EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

5 October 2012 Volume: 22 Issue: 19

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

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

PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

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

EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.
Volume 22 Issue: 19
5 October 2012

Negotiating Catholic healthcare moral dilemmas

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

On 8 August, Tanya Plibersek, the Commonwealth Minister for Health, assisted with turning the first sod for the construction of the Midland Health Campus on the outskirts of Perth.

It will include a 307 bed public hospital and a 60 bed private hospital to be run by St John of God Health which has a proud tradition of running first rate Catholic private hospitals. This, their first public hospital venture, 'will help meet the rapidly growing need for additional health and hospital services in eastern Perth', said Plibersek.

'For the first time, people from Midland and the surrounding area will have access to chemotherapy, high dependency care and coronary care and children will be able to be treated in a dedicated pediatric ward.'

Not everyone was overjoyed. Members from United Voice and the Health Services Union joined protesters opposed to government vesting the management of a public hospital in private hands. Carolyn Smith, acting secretary of United Voice, said, 'We don't oppose the Church running hospitals. We don't oppose St John of God running hospitals; they do a great job. But we don't think they should be running public hospitals.'

The protestors claim the public will suffer because some citizens, not sharing the Catholic view on some moral questions, want access to services such as abortion and sterilisation. They say a public hospital should offer the full suite of services, and not omit particular services simply because of the religious beliefs of the managers.

But no public hospital offers the full suite of all possible medical services. If abortions and sterilisations can be provided at other convenient locations, a Catholic provider should not be forced to provide these services which they believe to be morally questionable.

Two weeks later, Plibersek accompanied Prime Minister Gillard to the opening of the Kinghorn Cancer Centre within the St Vincent's Precinct at Darlinghurst, Sydney, which includes St Vincent's Public Hospital which has offered medical services (but not abortions or sterilisations) to the public for over 150 years.

The Kinghorn is a fabulous, state of the art facility, highlighting the benefits of medical and research facilities being provided not just by government health departments.

Julie Soon, a young survivor of leukaemia who received treatment at St Vincent's, said her 'cancer journey was long, dark and very lonely'. 'Therapies such as meditation and speaking with a social worker helped me cope with the roller coaster ride. With my recovery being a lot smoother than for most, I cannot fathom how much harder it would be to cope for the vast number of cancer patients who are not as fortunate as I was.'

To be able to provide a holistic service to patients aspiring to the healing mission of Christ is part of the vision of Catholic healthcare. The nation would be the poorer if this Catholic vision were confined only to those who could afford private health insurance.

The Church's moral teachings provide Catholic health providers with some acute pastoral challenges. Especially with emerging technologies, not all issues are clear cut. Christian charity, pastoral solicitude and respect for a patient's own ethical concerns are usually

enough, but not always.

Last month, the Melbourne *Herald Sun* carried a front page headline: 'Best Friends' Baby Miracle ... and Why a Top Hospital Said No to the Birth'.

Three years ago, doctors at St Vincent's Private in Melbourne saved the life of Melissa Humann when she gave birth to her first child. Unable to carry a second child, Melissa accepted the offer of her friend Tracey Osborn who said she would carry to birth the child conceived by Melissa and husband Craig. Tracey, a mother of three, got the agreement of her husband Andrew, and the surrogacy arrangement was put in place.

Both Melissa and Tracey had appreciated previous hospitalisation at St Vincent's and would have liked the birth to occur there. The treating obstetrician would usually have arranged the birth at St Vincent's.

But with five months notice before the planned delivery, the hospital authorities consulted a Catholic bioethicist and advised that there were moral issues at stake which precluded the hospital from providing its services for a surrogate birth. A booking was made at the Freemasons Hospital nearby.

Three months after the birth of the baby, Tracey and Melissa went public with the story of their happy surrogacy arrangement, which appears to have brought joy to all parties, without undue complications.

Catholic Health Australia has engaged a panel of ethicists to advise on surrogacy, and expects to reach a position next month. Some of the public may well be upset by this delay. But it is good that time be taken to consider the appropriate course of action. Not every surrogacy arrangement will be as free from emotional and moral complexity as the arrangement between Melissa and Tracey.

Some commentators argue that the Church does not inquire into how conception has occurred, so why should it be worried about surrogacy. While Catholic facilities do not provide IVF services, they do provide birthing services for women regardless of their marital status or mode of conception.

Surrogacy raises extra issues, including appropriate pastoral care for both mothers and their families, and formal cooperation in the surrogacy procedure, including surrender of the child from birth mother to biological mother.

As Martin Day, CEO of St Vincent's Private, insisted, 'Conception is strictly a private matter between parents, not the hospital. We do not know if assisted conception has been used. Surrogacy is different as strict statutory rules must be followed so the hospital does know.' The hospital not only knows, it is intimately involved.

The nation is the better for policies and funding arrangements that encourage public and private providers of healthcare, including the Churches. The public may need to be patient with Church authorities as they discern appropriate moral responses to new technologies. This is a small price to pay for creative diversity which delivers healthcare of the highest standard with a special character cherished by many citizens, not just Catholics.

Drunk tweeting and other social media pitfalls

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

The private funeral of Jill Meagher will be held today in Melbourne, and there will also be a memorial service in her hometown of Drogheda in Ireland. Events over the last week or so surrounding her tragic death have highlighted the positive and negative sides of social media.

In a media conference last Friday her husband, Tom Meagher, made a plea that people stop posting comments about the man who had just made his first court appearance for allegedly raping then murdering her. Meagher said the negative online commentary might affect legal proceedings against the accused.

This was followed on Sunday by a huge procession along Sydney Road, Brunswick, north of Melbourne, the scene of Jill Meagher's disappearance, which saw 30,000 mourners from all parts of the city come to pay their respects and protest against the brutal crime. The procession was organised on social media.

The woman featured in this week's video argues that the benefits of social media outweigh the downside, but she is well aware of the dangers and pitfalls. Veteran journalist and academic Julie Posetti has almost completed her PhD on how social media, in particular Twitter, are transforming the values and practice of journalism.

As well as an interview with her, the video features excerpts from a keynote presentation she gave at the recent Australian Catholic Media Congress in Sydney, entitled 'Citizen journalism: the Twitterisation of journalism'.

As well as stints in various commercial media, and as a reporter on ABC TV, Posetti worked with the flagship ABC Radio current affairs programs *AM*, *PM* and the *World Today*. In 1997 she was posted to the Canberra Press Gallery as political correspondent for these programs.

In writing about her journalistic career, and only latterly taking to social media, she has described herself as a 'digital immigrant but a journalism native'.

A key driver for Posetti is a commitment to social justice, and a belief that good journalism can help create a better and fairer society. Her reporting has focused on social justice including Aboriginal affairs, ethnic and multicultural issues, and the plight of refugees and asylum seekers.

While still practising as a journalist, in 2003 she moved into academia and now lectures in radio and television journalism at the University of Canberra. While working on her PhD, she is also continuing research into multicultural journalism, talk radio and public broadcasting.

Posetti has a strong presence in various social media. She is prolific on Facebook and Twitter , and has her own blog called j-scribe . On the banner of j-scribe she describes herself as a 'journalist/academic/furious citizen'.

Economic empire's unethical end

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Arbitrage* (MA). Director: Nicholas Jarecki. Starring: Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon, Brit Marling. 107 minutes**

'High finance, low ethics' was one reviewer's succinct summation of the plot of the new financial-world thriller *Arbitrage*. In fact 'distorted' or 'misaligned' ethics might be more appropriate.

In many ways its beleaguered antihero, hedge fund magnate Robert Miller (Gere) acts from a strong sense of obligation to others in his life; his family, employees and shareholders. But there are numerous other individuals who prove to be merely collateral damage, falling along the way in Robert's murky moral margins.

Robert has built an empire, that his adoring chip-off-the-block daughter Brooke (Marling) is set to assume when he retires. But unknown to Brooke or Robert's longsuffering 'good wife' Ellen (Sarandon), the empire is about to be sucked into the mire by a bad investment, leaving behind nothing but dead dreams and empty pockets.

He has a potential buyer lined up for the company. The trick will be to offload it as quickly as possible, before the purchaser realises that anything is amiss, and the price plummets. It will take some shady wheeling and dealing on Robert's part to prevent himself, his family, employees and shareholders from being left with nothing.

But Robert's practical obligations to those for whom he is immediately responsible usurp his human obligations to those who become pawns in his efforts to maintain an orderly facade. The situation is exacerbated when an accident — stemming from a personal indiscretion and tragic for someone who trusted him (to say more than that would be to ruin the biggest of the film's many plot twists) — pushes him to take extreme measures.

Writer-director Jarecki's debut feature film is a thriller of great composure, sharply topical in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, and anchored by an impeccably controlled performance by Gere, who easily synchronises the various aspects of Robert's character: the warm family man, calculating businessman, cunning criminal.

Robert is clearly the villain of the piece, yet we are engrossed by his ordeal, and eager to know whether he will get away with it. We can worry later about the justice or otherwise of the outcome. In fact there are enough nuances to Jarecki's screenplay and Gere's performance that this question could be debated at length.

The character and his plight bear comparison to that of Walter White, of television's *Breaking Bad*. Walt (Bryan Cranston) is a former high school chemistry teacher who, after a diagnosis of terminal cancer, turns to cooking methamphetamine as a way to earn enough money to provide for his family once he has died.

Like Walt, Robert compromises his ethics for the sake of his family because he thinks he is on borrowed time. But like Walt, he learns that compromise breeds corruption, and that once ethics have become misaligned, 'being bad in order to achieve good' leaves the door open to also serving pride and self-interest.

The question Robert must ultimately answer is whether he is willing to sacrifice his own wellbeing for the sake of others', or if self-interest will prevail. Only if it is the former can he

make any true claim to ethics.

