EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

23 August 2013 Volume: 23 Issue: 16

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

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

PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

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

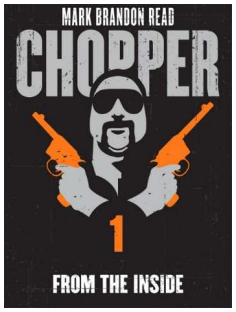
EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.
Volume 23 Issue: 16
23 August 2013

Torn by Chopper's inner torment

REVIEWS

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

***From the Inside: Chopper 1* and *Hits & Memories: Chopper 2.* Mark Brandon Read, Pan Macmillan, 2012. Website**



Barry:

Mark Brandon 'Chopper' Read: latter-day Ned Kelly, self-perceived Robin Hood, scourge of drug dealers. His re-released literary efforts reveal a paradox. Chopper's a racist, self-billed sociopath with acknowledged mental and physical health issues and a highly evolved if bizarre set of moral principles. A raconteur ever-ready to discuss the robbing, bashing, torture, murder and disappearance of various peers and colleagues.

Yet Chopper is also a man who recognises the damage done by the spiritual, emotional and physical abuse he took as a child. The enemy of Chopper's enemy is his friend; unless he's his enemy, too, or a 'Walter Mitty' — the author's pet term for a dreamer, or someone unbearably rude, unintelligent, amateurish in his criminality, or carrying some owed or useful cash.

Actually, that unintended association with the quixotic comic Danny Kaye, who played Mitty in the 1947 film *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, is apt. In a grimly self-deprecating manner that is greatly disconnected from the world of we mug citizens (non-denizens of the underworld), Chopper is outlandishly funny and, um, arresting.

Read owns up to his essential brokenness and self-declared waste of a life and, Jen, I'm coming clean: I'm torn. Saddened by the grubbiness, cruelty and loneliness, the betrayal and the betraying, yet equally fascinated by the guy's life and, moreover, actually impressed and lured by the power of the voice coming out of Read's writing.

I don't know if this is just *Underbelly* rubbernecking at moral roads untaken, or if tomes such as *From the Inside* and *Hits & Memories* transcend Read's dogged poetry and pub parlance the better to scratch some Dickensian itch in all of us. (Doubtless his accomplishments as a teller of partial tales is aided and abetted by the editing of Melbourne's crime reportage princes John Silvester and Andrew Rule.)

While 'Chopper' will always be a disturbed, cinematic standover merchant, immortalised by Eric Bana's breakout turn as the earless enforcer, there's more to him, Jen. His writing has a certain quality I just didn't expect. It's not pretty enough to be 'beauty', although you can appreciate the labours taken to craft his rambling tango through life. And it's too scarred, warped and dipped in pains

inflicted and endured to be 'goodness'.

Yet despite the bulldust and bluster, Read touches sporadically on 'truth'. Who'd have thunk it?

Having written largely behind bars, Chopper re-lives battles and schemes, namedropping old school coppers like 'Rocket' Rod Porter and Allan 'Diamond Jim' Taylor, and numerous crims in a revolting, revolving door of oddbods, sadsacks, 'game players' and 'deal makers' who operate 'in a world of shadows, police spies and double agents'.

And when he's not quoting the likes of Oscar Wilde or citing Raymond Chandler, while lamenting the poor quality of modern crims and cop, Read surprises by resonating with the squat, angry Neanderthal that lurks within us all.

Jen:

Gun for hire, raconteur, artist and (I kid you not) rapper; Mark Brandon 'Chopper' Read is a man of many ... um ... talents. But he is also a man living on borrowed time. Having survived numerous attempts on his life (including a sorry episode where he was forced to dig his own grave), Read contracted Hepatitis C during his time in prison, and has since been diagnosed with both cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. How he not only walks among us today, but has managed to record his first blues album , remains one of life's minor mysteries.

From the Inside, collected from letters he sent to journalists John Silvester and Andrew Rule in 1991 while in Melbourne's Pentridge Prison, is the first volume of the reissued series, and, yes, the 'inspiration' for the iconic 2000 Eric Bana vehicle *Chopper*.

'Larger than life' is a term that could have been written for Read; but so, too, is 'doomed from the start'. Like many career criminals, Read's early years read like a 101 manual in neglect, violence and indifference.

Born to an ex-army father and a devout (read: detached) Seventh-day Adventist mother, Read spent most of his formative years in a children's home. At 14, he became a ward of the state and soon got caught in the revolving door of psychiatric institutions. Between the ages of 20 and 38, Read spent only 13 months outside prison, having been convicted of a veritable smorgasbord of crimes, ranging from armed robbery, firearm offences, assault and arson, to impersonating a police officer.

Of course, Chopper is no boy scout, yet I feel compelled to defend his honour, Barry. Contrary to the evidence (a KKK membership notwithstanding), he's no racist. As he writes, joining the 'brotherhood' was a 'bit of a joke' and just another way of staving off boredom in jail.

This isn't about splitting hairs, but rather looking for clues to the real Mark Read. After all, he's a 'criminal legend' who says he's never hurt an innocent; a

champion of children who never had a childhood; anti-drugs yet happy to appropriate the spoils of trafficking; a miscreant speaking out against domestic violence; a non-believer who walks with God. And a clown who somehow avoided becoming the punchline.

In short, a contradiction in Ray Bans. Reading this cautionary tale I'm not sure whether we're tapping into our inner-Neanderthal or our inner-disenchantment. In his unaffected charm — and, perhaps, refusal to die — is human nature stripped bare. A day in Read's underworld reads like an episode of *Survivor*, only behind bars.

Sure *From the Inside* is a search for fame and glory, but look closer and you'll see a clear need for validation. Coming across as vulnerable in his main line of work is either intensely brave or completely stupid, but it's also undeniably, unapologetically frank.

Two bulls in the election ring

AUSTRALIA

Moira Rayner

Our time of testing comes every three years when we, the-people, are supposed to be interested in what the two biggest bulls in the political ring 'stand for'. Elections are always short-term marketing campaigns, because we are encouraged to turn off in the between times, to select one of exceedingly limited choices that have floated to the surface through the churning internal wrangling and organisational conventions of the respective major parties.

A century later, Ambrose Bierce's definition of the elector as 'one who enjoys the sacred privilege of voting for the man of another man's choice' is still apposite. Nobody — not even she herself — expects Christine Milne to lead a Green government. The two men — Abbott and Rudd — are running strong-man, presidential-style campaigns offering populist solutions and punitive programs for perceived problematic societal groups, including- refugees, single parents, women who have the audacity to claim a workplace right to financial support when they take maternity leave, all those unemployed young men, and 'feckless' Aborigines for whose finances and family life the intervention is in demand.

What strikes me is the similarity between the political and parent-child relationship. A young child depends entirely on a nurturing parent, usually the mother, for the necessities of life. Their whole life. To that child, their mother is their whole world.

But the child is not a mother's entire world. A child has to be 'managed' when they are demanding, frustrated and furiously grief-stricken because of this, when the mother cannot and will not fulfil all their wants and desires.

An infant cries first for attention: the toddler, finding more and more world to interact with and experiencing frustration, has to control their instinctive desire for immediate gratification of their needs, both loves and hates the parent who teaches them, through frustration, to learn patience, read the propensities and vulnerabilities of the powerful other.

The loving parent suffers, at first, in denying the infant's demands for satisfaction, until that parent learns to enjoy the process. The child, in learning that he can't have everything he desires when he desires it, or necessarily at all, learns that love and pain are just different sides of the same coin. In other words, the parent-child transaction becomes a sado-machochistic one, with the parent learning to justify and take some enjoyment from the exercise of the power they have over their child, while the child learns that the catharsis of their tantrums may yet lead to a kind of fulfilment if not pleasure in being reconciled with the frustrator.

This dynamic, I have begun to see, is one that our two would-be patriarchs are

perhaps unconsciously enjoying in their public activities in these short, furious weeks. Abbott has successfully — until the second candidates' debate at least — damped down his glee in the taunting and negativity which he aimed so cruelly at the first woman prime minister of this country, when she withdrew from the internal stoush she couldn't win, and both he and Rudd offered to the country the most boring, stagey and value-free 'debate' we have witnessed since the days of Billy McMahon.

But the blokes got aggro and personal at the second — to no great accolades for either — and we had a touch of the old Tony when he asked whether 'this bloke ever shuts up'. Hardly a great debating model.

Both of these men are explicitly Christian, though neither is behaving much like one. The 'soft side' of their natures is carefully posed in public appearances where they kiss babies, puppies or are flanked by their attractive, intelligent, personable wives and lovely daughters. Both Rudd and Abbott want to be 'Dads'.

Well, my Dad wasn't the sort of man who sacrifices kindness for some 'greater good'. And he is my model.

I object to vulnerable people being maltreated 'for the good of all'. In Ursula K. Le Guinn's novella *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,* the happiness and joy and prosperity and spiritual maturity of a utopian society is shown to depend exclusively on the thoroughgoing cruel treatment and eternal suffering of a wretched and lonely scapegoat child in the bowels of the City.

In le Guinn's story, every maturing child is shown this child, and taught that its suffering is the reason for the success of the civilisation above. All are shocked and sorrowful, but know that they can destroy that society with any kindness or protest. Most accept, with a leavening of wisdom, that great prices are paid for the happiness of many and the many good things that consensus and harmony brings, and their joy has a shadow. But there are those who, after they see and hear and smell that child, fall silent and become thoughtful, and some time later, slip away from the golden city, and nobody knows where they go or what they may do.

This is an election in which the kind of a society we want has not been spoken of. It is time for electors to decline the pleasure of punitive policies, or engage in the sado-masochistic rhetoric of economics, markets, threats and 'sovereignty'. Bierce was no democrat. He thought that the vote was the instrument and symbol of a freeman's power to make a fool of himself and a wreck of his country.' It would be folly to 'man up' to the policies of fear and resentment. We should be sending a message about what a society built on care for our neighbour might look like.

Here endeth the lesson.

Smiling face of a quarter-life crisis

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Frances Ha* (MA). Director: Noah Baumbach. Starring: Greta Gerwig, Mickey Sumner, Michael Zegen. 86 minutes**

I saw *Frances Ha* on a cold, wet night, in a theatre situated in a discreet concrete warehouse beneath an overpass in South Melbourne. Despite the grim circumstances I left the theatre smiling, though initially unsure quite what to make of what I'd just watched. Two nights later, sitting in a different theatre to see a different film, I saw a trailer for the film and the smile instantly returned. This low-key, low-fi (black-and-white) gem is certainly easy to love.

That's thanks mainly to the character Frances herself, portrayed with warmth and conviction by Gerwig, who also shares a screenwriting credit with director Baumbach. Frances is the archetypal woman-child, late-20s going on 16, prone to impromptu dance routines through the streets of New York, and to play-fighting in the park with her long-time best friend Sophie (Sumner). Gerwig has fun with the character's goofs and gags but is also just soulful enough to win abiding affection for a character who may otherwise have simply been irritating.

