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PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

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

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China's asylum hypocrisy

INTERNATIONAL

Nik Tan

This week China criticised Australia's treatment of asylum seekers. The criticism, raised at a bilateral human rights dialogue, is good politics: China is using Australia's cruel and inhumane asylum policy as diplomatic leverage. Nevertheless, it is astounding hypocrisy from a country that returns refugees to danger, including to North Korea, a state infamous for its widespread violations of human rights.

China's vice-minister of foreign affairs, Li Baodong (pictured), raised the question of whether refugees will be 'illegally repatriated to other countries' by Australia. He is referring to the principle of non-refoulement, which requires countries to refrain from returning refugees to a place where they face persecution.

Non-refoulement, set out in the Refugee Convention, prohibits the forced return 'in any manner whatsoever' of refugees to places where their 'life or freedom' would be threatened on account of their 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social or political opinion'.

The principle is the fundamental plank of international refugee law and the first and foremost obligation of countries that have signed the Refugee Convention, such as Australia and China. However, the scope of non-refoulement is limited. Although non-refoulement has erroneously been thought to include a duty to offer asylum, the principle only extends to a responsibility not to return a refugee to persecution.

While there are many problems with Australia's asylum policy, the Government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers probably does not amount to refoulement. In fact, a rationale of the current regional arrangements with Nauru and Papua New Guinea is to avoid violating the non-refoulement principle while still deterring asylum seekers. That said, the 'enhanced screening' process for Sri Lankan asylum seekers, some of whom are returned without access to legal advice, certainly calls in to question Canberra's commitment to the principle.

China, on the other hand, has a track record of returning refugees to danger. As recently as June 2013, China refouled nine North Korean dissidents who had fled the country. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed 'extreme concern' for the young defectors, citing 'risk of severe punishment and ill-treatment' upon their return and dismay that China had abrogated their obligation of non-refoulement.

All nine defectors were reportedly orphans, including up to five children. The

group was arrested by Laotian police while crossing the Laos-China border and sent back to China, from where they were returned to North Korea. At the time of the return, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, Marzuki Darusman, said that 'no one should be refouled to the DPRK' due to the risk of torture and the death penalty.

North Korea is currently the subject of a Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry. Led by former High Court judge Michael Kirby, the inquiry is investigating systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the country. A preliminary report documents shocking crimes comparable to those perpetrated by the Nazis that amount to crimes against humanity.

While it is worth noting that China tacitly allows tens of thousands of North Koreans to remain illegally, it has forcibly returned tens of thousands over the past two decades. Beijing continues to consider all North Koreans 'economic migrants' rather than refugees or asylum seekers.

China's violation of international refugee law extends beyond North Korea. In 2012, the UNHCR expressed serious concern at China's return of an estimated 5000 ethnic Kachins to Burma, after fighting broke out in June 2011 between Burmese government troops and rebels in Kachin state.

Beijing's criticism of Australia's asylum policy diverts attention from the many human rights challenges China faces and demonstrates how Australia's international standing is damaged by our cruel and inhumane approach to asylum seekers. On the other hand the criticism lacks legal basis: while Australia may well be testing the boundaries of the non-refoulement principle, China has repeatedly violated its international obligations outright.

The dawning of the Age of Unpleasantness

AUSTRALIA

Brian Matthews

The age of entitlement idea is shallow and facile not only because it is apparently selective about those who are entitled and those who must relinquish whatever entitlement they have managed to lay claim to, but also because the 'end of an age' is such a venerable and much resurrected image which historians, writers, politicians in particular, and others turn to their various purposes at different times.

In the last couple of decades we have lived through the age of endings. The 'end' of the communist regimes, the fall of the wall, the 'end of history', the end of nature, the death of God, the death of the novel, the bonfire of the vanities, the end of ideology, the demise of the book culture, the age of anxiety, and so on and on and on ... until we reach the end of entitlement which — set against its family background of this or that conclusion, this or that 'dying fall', this or that last gasp — looks feeble and derivative. And it is.

