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Pilgrims in the landscape of lament

EUROPEAN DIARY

Benedict Coleridge

The tiny village of Lojane is perched in the foothills, 500m from the Macedonian-Serbian border. Mud-walled houses surround a dirt yard, and the thin minarets of a diminutive mosque rise above the rooftops. As we drove into the village, dogs, chickens and children scampered out of the way and men looked curiously from doorways.

We had come from Skopje, a city of dubious character, surrounded by mountains, whose isolation belies the evidence of its historical experience as a meeting point: amidst a crumbling cityscape there are ancient Orthodox churches and Ottoman mosques; a Byzantine fortress perches on the hill above the city.

I was in Macedonia for research, interviewing irregular migrants and asylum seekers for a report on the Western Balkans as a transit route for mixed migration flows to the European Union. Hence this journey from Skopje, through the mountains to meet the mufti of Lojane, a stone's throw from border.

Greeting the mufti I couldn't help thinking of Hadji Murat, Tolstoy's Caucasian warrior, with his fierce eyebrows and intimidating beard. The mufti was a tad too portly to ride the slopes on horseback but, surrounded by henchmen of various shapes and sizes, he looked very much in charge.

The village was hosting several hundred irregular migrants from every country imaginable, from Pakistan to Nigeria. They were camping out in abandoned houses and sheds, paying the locals rent, scavenging in bins for food. Every night, large groups of them departed across the mountainous border, to be replaced by new arrivals.

This tiny village is now at the centre of the irregular migration route to the European Union and is struggling to cope with increasing numbers of migrants. In that sense it's a microcosm of the wider Macedonian situation.

The immigration detention facilities in Skopje are always full of new arrivals; undocumented migrants from Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria. In the prison and reception centre, men slept on the floor amidst the cooking pots, the air was thick and overpowering; rubbish filled the corridors, young children were thrown in with everyone else, living in shit-smearred rooms. The diet consisted of thin soup on weekdays, nothing on weekends.

One interviewee was the same age as me and had the same name — Benedict. But he looked old. He had left Nigeria and walked to Macedonia; four years of walking. His feet were covered in callouses, dried and thickened. In the course of these wanderings he had been kidnapped, ransomed, beaten and starved.

Another, Ghulam Abbas, had been kidnapped, shot three times (the bullets

were still lodged in his arm), escaped and lost all contact with his family. And so the stories continued — evil, suffering and loss.

One evening we drove through the mountains on the Albanian border and, as the sun was going down, stopped at the Orthodox monastery of St Jovan Bigorski (pictured). It was founded in the 11th century by the monk John of Debar, who, while hiking in the mountains, witnessed an icon of St Jovan Bigorski hovering above a mountain spring. After slaking his thirst and recovering his equilibrium, he decided to establish himself on the spot.

The great fortress-monastery is perched on the slopes of a deep ravine, and facing it across the river is a dark mountain range with snow on the peaks. A monk in a black cassock led us up to the high tower where the 'old father' greeted us and we sat down to tea and spoonfuls of jam. The sun went down behind the mountains and the bells of the monastery church started ringing.

Bowing and kissing the hand of the old father, we took our leave and passed under the great gate, pausing to drink from the spring where the wandering John had his vision; the water was cold and fresh, the lights had come on in the monastery windows, and I could hear the sound of the monks chanting the evening prayer, singing before the tomb of the pilgrim monk John. And Benedict the Nigerian migrant came to mind.

The 'way of the pilgrim' is a 19th century Russian Orthodox spiritual text — the original copy lies in a monastery on Mt Athos. It features a pilgrim journeying across Russia on a spiritual quest, enduring the cold of a Siberian winter, beatings from bandits and an appalling diet — and all the while he prays ceaselessly. It's a contemplation of the spiritual life, of whether it's possible for life to become a constant prayer.

But it's also a contemplation of suffering: as the pilgrim travels he suffers — he walks barefoot through the snow, gets beaten and robbed, lives on thin crusts of bread. At the end of the text, after all his wanderings, he decides to walk to Jerusalem, to die there — life has been stripped of everything except the vision of Jerusalem.

The irregular migrants in Macedonia have come to the end of the road — they can't go back, and to go forward is to risk frostbite, kidnapping, deportation and in the end perhaps death.

Here there's a kind of immovable sadness — it's ingrained in the landscape of a life. I thought of Rilke's tenth Duino Elegy, which wanders through 'the wide landscape of Lamentation'. All of the stories of my interviewees unfolded within a vivid physical landscape, among the mountains, rivers and ravines, border checkpoints and prisons. But after listening for long enough a human landscape took shape, a landscape of lamentation.

Above all, the stories of the interviewees added a human face to Hannah

Arendt's argument: that the greatest deprivation is to be deprived of citizenship, of belonging, of the right to have rights. Think of Benedict — a person condemned to walking endlessly from country to country, through mountains in the cold.

Politicians and political philosophers alike make arguments about the vital importance of strong border controls — that they safeguard the liberal-democratic community, that they're necessary for the stability of the *polis*. Border controls may be important, but while making these arguments it's also important to keep in sight the tumultuous human scene that borders shape and delineate — the landscape of lament.

Malaysia Solution is dead in the water

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Wondering about how humanely to stop the boats and how best to build a regional response to the irregular movement of asylum seekers in our region, I spent last week in Malaysia discussing the 'Malaysia Solution' with the Malaysian Bar Council, UNHCR, PROHAM (the Society for the Promotion of Human Rights), various local NGOs and Church groups.

I was anxious to see if there might be any prospect of reviving the Malaysia Solution, but with appropriate safeguards set down by the Houston Expert Panel, after the Malaysian Election on 5 May 2013 and before the commencement of the Australian election campaign and caretaker period presumably commencing no later than 10 August 2013.

If the Gillard Government were to propose Malaysia as a regional processing country it would need to table the necessary documentation in parliament by 20 June 2013 at the latest. As recently as 27 March 2013, Prime Minister Gillard repeated the mantra:

But the problem we confront here with implementing the agreement with Malaysia is of course that the Opposition has taken the view that it would prefer to be negative, and it would prefer to see more boats. If we could implement the Malaysia agreement we would do it very rapidly. We have been prevented from doing that by the negative approach taken by the Opposition.

The Malaysia Solution proposed that Australia transfer 800 asylum seekers to Malaysia in return for Australia receiving 4000 refugees from Malaysia over the next four years.

When this idea was first floated in 2011, I was critical of it because I could not receive any clear answers about the plight of unaccompanied minors (UAMs). If they were to be included in the group of 800 transferees, the scheme would have been ethically very problematic; if they were not included, the scheme would have been unworkable because children would have come in increased numbers on later boats.

I have been generally supportive of the recommendations of the Expert Panel with the exception of their recommendations that Pacific Island facilities be reopened for offshore processing and that review of future offshore arrangements be moved from the High Court to Parliament (especially the Senate).

Both sides of the Chamber would have been well advised to heed the earlier warning of Andrew Metcalfe, past Secretary of the Immigration Department, that the Pacific Solution would not work again as a deterrent. The arrival figures since the panel reported have vindicated Metcalfe's assessment.

Shifting review of future arrangements, including a revised Malaysia Solution, to the Senate has meant it would be very difficult politically for the Gillard Government to succeed in putting in place any future offshore arrangements before the September election, given the 20 June cutoff date. There might have been a way through the political morass if the recommendations of the Expert Panel regarding Malaysia were achievable.

The new Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Brendan O'Connor has rightly said:

If the Malaysian government is expected to consider any further efforts to the agreement we have in place, they need to know from the Opposition that there is some chance that they will support it ... You cannot expect the Malaysian Government to continue down this path if they're going to be completely and utterly rejected and criticised again in a most outrageous fashion by Tony Abbott and the Opposition.

The only remote possibility of winning Opposition support would be if O'Connor and Gillard were able to satisfy all parties that they were able to sign off on all additional protections recommended by the Expert Panel. This would require a rigorous test in light of the remarks by panel member Paris Aristotle on the ABC *Lateline* program when discussing Manus Island this month. He said:

When we established the safeguards, we didn't say, 'Here's a set of safeguards to mitigate against the risks. If you can do them great; if you can't, go and do it anyway.' We were explicit. We said, 'These safeguards need to be implemented as a part of any offshore processing arrangements.'

In light of these remarks, the Government would need to address the Malaysia concerns listed by the panel:

There are concerns that relate to the non-legally binding nature of the Arrangement, the scope of oversight and monitoring mechanisms, the adequacy of pre-transfer assessments, channels for appeal and access to independent legal advice, practical options for resettlement as well as issues of compliance with international law obligations and human rights standards (particularly in relation to non-refoulement, conditions in Malaysia, standards of treatment and UAMs).

In particular, the Government would need to make the following changes recommended by the panel:

1. Provisions for UAMs and for other highly vulnerable asylum seekers need to be more explicitly detailed and agreed with Malaysia
2. A written agreement between Malaysia and UNHCR on implementation of the Arrangement
3. An effective monitoring system should be established involving 'senior officials and eminent persons from civil society in Australia and Malaysia'.

From my discussions last week in Malaysia, I do not think there is any possibility that any of these three changes could be effected between 5 May and 20 June. Unless all three changes were agreed to, there would be absolutely no prospect of the arrangement winning endorsement from the Expert Panel, let alone support from the Coalition parties or the Greens.

All of us seeking a breakthrough need to concede that O'Connor is not afforded the optimism expressed by his predecessor Chris Bowen in 2011 when he stated in his High Court affidavit that he had formed an 'understanding' from his conversations with the Malaysian Minister of Home Affairs and other Malaysian officials that the Malaysian Government 'was keen to improve its treatment of refugees and asylum seekers'. He swore:

I formed a clear belief from these discussions that the Malaysian government had made a significant conceptual shift in its thinking about how it wanted to treat refugees and asylum seekers and had begun the process of improving the protections offered to such persons. It was also clear to me that the Malaysian government was enthusiastic about using the transfer of 800 persons under the proposed arrangement as a kind of 'pilot' for their new approach to the treatment of asylum seekers generally.

He stated that Malaysia was 'actively considering' allowing work rights for all asylum seekers. No informed person in Malaysia with whom I met last week would attest these things two years on.

The situation confronting the 102,000 persons registered with UNHCR and the more than 50,000 other persons of concern to UNHCR in Malaysia has not improved since 2011. There has been no progress on work rights. There has been no conceptual shift by the Malaysian government. With over 4 million migrant workers, half of whom are undocumented, the present Malaysian government remains content to leave processing and protection of asylum seekers to the good, but very stretched, offices of UNHCR.

I applaud all efforts by the Australian Government to engage regionally on these difficult issues seeking regional solutions to regional problems. If we are to advance the issue in Malaysia, we will need to restate our interest in addressing regional problems including the overwhelming problem confronted by Malaysia, not just seeking a regional solution to the comparatively small Australian problem.

Many of the persons with whom I met last week appreciated the opportunity afforded two years ago for constructive discussions with the Malaysian government and across sectors in Malaysia. Many NGO members thought that there was in 2011, for the first time, a useful international spotlight on Malaysia's approach to asylum issues, together with constructive inter-departmental and inter-ministerial dialogue.

