

Funny mummy slaps patriarchal Australia <i>Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk</i>	<u>1</u>
Abbott's night of the short knives <i>Tony Kevin</i>	<u>4</u>
A broken woman hastily reassembled <i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>7</u>
Shaky grounds for just war in Syria <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>9</u>
Dissecting Syria turbulence <i>John Langmore</i>	<u>11</u>
Lessons for Labor from across the Tasman <i>Cecily McNeill</i>	<u>14</u>
Representation in a blokey cabinet and wonky senate <i>Ray Cassin</i>	<u>16</u>
Philosophy of falling <i>Ailsa Piper</i>	<u>19</u>
An irritant of soul <i>Robin Pryor</i>	<u>21</u>
Pro-choice paradigm lacks compassion on Zoe's Law <i>Zac Alstin</i>	<u>24</u>
Sarah Hanson-Young's Zoo suit righteous <i>Ruby Hamad</i>	<u>26</u>
Julie Bishop's opportunity to press PNG on death penalty <i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>28</u>
Domestic violence reality check for the 'manosphere' <i>Sarah McKenzie</i>	<u>30</u>
Swapping stories with a barracouta sage <i>Brian Matthews</i>	<u>33</u>
Human stories from Tim Winton's Australia <i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>35</u>
Treating people well in Abbott's Australia <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>37</u>
Turnbull's electronic voting pitch is on the right track <i>Edwina Byrne</i>	<u>39</u>
Slow down, you're just in time <i>Megan Meaghan</i>	<u>41</u>
Border protection transparency under Abbott <i>Tony Kevin</i>	<u>46</u>
Why we still need the Senate <i>Binoy Kampmark</i>	<u>48</u>
Rineharted by the minehearted <i>Various</i>	<u>50</u>
Bats not boats for Afghanistan <i>Anthony</i>	<u>53</u>
The moral point of difference between Labor and the Coalition <i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>55</u>
Australia's political goldfish bowl from the outside <i>Ray Cassin</i>	<u>57</u>



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.

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Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

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Funny mummy slaps patriarchal Australia

REVIEWS

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

***What Women Want*, Nelly Thomas, Random House, Random House**

Jen:

Anyone picking up Nelly Thomas' *What Women Want* expecting to find a Birkenstock-wearing feminist-lite read will feel sorely ripped off. Born in WA and based in Melbourne, Thomas is a comedian, award-winning performer, a self-confessed 'funny mummy' and one of 'Australia's most innovative thinkers'.

And she has a bone to pick with modern-day Australia.

Of course, Thomas knows she's being a tiny bit facetious with the title of her book. I mean, considering that women, like men, come in all shapes, sizes and political persuasions, how can anyone profess to know what half of the population wants? Thomas addresses this fully and with candour in her punchy introduction.

What she has in her sights is the chiaroscuro backdrop of our society, which is progressive, yes, but also patriarchal; a land of choice and opportunity as well as the tall poppy syndrome. And if you're a woman, then climbing the ladder means invariably coming face to face with your own reflection in the glass ceiling.

Thomas is at her most witty and whittling when talking about the male-dominated comedy circuit, something she knows a thing or two about. While the degrees of misogyny vary, the worst, she writes, are 'those places where you'd expect gender equity to be on the agenda'.

Sex and relationships also duly get the Thomas treatment. Discussing the former, the author adopts her best teacher voice (she has written sexual health DVDs for teens). Aside from navigating the twists and turns of a young woman's burgeoning sexuality, she writes with some authority — and plenty of conviction — on the rise of the raunch culture and its awful grip on young women (and some men).

And for someone caustically agnostic Thomas gives the 'big three' religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam a surprisingly good rap. 'At least they have thousands of years of robust intellectual tradition behind them, texts that they can be held accountable to,' she writes, one can safely presume, sans tongue in cheek.

Sure, you might need to pardon her French, as they say, and for this reason I'll probably not be recommending the book to my 78-year-old mother, but there's such raw honesty, probing reflection and solid research that it's hard to take much offence.

I don't know about you, Barry, but I'm ashamed to say that I'd never heard of Thomas before picking up this book. Her 'comedic star' began to rise when she

won the national Raw Comedy competition back in 2003 — certainly in (my) living memory. A decade later and Thomas is telling us what we women want. How audacious. But guess what? I'm all ears.

Barry:

True, Jen, books offer everlasting surprises; Nelly Thomas was a welcome stranger to me also.

Tackling life's meaning, for one gender at any rate, ain't easy. Thomas laughs off her ambition to do so as 'a woman who grew through one of the greatest periods of change in history for women'. Her sometimes glib, sometimes passionate take is always engaging and disparagingly self-aware (ineffectual problem solvers such as bureaucrats and policy people are 'where we arts students go to die').

So, what do women want? Apparently, not necessarily in this order, they want: safety, fun, friendship, nutrition, aspirational and empowering Pixar flicks, and financial independence. Ultimately, she declares, 'I want women to have it all ... to be valued and respected'.

Respect and a valuable status in life. Too right. Having it all? Not necessarily a realistic or achievable desire.

My concern, Jen, is that by playing for laughs and revelling in her own idiosyncrasies, Thomas ignores or dismisses inequities. For her, happiness is a warm mop. But is housework truly a girl's best friend? The confession that she loves 'to Ajax a bath' is accompanied by the dismissive nod that, yes, Thomas does more domestic labour than her Lachlan because he 'has a real job (as opposed to show biz), and like most men, he earns more'. A real job? Rimshot, please. Maybe I've missed the punchline.

It's not always clear when Thomas plays for laughs. Perhaps the stage works better than the page.

Her experience of motherhood is given earthy credibility by adding 'politics and guilt' to her expectations of 'some fear, joy, sleepless nights, love and a sore vagina'. For me, she's most effective in her tackling of sexualisation of girls, and the body fascism women stare down every day. Re-living her own struggles against negative body-image (she was described as 'big-boned', which is 'code for fatty boombah'), Thomas rails strongly and intelligently against the unthinking acceptance of elective plastic surgery, especially among the young.

As a fellow parent of a boy, Jen, I was concerned by Thomas' experiences doing 'sexual ethics theatre performances'. She recounts negative responses from teenage boys to one scenario dealing with pubic hair — the lads assuming that 'any girl with pubes would be so self-conscious about them that she'd avoid sex altogether', and that malekind is disgusted by non-exfoliated women.

Thomas, rightly, describes that bit of vitriol not as a culturally-learned response but 'full-on hatred of the natural female form'. It's serious stuff, from a comedienne with chutzpah.

Thomas cuts a swathe through wannabe exploiters of young girls and women. She believes that, among the would-be dissers of my ten-year-old daughter, such as lunky chauvinists, are women pretending to be girl power role models (take a bow, Spice Grannies and Beyonce etc.) who talk a good game while they 'teeter around on nine-inch heels in catsuits ... I can't see how lip synching in lingerie is empowering'.

Non-predatory development of sexuality. Equitable work opportunities. Valuing of labour, regardless of gender or roles. Supportive partners.

No, Nelly, it's not too much to ask for.

Abbott's night of the short knives

AUSTRALIA

Tony Kevin



The standard [selection criteria](#) for members of the Senior Executive Service of the Australian Public Service state that they should 'shape strategic thinking, achieves results, exemplify personal drive and integrity, cultivate productive working relationships, and communicate with influence'. The third of these goes to the crucial working relationship between SES public servants and their political masters.

It is elaborated in the Senior Executive Leadership Capability [Framework](#), which states that public servants should demonstrate 'professionalism and probity' as they adhere to and promote 'the values and ethical framework as set out in the code of conduct', serve the government of the day 'irrespective of personal preferences', implement 'policies and programs based on corporate decisions rather than personal views', and 'show personal courage' by being 'prepared to be forthright' and 'independently minded and willing to challenge ideas and confront issues'.

If public service selection and promotion processes are non-corrupt, we can safely assume that the men and women now occupying positions as heads of departments met these criteria when promoted or selected by governments of the day. Why, then, should it be necessary to remove any of them when the government changes?

This week, former Treasury secretary, current Westpac Banking Corp chairman Ted Evans condemned the removal of four serving APS heads — Blair Comley, Andrew Metcalfe, Don Russell, and soon Martin Parkinson — as a waste of 'good people'. 'It's a great pity — we can't afford to lose people of that quality. It's hard enough to get top-class people in Canberra these days. To see them treated in a political fashion is more than disappointing, it's sad for the country frankly. We'll end up as bad as many other countries ... where appointments are purely political.'

Evans, no Labor partisan, gets right to the heart of the issue. Under the US revolving door model, there is waste and destabilisation every time the government changes. Top public service jobs are held by openly politically affiliated people who move in and out of government whenever it changes, at other times working as special interest Washington lobbyists.

Australians have made clear many times that we don't like that system — it is open to corruption, and when our governments flirt with it, they usually come to regret it. We are rightly apprehensive about effects on good governance when we hear of top public servants sacked by incoming governments.

Famously, John Howard did it on a massive scale in 1996. His 'Night of the Long Knives' is looked back on now as petty and vindictive. Tony Abbott has now done it again, albeit on a smaller scale.

Let's look at those key SES criteria again: 'Exemplifies personal drive and integrity ... demonstrates public service professionalism and probity ... serves the government of the day irrespective of personal preferences'. They are quite clear, and I am sure Messrs Comley, Metcalfe, Russell and Parkinson did all those things in their SES careers.

Their sackings don't just hurt and demean them — they send negative signals to every SES officer in those departments and beyond, that this is a new government-APS relationship based on fear and mistrust rather than mutual respect and trust. This is really signalling to every senior APS officer: 'We believe you may have been corrupted by your six years working under Labor governments. Watch your step.' It is management by fear.

How much better was Labor's record in 2007 after 11 years of Howard rule. It gave every SES officer the compliment of trust that they were working in accordance with the values of the Framework. As proved to be the case: the SES officers who had loyally served Howard went on to loyally serve Rudd and Gillard. As now they would have been ready to serve Abbott. It's a bad signal the new government sends here, for all of us.

Let me also comment briefly on the decision to move Ausaid back within Foreign Affairs. There is a long history of the function of running a national foreign aid budget and program bouncing in and out of Foreign Affairs. In my memory it has done so at least three times. There are strong, finely balanced arguments for each option.

Keeping the aid function within Foreign Affairs makes it easier to place national interest at the forefront of aid budget allocation. It makes it easier to use aid as a foreign policy sticks-and-carrots lever. Many diplomatic professionals think this is legitimate, prudent use of taxpayers' money.

The arguments for keeping aid out of DFAT are quite idealistic. According to this view, it is the job of aid professionals, not of empire-building diplomats with agendas, to ensure the aid budget is spent in ways that maximise recipient welfare, consistent with broad national interest guidelines set by the government of the day. When the aid function is separate from the foreign policy function, it's harder for diplomats to distort aid allocation decisions for foreign policy reasons. (When I was Ambassador to Cambodia 1994—97, Ausaid was separate from DFAT, and it was made politely clear to me on several occasions that I had no official role in determining Australian aid priorities in Cambodia.)

Certainly, the Australian NGO sector, which itself collects and disburses a lot of Australian aid, generally prefers the separation model. They don't like to see aid politicised or misused for other policy agendas. They represent the views of an

important part of the electorate. A wise government would heed them.

I suspect that Abbott may rue this decision at the next election. If Labor is smart, it will commit to restoring the independence of the aid function. And so, when Labor next wins, this wheel will turn again.

A broken woman hastily reassembled

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Blue Jasmine* (M). Director: Woody Allen. Starring: Cate Blanchett, Sally Hawkins, Alec Baldwin, Peter Sarsgaard, Bobby Cannavale, Michael Stuhlbarg, Louis C. K. 98 minutes**

2013 is clearly an 'on' year for Allen. One of the great American filmmakers, he is an institution unto himself, although in recent years his strike rate is no better than 50/50. Last year's Roman tourist video *To Rome With Love* was largely deplorable. By contrast *Blue Jasmine* is a dark gem that deserves to be named one of his best.