Announcing the end of an 'age' is just another way of obscuring the truth that you're not quite sure, or perhaps haven't the faintest idea what the hell is going on; or that you suspect what's going on but not how to influence, redirect or stop it. So you fall back on this persuasive notion of a great shift in the times, you claim to have detected that one sweep of history is mysteriously running out of puff and another — of an as yet unknown type or tendency — is about to supervene.

Joe Hockey, the Federal Treasurer, is just such a detector, but there is one difference: he claims to know what the next 'age' will be like. In a word, it will be — for those whose entitlement is disappearing — unpleasant.

Those who announce a new age, or the death of the old one, seem to be ahead of the game, but are of course always a step or two behind it. Before he could make his tendentious pronouncement about the 'end of history', Francis Fukuyama had to observe and, so to speak, accredit the end of the Cold War. One of the more famous and well-known 'ages' was 'The Age of Aquarius' ('When the moon is in the seventh house ... And love will guide the stars ... Aquariuuuuus!'). But though the song proclaimed an age, it was actually memorialising one: the Summer of Love in Haight-Ashbury was already finished by the time *Hair* hit the boards in October 1967.

Closer to home, when Marcus Clarke was researching and writing *His Natural Life* — one of the great Australian novels of the 19th century — he visited Port Arthur, the most evil of the convict system's prisons. His description of his first sight of the settlement is eerily familiar to us in 'The Age of the Turned-back Boats'. From his approaching boat he saw Port Arthur 'beneath a leaden and sullen

sky' and 'beheld barring our passage to the prison the low grey hummocks of the Isle of the Dead'. The dreary prospect convinced him 'that there was a grim propriety in the melancholy of nature ... Everybody ... begged that the loathly corpse of this dead wickedness called Transportation might be comfortably buried away and ignored of men and journalists'.

Indeed. Boat loathsomeness, in its contemporary manifestations, is something many of us would like to see not buried and ignored but, like the various 'ages', summarily discredited and forever ended.

Nevertheless, like Hockey and other wranglers with the 'ages', Clarke was behind the curve. Vestiges of convictism were still visible in the 1870s when he visited Port Arthur and Hobart and saw there the last living convicts. The actual convict system, however, and organised transportation, were gone, abolished on the east coast ten years before Clarke's arrival in the country in 1863. Clarke wrote about 'Van Diemen's Land', but the place he visited had officially been called Tasmania since 1854.

Convictism lingered only in the stones, shattered historic remains and grim buildings dotted around the landscape at Port Arthur and other infamous sites, mute evidence of a repressed and melancholy past. But Clarke needed to prolong the age of the convict system for his own purposes just as Hockey needs to invent the death of an 'age' for his.

So, all things considered, we know the age we don't live in — not entitlement, that seems to be over for most of us, though quite a few, including Hockey himself, won't notice — but where, or rather when, do we live? Is the moon in the seventh house? Is Jupiter aligning with Mars? Is peace guiding the planets? Is love steering the stars? Well, not bloody likely. If there's a dawning to be glimpsed in all this it is the dawning of The Age of Scott Morrison/Scott Morrisooooooooon/Scott Morrisooooooooon ...

Time for Labor to disown PNG solution

AUSTRALIA

Tony Kevin

All the news out of Manus over the past week confirms [Moira Rayner's](#) and [my own](#) grave forebodings.

Morrison's initial [statement](#) on 17 February that detainees had broken out of the Australian-run detention centre overnight, and that one death had occurred outside the centre, were found to be false, a fact finally [admitted](#) by him on 24 February.

Three important pieces of independent reporting from persons connected with Immigration or the now-ended G4S management operation between 21 and 26 February paint a consistent, grim picture: of disturbances that G4S had predicted, if asylum seekers were given bad news on the failure to process their refugee applications; of G4S's failure to control the ensuing events; and of the PNG government failure to control its own police and public surrounding the centre.