Same sex marriage and the republic

POLITICS

John Warhurst

Same sex marriage has now been defeated in the Tasmanian Upper House as well as in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Will the issue now fade away or is ultimate success for the same sex marriage cause inevitable? The political commentator, Paul Kelly, discussed this question in *The Australia* recently and forecast what he calls a lengthy cultural conflict. In doing so he drew several comparisons with the republic question, but he neglected important differences between their politics.

The defining characteristic of the same sex marriage debate in Australian politics is that it has a big international dimension. It is this characteristic that will probably ensure its political longevity. There are more important political arenas, including the United Kingdom and the United States, than Australia for this debate.

If same sex marriage continues to gain momentum around the Western world then the Australian debate will not go away. If much of the West adopts same sex marriage then the pressure on Australia to do so will eventually be great. But should international interest fade away then it probably will in Australia too.

Whatever the future of republic-monarchy debates in Australia they are not of the same international character and therefore are quite different from same sex marriage. There are a number of Commonwealth countries seriously considering the move to a republic from the monarchy, including Jamaica, but Australia's international comparators are really only Canada and New Zealand. Effectively it is a stand-alone domestic issue.

A second important difference lies in a factor that Kelly did recognise, which is that same sex marriage is also very much a state and territory issue. The ACT has shown this for some time and several states are currently debating the question. This will continue. Importantly this means that within Australia there are multiple parliamentary avenues for advocates to pursue the same sex marriage cause.

This has not been the case with the republic question, which is about national constitutional reform. Certainly the states play a role, as they are constitutional monarchies too, but the state parliaments have never been major arenas for monarchy-republic debates.

This difference gives same sex marriage advocates a big advantage over republicans as they have many more real avenues to take. These avenues can be used for building momentum and ultimately for achieving national-level success. Together with the international character of the issue it means that same sex marriage can be debated at multiple levels: international, national and state.

A closer political parallel with same sex marriage is the euthanasia question, which also has state, national and international elements.

However, the international momentum for euthanasia is much weaker and doesn't feed into domestic Australian debates in the same way. Euthanasia is a fringe issue, though it has advocates in each state and territory. It has already had one major national parliamentary debate in 1996—97 on the back of Northern Territory legislation. The Federal Parliament overrode the NT legislation on that occasion.

Finally, at the moment, same sex marriage is not yet a constitutional issue like the republic. Constitutional issues have their own politics, most notably, the demanding referendum process. There are some calls for a referendum on same sex marriage but if one were to occur now it would not be a binding constitutional referendum, under the provisions of s.128, but a plebiscite.

It may become a constitutional issue if a state parliament introduced same sex marriage and the legislation was challenged on constitutional grounds in the High Court, and the challenge upheld. At that stage the politics would enter a new era and success would be harder for its advocates to achieve.

Continuing momentum internationally, in terms of pro same sex marriage legislation passed in some other countries, would make its achievement in Australia more likely. The same would be true if one or more Australian states were able to pass legislation which survived constitutional challenge.

Conservative arguments in favour of gay marriage

POLITICS

Dustin Halse

Cory Bernadi's recent speech in the Senate linking homosexuality to bestiality illustrated how inverted and confused politics in Australia has become.

Bernadi and other so called common sense conservatives contend that amending the marriage act to allow gay couples to marry is a case of extreme left-wing politics. As if gay marriage is a radical and abstract liberal idea.

In fact, conservatism and gay marriage are no longer irreconcilable. Indeed the most persuasive arguments in favour of gay marriage are distinctly conservative.

The most cogent argument is based upon facts. Studies in psychiatry and neuro-psychology have for decades demonstrated that an individual's sexual orientation is not a matter of choice. Those who contend otherwise have a narrow understanding of the established science.

Pragmatism and established facts have never bothered conservatives. Facts are the domain of realists and help demolish loosely constructed theoretical ideas. In light of the facts the millennia old idea that marriage must solely be a heterosexual phenomenon collapses.

Second, those who take exception to perceived aspects of gay life should welcome the institution of gay marriage. Wouldn't the alleged promiscuity inherent within the gay community benefit from the edifying influence of marriage? Of course it is spurious to claim that gay couples do not equally value fidelity. At a time when heterosexuals are increasingly spurning commitment, here is a group that is championing the institution of marriage. Perhaps gay couples might even coax straight couples back on to the marital path?

Third, people choose marriage for a wide range of reasons, not just to start a family. In affluent societies young married couples are increasingly eschewing large families and instead focusing on advancing their careers. Others choose to not have children at all. We do not revoke the marriage certificates of those who decide not to be parents, or those who are unable to have children.

Fourth, the children's rights argument is weak and particularly misleading. The parental debate should not automatically be attached to the marriage debate. Yet it is important to note that our society legally acknowledges the parental status of gay couples that already have children. What is the benefit of preventing these couples from marrying?

Fifth, the attempt by some conservatives to apply religious tenets to the debate has become tedious. Theological suppositions founded upon a literal reading of ancient texts can be problematic. Christian conservatives often cite Leviticus chapter 18 verse 22 which labels homosexuality 'detestable'.

Yet most overlook other biblical extremes. Never once have I heard a pastor instruct parishioners against wearing wool and linen fabrics in one garment (Leviticus chapter 19 verse 19), or sign off on a father's intention to sell his daughter into slavery (Exodus chapter 21 verse 7).

Such verses clearly reflect the wisdom of a very different era. Writing in *Eureka Street*, University of Melbourne Theologian Professor Andrew McGowan argued that Christians need

to overcome the myth of the immediacy , which suggests that one can judge biblical authors as though they had our own sensibilities.

Sixth, the semantic argument misses the point entirely. Some protest that marriage by definition is between a man and a woman. But surely there is more depth to this debate than a desire to ward off singular distortions of the English language? One wonders whether Sarah Palin's invention of the term 'refudiate' (an amalgamation of refute and repudiate) stirs similar passions.

Finally, what characterises the conservative disposition is a dogged commitment to realism. Conservatism is not opposed to reform; it is a prudent political philosophy that refuses to gamble current benefits for uncertain future outcomes. The intellectual giant of conservatism Edmund Burke warned against what he termed 'abstract principles', believing that society must evolve organically.

Polling data has for years confirmed that a majority of Australians support the legalisation of gay marriage. Our society has been debating the merits of gay marriage since the 1970s. Attitudes towards homosexuality have changed and the public now believes same sex couples are worthy, that they can fulfil the fundamental purpose of marriage. Such reasoning is Aristotelian, not liberal.

True conservatives have always accepted what is irreversible. The Bernadis of the this world should stop and consider the principal works of conservative philosophy. Opposing gay marriage is now conspicuously unconservative.

A day in the life of a nun

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

My grannies despaired when, long ago, I strayed from Nonconformity into Greek Orthodoxy, and I fancy the august ancestors still have occasion to eye me beadily from above; I even imagine their semaphore signals.

'What do you think she's up to now, Doris?'

'Search me, Harriet. Focus that telescope. And let me know.'

The latest episode involved Monastic Retreat, which a friend and I resolved to undertake together: it was capable Marjory who found the person to contact and petition the Bishop. His Eminence declared that we had to consult the convent's priest: a kind of ecclesiastical security clearance.

We found the *papas* at his other scene of operations, the church of St John the Theologian, a tiny place perched on a hill in the middle of the Taygetus Range. The locals had gathered to venerate their icon of St Mary Magdalene, bearer of myrrh, Apostle to the Apostles, whose Feast Day it was. The Saint, swathed in bright summer flowers, gazed serenely from her outside stand.

Inside, Papasotiris, resplendent in red and gold, was reciting the liturgy *basso profundo*, assisted by a layman great of girth and beard, who looked more like a Barbary pirate than a churchgoer: one could imagine a cutlass clamped between his teeth. Another basso was singing the responses and training a talented boy of about 12, bespectacled and very earnest, who was showing extreme dedication, for chanting Byzantine psalms is like learning a demanding foreign language.

Marjory and I waited our turn to speak to the priest at the end of the service. Although we had been promised two nights at the designated convent, Papasotiris took one look at us and decided, we thought, that the frail foreign vessels would not be able to cope. *Oxi*, he said, firmly, and went on to describe the multiple difficulties of the monastic life. But, he said, we could go for a day, as long as we went by arrangement, and could be there for the liturgy, which would start at 7am.

We were to dress as modestly as possible; we should also be aware that the nuns maintained silence for part of the day. We nodded and agreed, like obedient children.

Greeks believe in balance, so that after spiritual needs, bodily ones are always attended to. The groaning board is a feature of such occasions, and so there we were, high up in the mountains, eating multiple souvlakia with heaps of salad and baked potatoes, and drinking beer, all before 11am.

Suddenly I felt two pairs of eyes boring into my back. I swear. And could imagine the signals.

'She's drinking, Doris!'

'Not for the first time, Harriet, but we knew that.'

'What's next, then?'

'Another adventure, I suppose. She will persist in having them, won't she?

'But sit tight, Harriet: we might learn something.'

*****

They might have learned something, the grannies: I certainly did.

Being at the Dimiova convent at 7am meant getting up at 5am; we managed it, and set off through ravishing landscape and along a road that in itself was a test of faith. On arrival we presented our offerings of watermelon, grapes, loukoumi (unacceptably translated as Turkish Delight), bottled water, and assorted biscuits. The austere nun who greeted us soon became like a quietly excited child as she investigated the various bags.

