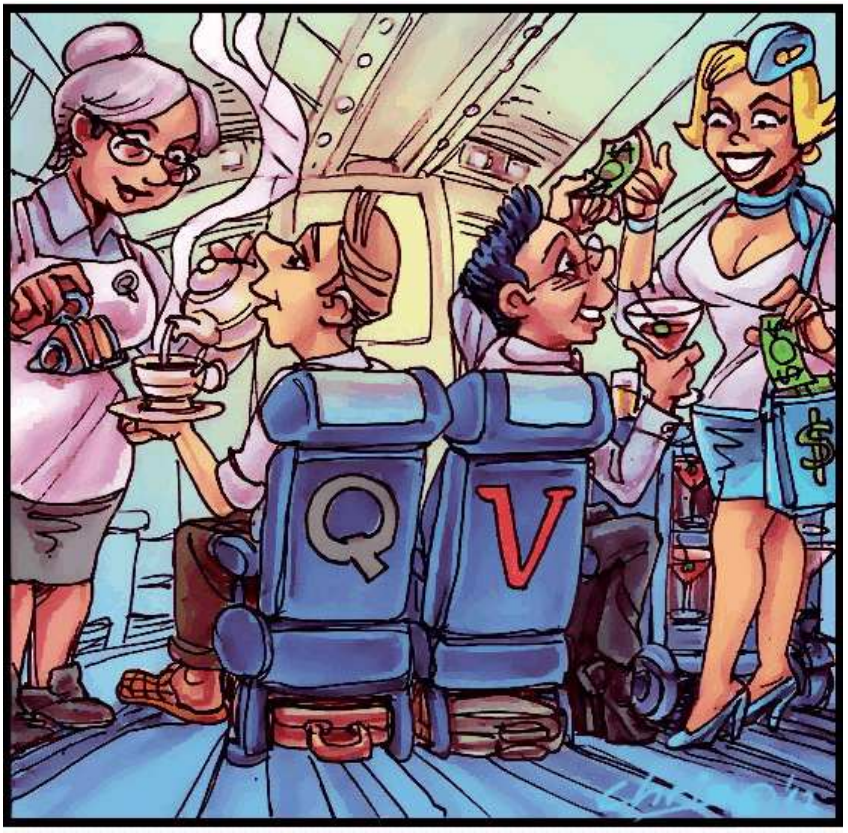
EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

24 February 2012 Volume: 22 Issue: 3



Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Requests for permission to reprint material from the website and this edition should be addressed to the Editor.

PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

Tel +61 3 9427 7311
Fax +61 3 9428 4450
Eureka@eurekastreet.com.au

EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.
Volume 22 Issue: 3
24 February 2012

Gonski's reductionist view of education

EDUCATION

Chris Middleton

The Gonski Report is ambitious. It focuses on addressing educational disadvantage in Australian schools through an additional $5 billion dollar increase in funding. This recommendation is popular with advocates of state schools because the vast majority (75 per cent) will be directed to the state system, which educates the majority of disadvantaged students.

The non-government sector is also happy because it has argued that the focus should be on increasing the size of the cake, rather than on the state versus private debate.

Hopefully all agree that there are pockets of disadvantage — Indigenous children, children in remote and country Australia, children with physical and mental disabilities, and children from poor backgrounds — where an injection of resources is needed.

Moreover, the report appears to encourage the non-government sector to assist more in this area. This was a theme of many submissions made to Gonski and the panel from private schools.

There is, however, an important caveat to this. It presumes that a $5 billion injection is possible.

The detail that is passed over is that only 30 per cent would come from the Federal Government, with the rest coming from the states. This seems to vindicate those who have argued that state schools are primarily responsible for funding state schools, whereas from the 1960s the Federal Government has taken responsibility for providing some state aid to the non-government sector.

The AEU and others talk of non-government schools receiving more government funding than state schools. They conveniently ignore the fact that state schools receive most of their funding (88 per cent) from state governments. If you combine federal and state funding, only 20 per cent of all funding goes to non-government schools, which educate 32 per cent of Australian students.

Gonski appears to suggest that the bulk of underfunding of state schools is the responsibility of the states. State governments have allowed the state school systems to be increasingly under-resourced, especially in the area of maintenance, while the bureaucracies ever expand. It could be argued that the AEU itself has been an obstacle to reform in this area.

Australia spends a lower proportion of its GDP on education than many countries. It also has the biggest non-government sector in the developed world.

My concern about the Gonski Report, in this respect, is that for the authors to have as a central feature a spending target that is undeliverable raises unrealistic expectations.

Moreover, the timing of the report and the Government's decision to give more time for consultation makes it unlikely that its main recommendations will ever be implemented.

There appears to have been little consultation with the states, who will be expected to find much more money for education; the Federal Government seems unlikely to commit to such an increase because of its commitment to a budget surplus; and by time the consultations are completed there are likely to be four non-Labor states. Already the Federal Opposition has opposed the report.

A Federal election is due before the next funding arrangements in 2014. It is hard to see anything like the model of funding suggested by Gonski being in place by then.

The second key feature of the report is the recommendation to establish a school resource standard as a basic measure for funding students in all schools. It is proposed to represent the efficient cost of education, so as to determine base funding for all schools.

Such a cost would be worked out in identifying a school resource standard. Government schools would receive this payment in full; additional funds for needs, such as students with disability, would be provided. Exactly what this school resource standard would be is not specified, though it estimates $8000 for primary students and $10,500 for secondary students.

One concern is that such a figure may not take into account other variables that can affect the cost of schooling, apart from disadvantage. The cost of schooling in Sydney may differ from that in Adelaide. How to take into account specialised schools such as the Conservatorium? Or performing arts high schools or sports academies?

It might lead to the lowest common denominator approach to determining what is an efficient education, and thus reflect a reductionist view of education, in both government and non-government schools. Creativity, diversity and experimentation may be hindered in such a regime.

This may be even more the case with the non-government sector, of which diversity lies at the heart. Schools with large co-curricular programs, for example, have quite a different cost per student. Such schools also have to include capacity for capital works in their fee structure.

The report also proposes government funding to non-government schools be based on each school's capacity to raise income from parents through a measure similar to SES (socioeconomic status). Two positives in this are that non-government schools with students with needs will be eligible for extra funding,

and it respects the principle that each student has a right to some funding.

The report suggests a minimum payment to schools with a high SES at 20—25 per cent of the schooling resource standard. For some very high fee paying schools this might preserve the status quo. For schools in areas that attract a high SES , but have tried to contain fees to a more modest level, such a proposal may well represent a significant financial loss.

The problem rests in determining the amounts for each school. The SES model itself has flaws in determining what schools are eligible for.

The devil will be in the detail. Will it be flexible enough and discriminatory to deal with the particular school and its circumstances? Will it penalise schools that work harder at fundraising?

There are a significant number of Catholic schools that might fall into that category, losing $1—3000 per student in funding. They would face the unpalatable choice of hiking fees. Some modelling done in Victoria by the Catholic system warns that Catholic primary school fees could rise between 92 and 131 per cent by 2016, forcing out lower socioeconomic status students.

The issue could be raised as to why one sector is means-tested and another is not. If the size of payments to schools is to be determined on a needs basis, it seems reasonable to ask why the child of a millionaire, attending James Ruse High, with the longest waiting list in Sydney, should attract to that school the full payment rather than be means-tested.

The majority of families earning income over $104,000 send their children to government schools.

An important area in all this is the distinction between funding as entitlement and as welfare. Medicare is not means-tested, because its proponents saw the universality of the scheme as an important aspect of social policy. I'd argue similarly that a basic payment is the right of each student, and that additional payments to disadvantaged students/schools are then made on a needs basis.

Nearly 32 per cent of Australian students attend non-government schools. In capital cities this climbs to 50 per cent in years 11 and 12. Non-government schools are already funded according to a sliding scale of need, between 13.7 and 70 per cent of the cost of educating a child in the state system.

Prior to the release of the Gonski Report there were a number of stories on the Grattan Institute's report , 'Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia'. It highlights the success, as measured by international testing, of schools in Shanghai, Korea and Singapore.

Where Gonski highlights a perceived fall in competitiveness of Australian students as a rationale for challenging the status quo, most of the factors cited in the Grattan report do not relate to the allocation of resources, but to the nature of

teacher training and the atmosphere in the classroom.

Some of this can be explained in cultural terms, and sometimes these reports, by focusing simply on narrow academic results, do not necessarily report on the quality of education. They also don't explain how pervasive coaching schools and outside tutoring are in the system.

But it seems to me that the measure by which Gonski may base funding will be the cost of an 'efficient' education. This carries real dangers for the quality of Australian schools.

Debates over education tend to focus on the issue of funding of non-government schools. This avoids dealing with real issues that pertain specifically to public education: the autonomy of a local school within a sometimes stifling government bureaucracy, the power of the teachers union in determining standards and accountability; the relationship between selective and comprehensive schools; and the failure of state governments to effectively support and maintain state schools.

I'm not sure the Gonski Report will shift that focus to what can really improve schools. The mandate of the report related to a review of funding, but perhaps an argument could be made that it claims too much for funding in terms of curing the ills of Australian education.

There is no causal relationship between funding and good educational outcomes. Professor Scott Prasser of the Australian Catholic University, writing in *Eureka Street*, observes that:

The link between education performance and either the quantum of resources or the allocative mechanism is generally considered at least indirect, and by most researchers weak. A strong focus on elements of schooling such as teacher and principal quality, early intervention, targeted programs with proven success at overcoming educational disadvantage, choice, autonomy and accountability is where differences in performance can really be addressed.

I suspect the Gonski Report has little to offer in terms of ways to improve the system in a broad sense. Insofar as it seeks to offer a way forward for government funding of schools, in finding a balance between public and private, and valuing choice and diversity, I suspect it will prove not to be the way forward, either in principle or politically.

In addressing the issue of disadvantage in Australian schooling, I believe it does establish the need for greater funding, most of which should go to government schools. It makes the case for the non-government sector to assume a greater share of the burden in assisting the disadvantaged.

Why Gillard should lead

POLITICS

Tony Kevin

Monday's leadership ballot will offer a much needed opportunity to clear the air and move on to a healthier, more open climate in Australian federal politics.

Whether or not Rudd contests, the result should begin to heal the deepening wounds the party has suffered from weeks of Machiavellian plotting and rumour-mongering. As Tony Burke said on Thursday, the vote will lance the boil so that healing may begin.

Most Australian voters of Labor sympathies will breathe a sigh of relief that the subterranean issues of leadership and thwarted ambition are out in the open. Now elected ALP federal representatives may freely make their final individual decisions.