These sources are: the [transcript](#) of former interpreter Azita Bokan's interview with Richard Glover, ABC Sydney on 21 February; Mark Davis' [interview](#) on SBS *Dateline* program on 25 February with former migration agent Liz Thompson, who denounces interview process on Manus as a 'farce' and 'charade'; and Tara Moss' compelling [account](#) on 26 February 'Manus Island — an insider's report' from a trusted G4S source.

Over the past week of Parliament, we have seen the strange and distressing spectacle of Labor timidly criticising the Government's handling of the issue. It would have been the perfect opportunity for Labor, proceeding from these very disturbing revelations, to decide and announce a change in policy: to say that Kevin Rudd's PNG solution had now been found unsustainable, that Australia cannot persist with a PNG-based deterrence system that leaves people to be killed in uncontrolled armed attacks on an Australian detention centre that cannot be protected by Australia, and that Australia cannot therefore meet its duty of care at Manus.

Labor could be saying, 'We would have preferred an orderly regional burden-sharing and processing solution, and as a step towards that we tried to mount a Malaysia solution, but we were blocked from that by the Opposition and Greens. We see now that the PNG solution is just too dangerous to support any longer. Manus must close, and detention and processing centres in Australia must reopen. The present numbers of detainees allow this to be done, and it should be done before more people die.'

This would be the moral policy for Labor at this point. Decent people in the community would support it. The tragic death of Reza Barati provides sufficient trigger for the policy change, if Labor is brave enough to make it. If not, we will

continue to see Labor leaders Bill Shorten and Tanya Plibersek standing shoulder to shoulder on the Manus issue with Tony Abbott, Scott Morrison and Janet Albrechtsen. Not, I think, a good place for Labor.

Both Plibersek and Albrechtsen are reported to the effect that one death at Manus is less awful than hundreds of deaths at sea. Albrechtsen drew the explicit comparison with 1100 deaths at sea under Labor.

But there is an important distinction to be made here. The deaths at sea under Labor — a matter on which I have written extensively — were not the clearly foreseen outcome of a deliberately harsh and dangerous offshore deterrence regime, but a result of policy irresolution and conflicting signals to the border protection agencies. As I wrote in my 20 February article:

Labor's problem — and we see it again in its first responses to the awful news from Manus — is that it is neither principled enough nor brutal enough. It suffers from conflicting objectives: in government it wanted to deter, but to stay within the law and decency as far as possible. So it sent mixed policy messages to the Border Protection Command, ADF, and Australian Maritime Safety Authority ...

The Coalition's message is brutal and clear: we will stop the boats. To do this we will break international maritime and refugee laws, jeopardise Australia's relations with Indonesia, and stand at arm's length and watch as major avoidable violence and human rights abuses take place in PNG. Because all this bad stuff reinforces the deterrent message we are utterly determined to keep sending.

By endorsing the continued operation of Manus after the death of Barati, Labor leaves itself complicit in the Coalition's brutal, deliberately violence-provoking, deterrence policy. It leaves itself with nothing useful to say.

There is an alternative. Labor can continue to support strong non-lethal deterrence. It can, if it wishes, support OSB's present towback policies, using giveaway lifeboats to preserve lives of people who are forced back: illegally in my view, a view shared by a growing number of Australian legal experts, but at least it can be said that under the Coalition's five months of turnback, hardly any lives have been lost.

Would closure of Manus and reopening of detention centres in mainland Australia provoke an upsurge in asylum seekers paying people smugglers to make the voyage? My immediate answer would be no, because OSB's turnback policies are working to deter voyages. Labor could craft a position that essentially supports present OSB turnback practice, but rejects the murderous status quo in Manus.

If Labor does not make this policy change now, it will be supporting an Abbott-Morrison policy of knowingly goading desperate people into rioting, knowing that they will die as a result of uncontrolled PNG police and public responses that neither our Immigration Department nor its management contractors can control. It would be maintaining a bipartisan policy complicit in the

killing of people whom we have a duty of care to protect.