Greeks do not seem to go in for the convention of spiritual directors, and so we simply observed the routine, while learning something about the history of the convent and its miracle-working icon of the Panagia, thought to date from either the seventh or eighth century. The icon, painted in the Glykophyloussa or Mother of God of Tenderness style, with the Virgin cradling her son in golden-gloved arms, has a wide dark stain on almost half its face. During the iconoclastic era this Constantinople Panagia had bled when slashed by a knife. But the son rescued his mother, and so the icon eventually reached Greece.

The church dates from 1700, but the convent itself has a history of destruction and catastrophe at the hands of invaders like the Franks and the Turks. Then there was the severe earthquake of 1986, and my firefighter son was among several units that saved the establishment from the 2007s fires. Places have stories to tell.

Our lives are stories, too, and indeed Canadian Margaret Atwood maintains that God is an author: if so, he wrote a riveting narrative line for the Abbess. During the last war, the then Bishop was responsible for the many orphans in the town. He solved the problem by placing the little waifs and strays, of whom the Abbess was one, under a certain plane tree. Anybody was free to choose one or more children to rear. And so the Abbess was taken to the convent at the age of about two, so young that she did not know her name. Because she was rescued on a Sunday, she was named Kyriaki (after Our Lord) and Platonopoulou (daughter of the plane tree).

There are now only two nuns in buildings designed to hold 100. Sister Christina took her vows at 20. When I asked the reason, she gave me a penetrating look and said simply, 'The Panagia called me.' Marjory mentioned the loneliness, and the outside world. 'Why would we be lonely?' asked Sister Christina in genuine bewilderment, while Abbess Kyriaki announced emphatically that she would rather someone plunged a dagger in her heart than be forced to leave Dimiova. The canary believes the cage is good and beautiful, Papasotiris, formerly a businessman, remarked, ambiguously.

While Patrick White wrote that all lives are lived in the cage, the monastic cage is not one I could ever cope with. But retreating from the world for even a day made me examine my own story, with its various plots and leitmotifs. And I like to think the grannies, suspending their disbelief and engaging in distance learning, have been reading along with me.

Australia's pension fund perversion

ECONOMICS

David James

The demise of Gunns, Tasmania's biggest paper and pulp mill, has been greeted as a triumph of environmentalists over business. The saga encompasses much more than that. It poses some deep questions about ownership and accountability in Australia's financial system which are yet to be answered persuasively.

One of the intriguing aspects of the campaign against Gunns is that it was not just waged against the managers of the company and the board. Pressure was also brought to bear on the fund managers who were investing superannuants' money to fund the company. The tactic is unusual. There have been some instances when lobbyists have targeted the funds industry — the failed campaign to stop Campbell Soup from taking over Arnotts in 1997 was one instance — but for the most part it is rare.

This is surprising, because when managers and directors of public companies say they are 'answerable to shareholders' they usually mean they are answerable to the fund managers who invest on superannuants' behalf. Australia's superannuation savings are about $1.4 trillion, more than the value of the Australian stock market. This means that the largest blocks of capital are in the hands of those who administer the superannuation funds.

Speaking on ABC Radio, Alec Marr, general manager of Triabunna Investments, which owns Tasmania's largest pulp mill, and former executive director of the Wilderness Society, was scathing of the investment community.

The bulk of this money came from people's superannuation funds handed over by imbeciles in the investment community. I say that calculatedly because I and others sat down in front of the CEOs and argued with their fund managers that they should not pour hundreds of millions of dollars of other people's money into this company, and they did it anyway. And despite repeated massive losses they just kept pouring money in. It was just crazy.

The fund managers to which Marr refers could no doubt defend their decisions by saying that it is impossible to predict the future with total certainty. They would have a point — it is easy to highlight failure after the fact. But Marr is drawing attention to a vexed issue in Australia's financial structures. The workers literally own much of Australia's industry base. Trouble is, they have next to no say in how that ownership is applied.

A glance at figures from the Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority exemplifies the point. Australia's richest person, and for a time the world's richest woman, Gina Rinehart, is the only individual whose personal wealth can compete with the superannuation funds. Rinehart's wealth is somewhere between $20—30 billion, depending on the iron ore price. The top three superannuation funds control well over $100 billion. The other billionaires in Australia, whose individual net wealth is less than half Rinehart's, are minnows by comparison.

Management writer Peter Drucker described this phenomenon as 'pension fund socialism', and it does have a slightly Marxist flavour: the workers owning the means of production, as it were. Australia is well down this quasi-socialist path; it has the third largest pool of superannuation capital in the world.

According to the research firm International Financial Services, pension funds globally manage more than $US25 trillion, which puts Australia's superannuation fund pool at about 5 per cent of the global total. Australia's superannuation is about one third of the size of the world's sovereign wealth funds.

The problem, as Marr implied, is that the true owners — the workers who contribute a portion of their wages each week into superannuation — have little power over what happens to their money. Unless, that is, they establish their own self managed super fund.

The result is often perverse. Ownership, and therefore wealth, may be distributed widely, but it has tended to lead to the creation of an unaccountable elite: senior managers and boards of public companies and fund managers in superannuation funds, whose activities remain largely hidden. This, too, has a slightly Marxist flavour, an elite that professes to be accountable to a community of owners, yet which acts mostly for itself.

The conundrum is known in management circles as the agency problem. How can structures be created to make the agents (managers) accountable to the owners (shareholders)? Adam Smith famously described it in *The Wealth of Nations*:

The directors of such [joint-stock] companies, however, being the managers rather of other people's money than of their own, it cannot well be expected, that they should watch over it with the same anxious vigilance with which the partners in a private copartnery frequently watch over their own ... Negligence and profusion ... must always prevail, more or less, in the management of the affairs of such a company.

Smith was gloriously incorrect about the joint stock company; it became the cornerstone of capitalism. But his observation that those who watch over other people's money tend to be less vigilant than they are with their own money remains perspicacious.

It is an intractable problem that cannot be solved with financial trickery, such as giving executives bonuses (which are designed to make them owners as well as agents). The recklessness of senior management in the lead up to the global financial crisis was clear enough evidence that such innovation with incentives easily creates the exact opposite result to that intended.

In the final analysis it is a question of character. How much consideration do those who administer money or companies that they do not own, have for those who entrust them (wittingly or unwittingly) with their money?

No amount of tampering with executive reward systems can substitute for simple prudence and responsibility. Not least because incentive trickery (bonuses and the like) makes the gloomy assumption that managers and directors will only ever act in their own selfish interest, so it is necessary to exploit such selfishness to get a good result for the owners.

In 2008, an ashen faced Alan Greenspan, former head of the US Federal Reserve, acknowledged to Congress that the GFC demonstrated that the 'self-interest-as-greater-good' model was hopelessly flawed. All it produced was, well, selfishness. Something better is required, especially when it involves other people's money.

As the Gunns saga has demonstrated, finding better ways to hold financiers to account is an imperative in the Australian financial system.

Political shoe (for Julia Gillard)

POETRY

P. S. Cottier

The political shoe and the imaginary

For Julia Gillard

When I said, My foot slippeth; thy mercy, O Lord, held me up. In the multitude of my thoughts within me thy comforts delight my soul. Psalm 94

The political shoe is thrown at a duck-head,
banged like a sole-mallet on the table,
or simply slips off a dragging foot,
a snake skin from an oh-so-tired snake,
who finds itself grown a little too big
and seeks a less insecure self,
like an idea that has been sequestered
just a short two centuries too long.
The imaginary shoe fits Cinderella
like a second vulva, never shattering,
fits Pussy-Cats like certainty,
and take long league strides
over peasants and amazed cattle,
or dances and dances, until the bad girl's
red legs are chopped off, stumped,
by the same woodcutter who freed the wolf.

Corners and angles

Sideways glancing, I always liked misplaced things.
The workers' entrances, the back-stair wag's tales.
The Trotskyists and the Jesuits, the leprechaun's
inexplicable one shoe, repaired for who knows
what weird tap-dancing sailor, waving albatrosses
like flirty boas of jazz. Some would-be statues
gaze nobly into middle distance, past percussive
pigeons spurting white scorn. Others see nothing at all,
exploring only knobbly inside of over-weighted head,
muttering toxic monologues like rancid spread.

Sometimes I recognise those sweeping crevices
with scuttling glance, finding the ear-less slipped ear-ring,
or a banana blackened into smelly comma, cicada skins,
toffee wrappers and well-worn fragments of quirk.
Our eyes meet momentarily, then slip away,
to corners and angles and chords of discard.

Albanian bowels

Travelling between our South of South
and Europe's sprinkled dust of nation,
we had the two seats next to an Albanian.
He never moved. We climbed over him, pesky,
tree kangaroos grappling with marble gum.
Easter Island Albanian didn't shift.
Was he stopped up with drugged punctuation?
Or is Albania the natural home of iron bladders
and granite bowels? I cannot say, but at
Charles de Gaulle we left him, unmoved still.
On reflection, I sometimes dearly wish
for a temper more self-contained and sweet,
and an Albanian's gruff, set-in-concrete, seat.

Strong language

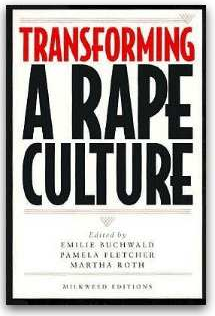
works out. See how he lifts
sentences into the air,
and plonks them down
with a metallic crash?
Strong wears a hoodie
even at the gym
(he is at the gym most days).
Those four letter words!
He grunts and tucks
and aspirates.
Strong is hungry for love
but can't quite get the word out.
The l strokes his tongue

like a lozenge of sweet,
but the word he produces
is a tucked bit, and blunt.
Poor Strong! Half-cocked,
orphaned and alone.

Fifty shades of rape culture

COMMUNITY

Moira Byrne Garton



The rape and murder of a Melbourne woman last week was a psychological jolt to the public who had hoped and prayed for her safety. Yet my conversations with other women about the crime include the admission that we too may have risked the short walk from the pub to home in the small hours of the morning.

