilic prophets to the contemporary powerbrokers and poor of Australia. He spoke poetically of things he knew not, knowing that those listening had endured the flames:

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for this rebirth is now!

Everyone present knew that he understood, and more than many who had spent a lifetime in this place.

Christmas Island crabs

POETRY

Various

Asylum (i)

In the hallway, she holds her breath, waiting

for the voice again that calls from there, and just there.

In a white nightdress, she is a ghost, feeling the walls

as though they are faces, locked tight with stories.

In slippers and night silence, she strains for a whisper that says

'hello, how are you?' and reminds her not to put cans

in the microwave, or to fall asleep in her chair, or to

forget that the most important things have been, and are going.

Somewhere in a drawer, there is a letter that contains

delicate things, and some words about gardens and the weather.

She calls a name and then cries it, trying to force it into

the paintwork like an indent, a foothold.

Alyson Miller

And the red crabs feast

*Red crabs' diet consists mainly of fallen leaves, fruits, flowers and seedlings. They are not solely vegetarian however and will eat other dead crabs, birds, the introduced giant African snail and palatable human refuse if the opportunity presents itself.**

Christmas for crabs; their island blooms

with a rare largesse of flesh
mashed to pulp on rocks -

such 'palatable human refuse'.

They too migrate, ten million scuttles,

on their yearly prickly walk from forest to sea.

But roads are cleared for them, cars parked,

as the needful eggs pull them down -

a crimson shawl over grinning cliffs.

We make space for the moon-mad crabs,

their urgent surging back to sea.

A wooden shell, a thin plank hull,

is no match for a carapace.

That homely self that moves

and so always has just room enough.

P. S. Cottier

**Australian Government Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities website*

The boat people of the New England Highway

An animate darkness
Rain from the day of creation

swamping and exposing
Windscreen wipers
hovering above surrender
as if it turned the earth
attuned to survival
a reed-thin membrane
of dry security within
Neon squints
a sanctuary of function

deeper than understanding
when belief filled the oceans

the reef we had become
at hummingbird speed
I gripped the wheel
the gelid breath of spines
Our metal carapace
between parallel worlds
gale-force immolation beyond
room at the inn
and budget

undressed bricks
the next day
for better weather
of the pillow
upon an unbarded sea
welcome is uniformed
by razor wire
and days innumerable

food without flair
limned with our hope
waited the other side
For others launched
of troubles
the inn is surrounded
hope is finite
threat grows inward

Paul Scully

The politician

The more he spoke, the more it seemed,
his lines were all rehearsed,
and English was his second language -
Yeti was his first.

Damian Balassone

Gillard's Speaker dirty trick could backfire

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Parliamentary speakers go back a long way, to the appointment of Sir Thomas Hungerford as Speaker of the English House of Commons in 1377. The speaker had to ensure that the House did its job, and the king had several early speakers beheaded when the parliament became disfunctional and the taxes failed to flow.

In the 19th century, parliaments of the Australian colonies also relied upon effective speakers. A *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion article from 1867 paints a picture of mayhem in the NSW Parliament, which it effectively puts down to the speaker's lack of control over the house.

If the house is to remain supine and the speaker powerless, while a small knot of shameless railers degrade and pervert our parliamentary system, an appeal to the constituencies is still open. I invoke their respect for order - their reverence for justice - their instinctive love of fair play. It is for the electors of New South Wales to ... rid the House of men who disgrace it.

There are obvious parallels with Federal Parliament today, and the writer would probably argue that Tony Abbott should be granted his wish of an early election. It does suggest that whatever role Prime Minister Julia Gillard played in last week's switch of speaker - labelled a masterstroke by some commentators - it could backfire.

If the new speaker Peter Slipper fails to command authority, it's more likely the public will want to see an early poll.

Slipper will have no authority if parliamentarians do not grant it to him. Opposition MPs do not respect him because of his history of disloyalty and questionable behaviour. He will never have their hearts and minds. For them, the appointment is nothing but another of Labor's dirty tricks.

Politicians first started to accuse each other of trickery during the Howard era, and it has now become a staple of modern politics. This is surely what Socrates was referring to when he distinguished the smoke and mirrors of sophistry from the depth of knowledge that he saw as the hallmark of the statesman. We would probably refer to this as 'policy substance'.

Like authority, statesmanship is a status that cannot be granted by a higher power or oneself. It is recognised by its subjects, although often not until after he or she has lost an election to a populist politician.

Invariably statesmen rise above party politics and tend to take the long view of

what is best for all concerned, not just those who elect them to office. Statesmen can be tough but are always measured and temperate and answerable to an external authority which they respect.

Germaine Greer and gay exploitation

MEDIA

Matthew Holloway

It is commonly thought that men represent the main producers and the main consumers of pornography. But earlier this year feminist firebrand Germaine Greer alluded to an important and often forgotten fact: men are also its victims.

'Pornography', Greer said on a September episode of ABC1's *Q&A*, 'also exploits boys, men and children, but most of all, it exploits the consumer of pornography.