When we meet Frances she is clinging to a casual tutoring gig with a dance company, and pining for a permanent (and increasingly unlikely) promotion to the main dance troupe. In an early scene she rejects an invitation to move in with her boyfriend out of loyalty to Sophie, with whom she shares a flat. This effectively ends the relationship, although in his stubborn sulkiness he is slow to grasp it. Frances is sad but like all the obstacles and mishaps life throws at her she tries to take it in her stride. Endless optimism can be wearying work though.

Soon, a betrayal of sorts. Frances and Sophie are intimate almost to co-dependence; a celibate lesbian couple, they joke. But Sophie's career is on the uptick, and she's ready to move on to a trendier neighbourhood, leaving the all-but penniless Frances in her wake. With a new circle of friends and, before long, a new fiancÃ©, Sophie seems to be quickly outgrowing Frances. This parting of the ways throws Frances into disarray. With her bank account drying up and time running out on her dancing dream, she, too, must find new friends and paths.

This is far from some maudlin or romanticised paean to the archetypal Struggling Artist living in New York, even though it shares some of that pedigree. Frances' dejection is palpable, but her determination always to find the silver lining is inspiring. A trip home for Christmas (shown mostly as a montage) reveals a loving, supportive family background, not a clichÃ©d wreck of dysfunction and broken relationships, or of overbearing or neglectful parents. Frances' chosen life in New York is one of wide-eyed wonder, rather than the cynical severing of roots.

Frances tries to maintain the wonder, against the odds. She makes new friends — notably, exchanging affectionate insults with new housemate Benji (Zegen) — but is frustrated by the lack of easy intimacy she had come to share with Sophie. Her attempts to force it are at times hilarious, such as her efforts to bodily engage a nonplussed colleague in a play-fight. Others are simply sad; during an impromptu (and fiscally unwise) trip to Paris, she tries to contact another acquaintance she knows to be there, and receives no response to repeated cheerful messages.

Of course, you can't synthesise the intimacy born from lifelong friendship; such friendships might change, even painfully so, but that doesn't necessarily mean they end. Meanwhile, new friendships arrive, not worse than, but different from, the old one. In the same way, if old dreams falter, new dreams replace them, and can be equally fulfilling. These kinds of lessons are part and parcel of growing up, which, ultimately, is the path Frances is on.

How to disagree without hurting

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

Ben's moving account of his participation in last week's SBS *Insight* program on marriage equality revealed the costs of public involvement in issues that matter personally. He felt himself judged, humiliated and seen as less than human by many who responded to him. It is impossible not to admire his extraordinary courage to persist in the face of such pain.

For me Ben's experience also raised a larger question. Is it ever possible to have public discussion of questions that matter for human lives and society between people passionately committed to their opposed positions, without the participants judging those on the opposed side or feeling judged and humiliated by them?

My liberal instincts say that it should be possible. My experience argues that it is not possible, but that a proper hygiene in public conversation could reduce the judgment and hurt.

My experience has been mainly of Catholic conversations, sometimes between Catholics, and sometimes part of a broader conversation about society. Some of the questions debated have been about personal morality — divorce, for example, abortion, IVF, and homosexuality. Others have been about social morality — the Vietnam and Iraq war, for example, the nuclear deterrent and Australian treatment of asylum seekers.

These questions are all distinctive. But at different times each of them was passionately fought over. Some people on each side were judgmental of their opponents to the extent of denying their human dignity. Some people felt themselves judged and disrespected as human beings.

Certainly those who argued that the Vietnam War was morally unjustifiable were often accused of moral cowardice and of displaying contempt for soldiers who had died. Protagonists on each side of the debate attacked the character and motivation of their opponents. In religious communities in the United States, some members served as military chaplains, while others served time in prison for their opposition to the war. Judgment and hurt were constant and to my mind unavoidable realities.

Among those to whom the ethical dimension of Australian asylum seeker policy matters, too, judgment and hurt at being judged can be seen on both sides. Opponents of the policies find it difficult not to judge the common humanity, integrity and motives of the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader. In turn they find their own integrity and motives called into question.

If judging and being judged as less than human are so inevitably and

unfortunately bound up with discussion of what is right and wrong for individuals and society, what is to be done?

The response of some is to let it all rip. Public discussion of questions important for society is necessarily robust, and if you want to participate in it you must be able to give and take wounds. Denigration of the character of your opponents is par for the course, and you give as good as you get.

In conversation about what matters this approach is counterproductive. The participants no longer test the truth of their own convictions against the arguments of others, but try to make their own position win. Ethical discussion becomes an exercise of power and not a shared search for wisdom.

Another approach is to give up on ethical conversation about how to live because of the judgment and the hurt that it involves and, for some, because of its inherent uselessness. We must accept that we shall have different views on what matters, and focus pragmatically on what we can agree on.

This is seductive, but it also has problems. Serious ethical questions about what matters always involve winners and losers. To leave the morality of a war aside and get on with fighting it, for example, is fine if you are a winner or an observer. But the dead, wounded, destitute and displaced deserve more than to be seen as the detritus of the best deal we could reach.

A better approach is to honour the large ethical questions about what matters, to recognise the likelihood of judgment and hurt, and to reflect seriously on how this can be avoided. This means first attending to those with whom you disagree first as people and not as objects of your argument.

In Catholic conversation this can be difficult. When challenged about church teaching there is a long tradition of first defending it in technical and alienating terms that ordinary listeners would naturally assume to imply condemnation and distaste. Any qualification that there was not intent to hurt will seem condescending and dishonest.

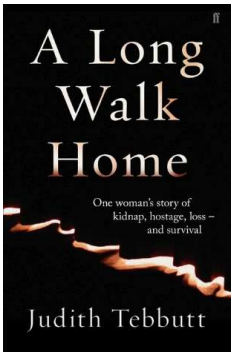
A better way is that shown by Pope Francis recently. When asked about homosexuality and he said, 'If a person is gay and seeks the Lord and has good will, well who am I to judge them?'

Such a response starts by listening to your conversation partners, reaching for a language that is shared and leaving room for your own opinions to be changed. Of course this is not a magic bullet to stop judgment in its tracks. But it does make space for respectful conversation.

Hostages freed to forgive

CREATIVE

Gillian Bouras



My father was a volatile man and easily hurt, so that from time to time the trumpet cry of 'I'll never forgive him!' would shake the house. 'Forget it!' my mother would instruct; or else she'd ask, 'Who are you to forgive?'

Forgiving and forgetting are weighty matters. It is unlikely, for example, that people like English Judith Tebbutt and Australian Nigel Brennan, both of whom were held hostage in Somalia, will ever be able to forget their experiences of prolonged isolation, near starvation, and regular threats of death. Brennan was held for an unimaginable 15 months, Tebbutt for six, but Tebbutt bore the additional burden of eventually learning that her husband, whom she had dearly loved for 33 years, had been murdered on the night of her abduction.

How have Tebbutt and Brennan coped with the inevitable flashbacks and hauntings? Both have written books (*A Long Walk Home* and *The Price of Life* respectively), which is a start, at least: we can't change experience, but we can make something positive out of it. It is difficult for memory to be deleted, but it is possible for it to be healed. We are narrative and expressive animals, so catharsis can be attempted by practising any of the arts.

Much has been written about forgiveness. Considered to be one of the seven heavenly virtues, the one opposing the deadly sin of anger, forgiveness, in cases of serious transgression and betrayal, is almost always very hard to achieve. My mother, in questioning my father, doubtless had Alexander Pope in mind: *To err is human, to forgive divine*. But surely there is also a human need to forgive? Oscar Wilde may have been right when he instructed: *Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them as much*.

How to achieve forgiveness, though? Tebbutt seems to have managed the matter, perhaps almost unconsciously. In her case and in Brennan's, a kind of forgiveness seems to have been reached via the effort to understand their captors' lives and environment. Brennan found himself trying to teach his captors yoga, and Tebbutt has publicly wondered why she doesn't hate her tormentors.

The answer to her question may lie in the fact that she has been able to separate the sin from the sinner. When she was asked whether one of her captors was a bad man, her reply was that she didn't know him as a man, but that his deeds, the deeds of all the people involved, were very bad indeed.

Both Tebbutt and Brennan were eventually able to develop some insight into their captors' lives and mentality. They were often very young men who had had little chance in the struggle against poverty and hardship that they had become

child soldiers, inured to violence and deprived of hope. Their mindset was so different from that of their prisoners that they genuinely failed to understand Tebbutt's grief at the loss of her husband. Tebbutt realised their ignorance, and in this the echo from Luke 23 is obvious: *Forgive them, for they know not what they do*.

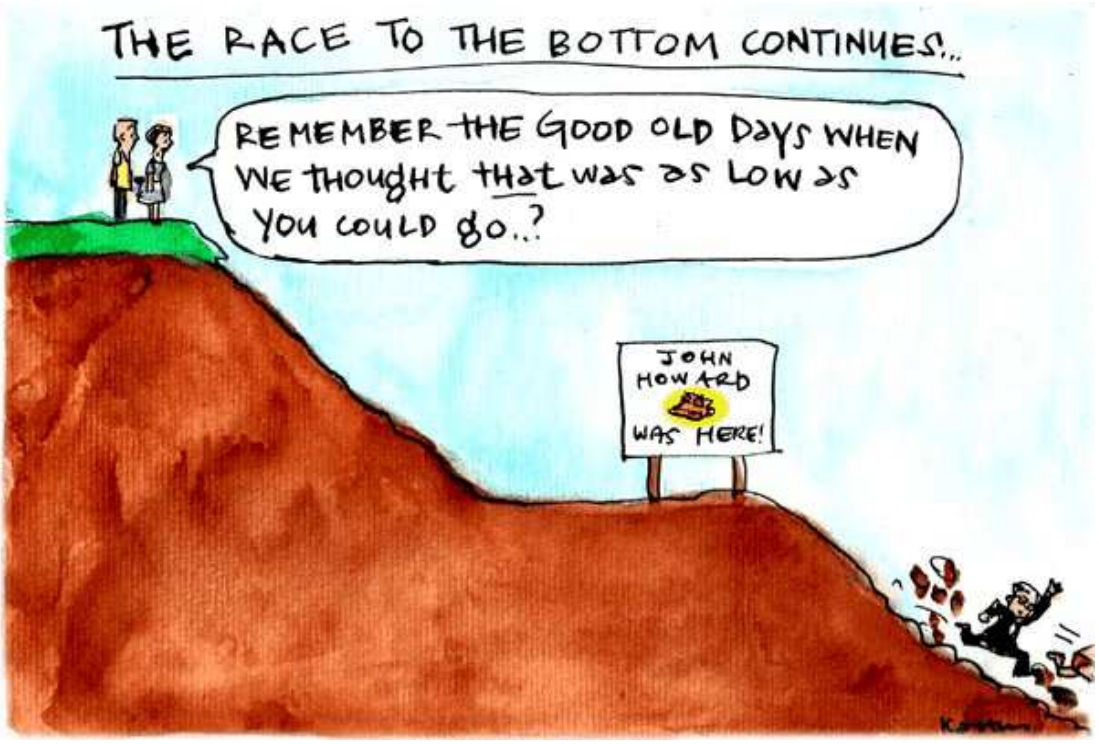
Forgiveness is often seen as a gift that lessens the burden of the recipient. But it is also a practice that can change the future, as the one sinned against is no longer trapped in the immobility of anger: he or she has the opportunity to make progress. Brennan says his ordeal has made him more compassionate and patient, while Tebbutt acknowledges that her life will never be the same. But, she says, the value of life itself cannot be underestimated.

