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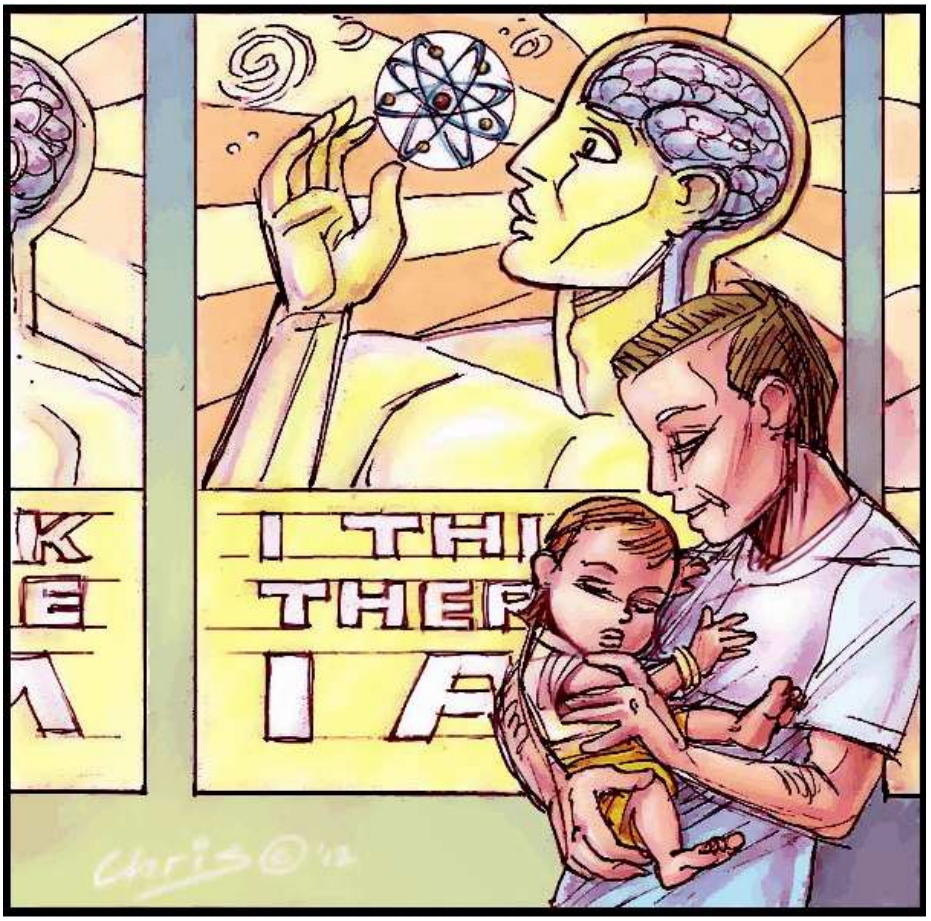

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Thoughts on democracy from a martial law baby

POLITICS

Fatima Measham

Ferdinand Marcos had been Philippine president for seven years when martial law took effect on 21 September 21 1972 - 40 years ago today. It was a unilateral decision, made under the pretext of securing the state against communists and dissidents. It essentially kept Marcos in power far beyond his mandate.

When martial law was lifted nearly a decade later, the damage to democratic structures was thorough. Marcos had abolished Congress, made himself concurrent president and prime minister, politicised the military, detained political opponents and student activists, tightened control over the press, and sequestered corporations for distribution among his cronies.

The end of martial law was a mere technicality. There was no longer any need for legislation to keep people compliant since terror had become internalised. That is how dictatorships work: foment fear by demonstrating that it is well-founded.

According to historian Alfred McCoy, there were 3257 extrajudicial executions during the regime. Over 70 per cent of these involved the calculated dumping of mutilated bodies on roadsides and empty blocks. An estimated 35,000 were tortured and 70,000 imprisoned. More than 700 people 'disappeared' between 1975 and 1985.

It is a mark of the oppressiveness of the regime that the atrocities it perpetrated did not penetrate the bubble in which we grew up. I was born during this time, part of a generation dubbed 'martial law babies'. This generation, as well as those born from 1965 onwards, grew up not knowing any other president. By the time Marcos was deposed, he had been in power for 20 years.

His forced departure by unarmed civilians was an anomaly in 1986. Nothing like it had happened previously. The People Power revolution, which saw two million Filipinos converge at Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), corrected the dysfunction of martial law. It re-established civilian supremacy over the armed forces.

This became the template for subsequent upheavals elsewhere, from Berlin to Bucharest. We saw it reprised more recently in Tunis, Cairo and Tripoli. Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi were Marcos contemporaries who finally met a similar fate, more than two decades later.

As it turns out, there are no textbook outcomes from removing textbook dictators.

Toppling regimes is not simply the means to an end where people may breathe more freely. It is the segue to further tumult as power vacuums fill, competing narratives wrestle, reforms are delayed, and in many cases, perpetrators of abuse

continue to walk the corridors of power with impunity.

It is a volatile phase, which countries that had jubilantly ushered the Arab Spring are now discovering.

The Philippine experience shows that it is not enough to be free. It is not enough to have a constitution that preserves democratic principles, or to have a free press. It is not enough even to hold elections, that hallowed signifier of civilised society. Democracy, it turns out, is a test of endurance and vigilance. It is a long game.

Cory Aquino, the beacon of EDSA, endured several coup attempts during her term. The next president, Fidel Ramos, saw his economic and social reforms squandered by his successor, Joseph Estrada — a shambolic former actor who was elected on a pro-poor platform. Estrada was deposed halfway through his term in a second revolution, after his allies in the senate aborted his impeachment trial. He is a convicted plunderer.

Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who completed the rest of his term, reneged on a commitment to eschew a full presidential term. She was found to have inappropriately contacted an electoral officer during the election that extended her presidency. She has been charged with electoral sabotage and is on bail.

It is not surprising then that many Filipinos look back on the Marcos era with nostalgia; a misguided longing for the certainty, stability and security the regime provided in its own dysfunctional fashion.

The hard realities of governance and complexity of reform can be disillusioning after the euphoria of liberation. And the truth is, democracy makes progress a messy and unpredictable affair, infuriatingly prone to setbacks. This disillusionment may already be playing out in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

According to Freedom House project director Vanessa Tucker, 'There are limits to citizens' patience with respect to political instability, economic disruption and physical insecurity.' She fears that the desire to return to a less chaotic environment may lead back to authoritarian rule. We can only hope that this is not the case, that the people who overthrew despots last year will see the long game.

Many of the anti-Marcos dissenters and activists stayed the course, long enough to construct what is now a stable and functional government under Benigno Aquino III. Some of them chose to work at the grassroots and established NGOs that have strengthened civil society.

As a result of these and other factors, the Philippines is enjoying a period of economic growth and social reform.

It took 26 years. But democracy, as Filipinos have found, is a game to be played for keeps.

The Vatican's Facebook guru

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

The power of new media was illustrated in a disturbing way in the violent riot that broke out in Sydney's CBD last weekend. It erupted in the course of a demonstration by Muslims against the trailer for a very D-grade film, *Innocence of Muslims*, which was posted on YouTube.

The Sydney protest was part of general outrage by Muslims around the globe which drew attention to the trailer, and it went viral with millions viewing it on YouTube. And police in Sydney are now investigating the trail of text messages and social media sites that Muslim protestors used to organise themselves.

The man featured in the above interview grapples daily with the dilemmas and promises of new media, and is trying to harness its potential to communicate about religion in a positive way.

Monsignor Paul Tighe is Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications , the Vatican department charged with trying to shape how the Church presents itself to the world.

The video also features excerpts of the keynote address he delivered at the recent Australian Catholic Media Congress in Sydney. His talk was called 'Communicating the word: timeless messages, new media'.

Tighe was born in Navan in County Meath, Ireland, in 1958, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1983 for the Archdiocese of Dublin. After ordination, he studied moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

In 1990 he was appointed a Professor of Moral Theology at the Mater Dei Institute in Dublin, and in 2000 he became head of the institute's theology department. In 2004 he was named as director of the communications office of the Archdiocese of Dublin.

While in this job, Tighe also started the Office for Public Affairs to aid communications between the Church and government, public institutions and non-government organisations in Ireland and Europe.

In these roles he proved himself to be a very able communicator and administrator, and in 2007 Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications based in Rome. In this job he formulates Church policy on media, and is a key advisor to the Pope. He also works with Catholic media agencies around the world, with a special focus on helping them to come to terms with and capitalise on new media.

Disabled is not a dirty word

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

A tall man with a generous smile approaches me in the foyer and introduces himself as Carl. His speech is clear but slightly stilted; my first though is that he has a stutter. But no, he explains, using a combination of gestures and carefully articulated words. He had a stroke. His brain is fine, but his speech is affected.

An hour later I see Carl again, this time projected onto a big screen in a town hall that has been converted into an accessible movie theatre. He is the star of *Aphasia*, a disarmingly lighthearted docudrama that recreates the story of the stroke of this actor, husband and father, his subsequent experience of the titular language disorder, and sometimes arduous journey back to the land of words.

Aphasia is a highlight of The Other Film Festival (TOFF), underway in Melbourne, which showcases films about, and by, people with experience of disabilities of various types and degrees. All sessions include captions and audio descriptions, audio loops that can be used to amplify or enhance sound quality, wheelchair access, and other services and facilities designed to optimise inclusion and accessibility.

Make no mistake: TOFF is no pity party. The tagline this year is 'What are you looking at?' — a brazen battle cry from those who have suffered discrimination because of their differences, as well as a clarion cry to the casual moviegoer to engage in films with substance, which can enhance the viewer's empathy for all their fellow human beings. It offers a program of high quality and great variety.

Such as angsty teen drama *Aglaee*, in which a gawky boy loses a bet and has to ask a classmate with a physical disability out on a date, and is humiliated when she turns him down. Or *Ingelore*, a stunning documentary about the experiences of a deaf Jewish girl in Nazi Germany. Or *The Attack Of The Robots From Nebula-5*, an idiosyncratic sci-fi homage that is also a deeply unsettling reflection on social alienation.

Aphasia — which screens Friday night at the festival — epitomises the quality of what's on offer. For a film to recreate factual experiences, using actors playing themselves, without stooping to mawkishness or self-indulgence, is in itself an achievement that should not be underestimated.