It is worth seeing for Cate Blanchett alone. Armed with Allen's dialogue and under his gaze she turns out one of her performances of her career, as Jasmine, formerly Janet, an upwardly mobile socialite lately brought low by the dubious business practices of her husband Hal (Baldwin), and by a subsequent nervous breakdown.

The film opens with her travelling from New York to San Francisco, to the working class neighborhood where her sister Ginger lives with two young sons. Ginger has offered Jasmine a place to live while she regroups, though she is bemused to learn that the penniless Jasmine has flown first class. Jasmine dismisses this as a reflexive extravagance. But it is a glimpse of the delusions held by a woman who has made self-delusion an artform.

The film juxtaposes the snobby Jasmine's attempts to start again from the bottom, with copious flashbacks to her previous life that provide hints to the exact nature of her downfall. The disjointed chronology is dizzying at times, although even this seems to reflect Jasmine's erratic state of mind. Blanchett's Jasmine is a tightly twist-tied bag of snideness, nervous tics and affected elegance; a woman seemingly hastily reassembled following her breakdown, her desperate self-doubts cobbled together with utter self-absorption.

Hawkins, too, is wonderful as the dowdy, humble foil to Jasmine's whiplash pride. The relationship between these two sisters — born of different mothers, but raised by the same adoptive parents, and so representing a kind of living case study for nature versus nurture — provides a measuring rod for Jasmine's world view. She openly condescends to Ginger for not improving herself, and, in assessing Ginger's loud but essentially sweet boyfriend Chili (Cannavale), berates her for not finding a 'decent man'.

Of course, the fact that Jasmine appears to conflate decency with upward mobility is blatantly ironic, given the rich scumbag she had previously in Hal. The cruel absurdity of Jasmine's snobbishness in this regard is underscored by a subplot in which Ginger, worn down by Jasmine's ceaseless condescension, hooks

a 'decent' man of her own (Louis C. K.). It's not hard to guess that for Ginger, it's an ill-fated diversion.

Jasmine is a tragic figure, and her fatal flaw is that she is entirely self-absorbed. But she is also a victim; the product of a society that expects women to conform to norms that disempower them. At one point she takes a job as a dentist's receptionist, and the dire treatment she receives at the hands of her employer (Stuhlbarg) because she is an attractive woman, serves as a reminder that it was not her husband's downfall and the resultant material loss that caused her breakdown. It was the many years she spent in a marriage that was fundamentally abusive.

Whether working in drama or comedy, Allen is at his best when he presents robust and complex portraits of deeply flawed human beings. It is hard not to feel sympathy for Jasmine, despite her destructive narcissism. Yes, it's definitely an on year for Allen.

Shaky grounds for just war in Syria

INTERNATIONAL

Andrew Hamilton

Although the desire for military action against Syria has been set aside in favour of negotiations, it remains on the table. War has always had its own brutal logic. As the Athenian ambassadors said to the islanders of Melos to whom they offered the alternative of subjugation or death, 'We shall not trouble you with specious justifications; and in return we hope that you will aim at what is feasible, since you know as well as we do that what is right is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'

The Melians put a high value on their freedom and were slaughtered.

In western democracies such honesty is rare. Military action is normally sprinkled with justifications after it is a done deal. The other Athenian tradition of ethical reflection receives only lip service.

So it is important for citizens to ponder seriously whether the wars their leaders propose are just. There are questions for that. Even though they were formulated in a time when nations declared war on one another and soldiers marched to fight them, they remain pertinent.

Military adventures now resemble gunboat diplomacy more than war. Strong outside powers launch military assaults to secure their interests or to punish wrong suffered, often trying to influence conflicts within the targeted country. Restricted in their scope they are like policing actions

Nevertheless, the questions traditionally asked about the justice of wars give us a useful fix on the proposed Syrian intervention. The normal things that reflection on just war demand be established are that military action is for a just cause and is carried out primarily with that intention, that it is a last resort, that the harm done is outweighed by the good achieved, that its success can be reasonably predicted and that it is properly authorised. For military action to be justified all these conditions must be realised.

The standard examples of just causes given for war are self defence and the patent threat of an imminent attack. For limited military action, however, there may be other just causes. Those used to justify action in Syria have included support for factions opposed to President Assad, punishment for using poison gas against civilians, the need to destroy Syria's reserves of poison gas, and sending a message to Iran in its proxy war in Syria. Central to the right intention is that all military actions are thought through in such a way that they encourage peace.

Of these arguments, it is difficult to justify using death and other destruction caused by military action as a means to deter one faction or its external supporters from involvement. It would be a case of the end justifying the means.

In themselves, the other reasons for military action could be justifiable if they meet other conditions.

Military force can be justified only if it is the last resort. In Syria it has rightly been postponed until complex negotiations with the regime and other interested parties have been opened and given time.

The crucial challenge to the morality of modern war comes from the disproportion between the harm done through it and whatever good it achieves. It is all too common to make a desert and call it peace. In police actions, though, and particularly in the use of drones, the disproportion between the targeted destruction of specific sites and the death and damage caused to others is much reduced. It might be possible to make out a case for limited action in Syria if other conditions were fulfilled.

But in any military action there also needs to be a similar proportion between the long term good effects of a military action and its harmful effects. By this criterion it is difficult to justify the use of force in Syria. Elsewhere military actions by outsiders have further polarised and militarised the conflict, and have led to the killing and expulsion of such minority groups as Christians. Intervention intensifies sectarian conflict and creates the demand for further military intervention.

To be justifiable, war must have a high probability of success. Success is defined by its contribution to peace. Intervention by foreign powers would need to be accompanied by a costly long term commitment to a peaceful Syria. This kind of commitment has been notably absent in other military adventures.

Finally, to be considered just, war and especially limited military actions must be properly authorised. Otherwise they amount to colonial gunboat diplomacy. It is difficult to see how a single nation can authorise military action against another unless it is unjustly threatened. And that authorisation must be formally sought.

For nations not involved in a conflict, it would be unjustifiable for them singly or in a group to authorise military force. It would need support in the international forum, particularly if the action was punitive in character. The grounds given for going to war and the evidence for them could be properly tested. Military action in which people are picked out for killing without trial and without formal international authorisation is unjustifiable.

When reflected on through this lens, the proposed military action against Syria lacks justification. Even if the cause for it were just, it would be vitiated by the lack of proportion between the limited good secured by it and the increased violence and sectarian division that will surely follow. It would also lack due authorisation.

That the strong should do what they can and the weak suffer what they must is real politik. But it should not be dignified with the name of justice.

Dissecting Syria turbulence

INTERNATIONAL

John Langmore

This has been a turbulent two weeks. One's attitudes have oscillated through anger and despair to a glimpse of hope and ended with renewed confidence in Obama's values and intentions. The principal issue being debated has been whether a US military strike against Syria was justified by Security Council deadlock. On 6 September Obama argued that: 'Syria's escalating use of chemical weapons threatens its neighbours. ... But more broadly, it threatens to unravel the international norm against chemical weapons embraced by 189 nations.'

The Chemical Weapons Convention entered into force in 1997. The US is still in the process of destroying its chemical weapons to comply with it. Obama said in 2012 that Syrian use of chemical weapons would cross a red line which would require an international response. Failure to respond to this use would indicate that there are no consequences from using these weapons of mass destruction. Obama said that he would 'greatly prefer' to work through the UN but that when this is impossible the US has to look for other approaches to 'enforcing international norms and international law'.

It was fairly quickly apparent that Obama was not winning sufficient Congressional or domestic support for a politically justifiable military strike on Syria or internationally at the G20 meeting in St Petersburg. Maureen Dowd wrote in the NYT on 8 September that:

... his lack of enthusiasm came across. He was not thundering from the top of the moral ramparts. He made his usual nuanced, lawyerly presentation, talking about the breach of international 'norms'. It's a weak, wonk word. Norms don't send people to the barricades.

So he needed political support and on 7 September adopted the democratic tactic of asking Congress for authorisation. But he acted as though the commentators were right: if he lost a Congressional vote he would be diminished. He sent his staff out as passionate advocates for a strike. Samantha Power said on Monday morning radio that when the Security Council is deadlocked and retribution is necessary, the Security Council should be by-passed. The shocking impression was that there was little evidence that the Administration had looked for alternatives to war. Security Council deadlock was described as sufficient justification for the habitual American military action. Diplomatic imagination seemed to have no role.

On 9 September John Kerry said in response to a journalist's question about whether there was anything the Syrian Government could do to stop a US attack: 'Sure. He could turn over every single bit of his chemical weapons to the international community in the next week.'

This was initially perceived as bizarre, but within four hours Sergie Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister, said that he would propose to Assad that he hand over his chemical weapons to the international community for destruction. Obama swiftly suspended the proposed strike and accepted negotiations with Russia. Not only was the missile strike further delayed but the Congressional vote could be suspended. By Wednesday Kerry and Lavrov were meeting in Geneva.

The striking, little known fact, is that this option had been informally discussed for a year. It was first raised at the G20 Summit in Mexico in 2012 (*Financial Times*, 14 September). Kerry and Lavrov had talked about it several times during the last year. Putin and Obama had discussed it briefly at St Petersburg. European foreign ministers had talked with Kerry about it the day before. US officials thought it wouldn't work unless Russia persuaded Assad to negotiate, and presumed that they could not. Putin however invited the Syrian Foreign Minister to Moscow. Putin may have acted because it was likely that the UN chemical weapon inspectors would find clear evidence of their use on 21 August which would greatly strengthen US motivation for an attack.

On Friday Ban Ki-moon said that the impending report would be 'overwhelming' in showing the chemical weapons were used. He also said, *sotto voce*, that Assad 'has committed many crimes against humanity'. A well informed senior official told me on Saturday that the Syrians had used chemical weapons a total of nine times. A UN Commission of Inquiry which is monitoring human rights in Syria also reported at the end of the week that 'Syrian government forces are systematically attacking hospitals and medical staff members and denying treatment to the sick and wounded from areas controlled or affiliated with the opposition' (*New York Times*, 14 September).

The Kerry/Lavrov agreement announced on Friday is a breakthrough. It is a detailed plan for the speedy accounting, inspection, control, and elimination of Syria's arsenal of chemical weapons, with provision for enforcement by the UN Security Council. Daryl Kimball, Executive Director, Arms Control Association, said in a media statement on 14 September:

The plan ... outlines a thorough series of key steps on an accelerated schedule and provides for enforcement through the UN Security Council ... While there are many further, challenging steps ahead, the agreement is an unprecedented breakthrough ...

Gary Quinlan, Australia's UN Ambassador told me yesterday that the Syrians have taken the first required implementation action by sending a letter acceding to the Chemical Weapons Convention which was received by the UN Secretary-General on Saturday. A Security Council resolution is being drafted and negotiated by the P3 and Russia and that process will continue through the week.

Not only is the agreement unprecedented; the process through which it was reached is too. Does this mean that the Americans have been bested by Russia? Is

Obama diminished by the process so far? Some are arguing yes to both those questions, but to many others including me the answer is no, because the outcome so far is what Obama really wanted. Yet another Middle East war with American participation is highly unlikely. The *New York Times* editorialised that the agreement to dismantle Syria's chemical weapons arsenal is remarkably ambitious and offers a better chance of deterring this threat than the limited military strikes that President Obama was considering'. The questions will not be answered conclusively until the whole journey is completed.

The central question is not about international political status but about whether one successful tough negotiation on one element of the Syrian horrors can lead to others which would reduce or end the conflict? 'There's reason to hope this cooperation will help advance an overall peace settlement for Syria' (*New York Times*, 16 September).

What a time for Australia to be chairing the Security Council! Of course the Mission's role is tightly constrained, but nevertheless it is significant. My impression is that our diplomats are working with professional skill, commitment to the rule of law — that is, the centrality of the Security Council — and to peaceful conflict resolution not only in Syria but also in the other score of countries which are actively on the Council's agenda.