For the moment, Bowen has achieved all that is possible in setting down guaranteed protections within Malaysia. Second time round, O'Connor is most

unlikely to achieve any better within a six week timeframe.

He is armed with the recommendations of the Houston Expert Panel but these will count for little with Malaysian decision makers bruised by the adverse Australian publicity they received first time round, knowing that this time they must run the gauntlet of the Australian Senate before the end of June.

While acknowledging the overwhelming problems confronting asylum seekers in Malaysia, many Malaysians rightly attest that Malaysia, with its loose borders and loose systems, is a preferred destination for many asylum seekers who find natural community among their own there. If Malaysia were to assume responsibility for registering asylum seekers who were then given the right to work, real progress could be made.

Some Malaysian experts, aware that Australia is presently receiving 1—2000 boat people per month, seriously doubt that 800 transferees would provide the necessary circuit breaker as proposed two years ago when the number arriving on our shores was far less. There was a suggestion that the increase, in part, may be explained by the apprehension that Australian policy will change significantly after our September election.

A revised Malaysia Solution consistent with the recommendations of the Expert Panel is an impossibility before the Australian election, regardless of the views expressed by our Opposition and minor parties. It's dead in the water. There can be no movement in Malaysia until after both elections.

It is time for each side of politics to stop blaming each other for the increasing wave of boats and for the Gillard Government to cease invoking the unreal prospect of a revised Malaysia Solution before the election.

Maintaining empathy as Boston mourns

POLITICS

Irfan Yusuf

It makes perfect sense. You go to the hospital to find someone close to you has died or is seriously injured. You can't help but feel a greater empathy for your friend than for patients in adjacent beds or in the same ward, people you barely know.

Perhaps this explains why journalist Miranda Devine's recent piece in response to the Boston Marathon tragedy makes mention of New York, London and Beslan. She also mentions the bravery and human spirit at Bali, though its significance is that the 'Bali bombing killed 88 Australians'. No victims of acts of terror in other places are mentioned.

Devine shouldn't necessarily be criticised for her choice of examples of terrorism. The main point of her article was that when the barbarism of murderous terror strikes a place, victims and bystanders will rally to save other victims wherever possible.

Her failure to mention victims of other countries is indicative of the fact that we relate more to victims with whom we have some kind of cultural, linguistic or other affinity. Chinese newspapers will perhaps be publishing similar opinion pieces given the Chinese student who perished near the marathon finishing line.

On the other hand, one would also feel heightened empathy toward someone with an illness you can relate to or which has claimed the life of a loved one.

That might explain a tweet from @Pakistaninews which referred to a Fox News report of a strong earthquake in Papua New Guinea. In recent days, a huge earthquake and tremors have affected south eastern Iran, Pakistan and parts of India. No doubt earthquake victims will be at the forefront of Pakistani concerns, though some no doubt will also have relatives in Boston.

Our suffering and the suffering of those we love should lead to a heightened sense of empathy for those who suffer similar tragedies, even if we otherwise share little cultural affinity. In this regard, one can't help but wonder why so many other attacks come and go without receiving a similar degree of concern and coverage.

When a group of Shia Muslims from the Hazara tribe are blown to pieces by Pakistani Taliban bombs in Quetta, the blood that flows is of the same colour as that of Australians in Bali. When a suicide bomber or an American drone aircraft rips innocent civilians to shreds, the shards of their bones are made of the same substance as the bones of the 9/11 first responders.

Terrorism affects non-Americans and non-Brits and non-Australians and non-Kiwis as well. The image of the innocent face of eight-year-old Boston victim

Marty Richards will touch the hearts of all but the most heartless. Yet in Marty's name, and depending on the outcome of the investigation, we might see calls for invasions of other lands. We might see politicians, pundits, cultural warriors play the pipes of war.

Isn't this what happened after 9/11? Many were moved by the disturbing images of planes flying into skyscrapers. The resulting wave of international sympathy led to calls for invasion. Australia joined a coalition of forces to invade Afghanistan and topple the Taliban government.

It was all for the victims. The only way to avenge the death of 'our' victims was to ensure 'they' had even more victims. Ten of their eyes for one of ours.

This is hardly representative of the express wishes of terror victims and their families. Marty Richards once walked in a school peace march holding up a placard that said 'No more hurting people'.

Perhaps one of the most horrific deaths from terror was the beheading of American journalist Daniel Pearl. He was murdered in February 2002 by Pakistani extremists. The UK *Telegraph* reports that Pearl was kidnapped in January. He was told a few hours before that he would be beheaded. He resisted attempts to sedate him.

Before he was murdered, they forced him to relate his Jewish background and express sympathy with detainees in Guantanamo Bay before putting the knife to his throat once — and then again, a second time, owing to the faulty camera.

One of those present told police: 'When they were slaughtering him in front of me I thought it was a bad dream. I had seen the cutting of a goat or chicken many times, but had never seen a human being slaughtered in front me.'

One would expect Pearl's Tel Aviv-born father to despise Pakistan and Muslims. Certainly cultural warriors speaking in his son's name would encourage such sentiment. Instead, Dr Judea Pearl has established a foundation in his son's name which (amongst other things) trains journalists in Pakistan and the Middle East.

The Foundation's website states it exists 'to address the root causes' of Pearl's death. It does this by working within the principles of Pearl's life. 'These principles include uncompromised objectivity and integrity; insightful and unconventional perspective; tolerance and respect for people of all cultures; unshaken belief in the effectiveness of education and communication; and the love of music, humor, and friendship.'

Far more effective than sending other people's sons and daughters to fight other people's wars.

How an advertiser toppled a dictator

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

No (M). Director: Pablo Larrain. Starring: Gael Garcia Bernal, Antonia Zegers. 117 minutes

This gloriously low-fi Chilean historical drama must surely have been a frontrunner in a strong field contending for Best Foreign Language Film at this year's Oscars. Michael Haneke's sublime [Amour](#) deservedly won that gong, but *No*'s credentials as a formally distinctive, historically fascinating, sharply satirical and downright funny and entertaining film are nonetheless beyond question.

The action takes place in 1988 as the people of Chile prepare for a plebiscite that will ask them to vote 'Yes' or 'No' to allowing the already 15-year dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet to continue for another eight years. Pinochet's supporters are, with good reason, banking that the populace's fear of the regime and willingness to maintain the status quo will ensure a straightforward victory for the 'Yes' vote.

Part of their concession to the democratic process is to allow each campaign an equal portion of television advertising, to be broadcast each evening across all television networks. Proponents of the 'No' campaign can ostensibly use these 15-minute windows to disseminate whatever message they please (though some interference proves to be inevitable). Their instinct is to use the time to point to the brutalities of Pinochet's rule.

Enter brash young advertising executive Renã© Saavedra (Bernal). The son of a prominent socialist though himself somewhat politically apathetic, Renã© is dubious about the prospects of a campaign that focuses on finger pointing and browbeating. His rusted-on socialist colleagues are at first aghast but gradually persuaded by his conviction that rather than wallowing in negativity, they should be selling optimism.

He devises a campaign, complete with catchy jingle, around the promise of 'happiness'. The film follows these schmaltzy but undeniably stirring advertisements from conception to production to broadcast. The fact that advertising is an essentially cynical tool, which is here being used to manipulate the hearts and minds of an oppressed people, sits in tension with the undeniable rightness of the campaign's end goal.

No was shot on analog videotape, allowing the footage that was filmed in the modern day to be cut seamlessly with archival news footage and with the commercials themselves. As a result the entire film looks like it might have been broadcast on Chilean TV in 1988. To experience this in a 21st century cinema is a surreal and rewarding experience that heightens the film's palpable authenticity.

Renã© is the hero of the film, whose growth comes, if not through

politicisation, then through a growing appreciation of the historical moment in which he has become a key player. The film gives considerable attention to his relationship with his estranged, activist wife Verónica (Zegers), whose radicalism and skepticism regarding working with the system in order to change it, tests and expands him.

No's director, Larraín, is in fact the son of conservative politicians, though he himself is a vocal critic of the Pinochet years and of the right in general, especially the regime's impact on culture. 'Chile found itself unable to express itself artistically for nearly 20 years,' he has said. It is both fitting and unsurprising then that the hero of his film should be an artist whose creative drive proves to be the ultimate foil to a regime's brutal politics.

Positives of discrimination

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

The debate about the right of church and similar organisations to discriminate in employment practices is usually framed in terms of exclusion. Have such organisations the right to exclude particular categories of people from their workforce? But a more important question needs to be framed positively. Do they have the moral right to favour applicants from particular religious backgrounds and ethical convictions for some positions?

This question is sometimes answered by appealing to religious freedom, and so to the privilege of the churches that sponsor community organisations. But it is more plausibly and persuasively answered by appealing to the benefits that may accrue to the people whom the organisations exist to serve.

What matters most to good community organisations is a deep respect for the human dignity of the people whom they serve, and the determination that this should characterise all their dealings with them. This respect is grounded in the conviction that each human being is precious and makes a claim on us, independent of their wealth, reputation and religious belief.

Respect is expressed above all in the way in which staff members relate to the people they serve. It extends also to the quality of the services they offer and of their advocacy. If you respect people you will want to offer them the best service available and to make their case publicly in the most effective way. A proper professionalism is calibrated by commitment to people in need, not vice versa.

Respect also characterises the relationships between those who work in the organisation, and so all the human exchanges that form its daily life. This high respect for human dignity, of course, is always an ideal. The reality is always flawed and partial. Respect always needs nurturing.

In organisations where the focus on respect remains strong, the staff will have appropriated an ethical code and translated it into predictable practice. By ethical code I do not mean an abstract philosophy or a set of religious teachings that are taught explicitly but rather a coherence between values and actions from which an observer would infer a consistent ethical framework.

Such codes are learned primarily by imitation and by doing, not theoretically. They are communicated in such phrases as, 'That's not how we treat people here'.

In faith organisations (and in others that are inspired by a similar overarching world view), this ethical framework is supported by tradition.

It involves the constant weaving and reweaving of the history of the organisation, stories of its key decisions and crystallisations of the faith and symbols that convey its central values, into the perplexities and struggles of staff

as they meet the demands and challenges of their relationships with the persons whom they serve. Each time these stories are told, they lead to reflection on current practices and how adequately they embody respect.

Traditions are not handed on in community organisations simply to provide information about the past, still less to indoctrinate staff in the beliefs of the sponsoring church.

The purpose is to strengthen a shared commitment to respect for the people served. Given that most staff are unlikely to be active members of the sponsoring church, the stories and symbols that incorporate respect will be introduced in a style that allows participants to own them as they will.

They are important because they give the staff a common point of reference for talking about what matters most in the structure and life of the organisation. They allow people to use words like love, wonder and faithfulness that are absent from the language of welfare, but which fill out what is entailed in respect.

This process addresses the challenge faced by most community organisations: how to sustain and reaffirm in the face of change the values that mattered in their beginnings. The replacement of key staff members, growth in size and complexity, changes in social and political context and challenges of economic viability demand such a tight focus on practical problem solving that less tangible qualities like respect can fall into shade and rust away.