It does so by balancing humour and humanity. One of Carl's young children rides him cowboy style as he drags himself to the phone after his stroke. Later, recovering aphasic Carl, struggling with his 'f' words, tries to order a trademark icy soft drink from a fast food outlet, but instead of a 'Frozee' asks the female drive-thru attendant for a 'fuck'. Her grace and patience turn out to be a saving grace for Carl and a poignant highlight of the film.

In the foyer after the opening night screening, it's difficult to get another word with Carl. He's accosted by other patrons and guests who bathe in his gregarious personality and congratulate him on his fine and frank performance. Far from highlighting physical and mental deficiencies, The Other Film Festival is about celebrating the greatness that can be found in any human package.

Life after Hitler

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

How does a German teenager, the daughter of a Nazi officer, face up to the fall of the Third Reich, and the revelation of the regime's true nature? Just as pertinently, how does an Australian filmmaker of Jewish heritage go about probing the immense moral conundrum facing such a protagonist, herself an unformed innocent?

'The moral questions weren't answered in 1945,' said Cate Shortland, writer-director of *Lore*, when I spoke to her after a recent press screening ahead of the film's release this week. 'The country was in shock and denial — it was a real shutdown. Also they were just trying to survive.'

Survival is certainly on the mind the title character, played by newcomer Saskia Rosendahl. Her mother and father have been apprehended, leaving her to guide her four siblings, including her infant brother, on a sometimes gruesome cross-country trek, in search of a perceived safe haven at their grandmother's house.

It is a coming-of-age story for Lore, in the truest sense of the phrase; a journey from innocence to maturity via hard experience. Her journey mirrors that of her country, which as the film begins is yet to shake off its illusions about Hitler, and has only just begun to face up to the horrors of the Holocaust.

'People lost faith in National Socialism not because they suddenly stopped being anti-Semitic, but because they were being badly bombed and losing so many soldiers,' says Shortland. 'In December-January they lost 800,000 civilians and soldiers. When our films starts the whole country is in a state of shock.'

Lore is based on Rachel Seiffert's 2001 Booker shortlisted novel *The Dark Room* — actually a collection of three novellas, which are set before and during the war, immediately after it, and in modern times respectively. 'It's about how German's have dealt with National Socialism, but it's really intimate,' says Shortland.

Shortland and her producers selected the second novella, set in 1945, for adaptation 'because it's far more difficult terrain, trying to deal with what it means to be the child of a perpetrator, what it means to be indoctrinated, what it means when your whole country has lied'.

'I went to Berlin and did workshops with people who had been in the Hitler Youth and German Girls League, the fascist children's organisations. It wasn't like the war ended, Hitler committed suicide and everybody stopped loving him. One man told me he was really traumatised because he loved Hitler more than his own family.'

Shortland was intrigued by the broader issues raised by Lore's predicament. 'I

was fascinated by the idea that how a regime falls tells us so much about how that regime was structured. This one was structured with fear and hatred, and that's what happened when it fell too.'

But she was also interested in the intimacy of the story. 'The book is made up of details: the veins of their skin, their eyelashes, the reflection in a spoon.' Shortland's film similarly appeals to intimate details and, notably, to tactility: fingers brush water, catch a drip of dye, touch tacky glue, fondle ceramic shards.

We sympathise with Lore, though the tendrils of indoctrination still grip her. On the road she encounters Thomas (Kai-Peter Malina), a Jewish boy who protects the five young siblings, while stirring sexual feelings in Lore herself. She is never quite able to trust him fully though, as she is unable to see past his Jewishness.

'Saskia looked at her character without judgment,' Shortland says of her young lead. 'Her mother was brought up in the totalitarian regime, so we could speak really frankly about all of the issues, but basically she was playing a young girl. That commitment not to judge, to play things really truthfully, was brave.'

The same may be said of Shortland, who has composed a lyrical and honest Holocaust film that manages to be full both of visual and moral horrors, as well as much grace and beauty. The fact that the film was shot on location in beautiful places where horrors occurred, means it is pregnant with these qualities.

'Steven Spielberg said that when he was making *Schindler's List* it was like shooting in a cemetery. Two houses we shot in were taken off Jewish families in the 1930s. One of our locations was a slave labour camp. You take five steps and you're on the scene of some atrocity. That imbued the film and how I thought about it.'

George Orwell's example for Australian journalists

POLITICS

Sarah Burnside

As Australia undergoes a multilayered debate about the quality of its journalism, it is worth remembering that the best political writing not only analyses, but outlives the events it describes. George Orwell's work exemplifies this. Although he achieved acclaim for his novels *1984* and *Animal Farm*, he was also a brilliant essayist. He worked briefly for the BBC between 1941 and 1943 and is today honoured in the Orwell Prize for political writing.

Recently, BBC director general Mark Thompson turned down a proposal by the George Orwell Memorial Trust to erect a statue of the author on the broadcaster's premises. According to Labour peer Dame Joan Bakewell, the refusal was made on the grounds that Orwell 'would be perceived as too left-wing a figure for the BBC to honour'. The Trust awaits planning permission to erect a statue in the nearby Portland Place.

These events have renewed debate in Britain as to whether Orwell was indeed 'left-wing' or ought to be regarded as conservative. Political animals of all stripes have long sought to claim Orwell, along with his penetrating insights, luminous prose, and subtle wit.

Those towards the right of the spectrum value Orwell's clear-sighted critiques of communism and his contempt for 'orthodoxy sniffers' willing to diminish or deny the horrors of Stalinist Russia in the interests of ideological purity. Orwell was also dismissive of the 'cranks' he encountered in leftist circles and wrote disparagingly of 'left-wing intellectuals who are so 'enlightened' that they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions'.

It is not difficult to see why conservatives wish to claim Orwell as one of their own, but such an endeavour faces obvious problems. One cannot have Orwell's acerbic observation that in the Soviet Union 'all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' without his equally astringent statement that 'whether the British ruling class are wicked or merely stupid is one of the most difficult questions of our time'.

Although critical of self-styled progressives and revolutionaries and aware of the dangers of utopian projects, Orwell set himself against both his country's rigidly class-bound nature and capitalism's manifold injustices. He noted in his 1946 essay 'Why I Write' that 'every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written ... against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it'.

The intellectual tug-of-war over Orwell's legacy is destined to continue, for he was too complex, independently minded and allergic to orthodoxy to fit neatly into

any ideological category. He wrote in 1940 that 'any writer who accepts or partially accepts the discipline of a political party is sooner or later faced with the alternative: toe the line, or shut up': he did neither.

Journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft argues that Orwell remains as relevant as ever, for with each re-reading 'there is a flash of illumination, of acute contemporary value'. The man who famously claimed that 'good prose is like a windowpane' lives on in his words: looking through them we see the large themes, not only of his era, but of our own, with a major thread being the need for clear, critical thinking about one's allies and opposition alike.

It has been suggested that the infamous 'Ministry of Truth' in *1984* was partly modelled on the BBC, and Wheatcroft thus concluded that in turning down the proposal to erect a statue of Orwell on the broadcaster's premises, 'Thompson might be right, if for the wrong reason'.

We might wonder how a statue could embody Orwell's legacy, anyway. Orwell's sympathies were instinctively with the little people rather than with those, such as monarchs and generals, commonly immortalised in granite and marble; he sided not with the makers of history but with its victims. In 1941 he wrote:

I never read the proclamations of generals before battle, the speeches of Fuehrers and prime ministers, the solidarity songs of public schools and left-wing political parties, national anthems, Temperance tracts, Papal encyclicals and sermons against gambling and contraception, without seeming to hear in the background a chorus of raspberries from all the millions of common men to whom these high sentiments make no appeal.

Statues appeal to the high sentiments that Orwell mocked even as he acknowledged their importance, and generally represent those who have been assimilated into the establishment.

One can perhaps imagine Orwell looking on in quiet approval should the odd passer-by choose to blow his or her own raspberry at a statue of a long-dead writer in a rumpled suit.

Fashion mag's naked sexism

MEDIA

Melinda Tankard Reist

Upmarket British men's magazine *GQ* has declared four 'Men of the Year'.

Starring in the '15th Annual Men of the Year Awards Special Issue' is English rapper of Nigerian decent, Tinie Tempah; English singer-songwriter Robbie Williams (not just any old man of the year but 'icon' of the year); *Mad Men* actor John Slattery (if you're a fan as I am, you'll know him as Roger Sterling); and TV and film actor, James Corden.

All four men have been photographed dressed homogenously in black suit and tie.

I don't really know what any of these men have contributed to the sum total of humanity. Are there no living British men who have done something truly amazing for the world? But that's just an aside. What's attracting all the attention is that this year *GQ* editors have included a 'Woman of the Year'.

She's Lana Del Rey, 26, a singer. But there's no suit and tie for her. Actually there are no clothes for her at all. The only things she's wearing on the cover are a few glitzy jewels and bright red lipstick.

It seems giving her the label 'Woman of the Year' was just an excuse to take her clothes off.

If a woman wants to own the title, she has to do it on *GQ*'s terms. And that means a photoshoot designed for titillation, not respect; a birthday suit, not a black suit.

Not only is Del Rey featured with knees bent, naked, sitting on a floor — in contrast to the men who are standing, dominant and dressed — inside photos of Del Ray reinforce her true place as sex object.

In one image her breast is being groped from behind by a man standing over her, his hand securing her face (he's in a suit, are you surprised?). The hands grabbing her are those of *GQ*'s own creative director Paul Solomons. The image has sinister overtones, suggesting sexualised violence.

In another photo Del Rey is naked from the waist down, touching herself. Another has her demure and submissive in a corset holding a rose. Her crotch appears digitally emphasised.

It seems this is how *GQ* editors and male readers prefer their women of the year. Actress Jennifer Aniston, a former woman of the year — it has a patchy history, of course you couldn't dish out a title like that every year — was posed

topless.

While the titled men appear as sophisticated citizens of the world, achieving important manly things, Del Rey exists only for male gratification and pleasure. She is up for grabs, literally. Her job is to strip and pose and look hot. Who cares what she has achieved?

GQ mentions her number one debut album *Born To Die*, that she has signed with NEXT models and done some other stuff, but really couldn't they have illustrated this without disrobing her?