The theologian Lewis B. Smedes put it thus: *To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover the prisoner was you*. Tebbutt and Brennan may well have achieved far more than literal freedom.

Low down and dirty

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas



Irrational fear of the Muslim Brotherhood

RELIGION

Irfan Yusuf

Dr Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected president since independence, was not perfect. He inherited a basket case economy dominated by family and friends of Egypt's top army brass, among them former dictator (and ally of both the United States and Israel) Hosni Mubarak. Morsi tried and failed to unite various elements of Egypt's civil society, even failing to get other religious parties (such as Saudi Arabia's salafist allies) on board.

Morsi wasn't the most polished performer overseas. At home, he was viciously lampooned by satirists on TV, radio and in print. In his clumsily fitting suit and poorly-trimmed beard, he looked more like Yogi Bear than a statesman.

Egypt has been longer a home of Christianity than Islam. Six decades of military rule haven't made Egyptian Christians feel safer, especially with allegedly secular military strongmen using their power to spread anti-Christian hatred to deflect attention and manufacture religious scapegoat. This isn't a peculiarly Muslim or Egyptian phenomenon. Billy Hughes and John Howard each had pieces of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Hosni Mubarak in them.

But to many of Morsi's opponents inside and outside Egypt, his biggest imperfection was his affiliation to the Egyptian branch of the pan-Arab social movement calling itself al-Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (the Muslim Brothers or MB). The exact extent of his affiliation isn't very clear. Was he as close to the MB spiritual leadership as, say, Tony Abbott was to Cardinal Pell or the late Bob Santamaria? Or was he just one of those leaders who liked rewarding his political allies with cushy jobs, again something hardly unknown to Australian readers.

Some may find such comparisons offensive. They will insist there is a huge difference between Islamic chalk and Christian cheese. Christians don't declare jihad on other countries, nor do they seek to impose their theocratic politics on others. The MB is an Islamist organisation, much like to other Islamist organisations such as al-Qaida and Hezbollah and the Indonesian JI. Islamists aren't really committed to democracy. Islamists are theocrats at heart.

It's little wonder that those insisting on such reasoning will have little sympathy for any group meeting their label of Islamist. Which leads me to wonder: on what basis do we label individuals or groups 'Islamist'? Or 'fundamentalist'? Or 'extremist'?

How many times need it be said that it is impossible to have a monolith amongst a set of congregations making up almost one quarter of the world's human population? Further, when will anti-'Islamists' recognise that the history and politics and economics of Muslims is just as complex and complicated as the

variations of history and politics and economics of Catholic communities? Political Catholics (or Catholic politicians, whatever) in El Salvador has different priorities to those in Germany to those in East Timor to those in Australia.

So if we want to get an understanding of why we should all be concerned with events in Egypt, let's start by removing our sectarian blinkers. This applies not just to anti-'Islamists' but also to the many Shia Muslims that perhaps regard Morsi as a Sunni sectarian fanatic for his opposition to Iranian and Lebanese Shia forces supporting the Syrian government. It applies also to other sectarian and political groupings across the Muslim world who have been fervently critical of Morsi and his government.

It also applies to people like me, people who were once 'radicals' and who once supported 'Islamic' movements (of which MB was one) largely because we were taken in by the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. We then became disillusioned with MB-style politics after seeing movements becoming embroiled in the Afghan civil wars that erupted after the Soviets withdrew and the American cash dried up.

In Egypt, many 'Islamists' also became disillusioned with and left the MB. But groups like MB never left their communities. Even when they ceased their political role, successive Egyptian dictators saw the MB as useful for providing social services — medical clinics, legal aid services, etc.

The MB has been performing this role for decades. Its grass roots outreach is stronger than any purely political secular grouping in the country. Little wonder one of its allies won the presidential election.

When an elected government proves unpopular and incompetent, we only expect the army to intervene and a coup to take place if the country involved is Pakistan or Bangladesh or a central African nation. Indeed, these days it is rare even in Pakistan, Bangladesh and many parts of Africa. So why should our leaders speak almost approvingly of such a process taking place in Egypt?

It must seem hypocritical to the average person from a Muslim party, to the average cadre who would otherwise be volunteering in a health clinic or legal aid centre in downtown Cairo or Karachi or Jogjakarta. Or indeed Baghdad. The West can encourage democracy. It will even force-feed democracy (as in the Gulf War). It will jail hundreds of innocent people in Guantanamo Bay and in secret camps to protect what is left of its own democracy.

But woe betide any vaguely 'Islamist' group which tries to democratise itself and its nation.

Asylum seeker karaoke

CREATIVE

Barry Gittins

Fly me to Nauru

Fly me to Nauru and leave me dangle in the sun

though I fled from misery my pain has just begun.

In other words: treat me mean.

In other words: treat me cruelly.

History repeats, you Aussies did the same to Jews.

Running from the Nazis, with their pleas for help refused.

In other words: go away.

In other words: you can't stay.

Manus Island's hot, there's no protection for the weak.

Though you think you're kind, it's true asylum that I seek.

In other words: you don't count.

In other words: try New Guinea.

What's the point of difference between the church and state?

Why do Salvos validate a policy of hate?

In other words: contracts bind.

In other words: we are blind.

With apologies to Bart Howard

Fled the sword

People get ready, there's a boat a-comin'

it took desperation just to get on board.

Cause the world-weary passengers are

leaving slaughter. They couldn't get visas.

They fled the sword.

People get ready there's a boat that's sinking

It's keeping on keeping on, from day to day.

How will we treat those poor asylum seekers?

Can we afford to leave them in dismay?
Time to decide ... they come on the tide.
Can we retrieve our souls?
There ain't no room for the hopeless sinner,
who would hurt refugees for the bottom line.
Have pity on those who tread on their neighbour
there's no hiding place when you fail to shine.
people get ready people get on board
people get ready people get ready people get ready people get on board
People get ready, there's a boat a-comin'
it took desperation just to get on board.
You will need a heart, you hear that diesel hummin'?
They don't have a visa, they fled the sword.
People get ready there's a boat that's sinking
You turn it around, it may not reach shore.
If you close your eyes, pretend you can't hear cryin',
you just might be able — to hide ...
hide from your soul.
With apologies to Curtis Mayfield

Thin edge of reason

How to meet the needs of refugees ...
all those pesky people drowning in our seas?
We could trivialise their plight, unless they arrive by flight;
yes let's blame them to put our minds at ease.
If they need a refuge that's bad luck,
'cause Australians won't acknowledge that they're stuck
in a world of hate and pain, we will treat them the same
if not worse, depending on how they came.
I'm at the thin edge of reason shunning
folks on their knees in desperation at the welcome that they find.

Keep your woes to yourself and avoid that coral shelf
maybe out of sight will equal out of mind.
Both the major parties will agree
that our fears will equal votes, you wait and see.
Though the UN will bleat we will punish the fleet
of the half-drowned sunburnt damaged refugees.
NGOS and churches may oppose
the choice to punish babies brought on boats,
but the kids, Mums and Dads cop the same Oz jihad,
we will warp their minds until they crack the sads.
I'm on the world's biggest island
and I'll keep on denying you
your basic human rights, your well-earned tears.
Yes we'll treat you like foes, we'll ignore your tales of woe
cause your presence plays into racist fears.
With apologies to John Bettis and Richard Carpenter

Head back

Koshan was a man who thought he'd take his family
to a warmer kinder land.
Koshan left Afghanistan and wandered over
to get an Australian tan.
Head back, head back.
Head back to where you once belonged
Head back, head on back.
Head back to where you can be stoned ...
Head on back Koshan.
Sweet Sanduni knew her baby was a'comin'
but she'd lost her Tiger man.
Got the hell away from angry-eyed Sri Lankans,
tried to find a safer span.

Head back, backtrack.

you're gunna be wounded and wronged.

Head back, there's flack.

you'll be Rudd-ed, Burk-ed and Wong-ed.

Get back Sanduni.

Australia's waiting for you,

waitin' to drag you back

or let you rot in hell.

Head back Sanduni,

Get back, get back to where you once were raped.

Head home, kiss foam,

or Abbott's gunna see you scaped. (goat that is) ...

On behalf of the bland, hope we've failed the human audition!

With apologies to John Winston Lennon and Paul McCartney

Catch you unawares

Hey refugee,

you floatin' there.

I've got a concentration camp

that's sure to send you spare

so go and bleed

away from here.

We don't hear your moanin'

from pain and all yer stuff.

Get out of our line of vision,

'cause refugee you ain't pretty enough.

We's absentee jailors, yeah,

put a chain around your neck

and lead you here and there

Pacific-ly —

but just not here.

We just don't want you bleedin' here.

With apologies to Kal Mann and Bernie Lowe

Flotsam jetsam

They climbs aboard a patchwork boat
and drift towards our shores.
But refugees don't get a vote,
they're all just curs and whores.
And who's to say that terrorists
aren't working at the oars?
We've even heard they drown their little tackers.
They're always on the telly
standing around and looking glum.
They burn and break things, protesting,
their eyes are always numb.
I hate to have to say it
and I know it sounds quite dumb:
we've no longer got a market for kanakas.
You'd think there'd be a reason to exploit ...
at that we are adroit ...
How do you solve a problem like the Tampa?
Can you out-Howard Howard in the end?
How do you find the means to put a damper
on asylum seekers' hopes before they drown?
Many an obstacle you've set before them.
Many a trick they ought to understand.
But how do you make them stay
at length out of our harm's way;
how do you keep a firm and bloody hand?
Oh, how do you solve a problem like the Tampa?
How do you sacrifice your fellow man?

When I'm confronted with the mess
of rights and wrongs and woes
(reminded of our soldiers
and their guns and bombs in rows).
Unpredictable as our allies
reffos flee beneath our nose.
They're obnoxious! They're just demons! They're our foes!
They agitate our lefties
and make us feel quite gauche.
They paint us as the Huns, as the Nazis, as the Bosche.
We are noble! They are ill!
We are loving! They are fell!
They're a headache! They're a hindrance!
They are wild!
How do you treat a child who needs asylum?
How do you treat the mum and dad as well?
How do you rationalise your acts of cruelty?
Bastardisation! A mental bitchslap! Death knell!
Many a rape you'd pretend not to notice.
Many a bullying or travesty.
But how do you make them stay
the hell of a ways' away?
Perhaps genocide's an act of mercy?
Oh, how do you rid yourself of moral fibre?
Surely we're free to act as hate demands?
How do you treat a child who needs asylum?
They are but flotsam, jetsam on the sands
With apologies to Rodgers and Hammerstein

Losers

You've paid your fare.