That is why the communication of the tradition and of a language fit to describe the respect on which the organisation is built is so important. But if it is to happen, some senior staff members responsible for passing on the tradition must have integrated in their own lives the faith and the commitment to respect.

In these cases a particular religious background and ethical values may be required for the position, not because it satisfies the demands of the sponsoring church, but to ensure that those whom the organisation serves continue to be treated with great respect.

Greece's brush with linguicide

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

My mother, determined and idealistic creature that she was, struggled to bring me up a lady. 'Never make a scene, dear,' was an article of faith. But, she added, there is such a thing as righteous indignation. I like to think I was righteously indignant last week, but hopping mad was probably a more accurate description.

The reason for this was the latest arrogant and lunatic notion of the Troika. Not content with rolling back the concept of the welfare state in several countries, the European Commission (EC), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB) considered, according to an online article, that it would make good economic sense if the Greek alphabet were scrapped in favour of the Latin one.

Was everything to be connected with the economy? At this thought I foamed at the mouth for days on end.

The article cited Troika mandarins as labelling Modern Greek a 'crazy script' that hampered tourism and trade. These same mandarins somehow estimated that the cost to Greece and Cyprus of maintaining their alphabet was 800 million euros per annum.

Well, the Troika is good at manipulating figures and even producing them out of thin air. But still, so what if the Greek alphabet was a lousy business model?

It was the label of 'crazy script', however, that really infuriated me. More like libel, really, I thought, as a red mist of rage descended. The article stated that the Irish had been persuaded to part with their Gaelic script, presumably another crazy typeface, in the mid 20th century, and had been, the implication was, all the better for it. So a timetable was mooted for the big Greek typescript changeover.

An attack on a culture's language is an efficacious way of destroying the culture itself, and scrapping an alphabet seemed to me to be the thin edge of the wedge. How dare they condemn an alphabet that had been adapted from Phoenician script as early as the eighth century BCE, while English and German writing lagged far behind?

I fretted and fumed some more, recalling Harold Pinter's brief, compelling play *Mountain Language*, in which a minority language is eradicated. And apparently the reality is that a language dies somewhere every day.

Through the murky mists of time I also remembered Daudet's story 'La Dernière Classe', in which the schoolmaster, after France's defeat by Prussia in 1871, teaches his last lesson in French: the next day the children of Alsace-Lorraine have to begin their schooling in German. M. Hamel exhorts the class to hold fast to its French: for when a population becomes enslaved, if it has its language still, it has

the key to its prison.

And I was in Greece in the 1980s when uproar broke out because PM Andreas Papandreou had introduced the monotonic system of Modern Greek, which abandoned an ancient but complicated system of three accents and rough and smooth breathings. Eighty years previously people died in Athenian street riots over the ultimately successful proposal to replace 'high' *katharevousa* with the language of the people, *dimotiki*.

So I feared the consequences of the Troika's announcement. As if things weren't bad enough.

But then I eventually looked at the date on the piece. April Fool's Day. Could it possibly be? Yes, it could. Egg on my face, then, but not mine only: a Greek-Australian magazine had taken the story up, and waxed mightily indignant, the *hoi polloi* were protesting loudly, and Twitter was tweeting like mad.

The *Athenian Anglophone*, perpetrators of the hoax, preened themselves no end, and eventually updated their site eight days later with the news that the UK *Guardian* considered their effort among the 'most frighteningly convincing April fools'.

Much relief all round, but then I read a *New York Times* piece about history departments. For decades 'history from below', the study of women, minorities and the marginalised, has been in vogue, but now bosses, bankers and brokers are being studied, as a new generation of scholars believes that 'it really is the economy, stupid'.

In such a climate, no wonder the alphabet hoax fooled so many. And how sad is that?

Australia in a sorry state as Gonski faces failure

POLITICS

Ray Cassin

On Friday Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the premiers assemble once more as the Council of Australian Governments, better known by the ugly acronym COAG. Most of the media attention will be on the Gillard Government's response to the Gonski report on education. The Commonwealth is proposing a \$14.5 billion injection into school funding, on condition that the states kick in \$1 for every \$2 from Canberra.

Most pundits expect the plan to fail because the states are unlikely to agree. Western Australia has already delivered a curt 'no', and the two most populous states, New South Wales and Victoria, have given only wary 'in principle' consent. If scrutiny of the details doesn't confirm that the cash will flow as they wish, they'll be nay-sayers, too.

Whether COAG reaches agreement or collapses in bickering, it is likely to be reported chiefly through the prism of the Gillard Government's impending electoral doom. Will Labor be able to stave off defeat by finally ushering in the education revolution Gillard proclaimed six years ago, when she was Kevin Rudd's deputy and education minister? Or will the states' intransigence seal her government's fate?

The federal ALP's consistently dire opinion-poll results make this kind of reporting inevitable. Even if Labor is swept away as predicted on 14 September, a redistribution of funds towards the poorest schools would allow it to claim it leaves a legacy of social-democratic achievement. Given the Government's dilution of the Gonski proposals, and plundering of tertiary funding to pay for them, that claim will be highly debatable.

Friday's haggling and uncertainties will not, however, be only the story of a government on life support. They will be a reminder that the constitution devised by the founders of federation in 1901 is increasingly unsuited to the realities of 21st century Australia.

If the states do give the Commonwealth's plan the thumbs-down, it will not be the first time since Labor's return to office in 2007 that Australia's creaking constitutional arrangements have made fundamental reform impossible. Gillard's difficulties in selling even 'Gonski lite' to the states are reminiscent of those the Rudd Government faced in trying to overhaul hospital funding.

Rudd and then health minister Nicola Roxon declared that they intended to end the practices of blame and cost shifting created by the fact that the states have the constitutional responsibility for administering public hospitals but are reliant on federal funding. The inducement offered to the states was a bigger pot of money in return for increased federal oversight of policy. The threat was that if they did

not agree the Commonwealth might seek to take direct control of public hospitals.

If that had happened, it would have been the most rational outcome: the same tier of government would have been responsible for running and funding the system, so there could be no cost or blame shifting. But the states — including then Labor states such as Victoria — stared Canberra down. More money was poured into the hospital system but the division of responsibility remains.

And Rudd's briefly touted plan to hold a referendum on responsibility for health care in conjunction with the 2010 federal election can in retrospect be seen as one source of his downfall. Roxon, Gillard and Treasurer Wayne Swan all opposed the idea because without the support of the states a referendum would almost certainly fail.

Their judgment was tactically correct. But the instinct, strong on both sides of politics, to evade the difficult task of constitutional reform is the chief reason why federalism has become an obstacle to good governance.

As the Senate select committee on reform of the Australian federation noted in its report last year, the disparity in revenue between the Commonwealth and the states — which has been tilting in the Commonwealth's favour ever since the introduction of a single national income tax during the Second World War — is now greater than in any other nation with a federal system of government.

Yet the constitution remains locked into the vision of 1901, when the states were largely self-funding and self-managing.

In 1901, it was still possible to speak coherently of six separate state economies. That is not so now, which is why attempts to fix federalism's faults by tilting revenue flows back in favour of the states won't solve the problem. In 1901, it mattered little that educational standards were not uniform across the nation. That certainly matters now, but it is much more difficult to resolve the differences than it ought to be.

Recognition of the problem is no longer a partisan matter. Traditionally the coalition parties contrasted their support for federalism with Labor's centralising instincts.

But John Howard, to name but one prominent conservative politician who has spoken on the matter in recent years, observed when he was still prime minister, in 2005, that if 'we were starting Australia all over again, I wouldn't support having the existing state structure. I would actually support having a national government and perhaps a series of regional governments.'

As an abstract proposition, many would agree. But of course, we are not starting Australia all over again and the strongest argument for retaining the states is that they exist.

Howard also said that no one would want to try to abolish them in the face of

resistance by state governments, and so it has proved to be. Rather than take up the gargantuan task of constitutional reform, politicians across the spectrum would rather tackle the almost as difficult task of making a broken system work for them. That is what Gillard will attempt to do on Friday.

Did Australian authorities do enough to try to save asylum seeker lives?

POLITICS

Tony Kevin

We now have another distressing and perplexing case of possible Australian failure to use intelligence information to save lives in one or two (it is still not clear) asylum seeker boat sinkings in the southern Sunda Strait, on 10 and possibly 12 April. The boat (or boats) was on route to Christmas Island, sent by a people smuggler.

I have studied and cross-referenced 12 available Australian media reports — AAP, ABC, *SMH/Age*, News Limited, and SBS, dated between 12 and 14 April. These are the main unresolved questions at time of writing this essay. More clarifications may, or may not, emerge in coming days.

The case raises similar questions to three of the fatal incidents I analysed in my 2012 book *Reluctant Rescuers* — two boats that went missing in the Sunda Strait area in 2009 and 2010, and the *Barokah* which foundered off south-eastern Java in December 2011 — and two later boats that sank in June 2012.

There are two conflicting versions of when the boat sank last week.

First, AMSA [briefed](#) media on Friday 12 April that it had informed its Indonesian counterpart BASARNAS that 'a people-smuggling vessel may have sunk in or near the Sunda Strait around 3am AEST today' (Friday 12 April — i.e., midnight 11/12 April, local time), and that 'some passengers may have been rescued by a fishing vessel'.

Michael Bachelard (in Jakarta) and Bianca Hall [reported](#) in Fairfax on 13 April that an AMSA spokeswoman said 'yesterday' (12 April) that 'they had been informed by another agency, which she would not name, that the boat needed assistance'. AMSA says it told BASARNAS all it knew. But BASARNAS complains that, because AMSA did not give it any search coordinates, BASARNAS could not undertake any search. It did not do so.

Second, there is a separate, quite well-based, stream of media [reporting](#) from 12 April on, of a reported sinking in the same area at around 11am local time on Wednesday 10 April — a full 37 hours before the event reported by AMSA. This reporting stems from a 29-year old survivor Mr Hashimi who appears to have been directly interviewed on 12 April in Bogor, where he was recovering, by Bachelard for Fairfax and by Karlis Salna for AAP.

Hashimi told them the boat had travelled for nine hours before it sank. He said there had been 72 Hazara Afghans on board, of whom 14 survived for 24 hours in the water by linking hands, before being picked up by local fishermen from Sukabumi, a town in West Java. Six people were known to have died, and 52 were

missing.

So did one or two boats sink in the southern Sunda Strait last week? AMSA has issued no clarification or detail on its reported possible sinking around midnight on Thursday night, and no survivors have come forward to confirm this time frame. On the other hand, the Hashimi story seems factually detailed and credible enough.

Could AMSA have given BASARNAS 'misleading information', as Bachelard and Hall report a BASARNAS official Mr Firdauzi alleged on Saturday? Could AMSA have itself received incorrect information as to the time of sinking from the agency which it declined to name? I assume this could have been an Australian human intelligence (AFP or ASIS) or signals intelligence (ADF) collection agency, or possibly the PSIAT, the People Smuggling Intelligence Analysis Team located in the Department of Customs and Border Protection.