Lessons for Labor from across the Tasman

INTERNATIONAL

Cecily McNeill

Last weekend the Australian Labor Party embarked on its month-long process towards a grassroots election of a leader to replace Kevin Rudd. At the same time, the New Zealand Labour Party ended its long and sometimes brutal election of a new leader, with Sunday's naming of Auckland MP David Cunliffe. The lesson from across the Tasman is that a grassroots election of a Labour leader can broaden the base of those with a say in the party's destiny, and steer it back towards a more traditional social democratic stance.

This is particularly significant in New Zealand, the former cradle of the welfare state which the OECD charts as the member country with the fastest growing level of inequality. Australia, as we're aware, is not far behind, with its widening gap between rich and poor.

His stance on social inclusion appears to be the reason Cunliffe won the support of party rank-and-file and union affiliates, who carried the numbers he needed. Like Australia's Kevin Rudd, he was widely disliked in the Labour caucus. He beat two other candidates to the post after a two-week 'primary' in which the three candidates toured the country's key Labour strongholds enthusing party faithful with presidential-style speeches worthy of the American hustings. This method has worked in bringing out the differences in what each candidate has to offer.

Cunliffe's victory is a slap in the face for the ABC (Anyone But Cunliffe) group, which gained traction after the 2011 general election when defeated Labour leader Phil Goff stepped down in favour of unknown political novice David Shearer, who succeeded former prime minister Helen Clark as the MP for the electorate of Mt Albert.

Historian and political commentator Chris Trotter says in his column 'From the Left' that personal motives were behind the ABC's promotion of deputy leader Grant Robertson over Cunliffe, who was regarded as a threat to their position in the caucus, and political advancement in general.

Some in the party were concerned that Robertson's sexuality could become the subject of political barbs and wondered aloud whether the country was ready for a gay PM. One wonders whether Australia's Labor campaign might take an unexpected nasty turn once ideological differences are brought to the fore.

Trotter says in his [commentary](#) that Cunliffe's supporters were keenly aware that he would require the Opposition to 'adopt a more unequivocally social-democratic ideological stance'. Yet Cunliffe opponents have labelled a return to the party's constitution which espouses a more democratic socialism as 'naïve and stupid'. 'This is because a surprisingly large number of Labour's caucus no longer believe in social democracy ... They want no part of a labour movement

that sees itself as a direct and progressive challenge to the ambitions of the Right,' says Trotter.

Following the Labour caucus meeting on Tuesday 17 September, David Parker emerged as the new deputy leader ahead of Robertson, though Cunliffe's early assurances that he would offer Robertson his old job back suggest that Robertson turned it down. Senior party whip Chris Hipkins has also become a casualty in what had been an acrimonious battle to keep Cunliffe out of the leadership. Hipkins had attacked Cunliffe after Labour's divisive annual conference last year.

Cunliffe [said](#) in his first news conference that peace was 'breaking out all over the place' and the party was now in campaign mode in preparation for the 2014 general election. 'We are taking the fight to the Key government,' he said. 'They are on notice that their easy days are over.'

After 20 months of a leadership which has missed numerous opportunities to challenge Prime Minister John Key amid trade gaffes that occurred over dairy giant Fonterra's recent so-called 'dirty pipe' scandal, Cunliffe will be keen to prepare his war cabinet.

New Zealand diplomats have had to work hard to appease China, the country's biggest trading partner after Australia, following tonnes of baby milk formula, suspected of being laced with the botulism bacteria, needing to be recalled last month. Further testing revealed that the powder was not impregnated with botulism but with a much less dangerous bacteria. However, the scandal followed a greater horror last year when Fonterra company in China San Lu was found to be among 22 companies involved in whey formula being mixed with the industrial chemical, melamine, to boost protein levels. Four babies died from the poisoning and 50,000 others became ill.

Key has had an easier ride than he would have had the opposition been able to more vigorously put him on the spot. With Shearer failing to fire, it has fallen to the Greens to point up the deficiencies in Key's leadership.

If Cunliffe is to succeed in uniting the party to put Key on notice and claim the Treasury benches next year, he will need all the diplomatic and political smarts gleaned from a Harvard education to overcome party factionalism. It is worth those vying to replace Rudd here watching how Cunliffe overcomes party infighting so that they can more powerfully unify opposition to Abbott's policies.

Representation in a blokey cabinet and wonky senate

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin

In Australia everyone's a democrat. Or at least, anyone who might have doubts about the notion that government derives its authority from the consent of the governed will almost certainly refrain from saying so when seeking public office. The fact that democracy wins universal plaudits does not, however, mean that we're all agreed on what's required to keep our politics as vigorously democratic as most Australians like to think they are.

The Abbott Government that will be sworn in this week is democratically legitimate in an obvious and fundamental sense: the Coalition won the election, and will have a comfortable majority in the new house. But if governments want to claim that they are broadly representative of the nation — and, left or right, they all do make that claim — then it is surely a problem that the cabinet of 20 includes only one woman.

And it hardly answers the point to note that there would have been two if Sophie Mirabella had held her seat of Indi, or to suggest, as Tony Abbott has, that at some unspecified future date more women will be knocking at the cabinet-room door. It is not as if there are no contenders now. A talented, long-serving Liberal parliamentarian like Marisa Payne, for example, could reasonably ask why the door isn't already open for her, and why she has been relegated to the outer ministry instead.

'Broadly representative' is, of course, a vague term. It implicitly acknowledges that even introducing quotas for under-represented groups of the population would not result in a government that resembled an Identikit image of Australia. But vague is not the same as vacuous. To say a government is or isn't broadly representative of those it governs is to recognise that representation is not only a matter of votes and head counts.

Indeed, sometimes even rigorously proper voting procedures produce outcomes that, although legitimate, cannot seriously be regarded as democratic.

The Senate that has just been elected is a case in point. When the new senators take their seats in July next year, they will include a Sports Party member from WA, who won just 0.22 per cent of the first-preference vote, and a Motoring Enthusiasts Party member from Victoria, who won just 0.52 per cent. The fact that these and candidates from other so-called micro-parties, which were unknown to most voters until they received their Senate ballot papers, were successful at the election has attracted much mirth and some praise.

But the many who derided the Senate result and the few who have defended it have often missed the point.

It matters little that the Motoring Enthusiast senator-elect, Ricky Muir, enjoys throwing kangaroo faeces at people and until very recently could be seen engaging in this pastime in a YouTube clip. It is more worrying that his Sports Party counterpart, Wayne Dropulich, has no policies other than support for junior sport. And it is cause for alarm that the Liberal Democrats, a party that has more than a tad in common with Tea Party Republicans in the US, including support for relaxing restrictions on the sale of all types of firearms, has won a Senate seat in NSW.

All of these crossbenchers will be courted by the Abbott Government as it tries to negotiate its legislation through the Senate.

The real problem with the Senate result, however, is not the dubious nature of the micro-parties' platforms, or lack of them. It is the fact that they represent tiny fractions of the electorate yet will potentially wield great legislative power. (The Liberal Democrats did win almost nine per cent of the vote in NSW but, as they admit without embarrassment, this was because many voters confused them with the Liberals, and because they were placed first on the ballot.)

Defenders of the Senate result, who typically say that more diversity in parliamentary representation is good in itself, are evading the issue. The consternation caused by the result is not an attack on the Senate itself, as some have claimed.

Nor is it a reaction against the use of proportional representation in Senate elections, which does indeed produce greater diversity of representation than the system used for electing the House of Representatives. That is why the balance of power in the Senate has often been held by parties with little or no representation in the house, such as the Greens and before them the Australian Democrats and the DLP. That has been no bad thing, for over time the lack of major-party dominance has allowed the Senate to work more effectively as a revisory chamber.

It is preposterous, however, to suggest that the latest Senate outcome is merely an intensification of this democratic process. It is the result of manipulative trading of preferences, which has allowed the micro-parties to win seats by preferencing each other before the majors, regardless of policy differences.

This manipulative deal-making could, and should, be eliminated by some simple reforms. If the present choice between above-the-line and below-the line voting were abolished and replaced by optional preferential voting, so that voters would only have to number the same number of boxes as there are senators to be elected, the deal makers would be out of a job.

And, as is the case in many other countries that use proportional representation, candidates should also have to pass a threshold before they can be elected — say, 4 per cent of the primary vote, the limit already set for public funding of campaigns.

Ensuring that representative systems are genuinely democratic requires getting both the institutional settings right (reduce the scope for secretive electoral pacts) and inculcating the right ethos (it is not acceptable for a 20-member cabinet to include only one woman). The latter is the hard part, for whether political parties and movements see democratic process merely as a means to power or as something intrinsically worthwhile depends on whether they are genuinely democratic themselves.

And that is why the drawn-out process for electing the new ALP leader, which will give rank-and-file members a vote, is perhaps the most important reform in Australian politics for many years. It is not surprising that beneficiaries of the old, factional deal-making system, such as Stephen Conroy and Julia Gillard, have condemned the reform. And it should be remembered that one of the reasons that Kevin Rudd is so widely hated in the Labor Party is that he has sought to stand outside factional alliances.

If it turns out that the new system for electing the leader is his legacy it will be no mean achievement, whatever else his detractors will say of him.

Philosophy of falling

CREATIVE

Ailsa Piper

Maybe it was fore-fronted by the recent election, and the evangelising certainty it produced: politicians claiming they could stop boats and save economies; television programs pitting people against each other in nuance-free arenas; pundits pronouncing outcomes and moguls preaching slogans.

Maybe it started with a beaming Pope telling a planeload of journalists that the door was closed on women's ordination — end of story.

Maybe it was my own utter inability to construct a cogent argument when met recently with a slam-dunk about the negative nexus between asylum seekers and Australia's GDP. That day, mumbling lame phrases about compassion and empathy, I was confronted with my fallibility. Big time.

I'd always thought I knew the etymology of the word 'fallible', but how wrong I was. How fallible. Apparently it comes from Medieval Latin — liable to err, or to deceive. Mistakenly, I'd thought it meant you were able, even likely, to fall.

Fall-ible. Fall-able.

A laughable notion, to any decent Latin scholar. Fallible, certainly. But consider for a moment ...

We take a fall for someone when they are in trouble, shouldering the blame in order to lighten the load of someone who is vulnerable or broken, or simply weaker than ourselves.

The other day I sat opposite a woman on a train. Her clothes were skimpy and she was quivering, trying to hide her blackened eye under a hoodie. The rest of the passengers in the carriage averted their eyes. Were they making a judgement about her? Was I? Had we decided she was a fallen woman?

And when, I wondered, was a man last called fallen?

Bombs fall. Empires fall.

Soldiers fall, over and over and over, and we mourn them. They are boys, many of them, so fall-able, and I can't help wondering if that is not due to the fact that leaders are fallible. Cities fall to conquerors and to the earth, too, as it quakes and ruptures under cathedrals and citadels.

Waters fall. So does night, in a slow embrace or with terrifying speed. We fall asleep, sometimes because staying awake is too painful. Easter falls on a different date each year, as does Passover and Ramadan. We fall ill and we hope to recover. There are no guarantees. Sales fall and we can't stop them, no matter how often interest rates are lowered. They rise again. Or not. Things fall apart, as

the poet said.

And the centre may not keep holding.

We fall into love, and out of it again, like it is some dark hole. We forget that love should be about rising, because we have fallen back onto cliché. We fall for, and so we fall short. We fall behind, hoping we may yet find someone on whom we can fall back. We fall out — with family, friends, neighbours and cultures. We fall out and out and out, until we are so far fallen that we are invisible to each other. Tiny dots that can be rendered less than human, just targets on a flickering screen.

We fall.

They talk about the fall of man, but I know something of the fall of woman. I've fallen several times in recent years, and always onto concrete. I've bashed my kneebone and gashed my elbow. I've had stitches. I've sobbed like a child each time I've fallen, and I am not a crier. There is something about falling ...