Smugglers ahoy;
you've sought your share
of freedom and joy.
But what bad mistakes
for you to choose
the land of knockers and
three-mortgaged haters
with harbour views.
And we mean to keep you down and down and down and down
We are the losers, you frails.
We'll keep eviscerating
your entrails.
We are the losers
we're pick-and-choosers,
we will out-source
but we're the abusers of y'all.
Yo, refugees,
your guts are mine.
An open-ended sentence
for committing no crime.
So you're dehydrated,
on your pleasure cruise.
It's our challenge to hurt you and lose you
and we won't refuse ...
we mean to keep you down and down and down and down
You are survivors it's true
but just try surviving on
Nauru (and PNG too).
We are the losers,
shufflers and foolers,

No life for you
'cause it might confuse us, make us yearn.
We are the true refugees,
your innocence drives us
to our knees.
Curse you, you hopers
we'll rope-a-dope youze
No time for mercy
'cause we are the champions of your hell.
With apologies to Freddie Mercury

In the sticks

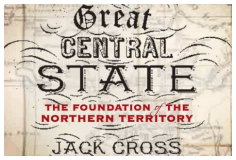
On the way to power —
gettin' closer now with ev'ry hour;
as yer human rights I readily devour,
I just can't wait to see your sweet dreams sour.
I love politics,
it allows us to be total dicks.
As fer y'all victims, you can kick against the pricks;
but prison islands means you're in the sticks.
Wonderin' where this ends?
Separatin' you from family and friends.
Little refugees, yer presence simply lends
a target for my kicks and blows and fends ...
And I can't wait to get on the road again.
Bein' tough and mean.
Keeps the other parties mighty green,
sendin' y'all to places that I've never been;
growin' voter polls I may never see again!
And I can't wait to brutalise again.
Girls or grown men,

little babies, mummas, all go down the dire way
until the bitter end.
We're insistin' that yer sufferin' paves our way.
And I can't wait to screw y'all again.
I'll lock y'all up and take y'all down again.
With apologies to Willie Nelson

Rudd and Abbott charge the north

AUSTRALIA

Dean Ashenden



Kevin Rudd has now joined Tony Abbott in a charge to the North. The common idea is that a substantial fraction of Australia's population and economic activity can be pushed up and across the northern half of the continent. The assumption is that northern Australia is ours to do as we like with. In fact, it's not.

Much of Australia's Aboriginal population lives in northern Australia, and Aboriginal people make up a far higher proportion of the population there than anywhere else. They own or co-own, in both Western legal terms and in customary law, vast tracts of land, many of which are open to non-Aboriginal people only with Aboriginal permission. In northern Australia, Aboriginal people have constructed a distinctively Aboriginal way of life, as different from the mainstream as it is from 'traditional' Aboriginal society.

What the major parties are proposing is not necessarily a bad thing from Aboriginal points of view. What is bad is the assumption about our prerogatives. Official Australia has long looked at the north as a tabula rasa awaiting 'development', an unmissable opportunity and an infuriating failure. And apparently it still does.

Credit for getting this history under way goes to the pastoral grandees of the colony of South Australia. In the 1860s they funded an obsessive-compulsive alcoholic Scotsman to find out what lay between their northern border and the far coast, and how it could be got. John McDouall Stuart's six expeditions found little to encourage them, but lust trumped reason, and South Australia set itself to be the first colony in history to found a colony. The two would fuse, in time, to become the Great Central State .

Dreams of imperial glory and speculative fortunes turned almost immediately into a long-running mixture of farce and nightmare. Eventually South Australia got lucky. In 1911 it managed to palm off its colony onto the newly-constituted Commonwealth of Australia. Astonishingly, the Commonwealth even agreed to pay serious money for it, nearly four million pounds, plus another 2.2 million for a railway line that had not even reached South Australia's northern border, let alone made any money.

Believing, as had the South Australians before them, that there must be a way to turn space into land, the Commonwealth did what South Australia had done, with the same result. An official inquiry report in 1937 was scathing. It found that in the 25 years since the takeover the federal government had spent more than 15 million pounds and was heading further into the red. The previous year's production had brought in 100 000 pounds less than the Government's outlay for

the year of 600,000 pounds.

Most revealingly, nearly a century after the frontier's first appearance in the Territory, its Aboriginal population still outnumbered the non-Aboriginal (if you include Chinese, which the inquiry didn't) by three or four to one.

But the inquirers nonetheless found that it can be done, if it's done right. It prescribed the familiar medicine: ports, roads, bridges, railways, ports, industry development boards, the lot.

Much of what the inquiry wanted soon came to pass, but not in result of its proposals. In 1939, war saw tens of thousands of troops stream north to build roads, airfields, a port and other infrastructure. For the first time the white population exceeded the black.

Soon motor vehicles, aircraft, air conditioning and buckets of public money transformed the look and feel of the Territory, but 'development' remained elusive. In the Territory, and more particularly in neighbouring tropical Queensland and Western Australia, mining was the only big earner, not necessarily to the advantage of government revenues.

The kind of on-the-ground industries apparently envisaged by Rudd and Abbott — horticulture and agriculture particularly — were confined to coastal enclaves or to the margins of viability. Much of the north proved too hot, too wet, too dry, too far from markets, too barren or too pestilential, with the happy consequence that the frontier failed to do its grim work.

Instead of a near-obliteration of Aboriginal populations of the kind seen on the eastern and southern seaboards, northern Australia witnessed a slow-motion saga of sporadic violence and accommodation, of advance and retreat. Neither side ever looked liked winning, and neither ever looked like giving up.

In the aftermath of the Coniston massacres of 1928 both sides abandoned violence for other means, and since then both have used the law, politics, money and public opinion in hundreds of struggles over land and 'culture', some famous or notorious, most not, one side straining to gain ground, the other to resist and to recover.

That 160-year struggle now seems to be reaching a new stage. We like to think that the devastation of one population and culture by another is all in the past, but the apparent failure of Rudd and Abbott to notice that northern Australia is shared country suggests that there might be more to come.

Labor and the Coalition's cruel credentials

AUSTRALIA

Kerry Murphy

The Government and Coalition asylum seekers policies are brutal. Labor is subcontracting our international obligations to poor neighbours who do not have the resources to resettle refugees who may well have trauma issues. Not to be outdone in the cruelty stakes, the Coalition has four proposals, each of which has serious flaws.

First, we have the old Temporary Protection Visa (TPV). The TPV was introduced in 1999 and shortly afterwards there was a serious spike in arrivals by boat, often with women and children who could not be sponsored by the men already here. The TPV is punitive, yet has no deterrent effect. I have never met anyone who thought the TPV was a deterrent to them coming to Australia.

Assuming the Coalition mean the first version of the TPV from 1999, this means no sponsorship of spouses and dependent children until the refugee is granted permanent residence. Previously it was taking five or more years before permanent residence decisions were made. Given the processing times for partners, this could mean six or more years separation from spouses. A number of psychologists reported on the deleterious effects on people's mental health of being forced to separate for such long times with the future uncertain.

Then you had to reapply for another protection visa, and endure more processing costs and delays while this was assessed. By 2004 it was clear that the policy was too harsh, and refugees were then allowed to apply for other visas such as skilled visas, student visas or partner visas for those who had married or partnered onshore since they were granted protection.

We do not require those resettled from offshore, or those who arrive with a visa and then make a successful claim, to reprove their refugee status after three years. Some psychologists have commented on the detrimental effect the actual process has on people who have to recount their traumatic experiences again and again.

The second proposal is to simply remove the review process. The logic here seems to be not that the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) is performing poorly, but that it is approving too many cases. This proposal shows the inherent bias in the Coalition against people coming by boat; a bias shared at least by Labor Senator Carr, reflected in his uninformed comments on Iranian asylum seekers.

The Coalition states that they will use a system similar to that used by UNHCR — single case officer, internal review only. This system is designed for use in countries without established administrative legal processes, and in refugee camps to deal with massive population movements. Why should a developed industrial

liberal democracy use an inadequate legal system just for asylum seekers?

Removing the review mechanism means the only review option is the courts. This is an inefficient and costly way to run an administrative process.

An independent review mechanism is the standard process for review of nearly every administrative decision in federal and state bureaucracies. A review process means there will be more careful decision making, not less. It is possible to foresee political pressure on case officers to turn around cases quickly, rather than carefully. While there are flaws in the current process, the solution is not to remove it altogether. The system is about selecting those who are in need of international protection, which is a serious and onerous task.

The third proposal is to use s91W to draw adverse inferences against an asylum seeker's nationality for someone who destroys their documents and is unable to adequately explain why.

This provision was inserted back in 2001 but has hardly ever been used because it is impractical. If someone says they are from Afghanistan, and have no documents, where can they be sent? Assume that an adverse inference is drawn about nationality, and they are assessed as not being Afghan because they do not have any documents; but then Immigration approaches the Afghan government for documents to send them back because there is no other realistic option — how is this a proper assessment of someone's case?

The final item is to adopt the fast track system of the UK. This system, as well as other parts of the UK system, have been strongly criticised by groups such as Amnesty International, Human Right Watch, Asylum Aid UK, and UNHCR among others. A common criticism relates to poor quality decision making at the initial level. Amnesty notes that this includes:

The use of speculative arguments or unreasonable plausibility findings

Not properly considering the available evidence

Using a small number of inconsistencies to dismiss the application, and

Not making proper use of country of origin information.

Anyone familiar with the Australian system would tick those four items as common errors in our system, yet the Coalition seem to want to copy a flawed system, add some cruelty with the TPV, and abolish the review mechanism which should reduce the flaws.

Neither major party has a policy that respects relevant human rights issues, or an administrative system designed to ensure the correct decisions are reached. And neither policy respects the dignity of the people involved.

Military rulers bring Egypt into disrepute

INTERNATIONAL

Andrew Hamilton

It was in England that I heard for the first time of a football player being charged with bringing the game into disrepute. I was amused. From an outsider's perspective the whole aim of rugby was to bring the game into disrepute. And the spectators seemed to relish its most disreputable features.

I can now see the point of the charge. If suspicion persists that players were encouraged to take drugs whose long term effects are unknown, it would lead parents actively to discourage their children from playing the game at senior level, with incalculable commercial consequences. Disrepute and disaster are twins.

Games are games. It is a much more serious and potentially dangerous thing to bring a nation's polity into disrepute. And that sadly is what the military rulers of Egypt appear to have done when crushing the protests by the supporters of the elected and desposed President Mohamed Morsi. Over 400 people died, perhaps many more.

Egypt has a long tradition of military influence in politics. Gamal Nasser came to power following a military coup. His successor, Anwar al-Sadat was one of the original revolutionary officers, and was killed by army officers. Hosni Mubarak, previously an air force officer, was eventually deposed by the military after popular protests. The military enabled the civil elections that led to the presidency of Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Morsi in turn was deposed by the military after protests that revealed widespread disaffection with his authoritarian rule and with the perceived sectarian goals of the Muslim Brotherhood. The army promised to take power for a month in preparation for another election, hoping to broker a new settlement.

But the deposition and arrest of Morsi led to widespread protests by his supporters. Fatefully the army, which had shortly before appointed officers as governors to the majority of provinces, decided to disperse the protests at the cost of a massive civilian death toll as troops fired into the crowds with shotguns, machine guns and sniper fire.