Underlying this is a second big question: did the unnamed agency that briefed AMSA on the event itself know the coordinates of where the boat might have been when it got into trouble, or was last tracked? I know from my book research that it is difficult to extract from Australian officials public admissions that they are usually able through intelligence means to know with some accuracy where boats are located at sea during their unauthorised voyages to Christmas Island. Yet it is clear from the interception history that they have access to such information.

If the unnamed agency did have these coordinates, and yet did not pass them to AMSA to pass to BASARNAS, it could be complicit in the deaths of up to 58 people last week.

We need to know more about this tragedy. It is time for Customs Minister Jason Clare and his Head of Customs Department Michael Pezzullo, possibly joined by Immigration Minister Brendan O'Connor who has so far declined to comment, to give a media conference clarifying what their agencies knew about this distress at sea, when they knew it, and whether the agencies then acted properly on that knowledge in a timely and useful way, in order to try to save human lives in peril of drowning at sea. At the moment, there are more questions than answers.

A four minute ABC video interview with George Roberts online on Saturday afternoon 13 April [concludes](#) with this very sad observation:

'All we have been able to find out so far — unless things have changed since late last night — AMSA wasn't helping yet or Australian authorities weren't helping yet and Indonesia hadn't launched its own search. It seems to be the same stand-off we had last year where Australia knew there was a problem, Indonesia was incapable of being able to help, and as a result people are left in the water for hours on end.'

Surely Australian ministers cannot leave so many deaths up in the air like this? There is an accountability obligation on their agencies.

Perceval's delinquent angel

POETRY

Various

Bonnards' cat

Pierre Bonnard's *White Cat (Le Chat Blanc)* 1894

has the smug face of a cat and the whipping tail of a cat
and the four legs of a cat, only this is Impressionism: the legs are far too long
Each leg floats like those of a halved octopus not like my cat on the windowsill
But it is like the cat I saw in the movie *The Hurt Locker*
about the war where we're bringing democracy to the Middle East
Baghdad, where they need our bomb disposal teams also teams with cats
The streetscape is desolate sand on sand and the cat picks its way
skinny, white fur with a hint of ginger long long legs to clear
the rubble

Jane Downing

Perceval's delinquent angel

Perceval's delinquent angel
Is up to something
But will not reveal
That tricky intention
For eyes raised
Hands extended, it listens
For the starting gun
In the hands of a distant God

Bruce Shearer

Miniature women

Kangra Valley Paintings, 18th century

Suspended like a cloud of ambered flies
are women, caught in motion, centre stage.

It could be London, 1970s;
some confluence of history. Every page
exudes imagined scent — there's jasmine here,
despite the thrumming air-con's temperate flow:
it perfumes all the heated spaces where
bold flowered fabric blooms, where hookahs smoke.
The women talk. They read and write, listen
to music, wear their long hair loose in falls
over bare breasts and flowing robes. The men
are in the background, if they're there at all.
The caption calls this art *'a song that sings
itself'*. Faint sitar strums. It's ravishing.

Virginia Jealous

heads

the trailing
hand, a mother
waves behind her
a nibble
of fingerlings
for a child
to grasp & hold
in their absence
of touch
a nothingness
& then the horror
a wall full of Sid Nolan heads

Rory Harris

Taking the Mickey out of North Korea

POLITICS

Duncan MacLaren

It was Walter Mondale, the former US vice president, who said that anyone claiming to be an expert on North Korea was either a liar or a fool.

Since the threats of nuclear attacks against its southern neighbour and the USA, North Korea seems to have spawned many experts in the West. Most of those who are neither liars nor fools agree that the threats constitute sabre rattling by the young and untried leader, Kim Jong-un, to keep the military in check so that some reforms, especially to the command economy, can be implemented.

Others say the threats are real enough. After all, last time round under Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, the *Cheonan*, a South Korean ship, was bombed, drowning 46 seamen, and Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea was shelled, killing four people.

It is a step too far, though, to leap from what any regime which has a 'military first' policy and spends at least a quarter of its GDP on military hardware would regard as 'small fry killings' to nuclear holocaust which would mean millions of North Korean deaths but, more importantly for the regime, the end of the Kim dynasty.

I've visited North Korea twice and negotiated, with a real expert by my side, the Caritas program in the country with government officials. I have continued to keep an interest in the country as I can't quite remove from my memory the stunted bodies of orphans in small towns near Pyongyang or the medieval obstetric equipment I saw in a hospital in Wonsan or the chain gangs of ordinary citizens fixing roads in bitter winds and snow.

And that's what they allow you to see. Many counties are closed at an hour's notice because of troop movements or too many citizens dropping dead from hunger. In addition to weaponry, these are the images negotiators have to keep in their mind's eye.

But in the search for an opening to end all talk of outright war, the West makes the paranoia of North Koreans even worse with their lack of historical context, insults and lack of cultural understanding.

Koreans have long memories, both of their glittering cultural past and the annexation of the country by Japan from 1910 until 1945, when attempts were made to suppress Korean culture and traditions. The memory of that experience is perhaps softened by gangnam style, the hi-tech and the rampant consumerism of contemporary Seoul but certainly not in the more austere North where every issue is put into a historical context.

There was an uproar when the President of Uruguay was heard through a microphone he thought was turned off calling the President of Argentina, Cristina Kirchner, an 'old hag', yet we think it is okay to publish pictures of Kim Jong-un with Mickey Mouse ears, and to refer to North Korea as part of the axis of evil and to Kim Jong-il as a 'pygmy' (President Bush in 2002), 'Orwellian', 'schizophrenic' and plain 'mad'.

Insulting a proud people, no matter how weird we think the regime is, does not win friends.

We should also remember that the North Korean people have been fed propaganda about the Kim family since the founding of the republic in 1948 with little access to other information to counteract the lies.

When I was in the country, I was taken to see a primary school and shown a tableau set in the middle of the room with little chairs for the toddlers surrounding it. The tableau was of the place where Kim Il-sung, the founder, was supposed to have been born (he wasn't) with the sacred symbol of the nation, Mount Baekdu, in the background. There was a feeling of holiness about the place, and Bethlehem came to mind.

The tears and histrionics that were reactions to the news of the deaths of the grandfather and father of the current leader were not necessarily false.

It is obvious that greater dialogue is necessary, with the abolition of nuclear weapons from North Korean soil as its aim. Dialogue can only begin with putting aside the past to ensure that there is a future — a difficult call when there is no basis for trust on either side.

De Klerk talked secretly to Mandela while he was still in prison about the new South Africa that would emerge after apartheid. Something similar happened between the two arch enemies in Northern Ireland. The West is happily wooing the Burmese President who was also part of a murderous regime. Dialogue requires deep listening to the other, no matter what we think of the person opposite or what that person stands for.

In North Korea, we in Caritas said we wanted to work with disabled people. We were told there were few disabled people in the country and we quickly responded that we would work with them anyway. And we managed that and also better monitoring of our program because we treated the people and the officials as human beings, rather than as if they belonged to an axis of evil or a Mickey Mouse dress party.

There may be a lesson there for politicians.

Exceptional Thatcher and the feminist fallacy

POLITICS

Ruby Hamad

Margaret Thatcher was many things: a pioneer, a visionary, a trailblazer. But there is one thing she absolutely was not, and that is a feminist.

But that hasn't stopped many pundits from trying to paint her as exactly that. From the *Washington Post's* Alexandra Petri who called her a 'feminist triumph' to author Lionel Shriver who, in a piece as extraordinary for its misrepresentation of feminism as for its mis-remembrance of the former British PM, [bestowed](#) on Thatcher a sort of Greatest Feminist Who Ever Lived award even as she ridiculed the very existence of feminism itself.

I'm not going to dissect Thatcher's political legacy, I'll leave that to others more capable than me. What I am here to do is to strike down this belligerent notion — often put forward by conservative women who can't seem to understand that feminism is by its very nature a left-leaning ideology — that everything a woman does is 'feminist' simply by dint of the fact that it is a woman doing it.

This misguided notion — that every choice a woman makes is to be celebrated as a victory for feminism, because, well, hey, a woman made a choice — is diluting the meaning and effectiveness of feminism, enabling even women who are overtly hostile to feminism to claim the title of Champion of Women.

As feminist writer Clementine Ford [put it](#), although 'choice and the ability to freely make it is central to feminist ideology ... it doesn't follow that all choices should be accepted as feminist acts and therefore given a free pass'.

Incredibly, Petri seems put out by the fact that Thatcher is not regarded as a feminist icon, even though Petri herself quotes Thatcher declaring, 'I hate feminism. It is poison.'

Shriver, meanwhile, simply states, 'if we had more feminists like Thatcher, we'd have vastly more women in Parliament and the US Senate'. Um, no, we most certainly would not. Throughout her three terms, Thatcher appointed only [one other woman](#) to her Cabinet. Compare that to our own Julia Gillard, who, in only her second term, [made history](#) by appointing six women to the outer ministry (that's 60 per cent), and three to the Cabinet.

Feminism is not, as Petri and Shriver appear to assert, about one woman breaking through the ranks and going where no woman has before. It is about acknowledging that women are still systematically marginalised, and actively working to end this discrimination. It is also about accepting that women are no less capable than men and deserve the same opportunities. In this regard, Thatcher did nothing to help pave the way for other women.

You can't be a feminist if you reap rewards for yourself but are content to allow

the barriers barring other women to remain standing. Feminism is an ideology that fundamentally demands women be given the same rights, obligations and opportunities as men.

Thatcher was not a feminist. What she was, was *An Exceptional Woman*. The Exceptional Woman is one who is successful and brilliant, but nonetheless remains the only woman allowed to play in a male dominated game.

History, literature, and popular culture are littered with Exceptional Women. *Star Wars'* Princess Leia, *Harry Potter's* Hermione Granger and Tatum O'Neill in the baseball comedy, *The Bad News Bears*, 'the best player on the team but still the only female player on the team', all [exemplify](#) the Exceptional Woman.

Joan of Arc was an Exceptional Woman, as was Queen Hatshepsut, one of the most successful pharaohs and, according to Egyptologist [James Henry Breasted](#), 'the first great woman in history of whom we are informed'.

But great women are not necessarily feminist women. And Exceptional Women are definitely not feminist women, because they operate on the assumption that they are, well, exceptional. Whereas feminism realises the inherent potential and worth in all women, Exceptional Women succeed because of their perceived likeness, not to other women, but to men. Consequently, they make things harder, not easier, for other women.

Thatcher is not alone. Exceptional Women politicians have existed in the modern era in the East, as well as the West — see Benazir Bhutto and Indira Gandhi.

These female politicians, even those who claimed to champion women, such as Bhutto, are the antithesis of feminism because, as the Pakistani feminist organisations who quickly grew disillusioned with Bhutto's failure to implement policies which improved the lives of women can attest, they do precious little to dismantle the social structure that oppresses women.

In today's age, they are happy to revel in feminism's benefits even as they give the movement nothing in return (think Sarah Palin).

Thatcher, exceptional as she was, was not a feminist. But don't take my word for it. Take it from the Iron Lady herself. 'I owe nothing to women's lib.' she proudly [declared](#).

Turnbull's NBN will disempower the poor

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins

If completed, Labor's rollout of the National Broadband Network (NBN) would represent a triumph of social inclusion. Future-proofed high speed internet access would be available inside the homes of nearly all Australians living in built-up locations irrespective of their income or social status.