To conclude: Dinesh Perera, a former Sri Lankan army officer involved in the suppression of the Tamil independence movement in Sri Lanka, was in charge of the centre at the time of the riot. It is possible that he was the source of the initial false advice to Morrison that the rioting, injuries and death had taken place outside the centre. Fortunately, there was enough independent reporting to force Morrison to correct his initial statement. Yet Perera has been reappointed head of Manus by the incoming management contractor, Transfield. And Labor, under its present policies of supporting the Manus model, cannot question this.

There is still time for Shorten to change Labor policy.

Robber bands in Parliament

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

In these times Augustine's mordant comment on the Roman Empire comes to mind. He wrote, 'Without justice, states are robber bands.' His line seems pertinent as we read of the human consequences of Australian asylum seeker policy and the continuing revelations of electronic snooping.

Augustine's comparison of states to robber bands is usually taken to be merely dismissive. That does not do justice to his thought. It is best taken as descriptive, pointing to the reality and dynamic of states which act in an ethics free zone. He is concerned to strip away the self-congratulatory rhetoric of empire from the reality of a Rome concerned purely with asking how to achieve desired goals uncontrolled by respect for human dignity. If we appreciate how robber bands work we can better understand what states do.

Such robber bands as the mafia or perhaps the triads, work pretty effectively within their narrow limits. They are effective at reaching their financial and organisational goals and generally moderate the violence used in achieving these goals to the minimum considered necessary. They can also survive for long periods since they are able to ensure silence and to win enough popular support by rewarding their friends and by opposing the central government. And they have a deserved name for carrying through what they propose.

So the mere fact that governments have no commitment to ethical principles in their pursuit of security or to preventing people from enjoying protection from persecution does not ensure that they will decline and fall. They may grow in esteem among the people and the commentariat, as happened in the Roman Empire.

But robber bands have always faced two challenges. The first is the desire that comes with success that their leaders should be respected as human beings and not simply as effective robbers. For their legitimacy they need people to respect them for those human values that they themselves regard as sentimental nonsense in their work. Without it the people whose tacit acquiescence they need will shrink from them.

The control of communications and willingness to use coercive power may allow this to be achieved. Godfathers can be seen as cuddly. And ordinary citizens saw even Stalin as the benevolent father of the people who was ignorant of the atrocities done in his name.

The second, and greater, challenge to robber bands follows when people pursue practical goals without justice. The absence of an overarching ethical compass leads them to act efficiently in ways that are well designed to achieve the desired small goals, but which conflict with the robber band's broader interests. A local

capo will take out the mayor who is impeding his profitable work without realising he is related to the provincial leader on whose protection the organisation relies. The goal small achieved turns out to be an own goal.

This is also a risk for governments that act without respect for justice or an overarching ethical framework. In Australia, for example, the names and details of asylum seekers were briefly published on the Immigration Department website, and attention drawn to the list by a Minister angry at the impression of ineptitude this gave.

It is easy to see how it could happen. When ethical principles are irrelevant to achieving goals, officers of the department might well fail to reflect that publication of these details might lead to the death of asylum seekers when deported to the nations that persecuted them. Indeed, even if they did realise it, they might have argued that the goal of deterring would-be asylum seekers would be better achieved if they realised that their names would be made known to their persecutors.

But whether the publication occurred through the simple neglect of ethical reflection or by calculation of advantage, it shows the way unprincipled action can hurt the broader interests of government.

The Snowden revelations in the United States teach the same lesson. A government agency set out to protect national security by collecting private communications without concern for ethical or legal boundaries. But its single minded focus on the goal with no respect for confidentiality led it to allow a subcontractor access to confidential information. He published it, so ensuring that by its unprincipled actions the government agencies damaged the security they tried to protect.

Augustine would not have been surprised by this. He knew that ethical reflection is about teasing out human dignity, and that the proper business of governments is to serve and not to trample on that dignity. When they don't we are all the poorer.

