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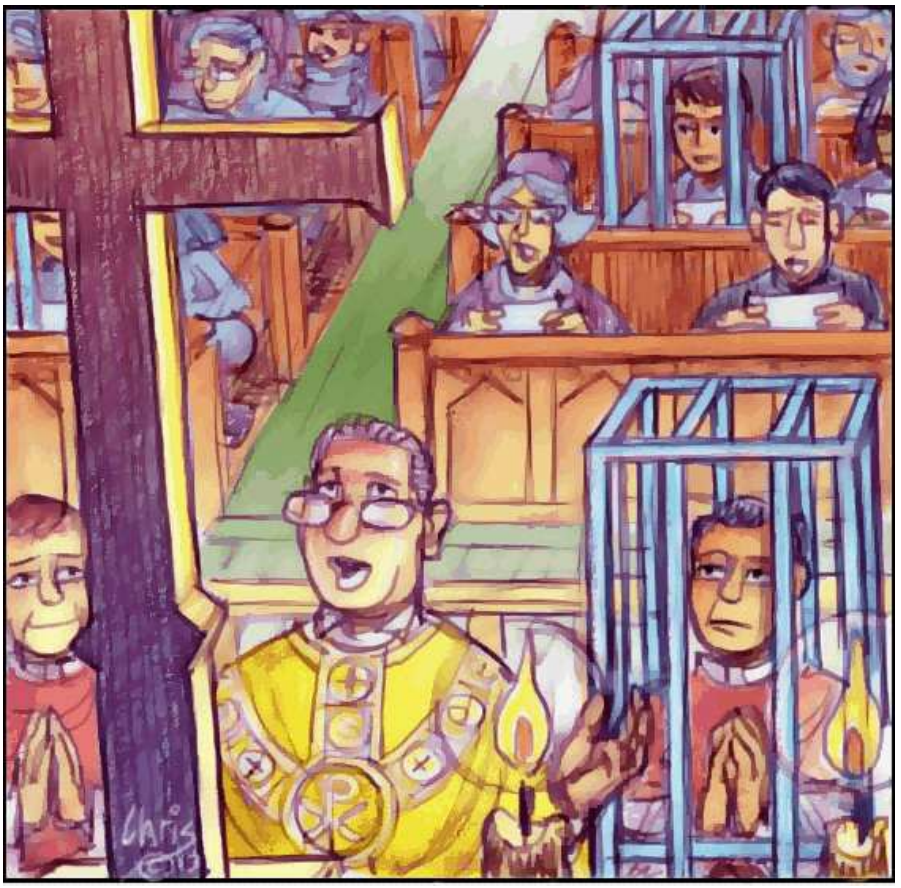

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In bed with Phillip Adams

BOOK CHAT

Jen Vuk and Barry Gittins

***Bedtime Stories*, Phillip Adams, Harper Collins, 2012.**

Jen

Broadcaster, columnist, 'collector of rare antiquities' and arguably Australia's best-known atheist Phillip Adams seems to have been around almost as long as the written word itself.

Adams has certainly amassed a tidy list of achievements. In addition to writing more 20 books, several screenplays and countless columns for *The Australian* magazine, he's chaired boards, including the Australian Film Commission, Greenpeace Australia and CARE Australia, and garnered two Orders of Australia.

What makes this all the more remarkable is that Adams, who grew up not far from where I live in Richmond — back then Melbourne's struggle town — is the archetypal self-made man, who left high school in his mid-teens.

And yet I can't say I exactly jumped for joy when Barry first suggested Adams' book *Bedtime Stories*, tales of his two-decade career at Radio National's *Late Night Live*, for this column. Somehow, Adams, radio raconteur, political stirrer and dedicated leftie left me a little unmoved.

Perhaps it's a generational thing (my 44 years to his ... well, timelessness), but I like to think of myself as open-minded and mildly intrepid. And so it was that I peeled back the cover of *Bedtime Stories* hoping for a little insight, rancour or, at the very least, high-brow gossip.

After all, Adams has interviewed some of the world's most 'influential politicians, historians, archaeologists, novelists, theologians, economists, philosophers and sundry conversationalists', according to the ABC's website.

For a book with such a wide net and an author with such strong views on God and religion, there's a conspicuous absence here. You won't find the strident ideas of the past (most pointedly formulated in *Adams Versus God*) in *Bedtime Stories*, because it is, in large part, a relational book. Here, the drivers aren't the arguments so much as the people who took turns warming the seat in ABC Radio's modest studio.

Not that all are exemplary characters. In the chapter entitled 'Strange Beasts', Adams shares his observations on, and relationships with, the deeply flawed, such as career criminal and murderer Bill Longley, decorated soldier and confessed killer Colonel David Hackworth and Anu Singh, who, in 1997, was convicted of murdering her boyfriend (a case forensically explored by Helen Garner in the heartbreaking *Joe Cinque's Consolation*).

Adams doesn't hold back in his character assassination ... I mean, assessment (*how has be managed to avoid law suits?* I wonder). And this is where *Bedtime Stories* works so well. Only through such candour does a clear picture of human endurance and folly emerge.

So am I won over? Yes and no. Adams is a first-rate thinker, as his adventurous musing on sex ('The amoeba has it right. Simple cellular division leading to replication without sin, guilt or sundry complications'), and death ('Without the deadline of death we'd all ... lapse into endless if increasingly overcrowded boredom') support.

But *Bedtime Stories* also comes at us from all directions — the structure is slack at best. And there's one factor I simply can't overlook, or easily forgive: the incessant namedropping has the lightness of touch of a landslide.

Thank you, Barry for the suggestion. With each page, Adams proved to be equal parts revelation; equal parts relic. I didn't even mind the nudge-nudge, wink-wink of 'In Bed with Phillip' ... all that much. But I can't help thinking that those 21 years of thoughts, ideas, arguments and relationships — however illuminating — could have done with a critical edit before they were themselves put to bed.

Barry

During a phone interview, Phillip Adams once fondly told me about his room of gods. It's chockablock with deities and artefacts, from myriad cultures and creeds; some still worshipped and others long forgotten.

A notion clicked, and still rings true decades later: Adams is searching for his place in the pantheon of 'public discoursers'. It's key to understanding and appreciating this wunderkind; advocate and activist, schemer and public intellectual in a land of footballers and fart-lighters (hat tip to Adams' protÃ©gÃ©, Barry McKenzie).

While Adams is revered as Godfather to Australia's atheists and the national film industry, at heart he remains a young boy huddled under the covers at night; buried under the considerable challenges due his story of origin.

Yes, Jen, agreed; in *Bedtime Stories*, as elsewhere, Adams namedrops with the best of 'em, and he does so with delight. Whether it's stroking Henry Kissinger's ego or stoking the late Christopher Hitchens' private fuego, there are always unspoken assertions. 'Look who I landed!' 'I launched this bloke's career!' 'I'm a clever boy, I am!'

But he is.

A highly intelligent interviewer and writer, Adams usually places himself on the side of the angels, while his namedropping and listing of successes suggests a constant second guessing of himself.

In this swag of recollections we have a ramblin' man, moseying contentedly

through selected anecdotes and mysteries. When Adams stops to smell the rosaries, to count his coups, you may laugh, yawn or roll your eyes. But the man's a stylist; you read on. Well, I do.

I love the guy's honesty, courage, intelligence, wit, passion and perspective. Adams regally gives good interviewer: listen, laugh, smear with honey — don't be no gladiator.

As well as his love affair with death and his absent meaning of life, Adams relishes sexual freedom fighters, true crime figures, death apparatchiks and monsters, including his cunningly contrived interview with Adolf Hitler.

Part potentate, part relic (well put, Jen), Adams' championing of the medium of radio does leave me cold. But his relevance comes from his rage maintenance. The man doesn't let go, thereby enshrining cultural memories.

Take his prophetic reflection on Pauline Hanson: Hanson was 'the recipient of the electorate's inchoate rage [often] fixed on groups like asylum seekers and Aborigines'. His coda? 'The great tragedy was, of course, that whilst Hanson's career would ultimately be reduced to dancing with the stars, her policies, such as they were, were embraced by the major parties.'

It's probably true; this Adamsfest would have benefited from a more interventionist editor. It certainly would have helped the flow. But too tight a rein may have meant the loss of the mischievous chaos.

Enjoy the jaunt; his gleeful emu parade littered with scraps of truth and the gristle of hypocrisy. That's where you find Adams' genius as an interviewer and a thinker. Not sure if this book's for you? Fair enough; not all readers wish to wade through Australia's bleak heartland of racism, and religious and sexual oppression.

Still, *Bedtime Stories* stands record to an eloquent if verbose legend. Adams recounts a lesson received as a child, that 'life is only froth and bubbles', and contends his mission is to 'try to produce good, nourishing noise'. Decades on he's still bubbling away.

Africa's answer to militant feminism

COMMUNITY

Catherine Marshall

Yahoo's CEO Marissa Mayer caused a furore last year when she said that she didn't have the 'militant drive' and the 'chip on the shoulder' that was required of the modern day feminist.

It was a statement that seemed directly at odds with her circumstances: the 37-year-old is one of the most powerful women in the technology industry, Google's first female engineer and now head of a Fortune 500 company. After the birth of her first child just months into her new role, she resolved the angst of mother-child separation by building a nursery alongside her office so that she could bring the baby to work.

Mayer might not call herself a feminist, but in smashing through the glass ceiling of a male-dominated industry she is standing, in part, on the shoulders of all those feminists from decades and centuries past who spent their lives fighting for gender equality.

While her comments have offended the women for whom the connections between modern-day female liberty and the feminist movement are still obvious and strong, they also highlight the way in which progress has transformed the feminist ideal in the western world.

Although women still earn considerably less than men for the same work, are not well-represented at senior levels in business and politics and are often valued for their youth and beauty rather than their skills and expertise, they exist in a largely egalitarian milieu when compared to women in developing countries.

In Australia, girls are outperforming boys at school, more of them are going on to university, and less of them are being discriminated against in the workplace. There is no need for militant drive and a chip on the shoulder when the fight has already been won.

Despite all this, feminism is still as relevant as ever, if only as a structure with which to maintain the advancements that have brought us to this point and to ensure that we don't regress.

But the lack of buy-in from women like Mayer, and the argument among women as to what constitutes a feminist, suggests feminism as a philosophy needs to expand its definition, to be flexible and inclusive so that it reflects the society in which we now live rather than the deeply inequitable era to which it originally responded.

'We shouldn't talk about feminism but feminisms,' says Chika Unigwe (pictured), a Nigerian-Belgian writer whose work explores the motivations of

women and the way in which they empower themselves in the most dire of circumstances. Unigwe has been a guest at this year's Adelaide Writers' Week, which is part of Adelaide Festival.