'The consumer', she said, 'doesn't realise that because of the stage in your life at which you become aware of pornography, that his sexual responses are being altered by pornography, so that he is expecting a certain kind of mechanical sequence of events, which he's learnt to manipulate in his own self-gratification. This then gets parked on a relationship, which prevents real intimacy from ever ensuing.

'That's pretty grim but it's much grimmer, the fact that people are moving towards each other in a series of pre-programmed responses.'

Like women, men have fallen prey to the unrealistic expectations of a hyper-sexualised culture.

A recent study from Italy surveying 28,000 men found that pornography addiction began at around the age of 14. Men who consumed it excessively became immune to explicit images and developed an idea of sex devoid from physical intimacy.

Carlo Foresta, head of the Italian Society of Andrology and Sexual Medicine, said: 'It starts with lower reactions to porn sites, then there is a general drop in libido and in the end it becomes impossible to get an erection.'

This reflects what Greer says; men who view pornography come to a sexual encounter with certain expectations but, due to the explicit nature of the material they have been viewing, these expectations are unrealistic. The man loses the experience of intimacy because he is unable to become aroused in a normal sexual encounter.

This has ramifications for both parties in a relationship. One is left feeling undesired and unable to live up to a fantasy image. The other is a man impotent and stripped of his masculinity.

At the same time the man wants sexual release and the urge to view the material which has caused his problems remains; in viewing there is release and instant

gratification. And so the cycle continues.

In response to Greer, Sydney journalist Joe Hildebrand asked 'What about gay porn? What about when it is two blokes doing it? Which one is being oppressed then?'

Hildebrand raised the issue in jest and the question went unanswered. But to offer Joe an answer, just because it's two men doesn't mean it is not exploitative or harmful. Gay pornography has the added element of the sub-ordinance of the homosexual male to the heterosexual male.

Common power play scenarios involve teen-looking or less typically masculine males being taken advantage of by alpha males. In some cases this can involve a competition; the male who finishes last is submissive to the other male or males. The symbolism is clear: the male who is less masculine needs to submit to and worship the other males as his superiors.

In other instances, some popular websites attempt to coerce males in financial hardship to put a price on their sexuality, and perform gay sex acts (or, more commonly, have sex acts performed on them) for money. Once again this portrays an image of submission by a vulnerable male to another powerful male.

How many bi-curious young males may be exposed to this material and act out the role of submissiveness, especially when questioning their own sexuality and feeling emasculated? A homosexual male, or a woman exposed to pornography, could take on board this image of submissiveness as sexually arousing, and become conditioned to subordinance.

All elements lead to what Greer described as pornography's ability to promote the acting out of pre-programmed responses devoid of intimacy. Ultimately we need a movement away from porn, and to re-assert a sexuality that is not based on images of actors from a specifically geared, targeted and manipulative industry.

For years the pro-porn lobby has tried to win the argument and take the ground from the left and right by portraying them as either censorship fascists or religious conservatives. The truth is that you can not have exploitation in the name of liberalism.

Family violence and The Slap

COMMUNITY

Moira Rayner

Today is national White Ribbon Day , a day when good men and true are asked to make their stand against domestic violence - particularly affecting women - heartfelt, public and unconditional.

It needs to be more than a theoretical commitment. As anyone who has read Christos Tsiolkos' novel *The Sla*p (or watched the serialisation on ABC television) would know, violence is intimately connected with power, ego, frustration and sex, and isn't easily abhorred, or even seen for what it is.

Earlier this week the chief justice of Western Australia, a contemporary of mine at law school and a champion of White Ribbon Day (as of many progressive and small 'l' liberal causes, bless) bemoaned as the major obstacle to eliminating domestic violence, women's reluctance to report it.

There is always, he said, a personal risk for any woman who protests, outside the inner family network, about being slapped, humiliated, micro-controlled or beaten up. The family power grid usually grills the protestor, the traitor, the persecutor, and further relationships fracture.

That's why so many Indigenous women do not complain to police about the thumpings they endure; to avoid family feuds, or police arresting and jailing or maybe even killing their men, leaving them even more impoverished and marginalised.

The Slap is a rather nasty, long and lascivious book, whose eight major characters - who drive the story in chapters of their own - are mostly self-focused, unempathetic and shallow. They reveal little or no insight into the childishness of their own supposedly mature attitudes and choices, yet seem to have focused their adult identities on children.

Far from addressing the issue of whether or not it is ever right for an adult to strike an obnoxious and disruptive toddler, the characters are by and large tellers of their own stories and preoccupations. The novelist and his characters are not in the least interested in the experience, feelings, confusion and furious humiliation of the three-year-old slap-ee, Hugo, with his entirely inappropriate sense of entitlement. They are solely concerned with their own aspirations and compulsive interests.

There is even some unpleasant sado-masochistic domestic violence in the sexual couplings of the principal characters, and a little wife-beating. The wives, sadly, are

presented as collaborators in their own submission, and in Hugo's parents' case, committed to nearly heroic, non-interventionist, laissez-faire parenting. Hugo wiill grow up with no survival skills, and a lot of bruises.

This nation first really noticed that violence to smaller, more physically and emotionally vulnerable human beings in a domestic setting was a serious matter in the mid 1980s.