The men are not being groped. They are not depicted touching themselves in sexually suggestive ways. It shows just how normalised pornified images of women are in the mainstream.

Of course this isn't the first time women have been posed naked beside fully dressed men. Fashion designer Tom Ford features women naked with clothed men in advertising. *Vanity Fair* featured Scarlett Johansson (then 21) and Keira Knightly (then 20) with a (suited up) Ford.

Glee stars were depicted in a photoshoot for *GQ* in 2010, the females in underwear, the male stars fully clothed.

Unequal dress almost always reflects unequal power. To be undressed around others who are completely dressed is a sign of vulnerability and of the power the clothed individuals hold.

But this time it is attached to an awards honour. Sexism, submission, objectification, groping — this is what a 'Woman of the Year' — and perhaps all women — deserve?

And this is the message we send to young women: that in a culture that rewards exhibitionism, your achievements count for nothing unless you're willing to get naked.

Disability, sex rights and the prostitute

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

Matthew Holloway

Australia is seeing a divisive battle of rights. On the one hand are those arguing against people being forced into sex work and needing to perform sexual services for money. On the other are politicians and sex industry advocates calling for legislation to entrench the right for those with disabilities to be able to access sex workers.

There are some major questions at play in this particular issue. First and foremost is the question of why access to sex is being portrayed as a human rights issue in Australia.

This issue is being played out in South Australia by Kelly Vincent, a disabled woman who was elected to South Australia's upper house under the Dignity for Disability ticket at the 2010 state election.

Disability rights advocates are divided over Vincent's push to bring about the legal use of prostitutes by people with a disability. Vincent said : 'For those who are feeling frustrated, alienated, alone and sad because they can't access this experience, and for those people for whom the services of a sex worker could make a genuine huge, positive difference to their lives, in a private, intimate manner, then I don't see why that can't be allowed.'

South Australian Labor MP Stephanie Key has unsuccessfully advocated decriminalisation of the sex industry since 2010, now in 2012 Key has reframed the debate as prostitution being needed to allow people with a disability to experience intimacy.

Due to Key's past of pushing for legalisation of the sex industry, it is questionable whether she is using people with disabilities to further her pro-sex industry agenda and whether the reframing of this debate is an attempt to evoke sensibilities of political correctness by portraying access to prostitutes as a disability rights issue.

In both a national and a global climate, legalisation is on the nose and states such as Victoria and New South Wales are now considered failed experiments which have led to a massive expansion of both the legal and illegal sex industry. Such a claim was backed by former Victorian police commissioner Christine Nixon who stated 'Serious and organised crime is well entrenched in regulated industries such as prostitution and gaming.'

Vincent promotes the benefits of allowing access to sex workers stating it will improve the mental and physical wellbeing of those with a disability. What Ms Vincent has failed to concern herself with is the negative mental and physical impact sex work has on a prostituted person.

Many prostitutes are victims of childhood sexual abuse. Evidence backing this claim can be found in a 2009 study conducted by the University of Queensland and Queensland University of Technology. Women were surveyed from three sections of the sex industry ; 103 private sex workers, 102 legal brothel workers and 42 illegal sex workers, 33 of whom were street workers.

The results showed that 83 per cent of illegal sex workers had been exposed to sexual abuse during childhood, and 45 per cent of licensed brothel workers and 48 per cent of private sex workers also reported childhood abuse. It also showed that 52 per cent of illegal sex workers had been raped or bashed by a client; 15 per cent of private sex workers and 3 per cent of brothel-based sex workers had had this experience.

The study highlighted that street workers were four times more likely to have mental health problems than brothel workers, but overall prostitutes from all sectors had poorer mental health than Australian women of comparable age who were not involved in the sex industry.

Vincent has stated that she believes the wonderful thing about her campaign push is that it's all about 'choice'. What needs to be questioned is how much 'choice' is present in this debate when one disadvantaged group, prostitutes, needs to stay disadvantaged in order to service another disadvantaged group, disabled people.

Sexual exploitation in relation to men with disabilities is revealed in a UK study in 2005 showing that 22.6 per cent of men with disabilities had accessed prostitutes compared to 1 per cent of women. This shows that men make up the majority of those utilising sex workers who are primarily women.

The other concern is whether the male right to sex could lead to sexual abuse of women, girls and boys. Anthony Walsh of Family Planning Queensland told Radio National's Damien Carrick :

Our experience at Family Planning Queensland suggests that many men with significant intellectual disabilities are perpetrating sexual offences. Now those are usually against other men, women or children who also have a disability, because they're the people to whom those men have access. So in effect, denying those men sexuality education and appropriate support could be increasing the risk of sexual assault against vulnerable people in our society.

In this instance it is important to discuss the need for sex education among those with disabilities; Sheila Jeffreys responded to Walsh's comments in her article 'Disability and the male sex right'. Jeffreys states:

The worrying possibility is that service providers might consider prostituted women as the appropriate deliverers of this form of 'education', especially when brothels set themselves up as specialists in the field and specially train their workers, as is happening in legalised brothel prostitution in Australia.

The sexual use of prostituted women, who are paid to dissociate emotionally whilst their bodies are entered, is not an appropriate means of sex education, or of reducing men's sexual violence. Rather than teaching boys and men with disabilities about mutual sex, respect for the personhood of women, relationships and intimacy, prostitution teaches the exact opposite.

The issue was also raised by Naomi Jacobs, a disability rights advocate from the UK. Writing in the *Guardian*, Jacob's argued against the unfair assumption that disabled people can only have sex through accessing prostitutes. Jacobs concludes: 'When we are seen as equal people, equally sexual people, we will be empowered to move on from the idea that we can only have sex by exploiting others.'

Robbi Williams, a disability advocate from the Julia Farr Association, also attacked the position of Vincent, stating that linking prostitution with disability rights creates a risk of association and potentially stigmatised people with a disability. Williams states :

The danger with the periodic focus on disability in the sex industry is it may create the impression the only way a person living with disability can have sex is if he or she pays for it. Presumably this is because some people assume the person's disability renders that person unattractive to every potential partner out there in community life. This doesn't seem fair or true.

A push to limit critical debate has denied the voices of sex workers and failed to correlate the evidence based approach currently taking place in European nations such as Ireland, France and Israel. All these nations are pushing for Nordic style legislation in a move to protect sex workers and end the crossroad which is liberalised sex laws, sexual exploitation, slavery and trafficking.

Equally people with disabilities are being further stigmatised and fed the notion that they are incapable of forming intimate relationships. This reinforces a notion that they are incomplete human beings, incapable of having sexual relations through any means other than a financial transaction.

Through arguing access to prostitutes as a human rights issue there is a failure to recognise the correlations of prostitution as a harmful cultural practice which furthers inequality and has silenced dissenting voices and those of sex workers themselves. Australia needs to question the motives of politicians and sex industry advocates in their push to normalise prostitution and reframe prostituted people as entrepreneurial sex therapists.

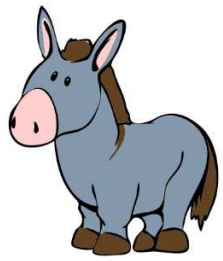
The premise that access to sex workers is a right and offers choice is a limited view spawned from a failed notion that prostitutes themselves have choice.

Legalising prostitution in the name of disability access to sex will do little more than create state sanctioned stigmatising and discrimination against prostituted persons and the disabled.

Who is the loudest and ugliest religious donkey?

RELIGION

Irfan Yusuf



Donkeys are gorgeous animals. But when they open their mouths, an ugly sound emerges.

The braying of donkeys is used as a metaphor in the Koran for a kind of dialogue that is in reality a collision of loud monologues. It is stated in chapter 31:

And be moderate in your movement; and lower your voice: verily the most unpleasant of voices is the braying of the donkey.

Sadly, discussion of religion in Australia too often sounds like donkeys competing to see whose braying is the loudest and ugliest. Evangelical atheists will have us all believe secularism involves keeping all religion out of public life. Self-declared Christian lobbyists will spread misinformed messages about sexual orientation.

But perhaps the loudest braying was heard on Saturday when a small group of louts hijacked what should have been a peaceful protest.

Why they were offended by a 14 minute D-grade trailer produced by a porn film maker is anyone's guess. But they did have the right to protest within the bounds of the law.

One of the purposes of law, religious or secular, is to ensure that people's emotions don't get out of control and become destructive. Islam is a religion with its own legal tradition. The law is derived from various sources, and mostly governs our relationships with our creator, our families and ourselves.

It also governs our relationships with those who offend us. An example is found in the early days of the prophet Muhammad's mission when he visited a nearby town. The town's leaders made snide remarks toward him. They even sent their own children to pelt him with stones until his feet and legs bled profusely.

Muslim tradition states that Muhammad prayed of his own inabilities, in response to which an angel was sent offering to crush the town's inhabitants. He refused the offer, expressing a wish that someday the descendants of that town would become believers.

It is the Creator's wisdom that none of the violent Sydney protestors were present with their prophet on that day 14 centuries ago. They would have drowned out his voice, maybe trashed the streets of that town and assaulted its children. They may have even brought their own children to carry placards declaring that anyone insulting their prophet should be beheaded.

This instance of Muhammad's mercy is no doubt replicated in other scriptures and faith traditions. Just as are instances of war and conflict. The last century is replete with instances of crazy Muslims attacking Sikhs for being Sikh, of crazy Hindus attacking Catholics for being Catholic and crazy Catholics attacking Protestants for being Protestant. And the crazed antics of these fanatics is more often than not based on reactionary politics, land disputes or other ungodly motives than some profound theological issue.

We don't expect everyone in the Sutherland Shire to apologise for the drunken freak show that took place on the beach in December 2005. Because we understand that many, especially local shopkeepers, despise the rioters. Cronulla is a community but it is not one singular monolithic community.

Not all Christians need to answer for what Cardinal Pell or Archbishop Jensen say. And not all Buddhists need to condemn the massacre of Rohingya and other non-Buddhist communities in Myanmar which are often orchestrated and encouraged by local monks.

If only certain self-declared Muslim leaders understood this before they make statements on behalf of that fictitious entity called 'the Muslim community'. The Muslim community in Australia just doesn't exist.