'You can wear power suits to work and be a feminist, and you can stay home and raise your seven kids and still be a feminist. What happens now is that feminism blocks out certain women, women who see themselves as feminists but who choose to stay home and raise their kids. At the moment there is no space for them — there are choices that you have to make if you want to be called feminist.'

The choices she speaks about — putting children in care, pursuing a career, eschewing your husband's name, wearing unfeminine clothes, even disliking men — are estranging young women from the West's aggressive and individualistic form of feminism, and turning the term 'feminist' into a pejorative statement.

Unigwe says women might find its antidote in her home continent of Africa, where community-centric, gender-inclusive ideologies have been espoused in recent decades: womanism, which includes racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations; motherism, which elevates motherhood, nature, nurture, and respect for the environment; stiwanism, which entrenches equal female participation in the social transformation of Africa.

The most recent African feminism — and the one Unigwe prefers — is nego-feminism, a concept spawned by Obioma Nnaemeka, a Nigerian professor and expert in the field of gender studies and development. Taking its name from the words 'negotiation' and 'no ego', nego-feminism accommodates traditional family structures and actively incorporates in its philosophy negotiation, complementarity and collaboration.

It's a movement that seeks to advance both men and women within the traditional construct, taking the gentle approach rather than ripping women from the family bosom and setting them on their own pedestal as so many people feel Western feminism has done.

'Western feminism says that women are at the centre,' Unigwe explains. 'It's almost taboo to say that you're not an individual, that you see yourself in terms of being a mother. In nego-feminism, women are part of an extension which includes other women and their own children.'

As we mark International Women's Day today, we may reflect that things have never looked better for women in the West. Mayer is captaining industry while her baby boy sleeps in a nursery nearby; Julia Gillard is leading her country; girls everywhere are taking up opportunities never dreamed of by their grandmothers.

As the old feminist guard continues to chip away at the last vestiges of sexism and inequality, let's take a leaf out of our African sisters' book: drop the aggression and ego, nurture an embracing sisterhood, invite men to be partners in social change and work in good faith towards the inclusive society our feminist

forbears longed for.

Sex and power in the case of Cardinal Keith O'Brien

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Side Effects* (M). Director: Steven Soderbergh. Starring: Jude Law, Rooney Mara. 106 minutes**

Reflecting on the case of Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the former leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland who resigned amid accusations of sexual misconduct, journalist Catherine Deveney observed in *The Guardian* that it was power, and not homosexuality, that was at issue; commentators who accused O'Brien's detractors of a 'homophobic plot' misunderstood 'the nature of the power a spiritual director has over his seminarians'.

Deveny is right, of course. When a relationship is based in power, the party with the greater power has an ethical obligation to not act in any way that could be against the interests and wellbeing of the other. That is why sexual behaviour within relationships where power is inherent and necessary, such as between teacher and student or doctor and patient, is always ethically indefensible. And power free of ethics is a deeply unsettling thing.

It may not be immediately apparent, but just such a consideration of power is at the core of *Side Effects*, a new thriller from the prolific American filmmaker Soderbergh. In it, an upwardly mobile psychiatrist, Jonathan Banks (Law), prescribes experimental anti-depressant medication to an emotionally troubled young woman, Emily (Mara), for which he has received payment from a pharmaceutical company.

That Emily gives her consent only partly diminishes the ethical dubiousness of this commodification of her mental health. He is her doctor after all, the powerful party in the relationship. She trusts he has her best interests in mind, and his actions inherently betray this trust. This all comes to a head when a side effect apparently caused by the drug leads to tragic consequences for Emily, and professional devastation for Jonathan.

This is where things get tricky. Jonathan begins to suspect Emily has played him for a fool. He sets out to undo her, playing both detective and vigilante. As a self-appointed crusader for justice, Jonathan is the closest thing Soderbergh offers us to a hero. But, whether he is right or wrong about Emily, he is so unerringly self-interested, and so increasingly ethically compromised, that it is difficult ever to sympathise completely with him.

Truth be told, there has always been something a bit off about his interactions with Emily. His attention to her at the expense of his wife and stepson seem inappropriate, rather than workaholic in nature. At one point we learn that a former patient claimed he had an affair with her; he denies it, but his ethics are murky enough that we're prone to believe him capable of such a blatant abuse of

power. Unethical behaviour begets unethical behaviour.

There is a neatness to the way the film ends that seems irksomely trite. But what irks most is not that it is too neat and formulaic, but that none of the characters really fits the formula. There is no one to root for here; what we are left with is not a sense of justice prevailing or of good triumphing over evil, but of power reasserting its place in the natural order of things. And power free of ethics is a deeply unsettling thing.

Kids corrupted by criminal treatment

HUMAN RIGHTS

Andrew Hamilton

When it comes to responding to children who behave badly, we have come a long way. In Roman times children, like wives and slaves, were seen as possessions of the father of the house. He had the right to beat and even kill them. Under the law children over seven were treated as little adults, liable to the same punishments for crimes.

Even in 19th century England, children were sentenced to death, although the sentences were almost always commuted. In general, harsh punishment was a favoured way to encourage responsibility in children and adults.

Today conventional wisdom no longer sees children as small adults, but as people growing towards responsibility and constructive participation in society. When they break the law, the response is usually to help them find a better way. They have special courts and supportive programs. The evidence overwhelmingly suggests punishment and incarceration are ineffective in encouraging responsibility.

That is the theory. But in practice children often suffer in Australia because the welfare of the child is often trumped by the demands of a justice system focused on containment of risk and due process for wrongdoers. And that in turn is overtrumped by the the populist call to get tough on crime.

All this could be seen in the January riot at Banksia Hill Juvenile Detention Centre in Perth (pictured). It was overcrowded because the only other juvenile centre had been closed. Seventy per cent of the children there were Indigenous, and many on remand. After the riot the children were sent to Hakea adult prison.

Deserving of particular reflection in this depressing story is the way in which throughout Australia children are routinely remanded in custody, the subject of a recent report .

Remand is part of the criminal justice system. It follows apprehension by police and their decision to charge rather than to caution, and then to seek to have bail denied. On any night about 500 young people aged ten or more may be remanded in custody in Australia. Banksia Hill was typical in including a large number of Indigenous children and of children who have been remanded before.

Although remand is an effective tool for managing high risk to the community, it does not encourage children to develop social responsibility. Many children on remand appear again in children's courts and graduate to adult prisons. This is understandable. Developing the capacity to overcome problems depends on a supportive environment, a sense of self-worth and helpful companions. Remand in custody provides none of these.

Given the problems associated with remand, why do children continue to be put on remand? The reason is that, when apprehended, the child is no longer seen through the lens of their personal growth but through the framework of a justice system focused on impartiality and process in the application of law.

In any society the rule of law is important in order to assure citizens they can live safely and that their legitimate interests will be protected. The observance of law is essential for the development and confidence of any society.

The police contribute substantially to public confidence that the law will guarantee personal security and equity by apprehending law breakers and bringing them to justice. Their work naturally conditions them to understand justice as essentially retributive — about rewarding the virtuous and punishing the guilty. Other aspects of justice as restorative and as pedagogical are seen only as secondary.

This focus, of course, is reinforced by populist views of justice which hold as dogma that the more severe the punishment, the more secure and crime-free the society will become. Governments commonly respond to such popular pressure by imposing more severe penalties and by reducing flexibility in sentencing.

In this climate offending children are more likely to be seen as wrongdoers who are to be sanctioned, and as threats from which society needs to be made safe. In particular it will create a bias towards refusing bail by extending the understanding of risk of harm to the community.

When the lens through which offending children are seen is judicial, and justice is seen as retributive, the support that society offers them to become responsible adults is inevitably fragmented and neglected. When they are held on remand, some of the supports that have been put in place for them will be removed. And others, from which they may have benefited, are restricted to children at another stage of the justice system.

In this environment the destructive effects of isolation, lack of good mentoring, discouragement of personal autonomy, and exposure to destructive social values inherent in incarceration will be seen as an unfortunate but justifiable side effect of the necessary workings of justice.

This poses broader questions for workings of the justice system itself, not just for its effect on children. The effects of remand form just one small example of the cost in human, economic and social terms that is incurred when policies do not focus on the concrete effects they have on human beings.

A policy that damages people may gratify society briefly. But society will pay the price as resentment, depression and mental illness poison personal and social relationships into the next generation.

Losing Chavez the indispensable

POLITICS

Antonio Castillo

With President Hugo Chavez's death Latin America has arguably lost the most influential political leader of the last two decades and has lost one of those men that in Bertolt Brecht's prose are the 'indispensible ones'.

Caudillo is a uniquely Latin American political term that goes back to the XIX century, and during his almost 14 years in power President Chavez became its modern embodiment. With a mix of colorful rhetoric, authoritarianism and a penchant for class confrontational narrative, Chavez resurrected the image of the old *caudillo*, a charismatic leader able to create a symbiotic relationship between *el pueblo* (the people) and the government.

And unquestionably the people were at his heart. Chavez has been the champion of the socially and economically marginalised since he came to power in 1999 under the banner of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela. And he put money where his mouth was. The level of poverty, a definer of this oil rich nation, decreased thanks to a decade of social investment. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean the investment reached US$400.000 million.

The black and mulatto, the majority of the 29 million Venezuelans, worshipped him. To them Chavez was a paternal figure while for the 'blonde ones' — as he referred to the minority white elite — he was a merciless class enemy.

The connection with the people was heightened by his brilliant use of non-commercial media. His Sunday radio talk show *AlÃ³ Presidente* (*Hello Mr President*) had thousands of followers among the poor. He was media savvy. He challenged the right-wing commercial media system — accused of being behind the failed and shambolic coup of 2002 — and established TeleSur, a pan-Latin American television network that was, as he once uttered, 'a voice from Latin America and not from Atlanta'.

With a few exceptions, most western media demonised him. He was portrayed as a dictator and his government was regularly branded as a 'regime' — forgetting that he was democratically elected in vigorous political contests that outshone many in western nations. His anti-imperialist narrative made him the bÃªte noire of Washington.

Chavez transformed the political landscape of Venezuela in a dramatic way. He broke the hegemony of Venezuela's traditional political parties — the Christian Democrat COPEI and the Social Democrat Democratic Action. Muddied up to their necks in cronyism and corruption, these two parties from 1958 to 1999 took turns

to control and embezzle funds from the oil lubricated state coffers. Chavez left a more democratic society.

And along the way he also transformed the Latin American political landscape. Chavez saw himself as the heir to the legacy of Simon Bolivar, the pan-American leader and hero of the Latin American independent movement from Spain. The Chavez 'Bolivarian movement' was his most ambitious undertaking. It was the foundation of his 21st Century Socialism, an economic, social and political alternative to what he saw as a decomposed capitalist system.