Very few men would see it as a risk, and in an ideal community it should not be a gamble for women either. So it is not that helpful when commentators counsel women to walk or travel late at night only with company (though a more appropriate recommendation might be that all people travel with company at night).

Some scholars argue that this kind of instruction is an indicator that we exist in a 'rape culture'. As Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth describe it , rape culture is 'a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women':

It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape ... A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm.

It is only when sexual harassment or assault is perpetrated on a man, by a man, that most men sympathise with a common experience of many females: the menace of a gaze that loiters or a hazardous tone of voice; the constant awareness of the ways in which one's voice, words, walk or gestures can be interpreted; the knowledge that some males consider their impulses to be uncontrollable.

Few men understand this 'continuum of threatened violence' that innumerable women encounter with distressing regularity. Many women I know have experienced harassment or threats, if not sexual assault, molestation or rape at some point in their life. But few have taken action.

Women who do not tolerate at least the narrow end of the wedge of threatened violence are seen to be lacking a sense of humour, oversensitive or uncooperative, which in educational settings or the workplace can have material as well as emotional and psychological repercussions.

This enables perpetrators to psychologically push the envelope, breeding detachment, muting humanity and silencing conscience, rendering power over women not only acceptable but intrinsic to cultural interplay and apparently fulfilling the indicators of a 'rape culture.'

Such a culture is emboldened by bad fiction marketed as erotica for women , where a female protagonist submits physically, emotionally, sexually and financially to the control and abuse of the male 'hero'. It is boosted by 'celebrities' who see sexually suggestive or offensive remarks as compliments or insults. It is bolstered when reports of sexual assaults by sportspeople or military personnel are dismissed or ignored. It is buttressed by famous actors declaring that it is a woman's fault if she is raped if she wears a certain dress.

In fact, years ago, an older woman told me that women should not dress with a skirt

above the knee because it is likely to provide a sexual temptation for men. In hindsight, I wish I'd pointed out that the figure-hugging long dress she wore would not be acceptable in some cultures for the same reason. With sexual violence and rape in mind, potentially every female image becomes provocative.

I suspect this view underpinned the internet meme circulating a couple of years ago which celebrated feminism because 'Society teaches *Don't Get Raped* rather than *Don't Rape*'. In researching it further, I was drawn to an article quoting a sexual assault counsellor who challenged victims to not wonder 'if I hadn't ...' but who instead encouraged society to notice the attacker's choice to take advantage of someone vulnerable.

The rape culture paradigm is disputed. Yet even accepting the premise of its pervasion in our society, there is hope for cultural transformation. Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth note that while a rape culture assumes sexual violence as 'inevitable', it is 'neither biologically nor divinely ordained'. They reassure readers that 'Much of what we accept as inevitable is in fact the expression of values and attitudes that can change.'

Families only a means to an end

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

This year's Australian Catholic Bishops Social Justice Statement focuses on the family. It is put into useful perspective by the publication the Bishops' Pastoral Research Office September *E-News Bulletin* headlining the 2011 Census statistic that only 50 per cent of Catholics aged 15 and over are married.

The often talked about nexus between marriage, the family, and the Catholic Church makes this seem an extraordinary figure. If marriage and the family are so important in Catholic teaching, are we talking about a 50 per cent failure rate?

No. Family life is often thought to be the norm, but that is not correct. It holds no value in itself but it is an often fruitful means to a morally good life. Many mature age 'devout' Catholics who find themselves single and without families have been conditioned by their upbringing to write themselves off as failures. But their marital status, or how many children they have, is not the measure of success or failure.

The standard by which individuals should instead judge themselves is the norm of *a life of self-giving.* The Social Justice Statement stresses this, and quotes Pope John Paul II: 'Self-giving ... is the model and the norm'. The family, of course, is a good situation in which to live such a good and virtuous life. John Paul II calls it 'the first and fundamental school of social living'.

But it remains a school, and it is only one means to the end referred to. There are other 'schools' for those who do not marry or have families. Examples include voluntary work, single-minded dedication to a profession, or caring for ageing parents. Perhaps the family could be considered the 'default' unit in our society, but it is not the norm in the sense that those living outside a family are considered abnormal.

If family is simply one means among many of living a good life, why do the Bishops, and indeed governments, go to so much trouble to support the family?

The answer is that it has traditionally been the single most powerful vehicle for social inclusion and, for the Church, faith formation and fostering a life of self-giving. Those who do not live in functional families are much more likely to end up on the margins of society.

At a time of rapid social change, the family is under threat but there is no replacement model on the horizon.

The Social Justice Statement is subtitled 'The social and economic challenges facing families today', and much of its content is devoted to spelling out perceived threats to the family such as the trend towards casual rather than permanent employment. There are many others. Similarly, governments have given preferential treatment to families in its distribution of tax cuts and carbon tax compensation.

The problem is that governments can go too far and usurp the role of families with paternalistic policies, such as those involving welfare for Indigenous Australians. Such policies break families as Indigenous families were broken by government policy in the era of the Stolen Generations.

For all the good it does, the Church can also unintentionally break families when it demands conformity to teachings that run counter to generally accepted norms of society.

Racist massacre in the Dominican pigmentocracy

POLITICS

Jeremy Tarbox

An Australian-issued drivers license specifies your driving conditions, like wearing glasses and the vehicle classification permitted. A USA license will specify your gender, height, weight, eye and hair colour, as it doubles as an ID.

And in the Dominican Republic, the state will also classify your skin colour: white (blanco), light indigenous (indio claro), dark indigenous (indio oscuro), almost black (moreno) or black (negro).

Since Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship in the DR, skin colour has been used to define the nation against 'the other'; its only border is with Haiti, whose rural poor are 'black' and speak creole not Spanish. That means the first four skin colour categories are for Dominicans ... and the last likely means society will brand you as Haitian.

Perhaps no 'nation' is more imagined than the Dominican: two of the categories refer to indigenous Tainos who had died out — or been killed off — within 30 years of 'The Discovery' of the Americas by Columbus in 1492.

However, the terms were reintroduced and European immigration and eugenics encouraged during Trujillo's repressive regime to 'create' a predominantly mulatto people, superior to their 'black' neighbours. The majority of Dominicans fall into the three middle categories.

Understanding the Dominican 'pigmentocracy' is especially relevant now, on the 75th anniversary of the worst peace time human rights abuse of civilians in the Americas during the 20th century (28 September—4 October).

In 1937, Trujillo ordered the massacres of Haitians in DR border regions, to promote 'nationalism', assert sovereignty, and control specific strategic and economic resources. Figures are debated, but not the brutality: 10—20,000 men, women, elderly, children and babies were butchered with machetes, shot, or thrown to sharks.

The victims were identified by their skin colour, and then by their creole pronunciation; but historians have also shown victims from English colonies.

Yet although many massacred were Haitians working in the DR, many others were born there and legally were Dominicans. Racism was the primary mechanism in the massacres; all victims were equally 'black' to the vicious murderers, who were released from jail and directed by the military to kill.

The massacres are central to history and culture on both sides of the border. But they are not commemorated by Dominican state or society; instead they are justified by actual and perceived 19th century Haitian abuses. This needs to change, to redefine the 21st century bilateral relationship through acknowledgement of the past.

Positive signs exist, especially the humanitarian relief from Dominican state and society following the devastating 2010 earthquake that left over 200,000 dead in Haiti.

However, the history of violence still infuses current relations. Two months ago the DR fronted the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights over the massacre of six Haitian migrant workers who entered without documentation in 2000, and were shot on the back of

a truck by the armed forces. State and societal racially based repression still occurs, and has led to responses by Haitians.

Due to societal concern over approximately 800,000 Haitians currently living in the DR, citizenship by birth was removed from the Constitution in 2010: two weeks after the earthquake. Furthermore, socioeconomic studies clearly correlate skin colour to education and economic attainment in the DR.

The 1937 massacres are an unhealed wound in Dominican-Haitian relations, and show how the pigmentocracy leads to human rights abuses. Their 25th anniversary occurred during political turmoil and repression following Trujillo's assassination. Their 50th anniversary occurred whilst Balaguer, Trujillo's right hand man, was still president, through a mixture of repression, electoral fraud and blatant vote buying.

Their 75th anniversary can be different: Danilo Medina, recently elected President of the Dominican Republic, has the opportunity to redefine the relationship. In last month's inaugural address, he expressed interest in pursuing a free trade deal to link the two countries that share an island, but otherwise did not mention Haiti. The new international norm is that free trade agreements include human rights discussions, which Medina can begin by honestly appraising the 1937 ethnic cleansing.

This is essential, because Haitian migrant workers past and present are the lifeblood of the Dominican economy: in agriculture, construction and tourism, their hard work for little pay has provided the DR with food security and economic development.

By doing so, the DR can also truly commence discussions on societal inequality due to its pigmentocracy. Danilo's campaign slogan was' to change what is bad, and do what has never been done before': what better chance than by healing the wound of racism to move forward as two countries arm in arm.

Fear the politicians of the future

POLITICS

Ellena Savage

If my short tenure in university politics gave me anything, it is an appreciation for non-politicians. Like Barbara Ramjan and journalist Lindsay Foyle, who both had dealings with young and rabid student politicians 35 years ago, I now have some dirt on the cabinet of the future, and I know who I'm not voting for.

I coedited the student newspaper in the final year of my BA. My coeditors and I came from different political backgrounds, and were elected on a politically unaligned ticket, giving and receiving our electoral preferences to and from various left and centre-left factions.