There are some 400,000 people who choose to tick the 'Muslim' box on their census forms. They do it for different reasons. Some belong to sects that don't regard other sects as within the fold of Islam. Some feel greater cultural affinity to non-Muslims who speak their language or who have the same ancestry.

Mosques in major Australian cities continue to be divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. Many perhaps took no offence to the movie that others were protesting about. Certainly most were too busy enjoying the lovely spring weather to worry about shouting loud slogans in defence of their prophet.

When self-appointed Muslim religious leaders and organisational heads claim to speak on behalf of an entity that exists only in their heads and in their government funding proposals, it merely makes all 400,000 census tickers an easier target for inciters of other kinds of rioters — for shock jocks and tabloid hate-scribes.

When you insist there is a singular Muslim community, it because easy to ask: 'When is that community going to rein in its extremists?'

Religion is supposed to elevate our speech and our conduct, not transform us into donkeys.

Feather on the breath of god

POETRY

Mark Tredinnick

Transit of Venus

Last night at eight, the Earth in its orbit
turned and threw its shadow — the aggregate
Of all our orphaned selves — over half the Orphic moon:
A sack dropped over the head of a god — Siva, maybe,
Mugged by love, in the sacred glade of night.
And dawn today was a tungsten blaze
when I rose to poke my fingers in the fire's eyes:
The morning the fallout from the night before, a godly light turned way down
Low. And tomorrow night, Venus,
who's been circling slantwise in her vestments
Since late May, has her second coming out, her first walk across the sun,
That fading star, since the century before last. We live in numinous days: the Earth
Stepping out of her own shadow,
love making a catwalk of the sun: so,
How could the city not be tossed about tonight like a salad in a cyclone?
Call it an East Coast Low, if you like: weather like this is the rough love
Planets make — those gods congealed, those tales of our olden days, our wilder
Ways — while we, like children, watch in fright from underneath eternity's bed.

Overgrown wisteria haiku

Blue shadow of wisteria swims
the open pages of my book:
A perfect haiku — until I try to make it one. Beauty is how
Eternity speaks — hastily — in time. But you'd have to finish finishing
School to learn to dissemble
with such tender, almost sexual, grace. Summer has come

home

For the holidays, and the sky's a weatherboard shack on the coast. The clouds have taken vows

And taken them back again in white paper bags.

And the truth lies, all the time,

(somewhere) between the shadow and the flower.

The drama of survival

I

The slow drama of rain on an autumn

roof. The faster drama of a child's sleep

beneath it. The teleological

morality play of the landscape, one night late in March. Here. Another moment

in the slowest story in the book. Rain

II

Reads us the same story over and over,

a tale in which we hardly matter, which

is why it matters so much, but no one

is listening now. Rain taught us how to speak.

It taught the rivers how to run. It taught

the fires how to stop. But no one listens

III

Slowly enough anymore. Our children

teach us what counts, and they learn it in the

rain that drums their dreams and tries to find

its way back down to rivers we've wasted

in our sleep. Whatever becomes of us,

the landscape will go on sleeping its slow

IV

Saga of cyclical self-actual-

isation. And for all I know the rain
will, too. But what will the children do?
Can we trust them to know how to muck things
up without us around to listen to
and only the slow drama of the rain?

The news (poetry tells)

'It is difficult to get the news from poems,
yet men die miserably every day
for lack of what is found there.'
William Carlos Williams

The news poetry tells
Is that everyone suffers
Like this; everyone delights,
Periodically, like this, remembers
What they'd like to
Forget, forgets the sunlight
In the voice of the finch — all those
Fibre-optic ligatures, which bind
The wound that never wants to heal
And (which) carry news of us to
The world: That is the news,
And poetry tells it,
The way the finches do.
Inside the sometime misery of things,
The engines of death,
The masques of sex, the comings
And comings again of age,
The mystic machinery of weather,
The lie of the land,
A coherence holds,

An impossibly beautiful grammar.
There's a music that fashions the world,
Moment by moment. A music
That's always just finished, but a touch,
A sketch, a chord, a line, now and then,
Seems to recall how some of it went
And carries it home
And dresses it in silence again
And gives it to you. Poetry delivers the news
The way a cat brings you a trophy in her mouth,
This mouse that used to have a head, say,
And lays it at your feet. And wants milk.
The news is that nothing is new,
And that everything is new again each time
It's deeply felt and spoken thick and slant; the news is
That, by the way, you can stop wanting now
And again: heaven's been here
A long while, waiting; you've probably been looking
Too far out.
Poetry reads the book
The beloved has written:
Love songs she'd like you
To sing her when you think
You're about ready
To give yourself up.
Poetry writes the only prayers
You feel free to offer these days.
It is the glint in the eye
Of the god you stopped
Believing, when she started

Causing you all this pain.
But inside the book of songs
That poetry hums, inside
The order it overhears
And remakes in voluble clay,
Retells slant and sly inside
The small rooms of its house,
Lies also what the order is not —
Its nemesis, the possibility
That anything else than this
Might have happened and might happen
Yet, at just about any moment,
But generally doesn't. Poetry,
Like music, contains the chaos
It cures; it tells the devil
In the detail. It finds Eros
In the weetbix pack
And offers you a taste.
For every immaculate pattern
Wants to unpick itself
And will find a way and a day,
And it must, or the circle
Will slow and the music
Will stop. This is the news,
Which you knew all along,
And poetry tells it again and again.
It is the rhythm inside
The pain, the music inside
The intelligence of every thing,
The echo of your lonely cry,

The architecture of your splendid despair,
The perfect colour schemes of love
In all its raucous denominations: everything is
An image of the truth; everything,
Even the worst thing, is how
A small phrase of the music plays,
And you, too, despite the false witness
Of the mirror in your mind, are part,
A very small part, of a very old music,
The sex and death, the feather on the
Breath of the god, of it all. Poetry tells
The big story small, and lets you bear it
As often as you like.
Poetry is an echo
In which your questions come back to you,
More neatly put
Than you could manage in the dark,
Shaped within an inch
Of your life.
Poetry rings its small bell
Inside a crowded temple,
Where the money has never stopped
Changing hands.

The iPhone 5 and Apple's profit fetish

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Ahead of his Australian visit earlier this year, Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak criticised the company for subjecting local consumers to 'horrible' price-gouging. Last week's release of the iPhone 5 has reinforced perceptions of Apple as an odious corporation that exploits consumers, alongside the likes of tobacco companies, big banks, McDonald's, and Coles and Woolworths.

Commenting in *Technology Spectator* on Friday, Professor David Glance of the University of Western Australia said Apple is about maintaining a very high margin of profitability, usually 30 per cent.

They know everything about manufacturing, supply and corporate consistency. They can deliver a consistent, scalable and profitable service on a global scale. What they aren't are reckless innovators, experimenting with radical ideas.

The iPhone 5 announcement appeared to be a demonstration of Apple's greed and contempt for the consumer. Apple explained the need for the new 'Lightning' connector to allow for a thinner phone and a larger, longer-lasting battery. Unfortunately it will prove costly for many consumers because most existing iPhone accessories will be rendered obsolete without the purchase of a $35 adapter.

Apple's strategy of profit maximisation compounds the inconvenience and cost for consumers. A 'fair go' approach would have the company include the adapter in the box with the iPhone 5, or at least selling it at cost, which could be as low as $1. Other companies would seize the opportunity to create good will, but that is not necessary for Apple because it is still widely regarded as the arbiter of style and innovation, which Glance argues is unwarranted.

In his commentary on the new iPhone, Glance also points out what he believes is the reason for Apple's decision not to include the NFC wireless payments technology, which could become the standard for purchases in physical retail stores. He says Apple failed to convince banks to pass on charges when phones are used to make payments. It appears Apple is not interested unless it is able to replicate the 30 per cent commission it charges publishers and other vendors for 'in app' purchases of magazines and other products.

The Australian Government has shown itself capable of asserting the rights of Australian consumers against the disdain of Apple. Following the release of the most recent iPad, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission took successful court action against Apple for misleading consumers about the capacity

of Apple's '4G' iPad to connect to any 4G network in Australia. Its chair Rod Sims last week portrayed Apple's 4G claim as a misleading attempt to beat the competitor Samsung, whose product was compatible with 4G in Australia.

This would only have been a minor irritant for Apple, but it shows that there is scope for governments to act against greedy corporations that take consumer law for granted. This year, we have also seen the House of Representatives Inquiry into IT Pricing , which essentially sought voluntary undertakings from Apple and other price gougers. While it did not manage to bring them to heel, continuing representation from consumer groups such as Choice shows Australian consumers could be ready to fight on.

Puncturing Australia's cult of the mind

MEDIA

Zac Alstin

In addition to more than half a million Australians who currently live with an intellectual disability, nearly 600,000 Australians are projected to be living with dementia by 2030. Yet for most of us, our daily lives have become increasingly dependent upon advanced cognitive activity.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter exemplify the ways in which new technology continues to draw out and emphasise the life of the mind above all else. At the same time, convenient new tools like online banking and shopping carry a hidden burden of knowledge, memory, and comprehension borne entirely by the individual user. The cognitive demands of active social participation have never been so high.

We seem set on a trajectory of ever increasing reliance on individual autonomy, rationality, and self-awareness augmented by complex technologies. But if our culture glorifies the mental life of the autonomous, empowered individual, what does it offer those whose mental faculties are limited or impaired?

We are living in what ethicist Stephen G. Post has called a 'hyper-cognitive' society — a society which not only demands but idealises the mental life as the essence of personhood and individuality. Post has critiqued our present culture's implicit affront to people suffering cognitive deficits such as dementia:

I associate hypercognitive values with the Enlightenment notion of salvation by reason alone and suggest that this imperils people with dementia. Very simplistically, 'I think, therefore I am,' implies that if I do not think, I am not. In essence, the values of rationality and productivity blind us to other ways of thinking about the meaning of our humanity.

The moral implications of such values are clear. The acclaimed Princeton Philosopher Professor Peter Singer has infamously championed the view that:

The fact that a being is a human being, in the sense of a member of the species homo sapiens, is not relevant to the wrongness of killing it; it is, rather, characteristics like rationality, autonomy, and self-consciousness that make a difference.

Infants lack these characteristics. Killing them, therefore, cannot be equated with killing normal human beings, or any other self-conscious beings. This conclusion is not limited to infants who, because of irreversible intellectual disabilities, will never be rational, self-conscious beings.