As a good Bolivarian, Chavez didn't want to make this transformation alone. He sought the elusive unity and collaboration of Latin American leaders. He seduced them — especially left wing governments — with his anti-imperialist rhetoric and with the vast resources of oil at his disposal.

The result was a Caribbean storm of integrationist initiatives, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, Bank of the South, Union of South American Nations and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

Nicolas Maduro, a 51 year-old former bus driver, took over power as soon as the death of Chavez was announced. He has big shoes to fill. First of all, he will have to face an imminent showdown with the centrist Henrique Capriles — defeated by Chavez in last October's election.

However Maduro's most urgent task is to maintain the integrity of the Bolivarian movement. Without Chavez, Maduro will have to fight hard to avoid the chaotic rise of internal factions, including the less 'Chavista' and more nationalist faction represented by some prominent military officers.

The death of Chavez is the death of the first truly Latin American *caudillo* of the 21st century and it is also a marker for the modern history of the region, creating a pre- and post-Chavez chapter. And while the preservation of his legacy remains to be seen, Chavez's memory will be preserved in the many streets of Latin America soon to be named after him. That is for sure. Because that's the way Latin Americans honour great leaders.

Beware if Mr Assange goes to Canberra

MEDIA

Ray Cassin

As Australia's unofficial election campaign grinds dispiritedly towards a distant polling day, the plans of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange to seek a Victorian Senate seat are providing a diverting sideshow.

Last week those plans took a small step closer to fulfillment when the Australian Electoral Commission placed Assange's name, as a citizen residing abroad, on the electoral roll for the House of Representatives seat of Isaacs, held by Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus.

To write about Assange is to risk immediately being classed either among his tormentors or among those for whom he long ago transcended mere hero status, becoming instead a sort of messiah who will save this fallen world from treacherous politicians and their minions.

In some eyes, by having described the cult of Assange in this way I will have declared myself to be one of the tormentors.

And unfortunately, so enmeshed in whispers of conspiracy has the debate about Assange become, they may not be dissuaded if I protest that I think it risible to label him a dangerous security threat; that I think Wikileaks' publication of US diplomatic cables usefully served the peoples of the world by opening a window on to the dealings between their governments; and that I think the Swedish prosecutor should travel to London to question Assange about the sexual-assault allegations against him, rather than insisting on his extradition.

And for the record, I think the US military justice system's treatment of Bradley Manning, who is accused of providing Wikileaks with the diplomatic cables, has been brutal and appalling. So there.

My concern is not with Assange's activities as editor-in-chief of Wikileaks. Nor is it with the related debate about whether Wikileaks and similar websites are a democratic means of wresting control of the dissemination of information from traditional news media (which, to Assange cultists, are as untrusworthy as the governments they purport to cover).

It is not the Assange who aspired to strut the global stage, whether as messiah or as a naughty boy, who bothers me. It is the Assange of recently diminished ambition, who now apparently aspires only to strut the corridors of Parliament House.

I am not suggesting, of course, that he should be barred from nominating as a candidate. He possesses the same right to do so as any other citizen who has not been convicted of a crime. And I acknowledge that, as some have suggested, entering the Senate race may be a ruse intended to forestall his arrest and

extradition (though just how that is supposed to work is unclear).

But so far there is no reason not to accept the Senate plan at face value. Prominent Australians are organising support for his candidacy, and it seems that Assange in Victoria and the lawyer and activist Kellie Tranter in NSW will run under the banner of the Wikileaks Party.

And that's what niggles. The Wikileaks Party. Think about that name. Wikileaks, Assange assured the world during his editor-in-chief, pre-Ecuadorean embassy days, existed to hold governments to account. All of them. And it was therefore necessarily independent of them.

Whether or not one accepted Assange's self-description as a journalist, or preferred to call him a source, as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* did during their alliances with him, Wikileaks and traditional news media had one claim in common: they could be trusted to report fairly on political process because they were not part of it.

The further claim of Wikileaks was that its claim was the stronger, because it was not beholden to any other corporate, sectional or private interest, either. Wikileaks, so the argument went, was what the traditional media had only pretended to be.

Perhaps it was. But what of Assange? The reality is that the man who, like so many before him, promised to keep the bastards honest is now intent on joining the bastards.

One could, of course, maintain that he won't be like other politicians, that he won't really be a 'politician' at all. And some earnest cultists probably will maintain that.

But would it not be more honest to say that in the trajectory from journalistic messiah to expat candidate Assange has, unintentionally, given us a salutary election-year lesson. The democratic process, for all its frustrations and openness to corruption, and for all the venality of most of its practitioners, remains all we've got. Beware those who promise to save us from it.

The fable of Benedict's red shoes

RELIGION

Philip Harvey

In 1948 the British masters Powell and Pressburger made a film called *The Red Shoes*. Moira Shearer played a ballerina whose dream is to perform on stage. She gets her wish, playing in a new production wearing special shoes. They take her places she has never been and always wanted to go.

But she cannot take them off, and is trapped in an unending cycle of dance. Her one hope of escape from this growing nightmare is to take off the red shoes, but can she?

It is a modern fable, based on a story by Hans Christian Andersen. In the original a vain, spoilt girl tricks her adoptive mother into buying a pair of red shoes. She shows them off in church and other places, only to find that the shoes take over. They dance her everywhere. She is cursed by an angel and forced to wear them forever.

Even when her feet are amputated the shoes keep showing up and dancing before her eyes. Only after repeated efforts to seek forgiveness, to be humbled, is the girl finally forgiven.

The Red Shoes would, for obvious reasons, come to my mind during the last pontificate. It's hard to trace the rumour that Benedict XVI's shoes were designed by Prada. Perhaps it was just a mischievous allusion to *The Devil Wears Prada*, but nothing so vulgar! The Pope's shoes were actually made by a local Vatican shoemaker out the back of Borgo Pio and one thing you had to say about them, they were not the shoes of a fisherman.

Whatever Benedict had in mind when he donned his gay apparel will go with him to the grave, but one reason seems to be a message that popes are unique. Because John Paul II wore brown Polish loafers, and no one paid much mind to his predecessors' footwear, Benedict's stepping out caused a sensation. Sydney went seismic.

Popes in previous centuries wore red shoes, hence Benedict's harking back to an age of papal prestige. He would know that in Byzantium only three people were allowed to wear red shoes: the Emperor, the Empress, and the Pope. They are symbols of imperial power, in keeping with the opulent dress sense exhibited by monarchs. Even on a normal day, Queen Elizabeth II is still the best-dressed person in the room. Power treads the boards.

Benedict is a wily fox, which is why we can be sure his red shoes were there to invite symbolic interpretations. Only thing is, red shoes have a life of their own. They take the wearer where he would not go. He has always wanted total control, but it's the red shoes that control him.

The only way this giddy madness can stop is by taking them off, which Benedict did on 11 February when he announced his resignation. The cardinals stared at one another in disbelief. They were living in a fable.

Benedict's close theological friend Rowan Williams teaches a theology of letting go of control. 'For the Spirit to be free in us, our expectations of possession and understanding and control need to go,' he says . 'Our expectations of being in charge have to go, and any experience whether grievous or joyful that begins to break our hold of control, any such experience is the beginning of an opening to the Holy Spirit.'

Letting go of control lets the Spirit in, and something new happens. This is what seems to be happening now that Benedict has taken off the red shoes. Almost anything could happen, and it won't be easy for anyone.

Williams wears sensible black shoes. When Archbishop of Canterbury he rarely wore a purple shirt, but plain black, itself a break with tradition. To wear black was an example to others about not showing off. It was about sharing the humility of a servant and was of a piece with his reintroduction after 400 years of the practice of the Archbishop himself washing the feet of 12 others at Maundy Thursday services in Canterbury Cathedral.

At foot washing, participants remove socks, whether designer, off-the-rack, or holey, and shoes, black, red, whatever. The iridescent vanities of their life no longer dance before their eyes in perpetual torment; they have been put aside. Each person is on the same level as everybody else. They have let go of control. What now?

Auden dines with Barry Humphries

POETRY

Peter Gebhardt

Auden arrives in New York

26 January 1939, Australia Day

When he sailed into Liberty's arms
He entered a new harbour.
When he sailed into my dream,
He began to talk of *eros agape* lust
and longing, of love and self-acceptance
of how words can be flowers
or dead leaves, can be bed-mates
or jailers in the night.
The face that was etched, finely grained,
was still wide and open, corruscated and corrugated
would come in time with whiskey and smokes.
The habits of living are often
The habits of dying — *dulce et decorum est*.
We do remember him more than others.

Devices for comfort

It is perfectly consistent with Wystan's habits day by day,
That under the dining table there should be a chamber pot
Antique and ceramic in a Victorian way.
Valerie came to dinner and the Stravinskys too,
In the small Greenwich Village garret occupied by two.
Drinks flowed like the unchecked cistern,
And Wystan and Chester meddled about in the kitchen.
Valerie stretched her legs, as good secretaries do,
And, suddenly, she felt something hard against her shoe,
Peering beneath the doily she saw the pot,

Brimful and briny with the outpourings of the lot.
Manners maketh the woman, and she lifted the pot
Post-haste to its bathroom spot.
Dinner resumed. Chester was called to account,
Looking under the table he was denied his fount.
'Wystan, darling,' he cried, holding his pants, 'where's the
Zabaglione we prepared for dessert.'

W.H. Auden and B. Humphries dine together

'Every man carries with him through life a mirror,
as unique and impossible to get rid of as his shadow.'
'Did I ever tell you of the Summer Fair?
Cherry Grove was the place and we all were there.
Fancy dress was the order of the day
so I, armed in Anglicanism, dressed with cope and mitre
and all that a Bishop can wear,
gaiters gartered and tight with emoluments
I journeyed into the park where all were gay
and each of us frolicked in our own special way.'
I have this photograph of a wartime nurse,
a lady tall in stature guards the two of us
a tower of rectitude, battalion bosoms,
and mother sends this to the battlefront —
'This is a picture of a frustrated hen
who is suffering from ingrowing virginity.'
That's Auden I later learn.
Mother knew a thing or two, but
didn't give much away.
No wonder expulsion was a habit
like the Craven 'A' cigarettes she ate.
No wonder B. Humphries esquire

late of Camberwell

potted plants
potted wives and lives

picket fences

wanted to meet Wystan.

And so to an Oxford high table

where the manners were known to be stable

where corpulence was respectable,

and flatulence venerable,

and dons at dining are notoriously hospitable.

And so we learn that W.H.A.,

having spent a long time in the U.S.A.,

loved Martinis like matins

a twist of lemon

a skewer of olive

gin and vermouth

bitters for taste

not the College sherry — and well I sympathise —

which was de rigeur

sweet and passe

Auden rose to his feet

'I should like to make 49 points.'