We go through life as though we will always be upright, and maybe we need to believe that in order to keep going. But when we fall, we must confront the brutal reality that gravity is real. That even the mighty fall, though it may be forced on them. And it hurts. Children are able to fall and come up laughing. They don't yet know about the importance of saving face, or the solemnity of falling to the knees. They just know that falling is part of life.

Part of being human.

We grown-ups might do well to remember that, and to remember that the fallen — the refugees, the homeless, the mentally ill, the depressed, the penniless, the carers, the infirm — can be helped to their feet and to walk again, if only we will recognise that in the space of a heartbeat, we can become them.

Beware the cracks. They can trip you up or you can fall between them.

The sensation of head, hands and knees falling toward concrete is not something I would wish on anyone — not politicians or popes or pundits — but it's a reminder of fallibility. That is a memory that can slowly, humbly bring me to my knees.

An irritant of soul

CREATIVE

Robin Pryor

With this man I stand

[one of the legends surrounding Menas who died a martyr c. 303 AD]

The hermit's cave
was dark and bare
and sparse to meet a robber's greed:
a desert Father's wealth is love,
his jewels are only
wisdom, peace and grace.
Returning home
he found a thief
clawing and cursing in the gloom,
so old dry hands removed a stone,
retrieved his cross of gold and chain,
and placed its loop around the neck
of Menas, scowling,
mocking in his face.
The rough rapacious bandit,
bent on blood and vengeance wild,
at home in hills and wilderness,
who saw life cheap, his to possess,
rode out into the desert of his heart
where cross of gold clung to his sweat
and questioned life and dreams,
his violence mad.
In camel's flight across the sands,
in noon-day heat,
the stench of death,

and that cross, an irritant of soul:
more questions came
and fears arose,
but still he drove the camel on,
pursuing tracks
through inner wastes
of haze and dust
and dune and rock.
At length
with desperate boldness,
wracked in mind and torn in soul,
he staggered from the margins of his life
into Egypt's sanctuary
and craved death's water *[baptism]*
to slake his spirit's thirst
for life.
Recognised for who he was,
Alexandria threw him out,
and left stunned Menas
on the road,
beside the church,
dust in his mouth
and heart.
But One approached him,
vellum book in hand,
to dust him down and
help him to his feet.
Then arm around him,
faced the crowd
of judgement and abuse:

'With this man I stand!'
was all was said,
and deserts were baptised that day.
With word
and arm
and face of love,
with eyes that read the heart,
this figure strong
still stands with those
who come at last to knock.
However wild,
however dry,
the desert times have been,
the day can come
as cross strikes heart
and soul responds in grief,
our brother Christ
extends his arm
and brokenness is healed.

Pro-choice paradigm lacks compassion on Zoe's Law

AUSTRALIA

Zac Alstin

A NSW bill seeks to create a new offence under the Crimes Act for causing serious harm to, or the destruction of, a child in utero.

The bill was originally introduced by Christian Democratic Party MP Fred Nile and dubbed 'Zoe's Law' in honour of the unborn child killed when her mother [was hit](#) by an allegedly drug-affected driver. Dismayed at the lack of legal recognition for their daughter's death, Zoe's parents have since campaigned for a change in the law, stating that: 'There has to be a specific law that recognises the viability of life and protects an unborn child.'

But the NSW bill has met with opposition from an unexpected quarter, with some feminist and pro-choice groups [concerned](#) that Zoe's Law is the start of a slippery slope toward more restrictive abortion laws.

The bill specifically [states](#) that it does not apply 'to anything done in the course of a medical procedure', or 'to anything done by or with the consent of the mother of the child in utero', and applies only from 20 weeks gestation. Indeed, Zoe's mother is herself [pro-choice](#) and worked with her local MP Chris Spence to ensure that a [redrafted](#) bill would not impinge on legal access to abortion. But the bill nonetheless worries abortion supporters because its premise cuts to the heart of the moral and philosophical contention over abortion.

Some people in our society believe that a foetus is a human being endowed with moral rights and deserving of the same legal protection afforded all other members of our species. Many people do not share this belief, though it is typically only in the vexed context of the abortion debate that this profound disagreement comes to the fore.

We have learned, as a society, to put the abortion issue to one side. Taking a cue from America, we prefer to let it remain a 'private' matter. As a 2004 survey of Australian attitudes to abortion suggested, [most](#) Australians support legal access to abortion even when they are ambivalent or uncomfortable with it in moral terms. The common refrain of 'personally opposed' but not willing to impose one's beliefs on others rings true for many Australians, while 'Don't like abortion? Don't have one!' neatly summarises the status quo for many others.

But the philosophical wing of the pro-life movement maintains that this awkward *dÃ©tente* cannot endure forever, that we either respect the lives of all human beings equally, or we find something else to respect. This logic played out in the surprising public outrage against two Melbourne philosophers who [argued that](#) 'a foetus and a newborn are equivalent in their lack of a sense of their own life and aspiration [and] this justifies what they call 'after-birth abortion' as long as it is painless, because the baby is not harmed by missing out on a life it cannot

conceptualise.'

Human reason pushes us towards coherence and consistency. We bridle at unfair or inconsistent laws, principles, and treatment. We love the idea of equality, even when we argue over its precise application. So it should come as no surprise that pro-choice feminists and other supporters of access to abortion are strongly opposed to a law that invokes the moral significance of an unborn child's life.

The heart of Zoe's Law is in her parents' recognition that their daughter was not merely a 'potential person' or some other morally diminished non-entity, and the injustice of a legal regime that fails to appreciate the extent of the harm done to Zoe, her family, and the whole community.

We have the curious idea that 'pro-choice' is synonymous with compassion, respect, inclusivity and empowerment, yet opponents of Zoe's Law are philosophically unable to support a compassionate response to Zoe's mother, [warning](#) instead that 'We cannot accept a foetus being considered as a 'child' in NSW law.' Such groups may claim to represent the 'three and a half million women of NSW', but mothers seeking justice for their unborn children will have to look elsewhere for support.

Who would have thought that abortion activists would one day seek to dictate our response to a family grieving the tragic death of their unborn child?

The fact is that our society treats the unborn in radically different ways depending on the context, and most of us simply ignore the inconsistencies, never imagining that our devaluing of the unborn in the context of abortion would have implications for our valuing of the unborn in another context.

The pro-choice movement has historically skirted these inconsistencies, using 'wantedness' to account for the grief associated with miscarriage, or to bypass the incongruity of a medical system that fights to save the lives of premature infants on the one hand, while 'terminating pregnancies' of equivalent age on the other. Zoe was 'wanted', but under the pro-choice paradigm how can that ever truly count?

Sarah Hanson-Young's Zoo suit righteous

MEDIA

Ruby Hamad

All media eyes are on Sarah Hanson-Young's defamation suit against *Zoo* magazine over a 2012 article that included an image of the Greens senator's face photoshopped onto the body of a lingerie model.

Crikey [asks](#) what implications the case could have for *The Daily Telegraph*, which has recently depicted former speaker Peter Slipper as a rat and Kevin Rudd and Anthony Albanese as bumbling characters from Hogan's Heroes. Similarly, Fairfax's *The Vine* [compares](#) *Zoo's* Hanson-Young image to the *Telegraph's* depiction of then communications minister, Stephen Conroy, as Joseph Stalin.

While the Murdoch press' ludicrous comparisons of centrist Australian politicians to genocidal, authoritarian tyrants needs addressing (if for no other reason than they are an insult both to the intelligence of the public and the actual victims of genocide), *Zoo's* treatment of Hanson-Young is an altogether different beast.

The *Telegraph's* attacks on Labor politicians, while clearly designed to undermine Labor's chance at the polls, were ostensibly criticisms of the said politicians' policies. The *Zoo* image, on the other hand, was an explicitly gendered attack that had nothing to say about Hanson-Young's actual stance on asylum seeker policy. It is a classic case of sexualising a woman in order to deflect any danger of taking her seriously.

While NSW supreme court justice Lucy McCallum agreed that *Zoo's* image was capable of holding Hanson-Young up to public ridicule, she also struck out two of Hanson-Young's key [arguments](#), that the image made the senator appear 'immature' and 'incompetent'. On the latter claim, at least, McCallum is wrong.

There is a quote by the 18th century writer Mary Wollstonecraft that I am fond of repeating because, more than 200 years later, it remains a truism. 'Taught from infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre,' Wollstonecraft laments, 'the mind shapes itself to the body and roaming around its gilt cage only seeks to adorn its prison.'

Throughout history, the emphasis place on women's looks has been a key factor in their exclusion from intellectual participation. It was the job of men to think, speak and act while women were merely required to look ornamental.

Clearly this is not a thing of the past, as attested by the spectacle of Tony Abbott parading his adult daughters on the campaign trail and [boasting](#) that the best reason to vote for him was his 'not bad looking daughters'.

Haven't we all heard them — those 'compliments' that imply women are to be seen and not heard? 'Don't you worry your pretty little head about that' 'What's a pretty girl like you doing in a place like this?' 'You're [too pretty](#) to run for office.' Women, it still seems, don't need to think, they only need to be pleasing to the

male gaze. The mind shapes itself to the body.

Zoo's hatchet job on Hanson-Young is a not so subtle reminder that, for all the talk of '[the end of men](#)', ours is still a culture that does not take the arguments and perspectives of women seriously.

Putting aside the outrageousness of 'jokingly' offering sanctuary to asylum seekers in exchange for an Australian senator posing for a lad's magazine, *Zoo's* actions simply tell us that mouthy women with an opinion can be dealt with by reducing them to sexual objects. And that objectification directly affects how women are perceived. It's hard to be both a sex object and a fully-fledged human being with thoughts and opinions.

Two studies by Name It. Change It, an initiative aimed at getting more women to run for public office in the US, [found](#) that focusing on a female politician's appearance leads people to take her less seriously: 'After voters hear language about the woman candidate's appearance, they are less likely to think she is experienced, strong, effective, qualified and confident.' This effect is the same whether the attention was positive, negative or neutral.

Hanson-Young is not the first female politician to be subjected to sexist ridicule. In the 2008 US election, as much undue attention was paid to Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's 'attractiveness' as it was to Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's alleged lack of it. As if the size of Clinton's ankles would somehow be an impediment to her leadership.

And I will up bring up the appalling treatment of our first female prime minister only to say it was effective at fostering an environment in which Julia Gillard was widely regarded as incompetent and unsuccessful, even as she was busy being the [most productive](#) prime minister, in terms of legislative output, Australia has yet seen.

Beauty and sex appeal, for women at least, is a double-edged sword. Very few of us would not want to be regarded as attractive at least some of the time and to certain people, but the obsession with female beauty is not without historical context.

Photoshopping Hanson-Young's head onto the body of a lingerie model was the cheapest of cheap shots that went beyond holding an individual politician to ridicule. It is a quintessentially gendered attack and stark reminder of what the likes of *Zoo* magazine think about women.

Julie Bishop's opportunity to press PNG on death penalty

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

Papua New Guinea's prime minister Peter O'Neill has declared his resolve to see the death penalty handed to the murderers of two porters killed during last Tuesday's attack on a group of Australian and New Zealand trekkers.

'These are appalling crimes, and they attract the death penalty under laws passed by the parliament since the last election,' he said. 'At a time when we are seeking to increase tourism these crimes are an obvious setback — but we must not let them deter tourists visiting PNG, and our own people helping visitors in their travels.'

In May, PNG passed legislation to promote its use of the death penalty, following a number of high-profile and violent crimes such as rape, robbery and sorcery-related murder. Capital punishment had never been outlawed but there have been no executions since 1954, when PNG was administered by Australia.

Soon after the legislation went through parliament, then Australian foreign minister Bob Carr voiced our opposition to capital punishment during a visit to Port Moresby: 'I said to foreign minister Pato, Australia is opposed to the death penalty in all circumstances and we never cease to make that clear.'