The tenure itself was hard work; learning to make a magazine from scratch with only a 2002 iMac and the phone number for a printer, while dealing with the strange demands and personalities of the office-bearers. Our pay rate of around $3.40 per hour perhaps was a little low.

Once in the media office, we decided to remain on peaceful terms with all of the other factions in office. We reasoned that it would make for a better working environment, and a better magazine if every student felt they could contribute, regardless of their politics.

We offered a right of reply to anyone who was challenged or insulted by the contents, and invited the relevant student representatives to respond to challenges levelled against their departments within the same edition.

This policy of openness quickly found us completely alienated from every faction we refused to make exceptions for. The rift between politicians and journalists was quickly established.

Nothing terrible happened — I wish I had more battle tales to recount. But then, I am lucky to not have been made a target of some A-type android's personality disorder. In previous years, women had been sexually harassed by opponents, property stolen and sabotaged, and people of all political bents had been smeared.

While everything that happens in the student unions around Australia is completely, mind-blowingly important, campus election weeks are by far the most stressful times in the political calendar. Over the three years I campaigned in elections for myself and others, I witnessed a good many tears spill onto hyper-coloured party T-shirts. Elections are a rollercoaster of betrayals, dodged regulations, and primary-school-grade bullying.

The worst offenders are usually campaigners who sit between the centre and the hard right of politics — those who have a real future in party politics in Australia — and the targets of their bullying are usually on the fringe left — often women and queer men engaged in activism as opposed to career politics.

While there are certainly creeps and bullies on both sides of the political binary, the right, in my experience, does seem to produce the most visible offenders. And they're usually male.

To be staunchly against unionism generally, and simultaneously be involved in a student union with the express desire to disrupt it, well, that's a cry for help. It takes an aggressive kind of personality.

Ramjan's allegations against Abbott didn't surprise me. Actually, I am surprised by the mildness of the alleged harassment. In the real world, shouting and throwing a punch next to someone's head in a rage is a seriously harassing act. But in the strange, tense world of student politics, the honest brutality of the act sounds preferable to the slow and steady harassment and character attacks that sustain student politicians these days.

Abbott is right to point to inexperience and immaturity driving the 'silly' behaviour of student pollies. But we should take note that these bullies are there to cut their teeth for state or federal politics later in their careers. Where they are not held accountable for their indiscretions, their histories follow them into parliament.

Politicians of all ages should be held to higher standards than the rest of us, because the rest of us do not purport to represent collective values and act on such preposterous claims.

Student politicians continue to punch walls in front of each other, plot to smear their peers, and generally create atmospheres of humiliation and harassment for their own political gain. Yes, the smaller the gain, the dirtier the fight. And these people, they are our future. So be afraid.

Resurrecting Work Choices

POLITICS

Brian Lawrence

The Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations is currently considering a Bill that revisits the ill-fated Work Choices legislation. While Opposition Leader Tony Abbott maintains that Work Choices is 'dead, buried and cremated', Independent Senator Nick Xenophon is advocating a position that adopts a central feature of that legislation.

The Fair Work Amendment (Small Business-Penalty Rates Exemption) Bill 2012, introduced by Xenophon on 16 August 2012, proposes a fundamental change to the national award safety net system. If enacted, it would remove penalty rates from the awards covering small businesses in the restaurant, catering and retail industries and would reduce the rights and incomes of many low paid and vulnerable workers.

The rationale is that these pay cuts would lead to increased employment in the firms covered by the exemption.

This kind of rationale was the basis of Work Choices, which sought to cut the costs of employment by lowering safety nets and exposing workers to more labour market forces. It restricted collective bargaining, excluded workers in small businesses from unfair dismissal rights, removed 'needs' from the minimum wage-setting criteria, and permitted the removal of established rights, such as penalty rates, from the award safety net.

The burden of job creation thus fell on the low paid workers and their families. In effect, these vulnerable workers and families were told that their wages and conditions of employment were the reason why unemployed workers and families were suffering and that they had bear the cost.

The Australian Catholic Bishops issued a Statement in November 2005 expressing concern about aspects of Work Choices, including the prospect that 'many workers, especially the poor and vulnerable, may be placed in a situation where they will be required to bargain away some of their entitlements'. In particular they referred to the risk to penalty rates, and called for the protection of these entitlements.

The current bill's proposed loss of penalty rates would have a major impact on many low paid workers and their families. The National Minimum Wage and other award rates already provide only poverty wages. Workers who rely on penalty rates to help make ends meet would be left without any compensation.

Penalty rates compensate for working in unsocial hours. Work on evenings, nights, weekends and public holidays impacts a wide range of personal and family arrangements. The bill proposes treating the restaurant, catering and retail industries differently from other industries that operate during the same time periods: nurses, public transport workers and police, for example, would be unaffected.

It is immoral to hold back wage increases or drive wages down below a decent level on account of economic circumstances when there are other ways to promote job protection and the creation of employment opportunities, that are consistent with an equitable sharing of the burden of creating and sustaining jobs.

The burden of creating and sustaining jobs, including low paid jobs, should not be

imposed on those who are in or near poverty. Yet this is the intent and effect of many proposals for labour market deregulation.

Rather than seeking to impose selective burdens on low paid workers, governments should be considering the ways in which the costs of employment can be reduced, at a cost to the broader community, without reducing fair minimum standards for low paid and vulnerable workers.

The tax system must be reviewed. Payroll tax (which is imposed by the states) is a tax on employment. Income tax on the National Minimum Wage, which is currently 8.2 per cent, has the effect of increasing labour costs and also operates as a tax on employment. Changes in these taxes would promote employment opportunities and spread the costs across the community.

Incentives and rewards for the employment of labour need to be built into the tax system. A review of employer on-costs might also be undertaken with a view to reducing the costs of employment without prejudice to fair safety net wages and conditions of employment. Improved targeting of family payments would reduce the need for wages to provide for workers with family responsibilities.

A century ago Australia had a tariff system that protected Australian industry in return for a wages system that was designed to protect Australian workers and their families, with the costs spread across each segment as consumers of intermediate or final goods. It served Australia well for decades.

But the globalisation of markets in recent decades requires a new system in which society as a whole has a shared responsibility for ensuring decent work and decent wages. The current bill runs counter to that objective.

Curing Kerouac's misogyny

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***On the Road* (MA). Director: Walter Salles. Starring: Sam Riley, Garrett Hedlund, Tom Sturridge, Kristen Stewart, Kirsten Dunst. 140 minutes**

'If you're not a liberal when you're 25, you have no heart. If you're not a conservative by the time you're 35, you have no brain.' The words commonly (though falsely) attributed to Winston Churchill are pragmatic to the point of pessimism; the idealism of youth is necessarily supplanted by the wisdom of experience.

American singer-songwriter Ben Folds had a more sardonic take on the same concept: the titular character of his 2001 song 'The Ascent of Stan' is a 'textbook hippy man' turned corporate middle-management cog. Stan once 'wanted revolution', now he *is* 'the institution': 'How's it feel to be The Man? It's no fun to be The Man.'

It's hard to know what is to be achieved by producing in 2012 a film adaptation of Jack Kerouac's seminal and autobiographical 1957 novel *On The Road*. The book sprang from and helped to define 'beat' culture; heir to the hipsterism of the 1920s and forerunner to the hippy movement of the 1960s, and characterised by culture-busting creativity and experimentation with sex and substances.

In it, Kerouac's alter ego Sal Paradise (played in the film by Riley) sets out on numerous adventurous road trips with his somewhat idolised acquaintance Dean Moriarty (a mythologised Neal Cassady, portrayed here by Hedlund). 'The road' is a living metaphor for exploring life and the search for meaning, and for eschewing the shackles of conformity in favour of freewheeling. The trips are fuelled by sex, jazz, drugs and male camaraderie.

But surely this book, if any, was a work both of and for its time. Today, not only the original readers of *On the Road* but also several subsequent generations have *grown up*. Whether you ascribe to the 'Churchill' conception of 'with age comes wisdom', or Folds' lament about selling out to the comfort of conformity, the book's once counter-cultural themes are so entrenched and well-traversed as to be clichÃ©d.

This is made abundantly clear as the rugged, relentless poetry of Kerouac's work is reduced on film to attractive landscape cinematography and a string of loosely connected episodes that, when you can't feel the author's own questing, gravelly yet melodious narration surging against your eardrum, simply don't amount to more than the sum of their parts. Even the sex and drug use in Brazillian director Salles' *On the Road* seem passÃ©.

This, despite a distinct heightening of the homoeroticism that is arguably innate to any 'boys' own adventure' story and certainly simmers not far beneath the surface of *On the Road*. Kerouac's is a book about male bonding; in the film the sexual, even romantic tension and jealousy that exists between the blokey triangle of Sal, Dean and 'Carlo' (beat poet Allen Ginsberg, played by Sturridge) is intense and intimate. It's a strength.

Of some note, too, is the film's treatment of gender issues. Kerouac's book is essentially misogynistic. Women are objects of hedonistic possibilities in the same way that drugs are. They are 'dumb' or 'sexy' and rarely more than that. Even Sal's humorously self-deprecating accounts of failing to impress a virginal lover or to bed the girlfriend of a sailor at best belittle, and at worse marginalise the women in question.

The film, perhaps reflecting a view that it is aimed at a more enlightened audience, seeks

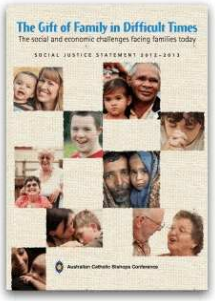
to rectify this by giving flesh to its female characters, in particular to Dean's respective wives, Louann (Stewart) and Camille (Dunst), and ruminating on the consequences of Dean's ill treatment of them. It is not entirely successful in this, due to the limitations of Sal's perspective, and particularly to the limitations of Stewart's abilities as an actor.