The scholar stitched up with laughter

silence floated to the rafters

and the sherry was gulped down in all its sickliness.

'*Hic et Ille*'

This and that, here and now

a sort of fastidious compliment to pretension.

Recess for Lucky Strikes.

But, Oh! my goodness it was all good fun

and where else could you match it?
'But I have to work, or else who am I?
What I fear is that on Judgment Day
one's punishment will be to hear God
reciting by heart the poems I
would have written had my life been good.
I have the habit of art.'
And other ones innumerable.
We are all so envious my friend.
What a dinner!
Salmon entree, then beef with Yorkshire pudding.
Carpet slippers, frayed at the edges,
Drafts of 'The Dyer's Hand' dangling pocketless,
'Mirror, mirror on the wall ...
who is the most crumpled man of all?'
'Let it always be autumn under your arms,'
said Auden.
An advertiser's dreamworld copy.
'Let your armpits be charmpits,'
said Barry,
from the land where follicles are fashion
where B.O. was banished with a rub and a scrub
Lifebuoy
fragrance and fertility
oils suppurating with spermitic agility.

Outsized party power distorts democracy

POLITICS

John Warhurst

There are lessons from the pre-selection defeat, now under challenge, of ACT Liberal Senator Gary Humphries, Parliamentary Secretary to the Shadow Attorney-General, that are of wider interest.

Some, such as the ability of local pre-selectors to displace a sitting member supported by the federal party leader (in this case Tony Abbott) and the shadow front bench, seem admirably democratic. Others, such as the small pool of party members determining future parliamentary representation in a safe seat, are problematic.

Humphries is a political veteran who has held elected office since 1989, first in the ACT Legislative Assembly where he rose to be Chief Minister and then since 2003 as Senator for the ACT. He was defeated by Zed Seselja, Leader of the Opposition in the ACT Assembly since 2007, who had the support of all seven of his Assembly colleagues. Seselja twice led his party to electoral defeat, but only narrowly lost in the October 2012 elections.

The result was in part about generational change: Seselja is about 20 years younger, though Humphries is only in his mid-50s. The Young Liberals rallied strongly around Seselja. It was also partly ideological as Seselja is probably more socially conservative, though both are best classified as middle of the road Liberals. But it was largely about conflicting aspirations and organisational power.

What stands out most is that less than 200 pre-selectors voted. Seselja won 114 to 84 amid allegations of unfairness in the process that are still being ruled upon within the party. The power of this small pre-selectorate points to a broader problem in Australian politics.

In short, while the major political parties are in decline as membership based organisations, they retain disproportionate power in determining the composition of Australian legislatures.

Political party membership has now fallen to quite low levels and the major parties are not as organisationally vital or active as they ought to be. This applies to Labor as much as to the Liberals. Not only are membership levels low, but the number of active members is far smaller than the merely nominal ones whose membership commitment generally ends with their financial support.

Yet these parties effectively select most MPs, because their candidates in safe seats are almost always elected and they share the marginal seats between them. The number of Independent and minor party MPs in lower houses is miniscule other than in proportional representation systems like Tasmania and the ACT.

The Liberals rank behind Labor in Canberra, but they support and produce from

among their ranks eight members of the ACT Assembly, one Senator and occasionally a member of the House of Representatives. Yet they are a party of just 600—650 members; and only about a third of these paid up members have been ruled active enough to be eligible to vote in this pre-selection contest.

Incumbent MPs in safe seats, like the ACT Senate, often serve long terms because incumbency is usually a great advantage within their own political parties. Not only do incumbents have inherent advantages in communicating with party members but they tend to stick together and to have the support of their parliamentary leaders.

One consequence of this phenomenon is that MPs in safe seats serve long terms and some of them, like federal MPs Peter Slipper (former Liberal), Laurie Ferguson (Labor) and Bruce Scott (Nationals) stay on far too long.

Relatively small active memberships also inevitably mean that some individuals end up wearing more than one hat, such as branch officer and parliamentary staffer. Activists with multiple hats come to dominate the workings of parties. The division between the party organisation and the elected parliamentarians becomes fuzzy.

In the case of the Canberra Liberals the party president also served as a political staffer to Seselja. In these circumstances there can easily be crossed wires and perceived conflicts of interest.

Given the predominant place in Australian democracy of a few political parties it would be much healthier if these parties had larger and more active memberships. Otherwise crucial democratic decisions are left to just a few.

Fear is the enemy of democracy

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins

It's possible that future generations will judge the Bush administration's post 9/11 'War on Terror' as one of the most shameful and dangerous moments in American history. Crucial to this campaign were the 'enhanced interrogation' techniques that induced fear in order to bend the wills of those held captive. It was believed the end justified the means, and that the person's dignity, self esteem and grasp of their own reality were expendable.

We can look upon such forms of psychological torture as merely extreme manifestations of the damaging incidences of negative persuasion that are disarmingly commonplace in our society. There are still teachers and parents who prefer the pedagogy of the stick to that of the carrot. Also, political strategists are making increasing use of fear in order to persuade electors to vote for their party's candidates.

The most dramatic example of such manipulation in recent political history was the anti-Work Choices campaign that is credited with winning the 2007 Federal Election for Labor. It is widely believed that voters were paralysed by fear of losing their rights at work and their livelihood, and consequently voted the Coalition out of government because of the Work Choices legislation it had passed.

This in turn spooked the Coalition, which is now afraid to countenance workplace reform, even though it is one of its core philosophical beliefs. Last week it shelved changes to the Fair Work legislation until the second term it hopes to win in 2016. This suggests that once fear becomes the currency, individuals and groups will abandon their values and hitherto perceptions of reality in a desperate attempt to avoid the imagined catastrophe.

For its part, Labor was thoroughly disarmed by the susceptibility of the population to the myths surrounding the Coalition's ongoing 'Stop the boats' rhetoric. It subsequently wound back the reforms to asylum seeker policy that it introduced during its first term of office.

Labor adopted the Coalition's terminology, embracing the delusion that 'breaking the people smugglers' business model' was the only way it could deal with our share of the worldwide challenge of refugee flows.

Opposition Immigration spokesperson Scott Morrison showed last week that a population paralysed by fear of *dangerous and illegal boat people* ending up in its community could easily accept a premise that was blatantly untrue, and act and vote accordingly. After Morrison called for a suspension of asylum seekers being released into the community on the basis of a single violent incident.

Fairfax Media pointed out that these people are about 45 times less likely to be

charged with a crime than members of the public.

The fact that the manipulative and misleading rhetoric of a fear mongering politician appears to have more influence and credibility than a set of statistics available on the Bureau of Statistics website and reported by a major newspaper group, is a worrying sign for democracy. The press may be free, but it is impotent in a climate of induced fear in which our democratic freedoms are an illusion.

Religious schools discriminate against the vulnerable

EDUCATION

Luke Williams

She was in year nine when people started to suspect she was gay. At about that time, she says, a lesbian teacher at her Catholic school 'was kicked out', and 'people targeted me even more'. 'The teachers wouldn't do anything ... one actually joined in,' she says. Years later this former student was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and placed on medication.

Such were the experiences of one young lesbian woman, recounted in a senate inquiry submission calling for an end to exemptions which allow religious schools to discriminate against students who are transgender, gay or pregnant.

The Labor-Greens Senate committee has recommended such exemptions remain. Which means that unlike a public school, it may be lawful for a religious school to expel or discipline a student on the basis of gender identity, marital or relationship status, potential pregnancy, pregnancy, religion or sexual orientation.

The senate committee has attempted to find a middle ground. It says it's okay for students to be discriminated against in religious high schools, so long as they know and understand the school's discrimination policies and whether exemptions would operate when they enrol at the high school.

Essentially, the committee has put forward a 'freedom of contract' approach emphasising choice, compromise and pluralism: if you don't wish to adhere to the values of a religious school, choose another school. This 'choice principle' is not without merit. It represents an attempted compromise in a contentious clash of rights, and works to some extent when applied to employment in the religious sector: if you don't like it, don't work there.

But the recommendation overlooks a crucial fact: most students don't choose which high school they go to (let alone whether they will ever fall pregnant or identify as gay later in their schooling life), their parents do. So arguably, the minor isn't consenting to anything. This is an important fact when you consider they are essentially being asked to forfeit their legal rights.

Anti-discrimination law exists in part to protect the rights of vulnerable members of the community. In this regard, it is hard to ignore that first and foremost we are dealing with the legal rights of minors.

Further, some studies suggest homosexual teenagers are 14 times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers. Transgenderism is viewed a medical and biological phenomenon. In light of this it's hard to view discrimination on the basis of gender identity as anything but cruel in most circumstances.

Dr Tiffany Jones, a former school teacher and now academic at the school of education at the University of New England, submitted research to the inquiry

based on interviews she conducted with GLBTIQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer) students at religious schools. She told the inquiry they described having abuse complaints ignored by staff, being punished for reporting abuse or asked to leave their schools.

According to Jones, 'the majority of GLBTIQ students who attended religious schools rated them as homophobic spaces' and many students in religious schools suffered attempts to be 'converted to heterosexuality'.

It's difficult also to dispute the welfare needs of pregnant teenagers who can often slide into poverty and out of the education system. Certainly the overriding principle must be to keep them in school wherever possible — not force them to endure the humiliation of being made to leave.

The impact of discrimination must not be forgotten. Beyond Blue told the inquiry 'discrimination is a risk factor for poor mental health and wellbeing. Discrimination and prejudice can result in rejection by families, bullying, violence ... restricted access to resources, and internalisation of negative stereotypes.'

The right to belief, freedom of religion and the right to practice belief are legitimate rights that must be balanced against the concrete financial and psychological effects of discrimination. State intervention in religion might be undesirable, but too many religious groups have responded to the anti-discrimination debate with one-sided rights-based arguments that are completely lacking in empathy.

Jim Wallace, head of the Australian Christian Lobby, who was personally assured by our PM that the religious exemptions at schools would remain, previously told Fairfax Media in relation to the expulsion of a gay student from a high school: 'I would expect any church that found itself in that situation to do that in the most loving way that it could for the child and to reduce absolutely any negative effects ... I think it's a loving response.'

Wallace may regard this behaviour as loving, but the obvious question is whether the expelled student — almost certainly alienated from his peers, possibly having been rejected by his religious parents, maybe hating his own desires and occasionally engaging in suicide fantasies — would in fact feel loved?

Remember the Rohingyas

POLITICS

Susan Metcalfe

The recently reported deaths at sea of nearly 100 Rohingya asylum seekers from Myanmar is the starkest reminder that Australia needs to step up its efforts to improve regional protection for asylum seekers and refugees. Without cohesive regional strategies to address the needs of fleeing asylum seekers, the body count will continue to grow, and we must all take some of the blame.