Those decisions will be informed partly by self-interest (under which leader can each member of caucus best hope for re-election at the next national election?) but also, one hopes, by consideration of which leader is likely to operate cabinet government most effectively in the national interest.

I believe the right course of action will be for the caucus to support Gillard.

Politics in the Australian party system has to be a team sport. Players must stand behind the captain, loyally papering over their faults. They must not undermine them with disparaging judgements, either on or off the record or by leaking to others.

Things are at last being said in public about Rudd's record. Eminent Labor politicians such as Simon Crean, Wayne Swan, Greg Combet, Tanya Plibersek, Nicola Roxon, Tony Burke, Anna Bligh and Peter Beattie are saying in different ways that this saga must end now. These are not 'faceless men', but men and women with clear faces, opinions and responsibilities.

Rudd had acquired a reputation as PM for failures as an efficient decision maker and manager. He failed to show decent and productive respect and courtesy for ministerial colleagues and senior public servants. He was autocratic and unreasonable in his determination to monopolise power and exploit all the prerogatives of his office. These things were well known in Canberra.

The gossip out of Foreign Affairs since he became Foreign Minister is that those habits had not changed. Last week's leaked YouTube video tended to confirm this.

Rudd's was not a high-achieving government in terms of policy runs on the board. It was good at articulating messages of general philosophy and intent —

how Australia needed to put the John Howard era behind us — and Rudd knew the arts of stroking and flattering the public. His government took Australia safely and calmly through the first stage of the Global Financial Crisis.

But it badly messed up the carbon pricing issue, leaving environmental reformers like Ross Garnaut marooned. It messed up the mining tax and pink batts. The style was high-handed and autocratic, but at the same time careless with detail, messy and inefficient.

When the supporters of Gillard moved to unseat Rudd in June 2010, they did so in the belief that the Labor ship was under serious threat from Abbott, but was salvageable. The election outcome of a hung parliament was a narrow shave. But it was a genuine election and a genuine outcome, whatever Abbott may say about it. His claim that this is an illegitimate 'unelected' government is nonsense.

Minority government has presented unique challenges to Gillard and her team, to which they have responded with dignity, clarity and efficiency. Labor now has real policy runs on the board: a carbon pricing system, a mining tax, health funding reform, and the start of education reform . The working style of cabinet is by all accounts collegial, respectful and far more effective than before.

Crucially, Gillard took the decision in 2010 to invite Rudd to stay on as Foreign Minister. He was given the opportunity to make a serious and continuing contribution. And generally, he did, as the Libya intervention and the well-managed Obama visit attest. (His record on relations with China is mixed — there is little doubt he lost Beijing's trust starting in 2008, and has never recovered it.)

But Gillard and her team have been forced to fight on two fronts, against relentless attacks from the Opposition and its media sympathisers, and from undermining forces within the party. The anonymous undermining can only have originated from those close to Rudd.

Burke explained it well on Thursday. Gillard's team had hoped for the best after the change in June 2010 — that Rudd and his backers would accept what had happened, and move on in doing their jobs. This did not happen. Other agendas were in play.

And here arises Labor's dilemma. Gillard's determination since June 2010 to publicly assume the best of Rudd left her until this week unable to articulate to the public the ways in which he was failing in loyalty to her government. A sense of decency kept her and her ministers silent on his failures as PM.

As a result, in the apt words of *Eureka Street* correspondent 'Pam' yesterday: 'Gillard is perceived as a good leader by the party and not by the electorate, and Rudd is perceived as a poor leader by the party and not by the electorate.' This is a problem of Labor's own making. Now, because Rudd's backers have fatally overreached themselves in recent weeks, it has the chance to set things right.

Gillard says that if defeated she will retire to the backbench. She calls on Rudd to make the same pledge. Clearly, there will be no more ministerial posts for Rudd under Gillard. Whatever the outcome on Monday, a chapter has ended.

Now the party has a quick repair and public education job to do over the next few days and weeks, in reminding all Australians that politics as a team sport requires solidarity and mutual loyalty.

'Buddhist' Catholic nun's interfaith leadership

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Two weeks ago Eureka Street TV featured a conversation with American Episcopal bishop, William Swing, founder of one of the world's largest interfaith organisations. Continuing in the same vein, this week's interview is with a Catholic nun who is one of America's most prominent female interfaith activists. Joan Kirby, a sister of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, is a veteran of inter-religious dialogue.

Since 2000 she has been the representative at the UN of one of the oldest interfaith organisations in the US, the Temple of Understanding . Prior to that, from 1993 till 2000, she was the Temple's director.

The Temple of Understanding was founded in 1960 by an American lay woman from Connecticut, Juliet Hollister. Appalled at inter-religious conflict around the globe, Hollister was inspired to start an organisation to promote understanding among the major world faiths.

Hollister was well connected and a skilled networker. One early ally was Eleanor Roosevelt, who at that time was working with the UN. Roosevelt wrote letters of introduction to many religious leaders around the world in which she described the proposed organisation as a 'Spiritual United Nations'. Then Hollister set off on a journey around the globe to discuss it with them.

Initially Hollister called the project 'A Centre for World Religions'. But when she reached India, she discussed it with Harriet Bunker, wife of the American Ambassador, who suggested the name the Temple of Understanding. Her logic was that while 'centre for ...' sounded particularly Western, the word 'temple' is a common denominator for all religions.

Hollister's original vision was to construct a physical temple, with wings for each major religion, a large library and a central pool and flame for meditation and prayer. An 18 acre site was purchased near Washington DC, an architect drew plans, and a model was made. But the building never went ahead.

In the beginning, the focus was on organising big international conferences for religious leaders from different faiths. The first meeting was held in India in 1968. Subsequently they took place in Switzerland and at several locations in the USA. The final one took place in Oxford, England in 1988.

After this the Temple changed direction. Its leadership decided the message needed to be taken to the grassroots. Now its focus is on providing educational opportunities for ordinary people to experience other cultures and faiths. Kirby's contribution to this is in organising and mentoring interns from the US and other countries who spend time at the UN in New York.

The Temple of Understanding is now based in an office building just a few

blocks from the UN headquarters, and much of Kirby's time is spent there. In 2010 she was honoured with the Temple's Interfaith Visionary Lifetime Achievement Award.

In his congratulatory message for the award, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon wrote that he was mindful of the special role she had played 'in interfaith and intercultural dialogue, as well as confronting climate change. I am also thankful that you have taken the time to nurture young global citizens from all parts of the world. Your leadership has been exemplary. Your influence profound.'

Islamic women's sex and power

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Source* (M) Director: Radu Mihaileanu. Starring: LeÃ¯la Bekhti, Hafsia Herzi, Biyouna, Saleh Bakri. 131 minutes**

In an early scene, liberal leaning schoolteacher Sami (Bakri) presents his beautiful young wife Leila (Bekhti) with a copy of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

It's a knowingly symbolic gesture. The couple belongs to a patriarchal Islamic community in a remote North African village, where Leila has recently instigated a kind of feminist stand against the local men. Given the *Nights*' framing narrative about a bride who gains power over her ruthless husband through storytelling, the gift represents a nod from Sami to Leila's own act of self-empowerment.

It is also a perhaps hopeful wink from director and co-writer Mihaileanu that his film can be seen as a modern day Arabian fable, to be read in the context of the Arabian Spring movement for democracy and modernity. To this end *The Source* is inspirited by folk songs and dance sequences featuring 'girl power' protest lyrics, which bat against other folk songs celebrating a more subservient feminine role.

The key issue, as far as the women are concerned, is water. The region is experiencing drought, and the village is yet to be plumbed for running water. The women are expected by tradition to fetch water from a source outside the village, which is a genuinely perilous task: Leila's outrage is sparked by what is the latest of many miscarriages suffered on the craggy incline by the village's women.

Led by Leila and feisty widow Old Rifle (Biyouna) — who, having been married off at 14 and raped by her husband on their wedding night, bears long-held disdain for the patriarchy — the women declare a love strike: to withhold sex from their husbands until they pipe water to the village.

This is an act of self-empowerment for the women, but it has its hardships. One woman is raped by her husband and, when she adopts non-violent strategies to repel his forceful advances, she is beaten for her recalcitrance. Even Leila's marriage to the sympathetic Sami is tested by the social and family pressures that come to bear on him as the husband of the ringleader.

The strike is certainly disruptive. But for the women it's the only way they can see to earn the respect and consideration that their humanity — not just their gender — demands.

The film's pointed feminist message (the original title was *La Source Des Femmes*, or *The Source Of Women*) is tempered by humour. Consider the sight of Old Rifle gossiping on a mobile phone while sitting side saddle on a plodding mule. Cut to a wide shot of the open desert landscape that she is traversing, as she

suddenly starts yelling 'Hello? Hello?' repeatedly into the phone. 'No signal!' she finally curses.

The incongruity of the scene also exemplifies the tendrils of modernity that have entered village life. This is a consistent theme in *The Source*; in the same way that Leila is seen to have 'blown in' from more free-thinking regions and presumed to challenge their traditions, the winds of technological change bring with them new possibilities as well as new anxieties.

A politician warns Sami that once the women have running water and electricity, the next thing they'll be asking for is washing machines. The remark is deliberately sexist, said with an eye-rolling 'there's just no pleasing women' tone. But at the same time it reflects the anxiety that old ways and methods can be supplanted by modernisation, and that this process can involve grief and anguish.

If *The Source* is a fable, its power is limited. Leila's sister-in-law Esmeralda (Herzi) is enamoured to Mexican soap operas; and this is as apt an intertextual reference for the film as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Notably, a plot thread involving a former flame of Leila's, Soufiane (Akhmiss), who turns up to try to reclaim her love, is one of several schmaltzy subplots that merely swell the running time.

What should Rudd do now?

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

'Rudd should ...', 'Gillard should ...' And so the national conversation drones on, constantly crossing the divide between moral imperatives and self-interested political plotting. Things are now so messy, you wonder whether there is any point in trying to sieve the short term political interests of the players from the moral imperatives of good policy and sound administration in the national interest.

It's not as if this level of intrigue, back-stabbing and character assassination is anything new in Australian tussles for the top job in politics. Think only of Hawke and Keating. They sealed a pact in November 1988 secretly agreeing to a seamless transfer of the leadership baton down the track. Their fellow ministers and caucus members were not privy to it; and we the public were completely oblivious.

Keating announced a challenge to Hawke in May 1991, having voiced his discontent with Hawke in December 1990 when he delivered a speech which Hawke described as 'treacherous'. In January 1991, Hawke and Keating had a three hour meeting seeking a way through the impasse. Each was immovable. The deal was off.