Since these events the acting prime minister, the liberal Mohamed El Baradei, has resigned. The army now rules by default, its strong-man general and defence minister Abdel Fattah al-Sini enjoying much popular support.

It is hard to imagine anyone bringing a national polity further into disrepute than the Egyptian army officers. They promised to return to a less autocratic polity than Morsi, and the monument to their own style of government will be the rows of gravestones of their victims.

Now that the army has become embroiled in divisive politics we may expect that

it will do what such armies do best. It will treat the nation to a diet of counter-insurgency, trumpeting the need for the army, isolating its enemies, building its intelligence services through the whole of society, all in the name of state security.

In the meantime the Muslim Brotherhood will be driven underground, resentment will build, Christian churches will be burned because they are not worth defending, and people will eventually demand a polity of repute. But at what cost.

Australian democracy needs an intrusion of the excluded

AUSTRALIA

John Falzon

We're well into the election campaign and everybody is talking about the economy. The word 'economy' has a Greek etymology. It comes from *oikos* (household) and *nomos* (law, order, management). In the contemporary context it is generally understood to refer to a set of figures, such as GDP, rate of growth, inflation, employment, balance of trade, the deficit. But maybe the number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia is also a measure of the economy? After all, it provides us with a picture of how many people are actually without an *oikos*!

The truth is that we could look at ourselves as enjoying a thumping record of economic growth while viewing the number of people experiencing homelessness as somehow incidental to this rosy picture. Likewise for the 2.3 million people living in poverty, including 600,000 kids!

In a poem entitled 'Economic Report', poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal wrote prophetically about the kind of internal revolution that is demanded by the Gospel; a Beatitudes-like inversion of our values and practices to the degree that we might be able to say that 'economics now is love'.

In truth the popular mainstream notion of 'economics' is ideologically loaded. It is a reference point not for love or for the 'public good' but rather a paean to private gain, private profit, and the accumulation of wealth — regardless of the concomitant accumulation of misery, both here and in those parts of the world where people are savagely exploited and plundered of their natural wealth so that our standard of living might be augmented.

It is predicated on the assumption that wealth generated for the rich will eventually trickle down to everyone else. Poverty, then, is seen as a symptom of personal failure. People are pathologised and many are eventually criminalised; for the criminal 'justice' system is the logical end-point for those who find themselves outside the household, neither producing nor consuming according to the rules of the household.

John Berger, in *A Seventh Man*, his moving study of migrant workers in Europe, wrote: 'According to the capitalist ethic, poverty is a state from which an individual or a society is delivered by enterprise.' Poverty and homelessness therefore are constructed as a lack of enterprise, a moral failing. Berger goes further with this analysis of how exclusion is justified, and utters the terrifying judgement that 'to be homeless is to be nameless'.

It is time for a new beginning. The Prime Minister says we need a 'new politics' or a 'new way'. The Leader of the Opposition responds that we'll only get a new

way by electing a new government. What is missing is the recognition that we actually need a new kind of economic democracy: a reconfiguration of our economic decision-making and prioritising, away from individualism towards a sense of the public good, the common good, the participation of all rather than the exclusion and marginalisation of many.

We need to broaden our revenue base in order to provide social goods such as education, healthcare, transport, housing, childcare, disability services, and employment services. We need to be unafraid of removing some of the massive and wasteful concessions — such as superannuation tax concessions that cost the taxpayer about $32 billion a year, according to Treasury, the bulk of which goes to middle- and upper-income earners. Many such potential savings have been identified in the Henry Tax Review.

We *do not* need to take from the poor to give to the rich. We *do not* need to cut payments to single mums or the unemployed. We *do not* need to cut expenditure on health or social housing or education.

In a recent opinion piece I put the following three questions to both leaders.

1. What will you do to make sure that everyone has a place that they can call home?

Over 105,000 people are homeless. This is not worthy of a nation that prides itself on being progressive. Thirty-nine per cent of these people are living in severely overcrowded conditions. Eighty per cent of the people seeking help from housing and homelessness services are trying to survive on a social security benefit. The factors contributing to homelessness include poor health, housing stress and the need to escape domestic violence.

Safe, affordable housing is a human right for all, not a privilege for some. The 2008 Homelessness White Paper sets the target of halving all homelessness by 2020. It costs more, in the long run, to manage homelessness than to end it. And you don't end homelessness by blaming people who are homeless any more than you can fix unemployment by blaming the unemployed.

2. What will you do to make sure that everyone who can work actually has the chance to work?

We all want to be treated fairly and respectfully in the workplace and receive an income that allows us to keep up with the cost of living. While people are looking for work or are outside the labour market because of caring responsibilities, they should not be forced to wage a battle for survival from below the poverty line or be treated in a punitive or patronising fashion. If there was anything we should have learned from the Global Financial Crisis it is that unemployment and underemployment are, in the main, structurally rather than behaviourally caused.

It is a matter of deep shame for a wealthy nation like ours that our unemployment benefits have been kept deliberately low as a means of humiliating

the very people they were designed to assist. We support helping people into the paid workforce. The time has come, however, to abandon the foolish notion that forcing them into deeper poverty improves their chances of employment. You don't build people up by putting them down. You don't help them get work by forcing them into poverty.

3. How will you ensure that everyone has the opportunity to learn?

Education is a game-changer in the fight against poverty. Every parent in Australia should feel confident that their child is going to have access to the highest quality education and that this should never depend on what they can afford or where they live. And education should not be seen as something that ends at year 12. University, TAFE, apprenticeship training and adult education should be accessible and affordable for all. Education is not just something we benefit from individually but also collectively as a society and as an economy.

It's hard to be able to look for, or keep, a job when you don't have a place to call home. It's equally hard for a child, or an adult, to engage in formal education, in circumstances of homelessness, including overcrowded housing. It's hard to find work when your literacy and numeracy levels are not up to standard and it's hard to keep a roof over your head when you're out of work.

The message is clear: A place to live, a place to work and a place to learn are deeply interconnected fundamentals for building the kind of Australia that deserves to be called progressive or fair. And this means for everyone: the First Peoples, the most recent arrivals, and for everyone in between!

It's time to move beyond the politics of marginal seats to a politics that listens to marginal people. A good society is one where the people treated as the most marginal enter the public space and teach the rest of us what really matters. This 'intrusion of the excluded' as Slavoj Zizek calls it should be the true measure of our democracy.

Finagling free trade in the Pacific

INTERNATIONAL

Jemma Williams

Negotiations towards a free trade agreement involving Australia, New Zealand and 14 of our neighbouring Pacific Island countries are underway this week in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

The agreement, known as PACER-Plus , aims to enhance development through greater trade in the region. However, the negotiations are being carried out on unequal playing field, with Australia and New Zealand leading the talks which involve largely small, underdeveloped island nations, five of which are listed by the United Nations as among the least developed countries in the world. Recognising this, Australia and New Zealand are funding the negotiations as well as providing assistance to Pacific Island countries to implement the agreement.

Despite insisting that promoting development in the Pacific is the priority, Australia stands to gain more than most of the Pacific Islands, which already have tariff-free access for their goods into Australian markets under previous trade arrangements. Among the issues expected to be discussed in Port Vila is trade in services, which would mean Australian companies, providing services from banking to health and education, would have unrestricted access to Pacific Island markets, and Pacific Island governments would have less rights to regulate them.

The logic for including services in trade agreements is that established private service providers, in this case based in Australia or New Zealand, would be enticed into Pacific markets through deregulation, and Pacific Island nations would benefit from increased access to the service they provide. Indeed, the entry of international telecommunications companies into a number of these island economies did improve mobile phone coverage and connectivity, including in rural areas.

However, opening up all service 'markets' in vulnerable economies poses many threats. The inclusion of services in a free trade agreement restricts the regulation of any service which could be considered to have any commercial activity or where there are one or more service providers. This deregulation and entry of private service providers is often followed by pressures to privatise essential services like water. In countries like Argentina and Bolivia private companies have raised prices and have not invested in infrastructure in unprofitable areas.

Additionally, services are typically negotiated on what is known as a 'negative list basis' — meaning that all services are included unless they are specifically excluded. This means that all services now and *in the future* would be subject to these rules even in light of new environmental or social problems or new research. This would undermine governments' policy space to address pressing development

concerns like climate change, which is already affecting Pacific Island countries.

Many Pacific island nations are already struggling to provide essential services such as water, health and education. Having access to many of these services is a basic human right. Implementing policies to ensure the equitable distribution of essential public services throughout all areas of the country is one of the essential responsibilities of government. Liberalising trade in services could hinder the ability of government to fund or provide local or government-owned services to their most vulnerable populations.

Healthcare is a typical example. Foreign healthcare providers are likely to establish themselves in wealthy areas, profiting by charging high prices to those who can afford it. They would not service rural populations where the majority of people are unwaged and survive on subsistence agriculture. Governments would still have to fund or provide health care to the most vulnerable populations. Additionally, the stark inequalities in healthcare provision could lead to a 'brain drain,' where the most qualified professionals seek work in clinics which serve the wealthy.

Many Pacific Island nations question what they would gain from PACER-Plus. Earlier in the year Papua New Guinea's trade minister said PNG would gain nothing from the negotiations and he would consider withdrawing. The islands are pushing for the inclusion of temporary labour mobility rights so that their citizens will be able to gain visas to work in Australia and New Zealand, as well as more development assistance. Neither of these issues is normally included in free trade agreements, but they are being used as bargaining chips for Pacific Island nations to concede access to Australia and New Zealand access to their services markets.

If the Australian and New Zealand governments really want to achieve development in the Pacific, it is difficult to understand why they are pushing these islands to reduce their barriers to trade in a manner which could restrict their achievement of human development goals.

Parochial Australia needs to grow up

AUSTRALIA

Fatima Measham

With only weeks left until the elections, it is clear that the campaign will be fought solely on domestic issues such as economic management. It is not unusual; perhaps it is even appropriate. But one can't help feel poorer from another contest mostly devoid of international context. What passes for foreign policy thus far is 'stop the boats', 'you will not be settled in Australia' and 'aid for trade'.

It is reminiscent in its parochialism to the previous election. As visiting Harvard University academic Niall Ferguson then observed : 'One listens to the contenders for the Australian premiership discussing in the most oblique and mealy-mouthed way issues about immigration and infrastructure that really, you know, sound more like Strathclyde Regional Council than a debate for the leadership of a major power in Asia-Pacific.'

Dr Michael Fullilove, executive director of the Lowy Institute, recently took up this point. 'Australia is not a small, isolated country. We should not conduct our election campaigns as though we are.' He emphasises that we are the 13th largest economy with a seat at two of the most important international forums, the G20 and the UN Security Council. We are definitely at the big people's table, but we don't seem to have worked out what that means.

In this respect, there is something to be envied in United States election campaigns, where foreign policy is treated as a set of topics in its own right. At least one election debate is devoted to it. It is an area that is taken so seriously that it has left many gaffe-prone candidates, including Sarah Palin and Mitt Romney, in the dust.