When more than 30 survivors were rescued from the sinking vessel off the coast of Sri Lanka, reportedly en route to Malaysia and Australia, stories emerged of bodies thrown overboard as people died from dehydration and starvation during weeks at sea.

When the Sri Lankan navy rescued another 138 people earlier this month, one person was found dead on board. In recent days, 121 Rohingya asylum seekers were rescued from a boat found drifting off the coast of Indonesia.

In their homeland, Myanmar, the 800,000 Rohingya residents are treated as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, denied basic rights and citizenship and subjected to daily discrimination. Many have fled to Bangladesh over the years but only 30,000 are offered basic assistance in official camps. The other more than 200,000 are treated as illegal Myanmar immigrants, refused aid, and often forced to survive in squalid makeshift sites.

The inter-communal violence that erupted in Myanmar's Rakhine state in June last year has led to greater numbers fleeing in recent months. But attempts to find a safe haven over the nearest border often end in tragedy, with Bangladeshi guards ordered to arrest and return asylum seekers and forcefully turn boats back.

Children are included among those who have died at sea, with one ten-year-old girl recalling, 'we floated in the sea for four days and my younger brother starved to death'.

Other countries are just as unwelcoming. Rohingyas who try to land in Thailand are pushed back out to sea and many have died of starvation. Others are forcibly returned to Myanmar. The Thai Government recently granted six months' temporary stay to more than 1700 recent arrivals, temporarily reducing the need for further boat journeys. But the government claims it will push away future arrivals.

Around 25,000 Rohingyas are registered in Malaysia (more are unregistered) but are refused legal status and live in constant fear of arrest and deportation.

The UN Refugee Agency estimates 13,000 people left Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat last year, 500 of whom are likely to have died at sea. This year alone,

several thousand mostly Rohingyas have boarded boats in the Bay of Bengal, while 115,000 remain displaced by the violence in Myanmar. In December last year, UNHCR had raised only thirty per cent of the funds needed to care for the internally displaced in the first six months of 2013.

As members of a regional and global community, Australia, along with other countries in the region, must stop ignoring the suffering of Rohingya people and stop pretending the problem is someone else's to solve.

Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted and dehumanised minorities in the world and we must do more to ensure no asylum seeker in our region is denied access to a fair refugee determination process or to appropriate and safe living conditions. Temporary and long term solutions must be sought urgently for those in need.

Australia's new immigration minister, Brendan O'Connor, said last week that to address the problem of people using desperate measures to seek asylum, 'we need a regional approach involving countries of origin, transit and destination under the auspices of the Bali Process'. Julia Gillard has previously said her government believes 'the only way to respond to what is a regional problem is to develop regional solutions'.

But in spite of some worthy policy efforts — notably the increase in our humanitarian program to 20,000 places each year — the Gillard Government is not leading by example. Corralling people into tents in Nauru and PNG, while diverting foreign aid to run those camps for small numbers of asylum seekers is not a regional solution. Nauru is not a source, transit or destination country and has no role to play in a genuine regional approach.

Last week, Foreign Minister Bob Carr announced a further $2.5 million in emergency aid for Myanmar, with half the money to be spent on much needed shelter, clean water and sanitation in the Rakhine State. But we and other countries need to do much more to assist and draw attention to the persecution, discrimination, and neglect of Rohingya people, both inside and outside Myanmar.

Within Myanmar, Rohingyas must be granted access to the same basic rights as the wider population and allowed to become citizens. Australia must continue to place pressure on the Myanmar government to facilitate processes that will lead to equality, freedom and peace for all ethnicities and religions. Australia must take immediate action to drive multifaceted protection strategies for people who seek safe haven outside Myanmar.

In Jakarta next month, governments and NGOs will attend a UNHCR facilitated regional discussion on irregular sea movements. UNHCR hopes the meeting will lead to progress on cooperative approaches that 'could offer asylum seekers and refugees an alternative to dangerous and exploitative boat journeys'.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called for 'a far

more concerted effort by countries of the region both with regard to addressing the causes and to preventing lives being lost'. If Australia is genuinely committed to finding regional solutions and saving lives at sea, we must bring more to the table than empty words and Pacific island diversion policies that punish rather than protect vulnerable refugees.

Church blame in the frame

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Last night I attended the opening night of the Big Picture Film Festival in Sydney. The festival is the brainchild of the Reverend Bill Crews who sees a place for film enhancing the community's commitment to social justice.

On the very eve of Pope Benedict's last day in office, the program included the Australian premiere of the American documentary about clerical sexual abuse *Silence in the House of God: Mea Maxima Culpa* followed by a panel discussion with Tom Keneally, Geraldine Doogue and myself. It was a very confronting and draining night, particularly for me, the one Catholic priest in the audience.

Crews introduced the festival declaring that the common theme of all films chosen for the week was 'Hope'. For the next 90 minutes the audience took in the relentless and overwhelming portrayal of child sex abuse in the Catholic Church presented by producer Alex Gibney, focusing on the horrendous case of Fr Lawrence Murphy, who abused up to 200 children at a school for the deaf in Milwaukee.

Gibney then moves the camera to Ireland before returning to Boston and then zeroing in on the Vatican with with horrific case of Fr Maciel, the founder of the Legion of Christ.

At the end of such a cascade of abuse and cover up, what could one usefully say? We panellists identified four reservoirs of hope in the midst of all this putrid activity.

First was the dignity and persistence of the four deaf victims who persevered against the odds in outing Fr Murphy. They sought justice, compassion, transparency and safety for children in the future.

Second was the one priest who visited the home for the deaf decades ago, heard the children, and tried to blow the whistle on Fr Murphy.

Third was the realisation that everyone in the cinema had a heightened awareness of child sexual abuse. A generation ago, the community lack of awareness allowed abuse and cover ups to continue.

Fourth was the understanding that we are individuals with a plurality of associations. Some of us are members of a hierarchical, undemocratic Church, but at the same time we are members of a robust pluralist democratic society and citizens of a State which is founded on the rule of law.

We Australian Catholics know that our Church needs help from the State to ensure that the processes and structures are in place to arrest the incidence of child sexual abuse within our Church.

Moving from the screen to the Australian reality, the recent Whitlam Report into the case of Fr F and his two identified victims provides pointers for the work ahead for the Royal Commission.

In the movie, the Milwaukee police turned the victims away; the District Attorney's Office turned them away. That would be unlikely to happen today. In the case of Fr F, retired Justice Whitlam found the bishop of the day derelict in his pastoral duties. He also found that the magistrate was reckless, the prosecuting authorities too laidback, the police dilatory and the consulting psychologist out of his depth.

In the movie, the viewer is left uneasy and even outraged about the role of Church leaders all the way to the top when it comes to the case of Fr Maciel. It appears that even Pope John Paul II was at least negligent in failing to pursue the many allegations about Maciel. On the death of John Paul, the Vatican immediately ramped up the inquiries into Maciel. While Cardinal Ratzinger, as he then was, knew the problem, John Paul looked away.

Just a week ago, Geraldine Doogue and I appeared on a TV program with Archibishop Mark Coleridge who made the point that he was working closely with John Paul at the time the Maciel allegations first came to light and that it was clear that there was abuse to be investigated but that the Pope had thought the allegations simply reminiscent of the Communist smear campaigns he had experienced in Poland.

While the world waits for the election of the new pope to put the Church in order complying with the requirements of justice, compassion, transparency and safety for children, some of our most informed bishops like Coleridge and Cardinal Pell have belled the cat and told the media that government and governance of the Church have been wanting during the papacy of Benedict.

The temptation is to see notions such as justice, compassion and transparency as the preserve or obsessive concern of western liberals who don't go to Church anyway. These notions are much more universal than that; they are the contemporary, institutional rendition of gospel values.

The unaccountable hiddenness of Vatican clericalism has reached its use-by date. The God of the scriptures looks first to those deaf victims and decries the silence in the house of God.

Lets hope the Royal Commission can help us hear the voices that need to be heard for the good of us all, and for the good of the Church. And let's hope our cardinals elect someone who can insist on justice, compassion, transparency and due process within his own Curia.

Meanwhile we would all be well advised to take more seriously the notions of good and evil, grace and sin, repentance and forgiveness, individual complicity and sinful structures. Whatever our language or theological matrix, we need to own

collectively what we could have prevented institutionally. We have a responsibility to call everyone including the pope to account, and not just after they resign.

George Orwell's chicken feed solution

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Writing to Henry Miller in August 1936, George Orwell confessed to having 'a sort of belly to earth attitude and always feel[ing] uneasy when I get away from the ordinary world where grass is green, stones hard, etc'. As if to illustrate the integrity of this revelation, he interrupts the letter because he has 'to go and milk the goat'.

Orwell was living at 'The Stores', in the small Hertfordshire village of Wallington. He had rented sight unseen a ramshackle house and arrived there in April, after three months among the unemployed coal miners in the north, to write *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

He also set to work to make the 300-year-old house habitable, reclaim the weedy garden, buy a goat and some hens and open a small 'general store'. He made good progress on all these projects, so much so that when he interrupted his letter to Miller, he really did have to do the milking.

Orwell's Wallington interlude and, at the other end of his life, his retreat to Barnhill on the inhospitable Hebridean island of Jura were the two occasions when he was able to indulge his 'belly to earth' preference and his desire for peace and seclusion.

By 'belly to earth', however, Orwell meant not only the uncomplicated, hands-on approach that he brought to these places but also, pre-eminently, a close engagement and harmony with the natural world, an engagement threatened by what he judged to be the 'evil' times into which he had been born.

His diary of this time — as events in Europe deteriorated daily — is determinedly bucolic.

14-4-39: Cloudy, & a few small showers. Cold after dark. Saw two swallows (not martins) ... Wall flowers in sheltered positions are full out. No apple blossom anywhere yet. Eight eggs. For the first time M [Muriel, Orwell's goat — also the *Animal Farm* goat] gave a quart today.

15-4-39: Chilly, windy in the evening & light showers. Began clearing out rhubarb patch, otherwise busy moving hen-houses ... Saw another swallow. Thrush is sitting on eggs in our hedge ... Eight eggs.

5-8-39: Raining almost continuously until 6.30pm. Parts of the day rain extremely heavy. Baldock High Street said to have been flooded. Marrows swelling rapidly. French & runner beans 3" or 4" long. Apples growing very fast ... 9 eggs (2 small). Sold 30 @ 2/6 a score. Total this week: 77 of which 15 small.

Looked at from one point of view, Orwell's domestic diaries seem trivial. Of

course, he never intended them for publication, but when in 2009 they appeared as part of his collected works and correspondence, his characteristically detailed and meticulous record of life at The Stores, Wallington, attracted some criticism.

One reader, though keen to be on Orwell's side, reported a 'feeling of vacuity on reading his diary', while poet Gwilym Williams objected with corrosive irony: 'On this day in 1939: Belgium signed a trade treaty with France, 71 people died in the "Black Friday" bush fire in Victoria, Australia, and George Orwell's chickens laid two eggs.'