At the first ballot on 3 June 1991, Keating lost by 44 votes to 66 votes. He went to the back bench insisting that he had only one shot in the locker. No one believed him. He and his backers worked feverishly in the next six months, waiting for Hawke and his substitute treasurer to make mistakes. Keating was not there to help. He just waited in the wings. He then won his second challenge on 20 December 1991 by 56 votes to 51.

In the lead up, the media gave him a dream run. What's different about Gillard and Rudd? Gillard is more unpopular than Hawke ever was. Rudd is more popular than Keating was in the lead up to his first challenge. And Rudd's already had one go in the top job.

From day one, Keating wanted to knock off Hawke so that he could be prime minister. Rudd has not declared a challenge. Whether or not that is simply the result of personal calculations about caucus popularity does not matter. If he were to challenge, like Keating he would probably lose the first round and he would have no option but go to the backbench.

Then to do what? Spend the next six months undermining Gillard as Keating did Hawke? Rudd might not think that is a morally appropriate course of action. He might think it would cause long term damage to the Party. Or he might figure that he would never have the numbers in caucus no matter how terminal the Government's position in the polls.

The Labor Party is under siege from left and right.

The Greens are stealing their idealistic young voter base on issues as diverse as same sex marriage and a green future. The Liberals, despite depleted front bench talent since the Howard days, are promising economic management and development without the world's heftiest carbon tax which on its own will neither decrease global emissions nor provide greener technology. The tax obviously provides a disincentive for the manufacturing sector except in those instances where government subsidies are maintained.

If Rudd was not so popular and if Gillard was not so unpopular, the Gillard backers would have been more content to leave Rudd strutting the world stage. No doubt he, like many leaders before him, could be more of a team player. But how do you play in a team which belatedly admits that they conducted confidential polling unfavourable to the leader without telling him, and whose staffers saw fit to prepare a victory speech well before acknowledgement that the challenge was on?

Rudd is up against a team which is so well oiled in keeping the whiff of intrigue from its leader that Harry Jenkins can be sacrificed on the altar of political expediency and Peter Slipper bought off without the leader having to know anything until the deal is done.

It's in this context that one must view this week's unprecedented attack by Simon Crean on Rudd's integrity and fitness for Cabinet office. The mission this last week was to kill off Rudd.

Having resigned as Foreign Minister, Rudd should only challenge if he intends to do a Keating, retiring to the back bench with the firm resolve of coming back for a second challenge before the next election. If he does not desire that, there would be no point in his challenging. He should enjoy the Keating largesse of the back bench, waiting to see if he is drafted by a party which is on the way to electoral oblivion.

Though some of Rudd's colleagues called for his sacking this past week, Crean, a key Gillard backer, was the only minister who committed a sacking offence with his demonstrated public breach of cabinet solidarity.

If Rudd decides not to challenge, it may be because he thinks he will never have the numbers in caucus before any election. It might also be because he judges that six months disruption of the party with him on the back bench as a lightning rod conductor for public sympathy would be more than a party led by a desperately unpopular Gillard could bear, thereby paving the way for an Abbott Government, the annihilation of Labor and increased fortunes for the Greens.

Of course those caucus members and staffers who leak swearing videos of Rudd refuse to believe that he could act other than in his own self interest because that is all they ever do, wanting to cling to power and privilege at any cost. Whatever

might be said of Rudd's motives against Gillard, consider what Peter Hartcher, who went on to become Keating's journalistic confidante, said of Keating on the eve of his first challenge in June 1991:

For Paul Keating, the point of today's leadership vote is not to win the prime ministership. It is to break the legs of Bob Hawke's administration. If the Labor Party can be persuaded that Mr Hawke is lame, then it becomes inevitable Mr Keating will eventually win in a second challenge. How many votes does Mr Keating need to cripple Mr Hawke?

Back then the received wisdom was that Keating needed 40 votes in a caucus of 110. In a caucus of 103, how many would Rudd need to declare 'Game on' from the back bench?

Everyone knows Gillard is lame. But like the Monty Python figure she will fight for as long as she has a torso, regardless of how many limbs she has lost. Some say, 'Rudd should challenge!' Others say he should retire gracefully to the back bench then leave parliament at the next election. There is not necessarily any 'should' to this assessment. It may be just a matter of his personal choice, ambition and political calculation.

Then again, Rudd may decide what he should do in the light of his party's long term interest and what he assesses as the national interest. It's this that make politics such a dirty business as well as a noble profession.

Feminism in Bougainville

POLITICS

Ellena Savage

Yesterday I interviewed a former Bougainville Revolutionary Army combatant. I'm in PNG for three months to visit my boyfriend, a linguist who is documenting an endangered Austronesian language here. With an interpretor, we began documenting the former combatant's story, which is harrowing.

Beforehand, I wasn't sure about the ethics of interviewing someone about conflict who was a perpetrator in conflict; how to ask important questions but not to retraumatise someone who was a very young adolescent when he first entered battle.

But he was more prepared than I was to fully document his story, which includes details of torture and rape, of cold-blooded murder, and of corpse mutilation, perpetrated by his side and the other sides during the crisis that spanned the 1990s, killing upward of 10 per cent of Bougainville's population.

His story is long and painful, and we're not sure what to do with it just yet, so we'll just keep meeting and piecing it all together.

This was the first time I'd heard about the real events of the conflict: most of the information people give is their frustration at the politics of it, or their disgust at the various factions that emerged, armed and dangerous.

With the support of the Leitana Nehan Women's group, Gregory put down his arms later in the conflict and was heavily involved in weapons disposal programs. He's now a community leader and activist, running programs for young people.

The generation of Bouganivilleans who have school-aged children now are those who were thrown into conflict during their adolescence. Being traumatised and having never had time to be children themselves, Gregory, and other community leaders say many of these folks aren't able to meet the responsibilities of parenthood.

Outside the family there are few resources for their children to get support here, so his ideas are quite radical. His dream is to have a place for troubled young people to access education (education isn't universal in PNG), rehabilitation and other support.

During the war, women's groups in Bougainville were very powerful in providing resources: food, shelter, and educational workshops, to young combatants and other at-risk young people during the conflict. They were successful in disarming many young combatants.

Since the conflict, they have been some of the only organisations to provide trauma rehabilitation services. And all on minimal funds. During the conflict,

women cooked food from their own gardens to provide for the young people.

'Women in Bougainville have no choice but to be political,' I was told by a community leader. From housekeepers to businesswomen, they all seem to be pretty fierce feminists. Even random women I meet at cafes and pubs tell me about the work women do in their communities. Different village councils work differently, but some are all women, some are mixed, and some are all men.

Society in Bougainville is matrilineal, but patriarchal; upon marriage, the husband moves to his wife's village. I think this fact eases the usually difficult transition women face taking on public leadership roles for the first time.

On Nissan island, a council comprised largely of women subsistence farmers and service industry workers living in Buka organised to have toilets put in every residence on the island. Domestic roles there have broadened to take on public health and hygiene. I've heard some people say the men on Nissan island are lazy. If this is true, the women seem quite happy to be the leaders in their place.

Bougainville's provincial parliament has three seats allocated to women, and the national government will allocate one seat to a woman in the upcoming federal elections. People here believe it is because of Bougainville's example. There is already one woman in the national parliament, but I'm told she doesn't really count because she's white and Australian, and is married to a very powerful judge.

National elections are in July, and I know one woman who is planning to run. During the last elections, a female candidate ran and came a very close second in one seat. One reason, I am told, is that women who don't know about all of the candidates are likely to vote for a female name.

This might sound like a less than desirable model of democracy, but it illustrates how keen women here are to have representation, and how willing they are to trust other women in leadership roles.

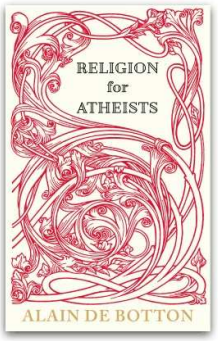
Rebuilding a society after a conflict requires courage and compassion. Data from the conflict is still being collected, and wounds will take a lot longer to heal. The record of the crisis has not yet been set straight. Women's leadership during the crisis provided rare space for young people to be safe, and for traumatised survivors to access support.

Their contributions need to be acknowledged, and supported at all levels of politics.

Alain de Botton's pastoral atheism

RELIGION

Patrick McCabe



If the provocative title of Alain de Botton's book *Religion for Atheists* does not annoy believers and non-believers alike, then its first line probably will: 'The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true.'

And if any sanguine readers out there remain unmoved, the book's central thesis should rile even them. De Botton says religions are not true, and God does not exist. Yet atheists should not dismiss religions on these grounds. The rituals, modes of thinking, methodologies, and approaches to life that religions promote can still be of great assistance to atheists.

For instance, de Botton argues that atheists could learn how to foster a sense of community from the Catholic Mass. The Jewish Day of Atonement could help atheists build better interpersonal relationships. Zen Buddhist retreats could assist atheists to reflect on the direction of their lives.

(As this representative sample suggests, the book could probably have been more precisely titled Catholicism, Judaism and Zen Buddhism for Atheists.)

One chapter commends religious places of worship and the feelings they can induce in us. De Botton suggests building a secular 'Temple to Perspective' — a place where humans can put their troubles into perspective by reflecting on the 460 million years Earth has existed for.

With typical zeal, de Botton has already put this suggestion into action, raising almost half of the million pounds required to actually build this temple in London.

The proposal has angered fellow atheists. Richard Dawkins has condemned the plan, declaring that 'atheists don't need temples', and that the money would be better spent on promoting 'rational, critical thinking'. *The Guardian*'s Steve Rose protests that the Temple of Perspective is insufficiently atheist, and so 'a Christian or Muslim' might also be able to enjoy it.

These criticisms demonstrate the gap between de Botton and other atheists. Dawkins and Rose's outlook is missionary, while de Botton's is pastoral. Dawkins and his ilk want to save souls from religion, and promote the good news of atheism. De Botton is more concerned with the spiritual needs of the existing flock.

Many atheists argue that religious people are childish, irrational, needy, and vulnerable, and that atheism is about turning away from all those things, and embracing a rational, 'grown-up' existence. That argument is implicit in Dawkins' dismissive 'atheists don't need temples'.

While de Botton agrees atheism is the rational choice, he argues that those who make that choice do not suddenly cease to be irrational and childish. It is not religious people who are childish and vulnerable, but human beings. The wisdom of religion is to recognise our inherent vulnerability, and cater to that aspect of our being.

It is evident why atheists might be angered by de Botton's ideas. But what should theists make of this book?

It will offend theists who believe the only reason to practise religious rituals is simply to adhere to God's edicts. For such theists, God's reasons for prescribing particular rituals are irrelevant and inscrutable. To put it bluntly, God might as well have commanded us to do the hokey-pokey, and these theists would perform it with as much zeal as they might attend a Catholic Mass.