While this does not mean that Americans are necessarily less insular than Australians, they are at least far more self-conscious of their place in the world. Questions regarding US relations with other countries such as Israel, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, China and Russia often serve as the litmus test for savvy, however 'savvy' is interpreted by voters. For Americans and even for us, the US presidency does not exist in a localised vacuum.

It is time we position the prime ministerial office in the same way — as being more than just housekeeping. This is not only about maturity but perspective. Hot-button topics such as economic management and asylum seekers are best seen from a wide lens, yet we seem determined to keep the rest of the world out of the frame.

It is a sea-girt mentality that our politicians don't care to take apart because it is too hard to convince the average voter that there are in fact other people on the

planet. Acknowledging this reality demands a lot from voters, perhaps more than they're willing to allow, and they fear it. We all prefer to think that we're completely in control of the things that affect our lives.

Such denialism will inevitably leave us ill-prepared for significant challenges. It is disturbing, for instance, how peripheral an election issue climate change is, once we cut through the bulldust around the carbon emissions price. It is in fact a significant foreign policy issue because it is also a security issue; the resulting intensity of migration, food insecurity and frequency of national disasters will act, according to the US Defence Department, as 'an accelerant of instability and conflict'.

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, between 2009 and 2011, more than 40 million people in the Asia-Pacific were displaced by climate-related and extreme weather events. If thousands of asylum seekers are enough to create a moral panic, how will we respond to tens of millions of environmental refugees by 2050?

Our complicity in US security instruments such as NSA surveillance and the drones program should also be an election issue. Edward Snowden, the whistleblower who exposed American global surveillance, revealed four Australian facilities that contribute to the interception of telecommunications and internet traffic worldwide. This includes the US Australian Joint Defence facility at Pine Gap, which also assists in drone strikes.

Our involvement in these two programs raises important questions around sovereignty, transparency and accountability. Australians deserve to hear them answered. Yet few of them are probably even aware of these links, much less realise what the implications are for their privacy and security.

The point is that there are other things going on. Bigger things. Yet we seem trapped in insular political squabbles over who can maintain our lifestyle and preserve our borders. The only way we can mature as a democracy is by shedding our provincial outlook. Our political leaders need to show the way. Right now they are holding us back.

Foreign policy beyond asylum seeker silliness

AUSTRALIA

Evan Ellis

Back in April a boat of 66 Sri Lankan asylum seekers slipped into Geraldton harbor. By the afternoon half the town had assembled for a gander. One woman's indignation was tempered with relief: *What if they'd been terrorists?*

Now in reality, no credible threat would attempt to invade a Pacific middle power with an annual defence budget in excess of $20 billion and strategic ties to the US via a boat that was remarkable only for staying afloat. But the woman's fears hadn't come from nowhere. Politicians avoid the term 'invasion' to frame the issue of asylum seekers, but only just. We are regularly told we have 'lost control of our borders', that our sovereignty is imperilled and, by way of debacles such as the Sayed Abdellatif affair, that asylum seekers are wolves in sheep's clothing.

The irony is that, quite apart from campaign slogans and the issue of asylum seekers, Australia may be entering a geo-political reality where serious questions will be asked of our national sovereignty.

The imperial mandarins learnt the hard way that sovereignty is not inviolable. For centuries China boasted the world's largest economy and superpower status. The Treaty of Nanjing of 1842, which concluded the First Opium War, wounded this sense of preeminence. Having missed out on the industrial revolution, the Qing dynasty was little match for the industrial war machines of Europe. The treaty excised large chunks of China to the foreign powers and was the first of many significant defeats China faced over the next hundred years.

China specialists Orville Schell and John Delury argue that the treaty has become year dot for modern China. In an exhibition in Nanjing city commemorating this capitulation, a panel records: 'Those unequal treaties were like fettering ropes of humiliation that made China lose control of her political and military affairs ... [It] has become a symbol of the commencement of China's modern history.' Why would the Chinese Communist Party want to commence its modern history here?

The exhibit concludes: 'It is hard to look back upon this humiliating history ... But the abolishment of the unequal treaties has shown the Chinese people's unwavering spirit of struggle for independence and self-strengthening. To feel shame is to approach courage.' To an outsider that might all sound simplistic, even glib. Isn't that the plot of *Karate Kid*? — an innocent suffers a crushing humiliation, the adversity surfaces a hitherto unknown strength of character, and redemption is achieved by manning up to the bullies of the world.

However the repercussions of this 'manning up' is anything but glib. China is converting its economic power into military power. It is increasingly assertive in the tinderboxes of the East and South China Seas, developing weapons to sink US

warships, leveraging its industries for strategic advantage, getting better at shooting down satellites, hacking sensitive national secrets and generally behaving like an emerging superpower.

And America has started to push back , erecting a ring of a new air force bases across South East Asia and the Pacific, increasing regional military cooperation and generally behaving like an entrenched superpower.

And these immediate strategic maneuvers are taking place against sweeping economic changes that may see China as the world's largest economy in a few years, India as the second richest in a decade or two, and maybe even Indonesia in fourth place by mid century. Not for nothing is this called the Asian century.

Which brings us back to Australia today. The official line from both major parties is that Australia can continue to make money from China and get security from the US.

Granted, the 'Australia in the Asian Century' white paper concedes that the US-Sino relationship 'will inevitably have a competitive element'. The overall tone though remains upbeat. However, Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at ANU, identifies a crippling tension that undercuts the white paper:

Asia is being fundamentally transformed by the second biggest event in human history [the rebalancing of global wealth and power to its shores], and all we need to do is maintain our current policy settings, hire a few more diplomats and teach a few more languages. No hard choices or uncomfortable reforms — let alone serious investments — required.

Tensions mar Australia's current policy planning. How else do you describe a policy blueprint like the white paper that says 'this is not a world in which anything like a containment policy can work or be in our national interests' while at the same time we welcome US warplanes to Darwin next year?

To be fair, we might be lucky. Malcolm Turnbull and Henry Kissinger might be right , and this swirling mass of egos, missiles, grievances and interests that make up US-Sino relations might 'evolve into a new order, without either side having to make concessions to the other'.

But the risks are real and growing. And it's in this context that the framing of asylum seekers as a threat to our sovereignty is exposed as just plain silly. A war between China and the US would be a disaster to our national interests. A trickle of desperate people on barely sea worthy vessel is not.

Community sector sickened by managerial mindset

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

Around election times much is spoken about the future directions of society. But the decisions that make the most significant changes to society often seem purely administrative, are tacitly approved by all parties, and so receive little attention. One of the most significant of these has been to the provision of community services, especially to disadvantaged groups, like prisoners, asylum seekers, and recipients of public health care and welfare.

Over the last 30 years governments have reduced their role in the provision of services, contracting them mainly to community and for-profit organisations. Most recently they have sought single contractors that can tender for all the services. Some of these have been large charitable organisations, particularly in health care. But many have been multinational corporations which tender for a wide variety of services. So, a visitor to immigration detention centres may be surprised to find people in Serco uniforms mowing their nature strips and also staffing the centre.

One result of this change is that in order to continue to serve the disadvantaged, smaller community agencies, which once tendered for relatively small projects, will be forced to combine with one another or to enter partnerships with for-profit groups.

The preference for large service providers is attractive to governments which choose to acquiesce in a narrowing revenue base and also face the higher costs of an ageing population. Large corporations can promise economy of scale and so save costs. The government public service has only to establish and monitor the regulatory framework within which the service is provided.

Outsourcing also offers political advantages. Governments can sheet home to corporations failures in delivering public services in prisons, mental health, and even public transport. Ministers can divert public anger against the service providers from whom they then demand answers and improvements. Contracts signed by the governments with corporations, too, can be kept secret for commercial reasons, so hindering public scrutiny. The employment contracts of the providers can also include confidentiality provisions.

What is at issue for society in these developments? Services provided by large corporations are certainly not necessarily worse than those provided directly by the state. In my experience in detention centres the quality of service depends on the attention given to detail in the rules of operation and to the culture of the organisation and its local leadership. The decisive test lies in how those who use the service experience it.

The risk to society and to the quality of service is longer term and more subtle.

It lies in the managerial culture that these changes encourage. The interest of government will focus almost exclusively on financial efficiency, and the regulatory framework generally measures the delivery of services by only quantitative criteria.

The quality of the relationships on which effective service rests and other intangible factors that are central to human growth are easily ignored. As a result the care of the most vulnerable and needy will increasingly be neglected by the large providers. They will be blamed for not meeting benchmarks, and responsibility for their care abandoned to charities.

Within this culture the health of community organisations will be vital. But it will also be under threat. Community organisations are generally inspired by a vision of the human dignity of the less fortunate in society, and a commitment to them as persons. They represent community groups such as churches. Generally, too, they privilege the building of relationships as the path to growth in those they work with, and so insist on the quality of the relationship between worker and client.

This emphasis on the personal quality of service is important in making services effective. It emphasises the fact, otherwise forgotten in the focus on what is economically effective, that service to people cannot be commodified.

Although community organisations are often a burr in the saddle of a managerially minded government, they are important because they represent a humane vision and because they can reflect back to government an intimate experience of what is happening to the people whom they serve. Their advocacy, even when unwanted, keeps governments in touch with human needs.

But small organisations are also at risk, first of the loss of funding to support their work. They will be victims of the preference for larger organisations, whether community based or for-profit.

Even if they find partners in larger organisations, they will constantly need to assert their spirit and values in the face of the purely managerial and financial criteria of the prevailing culture. Their capacity to innovate and to go the extra mile for their clients will inevitably come under pressure.

Their ability to advocate for their clients and to protest against misguided practice will also be put at risk. That will be to the detriment of society.

The health of society is dependent on a real and hands-on responsibility of government for the good of all citizens. It cannot shuffle off that responsibility to corporate bodies. But governments need also to encourage a lively civil society in which community organisations offer a personal service and present a critical and evidence based critique of current practice, both their own and others'.

Blowing up the people smugglers

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Elysium* (MA). Director: Neill Blomkamp. Starring: Matt Damon, Jodie Foster, Sharlto Copley, Alice Braga, Diego Luna. 109 minutes**

Blomkamp is a blockbuster filmmaker with a social conscience. In his previous film, *District 9*, an alien invasion morphed into a vast (in)humanitarian crisis when the new arrivals were forced to live in slum-like conditions outside apartheid-era Johannesburg. The South African filmmaker's Hollywood follow-up *Elysium* is set in a dystopian future where the gap between rich and poor has been exacerbated by ecological disaster; now the elite one per cent live in a snap-sealed space-bound paradise called Elysium, while the impoverished 99 per cent remain below on a polluted and overpopulated earth, in crowded, decrepit cities and toiling in dangerous blue collar jobs.

These are extremely good, issues-based sci-fi premises that in both instances Blomkamp spends too quickly. *District 9* used a documentary format in its first ten minutes to spell out its most interesting idea, which was a comment on how we treat the refugees who arrive among us. *Elysium* is even quicker to spill the beans; within its opening seconds it has told its audience via bold captions everything that it needs to know about this world; of the elevation of the rich literally beyond the reach of the rest. It then progresses to a reasonably engaging but straightforward action-driven story, that draws some obvious moral points from its potent premise.