The week's good news was that the Federal Coalition has decided to back down from its previously announced plan to trash the NBN if it wins the 14 September election. It now intends to retain the NBN, but using a model that discriminates against the poor.

A Coalition government would deliver high speed internet access to street cabinets (pictured) located up to a kilometre from users' homes and business premises. The need to retain Telstra's old copper wires to complete the link would reduce speeds by a factor of around three quarters.

It would remove for most Australians the option to take advantage of broadband applications such as home medical examinations for the elderly and infirm.

But super-fast access would not be lost for those who can afford the internet equivalent of a business class flight. In many locations, it will be possible for users to pay between \$3000 and \$5000 to secure a high-speed fibre connection from the street cabinet to their premises. The majority would still need to endure the slow speeds of the Telstra copper wire cabinet to the premises connection.

This would effectively exclude them from the health, education and other benefits of the digital economy.

It is significant, and pleasing, that the Coalition has now acknowledged that some version of the NBN is necessary for Australia's future development. We may still lack the city metro or high speed intercity rail connections our peers in the developed world take for granted, due to the lack of vision of previous governments. But at least those of us who can pay will benefit from the new economy.

Those who cannot will make up the large new underclass of the digitally disadvantaged.

Opposition Communications Spokesperson Malcolm Turnbull frequently cites Britain's inequitable fibre to the cabinet (FTTN) as a model for Australia. It is a revealing coincidence that the Coalition made its NBN announcement during the week of the death of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who championed user pays as part of her often quoted principle that there is 'no such thing as society'.

The healing God of the Royal Commission

RELIGION

Fatima Measham

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has begun, with its first sitting held in Melbourne last week. Expectations are high; relief runs deep. Both commissioners and victims will be treading a harrowing path together in the coming months and years. It is bound to be a national catharsis.

The six commissioners expect to receive more than 5000 submissions. Orders have already been served on the Catholic Church, its insurer, the Salvation Army and the NSW Director of Public Prosecutions. The Commission foresees that it will miss the 2015 deadline for a full report, due to the monumental scope.

Though it will not be prosecuting criminal cases, it has established links with state and territory police. There is also a focus on policy corrections for institutions which are found to have failed in their duty of care. The prosecutorial and legal outcomes from the commission will be significant. But other wounds bear considering.

The Catholic Church is placed uniquely among institutions under scrutiny. The trust that laypeople hold in priests and other vowed religious is not the same trust held in teachers, doctors and coaches. It is sourced from the stories that feed their faith.

The shepherd, in particular, is an abiding image of God. 'The Lord is my shepherd,' goes one of the more famous biblical passages shared by Jews and Christians. 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me.'

The words provide a mirror for Jesus, who casts himself as the good shepherd, who would leave 99 of his flock to look for the one that is lost, who would lay down his life for them all. When his disciple Peter asserts his love, Jesus tells him to feed the lambs and sheep, to look after them. This is the Peter to whom Catholic priests, religious brothers and sisters, bishops and popes trace back their authority and ministry.

This is the context in which the depth of betrayal must be understood, as the Royal Commission progresses. These aren't merely images and stories; they are the bases of a Christian understanding of a loving God. It flavours public expectations of his earthly envoys. Yet no one seemed to be at the gate when the wolves came.

There is no overstating the distress that this has caused the faithful. The hurt and anger can be overwhelming. It is impossible to reconcile with the scale and pattern of cruelty. The undeserved stain on the many religious whom I know to be uncommonly decent is also enraging.

The Royal Commission is thus received as a purgative for a particular toxicity that has coursed through our institutions for too long. Rather than an exercise in self-flagellation, it is an opportunity to walk in solidarity with those who have been hurt. It is cause for hope.

To its credit, the Australian Catholic Church has released victims from confidentiality agreements, so they may add their story to those that will be gathered by the commissioners. The fact that such confidentiality was ever a feature of church process reflects poorly on officials. It is a business of shadows, which look set to be dispelled.

As head commissioner Justice Peter McLellan puts it, part of their task involves bearing witness. It is a completely apt approach for any royal commission, but it holds special resonance in the Christian tradition.

To bear witness is to listen closely and watch, to allow room for unravelling. It is to value a person's story and accept that suffering is its own truth. It is to expose yourself. It is to tread with care on holy ground.

This means keeping from inserting yourself into the scene, respecting the space that has been given over to victims. It may be difficult for some in our community to restrain themselves in the coming months. But they must. We must also take care of our own safety, as there are limits to the number of personal accounts we can hear or read in one day. It will be an arduous process, with public hearings unlikely to commence before October.

But Catholics must stand fast; so must the wider community. That is also what witnessing means: to abide. We do this so we may better tell the stories. For the stories to come aren't just the stories of victims; they are the story of the Catholic Church and the community within which it sits. Their healing will be our healing.

'Naked Jihad' sacrifices feminism to racism

THE SAVAGE MIND

Ellena Savage

What gets lost when a reasonable feminist action is subsumed by racist and imperialist language?

Femen is a feminist organisation originating in Kiev that uses the naked female body as a 'weapon' of protest. Naked protest has a long history — it has been used successfully by women activists in Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere, for over a century — and its meaning is relative to the conditions it arises from. Femen has had members mobilise globally, including in the Arab world.

Recently Tunisian activist Amina Tyler was exposed to death threats by federal politicians for posting naked images of herself scrawled with protest slogans including 'F*** your morals' and 'My body belongs to me, and is not the source of anyone's honor'. Tunisian preacher Adel Ami said Tyler should be lashed and stoned to death.

Femen's response left a lot to be desired. It staged a 'Naked Jihad', in which naked protest was levelled against mosques, Islamic cultural centres and Arab embassies across Europe. The actions were underpinned by an insidious form of racism, one statement by Femen claiming a 'lethal hatred of Islamists — inhuman beasts for whom killing a woman is more natural than recognising her right to do as she pleases with her own body'.

Clearly there is something out of sync here.

The phrase, 'white men saving brown women from brown men' was coined by Gayatri Spivak in 1988. She used it to describe how the imperial British mandate in India banned the practice of *Sati* — widow burning — without ever having consulted the real experts in the field: the women who would participate in the tradition.

Since then, the loaded phrase has been used to describe the practice of using western feminist tropes to further colonial expansion and oppression.

This has ranged from French colonists in Algeria prescribing 'liberation' to Algerian women while objecting to female suffrage back home; to conservative women like Laura Bush justifying the 'war on terror' as a war for women's liberation, despite the fact that nothing sets back the status of women like a military invasion.

And it can be seen, too, in Femen's Naked Jihad.

The perception that Muslim women are essentially subordinate — and subordinate only to Muslim men — serves only to bolster attitudes of western

superiority and to deny the west's complicity in the conditions that confirm inequality in the first place.

On Q&A on Monday, in response to a question about whether feminism was still relevant in Australia, Yorta Yorta soprano Deborah Cheetham said we needn't look further than the Northern Territory to see why we still need it.

I would say we needn't look further than our own family structures, where women perform the bulk of unpaid domestic labour and are exposed to domestic violence; our working conditions, where women perform more labour for less income; our neighbourhoods, where women are harassed and assaulted; and our political system, whose female participation ranks below 'sexist' countries like Tunisia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Algeria.

Feminism should be just as relevant to Australian women as it is to women in the Arab world, who are exposed to a range of overlapping, but not identical, oppressive forces. Even the most privileged women in Australia do not escape sexism. Blaming 'brown men' for misogyny is the oldest way of obscuring gender inequity at home.

On the one hand, it should be said that Femen can be applauded for spearing one of the most insidious forms of gender oppression we experience in the west: the categorical sexualisation of women. When women expose their bodies while rejecting demands that their bodies exist for male consumption, they are breaking a longstanding tradition of male possession. This in itself is an important achievement.

But when a movement such as Femen abuses the language of feminism to cast aside the concerns of women with non-white and non-secular identities, they lose credibility as a feminist organisation, and the status of a woman like Amina Tyler gets derailed. In denying muslim and Arab women a voice of their own, Femen denies the possibility of global solidarity among women.

Turkey's Kurdish Spring

POLITICS

William Gourlay

The equinox on 21 March heralds the arrival of the northern spring. The Kurds, and other peoples of western and central Asia, know it as *Newruz* (*Nevroz* in Turkish). It is the start of a new year and they celebrate accordingly.

While Nevroz was once outlawed in Turkey, this year it was celebrated openly and more jubilantly than ever. In the south-eastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir crowds amassed to hear a Nevroz letter delivered from Abdullah Öcalan (pictured), the leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) imprisoned near Istanbul.

Öcalan's message, read out to the assembled throng, was greeted rapturously. In language lyrical and effusive, he declared that the insurgents of the PKK should forego armed struggle against the Turkish military. After negotiating with the Turkish government since last October, Öcalan proclaimed that this Nevroz, traditionally a day of defiance, should presage a new era of 'sunshine, with enthusiasm and democratic tolerance'.

The PKK leadership holed up in the Kandil Mountains of northern Iraq promptly declared a ceasefire, creating the prospect of an end to a military conflagration that has bedevilled Turkey's south-eastern, largely Kurdish-populated provinces for almost 30 years.

The PKK emerged in the late-1970s with a Marxist agenda demanding cultural and political rights for the Kurds, whose existence had been denied since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. Launching a military campaign in 1984, it declared its intention to create an independent Kurdish state in south-eastern Turkey.

The terror tactics that the PKK adopted and the threat they posed to Turkish territorial integrity brought a swift and determined response from the Turkish military. A strength-sapping guerrilla war has rumbled on ever since, resulting in an estimated 40,000 deaths, seeing the displacement of large numbers of Kurds and hobbling Turkey's economic and political development.

The Turkish Republic is predicated on Turkish homogeneity, despite the fact that an estimated 20 per cent of the population is Kurdish. The PKK anointing itself champion of Kurdish rights and seeking to carve out a Kurdish state made it simple for Turkish nationalists to dismiss any Kurdish demands as separatism. And the PKK's brutal tactics meant any concession on Kurdish rights would be construed as giving in to terrorism.

The PKK's ceasefire in the wake of Öcalan's letter, and the democratic timbre of his overture, should invalidate any further dismissal of Kurdish demands as

manifestations of separatism and encouraging terrorism. It is to be hoped that these recent events bring a permanent end to the PKK insurgency.

But PKK terror was one thing, the Kurdish issue is entirely another. The first may have been brought to heel, but the second remains unresolved. As Aalan himself enunciates, the PKK's laying down of arms amounts not to an end, but to a beginning.

After decades of repression, denial and attempts at assimilation, Turkey's Kurds have long hankered for fundamental rights and freedoms. This is something that the incumbent AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has recognised. The AKP Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan told *The Economist* in 2005 that the solution to the Kurds' long-running grievances was not more repression but more democracy.

Despite a patchy record on press freedom and increasing (over)sensitivity to criticism, the AKP has overseen the introduction of a Kurdish-language TV channel, the opening of Kurdish-language elective courses at high school and university level and, in recent months, the use of Kurdish language in the judicial system in some provinces.