These believers will regard de Botton's use of elements of religious rituals outside of a theistic context as absurd and blasphemous.

Other theists, such as myself, instead see religious rituals and practices as a means of guiding and enabling a life lived in accordance with the beliefs and values of a particular faith. *Religion for Atheists* can help this type of believer gain a new appreciation for the utility of religious rituals.

De Botton eloquently demonstrates just how helpful religious practices are, even when the theistic content is substituted for lessons about 'perspective' or 'community'. Believers can see that when the more profound teachings of religions are re-inserted into the rituals, those rituals are powerful tools indeed for assisting us to live our lives in a way that is attuned to theistic values and beliefs.

While de Botton's individual ideas and arguments are at times open to fundamental criticisms, his general perspective is a valuable one. His book can help theists articulate the importance of religious practices in a world that is, even among believers, increasingly sceptical of organised religion.

But at the same time, it can also assist believers to fearlessly adapt and improve aspects of traditional religion where that is required. In a new epoch that requires religions to be introspective if they wish to remain strong, this can only be a good thing.

Op-shop religion

POETRY

Matthew Davies

We cannot measure

for Thomas von Kempen

We cannot measure
Those saved by the Word
But those fallen and assaulted
By, let's be clear, the Word
Seek a suitable time for meditation
On the saved who live in secret pacts
Hiding from the harsh world
By wrapping all in holy cloth
Never holding the courage
To unwrap

Tweed jacket

you must leave rather soon
or they'll cry 'get out!'
if you try on any more religions
torn, weary & grey
like many a tweed jacket
from St Vinnie's
they're never your size
and they humble your closet
so proudly

The coals I carried for you

Who am I to deny your genealogy
in the form of commercial paganism?
Those earthly stars hardly match
the real ones just overhead now.

High voltage delirium found solace
in underfed unicorns
expounding commonsense.
Why not turn inward instead?

Pixilation

our preserver
our soon-to-be
streets to be littered
with deconstructing wares
no natural life-force
to engulf and spiral through
only the 'products'
computer chip fragments
replacing the 'sands of time'
pixilation earth
DOS-dust

It overwhelms

and your lawless heart
cannot intend another divide
to break through
to bend through
to chew through
the adultery you commit
in your heart
makes churches
such scarce ventures
but all of that skin
that you pace for
overwhelms your
already bright yearning

in the shadows

of cold compunction

Clutching at air

Of course, all longhairs are assured

That you can't rely on anyone, for

Anything, for any length of time,

For any staidness in space, for any

Rapture dissipated out in a friend's

Kind impatience.

Offer a hand up to offer another life

In the desert to one inhaling dust, as

He denies the metaphoric futilities.

It isn't exactly life, but admit it freely,

If you were a sun-baked carrion, or
Simple fearing the marketplace. Here

Your soul would leap, forgotten by

Dealing, crushed by opportunity.

If this being does not transpire, we

Turn, after clutching at air, to Christ.

For the time-watched glory is there.

The baggage, on first sight, is slim,

He's travelling light, he'll soften

Those silly little whims.

But more so for the pathetic weakness

That walks on high without aspiration

Or pill. His shorn power as the lamb, not

As the holder of the keys to the lost and

Found box. The smudge of sweat upon

A clean, crisp page, a wrinkled face lit,

The joy of a crippled black pup.

Gonski process leaves schools in limbo

EDUCATION

Scott Prasser

A two year process of research, consultation, public input and expert consideration and analysis is a reasonable route to follow for a government-appointed independent inquiry into a major policy issue, and there is no question that school funding is such a major issue.

But when that lengthy and costly process leads directly into a further protracted process of consultation, public input and bureaucratic consideration, the value of the initial inquiry is open to question.

When Julia Gillard, as Education Minister, appointed the Gonski review of school funding in April 2010, it was with a promise that an objective and balanced assessment of the claims and counter-claims in this highly politicised area would lay to rest the long-running acrimonious debate about school funding arrangements and provide expert advice as a foundation for government action.

Instead, the Gonski panel has recommended a complete overhaul of funding, involving readjustment of entrenched Commonwealth-state responsibilities, the estabishment of new bureaucratic structures in each jurisdiction, and ongoing uncertainty for schools.

While the full 250 page Gonski report released at 1pm on 20 February 2012 warrants a more detailed examination than has yet been possible and may well reveal a strong rationale for its proposed revolution in funding, at face value the main proposals and the government's response to them hold little promise for school funding to become more effective and equitable in the near future.

The main recommendations of the review are for a comprehensive approach to funding which would entail a realignment of current Commonwealth and state roles, the payment of a base grant for every student, the provision of additional funding according to need and the introduction of a schooling resource standard.

The purpose of this overhaul is to bring greater coherence and consistency to the current complex funding arrangements, in the expectation that this will raise education achievement and increasing equity. The aim of greater coherence and consistency is commendable, but may well have been achieved by reform of the present arrangements rather than a complete revolution.

The link between education performance and either the quantum of resources or the allocative mechanism is generally considered at least indirect, and by most researchers weak. A strong focus on elements of schooling such as teacher and principal quality, early intervention, targeted programs with proven success at overcoming educational disadvantage, choice, autonomy and accountability is where differences in performance can really be addressed.

The concept of a base grant for each student and funding according to need are necessary components of any funding system, including the present Commonwealth Government system for funding for non-government schools, in theory although not in practice for all schools.

The idea of a schooling resource standard is not new, and presents many challenges in its detailed design if it is to be robust, based on sound data and implementable. The construction of an acceptable standard will need considerable work and careful collaboration. It is not likely to be a speedy process.

Even less speedy is the proposal to pass the burden of further investigation to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the cumbersome machinery of Commonwealth-state bureaucracy hardly renowned for its capacity for effective policy-making in the public interest.

While the bureaucratic processes crank up to establish working groups, engage with stakeholders, consider options and model new funding arrangements, the Gillard Government is launching a new public relations campaign to discuss school funding with the wider community, a repeat of the public inquiry process itself. In the meantime, schools are left in limbo about their future funding.

In defence of 'adults only' video games

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The Federal Government last week introduced legislation to create an R18+ classification for computer games from the beginning of 2013.

Until now violent or sexually explicit games have had to be either banned or put into the MA15+ classification that is accessible to minors. The legislation represents a breakthrough in that it will allow adults to play a wider range of games, while teenagers will be protected.

This protection has prompted the Catholic Bishops to offer cautious support for the new classification. Father Richard Leonard of the Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting said the old system is flawed because many games that should have received a restricted rating ended up attracting the highest possible MA15+ rating that includes content ostensibly suitable for older teenagers.

'Some parents have assumed that on seeing this classification on the cover of a computer game that these games were deemed to have less adult content. But they do not.'

The changes represent a step forward for both child protection and adult civil liberties. However they do beg the question of whether shifting the boundaries to legalise more sexually explicit and more violent content really serves a social purpose.

Indeed it would seem reasonable to conclude that increased exposure to sex and violence as entertainment will lead to more sexual exploitation and violence in the community.

Barbara Biggins of the Australian Council on Children and the Media does just that. She has been outspoken in expressing her conviction that the R18+ classification will lead to desensitisation, loss of empathy and an increase in risk taking activities.

Unfortunately Biggins' style is polemical. She appears to see only propaganda in the arguments of R18+ supporters, and this lowers the quality of the debate. She makes possibly important, but undeveloped, points, for example that video game violence is more sinister than violence in the cinema because 'you are rewarded for being the best at violence'.

Such assertions are not backed up by scholarly research, according to Christopher Ferguson, a US psychologist and video game violence researcher from the A&M International University in Texas. He regards Biggins' presentation of the facts about the link between video violence and actual violence as 'not accurate'.

He wrote on the ABC's *The Drum* website last April that in recent research he conducted he found that youth exposed to violent video games actually engaged in more pro-social behaviours. The scholarly community, he says, is becoming quite skeptical about claims such as those of Biggins.

'In fact increasing numbers of scholars have criticised this conclusion, pointing out serious methodological flaws in much of the research as well as the irresponsible repetition of debunked "urban legends".'

Significantly Ferguson's research has found mental health issues to be a more reliable predictor of negative outcomes, not violent video games or television. This points to the need to stop demonising video games and instead to provide proper funding for youth mental health services.

Virgin's sexism in the sky

MEDIA

Catherine Mashall

It's 6am and I'm sipping a flat white in Virgin Australia's Sydney Airport lounge. I'm here with a colleague who has lounge access and favours this carrier over the opposition, Qantas.

Our debate over which of these two local airlines deserves our patronage continues as we take off for Melbourne: Virgin is bright, polished and inexpensive; it has a sleek, modern lounge which serves great coffee, but it won't allow economy-class passengers a complimentary cup of tea; Qantas, with whom we travel back to Sydney the following day, trades on customers' patriotism while pandering to its shareholders, and has shamelessly moved jobs offshore; but it keeps its cabins largely commerce-free, ensuring that they aren't transformed into cheap food kiosks.

But there's another point of difference, one that interests me most, and that's the way in which each airline chooses to represent women. The differences are stark.

For all the things Qantas stands accused of — selling out its Australian employees, uncompetitive pricing, bad management — it appears to be respectful of women, both its employees and its customers. And women hoping to thrive need all the positive reinforcement they can get from corporations such as Qantas, whose public persona is reflected in equal measure by men and women.

On our flight home to Sydney, I point out to my colleague the even mix of male and female flight attendants and the wide disparity in their ages. Indeed, most of the female attendants appear to be over the age of 40, and while they are well-groomed there is nothing provocative about their attire.

They set a comfortable tone in the cabin, for there is no confusion as to their role: they are here to take care of our in-flight needs and guide us in case of trouble; it is not their job to titillate us, to enliven the space with their beauty and cleavage, to stroke the egos of male passengers.

A ticket on a Virgin flight, on the other hand, brings with it the allure of sex, the commodity on which the company's brand has been built. Youthful air hostesses wear fitted dresses, 'Virgin Girl' pin-ups decorate the noses of some aircraft, and the company's advertisements depict flight attendants as sexually alluring supplicants and male passengers as the deserving receptors of their attention.

To be sure, sex is not an innovative marketing tool: Singapore Airlines has long used the beguiling 'Singapore Girl' to advertise its services; Ryanair is notorious for objectifying women, and just last week had its series of adverts featuring flight attendants dressed in lingerie banned.

A survey by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) found that sexism was rife within the aviation industry, with one respondent saying her employer only allowed women to serve passengers in its business class section. 'The object is to exploit the female body, to attract business class passengers. It undermines women's dignity, both as women and as professionals,' she said.