At best, Salles' film is a nostalgic remembrance of a particular book, and a particular time, that never had a chance of living up to the rawness of the source material, coming half a century too late. At worst, it is something like an undergraduate video essay that explores without illuminating Kerouac's original work.

Social justice and the 21st century family

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton



I came to the 2012 Catholic Social Justice Statement on the family [PDF] with some curiosity. Although the Catholic tradition deals extensively with both personal and social morality, there is often some tension among Catholics between those who focus on one or the other aspect.

The family is usually studied from a personal and interpersonal perspective, raising such issues as the uses of sexuality, marriage and the nurturing of life in its beginning and endings. So I was interested to see how a social justice statement, from which we would usually expect a focus on such issues as work, discrimination and solidarity, would treat the family. I found this document very helpful.

It begins by emphasising the social importance of families for the nurturing and formation of children, and then expatiates on the practical difficulties that families encounter in contemporary Australian society.

It stresses the difficulties created by a consumer society. The emphasis on the individual choice to buy and sell and the relatively unrestricted freedom to do so puts pressure on people to work long and unsociable hours. It restricts the opportunity for families to spend time together. Family members would like to live in an environment that nurtures their family relationships but feel themselves compelled to live largely separate lives by the need to pay off mortages and so on.

As one might expect from any reflection from within the Catholic tradition of social justice the statement pays much attention to the plight of poor families. It discusses in some detail the needs of Indigenous and asylum seeker families. It points to the potentially destructive effects on families of government policies when these are imposed without consultation. They weaken the sense of responsibility of families for their own lives.

The statement recommends all legislation be accompanied by detailed statements of its impact on families. It urges Catholics to develop the spiritual resources to be found in the scriptural understanding of the Sabbath, with its emphasis on rest and reflection in the face of the restlessness encouraged by a consumer society.

The tone of the document is encouraging and practical. It invites Catholics to reflect on how to enrich their family lives in the face of aspects of society hostile to them. It is not a jeremiad against the ills of the modern age and the philosophical theories seen to underlie them.

But this pastoral focus invites further reflection on the centrality within our economic order given to the individual's choice to consume. Prosperity depends on multiplying economic transactions, both those concerned with making money from money and those involved in the buying and replacement of discretionary goods. To repair the damage caused to family life would require building a better economic order.

The statement also encourages us to ask how we are to define the family in contemporary Australian society. Throughout the document the family is seen as the nuclear family with stable relationships between husband, wife and children. The scriptural model offered is Jesus' own family.

As an ideal this is fine. But in Australia families of this kind are the exception rather than the rule. Mixed families, serial fathers, single parent families are common. And as the statement recognises, these groupings are significantly represented in the poor families to which Catholics have a special responsibility.

Indeed, in Matthew's story, not even Mary and Joseph are a normal family. It took a special vision to Joseph to prevent Jesus from being raised by a single mother.

This suggests that reflection on the family needs to consider in detail the factors that create instability and suffering to children in a variety of relationships, and will need to reach out pastorally to people in these varied relationships. It will be important to encourage connection, love and stability in all family groupings, and not simply to decry their failure to meet the Christian ideal.

This may be especially important in the face of recurrent attempts to save money by penalising unmarried mothers in the name of family values.

And that takes us back to where we began — the perceived division between personal and social morality. The approach to the family taken in the statement complements and invites reflection on all the personal qualities and relationships involved in making and nurturing a family.

Equally, it invites reflection on the economic relationships upon which our society is built and the lack of connection that they foster. The discontents of families do not arise solely from the pathologies of sexuality, but from the pathologies of power and of wealth.

The just world fallacy and the need for empathy

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

Sarah Burnside

Analyses of contemporary issues tend to be rooted in the immediate, concrete and practical aspects of life. There is also value, though, in more amorphous questions. In that spirit, and conscious of its own generalities and limitations, this essay considers the importance of empathy — the ability to recognise feelings or emotions in another person, or put ourselves in another's shoes.

This focus is timely to anyone concerned about the Australian political scene and, in particular, the lack of moral seriousness in much of our public conversation.

Witness Opposition Leader Tony Abbott's recent statement on asylum seeker policy: 'I don't think it's a very Christian thing to come in by the back door rather than the front door ... I think the people we accept should be coming the right way and not the wrong way'. This conclusion, which blames people for their own desperation, presents a topsy-turvy world in which Australia is victimised by 'unChristian' asylum seekers.

Abbott's statement has been elegantly deconstructed, on both a factual and a moral basis, by Julian Burnside QC. The eminent barrister appealed to his readers to put themselves in someone else's situation:

Imagine, just for a minute, that you are a Hazara from Afghanistan. You have fled the Taliban; you have arrived in Indonesia, where you will be jailed if you are found; you can't work, and you can't send your kids to school. You will have to wait between 10 and 20 years before some country offers to resettle you. But you have a chance of getting on a boat and heading for safety in Australia. What will you do?

I know I would get on a boat; I know that most Australians would get on a boat. I imagine that Tony Abbott would get on a boat.

This essay does not pretend to any expertise in migration or refugee policy or seek to offer any prescriptions. Instead, moving from the specific to the general, it considers the broader question of empathy and suggests that we need to address a lack of imaginative understanding in both our public language and private thoughts.

The kind of language used by Abbott, with its refusal to acknowledge any complexity beyond an inflexible 'right way' versus 'wrong way', echoes the tenor of comments that depress readers of online news and opinion sites. With distressing predictability, almost every story about asylum seekers, global poverty, racism or disadvantage in Indigenous communities will attract at least one comment which begins 'I have absolutely no sympathy for ...'

A lack of understanding has become a matter of pride; a badge of strength. Compassion is for the weak.

Concerns over abusive or callous remarks on the internet are often overstated, amounting to a kind of moral panic at old habits in new technology — human beings have been busily demonising, insulting and attacking each other since we first appeared on the earth.

As blogger Stilgherrian argued recently in *Crikey*, it is strange to blame social networking sites, or the internet more broadly, for 'universal human behaviour'. Stilgherrian noted that

some people seemingly 'can't connect the words they're seeing on screen with a real living, breathing human being who might be reacting emotionally'.

The capacity to recognise that other people — who are unknown to us, who do not look or act like us, or with whom we do not agree — are 'real living, breathing human beings' is not a bad working definition of empathy. It is worth stating, though, that this ability does not come easily. In a commencement address he gave to the graduates of Kenyon College in 2005, the late writer David Foster Wallace spoke of the importance of having critical awareness of ourselves and our certainties. One such 'certainty', Wallace noted, was this:

Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us.

It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute centre of ... Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.

Feeling true empathy for other human beings necessitates a constant questioning of this most fundamental certainty: that I matter more than you, or him or her. It also requires us to look beyond our families, social groups or nationalities to undermine the assumption that we are more important than them.

Empathy also requires something even harder: a wilful erosion of some of the mental devices that help us to function in a chaotic and frightening world.

It has been persuasively argued that human beings have a cognitive bias towards what the social psychologist Melvin Lerner in 1978 termed the 'just world hypothesis' — the belief that the world is a fair and orderly place in which one's actions have appropriate consequences. This belief is a means of assimilating an unpredictable, arbitrary universe into our desire for stability.

James Waller, a professor of Holocaust and genocide studies, characterises the idea of a fair universe as a 'self-protective device' which gives us 'the courage to go out into the world'.

Unfortunately, this device also fosters in us a view that if someone is victimised, they must be somehow at fault. Thus as Waller notes the just world concept encourages a deep sense that 'victims deserve, and can be blamed for, their fates'. Armed with this belief, humans feel 'in control of our world ... because we would always behave more cautiously or wisely than other victims have'. We could never be desperately poor or face persecution and be forced to flee for lives; we would never need to rely on the kindness of strangers.

Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics posit that if the 'belief in a just world simply resulted in humans feeling more comfortable with the universe and its capriciousness, it would not be a matter of great concern for ethicists or social scientists'. They note, however, that the impulse to victim-blame means that the 'belief in a just world may undermine a commitment to justice'.

This tendency is displayed in attitudes towards women who have been sexually assaulted; it is often assumed that they are at fault. Some research suggests that female jurors are particularly reluctant to believe an alleged victim's testimony. Although this seems counterintuitive, it may reflect the fact that acknowledging that rape can happen to

anyone through no fault of their own would confront jurors with their own vulnerability to assault.

I do not seek to dismiss the fears that lead us to cling to the just world hypothesis. We live in an uncertain age. We may fear the caprices of the global economy, worry about our children's futures, fret about our families' welfare, suffer from stress; dread illness or personal failures; or feel dislocated from friends and communities.

The majority of us also, as writer Tim Dunlop noted, have increasingly limited 'options for meaningful participation in our democracy'. Our fears may therefore find expression in anger, hostility and victim-blaming.

While sympathising with the origin of these sentiments, though, we must not remove them from the sphere of analysis. This is because the just world hypothesis is not neutral in its impacts: it helps to prop up the powerful and undermine the marginalised.

The statements on which one might rely to articulate the concept of a just world — that wickedness never goes unpunished; that people get what they deserve; that God helps those who help themselves; that what goes around, comes around — imply that the suffering have only themselves to blame.

These rationales, which are intuitively appealing and may be strongly believed, pose serious challenges for those who seek to implement progressive social policies, for they fit in neatly with a kind of dog-eat-dog economic rationalism. If people are to be blamed for their own poverty, disabilities or unemployment, then why do we need a welfare state, anti-discrimination legislation, and subsidised healthcare and education?

In the context of the global financial crisis, these institutions, which depend upon a sense of solidarity or fellow-feeling, are increasingly vulnerable to being depicted as luxuries. If they are perceived as offering succour only to the undeserving — with the very need for help becoming evidence of one's own moral or practical failings — their position becomes more precarious still.