A key Kurdish demand remains: that the constitution be amended to acknowledge the Kurdish reality. The present document declares that every single citizen is a 'Turk'.

The AKP the government's pursuit of a negotiated settlement with the PKK and Aalan's 21 March oratory have provoked different reactions in different quarters. The Kurdish reaction has been predictably positive — and in Diyarbakir jubilant — while elements within Turkish society, in a chorus led by the far-right MHP (Nationalist Action Party), decry current initiatives as tantamount to dismembering the Turkish nation-state.

While such accusations are exaggerations, there remains a strong nationalist current within Turkish politics and society. The MHP is the third most widely supported party. Political scientist Ihsan Dagi says many Turks view the political arena as one where any advance for the Kurds must inevitably disadvantage the Turkish majority.

So in order to establish a lasting peace and permanent solution to the Kurdish issue, the government, and its Kurdish interlocutors, must chart a course through treacherous waters, reconciling the hopes and expectations of the Kurds with the fears and concerns of nationalist elements.

But, as Aalan points out, Turks and Kurds have for centuries lived in 'fraternity and solidarity' in the Anatolian heartland. If ongoing negotiations can rekindle a sense of common purpose for Kurd and Turk then perhaps a Kurdish spring may arise.

Gillard chalks up a win in China

POLITICS

Tony Kevin

Refreshingly, Julia Gillard chalked up a major foreign policy success this week in China. She has put Australia-China relations back on the positive track trailblazed by Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke many years ago.

Hawke's respected presence on her delegation emphasised this historic continuity: a point she made several times in her important [Boao Forum Speech](#) on 7 April at the start of her visit

She did not mention human rights in the speech. Nor did she mention Kevin Rudd. It is a paradox that Rudd — who certainly knows far more about China than Whitlam, Hawke or Gillard do — did not realise his opportunities as PM to enrich the relationship. We can see in retrospect that he deeply irritated China by lecturing them on human rights and by his needlessly provocative language on US-China strategic competition in Asia.

The Rudd years, like the Howard years, were years of stasis, even regression, in Australia-China relations. We aimed high — and sometimes convinced ourselves we were doing well — but Australia never actually managed to get the delicate economic relations/strategic /human rights mix right.

It was not for want of trying on the part of many knowledgeable Australian officials and former officials with expertise in China — people like Stephen Fitzgerald, Ross Garnaut, Richard Rigby and Hugh White. The difference now is — the Australian PM was this week acting on good advice.

In her Boao speech, Gillard made this crucial observation — couched in general language not naming any country, but the meaning would have been as clear in Washington as in Beijing:

We must also understand that continued and strengthened economic growth will keep changing the strategic order of our region. Militaries are modernising. Economic growth will put more pressure on energy, water and food resources. This does not make major power conflict inevitable — all countries in the region share a deep interest in strategic stability — but the consequences of conflict are ever more severe for us all.

Those historic words — they must have been hard fought over in Canberra — mark the end of Australia trying to have it both ways: to enjoy the fruits of a thriving trade and investment relationship with Beijing, at the same time as standing four-square with US aspirations — increasingly problematical — to contain the steady growth of Chinese strategic power in the Asian region.

With the beginning of the end of our mineral resources export boom and with Australia no longer able to take for granted our biggest market, China; and with

domestically contentious issues of Chinese investment in Australian resources like Cubbie Station, coal-gas fracking, uranium mines or strategic telecommunications industries complicating Australia's day-to-day working relations with China, there was a clear need for a new framework of regular scheduled contacts at the highest level, to provide political lubrication and manage disputes before they sour further. Gillard, to her credit, grasped this nettle.

Boao marked the key change Hugh White has been advocating for years. Australia needed to put down a strong public marker that we acknowledge that the US-China strategic balance is changing, and that we must — without betraying our loyalty to our ANZUS Treaty relationship — accept this changed reality in our relations with China.

With the respect for China Gillard spelled out in the Boao Forum on Sunday came Australia's reward yesterday: the new high-level diplomatic architecture rather misleadingly [termed](#) a 'strategic partnership'. This is not a strategic partnership in the sense of a strategic alliance: ANZUS is still pre-eminent in that sense, and will remain so.

But it is a significant mark of mutual respect nonetheless. The partnership puts China onto the same highest level of regular political dialogue Australia has had with Indonesia and India, and it puts Australia onto the same highest level of political dialogue China has had with the USA, Russia, Germany, Britain and the European Union.

This is an immense plus for Australia. Such regular top-level political dialogue gives the imprimatur for a host of useful bilateral dealings: in trade, investment, currency dealings, environmental policy including carbon trading, educational exchanges, technology transfer, copyright etc. It means we deal as friends across a range of issues.

The presence of the most senior Australian business leaders' delegation ever to accompany an Australian prime minister to China gave substance to these unfolding possibilities. The tide is now set fair for enrichment of bilateral relations in many spheres, to our two countries' mutual benefit.

The Australia-China relationship is back on the rails again. There is nothing here the Federal Opposition could object to, nor should it try. Gillard got the balance right. Possibly, after September, Tony Abbott will inherit these gains. Meanwhile, he should graciously applaud them. This is a time for foreign policy bipartisanship.

The Palestinian who would be Jewish

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Other Son* (M) Director: Lorraine Levy. Starring: Emmanuelle Devos, Pascal ElbÄ©, Jules Sitruk, Mehdi Dehbi, Areen Omari, Khalifa Natour, Mahmud Shalaby . 101 minutes**

'Teenage boys switched at birth' might sound like the setup for a screwball comedy or angsty melodrama. Add a twist to the formula whereby one of the boys is Palestinian and the other is Israeli and the possibilities are rather more explosive. In fact *The Other Son* takes a rather more subdued approach than you might expect.

The situation does have its roots in the Israel-Palestine conflict. As newborns the boys were taken from their mothers by hospital staff to be sheltered from shelling, and were inadvertently switched.

The error is only discovered when a blood type discrepancy arises as the now late-teenaged Joseph (Sitruk) is in the process of joining the Israeli air force. His war hero father (ElbÄ©) and French mother (Devos) must come to terms with the news while supporting Joseph as he navigates this personal crisis.

Joseph's journey is marked by a series of small epiphanies about identity and about what does and does not define him. These come from a quiet — and sometimes not so quiet — grappling with his central dilemma.

He has been raised to see a division between Arab and Jew, epitomised by the wall that divides Israeli and Palestinian territories. He is supposed to hate those on the other side, but to which side does he belong? Even a near death experience prompts the question, 'If I had died, would I have been buried as an Arab or a Jew?'

Joseph is perplexed to find that the extent to which the division is institutionalised. A Rabbi informs him that although he has been circumcised and celebrated his Bah Mitzvah, the revelations about his biological origins mean he must undergo 'cleansing' rituals to be accepted as a Jew. Religious institutions err when they elevate legalism over human need. In this instance the institution is found wanting.

Of course, as with the Israel-Palestine conflict itself, there are two sides to the story. Over the wall, Joseph's counterpart Yacine (Dehbi) has just returned from medical studies in Paris. His parents (Omari and Natour) inform him of the discovery about his birth shortly after his homecoming. Like Joseph's parents, they are curious about and drawn to their biological son, but desperate to support the son they raised.

In Yacine's story as with Joseph's we see the inter-generational nature of the

conflict and hereditary nature of hatred between warring cultures. His brother, Bilal (Shalaby) goes from adoration to hostility in a single moment when he learns of his young brother's true origins. His hatred for Israel runs deep, and its wounded heart is the memory of a third brother, who was killed in the conflict. The breach won't be easy to heal.

The Other Son explores these tensions elegantly and movingly. Its exploration of the dynamics of both families, and of the interaction between them once they meet, is particularly touching. Especially the mothers, who from the moment they are informed of the situation seem to share an intuitive understanding of how the other feels: the unshaken, protective love for the son they raised, and the potent, instinctive love for the son they bore.

Over time, characters are afforded opportunities and the impetus to cross the border, to visit the world and the people who live on the other side of the wall. Joseph and Yacine become unlikely friends, a friendship borne of curiosity and shared experience. What emerges is an understated but optimistic vision of shared humanity beyond conflict that is profound in its gentle persuasiveness.

Francis right to break the rules

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Good symbols create ripples. They get you musing and making unexpected connections. They are apparently superficial but quickly draw attention to the foundations.

Pope Francis' Holy Thursday [expedition](#) to the juvenile justice centre to wash the feet of young people, male and female, Christian and Muslim, was a case in point. It was a symbol of pastoral outreach to the disadvantaged outside the Catholic community, but it also prompted discussion about the place of law in church and society.

This reflection is much needed in Australia today.

Catholics have often seen rules about liturgy and other aspects of Catholic life as sacred in the sense that they are unalterably binding. And although the laws of the state may be bent to fit self-interest, many Australians also see them as sacred and not to be broken under any pretext. The mythical cavalier Australian approach to law and rules in our day is just a myth. Those who break laws for whatever reason are inordinately blamed.

That is evident in the common Australian attitude to asylum seekers. Although they have arrived legally in Australia to claim protection, they have only to be described as illegals to lose any support they had.

It is now also rare for idealistic people to commit such symbolic breaches of the law as trespassing on military bases in order to proclaim the injustice of Australian military ventures. For most Australians it is enough to hear that they have broken a law passed by Parliament to condemn them and their action without further reflection.

Missing in these approaches to law is the recognition that rules and laws serve a higher purpose.

They shape an order that protects human flourishing. The flourishing of persons in their relationships to others and as a society and to the world is what matters most deeply. In the language of Catholic canon law, 'in the Church the salvation of souls must always be the supreme law'. The reason for state laws, too, is to create a space within which human beings can reach their human potential in a way that enhances all people.

This means that rules are to be obeyed not simply because they are enacted legally, but because they support human flourishing.

For this reason they may allow explicit exceptions, and courts will allow room for implicit exceptions. Police and ambulance drivers for example, are entitled to

disregard traffic laws when lives are at risk, provided they can do so safely. Any citizen would justifiably do the same if their child's life was at stake, again providing it was safe.

And if people were threatened with death in their own nation, it would be right for them to seek protection in another country whatever the laws of that nation prescribed.

Similarly when Pope Francis breached liturgical rules on Holy Thursday he was right to do so. Not because popes make the laws, and so can break them, but because the self-respect of the young prisoners (the salvation of souls) was at stake. In the same circumstances any celebrant would rightly do as the Pope did.

Because laws and rules exist to make space for human beings to flourish, we have a responsibility to challenge government laws and actions that we judge to be seriously detrimental to human flourishing. Such symbolic and peaceful breaches of the law as stepping over the boundaries of military bases and chaining oneself to trees are a way of drawing attention to the perceived wrong of military actions and environmental destruction.

Those reviled as lawbreakers in their own time are often retrospectively honoured as custodians of the national conscience. They are both hated and applauded because their actions impelled people to ponder what is right.

Of course there is a cost to human flourishing when laws are broken. As a canon lawyer said of Pope Francis' action, it can diminish respect for the law. Instead of prompting people to ask about what is right, it can encourage them to believe that the law is to be obeyed only when it is in one's own interests.