It may be no coincidence that an academic philosopher would place elevated moral weight on the life of the mind. But the values put forward by Singer are

advanced implicitly by our whole culture: independence, choice, identity, personal narrative.

Perhaps this is why we are so afraid of illnesses and conditions which impair the mind: according to Alzheimer's Australia 63 per cent of Australians over the age of 18 are afraid of developing dementia — making it the second most widely feared medical condition after cancer.

Yet despite our high regard for these mental powers, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, people with an intellectual disability are not receiving adequate levels of assistance for cognition, emotion, and communication. These unmet needs seem obvious, and we should hope to see them fulfilled.

Less obvious are the unmet needs of the rest of society, brought to the fore by illnesses and disabilities that challenge our sense of what it means to be a human person, and force us to confront our underlying values. On a religious level this 'unmet need' has always been implied by doctrines such as the fall of man, which established as a most basic premise the broken and impaired state of all creation.

But outside of a religious context, the difficulties and suffering in life push us inexorably toward the same reappraisal of our deepest values. Another philosopher, Professor Eva Kittay, has written of how her values changed upon learning of her own daughter's intellectual disability:

Loving Sesha and loving the life of the mind forced me to think — to feel — differently about that latter love. My own child could not share its treasures, could not even remotely approach that which had, I had thought, given my life its meaning.

I had to reassess the meaning and value of cognitive capacities as the defining feature of humanity. I discovered that a love for one's child transcended any denumerable set of defining characteristics.

Kittay's realisation has great significance for the present trajectory of our broader society: where is our ideal of the independent, autonomous, intellectual human being taking us? Can the fullness of life really be encompassed by our ever-increasing immersion in the life of the mind?

The fall of man is set in the context of another vital religious concept: *Imago Dei*. The belief that human beings were created 'in the image of God' has been interpreted in various ways but never explicitly defined according to some particular aspect of the human being.

We can recognise the goodness and value of human reason and human will, without allowing the importance of these mental faculties to eclipse the more profound and mysterious claim that human beings are imprinted with the divine image.

Perhaps it is a special challenge of our age to recognise that 'I think therefore I

am' cannot approach the mystery of 'I am that I am'.

Ethical dilemmas on safari in Africa

POLITICS

John Warhurst

I've just returned from a 14-day holiday in Kenya and Uganda, taking part with my daughter in a tour called 'Game Parks and Gorillas'. We began our camping tour at Acacia Camp in Karen, a suburb of Nairobi named after Karen Blixen of *Out of Africa* fame.

It was a wonderful opportunity, including even the 13 cramped nights in a smallish tent with my adult daughter. I was easily the oldest in our group. I'd recommend the whole experience to anyone who is adventurous.

You will be exhilarated by the extraordinary quantity and range of wildlife to be found in the many national parks and game reserves, like the Masai Mara in the Rift valley in Kenya: elephants, giraffes, lions, rhinos, hippos, zebras and remarkable birdlife. We had the privilege of trekking into the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in far south-west Uganda to see one family among the 700 remaining mountain gorillas.

But even though the prime focus is on the wildlife, no tourist can avoid thinking about the ethical issues raised by tourism in poor countries. The contrasts in circumstances between tourists and locals were clear, and would have been even clearer if we had been at the upper end of the tourism industry.

Everywhere you go, you are invited to help the local people in various ways, including financially and through volunteering. Tourism itself makes a significant contribution to their community well-being through employment and investment, as our guide kept telling us, even though some locals complained about the inequitable way tourism revenue was distributed between central and local government. Nevertheless local communities certainly seemed to benefit from tourist spending.

The ethical issues that we came to face are not new at all, and I have no answers other than to always try to conduct oneself with sensitivity and generosity. As our group talked among ourselves, different reactions emerged to the obvious poverty and need around us.

We also worried about the reliability, and even probity, of those we might help. How could the credentials of those seeking assistance be tested? What were the best options among the many possibilities on offer?

One set of issues is about the choices available to those who want to help and have the means to do so. I was struck simultaneously by the needs of threatened animal species and by needs of children in poverty.

All of us who trekked were convinced of the threats that economic

developments posed to the remaining mountain gorillas and most of us wanted to do what we could to help. Yet just the next day at a local primary school near Kabale, called Little Angels, for orphaned and poor children several of our group also signed up for a $600 per year child sponsorship commitment.

Back in Nairobi on our last day we learned at the Dorothy Sheldrick Wildlife Trust that we could sponsor an orphaned elephant for $60 per year, as one young Canadian couple in our group had already done. These needs are not necessarily directly competing, though indirectly they are, as most people have to choose their commitments carefully.

A second set of issues, perhaps even more difficult, is about the personal interactions with those around you. There are lots of beggars, but no guidelines. Whatever you can give is never enough but you can't realistically respond to every request. There is also the matter of bargaining with traders, not to mention normal commercial interactions. The amounts are often small, and haggling is encouraged in the guidebooks and by our local assistants. Yet isn't there something mean about driving a price down from our positions of greater wealth and power or complaining because a barman seems to be trying to rip you off on the price of a beer?

There are no simple answers. In the end we all react differently and in many cases spontaneously to what we see in these situations. We have existing commitments and in many cases limited means. Perhaps that's all we can usefully say but the issues should still be talked about.

Fuzzy thinking on obeedjunt wives

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

About this time of year a decade or so ago, I had the pleasant experience of being in Dublin, staying at a small family hotel in St Stephen's Green.

Returning very late one night after the conference dinner, I found an old man — almost certainly the grandfather of the family — presiding at reception. The foyer and lounge areas were silent and empty, so I decided to use this quiet opportunity to send my wife a fax — to let her know I was okay and to check if all was well with her.

So I asked the venerable receptionist if he'd mind if I sent a brief fax to Australia and was surprised when he said no, it was not possible.

'Y'see,' he said, 'we haven't got the facility.'

Politely puzzled, I pointed out that there was a fax machine on the filing cabinet behind him.

'Well, now,' he said amiably, 'I thought that was one of those pho-to-copiers. But in any case, I'm sorry but I can't work them — the pho-to-copier or the fax.' He announced this with smiling conclusiveness. As far as he was concerned this was, sadly and regrettably, the end of our negotiations.

'But I can work the fax,' I said, 'and if you let me have a sheet of paper, I'll just write a quick note to my wife, send it off and you can put the cost on my bill.'

'Well,' he said, extracting a sheet of paper from its pile next to the fax machine, 'it's an amazing world we live in. To think your wife will be hearing from you in the blink of an eye.'

I nodded my agreement as I wrote the note then switched on the fax machine, fed the paper in and keyed in the number. Within seconds, the machine started that whirring, stammering process — advancing the paper in fits and starts — with which, in the early days of faxing, we became excitedly familiar.

The old man stood close by me, watching intently.

'Would she be seein' that right now?' he said, as the paper went through and the machine fell silent. 'Would she be readin' it while we stand here?'

Roughly calculating the time difference, I explained that she'd probably be at work in her study, with a cup of morning coffee to hand, and the fax machine on a side table would start chattering out its message as we spoke.

Judging from his stunned expression, he was about to utter more amazement when the machine began spitting out the transmission report with that same machine-gun rattle.

'Jaysus, Mary and Joseph, she's answerin' you already. She must be an oncommonly obeedjunt woman.'

To this staggering proposition I could only smile enigmatically, thank him for his help and wish him goodnight. But as I made my way up the creaking stairs to my room, I pondered this matter of 'obeedjunce'.

The Reverend Peter Jensen, Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, has been pondering it too. In the Sydney Diocese's draft new prayer book, it is suggested brides be invited to 'love and submit' to their husbands. It's an invitation not a stipulation, but many who've entered this debate have asked what is the nature of the quid pro quo here?

Well, Jensen argues that 'the biblical teaching is that the promise made voluntarily by the bride to submit to her husband is matched by the even more onerous obligation which the husband must undertake to act towards his wife as Christ has loved the church'.

More onerous perhaps, but more evanescent too, much less graspable, less unmistakable than the promise to obey — as it was — or now, to 'submit'. When the man and woman walk out of the church duly joined in holy matrimony, the bride who has agreed to submit has to start submitting. Her husband, on the other hand, must, in his treatment of his new wife, emulate Christ's love of the Church. Fuzzy?

On being invited to 'love, honour and obey', my wife chose to love and honour. Even way back then, in those comparatively benighted 20th century days, she was right to claim that — quite apart from her own strong and serious objection to having her obedience enshrined in the ceremony — if she'd vowed to obey, the guest congregation would have dissolved into unseemly and gravitas-shattering laughter.

This would have been partly because they all had a lively, personal appreciation of the truth that she was emphatically not 'an oncommonly obeedjunt woman'. But it was also because the social, political, cultural and moral tides of those times were flowing strongly against the idea of women being submissive because they were women — in marriage or anywhere else.

As we settle into the second decade of the 21st century, those tides are set and ineluctable, even if they encounter here and there obstructing reefs and crosscurrents.

Jensen's article, 'Men and women are different, and so should be their marriage vows', was originally pointed out to me by my wife. On the morning after the spirited domestic discussion it engendered, I considered reminding her that she had once been pronounced uncommonly obedient and that, accordingly, I could reasonably request that she bring me breakfast in bed.

I didn't though.

Beasts of the climate change apocalypse

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Beasts of the Southern Wild* (M). Director: Benh Zeitlin. Starring: QuvenzhanÃ© Wallis, Dwight Henry. 93 minutes**

In the 2008 short film *Glory at Sea*, a discarded street sign designates a patch of dull ocean 'Elysian Fields'. During one scene that occurs late in the 2012 feature film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* a neon sign similarly names a sleazy bar for the afterlife of Greek mythology — the resting place for the souls of the virtuous. Both films, written and directed by Zeitlin, juxtapose grim reality with elements of the metaphysical and even miraculous, with the hope of human flourishing providing the catalyst for transcendence.

Glory at Sea is a fable about post-Katrina New Orleans. A forgotten community of survivors unite to construct a rudimentary boat from their salvaged belongings, and journey in it to rescue their missing loved ones from beneath the sea. Zeitlin is a deft hand at merging the mundane and the mystical; 'When the rain started, I put on my spaghetti helmet so my head wouldn't get wet,' says his child narrator as the film begins. 'But that didn't do a bit of good. I went down to the bottom of the ocean, where the dead people go.'