It is ever more important that we challenge the concept of the just world; if we want justice, we need to work for it. Acknowledging and seeking to understand the experiences of others is part of this work. A call for empathy may be frustratingly ephemeral, and its practice undeniably challenging, but it remains humankind's best hope.

Groundhog Day for refugees

POLITICS

Lyn Bender

It is said that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. The asylum seeker debate and its 'solutions' illustrate our Government's failure to remember the inhumanity and damge caused by the original — now resurrected — Pacific Solution. But many Australians, particularly previous detainees, have not forgotten.

In March 2002 I was about to do my rounds of the dusty, heat soaked camp that is the Woomera Detention and Reception Centre — where I was employed as a psychologist — when the men in black suits arrived. I recall the image of those men standing in that environment of razor wire, dust and heat, so conspicuous that I exclaimed to the guard beside me: 'Who are those guys?' They were also attracting the uneasy attention of the detainees.

The men had come on a mission from Canberra to 'encourage' Afghan refugees to go home 'voluntarily'. Their brief was to present them with a choice of unending detention or repatriation and $2000. It had the ring of an offer that they could not refuse.

Ten years later $2000 has become a $3000 package and 18 refugees from SriLanka are reported to have chosen to go home rather than accept processing in Nauru. Some commentators are now asking whether they gave fully informed consent. For my part, I confess to feeling skeptical about the use of the word 'chosen', and outrage at Minister Chris Bowen's declaration that this is a signal that 'Nauru is working'.

The asylum seeker dilemma just won't die away, being a political windfall for the Opposition, and a poison ball that the current Government wants to surreptitiously dump. We are finding ways to circumvent our obligations under the Geneva Convention and our own Immigration Act.

The National Post recently recalled a case from May 1939 in which a ship, the *MS St Louis*, carrying 907 German Jews 'seeking a place to escape persecution' was 'shunned first by Cuba and then by America'.

Canada, too, rejected the refugees: 'none is too many', an unidentified immigration agent said of the Jews aboard the ship . The *St Louis* was within two days of Halifax Harbour. Despite the pleas of the captain and the suicidal distress of passengers the ship eventually returned to Germany, and to death for many of the refugees.

Apparently the relatively small numbers of people fleeing to our shores are also too many.

Yet I am flooded with memories of the Bakhtiari family's deportation on Boxing day in 2004, coincidentally on the day of the Asian Tsunami. This was a high profile case where the father had originally been granted asylum but his wife and 4 children, who had arrived separately, were denied refugee status.

When this anomaly was revealed it was 'rectified' by a reappraisal of the refugee status granted to the father. Refugee and asylum seeker expert Dr David Corlett has tracked those returnees and more. Many came to harm. So too, Phil Glendenning of the Edmund Rice Centre has tracked 225 refugees returned to 22 countries and found that many have been returned to the persecution from which they fled.

It is a violation of the Geneva Convention to return refugees to a place where they will be in harm's way.

In March 2002 I spent hours conversing with Afghanis, Iranians, Palestinians and Iraqis on hunger strikes. These are the desperate actions of people who feel they have no power except that of using their bodies to convey their message of despair. There were daily suicide attempts.

I am not the only health professional to predict that the proposed indefinite incarceration of asylum seekers in a remote location in an attempt to deter others will create the same destructive circumstances. I hope that the news tomorrow will be better and that we will awaken from this *Groundhog Day* experience.

Dodging dogma ninjas

POETRY

Barry Gittins and Matthew Davies

Strugglin'

Ol' Eve was said to fall for that lil' apple
(original thought 'n' action disturb, baffle),
fellatin' passive Adam by the lap pool;
'gals are Serpent's ruin', a sin falafel.
We're strugglin' through the mythos of our parties
we're losin' gospel truths that never rang true.
If life prompts metaphysical pilates
then faith is surely meant to stretch, extend you.
Among the patriarchs and vengeful judges
Noah, Abe, 'Zac, Mo, Dan, Josh, Joe, etc.,
left-handed Ehud fibs and feints and fudges,
his blade sev'rin' fat ol' king Eglon's viscera.
We're tip tap toe-in' through the tattered scriptures
where harlots and assassins dance lambadas.
Where lit'ralist fundos train their dogma ninjas,
secure in intellectual Masadas.
Post-Messianic construction, epic dustbins,
we soon lose sight of Yeshua the rabbi.
Pourin' out his spirit into faded wineskins,
we water down his message. Drown his God's eye.
We're strugglin' hard to reclaim ethic's solace.
We wave off drowning refugees as tragic.
The golden rule's ground down by deficit molars.
We abuse the weak: a perverse, punishin' magic.
Lacking rational mystics (heads, hearts and voices)
working here and now, sans divination,
we cann'balise our venal little choices, in a
rapidfire, stained glass defenestration.
We're bringin' roosters home; crow red denial.

We're salivatin' over mammon's menu.
We're hangin' round, bowls blurtin' in betrayal.
Golgotha's altruism's final venue.
We're strugglin' through the human aspiration.
Divinity comes down to partial vision.
If life's a gift, then judgment's a donation
and faith's a glass of water; home's a mission.
We're sloggin' through the mud that leads to glory,
The Christchild refugee's across our shoulders.
The monkey wrench we hobble on is gory
with congealed beliefs; agape's ember smoulders.
—Barry Gittins

Thrifty Psalms

O Lord
I'm shivering
Isn't this enough?
I have seen a hundred
Little Jobs
And taken none
To heart
O Lord
I want to go straight
The straightest, thinnest path
You can give me
Do I take it as a challenge
Or in joy?
O Lord
What
Is
A
'Personal
Landscape'
How can I not have one?
O Lord

Why can't we both be licked

By Devil or by Lamb?

O Lord

Why have you

Divided the nations?

And the rent is

The same pay for

Each glassy house?

We will learn to

Understand inequality

But where does this leave us

To live?

O Lord

The sand is full of imperfections

Of particles, of texture

Where can we stand so that we can lean
Upon your love?

O Lord

Tortured by throbbing

Guilt

And for this

I thank you

O Lord

Let me function

With One and All

O Lord

Born and lost

In a day

Won't offend you

O Lord

Destroy the part of me

That wants her to fail

Wants her to myself

In revolt to your making

O Lord
Let me eat away
From my internal suffering
And that of the prophets
Amen
O Lord
The shadow
Of my arm hairs
Will spell out my next move
O Lord
This luxury
Of lies
We built
Is a greater kingdom
In wealth than most see
Give me the patience
Not to undermine it
Congeal my thoughts
O Lord
Rear my sister
For the world
Not for worms
—Matthew Davies

Militancy trumps education on Pakistan frontier

HUMAN RIGHTS

Farooq Yousaf

The state of education in Pakistan has been grim ever since the nation's inception, and with the onset of militancy since 2001 the situation has become worse. With militants firmly holding the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the already low literacy rate of 29 per cent has nosedived to 17 per cent in the region.

Pakistan has, time and again, been included in the list of developing countries, but unlike its competitors, it has an abysmally low literacy rate. Only one quarter of the adults in Pakistan are literate. The measly 2 per cent GDP spending on education reveals the level of seriousness among policy makers regarding this issue. Although Pakistan has had to face various crises over the past decade, education was never given due consideration.

The current spate of militancy and violence in the FATA and its implications on stability, especially of the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) province, has drawn the attention of the world. This wave of terror that hit KP, FATA and other parts of Pakistan after September 11 not only damaged the economy but also the education foundations.

The province, which used to be a land of hospitality, became a breeding ground for militants. Schools were blown up and students threatened not to pursue 'worldly' education — i.e. any form of education other than Islam.

The roots of the deteriorating state of education can be traced back to the 1980s when President Zia's regime supported the US war against Soviet expansion. Religious schools, *madaris*, were transformed into Jihadi training institutes. Rural students seeking education in madaris were indoctrinated as guerilla fighters in the name of religion and war against the infidels (communists).

The curriculum developed for madaris propagated militant Islamic Jihad and contributed to the evolution of militancy. Even today, madaris are perceived as places of affordable education by common rural dwellers, while to the outer world, they remain breeding grounds for militancy.

This suspicion to some extents holds correct as most of this religious schools are unregistered. (With registration, the curriculum is regulated by state officials, who help keep a check over the activities.)

The fear of terrorism halted all recreational activities in educational institutes from 2003 to 2011. Female students felt pressured to use veils to avoid negative consequences from the Taliban. Co-education institutes received constant threats of suicide attacks.

Militancy spread a wave of panic among students. Faizan Azeem Khan, a bachelor's student from South Waziristan (FATA) recalls:

Militancy has set us apart from our relatives and ... I don't think I'll ever get a chance have a reunion with them in Waziristan. This situation has put a drastic effect on my education due to stress and anxiety. The militants only seem to have one agenda ... stop the youth from attaining worldly education.

The government, to a large extent, holds responsibility for not taking solid measures to

curb militancy through education. This is because the already low GDP spending on education of 2.5 per cent (in 2006) has been cut to 2 per cent (in 2012) by the current government.

Militancy, coupled with substantial cuts in higher education spending, has led to the abandonment of various educational projects in KP. The recent decision by the government devolving the Higher Education Commission to provincial governments also put a dent in the future education prospects of financially weak provinces.

Higher education projects planned for Hangu, North Waziristan and Bajaur had to be shelved due to concerns of reaction from militant organisations; as a result, hundreds of scholarships offered for FATA students were wasted. This was heartbreak for thousands of students for whom the universities of Peshawar were inaccessible.