Such practices also put flight attendants at risk of sexual harassment, according to studies, and are an affront to female customers, who are not afforded the same consideration and respect as men.

And they undermine men, too: the male attendants who are discriminated against because their bodies cannot be exploited in the manner of women's; the men who are assumed by airlines to be incapable of separating their primal urges from their work-a-day lives; and men in general, for whom the sexist treatment of women is further legitimised by practices such as this.

While sexual harassment has become taboo, sexism of the sort peddled by Ryanair and the Virgin Group is accepted — even lauded — by the public. And men's voices, which are crucial in the fight against sexism, are often absent from the debate altogether.

The erosion of female dignity can be a difficult concept for men to grasp: after all, the representation of women as sexual beings in many ways serves their natural instincts. Why would they complain about something they find sexually alluring? When men do enter the debate, it is most often to accuse female complainants of being 'jealous', 'fat', 'old' or 'ugly', as though any woman who opposed sexism couldn't possibly be young, beautiful and sexy herself.

The potential for societal damage is great when women are treated like objects. The world receives the message that women are at their most valuable when they are beautiful, subservient and pleasure-giving. When men respond positively to such portrayals, they entrench this notion further.

And when these attitudes go unchallenged, they seep into the fabric of our society, debasing women in general and manifesting in negative outcomes such as remuneration gaps, lack of promotional opportunities, sexual harassment and even abuse.

Back on the flight that is taking us home to Sydney, my colleague nods in agreement as I espouse the virtues of Qantas' non-sexist, non-ageist policies. Here is crucial evidence, standing before us in the aisle and pouring a cup of tea, that women are valued by this company not just when they are young and slim and beautiful, but in all their rich, varied and priceless diversity .

Innocence lost in Greece and Australia

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

I have always worried about the inexorable march of time, and all too soon that march turned into Marvell's winged chariot.

It has been written that past, present and future are linked by the thread of the wish that runs through them; my wish is the trite but true one that most parents have, and try to make become reality: we want our children to be happy, healthy, and able to enjoy each stage of their lives.

My youngest son, the only Greece-born one, is now 30, a fact difficult to believe. When I was 30, I was married with two small children, Alexander's elder brothers. It was 1975, and in November the infamous Dismissal took place: PM Gough Whitlam was sacked by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in what has been described as the greatest political and constitutional crisis in Australia's history.

Protest was immediate: Australians, often described as being apathetic about politics, took to the streets in large numbers. I heard much later that intensity of feeling in Canberra was such that a crack regiment had been put on full alert.

But during the ensuing month, the only instance of violence was the posting of three letter bombs, one of which wounded two people. The others were intercepted and defused.

When it comes to the dismal science of economics, my mind is in the Stone Age, definitely pre-wheel, but I can easily recall that way back then Australia's problem was money: the Senate had blocked supply, and Whitlam's innovative government was powerless to proceed with its plans.

Here in Greece, as most of the world knows, money, and lack of it, is again the problem.

The general population is confused, to say the least, as a favourite Greek game of blame goes on, as the poor and elderly suffer, as politicians continue to wrangle and manoeuvre with elections apparently uppermost in their minds, and as economists favour either austerity or stimulus, default or acceptance of yet another bailout from the EU.

So far the austerity and bailout lot are winning, although realists maintain that Greece has in effect already defaulted, and winning is a hollow word to use in this appalling set of circumstances.

Hard-headed economists observing from afar maintain that both default and bailout mean hardship, but that Greece would be better off going it alone. Some Greeks, however, consider that staying in the Eurozone is necessary, and not just for economic reasons.

A prominent Athenian journalist very recently wrote that without Europe, Greeks will cease to struggle against the patterns of behaviour such as sloppiness, incompetence and indifference that have always been prevalent. One of his colleagues wrote that 'God-blessed but mortally cursed' Greece has to change, and called on politicians to sink their differences with this aim in mind.

Greeks take to the streets very readily, noisily and peaceably. But often the protests are taken over by a small element of unruly young men, presumably because of their frustration and anger over the lack of change and the prospect of a bleak future: youth unemployment is over 20 per cent and set to rise. And this is what happened earlier this week: over 40 buildings burned in central Athens.

Alexander is a fire-fighter; his brother Nik is a commando in the Special Forces. Both have had their salaries slashed. I never wanted them to choose these jobs, but now I'm worried they might lose them: Nik has two little children.

In what I took to be an odd effort to cheer me up, he said, 'We're not going to get the sack, because we are part of the back-up for the Riot Squad.' As a friend cogently remarked: 'Poor Greece: one section of society is earning its living bashing in the heads of another.'

I remember reading that a post-war immigrant to Australia from a ruined Europe said Australians were innocent flowers in a pretty garden. I suppose that is what I was in 1975; events then seem pallid in comparison with what is now happening in the land of Alexander's birth.

Our lives at 30 are totally unalike, but when I think of Alexander at present: ah, the difference to me. How I wish he could be an innocent little flower.

Gillard the Brave

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

Nobody has died yet, but yesterday's editorials were howling for blood. Just about every reporter and would-be opinionator wants Kevin Rudd to mount an open challenge to Julia Gillard's leadership. Her newly furrowed brow — I had never seen a wrinkle before she was dragged out of The Lobby by The Bodyguard — is proof that being hated makes you look old.brac

Rudd on the other hand has gone smug. He says that questions about Gillard handing out polling in 2010 which showed that his leadership was foundering were 'for others' to comment on.

Papers like the *Herald Sun* have gone for the iceberg theory. Her captaincy of the *HMAS Concordia* is over, it editorialised on Thursday, doomed not only because of her policy reversals (the carbon pricing scheme, pre-commitment on pokies and the watered-down mining tax) which brought it too close to the Rocks, but for her oratorial failure to convince the likes of Laurie Oakes and my next-door neighbour that she is sincere.

For me, her spack-attack on the Chief Justice of the High Court after that court scuttled her atrocious attempt to send asylum seekers to Malaysia without the protection of the UN Charter of Human Rights was bitterly disappointing from the very first woman to hold the office of Australian prime minister. And I have said so. But I have had to reconsider my feelings about her leadership too.

The level of personal criticism and downright hatred carries with it the burden of misogyny. And being hated is unbearable. Just ask Kristy Fraser-Kirk who was badly damaged by her entirely justifiable attack on the Board of David Jones when she was sexually harassed by the CEO. Just ask me. You think you can tough it out. You can, but there is one hell of a price.

Gillard is brave, even if she is not particularly brilliant. Who, among our politicians, would like to stay on the bridge as the liner starts to tip?

Alistair Mant wrote in one of his books on leadership that the major problem with leaders, particularly in politics, is that level three people aim for and often get level five jobs. They have to work so hard and in such detail that they feel they are doing a fabulous job, but they have lost a realistic view of the endeavour in which they are engaged.

One of the two great lessons from this crise de cruise, is that level three politicians do hang on rather too long. In my humble opinion Rudd was just one of those, and he felt and feels that it was 'his' job and he was robbed of it.

Perhaps one of the least smart things Gillard did was kicking Kim Carr out of her cabinet last year. This man does not let go of anything, particularly a grudge.

Word has it that it was because he was running the numbers for Rudd. But as a well known Labor Party identity told me, it was always better to have a numbers man like Big Kim in the tent pissing out, rather than outside pissing in.

On Thursday Steve Bracks was talking to Jon Faine on ABC Radio in Melbourne. Bracks was the only recent ALP premier to have resigned at the top of his game and at a time of his own choosing.

Faine said that it was unusual for them to invite politicians onto the show, but that they hadn't invited Bracks the former politician, but because of his other work in East Timor and in business. Then he got the message about the unemployment rate dropping and the conversation became political anyway.

Faine's cohost commented that it took supposedly about five years to get over being an editor of a major newspaper, and asked Bracks how long it had taken him to get over being premier. Bracks thought for a moment and said that, given that he had moved on at his own time and for his own reasons, it had taken him less than a year.

Relevance. Carr can't ever let go. Obviously, that *Four Corners* program on Monday night had plenty of his DNA on it. If there were ever an inner-sanctum leak that Gillard's staff were preparing an acceptance speech a couple of weeks before she moved against Rudd, that was it. It seemed such a small matter, but it was another rupture of the fabric of the good ship governance.

Sad, indeed, that the labor party will go down, along with national government, when the plotters get their way.

Shane Warne and News Limited's hostility cycle

MEDIA

Andrew Hamilton

Sometimes it is in response to small and predictable incidents that pennies drop. The most recent 'Shane Warne affair' was such an incident . A cyclist and motorist (Warne) claim the same space, get enraged. The cyclist's bike is damaged; the driver twitters about mug cyclists. It gets into print. People rally to support their cause. Happens all the time.

As a cyclist I own an interest. From my perspective, no matter who was right and wrong, the salient fact is that cyclists are more vulnerable than drivers. When they collide, cyclists and their bikes finish up needing repairs. That is a good reason why cyclists should no more irritate motorists than they would provoke unchained pit bulls.

At the time of the incident I was following the Leveson enquiry into the British press, and trying idly to identify what seemed to be the distinguishing qualities of political, economic and cultural commentary in the News Limited media.

Different newspapers, different writers, different topics, but they had something in common. In a blind test you would not be able to associate every News Limited column with the stable, but you would instantly recognize the provenance of many columns.

That led me to reflect more broadly on the quality of much public conversation in Australia, and to ask why it is so often confrontational and dismissive of other views.

The penny dropped when I read in one News Limited outlet a commentary on the Warne affair. It sided with Warne and motorists generally. It castigated cyclists as an unruly road hazard, and supported the call for licensing them. The tone was indignant, certain, magisterial and dismissive.

The perspective of the article and the qualities of the writing seemed to define the characteristic News Limited style of commentary. It instinctively sides with the stronger, wealthier and less vulnerable. They should be free to make and enjoy their wealth and to exercise their power without constraint. The weaker and more vulnerable should get out of the way and be prevented from interfering.

When conflict arises, the weaker are chastised. Unions, government ministers, Palestinians, greenies, occupiers, employees, Muslims, intellectuals, Indigenous and refugee activists and judges are treated with scorn when they challenge the freedom of the rich and powerful to do as they please.

Such a consistent house style spread across many media outlets suggests a culture in which attitudes are no longer consciously thought through but have become instinctual. A clash between a well-known driver and a cyclist will be

perceived in a predictably partisan way.

But a culture in media organisations will persist only if it is reinforced by similar attitudes in the wider community. Writers need groupies whose attitudes they give voice to.