That is why the virtuous context of conscientious law breaking is so important: its insistence on what matters, its peacefulness and its respect for those who administer the law.

Both church and state laws are securely grounded when there is a shared sense of the importance of human flourishing. When this is absent, manipulation of the law out of self-interest, vindictive attitudes to wrongdoers and servile adherence to rules flourish. These apparently incompatible pathologies have a common root: a lack of respect for the values that law serves.

Margaret Thatcher versus the Scots

POLITICS

Duncan MacLaren

While agreeing with Donne's 'any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind', I must admit to pouring a glass of good malt at the news of Mrs Thatcher's passing.

In Glasgow, hundreds partied in George Square at the news. As one commentator said, 'I wish there had been a statue of Thatcher so that I could have hit it with my shoe', bringing to mind the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The Southern English may laud her as the greatest prime minister after Churchill but for us Scots — and many in Northern England — she was a hate figure who in the febrile, last days of her premiership scarcely dared to cross the border for fear of being assassinated. Why?

Primarily because she was an ideologue, a Schumpeterian who believed in 'creative destruction' in economics, setting entrepreneurs free (Schumpeter's 'wild spirits') to do as they pleased, and in ignoring the will of the people in favour of the decisions of politicians.

Her policies were like those of the IMF during the time of structural adjustment policies — experiments which omitted to note the effect of these economic games on the lives of human beings.

I lived in Scotland through her time as prime minister and saw my country's industries disappear like snow off a dyke, plunging thousands into poverty. She eschewed negotiation with the unions and preferred all out war, regardless of the consequences. Once her legacy is reassessed, she will have the unenviable reputation of being the PM who caused most poverty in UK history.

She supported tyrants like Pinochet, called Mandela a 'terrorist' and ordered the sinking of the *Belgrano*, an Argentinian battleship which was moving away from the Falklands and was outside the exclusion zone; 368 Argentinian sailors were killed and the Iron Lady was pictured smirking triumphantly at the news, no doubt approving of *The Sun's* notorious headline of 'Gotcha!'. That act scuppered the emerging UN peace deal.

She ushered in a culture of greed disguised as entrepreneurial spirit that resulted years later in the Global Financial Crisis. And she hectored our allies in the European Union like the Little Englander she became.

Above all, she was hated for using Scotland, with its separate legal system, as a guinea pig for another experiment — the introduction of the poll tax which was seen as a tax on the poor to benefit the rich.

It caused the largest civil disobedience campaign in Scotland's history. A

theologian friend filled out his tax form in New Testament Greek. I pretended to be a war veteran and said I had not fought for my country to tax the poor. We hoped for policy death through humour. We were threatened with the courts but how could you try a million Scots? The policy was defeated, and Thatcher was dumped, when she tried to introduce it into England.

Her most telling phrase was that 'there is no such thing as society', showing a complete misunderstanding of the communitarian nature of Scottish society which actually believes in the common good — as illustrated in the near unanimous support for a free health service, free (and good) education for everyone (a policy stretching back to the Middle Ages), a healthy civil society, a parliament designed to avoid the adversarial politics of Westminster, and free transport on buses for everyone over 60, all paid for willingly through our taxes.

This was anathema to Thatcher and she was anathema to us.

Thatcher said in 1988 'as long as I am leader of this party, we shall defend the Union and reject legislative devolution unequivocally'. The Scottish Parliament has been running successfully for over a decade, for much of that time under an SNP administration, and will oversee a referendum on independence in 2014. Thatcher's party, on the other hand, has been reduced to one lone Conservative MP from Scotland in the Westminster Parliament .

In the end, Scotland has the last laugh.

Tony Burke versus the invisible worm

ENVIRONMENT

Barry Breen

Upon being appointed to the federal Arts portfolio, Labor frontbencher Tony Burke confessed a love for poetry, saying he reads it every day. That's good, since his responsibilities as Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities as well as Arts, read like a post-modernist poem in themselves.

To be seduced by both policy and poetry might seem like a contradiction. But it doesn't have to be.

Buddhist poet Daisaku Ikeda described poetry as an attitude of the heart, an openness to the world, a vital sense of the connection between one's life and the life within all things. The 'poetic spirit', he says, is the impulse, the vibrancy, at the core of all artistic expression.

If poetry is the pulse of our cultural life, so too can it be seen as the pulse of our public decisions.

Take the environment, where every decision has a ripple effect on society. Emotions are roused, disappointments dealt with or suffered, heat generated, satisfaction is (rarely) reached. This, or somewhere within it, is the poem.

Our poetry loving Minister for the Environment pleases some clearly identifiable groups by declining to proclaim heritage protection for anything but a tiny percentage of the Tarkine Wilderness area in Tasmania.

Trade Unions cheer, local mayors count the coming influx of workers (and municipal rates), miners gear up to rip the guts out of the forests for minerals, loggers fall asleep counting crashing trees, and the people who have marvelled at rain forest and mountain are left in deep mourning.

The poetry of the wilderness will be gone, the mourners say. The poem is all around us, they say; its core is the beauty of the wilderness. The canker, the 'invisible worm' (as in Blake's poem 'The Sick Rose') that a core of beauty seems to inevitably contain, is the minister's decision to leave the wilderness vulnerable.

Those who fight for heritage recognition of the whole Tarkine area will see Burke's decision as akin to the last two lines of a Shakespeare sonnet:

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well, which thou must leave e're long.

And Burke, what poem swirls in his sub-conscious? This, perhaps, from T. S. Eliot (who incidentally is one of Burke's favourites)?

Shall I part my hair behind, do I dare to eat a peach?

No, like Eliot's Prufrock, he didn't dare:
No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant Lord ...

Attendant, say his opponents, on the mining companies, on the trade unions, on the argument that mining means progress, that jobs, even short-term, outweigh environmental values.

Burke, on the other hand, might look to W. B. Yeats and say:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem

Enchanted to a stone.

For him the poem is in the balancing of needs, the judicious allocation rather than the romantic impulse.

Poets can, helplessly, write their summations when it is all over, or people can see themselves as poets making the words now as they campaign and fight. The people become the poetry — if passionate people don't write it, someone else will.

Those who know that 'earth hath not anything to show more fair' (Wordsworth — ironically, writing about a city) would want to be able to say so in 50 years, and for the poetry to still be saying so in 100 years, in 1000.

And it doesn't have to be a dramatic poem. The policy developed for the Murray Darling Basin makes, on one level, a rural poem about husbandry, a poem that carries its warning too about exploitation.

It's a John O'Brien 'we'll all be rooned' poem if you look at it from said Hanrahan's point of view entirely, but the best of poetry has multiple points of view and, anyway, Hanrahan was wrong.

Like many policy decisions this one can become a 'dialogue of self and soul' (Yeats) where self is the land-user and soul is the need of the land and its lifeblood, the rivers. Not to mention another set of needs downstream.

Compromise may be the 'perfection of mediocrity' but it is also inevitably at the core of policy decisions. Too much water for the farmer to lose is not enough for the river system to gain. At times it can seem like a nonsense poem, like Lewis Carroll's Jabberwocky writ large.

The Great Barrier Reef too is a poem in progress, again with a core of beauty and again with a conflict created (or potentially created) by public decisions. These decisions potentially include the proliferation of mining ports along the Queensland coast, to the inevitable detriment of the Reef.

As Gerard Manley Hopkins said: 'there lives the dearest freshness deep down things', but perhaps his optimism for a new dawn is harder to hold now, when the

destruction caused by some public decisions seems so much more drastic than the mere 'ooze of oil' in Hopkins' day.

The 'ooze of oil' is nothing to the dredging of harbours, the detritus of mining pumped into the waters of the reef and the shipping of uranium through the reef's waters.

The environmentalists will hope Burke will find inspiration from Keats, another of his favourites:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever

Its loveliness increases, it will never

Pass into nothingness ...

and that a policy decision will be made which will be pure poetry to most Australians.

The last talker after Mass

POETRY

Brendan Ryan

Dog walkers

I walk the dog to discover
where I'm meant to be.

I recognise aloneness
in other dog walkers,
the bliss of being pulled along
to the same park, same footpath
where just enough chaos lives.

I think of the old man who used to stop me:

I hate this area, I grew up in Geelong West.

The way he waited at the picket fence,
his discontent at 93.

Bare carport, blinds drawn
his liver brown brick veneer
caught in the creep of McMansions.

How did we wash up here?

Bins out, porch light as our blankey,
bats circle and squeal round a fig tree.

Somebody flattens it down South Valley Road.

Wild, resolute, drawn to what seems
the way bats hunt by sonar,
dog walkers sniff by routine.

Sign of peace

When my uncle was dying
he suddenly wanted to shake hands.

My father drove three hours
along chipped country roads to see him.

All my uncle wanted to do
was grunt and shake his hand.
Most of his life, he had lived alone
had never really had the need to shake hands,
unlike my father who has had six sons
thrusting their right hand at him for seventy years.
Reclusive, unmarried, exiled to Murtoa,
the uncle who lived as an unanswered question
until I saw his photo on the funeral service pamphlet.
He might have been happy with the cigarettes,
the friend down to take care of the belongings
after the funeral. Perhaps other people too,
reach a point when they are ready to shake hands,
to touch another person's skin
like the sign of peace before Communion,
when people turn to shake hands
with strangers, those nearest, brothers.

The last talker after Mass

He belts his trousers with baling twine,
parks a mud-splattered ute outside the Bank
when there's a shift in percentage rates.
The straggly lines of his arguments follow cow paths,
every useless huar wants to run this country.
He laughs as much as he spits.
Veins in his cheeks, grey hair testament
to frosty mornings, a bull bowling his wife over in the yard.
Their days in mud at the foot of a mountain.
The smartest man in the district
talking his way through a church crowd.
Farmers fell away when they saw him coming.

My father had developed a bad habit of listening.
My mother sat in the car putting up with us kids.
We were always the last to leave after Mass.

The truth about middle class welfare

ECONOMICS

David James

The proposed changes to tax on superannuation for people with over \$2 million has prompted a flurry of comment on the need to cut back on 'middle class welfare'. The impression is created that the truly needy will miss out on much needed extra cash as politicians pander to middle class voters who decide elections.

Such an impression is almost entirely false.

In terms of where tax dollars are allocated, Australia has very definitely concentrated on providing lower class welfare. For 30 years it has had the lowest level of middle class welfare of any developed economy. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) only 15 per cent of government transfers go to the top half of the population. The average for OECD countries is 45 per cent.

More than two fifths of redistributed tax benefits go to the bottom 20 per cent of the population; only 3 per cent goes to the top 20 per cent. In America, the corresponding figure is 16 per cent.

As Peter Whiteford, professor of the Crawford School of Public Policy observes, the much criticised expansion of 'middle class welfare' under the Howard Government only increased the average real welfare payments for the richest 20 per cent of working age Australians by around \$1.60 per week.

Over the same period, the real earnings of this group went up by more than \$500 per week, a rise which received a favourable tax effect. Real taxes went up, but not in proportion to the income rise.

'The expansion of middle class welfare on average gave the richest 20 per cent less than \$2 per week, changes in tax scales gave them 30 times as much,' commented Whiteford.