Senior citizen's road trip to dignity

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Nebraska* (M). Director: Alexander Payne. Starring: Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, Bob Odenkirk, Stacy Keach, Angela McEwan. 115 minutes**

Alexander Payne's 2002 comedy *About Schmidt* rendered with poignancy and truth the latter-life crisis of its elderly hero. The cantankerous Warren Schmidt, played by Jack Nicholson, finds himself suddenly alone following his retirement and the death of his sweet but overbearing wife, Helen (Squibb). During a road trip from his home in Omaha to the wedding of his daughter in Denver, and through his touchingly frank correspondence with a Tanzanian sponsor child, Warren stares his past, his regrets and his loneliness in the face. Writer-director Payne and star Nicholson imbue Walter's twilight odyssey with the utmost authenticity and dignity.

Payne's latest outing as director, *Nebraska*, could be an unofficial sequel. It too concerns a road trip taken by a cranky and, in this case, alcoholic senior citizen (Dern). Like Warren, Woody Grant has neglected of his now-adult children; the film follows the efforts of younger son David (Forte) to bridge the emotional estrangement. Woody seems to be in the early stages of dementia, which would explain his certainty that a sweepstakes flyer stating he has won \$1 million is authentic. While David's brother Ross (Odenkirk) would prefer to put the old man in a home, David agrees to honour Woody's wish to cross state lines to claim his fictitious winnings.

Their journey detours and stalls at Woody's hometown of Hawthorne, Nebraska, where Woody stoically reconnects with numerous long-distant brothers, their wives and children. News of Woody's return and apparent fiscal good fortune spreads and causes a sensation among the sleepy and sometimes sinister townsfolk. David's encounters with numerous figures from Woody's past, including sneering rival Ed (Keach) and former flame Peg (McEwan), illuminate the man his father was, and is. If *About Schmidt* was about an elderly man coming to know himself late in life, *Nebraska* is about a younger man coming to know an unknowable father before it's too late.

The sturdiest signpost to *Nebraska's* thematic expansion of *Schmidt* comes in the form of Squibb, whose Kate Grant is a more abrasive version of the milder Helen Schmidt. Kate appears initially to be simply a wearying presence in Woody's life, who nags and belittles him for his early attempts to trek to Nebraska. But there is no doubt that her tetchiness reflects both long-suffering and genuine concern for her ill-mannered husband. Kate comes into her own during a comedic scene in which she berates dead ancestors in a Hawthorne graveyard, and a dramatic one where she defends her husband against the circling hyenas of his

extended family.

Payne's treatment of *Nebraska's* small themes — of family, of ageing with dignity, of the dimensions of small-town life that are parodied here, humorously but not always kindly — expands them to near-mythic proportions. Road movies are timeless and epic by nature, and *Nebraska* is delivered with an elegiac tone and beautiful black-and-white cinematography that makes it even more so.

It's the performances though, particularly of the older cast members, that ensure even the film's laugh-out-loud comedic setpieces ache with bittersweetness. Squibb and Dern have both deservedly received Oscar nods for their performances; Dern especially is superb, as a man who has much to regret, yet is much misunderstood, and whose half-dim squint suggests he is too aware of his own dwindling physical and mental agency. Ultimately he understands that the small gifts of dignity afforded to him by David throughout are not small at all.

Coming out of Cardinal Pell's shadow

RELIGION

Chris McGillion

When it was announced in 2001 that Melbourne Archbishop George Pell was to be made Archbishop of Sydney, the incumbent, Cardinal Edward Clancy, said Pell was 'a controversial figure, and controversial figures generally create a few enemies as well as friends along the way'.

Pell's latest promotion, to head an important new office in Rome with authority over all financial matters within the Vatican, is proof of the powerful friends he has made. Pell's appointment as Cardinal Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy was approved by Pope Francis — the third pontiff to have demonstrated extraordinary confidence in Pell's abilities since he was made Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne at the comparatively young age of 46 years in 1987.