In the wake of O'Neill's vow to make the attackers face the death penalty for their crimes against the trekking party that included Australian nationals, Australia's incoming foreign minister Julie Bishop needs to remind PNG that Australia remains opposed to the death penalty, and that PNG will curry no favour with Australia by executing criminals who harmed Australians. The involvement of the Australians as victims gives us the opportunity to make a representation without necessarily interfering in the sovereign affairs of another nation.

O'Neill is behaving brazenly when he makes it clear that, in seeking the death penalty, he is more driven by a desire to protect the country's tourism industry than seeing justice administered for its own sake. In a statement that eerily echoes the current state sponsored blood bath in Syria, PNG's Catholic bishops criticised the capital punishment legislation 'that draws Papua New Guinea closer to the point of legally killing its own citizens'.

In a statement released in May and signed by Archbishop Douglas Young of Mt Hagen, they were particularly worried that the enacting of the capital punishment legislation looked like a covert exercise of executive authority that lacked accountability:

It seems that the legislation was passed 'on the voices' thereby making it difficult for many voters to know the actual stand of their own members. The Attorney General noted that there had been widespread debate in the public forum

but he did not indicate who had won the debate. Only the decision of the government.

The passing of legislation in such a dubious manner, and now the idea that humans can be executed in an effort to demonstrate to foreigners that PNG is a safe tourist destination, is a sign that PNG's law and order problem can be traced not just to an unruly criminal element, but to the country's rulers themselves.

Domestic violence reality check for the 'manosphere'

AUSTRALIA

Sarah McKenzie

Domestic violence is a crime in which, overwhelmingly, the victims are women and the perpetrators are men. A recent 11-year summary of domestic violence trends in Victoria by the Department of Justice [found](#) that nearly 80 per cent of victims were female and over 90 per cent of perpetrators were male.

Yet lately it seems that there has been a subtle shift in community perception. Whenever the topic of domestic violence is raised in the media, talkback radio, online comments and letters to the editor are suddenly flooded with demands that we acknowledge that men, too, are victims. According to a VicHealth [report](#), one fifth of the community now believes that men and women are equal perpetrators of violence in the home.

The 'battered husband' claim has flourished within the online space known as the 'manosphere' where aggressive men's rights groups blame women, and more specifically feminism, for everything from high unemployment rates and shorter male lifespans, to false rape allegations and poor family court outcomes. The time has come, they say, to knock women off their pedestal.

Groups such as One in Three claim that as many as 50 per cent of domestic violence victims are male, and that women are as physically aggressive — if not more so — than men. According to one men's rights group website, feminists (or femo-nazis, to use the term preferred by many) 'invent fake domestic violence' so that they can continue to control, dominate, destroy and extort from men. Males, says another site, are facing increased hostility and being portrayed as the perpetrators of 'evil'.

There is no doubt that some victims of domestic violence are men. No one disagrees that this abuse is unacceptable and unforgiveable, and that these men are equally deserving of resources and support. But to suggest that domestic violence is a gender-equal crime is plainly incorrect, and dangerous.

These groups cherry pick studies with dubious methodology. The studies they cite have been repeatedly refuted for an approach that does not differentiate between the type and context of violent acts (for example, between a push in self-defence and a push down the stairs, or between a single act of retaliation and years of ongoing abuse). The research has also been criticised for interviewing only one partner in the relationship, and for ignoring post-separation abuse, which accounts for a very large percentage of intimate partner violence.

And of course it blatantly contradicts the vast majority of studies on the topic, such as the ABS [report](#) that showed that less than five per cent of men who experienced violence in a 12-month period were assaulted by a female partner or ex-partner.

Men's rights groups claim that such statistics are meaningless because males are less likely to report domestic violence. A study by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse directly [addressed](#) this concern, stating that 'the evidence is that men tend to over-estimate their partner's violence while women under-estimate their partner's violence by normalising or excusing it ... men upgraded women's violent behaviour while women discounted or downplayed their male partner's violence'.

Furthermore, research consistently [shows](#) that 'men's violence is six times more likely to inflict severe injury and is more humiliating, coercive and controlling. Women's violence is more likely to be expressive in response to frustration and stress rather than purposeful with the intention to control and dominate.'

Danny Blay, executive director of No to Violence, explains that the arguments used by men's rights groups 'seem appealing and credible because they simplify something that is actually quite complex. But they've fudged the numbers dramatically. The thing about this issue is that it is quite personally affecting. When you hear figures like one in three women will experience family violence at some in their lives, you immediately start reflecting on your mother, your sister, your relationships and it's a hard place to be.

'It's much easier to say, 'it's not men's responsibility, it's equally women's fault'.'

The misrepresentation of domestic violence as gender-neutral is dangerous for a number of reasons. Firstly, this 'what about men?' campaign wastes precious air time and column space that Blay believes would be better spent 'having real conversations about family violence — examining the figures, exposing the myths and getting the stories out from behind closed doors'. Secondly, it raises suspicion about all domestic violence claims by suggesting that women routinely exaggerate or invent abuse.

But finally, and perhaps most dangerously of all, the claims of men's rights groups downplay the amount and impact of domestic violence on women. By characterising violence as mutual or a two-way street, they trivialise the ongoing, severe and sometimes fatal nature of domestic violence.

A compelling reminder of its devastating effects can be seen in the recent report of the Victorian Systemic Review of Family Violence Deaths. It [found](#) that over half of all homicides in the state occurred within the context of family violence. Of intimate partner homicides, females accounted for more than three quarters of the fatalities; in just under half of the cases where the deceased was male, a history of family violence was established which identified the deceased as the perpetrator of that violence.

Men's rights groups are using domestic violence victims as pawns in a larger game that seems to be less about protecting males or females from abuse and more about discrediting women and promoting other ideological ideas.

Statistics show that men are at most risk of violence not from women, but at the hands of [other men](#) . If men's rights groups cared about male victims, they'd be addressing male-male violence. If they cared about all men, they'd be advocating for the most marginalised in our society, including gay men, Indigenous men and refugees. And if they really cared about putting an end to domestic violence, they'd advocate for egalitarian relationships and examine concepts of manhood in which violence is seen as acceptable and seeking help as shameful.

Swapping stories with a barracouta sage

CREATIVE

Brian Matthews

He was sitting on the bench just inside the front doors of the Community Health Centre. His left arm was in a sling and his sweater looked like it was heavily padded at the shoulder. Propped beside him was a gnarled, polished walking stick. He looked straight at me as I passed so I nodded and said, 'Gooday.'

'Morning, mate,' he said.

The automatic doors began to slide smoothly open as I approached, but just as I was about to step through he called out, 'You wouldn't be going to Queenscliff, mate, would you?'

'Sorry, no. I'm going the other way.'

'No worries,' he said. We smiled at each other.

As I walked across the car park I reflected on my instant reply. Why couldn't I go to Queenscliff? It was about a ten-minute drive and I had plenty of time.

I went back into the foyer. 'Look, I could take you to Queenscliff if you ...'

His face lit up. He wasn't waiting for anyone in particular, just hoping for a lift.

'Can't drive, mate, y'see. The quack won't let me. Bugged the shoulder, broke the arm as well.'

He struggled to his feet, leaning his good arm on the stick. He was tall and lean, an old man, but a maverick mop of white hair and a lively ironic look to him made it very difficult to guess just how old.

'I reckon I'd manage to drive actually, but the coppers might take a dim view. So I just sit here each time, after I've seen the man, until I can cadge a ride. He reckons I've only got to come twice more.'

My ute was full of tools and assorted junk. When I had cleared the front seat for him, he folded his long frame in and we combined our efforts to arrange his seat belt around the sling.

'Name's Alan,' he said.

'Brian.' We shook hands and then we were off to Queenscliff.

'Well, it was a strange business,' he said in answer to my inevitable question about how he had come by his injuries. 'I'm a professional fisherman,' he said. 'Couta. I've fished the entire South Australian and Victorian coast line for barracouta for 70 years. I turn 90 next week.'

The 'strange business' happened on his boat, the *Harriet*. 'We weren't even at

sea. Me and Albie were just cutting up some bait when — from what he tells me — my eyes just went up into me head and I keeled right over. Next thing I know I'm in hospital and not worrying too much about fish.' He had landed on his left arm and the point of his shoulder — a dead weight.

'Well, it could've been worse. I've never had anything more than a hook through me hand and a few bruises in all the years, so I can't complain. Bit of a mystery what happened. The quack says it could've been 'benign vertical something or other'. Not too bloody benign.' He grinned.

When we arrived in Queenscliff he said, 'Straight through the town and round to the docks. It's the very last street. I was born on the beach down here. Mother was helping clean a catch of couta when, apparently, I decided it was time to cast off.'

He directed me into a narrow street flanked by silent dry-docked boats, sheds full of marine gear and, in between, stretches of quiet, lapping water.

'This is good timing,' he said. 'Meals on Wheels are due in about half an hour and then when I've had lunch I'll meet Albie down at the boat. I'm really indebted to you, mate. This is me, here.'

We stopped in front of a high paling fence behind which, partly visible through a ramshackle gate, was an old weatherboard house.

'They're high off the ground these buggers, aren't they.' He meant the ute — he was easing himself from the cabin while I tried to steady him by holding his 'good' arm. With a last grunt he stood at the door, and I handed him his stick.

He gestured towards the beach beyond the marina.

'I caught six sharks just off that point when I was a young feller.'

'Gummies?'

He looked scornful. 'Grey Nurse.'

'All the best,' I said. 'Take care of yourself.'

'I'm right as rain — and thanks again.' He turned and walked slowly through the gateway.

Some time soon, I'll take a stroll through the docks and try to find the *Harriet*, a humble couta boat among all the swaying masts, shining decks and sleek, curving hulls. I'd like to have a yarn with Alan and Albie. I want to tell them that, as a nine-year-old, the first fish I ever caught was a barracouta off the Hampton breakwater. And that the way that famously aggressive fish smashed into my bait and then fought, jumped, splashed and tail-walked all the way to the rocks made me a fisherman forever, even if I live to 90.

Human stories from Tim Winton's Australia

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***The Turning* (MA). Director: Robert Connolly et al. Starring: Cate Blanchett, Rose Byrne, Miranda Otto, Richard Roxburgh, Hugo Weaving. 180 minutes. [Website](#)**

A boy plays a treacherous prank on his brother while visiting the beach (*Sand*, Stephen Page). A man sees a news report about the discovery of a long decomposed body, and follows his memories back to the day of a childhood tragedy (*Aquifer*, Robert Connolly). A woman, grieving for a broken marriage, paws through her husband's box of memories to discover the cause of his emotional distance; in split-screen, we see detailed the events of a formative relationship from his adolescence (*Damaged Goods*, Anthony Lucas).

On paper, *The Turning* seems like a puzzle. It is adapted from a collection of stories by the great modern West Australian fiction writer Tim Winton; each story is re-envisioned by a different Australian filmmaker, under the guidance of producer-cum-maestro Robert Connolly. Characters and events recur, but are recast and reimagined by each individual visionary. It is counterproductive though to work too hard to assemble the pieces during the act of watching. For the uninitiated *The Turning* is best approached as a diverse collection rather than a singular tapestry.

Favourites will vary from viewer to viewer. However the standouts are genuinely outstanding. Claire McCarthy's harrowing *The Turning* features Rose Byrne as a domestic violence victim who finds comfort in a bizarre distortion of Christian faith. Warwick Thornton's *Big World* is a beautifully shot and poignantly narrated road movie and paeon to the twilight of a high school friendship. In *Long, Clear View*, debutante director Mia Wasikowska presents a wonderfully offbeat portrait of one strange little boy.

Not every story works on its own terms, and there is a tonal sameness to a number of the films that belies the vision of presenting a multitude of Australian cinematic voices. That being said, there is no underestimating the ambition and significance of this film, the likes of which we have not seen from the Australian industry before. That it could allow the inclusion of a film like *Immunity* (Yaron Lifschitz), in which the entire story is rendered beautifully but obliquely through contemporary dance, is testament to *The Turning's* innovative spirit.