Certainly the relations between cyclists, drivers and pedestrians mirror the qualities I see as characteristic of News Limited commentary. Experiencing the world as a slow cyclist who shares the pavement with pedestrians and the road with cars, I am constantly struck by how common is the unkindness of strangers.

On shared footpaths both pedestrians and cyclists often barge through avoiding eye contact except for stare and glare, and show their frustration when having to give way. If you do slow down to call a pedestrian or a cyclist through, the response can be hostile. It is as if you have taken away a precedence that was theirs by entitlement and have returned it to them as gift.

The same is often true of encounters with cars. The assumption is that wealth and power convey rights that will be undermined by negotiation. It follows that if the weak wish to claim their space, they will need to be as bellicose as the strong.

Of course this is not the whole picture, any more than the columns I have described represent a full view of News Limited papers. Many pedestrians, cyclists and motorists relate to strangers as human beings and not simply as obstacles.

But the opposite is common enough to be the expected norm. This suggests that if we are to change the brutal conventions of public discourse, it will not be sufficient to draw attention to abuses and demand that politicians and journalists reform themselves. Journalists and politicians represent faithfully patterns of relationships between strangers.

As a society we may need to look again at such old fashioned ideals as *noblesse oblige*, respect, civility, courtesy and consideration. Although these outward virtues gained a bad name because they often masked and served an inner selfish ruthlessness, they may form the necessary conditions of civilised public discourse.

Melbourne's Gen Y hollowman

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Any Questions For Ben?* (M) Director: Rob Sitch. Starring: Josh Lawson, Rachael Taylor, Daniel Henshall, Felicity Ward, Christian Clark, Rob Carlton, Lachy Hulme. 114 minutes**

'Never mistake motion for action.' Hemingway's phrase appears as an epigraph to *Any Questions For Ben?*, the new Australian comedy from the veteran Working Dog creative team (*The Castle*), and reverberates throughout; an existential countermelody to the film's innocuous soft rock soundtrack.

Where 'action' connotes achievement, 'motion' merely implies activity. Ben's (Lawson) life is nothing if not active. He is a well paid marketing strategist, with a knack for reinvigorating tired brands. His social and sex lives are exuberant. He's forever looking towards the next item on his unending recreational to-do list. Quite simply, Ben is constantly in motion: when we meet him he's onto but his latest girlfriend, his latest job, his latest apartment in a long line. Not bad for a 27-year-old.

But for Ben this is a glamorous yet vacuous existence. This point is driven home when he attends a careers evening at his former high school. He is upstaged by a fellow student, Alex (Taylor), who is nothing less than a human rights lawyer working for the UN. So sharply does Ben feel the contrast between her achievements and his (it's hard to compare selling socks and vodka with saving the lives of women and children in Yemen) that he begins to question whether his life has any meaning at all.

He turns to various confidantes for assistance. His dad (Carlton) means well, but is not really into all that self-examination stuff. His roommate Andy (Clark) is too easily distracted by TVs and other shiny objects that enter his field of vision. Ben's best friend Nick (Henshall) is contemplating marriage to his longtime girlfriend Emily (Ward), a path that Ben can't even begin to contemplate at his relatively tender age. As Ben's search for answers meets endless dead ends, his crisis deepens.

Tales of alienation and angst within materially obsessed societies are hardly a new phenomenon. What distinguishes *Any Questions For Ben?* is that it explores that particularly Gen Y phenomenon of the 'quarter life crisis'; the epiphany (justified or otherwise) that, despite a dedication to 'experience' and 'connection', one's life is hollow. In this, it is very much a film for its time: one of the signifiers of Ben's crisis is that he doesn't own any physical photos, only digital ones stored in his phone.

This leaves the film open to the criticism that it is a case of grumpy older men and women griping about the silly lives of young people. But that would sell the

film short. While *Any Questions For Ben?* may not have the affection for its characters that, say, *The Castle* did, Lawson is likeable as Ben, and there is enough warmth and humour among the ensemble of supporting characters (Hulme as Ben's vainglorious mentor Sam is a comedic highlight) to ensure the film earns its feelgood stripes.

Ben's smart and fast world is evoked by the film's lively urban locales and sharp dialogue. Sitch and co. have not lost the deft touch they have honed over decades of brilliant comedy writing (the terrific political satire *Hollowmen* recently demonstrated that they are still as sharp as they were when they did *Frontline* 20 years ago). Each perfectly polished gag passes your ears so quickly that you are already bracing for the next one before you've finished laughing at the last one.

The themes of *Any Questions For Ben?* are evoked stylistically, too. Particularly in the early parts of the film, swift editing — notably abrupt location and time jumps — not only emphasise the fast pace of Ben's lifestyle, they highlight the blank spaces in his existence. It's as if the periods of time between each highly stimulated encounter or experience is merely tedium to be skipped over. Yet often it is when we are alone and still that we can locate the deeper meaning that underscores our activities.

Later, the film employs montages to carry this same theme of superficiality, and to telescope Ben's angst and emotional journey. Ironically, these sequences, which could be intended to elevate those 'in between' times, themselves become tedious and even grating. Given the number of Melbourne galleries, nightspots and attractions (from Captain Cook's Cottage to the Australian Open) featured, at times you can't escape the impression that this is actually a glorified promo for Tourism Victoria.

At 114 minutes, *Any Questions For Ben?* is easily half an hour too long, and would have benefited from maintaining the sharpness of those earlier sequences. It's greatest weakness is that it ultimately offers pat answers to its perennial existential questions, where perhaps it should offer none.

Baby steps in 'reformed' Burma

POLITICS

Duncan MacLaren

Seldom has there been so much news in the Australian and western media about Burma. In relatively quick succession, we have witnessed arguably the world's most repressive regime after North Korea embark on a series of reforms that has altered its pariah status among western powers.

Burma's icon of democracy, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (pictured) has not only been released from house arrest but has been allowed to stand for parliament, seemingly without hindrance. Other political prisoners have been released although many complain of being followed by the secret police.

Ceasefire talks have begun with the various ethnic armies which have been waging war against the government for decades. This, in Suu Kyi's words, is the most intractable problem of all and has to be dealt with slowly.

I coordinate an Australian Catholic University program that offers tertiary education to Burmese refugees and migrants on the Thai-Burma border. When I visited in January I found that few of these students believed they would be returning home soon.

First, for the Royal Thai Government (RTG), the nine camps strewn along their border with Burma are no longer a priority. The real priorities are the economic aftermath of the floods, the insurgency in the south, the nation's deep political divisions, and the government's survival. The RTG realises that, even if it is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, any hint of refoulement against the wishes of the refugees would be counterproductive and could cause more problems for the government.

Secondly, the Burmese government is quoted as saying that they are not ready for the refugees' return at present and have other higher priority issues to resolve first.

Practically, the refugees have little to return to since, in many cases, their villages were burned down, including schools and clinics (if they existed), and their crops destroyed. In addition, the vast areas of conflict are covered with landmines placed by the Burmese military and ethnic insurgents.

UNHCR is talking about 'return with reconciliation' but reconciliation means not just the cessation of violence but the creation of a new society where old animosities between all stakeholders and the government are replaced by less toxic relationships. For these new relationships to take root and generate the growth of a new society will take generations.

NGOs reckon the refugees will be in the camps until the end of 2013 at the

earliest. The most complex issue is how the conflicts with ethnic groups are resolved.

It would be inadvisable to put too much weight on the so-called ceasefire between the government and the Karen National Union and its armed wing. The meeting took place while I was on the border, and I met one of the negotiators. There is great mistrust between the two sides, and the agreemment merely said that they agreed to further talks in 45 days' time. Troops are to be confined to barracks and, if they move, hostilities will resume.

There was some anger among the Karen with their leaders, some of whom are regarded as out of touch and corrupt and divided among themselves. Some want to continue what has been a lucrative war and others believe peace has to be established for the people's sake. Such scenarios will be found in negotiations with all ethnic groups. In addition, the ethnic groups do not fully trust Suu Kyi who, like most of the generals, is a Burman.

Meanwhile, there are still reports of villagers being abused, killed and displaced in Karen State, and fighting continues in Kachin State with 50,000 people displaced either internally or in camps in China.

Unfortunately, donors, both governments and NGOs, seem to have made up their minds about the future and have reduced funds to the Thailand-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) to the extent that they have had to cut rations in the camps.

Reforms have led to actions by western powers eager to make Burma a buffer against the growth of Chinese power in the region; and, as a *Guardian* journalist put it, 'trade will follow the flag'. The US has restored full diplomatic ties, Norway is ending its policy of discouraging investment, and Australia is lifting financial and travel restrictions on certain Burmese citizens.

This is premature. Governments should remember that Suu Kyi does not fully represent all Burmese and that there are vast, intractable problems to be solved for the many ethnic groups who have suffered most from the regime's barbarity and have fought against it for 60 years. These factors should be taken into account before sanctions are fully lifted.

Malaysia's migration paradox

POLITICS

Joachim Francis Xavier

A large segment of Malaysian society and the government in particular seem clearly xenophobic towards migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. Yet in an oxymoronic way, Malaysia continues to insist on having these foreigners on her soil.

More recently, Malaysia has thrown its arms wide open to asylum seekers heading to Australia, risking life and limb for a better future. How does one explain this rather bizarre phenomenon?

According to statistics by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Kuala Lumpur, as of January 2012 there were approximately 97,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the country, with many more asylum seekers knocking on its doors every day for refugees status. Most are from Myanmar (91 per cent) while the rest are from Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

These are men, women and children who have fled their country owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted. They make arduous journeys to countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Australia in the fervent hope that the host country will offer them protection.

Unfortunately, protection is not exactly what they receive in Malaysia. Asylum seekers and refugees have no legal status here, and while the authorities have assured UNHCR and civil society that they will not be disturbed, asylum seekers and refugees are frequently subjected to brutal raids, arrest, detention and sometimes deportation.

Adults are not allowed to work in the formal sector while children of these foreigners have no access to government schools. Most live precariously in rudimentary conditions such as shacks, construction sites and even jungles fringing big cities.

There are also reports of extortion, physical abuse and human trafficking. Not surprisingly, Malaysia has been the subject of numerous international reports documenting the appalling treatment received by asylum seekers and refugees.

The World Refugee Survey commissioned by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in 2007 ranked Malaysia among the ten worst countries for refugees, together with Kenya, Sudan and Bangladesh. A 2010 Amnesty International report recorded numerous cases of foreigner abuse including trafficking by Malaysian security forces at the Thai-Malaysia border, some as recent as 2009.

Due to the frequent raids, detention camps are often filled to breaking point and

living conditions are distressing. In an attempt to reduce this overcrowding, Malaysia negotiated with Myanmar a detainee-swap deal, under which Malaysia will return Myanmar detainees in exchange for Malaysian detainees held in Myanmar prisons.