Yet Australia does not spend as much as most OECD countries on cash benefits: unemployment benefits, family benefits, disability benefits and other benefits. The OECD average for such benefits is 22 per cent of total income, but it is only 14 per cent in Australia (in America it is only 9 per cent).

Australia targets low income households much more tightly however, to the extent that the OECD reckons Australia's redistributive policies are more efficient than elsewhere. A 2011 OECD report said income inequality in Australia has fallen quite sharply since 2000, and is now similar to that of the OECD average for the first time.

About 5 per cent of household disposable income is redistributed to low income

households in Australia, compared with only 2 per cent in Japan and less than 0.5 per cent in the United States. Only Denmark, Sweden and Belgium have such a high level of redistribution.

Australia's social welfare system, in other words, has been designed for the needy, not the middle class.

It has left a hole — insufficient middle class welfare. Which is why the introduction of compulsory superannuation resembles the welfare systems of most OECD countries.

Most OECD countries have welfare systems designed to smooth income requirements over the lifetime of the middle class, which is why such a high proportion of tax revenue goes back to the middle class. Australia's welfare system, by contrast, has been more concerned with the redistribution of income from rich to poor.

Forced saving through superannuation is designed to achieve that smoothing effect for the middle class population, in a manner that is at arms length from government. It has already resulted in a superannuation pool of about \$1.3 trillion, the fourth largest accumulation of capital of that type in the world.

While it has been achieved by tax breaks for those with higher earnings — 'middle class welfare', as it were — it will provide some much needed underpinning for the middle class as the country ages, although it is unlikely to greatly relieve the pressure on government finances as was initially anticipated.

Still, government finances are unusually healthy in Australia, in part because promises to the middle classes in their retirement have been contained. Australia collects 23 per cent of GDP in taxes, a level that has varied little over the last three decades. It is slightly below the OECD average of 26 per cent.

More crucially, government expenditure has been contained. Australia has the lowest level of government debt in the OECD: about 21 per cent of GDP. The main debt problem in Australia is household debt, which is about 100 per cent of GDP (total debt is about 270 per cent of GDP).

That soaring household debt has largely been the result of another tax distortion that definitely has benefited the property owning middle class — negative gearing on houses and no tax on the family home. No political party will ever be interested in making changes to either of those policies.

At the intersection of faith and culture

EULOGY

Andrew Hamilton

Adrian Lyons, the founding editor of *Eureka Street* in 1991, died last week in Melbourne at the age of 70.

In the first edition of *Eureka Street* the editors promised that the magazine would attend to 'the questions behind the questions'. They also hoped it would reveal 'Christianity's continuing vigour and the resources of wisdom it makes available to anyone making important decisions, public or private', adding that 'issues that present as primarily religious or churchly always turn out to have counterparts elsewhere'.

Those thoughts represent Adrian Lyons' abiding interests. He was always concerned to go beneath the surface when reflecting on personal and public issues, and particularly to attend to the unnoticed connections between culture and Christian faith, and the surprising places where they come together in public life.

Adrian's interests came out of a naturally reflective temperament honed by his years as a university chaplain from the late 1970s. His work involved much listening to students as they tried to make sense of their own lives and of the wider world they were entering.

It also drew him, an apolitical man, into the world of student politics both in the university and among Catholic societies at a time when the claims of change and of stability were keenly fought over.

Good university chaplains always have a gift for attending to the quiet voices that speak from unexpected places, to what is communicated behind the words, and to places in culture that are open to faith. Adrian was very good. He was a good listener with a ceremonious gentleness of address, did not impose his views, and created the space in conversation that encouraged reflection.

His university experience taught him the importance of a non-adversarial Catholic presence in the public square. When the existing Jesuit magazines were brought together in the late 1980s to form Jesuit Publications he was involved in the move to begin a magazine for a public audience. He spent some time in the United States working on the well-staffed *America* magazine with a view to beginning an Australian magazine.

On his return to Australia he deepened his understanding of the place of faith in contemporary secular culture. He formed part of a team of Jesuits who explored the connections between belief and unbelief in Australia.

Adrian wrote the report of the project. It was characteristically fragmentary in style, reflecting his close attention to the particularity of experience and of the

language used to describe it, and his unstated skepticism about large theories that were insufficiently grounded.

Adrian's interest in the intersection between faith and culture can be seen in the exploratory pieces he wrote with Kate Lindsey in the first two editions of *Eureka Street*. They were based on interviews with people who had taken significant steps in their lives. The interviews attend to the subtle differences between individuals in the way they make important decisions. They rest on Adrian's patient attention to detail and his habit of weighing things carefully before judging.

These qualities enabled him to make thought-provoking contributions to the new magazine. But the role of editing a new, lively monthly magazine proved to demand other qualities. Processes needed to be established, decisions made which would form precedents, criteria for judging contributions established, all with little time for reflection. All this required intuitive gifts and a quick decisiveness that Adrian did not have.

In retrospect, Adrian would have been an excellent editor of a quarterly reflective magazine where he had much time to commission, to select and arrange articles. But he was not well suited to conducting the anarchic and improvised music of *Eureka Street*. After the first edition the editorship was passed to Morag Fraser who gave distinctive shape to its contribution to Australian public life.

Adrian was hurt by these events. But he found in a variety of pastoral contexts scope to continue reflecting on the fit between faith and culture in Australia. His matter was the sermon. He was parish priest in rural Sevenhill, preached regularly for the Sunday congregation at Canisius College in Pymble, and for schoolgirls at Potts Point. He was also able to pass on his wisdom to international groups of Jesuits completing their final year of formation.

He took preaching seriously. A week beforehand he read the text set for the following Sunday, then consulted a couple of commentaries and sermons of great preachers on the same texts, and noted the major news items of the week. Later in the week he would write his sermon, paying close attention to its intended audience. Closer to the time of preaching, he edited the draft to ensure that it read smoothly and contained the right tone.

His sermons became the thread on which he hung the beads of his life.

In his last years he contracted an illness that he bore with characteristic acceptance and gallantry. He also uncharacteristically conceived a large project and briskly brought it to a successful birth.

He put together for publication a [book of his essays](#) and another [book of his sermons](#). The publishers worked fast, and the books were launched just a few weeks before his death. The launch was ceremonious and gathered together friends of each period of Adrian's life, and allowed Adrian to celebrate the life he had enjoyed and to share its fruits with his many friends.

I chatted with Adrian briefly the afternoon before he died. He was welcoming and encouraging — mentioned, as he always did, recent *Eureka Street* articles he had enjoyed, spoke equably of his impending move to the hospice, and asked a blessing. Early the next morning, he died as he had lived. Lightly and faithfully.

End of the education revolution

EDUCATION

Dean Ashenden

Prime Minister Gillard's 'education revolution' is limping toward an unhappy end.

The revolution has been long on hype and activity, short on focus. Big promises and money have been spent on technology and physical infrastructure, programs targeting literacy, numeracy and teacher education, the launch of [MySchool](#) and its detailed profiles of every school in the country, the resuscitation of a national curriculum, the announcement of the first-ever national target for schools ('top five by '25'), and of course, on Gonski.

On 19 April Gillard goes to COAG (Council of Australian Governments) in search of a deal, any deal on the most important and iconic element of the revolution. She knows that even the most transparent appearance of a deal on Gonski may make the difference between certain political death and the slim hope of political resurrection.

The problem is that she has a desperately weak hand as well as desperate circumstances. In an effort to keep the appearance of Gonski she has already bargained away most of its substance.

Remember what the [substance](#) was: Many Australian students leave school without a decent educational grounding or sufficient understanding of words and numbers to cope with the demands of the workplace or ordinary daily life. All public funds, state and federal, should therefore be allocated to schools according to 'need' — i.e. in proportion to the size and difficulty of the educational tasks they face — irrespective of the sector to which they belong.

Any school, independent, Catholic systemic or government, with high proportions of children from poor, Indigenous, or rural/remote families, should get more money on a common scale from a common pool.

The backsliding began before Gonski even got started: his riding instructions from the government were to ensure that 'no school will be worse off'. As Gonski pointed out, that meant in practice that yet more money would go to some of the least needy of schools, making it difficult to get the necessary loadings for the most needy.

Since then one backward step has followed another: the prime minister's promise (at the national conference of independent schools) that every independent school would be better off; buckling to the states' demand that Gonski's 'national schools resourcing body' be ditched; acquiescing to the Catholic systems and spreading the money for need over half of all schools rather than Gonski's recommended quarter; the announcement that the extra funds would be phased in over five years from 2014; and, most recently, what appears to be the

[surrender](#) of the idea of 'sector-blind' funding and a reversion to different funding 'models' for each of the three sectors.

For all these reasons what Gillard wants from the premiers on 19 April is not Gonski but the appearance of Gonski. She may not get even that. She cannot afford to bribe or be seen to be bribing them. Several of the states have already canvassed their own Gonski-lite schemes, so why give the feds undertakings about how and how much they will spend on schools? And why would the four Coalition-governed states throw Labor an electoral lifeline?

It is a far cry from the revolutionary bravado of Prime Minister Rudd and Education Minister Gillard six years ago. It is also a warning to the next federal government.

Canberra is the Gulliver of Australian schooling. It is the biggest single spender, loudest single voice, and the only government to deal with all the others and with each of the sectors, but it runs no schools, employs no teachers, enrolls no students. It is tied down by eight governments, all in semi-permanent election mode, by 24 separate schooling 'jurisdictions', shoals of interest groups, chronic antagonism between the sectors, and educational methods, infrastructure and patterns of spending dominated by obsolete industrial awards and agreements.

Even had the revolution come with clear focus, priorities and educational targets, it would still have lacked headquarters and a chain of command, a fact demonstrated by the long, slow evisceration of Gonski. In other words, Labor's heart ran away with its head. The first task of any 'revolution' was and remains not to fix the schools but to fix the structures and machinery of schooling.

That task has zero appeal for the Abbott government-in-waiting. To the contrary, to the extent that it has revealed its hand it seems determined to hose down expectations of what a federal government can do about schooling and push responsibility back onto the states.

Specifically, it seems set to continue with the present funding system (condemned by the Gonski review as opaque, inefficient, and inequitable), although it may insert a Gonski-like modification or two.

It will probably scale back or abandon Labor's national programs, emphasise the right of states and systems to 'adapt' the national curriculum to their own values and circumstances, drop the 'top five' target (or slot each of the states into the international league table), and run with slogans such as 'not more teachers but better teachers' or 'more autonomy for principals and school communities'. It is likely to keep MySchool, perhaps finding ways to reduce the amount of information about schools' resources.

That will relieve the pressure, but not forever. The current funding regime demands around six per cent more federal money every year, not easy to find in any foreseeable future. And then there are those troublesome international

comparisons of student performance and the [ongoing bad news](#) they are likely to bring.

It might not be a federal government's fault, but it will be seen as a federal government problem. The pressure for and movement toward a national schooling system comes and goes, but will not go away.

And Labor? No doubt it would be delighted to be saddled with the tattered legacies of its revolution in the case of a miracle election victory come September. It is much more likely, however, that they will have plenty of time to re-think the whole business from the ground up.