The Turning is long, but patience bears fruit. The recasting of characters from one story to the next — notably, the shift from Indigenous to Anglo-Australian actors and back — may be disorientating, but it is also a neat way of blurring delineations of Australian identity. Some of the connections between stories are obvious — details such as a young girl's missing ring finger, or another girl's facial

birthmark, are referenced in multiple stores. But the subtler, fundamental connections will be most resonant if they arise organically through the accumulation of thematic threads — of love, loss, family, friendship and identity — that are contained within each lyrical tidbit.

The filmmakers, while putting their distinctive stamp on each story, also pay due reverence to Winton's sublime prose. Fans of Winton will certainly recognise the author's Western Australia here, as the stories trace veins of human angst from the sea to the suburbs to the bush then back, always back to the sea. *The Turning* then is less like assembling a puzzle than it is like gazing upon the Indian Ocean, allowing the pulsing or crashing waves to shape your mood and guide your mind as you ponder the profound and infuriating meaning of it all.

Treating people well in Abbott's Australia

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

When power passes from one political party to another we do well to reflect on the shape of the times. The way any party will deal with the challenges it faces is often shaped less by the distinctive attitudes of its leader or members than by those it shares with its opponents. These are likely to represent the prevailing winds in society. And if they are inhumane, they will not be countered by leader or politician bashing but only by persevering advocacy of a better way.

The election campaign showed that in Australia there is little sense of a shared humanity. When we put weight on the shared humanity that binds us to others we become ready to allow strangers to make a claim on our generosity. Now the bipartisan support for excluding asylum seekers from making this claim and the decisions by both parties to cut overseas aid or divert it to prisons and camps have been met by general approval.

This argues that a shared humanity is restricted to people like us. People do not make a claim on us because they are human beings, but because they are human beings of a particular nationality, religion, race or fate. Our kindness to strangers will not express a principle but a sentiment.

In coming years we might expect the categories of those excluded from the claims of our shared humanity to become broader. They will include other unpopular, excluded and disadvantaged people within the community. The ageing of the population, the pressure on revenue and the expectation that we shall continue to enjoy the same wealth and services as before will mean that governments will be unable to meet all their commitments.

It is natural for governments in such circumstances to cut the support it gives to the disadvantaged, whether they be Indigenous communities, unemployed or addicted. This is easier when the sense of a shared humanity is weak. They can then be portrayed as other than us, and their claim to a shared humanity to be diminished by such qualities we attribute to them as laziness, addiction, innate stupidity and antisocial tendencies. Their support will then be measured, not by their need as human beings, but by their lesser status. It can be measured out to them as a gift conditioned by compliance with whatever conditions we impose on them.

The sense of a shared humanity is further weakened by another feature of Australian culture. Emphasis is placed on the individual, and particularly on their choice through economic activity. The priority of economic relationships is reflected in the rhetoric and practices of government.

In coming years this emphasis may be reflected in a diminished awareness of the importance of connections within human life, a disregard for the place that

relationships have in encouraging disadvantaged people to participate in society, and a further hollowing out of the small groups and community organisations that help people to belong. Services will increasingly be left to private enterprise, and contracts for work within the community won by multinational contacts.

This may be economically effective, but it will reduce the part of the community in building connections with the disadvantaged. Such exclusion can be expected to result in increased expenditure on prisons, police, security, hospitals and mind altering drugs.

The election campaign, in which the two major parties competed to treat asylum seekers in ways incompatible with their humanity, showed that these trends would be reflected in the way both the major parties governed. They reflect the conventional wisdom of society. So there is little to be gained in indulging personal resentment against the Prime Minister and political resentment against the Coalition except the sour consolations of self-righteousness.

The real challenge is to persuade our fellow Australians that each person matters, not because of the choices they make or the qualities they possess, but because they are human, and that a society is measured by the quality of its relationships.

That is a hard task in which there will be no large gains. It is done best through personal conversations and informal discussion. It will involve showing the shared humanity of people from whom it is being withdrawn, and by inviting others to make that humanity a matter of personal experience not of abstraction. It will also be necessary to point out the human consequences and the brutal assumptions of policies that effectively deny the humanity of unliked groups of people and reduce human wellbeing to increased economic activity.

It will be a slow process to persuade people to want a better Australian way of treating people. When the desire is enkindled we may be able to speak of a better way.

Turnbull's electronic voting pitch is on the right track

AUSTRALIA

Edwina Byrne

Malcolm Turnbull — who according to our new Prime Minister 'virtually invented the internet in this country' — has called for the introduction of electronic voting in Australia.

But before you get excited, Turnbull's objective here is not to spare you the 20 minutes standing in line every three to four years when you are forced against your will to think about who runs your country. No, if anything he wants more voting! Turnbull's justification is that roughly six per cent of voters failed to correctly fill in their ballot papers on Saturday, and thus lost their voice in the election. Electronic voting would stop this senseless waste.

Ignoring the fact that electronic voting would disenfranchise the roughly 5.9 per cent of voters whose democratic wish is to draw male appendages on their ballot, Turnbull has a point. Electronic voting would fix a number of problems with our electoral system and, conveniently, spare party volunteers like myself the 24 hour process of covering schools in bunting, handing out how-to-votes, and scrutineering votes for 7s that look like 1s.

There is also the small matter of re-enfranchising voters with disabilities and those with low English literacy, and assisting remote and low-mobility voters.

But the best argument for electronic voting is that the advantage of the 'donkey vote' — estimated in some electorates to be worth between one to two per cent — would be eliminated by randomly generating the order in which candidates appear on your on-screen ballot. Currently, the order in which candidates' names are printed is determined by a blindfolded AEC official drawing names from a bingo wheel. The outcome can win or lose the seat for a candidate; that is, in close seats our members of parliament are more or less drawn from a hat.

So why hasn't e-voting happened yet? For a start, the term 'electronic voting' covers everything from those notorious Florida-style punch-cards, to remote voting over the internet. Turnbull would still demand you roll up to a voting booth, but use a touch screen rather than pencil and paper to make your selection. There are a number of competing models available for the electoral commission to consider.

The last full report into the potential of electronic voting was completed in 2001. Then, the AEC cited potential issues such as security, correct voter identification, cost of implementation, the threat of voter coercion outside supervised polling places, and the loss of the cultural institution of voting. The report's only concessions to technology were the recommendations that internet voting might be trialled for Antarctic electors, and that electronic reading (scanning) of paper ballots could be introduced.

Some of the AEC's hesitations are valid. Cost is a significant barrier, particularly to Turnbull's preferred model of fitting polling places with touch screens. The 2001 AEC report estimated the cost per touch screen computer at \$7000, plus \$20,000 for hardware backup per electorate. Cost would also be a barrier to any potential hybrid system where touchscreens produced printed ballots, but is negligible for remote voting via a web app.

Security and the privacy of ballots would obviously be vital concerns in investigating any electronic system. Besides the vulnerability of private browsers to cyber attack, there is potential for voters to be unfairly influenced by family, employers in a workplace, or other forces in their community. Australia invented the secret ballot — it would be a shame if we also played a role in undermining it. Then there is the possibility that the system could be 'hacked', and real votes replaced with data from some nefarious foreign power.

But these hurdles can be overcome. In 2013 Australians bank, shop, bet and date online. In each of these activities we assume a level of risk, build safeguards and controls in, and continue to refine our systems. The AEC's assessment of the 'insufficient maturity' of internet security was based on a year 2000 report from California's Internet Voting Taskforce — the issues deemed insurmountable then are well within our capacity now.

Technology is improving. Voter identification might be made possible using webcam technology, or even by the simple security questions used by online banking services. Since any proposed system would have to start with voluntary uptake, we could begin trialling solutions that allow us to monitor and improve security over time.

There are many issues to address if we take the step of introducing internet voting, and these must be rigorously addressed. We are right to be cautious about influences on democratic transparency. But we should not let fear of the unknown prevent us from solving existing issues with our electoral system.

Slow down, you're just in time

MARGARET DOOLEY AWARD

Megan Graham

More is expected of us in ever-smaller amounts of time as we strive to keep our productivity at pace with unending advances in technology. We are expected to be connected to more people more often, be across more information and be contactable more of the time (if not all of the time).

If this isn't enough, we can easily become buried in more data than we can process and more sensory stimuli than we can register. In a manic social media environment, with overbearing communications technologies and an unhealthy obsession with efficiency, an even greater issue than heightened stress is the resulting sense of meaninglessness as things become measured not by their significance but by how much they cost in our most valuable currency — time.

Nowadays there seems little chance to thoroughly reflect on anything. No 'spare' minute can afford to be wasted — it must be filled with the 'convenient' use of our devices. And of course we end up feeling like we have less time.

'Our perception that we have 'no time' is one of the distinctive marks of modern Western culture,' said writer and broadcaster, Margaret Visser. How true this is.

When our minds have little opportunity for reflection or downtime, we can fall into the habit of simply reacting to life. Gone are pockets of unfilled time, rainy afternoon boredom or opportunities to daydream or consider the 'bigger picture' at length.

On my way home on the tram recently, I observed the scene around me. The only two passengers not entranced by their phones were a man and a woman of the baby-boomer age bracket. I watched as they made eye contact (which was in contrast to everybody else who remained oblivious to their surroundings) and joked about the failings of the myki system. They connected, however briefly — and it seemed to put them both at ease.

Meanwhile, the other passengers seemed to be entirely elsewhere, mentally. One woman did occasionally lift her eyes from her iPhone — but only to do something on her iPad.

Do we lose touch with those actually around us in the attempts to maintain the endless streams of second-rate contact electronic communication allows us? In effect, this would mean that our communications technologies result in less real communication between people.

Before Facebook, people would usually find out about engagements and births and job promotions directly from the person — or at least through a mutual friend. A person also had more time to digest such news before his or her mind was consumed by the next thing.

Psychology recognises that at a certain point, emotional and mental overstimulation leads to a sort of detachment and emotional numbness as the brain and central nervous system can only respond to so much. Is the bombardment of stories, information and communication allowed by modern society having the effect of desensitising us?

'All media of communications are clichés serving to enlarge man's scope of action, his patterns of associations and awareness,' said Marshall McLuhan in his book *From Cliché to Archetype*. 'These media create environments that numb our powers of attention by sheer pervasiveness.'

Take the Greek myth of Narcissus — a wood nymph who was obsessed with himself through his own reflection. The word Narcissus is from the Greek word *narcosis* — or, numbness. With enough dopamine hits from 'likes' on Facebook, and adrenalin spikes from sensationalised news stories, one's emotions can become blunted. That is, with the notable exception of general irritability borne of expecting one's real life to be as fast-paced as one's online one.

From a broader perspective, how many of us find the time to really consider the full implications of the daily (let alone hourly) news that passes through our consciousness? My generation seem more preoccupied with responding with lightweight, lightning-quick tweets than with deep reflection. Twitter, which demands an immediate response to a topic if the response is to be at all relevant, is one example of the way that some technologies have simply led to higher expectations of what one person is capable of.

Serious modern day problems such as climate change, asylum seekers and mental illness should engage our emotions and thoughts for longer than five minutes. Creative and powerful solutions happen through breakthroughs in deep thinking, not surface thinking and knee-jerk reactions.

One day, a friend of mine told me how he and his toddler daughter had spent their time together on the weekend: my friend browsing social media and websites on his smartphone, and his daughter next to him watching movies on her own child-friendly version of a laptop. I struggled to stop an involuntary look of alarm from creeping over my face.

I was disturbed. Not because he is an uncaring father — he's not — but at the thought that this might be a typical situation. It is true that his daughter will be using more technology than we can dream of by the time she's an adult, and he probably thought it best to get her familiar with it from a young age. But I felt worried for her generation. Not for fear they will be uncared for, but that they will grow up, ironically, disconnected.