Its hero is ex-con Max (Damon), who is compelled by circumstances to enlist the services of a people smuggler, Julio (Luna), to try to get him to Elysium. To achieve this he must overcome the aggressive defenses employed by sinister bureaucrat Delacourt (Foster), head of the Civil Cooperation Bureau (another throwback to apartheid-era South Africa), which is charged with protecting Elysium from earthling invasions. In particular, Max must evade CCB foot soldier Krueger, a violent and technologically advanced maniac played gleefully by Copley.

Like *District 9*, *Elysium*, once the headier concepts are out of the way, is loudly and proudly an action film. Blomkamp and his team have clearly had fun coming up with futuristic gadgetry and increasingly devastating weapons (the violence in *Elysium* is pretty brutal at times) to be used by heroes and villains alike. The action sequences, and Elysium itself (which lines the inner rim of a massive wheel-shaped satellite), are impressively realised. There are some nice, blackly-comic digs at the interactions between humans and technology (see Max trying to reason with his robotic parole officer); but the exploration of the central, social theme is less than robust.

Heavy-handed is a better description. The film draws pointed comparison

between the insufficient health care on earth — where hospitals are overcrowded and ill-equipped — and the miraculous healing capabilities available to the wealthy citizens of Elysium. Herein lies Max's motivation for reaching Elysium; he is grievously ill following a workplace accident (such is the lot of the 99 per cent) and only on Elysium can his life be saved. A childhood friend, Frey (Braga), whose daughter is dying of cancer, helps to evoke a more selfless dimension in Max's quest. But amid the explosions and bodies being blown apart it's hard to take these more earnest points very seriously.

As social commentary *Elysium* clearly has in mind any country that receives 'unwanted' arrivals of refugees. But it seems particularly timely in Australia, where the political response to asylum seekers who arrive by boat is simply to *stop* them. Most of those whom Julio helps to reach Elysium are in desperate need; the fact that they presumably have the financial resources to enlist his services does not make them any less desperate. The response by the bureaucrat Delacourt, to blow the smugglers' ships out of the air before they reach Elysium, and violently apprehend any individuals who get through, certainly takes the 'stop the boats' mentality to its extreme.

SBS audience betrays gays with a kiss

MEDIA

Ben

My appearance with my partner Nam on last night's SBS *Insight* episode about marriage equality was one of the most intense experiences of my life. To speak so publicly about something so personal was harder than I had envisaged. I thought I was strong enough to bear the brunt of bigotry, but the day after the program was filmed I broke down. For the first time, I felt the full force of internalised homophobia and public heterosexism.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex sisters and brothers were not born thinking of themselves as activists. They were born, like all fellow human sisters and brothers, seeking to love and to be loved. Last night I experienced my sexual orientation as a gift to be shared, but also as a curse.

My experience of those in the audience who opposed marriage equality was one of homophobia. Their entrenched position on acceptable identity and behaviour, even to the extent of wanting to criminalise gays having families, is the kind of heteronormativity that LGBTI people experience as prejudice, and is very painful. The notion that people fall strictly into distinct and complementary roles based on gender is the root of heterosexism which may be defined as a prejudice against any non-heterosexual form of behaviour, identity, relationship or community.

When Nam broke down during the program, it shocked me and I didn't know how to react. I wanted to hug and kiss him but I was afraid. I felt vulnerable and frightened for him. The next morning, Nam looked weary in more than a physical sense, but he seemed to hold it together. I felt partly responsible for his distress.

Despite the kindness of those from the television program team, my tummy was churning. I drew strength from having Nam there with me, but apart from that the only way I could convince myself not to run from the stage was to envision those people sitting in the audience not as strangers, but as my fellow family members and friends. Some love us, and some don't.

There were moments of grace and kindness during the forum, but also many wounding moments. What hurt and frightened me most was not the unkind or even ignorant responses and questions from some members of the audience, but the fact that they seemed to not want to hear us: they talked at me, past me, but never with me. We were merely an 'issue'. I felt objectified as a piece of conversation. This hurt. I was transported back to the frightened 16-year-old boy at school, at church or at home who felt diminished and dehumanised.

After the program, many kind souls came to us and embraced us, told us that they have heard us and understand why marriage equality was so important to so many peoples and their families. While passing by the reception on the way back

to the car, there was a clique of people, the same ones who had said those rather diminishing things during the forum. One of them stretched out a hand to shake mine and said 'Nothing personal, and no offence.'

That shook me to my core. It felt like the kiss of betrayal. To me, those sentiments are the very seeds of discrimination. Words and thoughts that objectify people as 'issues' have proven in the past to lead to very cruel actions done to already marginalised people. That is how dehumanising heterosexism done in a seemingly 'benign' way becomes a weapon that destroys the lives and families of many here and around the world.

Some questions came to mind. Do we see a bird with wings and tell it not to fly? Do we trim off the flower of a tree that is meant to fruit, simply because the flower does not bloom as and where we see fit? What would the world look like if it were a garden like that? These questions go to the heart of heterosexism. They are questions about how we love one another and build a just and flourishing society, safe and inclusive of all.

Born-to-rule Bombers glimpse unprivileged reality

AUSTRALIA

Brian Matthews

'The drugs in football affair illustrates what happens when the interests of one particular team are put ahead of care for its players and for the competition of which it forms part. Eventually the group allegiance crumbles as individuals look out for themselves.' Andrew Hamilton's succinct summation is one of the best observations to have emerged from the thickening miasma of evidence, speculation, rumour and point-counter-point surrounding the Essendon Football Club since it 'self-reported' its supplements program at the start of the 2013 season.

Group allegiance has indeed crumbled, some individuals are certainly looking out for themselves, and the players — caught in the middle, grievously uncared for in the past under what the Switkowski report called a regime of pharmacological experimentation, worn down week after week by pressures, accusations and stresses they are ill-equipped to cope with — are now playing without heart or firm intent. As Steve Waugh has memorably remarked, you don't lose innate ability from one week or one month to the next, but, under certain kinds of conditions, you can lose form. For the Essendon footballers, the conditions have now bottomed out.

I am an avid, reasonably well informed fan of the game but no more than an interested and slightly bemused onlooker when it comes to understanding the complexities of a catastrophe like this drug scandal. I don't pretend to have the insights of the many experienced and accomplished sports journalists who have written thousands of words on this sorry business. For a disengaged onlooker like me, there are merely small but possibly potent straws in the controversial winds. One of these is a statement Essendon coach James Hird has made several times, namely that Essendon has a 'right' to play finals.

Now, of course, we know what he means on the face of it: simply, that Essendon have at the moment won enough games to qualify to play finals in September. It's a curious way to phrase it though, and Hird's emphatic claim of a 'right' runs deeper than mere statistics.

When you wed that word 'right' to Hird's often proclaimed passion for the club and his aspiration when chosen as coach to put Essendon back where it 'belonged', 'right' starts to assume the force of due privilege, a status not available to other clubs. Those who have convinced themselves they are in the nature of things privileged rarely tolerate much opposition. But a football competition thrives on opposition so, if you are privileged in that competition as of right, you expect to win, and do almost anything to ensure you win. That is your right.

It's not new, the conviction that this or that team is a natural leader, an almost invariable winner and, therefore, in a vague unstated way, beyond the laws governing the rest.

Jack Elliott, as president of the Carlton Football Club, poured scorn on what he called the 'miserable' history of a club like Footscray, and accused Essendon of cheating to win the 2000 Premiership on the eve of which (1999) Essendon was fined $276,274 for salary cap rorting and lost first and second round draft picks. In November 2002, on Elliott's own watch at Carlton, salary cap rorting cost the club $930,000 and crucial draft picks (including stars-in-waiting Brendan Goddard and Daniel Wells), blows from which the club in the view of some is still recovering.

In an eerie symmetry, AFL Commission chairman Ron Evans, father of recently fallen Essendon president David Evans, described Carlton's behaviour 'as a deliberate, elaborate and sophisticated scheme to break the player payment rules. Carlton members and supporters ought to feel betrayed by the actions of their club.' The scandal ended Elliott's tumultuous presidency during which at one point, asked if he had any regrets, he said his only regret was that Carlton didn't win the premiership every year — a flippant version of the born-to-rule syndrome.

Suddenly, a few weeks ago, like a marginal note to the central chaotic supplements plot, came the case of St Kilda small forward Ahmed Saad. Saad, an exemplary character, a practicing Muslim and an AFL nominated multicultural ambassador, tested positive to a drug banned only in competition after he incautiously accepted a hydrating drink from a friend.

What was interesting about this case was the precision, speed and certainty with which everyone — media, AFL, and pundits of one kind or another — were able to pronounce upon and predict Saad's probable two year ban. In what was so clearly an innocent mistake by a fine young athlete there was no talk about 'rights' or waiting until 'the truth' comes out or the deployment of heavy hitting legal minds or the threat of endless court action. Certainly Saad is a much smaller fish in the poisoned AFL pool, but should that matter?

Well, it does of course. St Kilda and, to take another example, Footscray (the Western Bulldogs) do not have 'a right'. St Kilda is one of the oldest clubs in the AFL but thin on success; the Dogs are the face of the underprivileged (Melbourne) west but equally light on the trophy front. Neither club is fashionable and their best days, while duly noted, are quickly forgotten.

No one connected with either club would claim it was 'the greatest club in Australia' as James Hird said of Essendon on Tuesday morning (13 August), while awaiting yet another AFL 'announcement' that failed to materialise at a proposed time. He meant it — another indication of how far rampant ambition and a conviction of entitlement, of having a 'right', has taken him from harsh reality.

If however — as Essendon FC remains intransigent and in denial — Hird needs a

glimpse of harsh, unprivileged reality, Ahmed Saad could probably accommodate him.

Making time and lasagne

CREATIVE

Various

Making time and lasagne

I have lost my recipe for making time
but it must be similar to making lasagne.

The meat sauce of opportunity,

the pasta strips of memory

and the cheese roux of anticipation.

In fact I'm making some moments right now,

and I'm hoping they don't over-cook.

The trick is to layer the ingredients gently.

Don't worry if you lose precious minutes

picking mozzarella up off the floor.

You have to be willing to lose some time to make some time.

You don't need to pour the seconds like salt through your fingers;

perhaps throw some over your shoulder.

And when the oven timer rings

savour every moment you've made.

Tony Brennan

Walk

The way you walk is your walk.

From a great distance I can identify my brother from the shape of his walk

a mile away

Your walk is your spirit saddling your body like a horse and taking it for a ride

it's your DNA in motion.

When you meet someone for the first time and they walk towards you,

you witness their vulnerability though the nakedness of space

you see their whole body unconsciously attempt to own the earth in the face of impossibility.

It's why when you see someone with a swagger, or a rehearsed dance move, it gives you a sense of sorrow.

These are moves for an earth unowned, a life unlived.

It's also why a walking conversation with a good friend is one of the loveliest things possible.

And you are never alone. If you want to summon the familiarity of your spirit, all you have to do is

walk the earth.

Even if it's down to the milkbar.