Raw cinematography, artless amateur performances and a stirring DIY score enhance rather than diminish the poetry of the language and imagery. It is easy to believe the gritty and impoverished world that Zeitlin creates is separated from metaphysical realms by a porous membrane, and that the living and the dead can pass between the two, enabled by faith and determination. It's a poignant way to highlight the social injustice experienced by the characters while also lauding the resilience of the human spirit without resorting to cliche and sentimentality.

These stylistic elements, along with many of the film's themes, are employed and expanded to similar effect in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Here it is climate change, rather than an isolated weather event, that compounds the marginalisation experienced by the characters. Six-year-old Hushpuppy (Wallis) lives in the ramshackle bayou village Bathtub, in a bungalow adjacent to that inhabited by her neglectful and fiery (though increasingly sickly) father. When melting polar ice caps cause the sea levels to rise, they are engulfed by a devastating flood.

It is often the poor who suffer most when disaster strikes, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* posits an implicit moral argument for the more privileged citizens of the world to take responsibility for humanity's impact on the environment. In one sequence the band of survivors destroys a dam that keeps the nearby city dry and the village immersed; they've been not only neglected but shunned by their wealthier neighbours, and resort to civil disobedience not to be heard, but to

survive. Zeitlin's indictment of the prosperous West is hard to miss.

Beasts is billed as a 'fantasy drama'; indeed there is a twist of magical realism, in which the melting icecaps have released into the world a quartet of aurochs, giant and ferocious prehistoric cattle, who stampede accross the face of the earth heralding the end of the world. In the context of the film's ecological themes, their heavy footfalls might resonate with the phrase 'global footprint'; they are runaway consumerism or commercial or political or otherwise purely selfish interests that care for nothing but their own advancement.

As much as it is an ecological fable, *Beasts* is also simply a coming of age story for Hushpuppy, who must make sense of her relationship with her father and her grief for her deceased mother, while taking responsibility for her own destiny and contributing actively to the life of her community. She is memorably, stunningly portrayed by Wallis, as a character with a child's mind but an adult's wisdom won through hard experience, and a fearlessness that asserts itself even in terror. She is the very picture of human resilience under siege.

The picture, perhaps, of the vulnerability and resilience of the marginalised in general. Ultimately the events of the film bring her to a close encounter with the aurochs themselves. Staring into her face, the beast is stilled.

Religious freedom is negotiable

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Freedom of religion is something that is normally taken for granted. But in the English speaking world there have recently been many spotfires over issues like wearing and hanging crosses in public, and proposed legislation to compel the disclosure of what is heard in confession, to compel Christian adoption agencies to accept applications from gay couples and to force clergy to marry gay couples in churches.

These, and other controversies over the insurance of contraceptive practices in the United States, have led some Catholics to identify a concerted secularist threat to religious freedom. I believe that the freedom to express publicly one's religious beliefs is central within any healthy society, but that the current tensions are part of the normal negotiation of its relationship to other values in society.

Religious freedom includes the right to hold religious beliefs, to associate with others with like beliefs, to engage in practices connected with those beliefs, and to commend one's religious allegiances, beliefs and way of life to others. Religious freedom implies the right of individuals to make and withdraw from religious allegiances, and also the right of religious groups to live by and promote their beliefs and practices.

It also means that people should not be impeded from holding religious beliefs, expressing them and embodying them in their association with others.

Religious freedom should be protected for the same reasons as political freedom. Both assert the value of human beings reflecting on what matters in life and of living publicly by the answers they give to these large questions. Religious freedom asserts the importance of human freedom and the personal centre that ground the respect given to individual choice.

This human freedom and interiority must be supported by the right to express itself in public and bodily ways. When religious or political freedom is suppressed, human beings are reduced to political and economic counters.

But religious freedom is not absolute. Nor is everything claimed in its name sacrosanct. Its claims need to be set against the claims made by other human values. And they may sometimes be denied. Extreme examples are easy to imagine. In some religions human sacrifice was central to belief systems and practice. Freedom to practice it would rightly be denied because it stands in contradiction to the central value of human life.

Some religious groups, consistently with their beliefs, have forbidden their members, including children, to receive blood transfusions. Here, too, the freedom

of the parents to follow in their family life their own religious practices has been set aside in favour of the child's right to life-saving medical treatment.

On the other hand, the freedom of parents to have male children circumcised in accordance with religious tradition, though questioned, has generally been upheld.

Generally speaking, however, the most common limitations on religious freedom in democracies do not apply to central practices and beliefs themselves but to the particular ways in which individuals and groups choose to express them publicly. And those things are often negotiable.

In my childhood the church Angelus Bell rang at 7.00am each morning, including at weekends. But when the neighbours complained that it interfered with their sleep, it was rung later in the morning. Similarly, after some dispute, Sikhs were able to wear their head dress, but not as substitutes for motorbike helmets.

Such limitations on freedom of religious expression are usually negotiated peaceably by mutual agreement in a way that affirms the claim of the values in tension. Earlier fierce opposition to trying clergy in the king's courts is now a historical memory.

We should expect challenges to religious freedom from time to time as other principles come to be given a higher weight in society. These challenges will be more frequent in societies like ours where religious belief and practice decline.

Many of the present conflicts over religious freedom are associated with the high value given to the principle of non-discrimination. It is seen to be in conflict with the freedom of Christian adoption agencies to place children with Christian parents, of schools to employ only Christian staff, and with the freedom of ministers to conduct in their churches marriages only between a man and a woman.

Many see these pressures to limit religious freedom as part of a concerted effort by secularist forces. I don't see it that way. They reflect new fault lines in the tension between religious freedom and other values and the need to negotiate the claims of each in different situations.

Both religious freedom and non-discrimination are important values, but the claim made by neither is absolute. But in negotiation ambit claims are made, and from this perspective many demands for the limitation of religious freedom are simply ambit claims, not the first wave of an incoming tide.

Negotiation requires a clear understanding of the values that are in conflict in each situation, of why each value is important, of what is non-negotiable and where there is room for movement. All this is best done by persuasion, not by going to war.

Catholic and Aboriginal 'listening revolutions'

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

Evan Ellis

Listen.

Worlds die. Although not like us. We have our little exit stage left scrawled once, somewhere in our life. A world dies more like a tree; creaking, snapping, falling, thudding, lying and then decaying, importantly decaying.

Possibilities then spring up. In a dark little cavity bugs huddle around the warm glow of the *Book of Kells*. Across a wet expanse of timber a centipede carries a printing press on its back. A moth takes flight (it actually flies) while tiny green shoots start to awake.

St Benedict of Nursia knew a thing or two about living in a dying world. He was born about 25 years after the Vandals sacked Rome and died only months after the Ostrogoths had their turn. He watched with his contemporaries as old certainties quite literally went up in flame. As existing institutions were hollowed out or winnowed completely, Benedict started a revolution.

Not that his life tracks like a revolutionary. He was not ignited by his studies but abandoned them, nor was he drawn to the centres of power but lived on the periphery. His great work, *The Rule of Benedict* has more in common with an IKEA construction manual than *The Communist Manifesto*, plodding systematically forward the way it does. After three years of solitude he became an Abbot, a founder of monasteries and then, according to tradition, died standing up.

Again, not textbook revolutionary stuff. Yet the man is honoured in the Catholic Church as an architect of a new civilisation. Which raises the question, with apologies to Aristotle, do 12 monasteries a new civilisation make?

Well, only if you understand what Benedict was really doing. With each monastery he founded, he essentially planted a new, stable community into the dead tree of Imperial Rome. In an era characterised by rupture and division, between Byzantine and the West, Romans and Ostrogoths, the old order and the new political vacuum, Benedict was knitting disparate individuals into communities, making things whole.

The Rule of Benedict was the glue. The IKEA jibe is not altogether unfair as *The Rule of Benedict* is self consciously a user's manual. It was designed, according to the writer Judith Knighton, 'to give his motley collection of serfs, scholars, shepherds, and wealthy scions of nobility a commonsense set of instructions for finding God in the ordinary circumstances of daily life'.

Writing the instructions down not only ensured his wisdom was retained after his death; it provided a sound template that could be exported. This enabled communities characterised by service and hospitality to spread throughout Europe,

which helped promote a new political and spiritual unity. The revolutionary text that made this possible opens with a simple injunction.

Listen.

It's the sixth century equivalent of 'Don't Panic', the advice written in large, friendly letters on the cover of the fictional *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Yet it goes deeper than that. It is more foundational. Not panicking is wise. Listening leads to the very source of wisdom.

It's also something our world desperately needs to cultivate. Old certainties are dying again. Our economic system, like some giant Jenga set, has risen impossibly high under the premise of endless growth and is now wobbling on our finite planet. How do you tweak something like that without bringing it down on your head? How do you play Jenga with the world?

Meanwhile the international order America helped forge after World War II, an elaborate system of trade and alliances that spanned the globe, is unravelling. We are slipping back into the more historically familiar multi-polar world.

In times of flux, which can be soil for new growth, Benedict reminds us that the first step is to listen. Yet have we gotten better at listening in the 15 centuries since he died? Have we cultivated a culture that promotes and privileges listening?

I'm not so sure. Go out into the thrum of a work day and have a look for any bubbles of silence where there is no glowing iPad, clicking blackberry or dull humming mp3 player where listening might grow. Turn on the television and watch our politicians at question time. Or better yet, don't turn off the television at all and see how you listen to those around you.

While you're watching, switch over to ABC 1 on a Monday night for *Q&A*'s self styled 'Adventures in democracy'. Evaluate the panellists and audience not on how well they speak but on how well they listen.

While you do that you could send a tweet. Is there anything more democratic than participation? Yet as I watch those tweets march dutifully across the bottom of the screen, I'm reminded of a study that showed audiences retain less information from news bulletins when updates scroll beneath the screen. Are we inviting people in to speak while showing listeners the door? And are they the same people?

Democracies thrive on a well informed citizenry but that's not necessarily the result of more information. As early as 1971, the Nobel Prize winning polymath Herbert Simon noted, 'What information consumes is rather obvious ... the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.'

A poverty of attention is the enemy of listening. This can be a disaster for our society. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who turned his back on safety in

America to suffer in Nazi occupied Europe, once observed:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them ... those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally no longer even notice it ... The death of the spiritual life starts here.