It was 1985 when I attended my first domestic violence conference, hosted by the Australian Institute of Criminology in Canberra, but flooded with articulate and sometimes determinedly angry women from refuges, grassroots organisations and community groups who were vociferously committed to make the conference the fulcrum for a massive national swing to protecting all Australian women, rather than leaving intervention to individual police officers' discretion.

It changed my awareness ('consciousness raising' in the corridors; impromptu tutorials in 'protective behaviours'; ad hoc consultative groups and marchers on Parliament; barrackers at the back of the hall, willing to challenge the ways experts told their research conclusions to an audience that included actual rape victims as well as academics) and inspired my subsequent activity in the belief the law itself should change, rather than society expecting violent men to change their attitudes.

In the end, a common approach by men and women, and the institutions of the law, is essential. Police do get involved in domestic violence, and women still withdraw their evidence if their families get involved. Parents still do not see that witnessing domestic violence permanently damages children. Personal violence intervention orders have been used effectively and misused between family members using them to score points.

And the vast majority of sexual assaults, in particular intra-familial and 'date rape' assaults, are still not raised. Only sexual assault centres know about those who have to go somewhere. The victims know that the sympathetic officers in Channel 10's *Law and Order: SVU* bear no relation to the land of the blue heeler.

The most sympathetic characters in *The Slap* are the Indigenous Muslim convert, and the gay teenage boy, who are prepared to take on an adult world of subtlety and complication, on honest terms.

So let it be with violence in our homes.

Men need to show their mates that violence against women and children is disgraceful. Women need to learn better ways to teach their children self-discipline and survival skills than smacking them. Mothers need to leave any home that has become a place of fear.

Domestic violence will only ever shrivel away when we acknowledge both the woundedness of our inner child, and our inner capacity to defer the urge immediately to gratify our rawest needs, and to look for find more lasting gratification than the giving and reception of a slap.

Death by a thousand yuppies

COMMUNITY

Ellena Savage

Also, I am in the problematic position of being a bleeding-heart, bike-riding vegetarian: the least trusted source of cultural regeneration in the world.

So what, aside from my burning love for this place, do I contribute? Local pride. 'Keeping it Coburg.' *Go back whence you came*-style. It's not pretty, actually.

There are drawbacks to living in ungentrified suburbs. They can have higher crime rates than other places. But that isn't such a problem if you accept that you need to be safe and lock up your belongings. The thing that really upsets me - and of course this occurs in all places - is that Coburg is a place where men think it's okay to shout at women as they walk or drive past.

I've never felt truly unsafe here, but that sort of behaviour certainly needs to be shut down. It's not to say that poor people are sexist, although conditions of social inequity can generate unhealthy gender relationships. When men are content and have things to be happy about, they seem to have less desire to attack women for simply existing.

So, my project for Coburg is shouting at men that it's not okay to shout at women. For example, when I go jogging and a strange man shouts some sexist abuse at me, I shout obscenities back at him and keep on running.

There are things that could be better here. And they are improving. But there are ways of improving a community without excluding the people who made it interesting to begin with.

Gentrification is inevitable. But it doesn't have to be totally bad. When a few years ago I drove past the cramped inner-city terrace house in Sydney where I was born, there was a Ferrari parked out the front, and I had the chance to imagine - just imagine - that its owners were my real parents.

Gentrification can even increase the livability of a place. Yesterday, Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper reported that since 2005, Coburg's 'livability' ranking rose 63 places, from 175 (out of the 314 areas surveyed) to 112. The criteria included access to public transport and schooling, proximity to the CBD and the beach, hills and tree coverage.

By some of the criteria, Coburg could never compete, even if all the oil barons moved in. But it still ranks number one on my survey.

Will my hip predilection for live music venues and vintage clothes mark the downfall of Coburg? Nope. That will be the fault of someone who might look like me but who is not me. I was here first. Such is the paradox of gentrification and local pride.

Two faces of the Catholic Church

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Last week two events disclosed different faces of the Catholic Church. The first was the funeral for Monsignor John Murphy, who for most of his working life was concerned with immigration. The second was the Vatican appointment of Bishop Geoffrey Jarrett as Apostolic Administrator of the Brisbane Archdiocese. It follows the acceptance of Archbishop John Bathersby's resignation on the grounds of age.

I came to know Father Murphy when I was helping to establish small Catholic communities of recently arrived Cambodian and Laotian refugees.

Refugees were often seen as a problem either to be deplored or to be solved from above. John, who was Director of the Melbourne Catholic Immigration Office saw them as people, and trusted them to shape their own community life.

He always accepted their hospitality when invited, listened and encouraged them. His style can be seen in the photograph above. He stands comfortably at the right of the group, is part of it but not central to it and is clearly a representative of the wider church. He enjoys the occasion and encourages the families and the Vinnies who support them to be at home both in their Cambodian community and in the wider Australian church.

Anyone who approached John for help knew instinctively that he would not see their request as a problem but as a simple expression of human need.