As for enemies, it is not hard to compile a list of those who will be glad to see Pell go. It would include most liberal Catholics, many priests who have served under him (one of whom once described him as 'a memory of all those silly stereotypes of authority that used to haunt us as children'), and many of his fellow bishops, who saw him as too eager to please Rome and too prone to do his own thing without acting in concert with them.

Aside from a few extremely conservative Catholic groups that he has favoured, one group that is likely to regret Pell's departure are those journalists and commentators for whom he has loomed large as a figure of ridicule, especially over the issue of clerical sexual abuse. The reason for this has nothing to do with any proven remiss on Pell's part and everything to do with what attracts media attention to him.

By any standards, Pell is the kind of tall poppy people in the media love to cut down. He is the highest profile leader of any church in Australia. He is not shy of media attention. He never takes a step backwards in defending traditional Church teachings and legitimate Church interests. And, publicly at least, he stands his ground in the kind of imperious way that easily invites the charge that he is out of touch, arrogant, and a bully.

Yet Pell has not actually achieved much in terms of his ambition to restore unity to the Church and restore the confidence of 'rattled' Catholics. His star has risen in an age when Australian Catholics ceased to be a tightly-knit community of largely Irish working-class migrants and their offspring dependent on Church resources such as schools to climb the social ladder; when weekly Mass attendance collapsed to around 12 per cent of the nominal faithful; when Church appeals to authority attract derision where they are not entirely ignored. These are not circumstances in which anyone, much less Pell, was likely to turn things around.

As for Sydney, prior to Pell it had a reputation for a pragmatic approach to

Catholicism befitting the nation's oldest, largest and most diverse city. This expressed itself in a degree of tolerance for the innovations of its clergy, for a benign acknowledgement (in practical terms if not official pronouncements) that homosexuals are part of the fabric of the city's Catholic community, and in a lack of enthusiasm for the old Catholic tribal displays of more sectarian times. Much has changed in 13 years and it is unlikely this approach can be retrieved.

In this sense, Pell's departure is unlikely to make too much immediate difference to the complexion of the Church in Australia. Out of his shadow, other bishops individually — and collectively — may breathe a little easier, may feel a little less pressured to toe Rome's line, may show a greater unity in managing the Church's affairs nationally than they have done for almost 20 years.

But let's not forget that key members of the hierarchy are former Pell offshoots — among them Archbishop Dennis Hart of Melbourne, Archbishop Julian Porteus of Hobart, Bishop Anthony Fisher of Parramatta — and that even if Pope Francis is more inclined than his predecessors to take the advice of the local hierarchy in selecting Pell's replacement, the ranks of the available talent from which to choose him are limited. Pell may soon be gone but his impact on the Church in Australia is likely to linger.

Certified at 35

CREATIVE

Isabella Fels

Certified at 35

Certified at the age of 35. I felt less than five, little more than three. They dragged me kicking and screaming, raging into the psychiatric ward.

I felt like an accident waiting to happen, or a bomb about to explode. My head felt like it was going off.

I could hear all the important people in my life ticking me off. 'You don't make the grade,' said old school teachers. 'I don't love you,' said ex-boyfriends. 'Go to hell,' said my enemies. 'Get a life,' said supposed friends.

The mental hospital was now my life. I felt stifled, almost set upon with a rifle.

I felt myself shrinking the more I talked to my shrink. I could no longer pretend I was fine. I could no longer shine. However, I could secretly pretend I was divine, at times, like a goddess or the Virgin Mary.

How I wished I could just shrug off my illness. But my illness held me tight. I was put under the microscope, nurses and doctors examining and controlling my every move from morning to night. I felt at a crossroads: choose the easy, safe, narrow path, or go deep into the heart of the vast, unexplored jungle.

I felt stripped and bulldozed, as all my possessions were taken off me, and I could do nothing to get them back. I could pull no strings, as even my shoelaces were done away with. I felt as dispossessed as my clothes.