This is a typical criticism, but it misses the point on two scores: first, Orwell was under no compulsion to make his daily personal diary a compendium of world events — though he later did so with war looming; and second, it is wrong to assume that Orwell saw his recording of vegetables, weather, egg laying and other small-holder concerns as necessarily dwarfed by the great world.

On the contrary, being 'belly to earth' was crucial, in his view, to fully realised, harmonious living. It was just that national and international crises, the naked opportunism, destructive ambitions and political antagonisms of various world leaders, and jargon ill-disguised as philosophical debate all interposed themselves between the human sensibility and the natural world, between, so to speak, the belly and the unequivocal earth.

Orwell's diary of simple tasks and pleasures did not shield him from the iron truths that he continued to see clearly in his wintry, uncompromising way; nor was his fearless enunciation of them in any way softened: 'The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.'

As we contemplate the corruptions, machinations, posturings, personal vendettas, moribund language and calculated distortions to which our state and federal parliamentary discourse has now descended, we might well feel, despite our antipodean good fortune, that we live in 'evil times'.

This is of course a gloomy exaggeration. Still, there is something to be learned, some consolation to be drawn from Orwell's passionate commitment to understanding, engaging and being in tune with the rhythms and metamorphoses of the natural world. It is not a romantic attachment; rather it is at heart political.

His delight in ordinary unromantic natural scenes and his insistence on the value of meaningful quotidian pleasures and projects are quietly exultant because, as he elsewhere points out, 'neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove' of all these activities, can prevent one's enjoyment of them. They are both humbly below and triumphantly above the political sight lines.

Trust is shot for cynical NSW Premier

POLITICS

Tony Smith

People are disillusioned by allegations of corrupt behaviour in the right wing of NSW Labor. While not all such allegations result in criminal prosecutions, their frequency damages Labor's credibility as a party dedicated to public service. Widespread cynicism makes it difficult for the party leadership to sound sincere during election campaigns. It also undermines public confidence in the ideals of democratic government and social cohesion.

Political trust is fragile and can be destroyed in many ways. Plundering state finances for private gain is an obvious one, but general mendacity works just as well.

The O'Farrell Government is repeating the mistakes of its Coalition predecessor by demonstrating ideologically driven attitudes to public assets. Critics have pointed to its actions regarding the public service, education and coal seam gas mining. But one decision stands out as being arrogant and disrespectful of the community.

In its desperation to pass legislation in an entirely unrelated area, the Government courted the votes of Shooters and Fishers Party members of the upper house by promising to allow recreational shooting in National Parks.

Minority groups have every right to press governments for policy changes. Governments need to balance such pressures against countervailing demands by other groups, general community welfare and their own ethics. But even the most cynical observers must have been appalled by the paradoxical nature of this decision. The ideals implicit in reserving areas as national parks are incompatible with recreational shooting.

What is perhaps most appalling is not so much that a government might make such a blatantly political decision, but that its spokespersons attempt to justify in terms of feral pest control. It would have been far better had spokespersons advised the people of NSW to get over it, rather than thumbing their noses at valid concerns and legitimate criticisms by citing half-truths about research and dubious guarantees of supervision.

The Government supposedly had research to hand into feral animal populations. Its reluctance to release this research before taking its decision suggests either that there was no research that would bear scientific scrutiny; that the research did not suggest that 'recreational' shooting was the answer; or that the research did not support the Government's decision about where this action is most needed.

The Government has couched its assurances in passive voice. Shooters will be supervised by ... someone. Critics fear that the government has ceded its

responsibility to shooters themselves. Chances are that killing of native fauna through misidentification will go unreported, and estimates of feral animals killed will be exaggerated.

In attacking their critics, representatives of shooters have made some very irresponsible statements. If anyone is killed, and this is not unlikely given the experience in other countries, then Premier O'Farrell's position will be untenable. As it is, the Government will have the blood of threatened species on its hands.

The shooters are supposed to respect limitations on their activities; to shoot only feral animals, within specified parks and at designated times. Given the record of shooters during open duck seasons, it seems unlikely that they will adhere to these rules. Shooting, to many who engage in it, is an expression of freedom. To operate within rules limits the excitement of the hunt.

Unfortunately, there is ample evidence from around the world that men with guns present a huge threat to security, wellbeing and justice. Indulging men with guns will diminish public safety.

In recent decades, Australians have begun to engage more sincerely with this unique continent. By learning how Indigenous peoples exercised custody of the land, we've learnt respect for other species and fragile ecosystems. To walk lightly on the earth is the most urgent ethical principle needed today. The O'Farrell Government's environmental credibility has been forever undermined by its decision to let hunters loose in national parks.

Furthermore, where shooters have been, animals will come to fear humans and avoid them. The opportunity for passive interaction with and observation of fauna will disappear.

Indeed, it might well be that this decision so deters public interest in parks that the Government will claim justification for cutting funding to parks and even declassifying some areas. Such an outcome would suit the rabid pro-development lobby which holds great power in Sydney. This politics of the self-fulfilling prophesy is yet another tried and tested tactic of the cynical.

While a government might claim that a crushing election win gives it a general mandate stretching into areas not specified during the campaign, a general mandate cannot justify extreme actions. Taking regrettable decisions based on rigid ideology is not recommended, and nor is trying to defend the indefensible.

Instead of persisting in propping up their lame arguments about national parks, the O'Farrell Government would cause less harm to public trust by breaking a cynical bargain made with a few shooters who lack both public support and public respect.

Anatomy of a papal scandal

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

By Renaissance standards the prelude to the papal election has been tranquil. But it has still been more boisterous than any in living memory. Almost every day the media have published stories of scandals, of gossip about the company cardinals keep, of discord within the Curia (the papal civil service) and of discreditable conduct by high officials that allegedly prompted Pope Benedict to resign.

The run of stories has led Cardinal Bertone, the Secretary of State, to claim that the media are trying to influence the result of the election by bringing the Curia into disrepute.

The media coverage and the Vatican response to it deserve reflection.

Some things are obvious. The reporting has emphasised the lurid and thrived on speculation.

In looking for a master story within which to situate the choice of the next pope, many commentators have naturally retailed the current default story of the Catholic Church: its identification with sexual abuse. But they have drawn attention beyond the sexual abuse of children and its cover up to accusations made against cardinals and others who have been unfaithful to their commitment to live chaste lives. This touches on governance.

Like sex, scandals in governance attract an avid audience. So the master story of the papal election has become one of governance in disarray — of Vatican departments riven by ambition, scandal and acrimony. Even if the reports are not true, hearers begin to wonder who leaked them, and in whose interest.

Cardinal Bertone is certainly right to surmise that this form of media coverage will encourage belief among cardinals as well as others that a radical reform of church governance is necessary. But what kind of reform?

The Curia is a whipping boy for critics of different persuasions. It is variously regarded as being too conservative, too strong, too weak, too out of touch, too in touch with unrepresentative Catholics in local churches, too arrogant, too clerical, too Italian in composition, too powerful or too weak, too pious or too worldly. Critics united in the desire to reform the Curia are quickly divided when they discuss in detail what reform should look like.

The Catholic Church is distinctive in the weight it places on its local and international dimensions and the symbolic representation of each dimension by local bishops and the Bishop of Rome respectively. The responsibility of the Bishop of Rome is to confirm his brother bishops in unity of faith. This involves encouraging local churches to live faithfully and be self-reflective about identifying

the Gospel with the values of their culture.

What the Pope's role of encouraging the unity of the local churches entails in concrete terms is the subject of lively discussion among Catholics. Many argue that the Catholic Church is too centralised in its governance, and that more autonomy should be given to local churches. Others demand stronger central governance to deal effectively, for example, with clerical sexual abuse.

These debates extend inevitably to the role of the Curia. It provides the eyes and hands that the Pope needs to understand how faith is embodied in the local churches and to encourage unity in faith. If centralised government and control are sought, the Curia will also be responsible for ensuring compliance.

In the work of any civil service, culture is all important. To work effectively the papal Curia must be characterised by trust and give priority to the service of the local churches, not to control. This requires broad experience, stored wisdom and a culture of public service. It is not evident that this professionalism will be automatically provided by prescribing national diversity or by short term postings.

If we are to judge by Australian experience the greater challenge is to build a political culture in which people are respected and consulted, and policies are not driven by economic, managerial and other ideological theories or by the passion to control. Failures like the Intervention and the cruel absurdity of asylum seeker policy betray that lack of respect. The imposition of the new liturgical translation may reflect a similar culture.

There is no magic bullet for the reform of governance. But in the case of the Catholic Church there does seem a mismatch between the structures of government that reflect a monarchic and aristocratic history and the culture required in a contemporary public service. The insistence that department heads must be cardinals, who must also be bishops, limits the pool of wisdom and skill on which can be drawn.

When civil servants are dignitaries it can also be difficult to build a culture of respect and service.

But ultimately any form of governance is known by its fruits. The fruits on display before the papal election have been shrivelled. They suggest that the new papacy will be a time for pruning, digging, fertilising and watering both the Catholic Church as a whole and in Rome in particular.

Oscar-winning racism in Hollywood's mixed bag

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

Now that the 85th Academy Awards have come and gone, Eureka Street's *assistant editor and resident film buff Tim Kroenert takes a moment to reflect on the slights and successes of Hollywood's night of nights.*

Nice surprises:

Best Director — Ang Lee (*Life of Pi*)

It was pleasing to see Lee named Best Director for *Life of Pi* (pictured). (No doubt the outcome was also surprising to many commentators who had thought Stephen Spielberg would win for his impressive yet elegiac *Lincoln*.) Lee turned Canadian writer Yann Martel's popular 2001 novel about a religiously voracious Indian teenager who becomes lost at sea with a Bengal tiger into a luscious piece of visual art that (especially in 3-D on the big screen) immerses the viewer in the mystical dimensions of this gruelling, transcendent survival tale.

Read full review of *Life of Pi*

***Best Picture* — Argo**

It was also gratifying to see the 'people's choice', *Argo*, named Best Picture, especially after its director Ben Affleck missed out on a Best Director nod (despite winning a Golden Globe and a BAFTA for his work). This film about an eccentric CIA rescue mission during the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis is a highly entertaining and finely honed thriller (the work done by its editors was rightly acknowledged with an Oscar). The fact that it largely sidelines the cause and character of the Iranians is a significant shortcoming of an otherwise excellent film.