When the deal hit the news in October 2011, it drew heavy fire from civil society including the Malaysia Bar Council and SUARAM, a national human rights NGO. It is unclear if Malaysia went ahead with the deal.

Having observed this xenophobic attitude for over 20 years, any right thinking person would conclude that Malaysia has a serious problem with asylum seekers and refugees. She wants them out. So it is a wonder that Malaysia has now taken a position that suggests she can't get enough of them.

This appears to be the case when one considers how hard Malaysia campaigned for the Australia-Malaysia refugee swap deal, touted as the 'Malaysia solution'. The Australian government signed an agreement with the Malaysian government on 25 July 2011 to ship 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia in exchange for 4000 of its refugees.

Civil societies in both countries were up in arms over the deal and staged a dramatic campaign to bring it down. Both governments defended it with everything they had. However by 31 August 2011 the deal was in tatters when the High Court of Australia declared the agreement 'invalid' for not meeting human rights standards stipulated in Australian law, particularly in relation to the 1951 UN Convention relating to refugees, which Australia is party to but not Malaysia.

The Australian government then decided to move Parliament to amend the law to 'legalise' the deal but all this came to a grinding and embarrassing halt when Prime Minister Julia Gillard abandoned the bill at the last moment on 13 October 2011.

That was not the end of the matter. On 25 January 2012, Malaysian Home Minister Hishamuddin Hussein once again offered to host asylum seekers in Malaysia. This time the invitation was made out to any country. He also expressed his disappointment that the Malaysia solution with Australia failed and blamed it on the Australian government.

Why the sudden interest? Could it be that the Malaysian government has begun to see that vulnerable people deserve care and protection? Or is it now clearer to the government that asylum seekers and refugees are not criminals looking to rob its host but people needing help?

If this is the case, then it is odd that Malaysia would continue to deny asylum seekers and refugees a legally recognised status. Maintaining that these are undocumented persons in the eyes of the law clearly debunks any suggestion that Malaysia has seen the light, even a dim one.

Perhaps Malaysia feels it is time to uphold basic human rights for all people

regardless of nationality, including the right to protection against persecution. After all, under the leadership of Prime Minister Najib Razak, the government has unleashed a slew of reforms that promise to guarantee more civil liberties. Isn't it possible that he would want to extend the same attitude towards foreigners?

If this is so, it is hard to explain Malaysia's objection to signing the 1951 UN Convention relating to refugees, which comprehensively states the standards a country ought to observe if it was serious about respecting the basic rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

It would also be extremely hard to rationalise why Malaysia audaciously objected to human rights provisions in the refugee swap deal when first negotiated with Australia. It is clear that Malaysia is not interested in human rights for asylum seekers and refugees. In fact the converse is probably true.

What about a purely arithmetic rationale? It makes economic sense to take in 800 asylum seekers from Australia and in return send 4000 processed refugees. The numbers are clearly in Malaysia's favor. The net outflow of 3200 unwanted foreigners would reduce the congestion in detention centers and by extension Malaysia's financial burden of hosting them for long periods.

This seems the best explanation for Malaysia's interest in asylum seekers and refugees, until one considers yet another figure: 1 billion ringgit. That is the cost of the deal, reportedly borne so kindly by the Australian government. Considering that asylum seekers are turned away before they touch Australian soil, it is a fair assumption that the bulk of the 1 billion ringgit would be spent in Malaysia.

One could speculate that the money would be utilised to put up new facilities, supply catering, make transportation and security arrangements and purchase equipment. Of course this would necessarily mean Malaysia would have the added burden of having to dole out mouth-watering contracts to salivating companies. Are we to assume that this would be done in a careful and transparent manner underpinned by the principle that the best man with the best price gets the job?

Then there is the inevitable benefit that jobs would be created and the Malaysian economy would receive a boost even if in a small way. Might this have been a motivation underlying Malaysia's sudden love affair with swap deals?

All this talk about swap deals has to be juxtaposed against the fast changing political landscape in Myanmar, the biggest source country of asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia. Myanmar President Thein Sein seems to be a man in a hurry to set things right in his country. It is entirely possible the dream of a peaceful Myanmar may become a reality soon, and with that the unrelenting wave of asylum seekers and refugees is likely to recede.

When that happens, it would not matter why Malaysia courted asylum seekers and refugees, for by that time there would be no more of them knocking on her doors begging for entry. All that would be left would be the hollow cries of feigned

love incessantly bouncing off the stained walls of selfishness, greed and xenophobia.

Art after shock

ARTS

Sasha Shtargot

MONA, the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, is one of the beacons of culture in Tasmania. Built into a hill with sheer rock walls and informed by an avant-garde sensibility like something you might find in Berlin or New York, it has gained an enormous reputation in a short time.

With a dizzying collection including ancient Mesopotamian tablets, paintings by Australian greats and contemporary sculptures and installations, MONA is meant to impress. But the edginess of its art is also in its desire to confront and shock the viewer.

Sex and death loom large. Walk in one direction and you meet a framed photograph of a dog humping a naked man. Turn a corner and there is a long row of plaster-cast vaginas. In one place a mummified cat's head; in another a sculpture depicting a dismembered body. There's a kind of appeal to what lurks in the collective shadow.

Shock is obviously not a new element in art — consider Caravaggio's brutal, sexual paintings in the 17th century, through to the modern day with Dada, Surrealism and the rest. The artist is a transgressor, pushing the boundaries of culture and society, challenging the norms of acceptability.

Working functionally, this approach renews society by cutting through its stale and restrictive forms and opening the door for new, life-affirming possibilities. It can also expose underlying issues with the hope of change.

Chaim Potok's novel *My Name is Asher Lev* explores this role beautifully. The artistic soul of the main character demands the creation of a crucifixion painting that is taboo in his rigid, ultra-orthodox Jewish community. The painting symbolises the inner torment and hope for redemption in the psyche of his community. The artist holds the seed for change.

But there is also a dysfunctional side to the artist as transgressor in which shock is elevated as a goal in itself. Boundaries are broken for the sake of merely doing so, not in the service of a broader context. The artist disgorges whatever is in the unconscious, without proper discrimination or maturity.

I wonder whether integration/synthesis could be a valuable underlying idea or goal in art. That is, the aim is not so much breaking boundaries as playing with boundaries so that they dissolve and a new whole is created; not so much confrontation and discord as unity and new life; and not so much shock as something that, while it may be challenging, is also deeply pleasing — not in a conservative, anodyne way, but in a way that nourishes the soul.

I think of Melbourne artist Godwin Bradbeer, whose figurative drawings (see

image) convey a depth and mystery that is difficult to put into words. In his work, faces and bodies often appear on a black background, dreamlike and incorporeal as form emerges from nothingness. There is little that is shocking or subversive, just a numinous reverence for the human body and the mystery of creation.

Swiss visual artist Pipilotti Rist, whose video installations are currently on show at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, is another case in point. Images of water in a pond, the faces of sheep, sunlight through the red hair of a young woman, coloured balls falling from a height are gathered in an unusual dance of exploration and delight in form and beauty.

For the viewer there's a feeling of elevation and sense of transcendence beyond the concrete everyday world.

Integration/synthesis can act as a template for culture and society as a whole. Human exploration, still largely rooted in individual gain and ego achievement, can have at its centre 'the many that are one', where one person's quest is that of the entire human race and planet. The adventure of life is undertaken not merely for oneself, but mindfully for 'the liberation of all beings', as Buddhists say.

This would mean the entrance of a level of mysticism into human self-understanding and require a shift of focus, a leap in consciousness.

MONA, it seems, is an example of the old patterns of ego, while Bradbeer, Rist and many others are laying the foundations for a new vision.

How to wrestle an angel

POETRY

Barry Gittins and P. S. Cottier

Love's Anchor

We squint through time's veil. You bring water to wounds.
Stumbling through my days you are a light for my feet.
Light and life are intertwined in caress and lavish, restoring kiss.
Faced with languid lack of hues we eschew shadows' shade.
Dank recess of human psyche gains perspective, shape, in your kindly glow.
No Nightingale, blood lies not on form; yet carer you are.
Heart's guard and guide, lover, prosecutor, confidante,
you traverse our orbit; your lamp reveals paths.
At dawn, dusk, or midday, as with Aesop or Diogenes,
you recount and weigh fables, dismissing foolishness and mistruths.
In candles' glow you radiate. That same light gleams from
sunkissed glacial eyes, twinkling at this absurd manchild.
Facing faults in love's candid glare we dwell unshaken. Bound. Here.
Fidelity's tangential weave preserves where discord undoes; lets fly and fall.
With visages unclouded, sans mirage of allure or ease, we bathe
in luminescent peace. Coupled in clarity, ignited
in the little death: making light of life.
Love's anchor holds true. Pray light shines ever still.

Barry Gittins

How to wrestle an angel

Clutching is advised; hold him tight as an idea,
well-loved and convenient. Wriggling will occur,
and it is imperative that the wings be kept from play.
What ring could hold an angel, should he unfold,
flex and soar? No ropes will ever net him.
He will reach out with as many arms

as Kali, as many voices as there are prophets,

hoping to flick slow minds into new holds.

Kicking him carries its own dangers too:

should the crusciate hold, there's the femur,

and the merest touch of a finger can mean trouble,
when we're talking of an artful angel dodger.

Imagine pinning down the Aurora Australis;

a butterfly of light, or holding a buttered pig.

A pig that whispers music, and in whose myriad

hues one hears music, whose breath, in your face,

is just more of the same. The angel will improvise,

finding the right riff to loosen your gluey grip.

First sax, then double bass, or even an oud.

May I suggest earplugs be inserted,

when the first notes of liquid jazz

drip into your ears from above?

Don't wait too long, like Hamlet's dad,

although that was poison, and this is ecstasy.

Some find it off-putting, to paw the naked flesh

of the celestial, as if spirit and body should never mix.

But there are precedents. Besides, your will, your mind,

can only be expressed through holds and throws,

so why should a sumo seraph be any different?

Try a Cobra Clutch Bulldog; an Elevated Gutbuster;

Wheelbarrow Driver; Gorilla Press Slam; a Frankensteiner.

There's always the Alley Oop, where you hoist him,

(the opponent) on your shoulders. But be aware
of the possibility of take-off. When your liftee

is an angel, you may find yourself Bellerophon

on Pegasus, but reversed. Who will be riding whom?