It's a chilling line. 'And finally no longer even notice it.' Perhaps whole societies can fall into this trap; so eager to be heard, understood and recognised that we don't even realise that we're all shouting at each other, on Facebook, via email, over the phone, across the shopping aisle, at the lights, in our cars.

An interesting thought experiment is to reread the above passage and replace 'the spiritual life' with an institution or social group that you belong to. It could be something large like 'democracy', 'civil society', or 'the Church', or a smaller unit like 'our parish' or 'our branch'. I suspect that whatever you choose it won't do violence to Bonhoeffer's observation. No group can live long without listening.

Benedict understood this. It might seem ephemeral to explore *The Rule of Benedict* and get no further than the first word of the prologue but listening underpins everything else. Even prayer, which is at the pinnacle of monastic life (43:3), begins with an act of listening (Prol. 9—11). Listening is a process, like photosynthesis for a plant, whereby we convert God's will (light) into action (oxygen). 'The Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings.' (Prol. 35)

In a secular sense, listening allows us to first know our fellow citizens, which then opens up the possibility of collective action. It is intrinsic to both Christianity and democracy.

This land has seen what a culture looks like when listening is privileged and cultivated. The concept of *dadirri*, so eloquently expounded by the Indigenous artist, educator and elder Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, has become increasingly well known. However it is worth revisiting in this context.

It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. It is something like what you call 'contemplation'. When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of *dadirri* is listening.

In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened.

For Ungunmerr-Baumann, *dadirri* is 'the gift that Australia is thirsting for'. As I watch the political blood sport that is Australia's border protection policy, drive past cars that buzz like angry hornets on our roads and see my generation toggle endlessly, even compulsively between their iPods and iPhones, I think she's right. We're crying out for some inner deep listening and quiet, still awareness. It would

be a cornerstone moment if this gift was received into the mainstream of Australian society.

I invite you to read the original and unabridged text on *dadirri*. Then in a quiet space sit with the passage, long and patiently. It captures what I have tried to say and much more. As Ungunmerr-Baumann writes 'even if someone close to me has passed away', or for Benedict and for us even if entire worlds are passing away, 'I can find my peace in this silent awareness.'

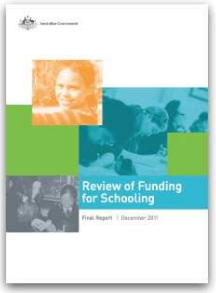
And then follow in the footsteps of Benedict.

Listen.

Rhetoric rules in Gillard Gonski announcement

EDUCATION

Chris Middleton



Saying so doesn't make it so. This was my initial reaction to the Prime Minister's announcement of the Government's formal response to the Gonski Report. I was struck by the prevalence of rhetoric and lack of detail in response to a detailed report that was presented more than eight months ago.

A central thrust of Gonski was that additional funds need to be directed towards students who experience disadvantage. The Government accepts that schools with students who face additional challenges would be entitled to additional funding. New money would be directed to pay for teachers' aides, specialist literacy and numeracy coaches and new resources. There would be continuity and certainty to such funding.

These additional funds and loadings would fund every student identified as being at disadvantage, irrespective of the school the student attends.

It is difficult to disagree with the principle behind this. The how and to what effect will be the critical points.

The question of where the extra money will be found is largely ducked by the Prime Minister. A purported $6.5 billion is to be phased in, from after the next election until 2020. Many commentators argue that this figure is significantly understated, if all promises are to be kept.

State governments provide almost 75 per cent of funding for education, yet rather extraordinarily the PM said 'We will now *start* discussions with state and territory governments, and Catholic and independent schools, over the details of our plan' (emphasis mine).

The credibility of the Prime Minister in announcing a policy response in such a critical area before reaching agreement with the states may also be questioned. Without the states coming on board, and finding their share of the money, the implementation of Gonski is impossible.

This point was illustrated graphically when the Catholic and independent schools sectors were informed by the NSW Government that their funding would be cut significantly from 2013, leading to fee rises of up to $500 per student. State schools were also to suffer undisclosed cuts.

To what extent these cuts, made without any consultation or warning — and after next year's budgets have been determined in many schools, are the result of over-stretched state budgets or are part of the clearing of decks before negotiations commence between state and federal authorities over implementing

Gonski, is uncertain.

True, the projected cuts may not occur, as a firestorm of objections from parents and schools has led to rumours of a backdown (current at the time of writing). But the fact that such a cut in education in Australia's largest state could be seriously contemplated demonstrates the grave concerns about the feasibility of fully funding the Government's response to Gonski.

With regard to non-government schools, we are assured 'Every school would see its funding rise every year'. Yet the modelling mechanism that will determine the funding for each school has not been released; one suspects, because any model that attempts to follow Gonski and honour the Government's promise will not add up.

Modelling attempts by various state governments and the Catholic system show many anomalies. Many schools, including state schools, would lose funds, while some modelling based on the recommendation that every school receive a base grant for each student means The Kings School would get an extra $2 million per annum.

Similarly the mechanism that would reflect the idea 'that the government funding provided to non-government schools would be adjusted based on parents' capacity to contribute' is not detailed. Nor is the rate of the indexation of funding each year. (The educational inflation rate is considerably higher than the inflation rate due to the costs of teachers' salaries and new technology.)

A key assumption underlying the Government's approach is that increased funding equals improved standards. There is no necessary causal relationship between funding and educational outcomes. By the Government's own measure of standards of our relative ranking in world academic testing such as PISA, our results have dropped despite increases in funding over the last ten years.

At the time of Gonski's release, the Grattan Institute launched its report 'Lessons from high-performing systems in East Asia'. It highlighted the success, as measured by international testing, of schools in Shanghai, Korea and Singapore, which the Prime Minister now sets as a goal for Australian schools by 2025. Gonski too highlighted a perceived fall in competitiveness of Australian students as a rationale for challenging the status quo.

Ironically, most of the factors cited in the Grattan report do not relate to the allocation of resources. In the education systems of places such as Korea, Singapore and Shanghai you will find often narrow and high focused curriculums, early streaming of students into vocational and academic streams, parental expectations and a cultural approach to education that is quite distinct from what most Australians might believe in.

Research identifies the single most important measure in lifting student classroom performance as teaching standards. Reflecting this, the Prime Minister

also focused on teacher training and appraisal. Her plan calls for, among other factors, 'higher entry standards — entrants to the teaching profession will be in the top 30 per cent of literacy and numeracy results'.

This is most problematic. There is already a teacher shortage in some areas, and most universities are adamant that it is impossible to train enough teachers if entrants must be from the top 30 per cent. Moreover, it may be that such an arbitrary limit will prevent some fine teachers being recruited — sometimes those who have struggled in their own education prove to be excellent teachers.

Insofar as there is a problem with teacher quality, I suspect it has more to do with industrial restraint than university entry. Achieving appropriate pay of teachers, especially in the years when they are in their prime, and in a way that can discriminate between those who are effective and those who are less so, while respecting the collegiate nature of the profession, is no easy task. It certainly can't occur in an overly rigid bureaucratic system.

Workers' just war on construction bullies

POLITICS

Dustin Halse

Finally, the three-week battle between Grocon and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) that brought parts of Melbourne to a standstill has ended. Union members have suspended industrial action and returned to work after Grocon agreed to commence negotiations.

The battle marks a further deterioration in the decade long feud between Grocon and the union. Played out in public the dispute's latest chapter has been exacerbated by an unedifying and bitter personal exchange between the involved parties.

At the centre of the dispute is the CFMEU's claim that Grocon is denying workers the opportunity to elect their own safety stewards and display union regalia. The Fair Work Act explicitly gives workers the right to elect health and safety representatives.

Union elected safety representatives are well versed in occupational health and safety laws and have the ability to flag safety hazards and organise an immediate walk off.

Many argue that the union's blockade of Grocon sites has nothing to do with safety. A number of conservative pundits have condemned what they perceive to be the insidious tactics of the CFMEU. Opposition leader Tony Abbott and industrial relations spokesman Eric Abetz have blamed the dispute on so-called union 'thuggery'. Apparently, the dark days of 'militants' and 'goons' have returned.

However, the safety concerns of construction workers are not trivial, and to suggest otherwise is vacuous. A detailed assessment of data compiled by Safe Work Australia clearly demonstrates that Australian construction sites are unnecessarily dangerous.

Statistically, one construction worker is killed on the job every week in Australia. Vagaries in the collection method often exclude fatalities caused by exposure to silicas, dusts and solvents. Thousands more are left permanently injured or disabled as a result of workplace incidents.

Australia's safety record compared with other developed nations is embarrassing. In Britain the fatality rate in the construction industry is half of Australia's. Moreover, in most developed nations the fatality rate is trending down. In Australia the trend is up.

Some in the industry are calling attention to this grim reality. Stephen Sasse, a former right hand man at construction giant Leighton Holdings, wonders 'Does it have to be this way? Should we just get used to the idea that it's a tough

industry? Does the needle of our collective moral compass stay steady if we accept the notion that people who work in construction are more than twice as likely to be killed at work than those in other industry sectors?'

Construction workers and the CFMEU are acutely aware of the tragedies that too frequently befall their colleagues. They will not accommodate arrangements that compromise onsite safety. The status of safety representatives speaks to the fundamental rights of workers.

Indeed, the protection of workers' rights is at the heart of this dispute. The Federal Opposition has signalled its intention to rewrite parts of Australia's industrial relations system. Employer groups and business lobbyists are calling for greater 'flexibility' to be returned to the labour market. Accordingly, few political commentators are convinced by Abbott's pledge that Work Choices is 'dead and buried'.

Compounding the animosity is the matter of the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). Daniel Grollo, CEO of Grocon, has twice attempted to impose non-union employment agreements on his workforce. These (failed) attempts served as the political catalyst of the Cole Royal Commission into the construction industry, in the aftermath of which the ABCC was established to police the industry.

Labor scrapped the Howard-era ABCC earlier this year, replacing it with an industry inspectorate within Fair Work Australia. However, during the ABCC's years of operation controversy was never far away. The infamous case of Ark Tribe, a construction worker and unionist prosecuted for refusing to meet with ABCC investigators, was denounced by the CFMEU as a travesty of justice.