Best Actress in a Supporting Role — Anne Hathaway (*Les Miserables*)

Many favoured Sally Field, who played the emotionally fractured Mary Todd Lincoln in *Lincoln*, to win in this category, despite a rather overwrought performance. For my part, I had high hopes for Hathaway, and was not disappointed. Despite her too-brief screen time, she was devastating as Fantine, the fallen heroine of *Les Miserables*, who suffers a series of injustices that erode her hope and humanity and destroy her dignity. Her rendition of 'I Dreamed a Dream' it is not a wistful lament but a gut wrenching howl of despair.

Read full review of *Les Miserables*

No surprises:

Best Actor in a Lead Role — Daniel Day-Lewis (*Lincoln*)

That Daniel Day Lewis (pictured) would be awarded Best Actor honours for his portrayal of the 16th president of the United States was the closest you could get to an Oscars night certainty. The film was almost universally praised and his performance is the main reason. Day-Lewis deserved to win; this was the kind of portrayal of a historical figure that transcends skillful impersonation to capture the character's emotional, psychological and moral intricacies.

Read full review of *Lincoln*

Best Actor in a Supporting Role — Christoph Waltz (*Django Unchained*)

The next surest thing after Day-Lewis was Christoph Waltz. In Quentin Tarrantino's bloody revenge film *Django Unchained* Waltz plays a German bounty hunter who teams up with ex-slave Django (Jamie Foxx) to free Django's wife (Kerry Washington) from a sadistic plantation owner (Leonardo DiCaprio). The film has been fairly criticised for its portrayal of African Americans (more on this below), but still there is no doubting that Waltz makes the most of every single line of golden Tarrantino dialogue.

Tarrantino's '*Gone With the Wind*' treatment

***Best Original Screenplay* — Django Unchained**

When I originally reviewed *Django Unchained* (in a post-script to my review of *Lincoln*), I described it as 'an irreverent up-yours to the idiocy of white supremacy'. I thought it was a dead-cert to win Best Original Screenplay — which it did — due in no small part to the sharp and subversive dialogue cooked up for Waltz and DiCaprio's verbal dualling. Indeed, the film does sparkle whenever these two are on screen together.

However I've tempered my enthusiasm after considering several commentaries on *Django Unchained*'s treatment of race, notably this persuasive blog by American actor Jesse Williams. After cataloguing the ways in which the film, in his view, belittles and marginalises the experiences of black slaves, Williams laments the fact that such marginalisation continues to exist seemingly unnoticed in mainstream popular culture. In this regard, the Oscar awarded to *Django Unchained* is the epitome of popular culture 'not noticing'.

Best of the no-shows

Zero Dark Thirty

That *Zero Dark Thirty* didn't win a single Oscar is less astounding than the fact that its director Kathryn Bigelow was not even nominated. The film has come under fire for condoning (or, at least, for not explicitly condemning) the use of torture in the hunt for Osama bin Laden. In fact, the sense of ethical detachment that Bigelow achieves is a great strength, causing the *viewer* to engage ethically, very deeply, as they are constantly made to question the characters' actions. This is a mark of a highly skilled and assured filmmaker.

Read full review of *Zero Dark Thirty*

***John Hawkes* — The Sessions**

That Jessica Chastain (as *Zero Dark Thirty*'s staunch and increasingly obsessed CIA agent heroine) was beaten in the Best Actress in a Lead Role category by Jennifer Lawrence (who was fine as an emotionally disturbed young widow in the offbeat rom-com *Silver Linings Playbook*) could be forgiven as a matter of taste.

On the other hand it is bewildering that John Hawkes was overlooked for his role as an intimacy-starved quadriplegic in one of last year's best films, *The Sessions* (pictured). That film was commendable for its affirmation of the dignity of those who experience disability, and its frank and humane treatment of their sexuality. Hawkes (*Deadwood*, *Winter's Bone*) proved once again that he is a character actor of chameleonesque quality, inhabiting the character's immobile but not insensitive limbs completely. He deserved a nomination.

Read full review of *The Sessions*

The extraordinary sandwiches of Sister Cook

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

When I was a Catholic schoolboy, several hundred years ago, the custom of our teachers, each a Sister of the Order of Preachers, was that if you forgot your lunch, or had it stolen under assault and occasionally battery, you were sent, curiously without ignominy, to the adjacent convent, where Sister Cook, a spherical woman with the immense burly forearms of a stevedore, would make you a peanut butter and jam sandwich, or a peanut butter and honey sandwich, your choice; and you would eat your sandwich at the huge old wooden table in her kitchen, a table as big and gnarled as a ship, as she bustled about doing this and that, and she would offer you milk or water, your choice, and she never had a tart or testy word for you, but would even occasionally haul up a tall wooden stool to the table, and perch upon it, as golden dust and swirls of flour drifted through the bars of sunlight, and ask you questions about your family, all of whom she knew, partly because your brothers and sister had sat at this same table, and eaten of the Sisters' bread and honey, and then been sent back through the tiny lush convent garden and through the vaulting wooden fence, emerging into the chaos of the schoolyard, where screaming children sprinted this way and that, some grabbing each other by the hair or necktie, until the bell rang, and we again fell into lines ordered by grade and teacher, and shuffled burbling back into the echoing hallways, therein to be educated.

Many a man has written elegiacally or bitterly of his education under the adamant will and firm hands of the Sisters, but not so many have sung the quiet corners where perhaps we were better educated than we were in our classrooms, with their rows of desks and pillars of chalk and Maps of the World. Perhaps I learned more about communion at that epic timbered table in that golden kitchen than in religion class. Perhaps I learned more about listening as prayer from Sister Cook than from any number of speakers on any number of subjects.

Perhaps I soaked up something subtle and telling and substantive and holy about service and commitment and promise from Sister Cook, who did not teach a class, nor rule the religious education curriculum, nor conduct religious ritual and observance in public, but quietly served sandwiches to more small hungry shy children than anyone can count, in her golden redolent kitchen, with its table bigger than a boat.

Sometimes there would be two of us, or even three, sitting quietly at that table, mowing through our sandwiches, using two hands to hoist the heavy drinking glasses that the Sisters used (they must have had herculean wrists, the Sisters of the Order of Preachers, after years of such glasses lifted to such lips), and Sister would wait until all of us were done, and we would mumble our heartfelt gratitude, and bring our dishes to her spotless sink, and be shown the door; and never once

that I remember did any child, including me, ever ask her about herself, her trials and travails, her delights and distractions, what music she loved, what stories, what extraordinary birds; we ran down the path toward the vaulting wooden fence, heedless; and only now do I stop and turn back and look her in the face and say thank you, Sister Cook, for your gentle and delicious gift, which was not the sandwich, savoury as peanut butter and honey can be, but you.

Inspirational Abbott's Indigenous aspiration

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Earlier this month we marked the fifth anniversary of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. The Apology was adopted by the Parliament on the motion of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and supported by the Leader of the Opposition Brendan Nelson. Their successors spoke well when passing the largely symbolic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Recognition Bill 2012.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said 'on this special anniversary we acknowledge the courage that enabled Kevin Rudd to offer the Apology and the generosity of spirit that enabled Indigenous Australians to accept it'. She spoke of the Constitution as 'a foundation document (which) is more than just a set of rules and procedures':

It can articulate a nation's sense of itself. But our nation cannot articulate such a sense of self when there are still great unanswered questions in our midst. How do we share this land and on what terms? How adequate are our national laws and symbols to express our history and hopes for the future? No gesture speaks more deeply to the healing of our nation's fabric than amending our nation's founding charter.

With a real show of bipartisanship, Tony Abbott complimented Gillard on her 'fine speech' and without any fanfare proceeded to put to rest the Howard critique of the 'black armband view' of history. He told Parliament:

Australia is a blessed country. Our climate, our land, our people, our institutions rightly make us the envy of the earth, except for one thing — we have never fully made peace with the First Australians.

This is the stain on our soul that Prime Minister Keating so movingly evoked at Redfern 21 years ago. We have to acknowledge that pre-1788 this land was as Aboriginal then as it is Australian now. Until we have acknowledged that we will be an incomplete nation and a torn people.

We only have to look across the Tasman to see how it could have been done so much better. Thanks to the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand two peoples became one nation.

So our challenge is to do now what should have been done 200 or 100 years ago to acknowledge Aboriginal people in our country's foundation document. In short, we need to atone for the omissions and for the hardness of heart of our forebears to enable us all to embrace the future as a united people.

Let's not underestimate the significance of Howard's successor giving credit to Keating for his Redfern speech, before then invoking the Treaty of Waitangi and calling for atonement.

A new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders were gathered in the public gallery for the passage of the legislation. Together with them were many of the leaders from earlier campaigns over the Northern Territory land rights legislation, Mabo, Wik, native title and reconciliation.

They then proceeded to the National Press Club which was packed to the rafters with supporters. The two speakers were two of the up-and-coming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders Tanya Hosch and Jason Glanville. Each spoke proudly of their diverse heritage .

I realised one of the benefits of the National Apology has been that Australians with a mixed heritage are now proud to proclaim it and share its benefits with the community at large. Hosch told the Press Club :

I was blessed to be raised in a family that is a model for the kind of nation I want Australia to be. A family where race isn't a divide, but an enricher ... that is proud of the many strands of its heritage, and particularly of our Indigenous heritage ... that integrates the best of all of our traditions and cultures, and which has nurtured me to play a part in bringing about this big moment in the life of our nation.

Glanville told the story of his great grandmother leaving the mission with her two year old child and coming to Cootamundra and building a home. He told us :

In the Cootamundra Town Hall, where once my great grandmother was barred from being able to vote, a stained glass window now hangs. It's a picture story. In it, she is telling bedtime stories to her grandchildren in the language of their ancestors. The town that once excluded this amazing Aboriginal woman has now immortalised her remarkable story. At long last, it has recognised her, and regards her story as a source of pride. It's time our Constitution did too.

I was privileged to sit at table with many erstwhile campaigners like Lowitja O'Donoghue, Pat Turner and Jackie Huggins. But alas, Karen Middleton was the only serving journalist from the Press Gallery to join the press gallery committee in asking questions. Later in the week, I was dining with some of the gallery and I quizzed them about their absence. They told me there was not the same interest in Indigenous affairs nowadays.

There is plenty of work to be done if the referendum is to get up in the next parliamentary term. In the wake of the National Apology, there is a new generation of Indigenous Australians able to show us the way. Hopefully our elected leaders will be aboard.

Abbott told Parliament: 'I believe we are equal to this task of completing our Constitution rather than changing it.' Hopefully there will be unanimity about what constitutes completion, and there will be patience and respect shown as we discuss what changes might be put off for another time.

Blood cancer solidarity

POETRY

Peter Mitchell

Final Straw

Our future was a sky sprinkled with daisy stars.
Sitting on the Murwillumbah XPT homeward bound,
eyes tremble, tears water-fall dry skin,
choking breath as if a swimmer gasping for air.
Was it the explosion of your troubled dreams?
Were your five knuckle arpeggios the last straw?
Through the night, a chaos of dreams: halo of purple
storm clouds, sweet talk as barbed wire, roses powder
to dust. Legs are tight knots of muscle.
With morning, considerations of independence, of being single
content the light. Legs become supple stretches in a cool, free skin.
A white care cruises a straight freeway, open windows winnow the past.