In the end, as you scent the music, as you
clench beauty like a grim nutcracker,
as you fly above cities like Faust on steroids,
as you feel the pounding of your own heart
merge with the oddly syncopated rhythm
of the wing-back, you may find an idea
insinuate itself like a finger into an eye ...
Why not surrender? Lose yourself in faith-flutter.
Ask yourself if this is a simple lack of oxygen,
or an excess of same, brought on by holy wind?
Is it the pinching of your nose, this sudden gnostic glee?
Wrestling, while divine, may have its limitations.
You may throw in your towel, a sudden sweaty feather.

P. S. Cottier

Russia's concern for besieged Syrian Christians

POLITICS

Benedict Coleridge

The recent Russian and Chinese vetos of a UN Security Council resolution on Syria have been condemned in the strongest terms by Western diplomats — Hillary Clinton called it a 'travesty' and the US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, tweeted her 'disgust' at the way events had proceeded.

At first glance, the reasons for the Russian veto seem obvious. Russia has important material interests in Assad's Syria: it continues to make major arms sales to the Assad regime — mainly high-end weaponry such as anti-air defence systems — and Syria hosts the only Russian naval base outside the former Soviet Union, at Tartus.

Furthermore, the Medvedev/Putin administration, itself beset by domestic political protest, has little interest in promoting norms of international censure and intervention into contested — even violent — political situations.

So it is easy to view the Russian veto as merely the outcome of a cynically realist assessment of its interests by the Russian regime. And, of course, it is in part.

But it is not only the Medvedev/Putin regime and its apparatchiks that maintain this position. There are other actors involved in communicating and sustaining Russian opposition to military intervention or orchestrated regime change in Syria, most notably the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Kirill.

Kirill visited Syria in November last year, ostensibly to renew contact with the Syriac Orthodox Church and its leader, Ignatius IV, Patriarch of the Great Antioch and All the East.

There is an important historical context for this visit. Russia's connections with Syria run deeper than mere contemporary strategic interest. Russian interest in Syria and in the broader Middle East stems also from Russia's historical conception of itself as the protector of eastern Christians.

The Crimean War was sparked in part because of Russia's intervention in the Ottoman Empire on behalf of Orthodox pilgrims and religious communities. Catherine the Great, Nicolas I and an assortment of 19th century Russian intellectual and cultural figures planned or advocated a Russian occupation of Constantinople as a means of re-establishing and reviving Christian life in the east — Byzantium would be restored and Russia would lead this enterprise.

And so, with this history not entirely forgotten, Kirill to Damascus. Kirill praised the relationship between the Syrian regime and the Syriac Orthodox Church and expressed anxiety about the implications of the 'crisis' in the Middle East for

minority communities, particularly Christians.

His concern is well founded. The number of Christians in Middle Eastern communities is declining, via emigration under pressure of actual or justifiably feared violence and political and socio-economic marginalisation — the heirs of Byzantium, the Christian communities of the east, are in decline.

So, in Syria, where relations between Christian and Muslim communities have been relatively harmonious, and where Christians have been afforded a comparatively secure place in communal life, Kirill's concern has been that, were the Sunni Muslim majority to assume political power commensurate with its size, this balance might be upset.

Again, this concern is justified. In Iraq the re-balancing of political power after the 2003 US-led invasion led to the mass exodus of Christians as violence and sectarian strife threatened their communities. In Syria minorities such as the Alawis, Ismaelis, Byzantine Christians and Maronites foresee the Islamisation of the Syrian state if the Assad regime were to fall.

As Fr Paolo Dall'Oglio, head of the Syrian monastery of Mar Musa al Habashi has emphasised, for many Christians and other minorities, the Assad regime has been perceived as a kind of secular state offering the possibility of inclusion and advancement. Thus the widespread support among these groups for the idea of more gradual political reform undertaken while Assad remains in power.

This is not to say support for the regime or for the resistance is neatly divided along confessional lines — on the contrary, while some Christians support the Assad regime, others are equally committed to ending it. Nonetheless, for many members of minority communities, the crisis raises questions about their position in a reshaped Syrian state.

What's more, as Dall'Oglio has pointed out, the conflict in Syria is connected to broader conflicts in the region, including between Turkey and Iran, the US and Russia, Sunnis and Shiites, and between the secular conception of the state and a religious vision of society.

Violence and discord has promoted the emergence of 'specific geographical identities' that hitherto had remained dormant and which threaten Syria with fragmentation in the event that some form of political consensus is not achieved.

Is it possible that the Russian position as expressed by Kirill reflects some of this complexity? It is obvious that during his Syrian visit Kirill to some extent echoed the rhetoric of the Russian state. In calling for non-intervention in Syrian domestic affairs his language echoed the language employed recently by Russian diplomats at the UN Security Council.

He made some highly dubious gestures, including presenting Assad with a chalice made by craftsmen in the Urals — in symbolic terms, handing Assad the mantle of 'protector of the faith'. Making gestures of this kind while Assad directs

violence against his own people is plainly the wrong, not to mention unwise, thing to do.

Nevertheless, Kirill's visit draws attention to some of the complex issues involved in considering political reform in Syria. While Russian diplomats may be less convincing , the position expressed by Kirill against any immediate move to depose Assad reflects serious concerns.

The Moscow Patriarchate's official statement about the visit reiterated Kirill's worry that the rise of religious radicalism in the Middle East would 'threaten the integrity of the Arab world'. By integrity, he meant the capacity for Arab countries to incorporate their various rich cultural and religious traditions equally into the fabric of the national community.

The themes Kirill emphasised serve as a reminder of the many different social and religious groups that would have to be incorporated meaningfully in any post-Assad political arrangements.

Means test won't fix health funding

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Since 1999 the Federal Government has been providing a 30 to 40 per cent private health insurance rebate that is not means tested.

It has worked in that there has been a significant increase in the number of Australians with private health insurance to 45 per cent. But because the insured are mostly those on higher incomes, low income taxpayers are subsidising the health insurance of the wealthy.

The subsidy therefore represents a good outcome for the private health insurance industry but a major setback for social inclusion.

Proposed legislation to apply a means test is likely to pass both houses of Federal Parliament despite the Opposition's intention to vote against it. They believe many of the insured will cancel their insurance and place a more heavy burden on the public system.

However a 2009 Access Economics report for Catholic Health Australia argued that means testing would have a negligible impact on the number of insured. Moreover a recent discussion paper from the Centre for Policy Development goes further by agreeing there will be little or no exodus from private health insurance, but suggesting that this is the problem.

According to the paper's authors John Menadue and Ian McAuley, the current system of multiple private health insurers takes money away from health care because it is inefficient.

Private health insurance is an expensive and clumsy way to do what the tax system and Medicare do so much better ... International experience shows that private health insurance buys more expensive health care than tax-funded health insurance, but it doesn't buy better health care.

Menadue and McAuley are not advocating 'socialised medicine' or 'free' health care, but a single national insurer, which they believe would provide the most efficient and equitable means of sharing the cost burden of health care.

The question of private versus public health insurance is related to the division of the hospital system between public and private hospitals. It has promoted inequity by subsidising, and encouraging queue-jumping by, those who can pay. The poor have only the increasingly dysfunctional public hospitals, while the wealthy can pick and choose.

There is no question that legislation for the means test should be passed. It will make health funding a little fairer. But it will not do much to change inequities in

the health system as a whole.

Australia's story in Indigenous languages

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Brian McCoy

'Where is the parish priest?' I asked the young girl sitting on the ground with her friends outside the parish house. I had just arrived in a remote Aboriginal community along with a colleague and was not sure where we were staying.

I will never forget the look that came upon her face. She seemed stunned as my question registered. I had asked her in her local language. Just a simple question. But that a white person, a visitor, might address her in her own language seemed the last thing she had expected.

As she paused and then went off to find the priest, I was reminded of the power of language. No matter how poorly I actually know Indigenous languages and how easily I manage to mangle them, I was reminded, once again, how important it is to keep trying to learn and speak the languages of our Indigenous peoples.

I am no expert of any Indigenous language in this country. But I have managed to learn some key expressions, particularly forms of greeting or farewell. Instead of people saying 'hello' and 'goodbye', they often use expressions that express something like 'Where are you going?' and 'I am going along now'. Even in simple exchanges, different values and meanings are communicated.

I have even managed to pronounce some of those sounds that we do not have in English, particularly at the beginning of words. My tongue has had to exercise, be stretched and learn some new behaviour. Still I cannot say that I can speak any Indigenous language well. I wish I could speak more and with a deeper understanding.

Within the Jesuit family one is encouraged, particularly in the early years of training, to learn another language. Some Jesuits, especially those who have grown up in Africa, Asia or Europe, and in the midst of many other languages, can speak a number. As Jesuits, we belong to an international society where we can be asked to work in places where our native language is not the local one.

I have lived in Indigenous communities within Australia, and also overseas, where English is not, for most, their first language. For some, it can be a valuable tool to help communicate with the wider English-speaking world. For others, it remains the language of newcomers: settlers, police, magistrates and missionaries. Of colonisers.

In their experience, few white people have ever respected or made the effort to learn their language. As a result, communication and mutual understanding is seriously limited.

I am very supportive of changes to our Australian Constitution that acknowledge and respect these ancient languages and the cultures they represent. These languages speak to the ancient past of our Australian identity and the need to state what has been missing.

Of the many hundreds of languages that have been spoken in this land, 145 or so are still being used. Some are closely related and similar, others vary enormously. In the 2006 Census, one in eight Indigenous Australians identified as speaking an Indigenous language as their primary household language; 50 per cent of Indigenous young people in remote areas continue to speak an Indigenous language.

Acknowledging the importance of these ancient languages in our Constitution is more than providing lip service to our Australian heritage. It is about the recognition of who we were, well before 1788, and who we still are. It represents a new willingness to hear the voice of our First Nations peoples, with a desire for better communication and deeper understanding.

Indigenous languages offer rich ways to describe and name our world. They offer valuable insights and knowledge for all Australians.

On this the fourth anniversary of the Rudd Government's National Apology to the Stolen Generations, I remain saddened when Australians make little effort to respect and engage this heritage, and when the emphasis remains largely about speaking English. I remember how much more remains to be valued and respected.

I deeply value what learning and appreciating something of our Indigenous languages has given me. I wish more Australian children were given that opportunity.

Even in the cities, away from the daily sounds of these languages, I am often made aware of how the past still speaks to the present. Council signs, tourist messages, Welcome to Country ceremonies and names of places remind me of words and meanings that continue to be remembered.

I try to pay attention to these words and, when given a choice between an earlier place name over a later and colonial one, I will choose to use the former. I try, also, to pronounce them as they were intended.

Perhaps, in years to come, when I visit that remote community again, young people will not be shocked to hear a white person trying to communicate in their local language. They may even have come to expect it.