I wished I could get back on my feet, take off in my own private helicopter to greener pastures.

I felt uncared for, both by myself and by others. As I stared out the barred window, I caught my neglected appearance in the glass. I felt like a stranger as I took in my lanky, heavy hair and body.

I wished I could be light years away, when life treated me well. Life was once easy. Now everything was effort: getting up, looking after myself, moving around, stringing a sentence together. I felt stripped of my powers.

How I wished I could prove myself as a strong, successful individual, stand on my own two feet rather than being dragged through the mud by those professionals and the patients who rubbished me for not conforming.

I longed for home. But there was no turning back. I felt chained to the mental hospital.

I felt as enraged as a bat out of hell, as I found myself getting battier. I felt

hard done by. I wanted to scramble over the walls of this deep, dark dungeon, but failed time and time again. The system had clipped my wings.

Childhood

In many ways I still feel like a child. Wild and out of control, like a mad car or raging inferno. I miss important cues and literally push into all of life's queues, interrupting conversations and generally getting ahead of myself.

Still I feel myself losing the race, particularly to those who don't understand the complexities of my illness and see me as annoying and troublesome.

A lot of the time I feel I am getting nowhere. My life is not mild, though often it can seem very still, when it's hard to get off the bed, or chair, or sofa.

At other times I run riot like a two-year-old. I used to pace around the psychiatric ward for hours on end, unable to keep still. 'You're going to make a hole in the carpet,' said the nurse. There are many holes in my life.

My life is not in my hands. I rely on a disability pension. My money gets managed by state trustees. I am given a hard time about how I spend my money. Often I feel like a kid deprived of pocket money, or a beggar. In the workplace, I'm told what to do and how to act by individuals half my age.

I do need guidance and control, as I find it hard to restrain myself. I will make bad headway if I am not shown the way. I am very taken in by appearances; someone just has to smile and I will give them what they want. I can't tell good people from bad people. I am susceptible to dangerous strangers. I need to be protected.

With my OCD also at play I am (as Freud would have it) stuck in the oral stage of development, wanting to consume and gratify myself all the time.

I am desperate for attention. At school I did all kinds of strange things, such as walking down the middle of a fully seated assembly hall or breaking out laughing and crying in a quiet classroom.

These attempts to get attention isolated me. I was laughed at or pushed aside. Kids would imitate the way I walked and make fun of my nervous gestures. I was bullied and ostracised (not only at school but also later, in the workplace, before I was diagnosed) until I would cry. On camp I could only dream of imaginary friends.

I have come a long way since then. Even though I was diagnosed a schizophrenic just after university, where again I made a complete fool of myself, coming out with my disability in later life has opened many doors where before there were only walls. There is now a lot of pleasure and fun in my life, a lot of opportunities.

I can laugh at myself rather than being laughed at, and the world does not

seem such a terrible place. I have many more friends. I don't feel as alone, or that I am going nowhere. But I dream of becoming fully independent and finally feeling like an adult, able to take control and manage my life.

On becoming a housewife for the first time

CREATIVE

Lisa Brockwell

Swamphens

This is no place to bring up a child, no wonder you look hysterical. But I judge you feckless, too. Why is one of you crashing through the reeds while the other hovers helpless on the far side of the road? When my car rounds the bend your chick, a downy pellet, is beside herself, feet frozen on hot asphalt. Lucky I'm not running late, lucky I'm driving my 'mind the poddy calf out looking for trouble' best. On the way back, later, I brake hard before the body of one of you, a mangled mess of feathers, guts and gravel. The other parent at your side now, and frantic. The chick, your dappled culmination, nowhere to be seen.

Eden

When your head, a black seal, bobs under the hob, when your starfish hands roll out the pastry, your torso flat and taut under your apron like the flank of a horse lifting his feet through a doorway; when the caramel sinews of your legs bend at the oven door, your back, still warm from bed, curving while the dish hits a high metal note as you push it in, that's when I feel replete. Woman at rest, man baking apple pie, woman is blessed.