Bandit Country

1.

Some symptoms of illness are bandit country:
sudden intrusions into our lives,
the treasures of
citizenship stolen,
ruddy health shimmied away.
Life margins tumble and slide
as night lives with day and day night.
Bodies wither, legs are twigs.
Dreams snag on thorns.
Our lives are
borderless,
envelopes in the post with no address.

2.

Stick figures stand at crossroads in frayed dusk.
Coloured flags point north
and south
and east
and west,
all points on the compass benign,
without judgement.
From nor nor east, words suddenly appear,
fly through thin air,
vowels and consonants as wingtips
feather our closed eyes.
Our eyes open,
word storms smother bandit country
in black-on-white.
Diagnostic words return memory of sky,
solace of light.
Our envelopes are posted abroad.

Bonds

A lymphoma brings affiliation: disquieting
fears as bedfellows. One, a doppelganger head —
Mars-sunset eyes deep sunk, prune wrinkled hide,
cheek bones protruding like clenched fists,
hovers above the bed of respite. In the silence,
this fellow-feeling fissures the lines of my ordinary features.
The chemical triad: Epirubicin, Vincristine and
Prednisolone are calligraphies rewriting cells and
DNA strands with recombinant healing.
The hologram dissolves to the high blue nothing.
My heart shines with golden flowers

as these blooms adhere the known world.

Israel's emotional pull on Australian Jews

POLITICS

Philip Mendes

Over the past few weeks the tragedy of young Israeli-Australian Ben Zygier has dominated the airwaves. Given that I am friendly with and wish to respect the privacy of the Zygier family I will write more about the general issues rather than the specifics of that case. Specifically I would like to address the issue of divided loyalties which has been raised by a number of commentators in an ill-informed and contentious way.

It has often been argued that Australian Jews have a particularly close identification with the State of Israel. For example, a 2009 study by the Monash University Centre for Jewish Civilisation found that 80 per cent of Australian Jews regarded themselves as Zionists, 76 per cent felt a special fear if Israel was perceived to be in danger, 74 per cent had relatives living in Israel, and 86 per cent had visited Israel.

Australian Jews have the highest per capita rate of *aliyah* (emigration to Israel) in the Western world. There is a strong political influence of Zionist groups within Jewish communal structures, significant Zionist education in the Jewish day-school system, high participation rates in Zionist youth movements, extensive Jewish fundraising and advocacy on behalf of Israel, and regular coverage of Israel-related stories in the weekly *Australian Jewish News*.

This Zionist identity is politically and religiously diverse. For example, the Zionist youth movements vary from the secular left Hashomer Hatzair whose adherents seek to live on collectivist *kibbutzim* which favour peace and reconciliation with the Palestinians, to Bnei Akiva on the religious right whose graduates often aspire to live on settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The reasons for this intense connection with Israel are both historical and current. One factor is that Australia has a comparatively high number of Holocaust survivors or children of survivors. The establishment of Israel is regarded by Jews as both an atonement by the international community for failing to prevent the Holocaust, and an ongoing insurance policy that ensures Jews will always have a sanctuary from anti-Semitism.

Another factor is the ongoing Arab campaign to delegitimise Israel. Given the historical Jewish experience of powerlessness and genocide, many Jews genuinely fear that Israel is threatened by destruction.

This Jewish support for Israel is hardly unique in our multicultural society. It mirrors the support many Australian ethnic groups offer to their Ã©migrÃ© homeland.

This is seen in nationalist politics (Australian Greeks holding rallies on the issue

of Macedonia, Australian Serbs and Croatians voicing their opinions on the Balkans, Australian Arabs supporting the Palestinians) and sporting loyalties (Australian Pakistanis or Sri Lankans cheering visiting cricket teams). Most recently, there has been the case of some Australian Arabs volunteering to fight (and a few being tragically killed) in the Syrian Civil War.

Some Australians may shake their heads in bewilderment at these expressions of dual loyalties. Australia is by any measure one of the best countries in the world to live in. It is quiet, affluent, tolerant and peaceful with virtually no political or ethnic/religious-related violence. Thousands of refugees are literally dying to come here.

Yet perhaps this sedateness and geographical isolation explains why some Australians of ethnic background, who were born in Australia and may not have even visited the homelands of their parents, feel intense identifications with events elsewhere. Sometimes home can be in two places, both where you live and where your heart is.

Even though most Australian Jews hail from Europe, not Israel, experiences of historical oppression and a collective culture of education and learning have propelled Jews to be disproportionately involved in political and ideological activities and debates. They feel an intense connection with the robust and existential political events around the future of Israel which contrast so sharply with the laidback nature of Australian life.

For most Australians who emigrate to Israel there is no sense of divided loyalties. Australia and Israel have a long history of friendship, and there is little prospect of conflict between them. Jews do not make *aliyah* because they are rejecting Australia, but rather because they feel a more emotional connection with Israel.

And there are many success stories. A couple of the most prominent international spokespersons for the Israeli Government in recent years have been Australians. My own aunt and uncle departed Melbourne in 1974, and successfully integrated into Israeli life, bringing up their children and grandchildren.

Equally, many Jewish immigrants to Israel quietly return to Australia after a few years, worn down not only by the difficulties of adjusting to a new language and culture, but also by the special demands of living in a semi-permanent war zone.

I do suspect that some Australians, Jewish and otherwise, may bring from their childhoods in tranquil Australia a special degree of idealism and innocence to their involvement in alternative homelands and conflicts. And it is perhaps this, rather than spy-catcher conspiracy theories, which best explains what happened not only to Zygier, but also to other young Australians who have recently died in conflicts in the Middle East.

Sports fans' idolatry makes monsters of heroes

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins

The lives of many ordinary people are focused on sporting heroes, who act as their proxies. Although they do not know their idol personally, their devotion enables them to feel in some sense that they have themselves reached the hero's extremes of physical and mental endeavour.

At its best, this delusion can have a positive social effect, in that it can make sports fans feel good about themselves, and infect their families and those around them with a positive outlook.

But essentially, many fantastic sporting achievements are just that. They are fantastic in the sense that what the hero has done is indeed great, but not well grounded in the reality of the give and take of human relationships and day to day activity in their lives.

The regrettable truth is that highly successful athletes are often deeply flawed human beings. Their success is frequently accompanied by a range of narcissistic and selfish behaviours that exploit and damage other people who are close to them in their personal and professional lives.

This appears to be the case with Oscar Pistorius, as it was with other sporting greats including Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods and Shane Warne. Australia's badly behaved swimmers from the 2012 London Olympics could well join them in the future.

With regard to Armstrong, it's possible to argue that his bullying, intimidation and misrepresentation of those around him — which was designed to protect his clean image — was a greater wrong than his use of the performance-enhancing drugs.

The paradox is that the activities of successful athletes off the sporting field often include establishing or helping charities, which are dedicated to helping those who are less fortunate. But, whether intentional or not, these activities can work to conceal the truth about the athlete's flawed record in their treatment of fellow human beings, and they also reinforce the damaging myth of his or her super-human greatness.

In seeking to curb the excessive behaviour of sporting heroes, we can call for greater regulation and surveillance. But we can also examine our own behaviour.

We should not discount the role the blindness of our own idolatry can have in fuelling the arrogance and inflated sense of self worth of these people. It's one thing to praise them for the mental rigour that facilitates their single-minded pursuit of particular goals on the sporting field, but another for us to continue to

support them when it's clear that they have brought this single-mindedness to their abuse of people off the sporting field.

Church helps set gay captives free

RELIGION

Paul Mitchell

Slavery, as depicted in recent films such as *Lincoln* and *Django Unchained*, might seem unthinkable to modern audiences. But for centuries, it was the norm. What's more, the worldwide church, due to suspect interpretations of New Testament passages, acquiesced in it. Yet it was Christians like William Wilberforce, leading the movement to abolish slavery in the British Empire, who helped society — and the church — overcome this evil.

Today, millions of gay men and lesbian women in every country, culture and religion of the world are in chains; bound by prejudice, hatred and fear. The Jesus I try to follow said he'd come to set captives free. Yet the church, far from setting gay men and women free, contributes one of the loudest voices to keeping them captive.

I have been a Christian since I was 20. When I was 25, I joined an evangelical church that had as its main ministry a program for 'healing' gays and lesbians. 'Healing' meant to become either celibate or heterosexual.

This program's participants eventually realised they couldn't change their sexuality. And when I talk to them after their involvement with the program, I discover something else didn't change: their desire to follow Jesus. To be Christians. Yet they still remained captives as they struggled to find a church where they could belong.

I attend a small church now, part of a mainstream denomination. I went to church a few Sundays ago and from the pulpit heard the story of how this little church had helped set a gay captive free.

'David' came to Australia as a refugee. His parents raised him in the church, and over time he found faith for himself. He believed God loved him. Around the same time, he started to feel different. He couldn't understand it, he felt lonely and distressed, and it wasn't until his late teens that he realised what his difference meant.

He had no one to talk to about it. And the place he most wanted to talk about it — church — had given him the message since he was a kid that gays could not be Christians. He went from church to church, but kept facing the same message. If he felt comfortable enough to admit he was gay, he was told he could stay, if he changed.

David felt gutted that church wasn't a place he could be himself. He contemplated taking his own life. But he couldn't give up on the God he believed loved him for who he was. David held onto the words of the psalmist: 'You knitted

me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.'

He couldn't give up on God, or the church. He read a line in my church's values statement ('we regard each person as a valuable member regardless of ... sexual orientation') and decided, 'Let's see if they're serious.'

Six months later, a few Sundays ago, David stood in front of the congregation and said yes, you are serious. He described his years of struggle, his depression and loneliness. Then he said he now at last felt accepted in a church. There were plenty of tears, from him and the congregation, and when he sat down, there was a round of spontaneous applause. Over coffee, the men and women of the church thronged around him.

David is no longer a captive. He is free to be himself, at least where church is concerned. He's soon to undertake the formal membership process. He has also been offered a role working with the church's young adults.

I'm excited our church helped snip his chains. At the same time, I'm horrified he ever had to experience them, and that he was rejected so many times by the church when he already felt rejected elsewhere. I'm also angry that, when it comes to gays and lesbians' social captivity in Australia as a result of homophobia, it is not the church leading the way to cut their chains. It's rappers, footballers and celebrities.

The church should be embarrassed. In the future, I believe people will watch movies depicting gays and lesbians' previous captivity, and find it unthinkable. Hopefully Christians won't be picketing the cinemas.