I realised this when attending a celebration of the 25th anniversary of his ordination. I had cycled across to the church unprepared for the steady rain which fell during my ride. Arriving cold and dripping, I instinctively went to the presbytery to ask if I could borrow an old pair of John's trousers for the celebration. With John, that was what anyone would naturally do. So I was momentarily taken aback to find that the housekeeper saw me and my bedraggled state as a problem rather than as a person in need. But John soon arrived and I was fixed up.

A few years later I took over from him in visiting the Immigration Detention Centre. There I heard many stories of how he had visited former detainees and immigrants when they were sick, and had occasionally spent all night with dying patients.

When John later moved to Canberra as Director of the Australian Catholic Immigration Office , he continued to focus on people and not on problems. He

supported people who applied for visas for family members. In a period when asylum seekers were treated with increased brutality, he worked for an effective church commitment to them.

The lives of people like John Murphy give some credibility to the claim of churches to expertise in humanity. His was the pastoral face of the church.

The administrative face of the Catholic Church was on display in the Vatican arrangements for the Brisbane church following Archbishop Bathersby's resignation. Their salient point was that they were unusual.

The ordinary canonical procedure when an Archbishop dies or retires is that the senior auxiliary bishop is responsible for the governance of the diocese. He must convoke a meeting of the Archdiocesan consultors who then elect an administrator until a new bishop is named. These procedures show a trust in the local church to manage its affairs as it prepares for a new Archbishop.

The Vatican appointment of a Bishop outside the diocese as apostolic administrator replaced the ordinary canonical process. To say this is simply to state a fact. It does not question the wisdom or legality of doing so, still less the appropriateness of the person appointed. But bypassing ordinary procedures has costs.

After a much-loved Archbishop steps down, many people, including priests, grieve his loss and are anxious about the future. It is a time when people are vulnerable. In such circumstances any breach of normal process, particularly through the appointment of someone from outside the local church, heightens anxiety and arouses suspicion that the local church is not trusted. People imagine that they are seen as problems, not as people.

That in turn makes it hard for the people to see the new administrator as a person, and not as a problem. The affective unity of the community and the effectiveness of the administrator are thus put under threat.

Under such circumstances the administrative face is seen to wear a scowl. That perception can always be overcome by magnanimity. But the test of administration is whether it encourages the pastoral face of the Church embodied so well in Father John Murphy.

Aboriginal community ditched by church and state

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Toomelah* (MA). Director: Ivan Sen. Starring: Daniel Connors, Christopher Edwards, Dean Daley-Jones. 97 minutes**

Warwick Thornton's *Samson and Delilah* (2009) probed the euphoric and demonic realities of substance abuse. Brendan Fletcher's *Mad Bastards* (2011) portrayed Aboriginal men in a remote Kimberley community struggling to find healthy means of expressing anger. Alongside these two films, Ivan Sen's *Toomelah* forms a kind of unofficial trilogy of stories of cultural displacement and disadvantage on remote Aboriginal communities.

It is named for the northwest NSW mission town where it is set; a place to which Sen himself has a profound connection. 'It's the home of my mother, it's where she grew up, a lot of my Indigenous family comes from there,' he tells *Eureka Street*. 'I've always wanted to make a film there, it was just a matter of when and how.'

Substance abuse, male anger and violence, all with roots in displacement, are realities in Sen's story as they were in Thornton's and Fletcher's. But Sen focuses more pointedly on the fact of cultural extinction - emblematically, the loss of language (the characters speak exclusively with a bastardised, subtitled form of English) - and the ongoing effects of this absence within the lives of his characters.

'Cultural extinction is the major issue facing a lot of Aboriginal communities,' says Sen. 'You don't hear a lot about it from government. You hear about health, education and housing. But cultural extinction is directly related to the psyche of the people. And a lot of these communities are struggling to find a system of living.

'They haven't connected with the western style of living. The church at one point had a big influence, but the people it influenced are dying out now. They're an amazing people that have had this amazing culture for such a long time, and now just remnants of it are left. Reclaiming that culture is a major part of moving forward.'

Toomelah delves into the cultural vacuum and finds ten-year-old Daniel (Connors). His mum is a stoner, his dad is a drunk and, after the latest in a line of serious classroom misdeeds, he has been kicked out of school. Daniel is drawn to affable local drug dealer Linden (Edwards), who takes him under his wing. Soon Daniel witnesses violence when a rival dealer (Daley-Jones) returns from jail to reclaim his turf.

For Sen, the story really started to take shape when he discovered Connors. 'I wanted to give people a chance to see what it's like for a kid growing up somewhere

like Toomelah. But I wasn't sure which way the story would go. Then I found Daniel. What stood out was his bravery and his cheekiness. He had an amazing presence, and a strong voice. I started following him, observing his life, and to integrate that into the script.'

The violence Daniel witnesses contrasts with the mute grief he observes in his recently returned aunt, who was removed from Toomelah decades previous, a member of the Stolen Generations. Both her grief and Linden's violence have roots in dispossession; a truth Sen's film evokes gently. Daniel becomes curious to understand this history, and his own culture. It is this desire that may finally keep him in school and out of trouble.