I wonder how much of my friend and his daughter's time together that day was spent giving their attention to their gadgets rather than each other. Receiving some undivided attention is a need we all have — for children, it is particularly vital to their wellbeing.

As technology advances further, so too does the degree of mental or emotional disconnect possible between people in the same room — or even in the same bed. According to proponent of the Slow Movement and author of *In Praise of Slow* Carl Honoré, there is evidence that around one fifth of Americans now interrupt lovemaking to attend to their phones.

The significant advantages of technological advancement are, of course, easy to list. We all benefit from the ability to instantly communicate at a distance (particularly in an emergency), use global positioning systems, have our information stored on computer records for the various services we access, and discover mind-boggling amounts of information about our health from medical machinery. The list goes on.

But our individual and collective attention spans are at an all-time low. Which is no surprise, given that our brains are bombarded with potential distractions from the moment we wake up until the moment we plug our touch-screened lifeline into its charger at the end of the day.

While reading *The Winter of Our Disconnect* by Susan Maushart (an account of the six months her family spent 'unplugged' from technology), I decided to abandon Facebook and Twitter for one month. At first, I experienced withdrawals from my social media world. But it didn't take long before the cravings subsided and I began to feel a sense of calm, wellbeing and a deeper connection to my home, the things I was doing and the people I was with. It was an eye-opening experiment.

Since then, I've become more aware of the effect that social media has on my life — so that when I hit electronic communications overload, I know to take a breather.

This issue is one that arguably affects our problems, big and small, across the board. From mental health and politics, to family relationships and stress-related illness — not to mention spirituality. Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest and writer, once wrote: 'Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, that without distance closeness cannot cure.'

Advocates of the Slow Movement challenge us to take control of our pace, to recognise that it is possible to choose to slow down. In the eyes of many, this emerging movement could not come soon enough.

I am making efforts to take the lead from this movement by simply taking time to pay closer attention to what is actually happening around me 'IRL' (that's cyber-speak for 'In Real Life'). Perhaps sit quietly in a park, or — as foreign as the concept may be — even choose to do nothing now and then. For a 20-something in this day and age, this is not an easy shift to make. But it's a worthwhile one.

I'm also encouraged by the words of artist William Wiley, who said: 'I wish I could have known earlier that you have all the time you'll need right up to the day you die.'

Human beings need time to ponder, switch off, unplug and simply breathe. Slowing down doesn't mean stopping (it is called the slow movement, after all). By all means, take action — but perhaps try taking your time, too.

Megan Graham is a Melbourne based writer, journalist and occasional blogger. She writes for [Crosslight](#) newspaper and [Across](#) website in her current role with the Uniting Church. Her work has appeared in Insights magazine and The Transit Lounge. Megan won the 2013 [Margaret Dooley Award](#) for Young Writers for the above essay.

Judge's citation:

In the Christian tradition, a prophet is not someone who has magical knowledge of the future. Instead, a prophet is someone who truly understands the current reality, who warns us of dangers present in it, and who advises us how we must change if we are to avoid these dangers.

I write all this to make clear that this article is genuinely prophetic. Its author warns that overuse of information technology, communication technology and the social media can leave us overloaded, numbed and detached. If we are to avoid this danger, we must learn to limit our use of all these technologies.

This warning is relevant to people of every age. The Margaret Dooley Award is given to young writers aged 30 years or under, and this warning is perhaps particularly relevant to people in this age group. It is therefore pleasing to see a young writer addressing an issue which is especially relevant to his or her peers.

The author draws on an impressive variety of sources. These range from pop culture to Greek mythology, from the author's own observations of the world to an impressive (and somewhat eclectic) selection of contemporary writing. At the same time, the author is able to use these sources effectively, so that they contribute to the argument without overwhelming or dominating it. In this regard, it is an impressive piece of writing.

This prophetic warning about a very real danger in today's world truly merits First Prize in the 2013 Margaret Dooley Award for Young Writers.

Border protection transparency under Abbott

AUSTRALIA

Tony Kevin

We will see under the Abbott Government a tougher philosophy and administration of Australia's policing of its northern maritime borders against unauthorised boat people. It cannot be assumed numbers of arrivals will quickly fall to zero, though they are already trending downwards since Kevin Rudd announced in July that all irregular maritime arrivals will be processed in PNG or Nauru and resettled offshore.

The Coalition pledged during the campaign to maintain that policy, and to augment it with new tough measures of deterrence at the borders.

In our northern maritime approaches, the new Government faces three policy challenges: to maintain maritime border protection and rescue-at-sea systems that are transparent and publicly accountable; to restore clarity to an Australian maritime rescue response system whose understanding of its responsibilities has been clouded by the pressures of the past four years; and to try to turn boats back to Indonesia without loss of life at sea.

There has been some public discussion of the third challenge, which is essentially operational. But the first and second are even more important, because they go to the heart of Australian values as a successful multicultural country of immigration that respects human rights.

One of Labor's humanitarian achievements was to establish a system of routine media releases announcing every boat interception and every incident of assistance to boats in difficulty at sea. The public thus had access to reasonably prompt and accurate numbers of arrivals and deaths at sea. Major fatal incidents at sea were reported in ministerial media briefings. They have been subject to routine internal Customs and Border Protection departmental reviews. There have, commendably, been four public coronial inquests.

It would be tragic if under Operation Sovereign Borders, as foreshadowed by Scott Morrison, the present degree of public transparency and accountability for deaths in border protection operations were to be abandoned on the spurious pretext (as happened under Operation Relex in 2001) that these are matters of national security that cannot be disclosed. It was a lesson from Operation Relex that any attempt to hide border security operations in which unacceptable risks were taken with human life, or in which deaths at sea occurred, will inevitably leak out. A civilised country should not fear submitting its border protection practices and outcomes to regular public reporting.

The second challenge is equally important. In the last four years, while up to 50,000 boat people have safely reached Australia, around 1100 people have died at sea in 30 known incidents. Many of those deaths were preventable, had

Australian rescue-at-sea responses to observed or reported distress-at-sea situations been more prompt and diligent, in accordance with our Rescue at Sea Convention obligations and decent maritime practice.

Australia's rescue-at-sea values became degraded since 2009 under pressure of increasing numbers of boat people, as they were degraded during Operation Relex. In recent years, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority came to see asylum seekers venturing out in unseaworthy boats as people who exploited an international rescue-at-sea system designed for 'genuine' mariners in distress.

Even now, despite significant criticism from the Perth Coroner of response shortcomings in the most recent inquest (SIEV 358), this agency has not conceded that its role is to coordinate prompt rescue of every mariner in distress. It still acts at times as if it were a border protection policeman. The agency has become desensitised to asylum seeker deaths at sea. This must change.

On turnbacks or towbacks, the risks of deaths at sea are well known to the ADF from its 2001 experience. As the Navy understands, protecting human life at sea must always come first. Possibly, a firm but humane administration of attempted turnback operations will prevent deaths of people who are under desperate stress but are not at war with Australia.

ADF ships' commanders must never be given reckless operating instructions or be micro-managed from shore, as happened in 2001 with *SIEV 4*, the 'children overboard' boat. They must know that their careers will not be blighted if they put their safety-of-life-at sea obligations first in any attempted turnback situations, even at the cost of some annoyance or embarrassment to ministers. And the ADF high command must back them.

Why we still need the Senate

AUSTRALIA

Binoy Kampark

It is part of the stream of Australian politics that the party of the Lower House assumes, with all genuine naivety, that their wishes embody the sovereign will. This has come to be called a 'mandate', presuming that mandates can only issue from numerically vast numbers.

The sovereign will, by definition, repudiates the democratic sentiment. It requires policing, managing and observance. But for those who claim that majorities are morally superior, defined by their number, problems arise. They get miffed when they see different views expressed. Sometimes, they would rather see those views not so much stifled as abolished altogether.

Prime Minister-elect Tony Abbott is the latest in a long line of those who have [warned](#) against the workings of those in the Senate. The newly elected senators 'all need to respect [that] the government of our nation has a mandate and the Parliament should work with the government of the day to implement its mandate'. The onus, as Abbott mistakenly places it, is on Parliament to serve the government, not the other way around.

The fruit salad variations that are coming together from the latest federal election are bound to make some nerves fray. Ricky Muir of the Australian Motorists Enthusiast Party in Victoria is one. Wayne Dropulich from the Australian Sports Party in Western Australia and David Leyonhjelm of the Liberal Democratic Party are others.

There are two parts of the discussion that should not be conflated. Choices arising from wonky preference deals for the Senate, supplemented by preference flows is one thing. The time for reform has well and truly arrived when a candidate can get 0.22 per cent of the primary vote and still obtain preferences to attain a seat. The institution of a Senate as a brake on power on the government formed in the Lower House is, however, another matter. Governments of the day tend to see both as one and the same thing: the 'minority' view that deserves to be quashed, and the fringe lunatic party who frustrates the sovereign 'mandate'.

It is fitting that, in the history of Australian politics, both major parties have [expressed](#) their yearnings to curb, if not abolish the Upper House altogether. The Labor movement initially opposed an upper house as un-democratic. The conservatives saw value in it as a bulwark against radicalism. In time, the Liberals would come to show that exact same frustration, seeing little value in a 'house of review'. Majoritarian impulses are irresistible.

To his credit, former Howard minister Peter Reith on ABC's *The Drum* expressed his support for the democratic principle that those in minor parties and independents needed to have a voice in the chamber, however awkward or

eccentric that presence might be. Senator George Brandis repeated the sentiment that same day on Q&A.

The question then arises as to whether some in government will be happy to tolerate the eccentric precisely because they are ineffectual.

After all, Dropulich, to take but one example, doesn't quite come across as threatening to the broad set of Coalition objectives, having admitted his manic admiration for gridiron. 'Our policy is about healthy living through sports — getting kids and young people involved in sports.' Dropulich [professes](#) no opinion on the carbon tax, paid parental leave or the prospective intervention in Syria. Obesity is his sole target.

Why the fuss then? John Stuart Mill takes the classic position on the subject in *On Liberty* [considering](#) the 'tyranny of the majority' where 'the people, consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number'. As with 'any abuse of power' precautions were required against it. The majority may be gargantuan in their presence and exude authority and justice, but minority opinions need accommodation and protection. Balancing is imperative. For all its current imperfections, the senate remains one method of restraint on majoritarian excess.

One of the neglected legacies of the Gillard Government was its ability to marshal views across the chamber and work with Independents on fundamental policies. The former prime minister's skills on this were rarely trumpeted, if at all. It was to be a feature of so much during the tumultuous Gillard years: a political chamber of officials forced to negotiate their stances rather than bulldoze them through.

It is that principle under threat as the final votes in the Senate are counted. By all means introduce optional preferential voting, but preserve the vitality of the Upper House. Governments, for all their attempts to draw upon authority, need to be watched. The use of the people's will, for whatever policy, needs to be scrutinised.

Rineharted by the minehearted

CREATIVE

Various

Selected poems

One more step

I

So ... this is our next step
along the sad and brutal
path we've chosen.
Even if they make landfall,
even if our labyrinthine
procedures and processes
find their lives are hanging
by a fraying thread,
we won't let them stay here.

II

Of course they can't stay here.
There's no way we can take
so many on our own. This flood
will never end. And half
of them are shonky,
playing us for suckers. Fair go, you lot,
you've worn out your welcome.
Time to move on.

III

One final step remains
for us to take: shoot
them at the border.
That might go down well
in certain marginals and, anyway,

an expert could be found
to say it's more humane
than drowning.

But we'll not go that far —
for now.

Bob Morrow

Unholy Sonnet

XIII

Strip out my heart, three-personed Gina;
As yet but truck, prospect and seek to mine;
That we may improve, export and ourselves refine
Your ore, to the US, Europe, and 'specially China.
I, like a usurp'd town, ignore union dues,
And admit labour, from all quarters,
Let them all flock, to the mineral slaughter,
That holds us captive, lest wealth you lose.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be Rineharted,
But have unwise ties to ideas green;
Divorce them, untie, or render them obscene,
Take me to you, make me minehearted,
Except you extract me, I never shall be free,
Nor ever rich, unless you ravish me.