The CFMEU was incensed by the investigatory powers afforded to the ABCC. The Australian Council of Trade Unions campaigned to have the ABCC abolished. The ABCC's unilateral ability to impose crippling fines and jail sentences upon construction workers who refused to cooperate was unprecedented. Rarely in Australia's history has there been a more egregious suspension of a group's legal and civil rights.

The Coalition has promised to reintroduce the ABCC if elected. Their enthusiasm to crush the opposition of the CFMEU is near evangelical.

This is the first round in a fierce industrial relations debate to follow. Expect neither side to back down.

September 11 shudder

POETRY

Brian Doyle

Shudder

Just before the first plane hit the north face of the north tower
Between the ninety-third and ninety-ninth floors, a number of
People later reported there was a flickering of power, a brown-
Out, *just for an instant*, as one man said — a sort of shuddering
Through the building. Probably an electric thing, but I wonder
If the tower was flinching. Busy morning, thousands of people,
Surely it was just a surge in the grid. But maybe not, maybe all
The people in the tower at the exact same moment thought did
I *say* that I loved her or just *think* to say it? Did I actually
Leave the newspaper divvied up like he likes it, with the sports
On top, or did I bring it with me? Maybe that's what happened
When the building shivered. Whatever you're sure of, don't be.
Maybe the last thing that happened before they were all melted
Is they grinned with affection and thought hey *I'll* make dinner.
That could be. I know it's his turn but o what the hey why not?

Army man

One morning I shambled out to the car to warm up the old bones
Before the snarling boys came with their huge bristling backpacks
To disgruntle their way to school but there in the dirt at the fringe
Of the lawn was an army man. He hadn't been there before. He'd
Been buried, I think, and the epic rains this winter disinterred him.
You know the army man I mean, the army man we all had as kids.
Why did we all have army men? With their rifles, and standing on
Their surfboards, their helmets pulled down over their staring eyes.
We mowed them down with marbles. We melted them in the oven.
We set them to attack the sea and we cheered when they drowned.

We strapped them to balloons and sent them to burn in mother sun.

We are not as civilized as we think. We still offer meat to old Mars.

We make little totems and let them fight and die for us in the lawn.

We still send our children to die and pretend to mourn as they burn.

We say that we hate wars but we do not hate wars at all in the least.

We have just created many more ways to war. Teams fight wars for

Us now, and toys, and boys, and now girls can be roasted too, isn't

That progress? It is more equitable that both genders can be burned.

We wouldn't want to exclude any genders; that would be primitive.

The varieties of tears: a study in human nature

My daughter, after her boyfriend broke up with her on the final day of high school.

The lady in the elevator at the hospital after she had to pick a wig for her daughter.

The Army major telling me about the teenage boy who was blown up on his eighth

Day in country and two guys about the same age were the ones who had to go find

The bits and make sure there were two legs and two arms and the right boy's head;

You actually had a choice of heads, where we were, he said, and he started sobbing.

The boat battalion sergeant tells a story

One time I was talking to a friend who had been in the war

In the Pacific when he was *just a kid*, his own phraseology;

I was nineteen, he said, fresh out of high school, I was skin

And bones and chasing girls and then suddenly there I was,

In the worst gang fight of all time. I saw terrible things, but

The first time I remember being shocked, really *startled* by

Something I never even imagined I would see, was a Bible

Some Marine had nailed to a rock, with a huge rusted spike.

You got the message, you know, that the Book was useless

Where we were. That really rocked me, I remember. Worse Happened later than *that*, that's for sure — but that was first.

Christian lobbying and politicians' self-interest

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

The Power Index is a sister publication of Crikey. Its purpose is to identify 'who *really* runs Australia'. Last Tuesday its focus was the 'powerful people in religion'.

There was a list of 18 leaders or representatives of faith communities such as the Australian Christian Lobby's Jim Wallace. It created the impression that religious organisations are increasingly spreading the word by lobbying and talking up the ' Christian vote '.

Religious leaders are using their clout and followers to influence the national debate on topics such as same-sex marriage, euthanasia, abortion. ... Religious lobby groups are making noise — and getting results.

The Power Index says churches are increasing their reliance on lobbying because fewer Australians are attending church services. This is obviously part of a more complex scenario that includes the power of the media and popular culture to shape opinion that once would have been influenced by clergy and religious teachers.

While many of the religious groups are lobbying in support of what they perceive to be wholesome causes, the activity of lobbying itself can be far from wholesome. John Warhurst writes in his 2007 book *Behind Closed Doors* about the methods of disgraced Western Australian Labor identity Brian Burke, one of the country's most successful and notorious lobbyists.

His view of human nature ... is that people always have a price. He 'identifies people's self-interest.' He has a pejorative, malign view of humanity. He is 'a very good judge of weak character.' .. [He] 'reads faces like other people read books.'

It's debatable how much the average Canberra lobbyist has in common with Brian Burke in terms of how low they will go in order to secure the support of a politician. But aside from the level of resources at their disposal, it seems that the lower they are prepared to go in manipulating the will of a politician, the more impressive the result is likely to be.

It is challenging for lobbyists attempting to appeal to the 'better angels' of our politicians. That is exactly what, for example, the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce, is doing. Its rival Clubs Australia simply has to remind politicians of the seats their party will lose in the next election if it supports anti-gambling measures such as pre-commitment technology.

Lobbying often involves issues that confront the interests of powerful mining or

business associations. But sometimes important changes can be achieved by small groups with a simple transparent approach to lobbying and a steadfast commitment to their cause. One such 'not so powerful' lobby is Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH).

ACRATH has on its website an inspiring account of its ' Canberra Advocacy Visit 2012 ', which took place last month. It had four requests to make of politicians to improve services for trafficked people in Australia. It urged MPs to support the *Crimes Legislation Amendments (Slavery, Slavery-like Conditions and People Trafficking) Bill 2012.* The bill was passed in the lower house in the delegation's presence, on 21 August, with the work of ACRATH acknowledged in Hansard.

Lobbies such as ACRATH and the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce are doing the right thing by attempting to appeal to the sense of compassion in our politicians. We can only trust in human nature that they will ultimately prevail. Unfortunately other groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby think in terms of the 'Christian vote' and its appeal is to the self-interest of politicians.

What the Conventions didn't tell us about November's US election

POLITICS

Jim McDermott

The United States finished Act One of its quadrennial orgiastic political kabuki last week with the Republican and Democratic National Conventions. Originally these conventions served the function of actually picking the candidates, much as a caucus picks its leader. Today they are instead a ~~total schmozzle~~ means of motivating one's base and making one's case to undecided voters.

If there were ever two candidates that needed the time for these purposes, it might be Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. Each finds himself fighting a war on two fronts; their bases are not fully behind them, and they have significant downsides to overcome with undecideds.

At the RNC, Romney made lots of pitches to family and faith: 'All the laws and legislation in the world will never heal this world like the loving hearts and arms of mothers and fathers.' 'Too many lines like that will put you in a diabetic coma (even in the States), but Romney and vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan rode them hard, appealing to the faith-and-freedom base of the party that has been at best divided about Romney.

Ryan's comment that 'each one of us was born for a reason, bearing the image and likeness of the Lord of life… had people leaping from their seats in exultation like early church Christians to the lions.

From the start of his campaign, Romney has had his eye mostly on the swing voters, avoiding slackjawed 'You Betcha' Tea Party extremism for the image of a wise and sober father. At the convention, he took careful aim at those voters again, confiding the hope and inspiration that 'we all had' when Obama was elected, and following with a left hook to the gut: 'You know there's something wrong with his job as president when the best feeling you have is when you voted for him.'

It's a good political point to make. Of course, it's predicated on ignoring the situation Obama came into as president (a strategy the Coalition in Australia has itself worked to a diamond stud), but no matter.

The brutal political truth is, it's hard to get people to vote for you if their lives seem worse. Nobody cares how challenging it's been for you, or even that you killed Osama bin Laden (a point the Democrats beat so fiercely at the convention they should have worn war paint) if there are no jobs.

What's more, Guantanamo Bay remains open, Obama has overseen a scary (and largely unreported) number of drone strikes in Pakistan, and his attitude of cooperation and compromise has proven largely naÃ¯ve in the grossly partisan

politics of the present day.

Since at least the midterm elections of 2010 Democrats have consoled themselves by saying no one could match the expectations they had for Obama. 'He's just a man.'

And that's true, but also not a great sales pitch. The crowds at the convention loved him; the framework he gave to the election — individualism or community, the politics of hope or the politics of power and fear — well captures the choice people will make in this election.

But his policy platform amounted to, 'Just have faith; we've got some great things planned.' It works if you're Willy Wonka, or your first four years have proven to be a great success; but when things seem still on the knife's edge, it's actually a little galling.

The greatest major speech from either convention came from Bill Clinton — an amazing accomplishment given that he spent most of it explaining policy. Clinton is our Paul Keating; there really is no one else out there, including Obama, who has his ability to explain policy in a way that is clear and compelling.

Also notable is kindly Sr Simone Campbell, one of the ' Nuns on the Bus ', a group of American sisters who went on a 2700 mile bus trip to stand up for struggling families against Paul Ryan's slash-and-burn(-the-poor) budget proposal.

Sr Campbell spoke of the need for continued aid for the needy and universal health care, declaring this is 'part of my pro-life stance and the right thing to do', to thunderous applause from the DNC. 'We care for the 100%, and that is what will secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and to our nation.' Given the climate in which American nuns find themselves, it's a speech that would make St Mary MacKillop proud.

Stepping back, what does any of this tell us about the election in November? Probably very little. There's still two months of this ~~nonsense nightmare ridiculous and appalling waste of money and Clint Eastwood jokes~~ campaign before the actual election. If the RNC is any indication, Romney still has trouble with his base; in the first 25 minutes of his talk his punch lines sometimes echoed in silence. And for undecided voters the jihad-extremism of the Republican Party makes Romney seem a Manchurian candidate, the soft sell that helps the loonies take over the asylum.

But the economy of the United States remains weak, and Obama a bit detached. At the end of his speech I could have sworn he looked bored. For the entirety of his presidency, he has shown a strange, Hamlet-like tendency to wait until it's almost too late to fight back. That approach didn't serve Hamlet terribly well; and it's not serving the US well, either.