Sen insists that *Toomelah* is not an 'issues' film, although a range of issues naturally make up the fabric of its story, as they are part of the life of the community. 'It was always going to confront a few issues because you can't get away from them. If you follow someone for a day in Toomelah you'll find numerous issues that will intersect. I could have explored other issues that are more difficult for people to watch and be confronted with.'

Given his family connections, it is no suprise that Toomelah is close to Sen's heart. It was important, then, that his film would not be a dirge, or a piece of poverty porn. The harsher elements are balanced by humour, and by the cinematographer's attention to the haggard, almost mystical beauty of the place itself. 'For me Toomelah is beautiful,' says Sen. 'Every time I go there I feel an amazing connection with the people and the land.'

Songs and stories of Sri Lanka's war

NON-FICTION

Martin Mulligan

Anticipation rises as you approach Elephant Pass on your way north to Jaffna. Yet it is an undistinguished place; a narrow strip of flat road passing between shallow sea lagoons and salt-pans.

It is hard to imagine the strategic importance of this place during nearly 30 years of warfare between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan armed forces. However, as you continue north of the pass the sad story of the war is more deeply etched into the landscape.

For a long stretch, almost all buildings have been largely destroyed and, eerily, around a quarter of the numerous coconut palms and the treasured palmyra palms have been decapitated by the impact of shelling. It becomes clear that every inch of this road into Jaffna had been fought over at different stages during the war.

There is not much to stop for as you take the long journey up the flat and straight road from Vavuniya to Jaffna, and you don't feel much like stopping anyway. The signs of devastation are pretty complete. Heavily armed soldiers and police stare out from their sentry posts dotted all along the road. There are military bases every ten kilometres or so. Roadside eating houses are run by the military.

War refugees - those who were relocated into refugee camps near Vavuniya for up to two years after the war reached its climax in May 2009 - are setting up house in makeshift huts within the vicinity of the main road. There are very few signs of orderly resettlement.

There is a steady stream of visitors from the south travelling to Jaffna and many of them stop near Elephant Pass to look at a war memorial in the shape of a Tigers 'tank' whichevokes an act of heroism from a young Sinhalese soldier when he threw himself in front of the advancing vehicle to try to save his comrades.

An even more sobering monument of war is the enormous, prone water tower of Kilinochchi. Reports vary as to whether this was brought down by the Tigers as they retreated under fierce bombardment from the army or whether it was destroyed by that bombardment. Either way, it serves as a reminder that there is a terrible 'logic' to warfare. Observing the final stages of the war from afar was like watching a slow-moving train wreck.

Things are less tense as you drive further into the Jaffna peninsula. People are out and about and the city appears to be recovering its vitality. Little progress has been

made on repairing the war-ravaged buildings, but the shopping centre is busy and the markets overflow with local produce. Splashes of colour are provided by new outlets of the commercial banks that have been quick to take advantage of the peace.

People from the south who have visited Jaffna say it is great that they can now travel freely to this part of their country. They tend to express great optimism for the future of Jaffna.

This echoes the mantra being repeated by government ministers and media commentators, that people living in the north should be grateful that the army was able to defeat 'terrorism' and that the time has now come to 'move on'. An official Reconciliation Commission has been set up and the government has promised yet another review of how to implement amendments to the Constitution that call for devolution of political power.

However, many residents of Jaffna wonder how they can 'move on' when they have not had the opportunity to tell the stories of prolonged misery and loss that they endured during the long years of war.

My travelling companions and I were lucky to have a prominent cultural historian of Jaffna as our unofficial tour guide. He told us he has not been able to return to his ancestral home outside Jaffna since his whole family had to evacuate the area during an army crackdown in 1987. Tears came to his eyes as he recalled his loss, particularly when he recalled that his father died - essentially of grief - about one month after the evacuation.

There are many sad stories of 'innocent' civilians who died, or those who lost their homes and livelihoods. However, as our guide emphasised, it is also important to remember that many young men and women paid with their lives for their fateful decision to join the Tamil Tigers, for whatever reason.

He told us of a time when a mass grave was dug for the bodies of Tiger combatants killed during an intense phase of the war. Even though the area was heavily patrolled by soldiers, local women took flowers to lay at the grave, to make the point that each of the young men lying there was somebody's son.

One evening we went to the family home of the former vice-chancellor of Jaffna University, Professor N. Shanmugalingam. After a delightful meal, cooked in the distinctive Jaffna way, the multi-talented professor treated us to a repertoire of his own soulful songs written in tribute to his mother, victims of the 2004 tsunami, and those who had suffered during the war.

As we listened, it occurred to us that songs and stories of lived experience, translated into all the languages of Sri Lanka, might do more than the government's Reconciliation Commission to heal the wounds of war.

Time to fix leaky nuclear treaty

POLITICS

Justin Glyn

The recent proposal by Australia to sell uranium to India raises the question of how international law regulates traffic in nuclear weapons, and the materials and technology to make them.

In theory, the cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime is the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons of 1968, usually known as the Non Proliferation Treaty or NPT. Many people are uneasy about Australia's proposed change of heart, because the NPT bans signatory countries from assisting non-signatory countries with their nuclear weapons programs. Australia is a party to the NPT; India is not.