Darby Hudson

Walking alone

There are too many days now when there are no listeners,

When even the attendant interlocutor, in his faithfulness, is gone,

Listening, we must presume, if we are allowed to presume,

To his own silences, filling them with new maps.
His directory is a volume of veins, vessels and capillaries,

Arterial direction to each destination as an orb

Polished to the point of reflection, it takes time, it comes.

Patience can be tiresome, but hurrying only means

We miss out on so much, the alleys and the arcades,

The lanes and cobbled endpieces, all part of the plan.

It isn't unusual to think that no one will bother

To know or need to know that others have been before,

All owning a selection of special solitudes, ways of coping,

Distinct in their art, and artful in their aloneness.

Peter Gebhardt

Which party really has the economic smarts?

ECONOMICS

David James

Debates between the major political parties in the lead up to the election have resulted in the usual exaggerations. The economic challenges are clear enough and neither side has obvious room to move. Revenue is falling, causing the projected budget deficit to rise and putting pressure on government spending. There is a bipartisan acceptance that deficits are a bad thing, requiring 'unpalatable choices'. Needless to say, neither side is being too fulsome about what those difficult choices will be.

So far, so obvious. The Coalition is pointing out that the Howard Government was better at reducing government debt than the Rudd Government, which is true. It fell from about 10 per cent of GDP to 1 per cent at its bottom. Under Rudd and Gillard government spending returned to 10 per cent of GDP. Most of this was due to treasurer Peter Costello, who almost unthinkably paid down debt in good times — a rare, if not unique, strategy in the developed world. Usually, politicians are happy to spend when the economy is strong because, well, they can.

When, in 2008, the consequences of the global financial crisis were neatly hand-passed by the banking sector to governments, Australia's low levels of government debt gave it an advantage enjoyed by few nations. It was as much psychological as real. Because of the low federal debt, the government's bank guarantees of deposits and the banks' wholesale funding looked much more credible than similar attempts by other governments to shore up their faltering financial systems.

Yet to look at government debt alone, without considering the context, is close to meaningless. For one thing, the increase in government debt is paltry when compared with Australia's overall debt. Under Rudd and Gillard, government debt rose by about 8 per cent of GDP, but household debt fell by twice that, from 160 per cent to about 143 per cent of GDP. Under the Howard Government, household debt doubled from about 80 per cent to 160 per cent of GDP, because of the housing bubble.

The Rudd Government also had to deal with the worst global downturn since the Great Depression. Just as it makes sense to save in good times, it makes sense to spend in bad times. The Australian Treasury estimated that without the Rudd Government's 2008 'cash splash', GDP growth in the December quarter of 2008 would have been negative 1.1 per cent, instead of only negative 0.6 per cent; and that the economy would have shrunk by 0.2 per cent in the March quarter of 2009, instead of recording modest growth (0.4 per cent) and avoiding a recession.

The effect of the Labor stimulus was especially obvious on retail spending. Around the developed world, retail spending fell off a cliff in Christmas 2008; but

in Australia, it rose. This was because while most governments were desperately shovelling tax payers' money into the banks — money that was for the most part gobbled up rather than passed on — the Rudd Government did something unthinkable. It boosted economic activity by giving money directly to the people, who then spent it.

The uncomfortable conclusion for political partisans is that, in terms of macro-economic strategy, Australia has been reasonably well served by both sides of politics. The main problem, which is a legacy of the Howard Government, is excessively high levels of household debt, a consequence of negative gearing and other reckless tax policies. It has left a weighty burden on the economy, but falling interest rates should mean that the process of working through the debt will take time, cushioning at least some of the negative impacts.

Having avoided the macro-economic problems posed by the GFC through a combination of good management and good luck, the challenge now is to micro-manage Australia's finances better. As the China boom fades Australia is experiencing a delayed version of the GFC, without the banking crisis. Rather than aggressive macro-economic shifts, this will require a way of dealing with more mundane economic issues like productivity and efficiency.

Neither side gives the impression it has many good ideas about how to achieve the required structural shifts. Little money has been put aside from the mining boom, in part because it occurred at a time when the world economy was teetering, and in part because the Rudd Government failed to come up with a credible levy of mining profits. That opportunity has been lost.

Given that both sides of politics believe government spending is off the table when the budget is under pressure, it is hard to see what the options are for either side. The Coalition talks about making the labour market more flexible. Labor is talking about making the work force smarter. Both are fiddling at the edges, mouthing ideological clichÃ©s. Rather than steering our economic course, the party that gets into power will instead find itself hostage to much larger economic forces. It will be managing after the fact.

Consider, for example, the productivity issue. Much of the decline in productivity is due to the heavy capital investment into the mining and utilities sector, as the Reserve Bank has documented. When more money flows in, then the output per dollar (the productivity) falls. But that is a consequence of too much capital, not labour costs or work force inflexibility. And as the mining boom eases and less investment comes in, then productivity will rise.

The currency is another area where government has no power. The biggest impact on rebalancing the economy will be the fate of the Australian dollar, but that is not in the control of the government. Likewise, the cost of capital, interest rates, is not in the hands of government. Neither side will be interested in challenging the structural problem that really matters, Australia's intensely

oligopolistic industry cartels (Coles and Woolworths, for example, both rank in the top 500 companies in the world on revenue).

When there is a bipartisan assumption that markets should be left alone and budgets should, whenever possible, be balanced, then the art of government becomes, at least in economic terms, a marginal activity. Both sides of politics gleefully exaggerate their opponent's economic shortcomings. But in truth the differences are small.

Election advice from ancient Rome

AUSTRALIA

Dustin Halse

In 64 BC, at the age of 42, the brilliant orator and lawyer Marcus Tullius Cicero decided to run for the position of consul, the highest office in the Roman Republic. On the eve of the campaign his younger brother Quintus — who possessed an unfortunate penchant for the most outrageous acts of cruelty — penned a detailed strategy memo outlining what his older brother needed to do to win the election.

The frank advice, eerily similar to the realpolitik of NiccolÃ² Machiavelli, is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. For our current political leaders the pragmatic counsel contained within the *Commentariolum Petitionis* or *Little Handbook on Electioneering*, recently translated by Philip Freeman, is well worth a read.

Quintus initially assures his older brother that he has what it takes to be victorious. The opponents he will face are brutes, murderers, philanderers and spendthrifts. But the Cicero brothers are political outsiders and if they want to win they need to command the Field of Mars. Every ballot is a grueling contest so therefore focus your attention and leave nothing to chance. Campaign incessantly. Discipline is the key to electoral success!

Quintus urges his brother to surround himself with people he can trust. Politics is full of deceit and betrayal so choose your campaign staff wisely. Make sure you have the support of your closest friends and family members, as the worst kinds of leaks originate from those who may be aware of your greatest weaknesses and improprieties.

The other precepts laid out are just as prudent. Promise everything to everyone. If problems emerge after the election it is easier to deal with them if you are in power. Engage in the art of flattery. Tell people what they want to hear. Make voters feel they are important. Shake as many hands as you can. Try to remember names and faces. Notwithstanding how objectionable you find your supporters, be sure to count their votes. Call in favours and offer future rewards to those who join the effort. Remember that the electorate is both gullible and self-interested.

Quintus counsels his brother to exploit the weaknesses of his opponents. Opposition research was more or less invented by the younger Cicero. Do not pass up the opportunity to remind the voters of the crimes, sex scandals and alleged corruption of your opponents. Draw attention to their weaknesses to distract from their strengths.

Finally Quintus advises his brother to put on a good show. The people need somebody to believe in, so be that person. Never underestimate the power and appeal of hope. Convince the voters that you will make their world a better place.

Remember it is inevitable you will let down at least some of the voters after you come to power.

Did the brotherly advice work? Absolutely. Cicero, the political outsider, won more votes than any other candidate and went on to save the republic from a conspiracy. He was later given the title 'father of his country'.

The current Australian federal election campaign would appear familiar to the Cicero brothers. Tony Abbott has cultivated the support of big business, press barons, and mining billionaires. Kevin Rudd has the support of Trade Unions. The Coalition has unleashed negative advertisements aimed at exposing the dysfunction of the Labor Party. The Labor Party will contend that Abbott is overly aggressive and without a policy agenda. Both will overpromise; both will engage in the art of flattery. Both will cast a new vision and attempt to give people hope.

Sadly the end for Marcus Tullius Cicero was rather unpleasant. In the decades succeeding his consulship the Roman Empire descended into civil war. Cicero and the new despot, Mark Antony, became sworn enemies. Cicero used his status in the Senate to denounce the authoritarian leadership of Antony. And in doing so he sealed his fate.

In 43 BC he was caught while attempting to flee to Macedonia. With his last breath he reportedly uttered 'There is nothing proper about what you are doing, soldier, but do try to kill me properly.' And with that he bowed to his captors and was decapitated. Quintus and his son were also rounded up and executed.

On the order of Antony the head and hands of Cicero were displayed in the Roman Forum. Before it was removed Antony's wife Fulvia took the head in her hands and spat on it. She then pulled out Cicero's decaying tongue and stabbed it repeatedly with her hairpin as a final act of revenge against his oratory brilliance.

Whatever the outcome of the election both Rudd and Abbott can take comfort that such a fate will not befall them.

Election issues that matter

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

At election times some things don't matter much. They're placed on the bottom of the inside pages of newspapers, while the things that do matter blare from the front page and the opinion pages.

On a typical day in *The Australian* the things that matter were interest rates, boat-stopping, riotous or dumb behaviour by candidates, company taxes, polls, paid maternity leave, and leadership and the lack of it. Among the things on inside pages that by definition don't matter much were two thoughtful pieces on the most disadvantaged areas in Australia. Most of these areas were Indigenous settlements. Others were on the edges of cities and towns.

Disadvantage was measured by the unemployment rate and the number of unmarried mothers. One might expect these measures to be matched by a higher proportion of criminal convictions and lower educational attainment.

All these things are signs of isolation and disconnection from society. Experience shows that unless children and those who care for them receive support to help them make connections through work and in other ways, they will perpetuate these patterns of disconnection. Disconnection will be an enduring feature of Australian society.

It is hard to imagine that those living in disadvantaged communities would find great personal interest in the things that matter at election time. Interest rates and mortgages, rates of company tax and paid maternity leave are issues for the advantaged. They are problems of managing income that those without it might like to have.

The punitive attitudes adopted to asylum seekers might be seen as welcome because they would divert vengeful attention away from the unemployed who usually bear the burden of electoral antipathies. Leadership might be of passing interest, but neither it nor the qualities of the politicians elected would take away the impression that their needs or desires would not receive much attention under any government. They do not matter enough.

From their perspective, the rhetoric of elections might seem to express disconnection within the wider society. They would note its adversarial and negative character and its preference for abstractions and slogans. It is less about seeking the good of a connected Australia than about managing, in a way that perpetuates exclusion and division.

It can be argued that this is the way elections have always worked. They appeal to self-interest, are adversarial, provide scapegoats and never touch on what matters deeply. Their function is to keep society going.

The argument is true but despairing. Elections are about good management, but they are also times to ask about the quality of the society that we keep going. In a humane society what matters is its people and the quality of their lives. That quality is measured by the way in which it treats its most disregarded members.

The things that don't matter at election time are the things that really matter.