P.S. Cottier

(John Donne-over)

A nation

Of exclusion
Of isolation (I-solation)
Of rejection
Of alienation

Of dumping the waves on their own heads
Of seeking asylum elsewhere, e.g. where no families break up
Of offering asylum inside its own body to its own body parts
Of self-hallucination
Of policing so much that heaven's gates are constantly under lock and key
Of irrevolution
Of irresponsible solution
Of no
Of no sharers
Of nay sayers
Of yes slayers
Of dreaming for its own sake
Of white on white
Of calculated cons
Of a scheme designed to last longer than long itself
Of hate boats
Of hate eyes
Of hate ears
Of love that contains a hole in it
Of hope that does the same
A nation
Of no asylum to others but its own people
Asylum sought
Asylum given
Asylum, the size of a continent, lived and being lived
Ouyang Yu

Bats not boats for Afghanistan

INTERNATIONAL

Anthony

In July, former prime minister Kevin Rudd, speaking at the launch of the Cricket World Cup 2015 in Melbourne, said he hoped the Afghanistan cricket team would qualify for the tournament to be held in Australia and New Zealand. He had just returned from a visit to troops in Afghanistan and saw some Afghan children playing cricket. Cricket, he said, can have an uplifting effect.

'When I see the young kids of Afghanistan taking up a bat and ball in the middle of nowhere and the difficulties which that country we all know experiences, it actually causes your heart to beat a little faster and think actually there's some good stuff going on here.'

As an Australian working in Afghanistan, I am seeing firsthand the value of the game in this country.

Afghanistan is one of the 'youngest' countries in the world according to the United Nations, with about 70 per cent of the population being under 30. After more than 30 years of war, this points to another sad reality: almost three quarters of the population have never known peace in their lives.

The violence continues and Afghanistan rates very badly on every global social indicator. Little wonder that many young people hold little hope for the future and look beyond Afghanistan for more secure lives.

The growth of the game of cricket, from almost nothing 12 years ago to international successes today, is having extraordinary effects. It is giving the international community a different picture of Afghanistan, without bombs and violence, showing the skill, hopes and commitment of young people. More importantly, it is having a huge impact upon the population, giving them a cause for pride, joy and celebration.

Cricket has become much more than just a game here, it is something that is uniting the country in a way that nothing else has for years. It is the largest peaceful movement and, by far, the biggest movement of young people. The game is tremendously popular everywhere, not only in the cities but even amongst Afghan kids, as Rudd saw, 'in the middle of nowhere'.

The largest gatherings of people in Afghanistan today are the crowds at cricket matches with 15 to 20 thousand people regularly gathering to cheer. A parliament member, watching a cheering 15,000 strong crowd at a match in Kabul recently, said 'Nothing has ever brought us together like this.'

The Rudd Government reportedly spent \$240,000 on its two-week campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan, informing those countries of its hardline policy against asylum seekers who arrive by boat. Most educated Afghans believed the ads would

have no effect given the desperate situations many face here. They were an embarrassment.

Cricket offers a different opportunity. \$240,000 could build up to three cricket grounds in provinces in Afghanistan, to be used by tens of thousands of people — more than the total number of boat people who have arrived at Australia's shores in the past 15 years. The United States, a country of cricket illiteracy, spent more than \$1 million constructing the Kabul Cricket Stadium — recognising the major impact cricket is having in the country. Australia, one of cricket's 'first nations', has done nothing.

It is tragic that, for ordinary Afghans, the vast majority of whom have never considered seeking asylum, Australia's most visible contribution to their country is the message to 'keep away'.

The moral point of difference between Labor and the Coalition

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

There was cause for celebration on Saturday night for both the Coalition and Labor. The Coalition was able to claim a decisive victory in the Federal Election, and Labor defied expectations and remains viable. But not so for vulnerable people overseas who will lose their Australian foreign aid lifeline so that the Coalition can fund its election promises.

Last Thursday, then opposition leader Tony Abbott announced the Coalition's proposal to cut \$4.5 billion from Australia's foreign aid program over the next four years. The proposed deep cuts to foreign aid will be used to pay for improvements to the nation's infrastructure.

In other words, people will die so that we can have better roads. This is consistent with the tough asylum seeker policies of both the Coalition and Labor which lead to people drowning at sea so that we may have more secure borders. It is even more scandalous if we consider that, for some time, funds have been diverted from the foreign aid budget to help cover the cost of running detention centres and prosecuting other aspects of government policy on asylum seekers. This has diminished the dignity of people, not helped to promote it, which is a major goal of foreign aid.

Caritas acting CEO Helen Forde [suggested](#) in a statement on Sunday morning that the amount of \$4.5 billion in foreign aid could save up to 450,000 lives.

'As a nation we are more than capable of continuing our commitment to the world's poor and we call on Tony Abbott as the next Prime Minister to reverse the proposal to cut \$4.5 billion over the next four years. We are saddened by the increasing habit of our political leaders in diverting and proposing cuts to our foreign aid budget to pay for their domestic policy costs such as processing asylum seekers and building better infrastructure like roads.'

The \$4.5 billion cut in foreign aid comes after both the Coalition and Labor backed away from a promise made during the last election campaign that by 2015, 50 cents in every \$100 of GNI (Gross National Income) would be spent on foreign aid.

Duncan MacLaren is a former Caritas international secretary general who now teaches international development studies at the Australian Catholic University. He pointed out in an [article](#) for *Eureka Street* that well targeted foreign aid can represent very good value for money 'if owned by the people it was meant for, if there are adequate training components, if it doesn't encourage dependency, if it is channelled through local community-based organisations and if, in a world

where violence simmers under the surface of many societies, it fosters peace’.

But increasingly it has been tied to purchasing Australia’s goods and services, which is actually trade rather than development aid.

We can only hope that, if not reversed, the \$4.5 cut over the next four years will represent a point of difference between the major political parties that has been lacking in asylum seeker policy. Labor might tap the Australian people’s openness to facing moral challenges that were part of Rudd’s successful pitch in the 2007 election campaign.

Australia's political goldfish bowl from the outside

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin

When an election results in a change of government, a stock line of punditry is to search for a 'when was it lost?' moment.

There will be those, for example, who cite Kevin Rudd's stilted and uninspiring performance in the first leaders' debate. Others will point to his increasingly panicked, policy-on-the-run approach to campaigning, which resulted in eyebrow-raising pledges about tax cuts for Top Enders and moving the Garden Island naval base to somewhere north of the Tweed.

Those who seize on these promises will typically do so by way of arguing that the 'old' Kevin, the one sacked by his Labor colleagues in June 2010 for not being a team player, had resurfaced — indeed, that he had never really gone away.

Still others will attribute Labor's downfall to the toxic atmosphere of disunity that characterised its second term in office, steadily leaching away the voters' trust. Depending on who gets cast as villain-in-chief, the blame in this line of argument is attributed either to the beneficiary of the coup of 2010, Julia Gillard, or to the undermining of her prime ministership by Rudd, the man she deposed.

These explanations are favoured by intra-party pundits, who on Saturday night could be heard telling interviewers that disunity is death, and that if Labor is to rebuild it must move beyond the divisions of the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era. Since most of these party elders also hinted at whom they blamed for disunity, it may be doubted whether the divisions will heal anytime soon.

Good arguments can be made in support of each of these theories, and they are not mutually exclusive: they all go some way to explaining why later this week the Governor-General will commission Tony Abbott as Australia's 28th prime minister, at the head of a Coalition Government with a comfortable majority in the House of Representatives.

But for me the real when-it-was-lost moment came just past the midpoint in the campaign, and it was truly bizarre, far stranger than anything Rudd might have said about relocating the navy or tax inducements to live in the tropics. And if the campaigning politicians and the media pack following them round the country noticed it, they chose to ignore it. That is not surprising, because it was an event that exposed the assumptions both groups work by. It was the publication of a leader in *The Economist*, calling for the return of the Rudd Labor Government.

I do not, of course, suggest that this text, lucidly and cogently argued though it was, could have had any direct influence on an Australian election. That is not only because in this instance the magazine's advice evidently went unheeded, but because scarcely anyone in the demographic that actually decides elections —

voters in outer-suburban marginal seats who really aren't interested in politics — is likely to be a reader of *The Economist*.

Nonetheless, the international news magazine turned a very dry eye on the murky goldfish bowl of Australian politics. And in the process it demonstrated, without intending to do so, why Abbott was better placed than either Rudd or Gillard (or, by extension, any prospective Labor leader) to hook and reel in the bowl's inhabitants.

As *The Economist's* leader noted apologetically, endorsing social-democratic governments does not come naturally to the magazine, which is philosophically aligned to parties of the centre-right. Thus *The Economist* flagged the strangeness of its own intervention in Australia's election campaign. Then it set out its reservations about the Rudd Government: most notably, the adoption of an Abbott-like punitive attitude to asylum seekers; Rudd's 'mercurial' temperament; and internal divisions that made 'the Chinese Communist Party look harmonious'.

But against all that, the magazine set 'Labor's decent record'. It pointed out that, exceptionally among developed economies, Australia has enjoyed 22 consecutive years of growth. It was impressed that Labor had been able to maintain growth, even after the global financial crisis, while introducing reforms such as fairer education funding, disability insurance, the pricing of carbon emissions and a national broadband network. The magazine was not perturbed by the size of budget. On the contrary, it argued that Rudd's approach to reducing the deficit was 'more likely to add up' than Abbott's.

All of this is why Australian politics, and especially the election outcome, must seem weird to those who do not inhabit the goldfish bowl. *The Economist* was not the only international observer to judge that, by most objective measures, Labor's achievements should be preferred to the Coalition's offerings. The US Nobel economics laureate Joseph Stiglitz wrote that the alarm so easily aroused among Australians by low levels of public debt was laughable; the US, Japan and most EU nations would all gladly swap Australia's debt problems for their own.

That is the big picture, yet none of it was acknowledged in Australia's dismal, dispiriting election campaign. *The Economist's* leader is my when-the-government-lost-it marker precisely because its informed arguments described everything about this country except electoral reality. The Government defeated on Saturday can take a substantial share of the credit for creating the material conditions *The Economist* lauded, but it was the Opposition that created the voters' mindset.

Rudd and his treasurer, Chris Bowen, put as little effort into conveying the big picture as Gillard and Swan had done before them, and most journalists have shown little interest in doing so, either. Abbott, however, always seemed instinctively more attuned to whatever it is that persuades people in one of the world's most affluent nations that their prosperity is under imminent threat, and

that it must all be the government's fault.

His assuredness in this line of attack was underscored by the fact that by the end of the campaign he had adopted, with no loss of credibility, many of the Labor policies he had once inveighed against: the Gonski school reforms (at least the initial stages), the NBN (albeit in cheaper, weaker form), and even a receding date for returning the budget to surplus.

As it happened, the Coalition's victory, though clear, was not the obliterating landslide some of the newer, seat-based opinion polls cited during the campaign had suggested. The outcome on election night was also a victory for the methods of older researchers such as Newspoll and Nielsen, whose predictions closely approximated the result. Yesterday Labor was on track to win at least 57 seats in the 150-seat House, and the Coalition at least 86.

Rudd's pride, evident in his concession speech, in having saved so many of his colleague's seats is justified. Gillard partisans may demur, but remember that when Rudd replaced her as prime minister polls were indicating that Labor would win barely 35 seats. One internal party poll even predicted Labor would win as few as 27 seats.

Nonetheless Rudd made the right decision in announcing that he will step down as party leader. He should also resign his seat at the earliest opportunity, and bring the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era to an end. Labor must start over again, but finding a leader who can eventually lead the party out of the wilderness will not be its hardest task. That will be finding a narrative that is not composed by its opponents.