So what is the NPT about? It was signed at the height of the Cold War and contains a simple, if not necessarily fair, formula. The five countries which then had declared nuclear weapons - USA, UK, China, France and USSR (now limited to Russia) - would be allowed to keep them but would assist other signatories to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). These non-nuclear signatories include Australia - commonly thought to have the world's largest uranium reserves.

By collateral agreements, the nuclear-armed countries would guarantee the security of any other signatory to the NPT from any nuclear strike.

Needless to say, the reality has not been that simple. The nuclear powers have not abolished their nuclear arsenals and have, indeed, occasionally threatened non-nuclear parties to the NPT with nuclear attack.

In 2002 and 2003, for instance, Geoff Hoon (then Britain's defence minister) threatened to use them against 'rogue states' using battlefield 'weapons of mass destruction'. (The latter is a political, rather than a legal, term but is generally thought to include at least nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.) In 2006, French President Jacques Chirac threatened nuclear attack against states supporting terrorism or developing WMDs.

There are also a growing number of non-parties to the NPT with nuclear weapons. Israel, India and Pakistan never signed the treaty, while North Korea (which has now successfully tested at least two nuclear weapons) withdrew in 2009.

Most of these non-parties see few benefits to joining. It is one thing to threaten a country which may be developing 'weapons of mass destruction' (remember the

oft-repeated justification for invading Iraq in 2003). Attacking a country that actually has them is quite another proposition.

The only nuclear weapons that have ever been used in battle (in World War II) were smaller than most of the smallest warheads in today's arsenals. Even those wiped out whole cities. Countries can see these most horrifying of weapons as providing security against larger countries' ambitions against them (whether of land grabs or simple 'regime change').

Additionally, there are now enough countries which can develop or buy some sort of technical expertise without having to rely on the 'big five' for nuclear knowledge. The technology to make nuclear bombs is, after all, now nearly 70 years old.

Also, the boundaries between civil and military nuclear applications are fuzzy. The NPT prohibits assisting the development of nuclear weapons but, on the other hand, proclaims an 'inalienable' right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.

While these things are necessarily murky, it would appear that most of the nuclear powers (whether NPT parties or not) have shared nuclear information with non-parties at some stage - with varying levels of justifiability under the NPT. For example, while South Africa had a nuclear program outside the NPT during the apartheid years, it received reactors from France and possibly technical military help from Israel. Most surprisingly, it even exported uranium oxide to the USSR.

In the same vein, Russia's assistance with Iran's nuclear reactors, Pakistan's alleged nuclear collaboration with China and North Korea and the US agreement for nuclear cooperation with India in 2008, have all exposed the fundamental weakness of the NPT protections against proliferation.

Given the leakiness of the NPT regime, it is scarcely surprising that the Australian Government is not terribly concerned about the possibility of breaching it in selling uranium to India. After all, there will always be ways around the treaty.

Nevertheless, assisting a nuclear-armed state to get more access to uranium seems unlikely to help the cause of non-proliferation or nuclear disarmament. It also sets a poor precedent. A party to the NPT with the ability to develop nuclear weapons could well ask whether membership of the NPT is more trouble than it is worth. (Iran, for instance, is a signatory.)

The current debate serves as a clear illustration that if the world is serious about developing real safeguards against nuclear proliferation, a new answer is needed: one which is both just and enforceable.

Labor's Intervention on steroids

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Last week, Jenny Macklin, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs in a 21st century Labor Government led by a prime minister from the left of the party, announced a new raft of welfare measures for Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

To her credit, Macklin has long conceded that the Howard Government Intervention was implemented in a ham-fisted, culturally insensitive and racially discriminatory manner.

But last Monday she said: 'School attendance in these new sites is particularly poor, and it is clear that our efforts in these townships must be strengthened to ensure children are getting a decent education and go to school every day.'

She was joined by Education Minister Peter Garrett who said parents must 'understand that their income support entitlements may be affected if their children are not going to school'.

When interviewed by Fran Kelly on ABC Breakfast, Macklin said : 'It may be that we have to address bullying at school, it may be making sure that a child is helped to get up in the morning and walk to school. What we want to do is work closely with parents, work closely with the Northern Territory Government, to make sure that children do get to school every day.'

Special measures for Indigenous Australians should be imposed only on those individuals or communities which seek them, and with provision for individuals to opt out if they do not wish to avail themselves the special community measures being imposed.

There is no substitute for relationships and respect for human dignity when designing welfare measures for the assistance of the poor and the excluded of our society, especially Indigenous Australians in remote communities.

The historic Apology by our national parliament provided the basis for the ongoing building of that relationship. But it ended last Monday with ministerial calls for the racially targeted docking of welfare payments for parents whose children are not regularly attending school on remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

Legislation is to be introduced to the House of Representatives this week. Presumably this will require the placement of truancy officers, rather than additional teachers, in remote Aboriginal communities.

Where is the evidence based approach which shows that this could possibly work? There have been no trials with demonstrable results. This approach would not be attempted by the Commonwealth government for any other group in society.