Recent educational setbacks in KP as a consequence of militancy include the destruction of more than 700 schools, loss of infrastructure worth millions of dollars, kidnapping of Ajmal Khan — a moderate founding vice chancellor of a renowned university, and attacks on school transport resulting in deaths of innocent students.

The staggering difference between public and private sector education standards leads to decreasing employment opportunities for the underprivileged, generating a sense of frustration among the masses, which in turn opens them up to the influence of the militant organisations.

Substantive measures need be taken to eliminate roots of extremism from the madaris of Pakistan. The government needs to realise that maintaining an ambiguous policy on militancy and minimal spending on education and development will not help in nurturing future moderate leaders.

Calls for total eradication of madaris hold little logic as most of Pakistan's population, which is living below the poverty line, depends on this free source of education.

Grass roots reforms, such as those introduced by the nonprofit sector, need to be introduced in these seminaries, to impart for example vocational and computer skills to the students. In coming years, bringing reforms to the structure of madaris and implementing a uniform curriculum would be of utmost importance in order to nurture generations of enlightened youth and ensure they are equipped to face the challenges ahead.

Tony Abbott's monsters

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Melbourne Anglican editor Roland Ashby recently produced a collection of interviews published in the paper over 15 years. Not long after Pauline Hanson made her legendary racist maiden speech in parliament on 10 September 1996, the author Morris West complained in his interview that 'too much attention has been given to Pauline Hanson [because] the media creates its own monsters'.

The most famous monster in the history of the western imagination is the one created by Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. When Victor realises he has made a mistake in trying to play God, he leaves his handiwork to fend for itself. Frustrated and angry at being cut loose, it wreaks havoc on everyone and everything in its path.

Since the heyday of Pauline Hanson, the media has made monsters out of many politicians. It has mercilessly caricatured them as grotesque and out of control. This may have ensured coverage of politics that is accessible to most Australians, but it has been at cost of diminishing the quality of rational political discourse in this country.

Significantly, the conservative side of politics appears to have itself adopted a variation on this practice. It has made monsters of its own MPs, in the belief that their larger than life profiles will translate into electoral success.

When appointing Nationals Senator leader Barnaby Joyce to the front bench as shadow finance minister a few years ago, Tony Abbott created the genre of the 'retail politician', in order to justify liberties such MPs would inevitably take with party policy. 'I think that Barnaby is a uniquely gifted retail politician,' he said at the time.

The retail politician is given special licence to move about the electorate to spruik party policy. As less gifted communicators, the 'wholesale' politicians will stay out of the limelight to finesse the policies their retail colleagues are busy selling. That's the theory.

True to the form of the monster, Joyce created havoc among his colleagues when he criticised the sale of Cubby Station to a Chinese-led consortium and thereby opposed the Coalition policy that supports foreign investment.

Then last week, another gifted retail politician who had been elevated to the shadow ministry, South Australian Senator Cory Bernardi, played to the nation's bigots by linking gay marriage to bestiality.

This monster had to go, in what could prove to be a sign that Abbott has learned from his mistakes. Abbott might finally have ditched his distinction between retail and wholesale, in favour of authentic politicians, by appointing erstwhile wholesale MPs Arthur Sinodinos and Jamie Briggs to replace Bernardi in the ministry.

If this is the case, he has heeded the warning against hubris contained in Shelley's morality tale *Frankenstein.*

Skating solutions to boys' education

EDUCATION

Tony Thompson

They don't tell you about indoor skateparks. They show you the ultrasound, they hand you the wrinkly baby and say, 'a little boy'. What they don't say is, 'you will spend every day of the school holidays at an indoor skatepark.'

My son is eight and rides a blue scooter. He got it for his birthday and for about ten minutes was content to ride it up and down the sidewalk in front of the house. Then he decided we should go to a small skatepark.

It was a largely concrete affair, covered in graffiti, and populated by kids with low slung jeans and battered skateboards that they rode intermittently between cigarettes. My son experimented with the various ramps, chatted to teenage boys and got some fresh air while I sat on a bench and read.

One day, he met a kid from school and came over to tell me about a magical place called Rampfest.

I held off as long as I could. I pretended I couldn't find it online, that it had closed, that it was for older kids. One rainy day, however, I relented. The outdoor venue would no longer be good enough. He took out a membership at Rampfest and it was there that we would be spending our time.

Rampfest is in a suburb called Braybrook, 9km west of Melbourne, a place whose very name can cause those sensitive souls east of the Yarra, or even east of the Maribyrnong, to shudder in fear. The truth is that it we will all be wishing we had bought there ten years ago soon. It's close to the city, pleasant enough, and well appointed, as they say, with things like, well, Rampfest.

I live in snooty Yarraville, an overpriced renovation ghetto just a couple of minutes away. Nice place, but no indoor skateboard facilities.

Rampfest is housed in a large warehouse that echoes with the sound of bmx bikes, scooters and skateboards landing implausible jumps. Or not. The soundtrack ranges from hip hop to metal that sounds, to my ear, like Dio era Black Sabbath but probably isn't. The park is a maze of wooden ramps, foam pits and swimming pool shaped valleys where boys, and I mean BOYS (girls rarely appear), practice moves with names like tailwhips and grinds.

I sit in a sort of indoor/outdoor (as they call it in Yarraville) arrangement near the front desk, set my laptop up on a metal patio table, pour some hot tea from my thermos, and wait for my son to come and hit me up for some money for lollies or a soft drink. I'm not entirely sure what he does inside. I have only been in once and it was so hair raising that I have avoided it ever since. It looked like a cross between roller derby and Pozieres.

I'm not really selling it, am I? A chaotic warehouse in Braybrook, filled with teenage boys on skateboards ... and have I mentioned how cold it is? I had to buy new socks, gloves, and a wool jumper after I spent one Saturday shivering for three hours.

But it does have a bright side.

I was a high school teacher for 15 years. When I started, there were murmurings that the education system wasn't working for boys. By the time I finished, that murmur had become

a roar.

I was vaguely interested in the discussion but found the occasional anti feminist tone unpleasant and unproductive. Yes, I thought the classroom environment was a problem for boys. No, I didn't think the feminist movement, which had ensured that my mum was paid the same as her male work colleagues in the 1970s, was at fault. So I let it pass, knowing that, like everything in education, it would come back at some point.

But then my son started school. He goes to a friendly little primary establishment where everyone knows him and he is making steady progress. But he doesn't love it. His handwriting is atrocious, he finds sitting for long periods a drag, and he doesn't understand why the girls are 'better at everything'.

He likes sport and art. Both of these involve, according to him, 'doing stuff' and not just sitting. I say to him that he has to learn to sit and that all of the other stuff is really important but I am starting to see his point.

And it is at Rampfest that I have seen it.

In my years as an English teacher, I taught a lot of teenage boys. I saw some of them get interested in books and writing but I saw an awful lot that didn't get much interested in anything. I watched them argue with teachers, fight, bully each other, tag desks, break things, get suspended, and waste a lot of time — mine, other kids', but mostly their own.

When I first brought my son to Rampfest, I commented to a friend that it was like someone had corralled the 100 or so worst boys I had ever taught and put them on wheels in a shed. With my son in the middle! But over the next few weeks, I started to see something else entirely.

The first thing was the care that the older boys took around the younger ones. There are 16-year-olds on bmx bikes sailing around eight-year-olds on scooters but there are very few accidents. The older kids seem to accept responsibility for safety in a manner that would surely surprise their teachers and maybe even their parents.

But it is more than just looking out for them. Older boys have taken my son aside to teach him tricks and techniques. They include him in discussions and warn him if he is in a dangerous spot. They observe the rules of the place and are respectful and polite with the management.

Even more of a surprise is their focus. To watch them practice a small manoeuvre over and over, to watch them work together to fix a bike, to listen to the passionate and informed discussions about their sport is to see another side to these kids. They may not be model students at school. No doubt their reports would use words like distracted, disruptive and disengaged. But that's not what I see here.

There have been a few articles recently about boys and schools. What is the answer? I'm not suggesting that schools set up skateboard parks, though stranger things have been tried and some have even worked. But perhaps some consideration of the dynamics might be instructive.

Despite what people often say, it isn't all about competition for boys. It can be about mastery. It can be about specific skills. My sense is that the boys at Rampfest are competing mainly with themselves.

Schools, whether we care to admit it or not, are intensely competitive places. In Victoria, the VCE exam machine has become such a monster that most schools begin to prepare their

students at year nine or earlier. My son talks entirely in terms of being the worst handwriter, or the second best at art. I never hear this in relation to his scooter. He talks about being nearly able to do a trick or having worked out how to do a particular move.

But what about the classroom environment itself? People have been saying for years that boys need to move. They need to be able to get up and do something else when they feel restless and not be stuck sitting at a desk in an uncomfortable chair for an hour.

I'm not naive. I understand the logistical difficulties in changing the structure of a schoo;. But maybe it's worth a try. IT has created possibilities for online learning. Many schools are experimenting with virtual classrooms. It's not flaky speculation or science fiction anymore but schools, teachers, and parents might have to get over the idea that kids can only learn in a classroom in a 50 minute period if any of this is going to make a difference.

And I include myself. As a teacher I liked to talk to my students. I liked to get up at the front of the room and entertain them while I taught. The idea of flexible learning would've forced me to change my style dramatically.

But my observations at Rampfest have had an effect. My son shouldn't be dragged kicking and screaming through an unsuitable education system because teachers don't want to change the way we approach education.

Part of the problem is that we have always looked at ways of modifying the education system for boys without paying due attention to the other places that boys learn and interact with each other.

Schools have been battling with adolescent boys for centuries. Maybe it's time to start giving some ground. There are lessons to be learned in a big shed in Braybrook if you are willing to brave the cold and the music. Come by for a chat, I'll be at my table.