In Cape York, Noel Pearson and the Cape York Institute convinced the Queensland Government to set up a Family Responsibilities Commission three years ago covering four Aboriginal communities. In its 2009—10 annual report, the Family Responsibilities Commissioner noted: 'The Local Commissioners have been pivotal in gaining the trust and understanding of community members in regard to school attendance obligations and the rights of families to live peacefully and in safety.'

As yet there are no flash results to report from the Queensland project. But at least it is based on the right principles. Instead of appointing local commissioners, the Commonwealth is more interested in the cost efficient and more controlled use of government officials to impose outcomes by means of the 'stick approach', reducing welfare payments of non-compliant parents.

If the Queensland model is judged by the Commonwealth to be too expensive, giving insufficient return by way of measurable outcomes for the investment in the local community, there will be no reason to expect better outcomes from an approach which gives less emphasis to trust, understanding and involvement of the local community.

There is no evidence that the truancy officers who will have to visit remote communities regularly will be able to achieve anything more than the dedicated teachers living permanently in these communities. We will have Commonwealth public servants entering houses to help children get up in the morning. We will have public servants walking children to school in circumstances where parents are not motivated to assist.

This is the nanny state on steroids.

And who will be responsible for feeding the children whose parents have had their welfare payments suspended? Presumably the truancy officers will double up as providers for hungry children.

While applauding Macklin's commitment to improving school attendance and educational achievement in remote communities, I would urge her to leave the conditional welfare payment stick behind this time, and to take on the harder and more expensive challenges elucidated in the Stronger Futures Report on Consultations released last month.

Namely, the provision of mentors and parenting education, greater Indigenous involvement in school teaching and curriculum, greater involvement by parents and elders in school activities, the provision of more local or regional high schools, the

need for 'vocational education, careers advice in schools, and education that was linked to jobs' and 'the need for school to be an interesting and positive experience for children living in remote communities'.

If these things are not provided, what purpose is served by docking the welfare payments of parents lacking the motivation to send their child to a school which seems irrelevant and useless, probably because it is?

The Commonwealth should embrace one of the benefits of a federal system and await clearer outcomes from the Queensland experiment with the Family Responsibilities Commission before making Aboriginal parental welfare payments conditional on child school attendance.

Let's not be treated to another Federal Labor charade, that the targeted docking of Aboriginal welfare payments is to be classed as a special measure under the Racial Discrimination Act for the benefit of those who will not receive full payment.

With trust and a commitment to relationships built on respect for inherent human dignity and cultural difference, we can strengthen the welfare safety net for the neediest First Australians without constructing a nanny state bound to fail with Commonwealth truancy officers wandering remote communities wondering about their purpose in being there at all.

Religion's homophobic scratch and sniff

POETRY

Barry Gittins

Attracted

Attracted to the other and/or drawn to the same,

we all bathe in the splendour of allure.

Reverse polarity provides an alien to abjure.

A goat to scape. Foes to shame and blame.

As pharisaical ghouls lobby for the status quo,

the legal 'bann' of variated love,

cynics note the dessicated unions blessed above:
divorce could prove a universal blow.

Tendrils of distaste and hate recoil in a tiff,

fear and loathing rile at *others*' joy.

Witness demagoguery's old yet newly minted toy:

religion's homophobic scratch and sniff.

Vile denunciations and allegations waft,

across the vast expanse of space and time.

Flatulent Dutch ovens of bigotry aloft fly,

as adult, equal love's tagged 'sin', not raft

to finding solace, as surely as the Made

seeks the Maker's consoling deeps.

Suicide and ostracism, hidden, slowly creeps;

onwards upwards deathwards. Passions fade.

Semantics fly, with rites and rights a puritan's lament.

Literal application to words rimed with years;

Words that wedge the *other* as the focal point of fears.

Church, mosque or temple: bodies exercise their bent
to non-hetero matrimonials defy.
Sordid 'sacred' words lose lustre in the Light.
Condemning comes not from Love, but spite.
What weight of misery typifies the cry
of adults drawn to other adult lives?
What hideous hypocrites act to censure Love?
Where can Grace dwell? Where is God? In? Above?
Absent when loathing and rank hatred thrives?
To thwart the needs and sorrowful dreams
of frail and potent figures, near and far,
the sexual Luddites wreck the engines of reform to mar
the would-be dignity and fragile schemes
of those who would be openly joined in view
of human, God and faith-besmirching church.
These haters soldier on, blindly fouling the search
for 'home' and kindling hearth. They must construe
a valley of dry-boned hopes. Make of love a tower
of denial. Their 'keepings off' round robin game
of demonising, skewering pain; can we name
latency, jealousy, envy, misuse of power?
Who and how an adult loves - who another gains
as adult lover, soulgazer, oasis, keenest friend -
leaves no grounds for judgment or fear. In the end
God wipes away their tears. Stills their pains.

Sending a message to Gillard about the new cold war

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

For some time, US President Barack Obama has been engaged in conversation with China's President Hu Jintao about the direction and pace of reform in Beijing's economic policy and acceptance of intellectual property standards.

Both leaders represent goals and interests that are both worthy and not so worthy. Obama is attempting to recreate jobs for dispossessed Americans, while Hu Jintao wants to keep China's industrialisation on track so that hundreds of millions of Chinese will continue to rise from poverty. But Hu Jintao appears prepared to break the established international rules, and Obama is beholden to the wealthy Americans who call the shots.

Because the pace of China's response is not acceptable to the US, it is possible the conversation will die and a new cold war will begin. The US Jesuit peace activist John Dear wrote in an email to *Eureka Street* at the weekend: 'This is the beginning of the end for you all.'

A cold war would end the friendship with China that Obama refers to in his speeches. It would promote fear through military coalitions, force deployments, proxy wars, espionage, propaganda, arms races, rivalry at sports events and technological one-upmanship. This serves the interests of neither side.

Australia will be a significant player in any cold war that eventuates between the US and China, with the positioning of 2500 US Marines in Darwin by 2017. The strategy is part of Obama's effort to protect US jobs and intellectual property rights, and is not necessarily in Australia's interest. For example, satisfying demands of the wealthy US pharmaceuticals lobby is likely to lead to higher prices for generic medicines here.

It is regrettable that the Gillard Government has set Australia on this unexpected path. This has occurred not only without an electoral mandate, but also in the absence of national debate.

If large numbers of Australians are worried about the threat to Australia's sovereignty posed by a few thousand asylum seekers arriving by boat each year, surely they would have wanted to be consulted on the use of Australia's territory in a potentially game changing US posturing exercise against China.

Australians taken aback by the precipitousness of last week's announcement will want to send a message to the Government. The best way to do this would be through

media and community debate that embodies the spirit of the conversation between Obama and Hu Jintao that urgently needs to be preserved. Good conversation clarifies what each side is about, which is necessary before differences can be resolved.

US Christian social justice advocate Jim Wallis recently identified some of the qualities of productive conversation in an Open Letter to the Occupy movement.

I would advise you to cultivate humility more than overconfidence or self indulgence. This really is not about you. It's about the marginalised masses, the signs of the times, and the profound yearning for lasting change. Take that larger narrative more seriously than you take yourselves.

It could well be that the actions of Obama and Gillard in setting up the Darwin strategy are in fact about themselves, specifically their re-election in 2012 and 2013 respectively.

Celtic tiger down but not done

POLITICS

Edmond Grace

Europe is in a mess and anyone trying to describe the mess needs to be clear about where they stand in it. The mess in Greece will have a different feel from the mess in Ireland, and different again from the mess in France or Germany ... or Malta or Lithuania. Part of the problem is that no one has an overview. No one can say *This is how things are in Europe* without someone else saying *No, it's not!*

Recently I was listening to a chat show being broadcast from a coffee shop in one of Ireland's midland counties. The participants had gathered to talk about their town and what could be done to make it a more vibrant centre. They had lots of ideas and spoke with great enthusiasm.

When the compere referred to the problems facing the town they were genuinely reluctant to speak in those terms, though it was clear the problems were real. Their concern was with how to overcome them. There was talk of business closures, of the impact of big out-of-town retail outlets on the town centre. There was much praise for local teenagers and a suggestion that they might help make empty shop fronts more presentable.

There was something admirable about this talk - a determination not to be beaten by adversity.

Ireland's economy seems to be turning a corner, but only after many have paid the cost and only after the return of something we thought we had been left behind - involuntary emigration on a scale not seen for over half a century. Yet the Ireland which people are leaving is a very different country to the one which so many left in the 1950s. The new-found confidence of the Celtic Tiger years has not completely disappeared.

If we have come on tough times we are not the only ones. Of those who came to live in Ireland in recent years from the former communist European countries, some have returned home but many prefer to remain in Ireland, especially if their children are growing up with Irish accents and attitudes. This change is profound.

The prevailing mood in Ireland could be described as one of hope, which is not to be confused with optimism. There is a sense of disillusionment. There was a lot of money around during the Celtic Tiger years but also a lot of slick cynicism. Our recently elected president, in his inauguration speech, spoke about the rise of 'an

egotism based on purely material considerations, that tended to value the worth of a person in terms of the accumulation of wealth rather then their fundamental dignity'.

People are weary and angry, but they also know they have to look to the future and to make something of it.

This is admirable, but it also points to an underlying fragility, which is all the more disturbing in that it is not confined to this country. Two short years ago we Irish were the bad boys of Europe and the most in need of help, but our problems have long since been dwarfed and are now of little significance to the rest of Europe. The same is not true in reverse; Europe's problems are like a river in flood and we are caught up in the current.

We can only wait and watch as events lurch forward but it is clear that all of us - not just the Irish but the Greeks and everyone in between - are being swept along in the same current with the same growing sense of dread. Europe's most powerful politician Angela Merkel has captured the prevailing mood in her recent comment that the unravelling of the euro could endanger peace.

In expressing this sentiment, Merkel may have had the following quotation in mind: 'World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.'

These are the opening words of Europe's founding document, the Schuman Declaration. The vast majority of European citizens know little or nothing about the Schuman Declaration and are getting increasingly disenchanted with 'Europe.'