I watch, book in hand, my own tools downed,
your labour the gift, to my oyster, of sand.
This is our dominion, we have been restored
to that cumbersome garden, rich and flawed.

Echidna

Where is your motorbike?
You look like you should own one.
Snuffling around the edge of town,
leather jacket, spiked hair.
A lift of your head at my car radio:
biodiversity, two speed economy.
You get on with your business
around the rubbish and gravel,
too shy to chat and too tough to run.

Honey

Where is the honey? You asked me
that morning, wide awake to the menu
of the world. I hadn't seen the honey
in years — the jar a harem of sun,
radiant and louche, perfected by a city
of drones. Too much to ask, a little wanton
comfort? We did have some once.
Now probably overturned at the back of the pantry,
candied and frumpy, the lid's thread
arthritic with crystals. Our breakfast was over,
I could not contain you with the butter instead.

On becoming a housewife for the first time at the age of 41

I learn to cut up a melon, though remain unable to bring a knife to a whole
chicken. I save small lizards from the dogs. I find myself on tuckshop duty with
my dearest friend; we didn't see this coming at university. I inspect a snake
carcass with the boys at the bus stop and deliver a short safety lecture. I learn

more than any woman like me needs to know about slashing paddocks. I watch the school terms march across my body and face. I stand at the sink and cry when the kitchen radio tells me yet another small child has drowned at sea. I wake with a start — counting loaves of bread in the chest freezer. I construct elaborate fantasies about a business trip to London wearing a suit. I choose the shoes I'd wear on the plane; I ponder which handbag I'd take. I visit the vet at least once a week; the animals seem to take turns, patiently. I wear gum boots for seven months straight. I picture my husband dying in a car crash; this dark bubble rises out of the mud of me much too frequently. I know the gecko on the veranda is a gift. At the school gate, I learn, the hard way, to avoid the mothers even crazier than me. I smile when I see the old man in town unwrap his every Thursday chocolate heart. Shouting at my five year old I want to bang my head against the wall, hard, to teach him the lesson my mother taught me. I stop myself. But even so, my punishment comes later. I cannot believe it is up to me to keep this baby alive when I am all heart, all naked flailing heart: no skin, no ribs, just this. Everyone, please, avert your eyes! I cope by doing more exercise.

Discussing a good death with Philip Nitschke

RELIGION

Frank Brennan

I speak at a writers festival about once a year. These festivals are always good fun, inspiring and mind-expanding. Last weekend I participated in a panel discussion at Perth Writers' Festival on 'A good death'. A panel of four members was deftly facilitated by Anne Summers, asking 'What is to be gained if assisted suicide is legalised? What stands to be lost? Does society need a better approach to dying?' I was the token 'religious' person on the panel, and the only one to express satisfaction with the status quo of Australian law which presently bans physician-assisted suicide and physician administered death. Predictably the audience was pro-euthanasia.

I was able to mix with other writers bemoaning Australia's refugee policy including the confusion and obfuscation about the death of an asylum seeker on Manus Island and Julie Bishop's latest diplomatic initiative asking Hun Sen to accept refugees from Australia for permanent resettlement in Cambodia. I came away wondering how passionate refugee advocates could be so sanguine about physician assisted suicide and doctor administered death even for children.

No doubt many of the audience wondered how I could be a refugee advocate while not extending the right of self-determination to any person wanting assistance to end their life, at a time of their choosing, in a manner of their choosing, and in the company of their choosing.

Despite my insistence on distinguishing personal moral beliefs, voluntarily embraced and espoused, from laws and policies imposed with sanctions on all citizens, I suspect many thought my views on appropriate laws and policies governing death and dying were really predetermined by my Catholic moral upbringing. I did point out that the 85-year-old Hans Kung, a leading Catholic theologian who is increasingly incapacitated with Parkinson's Disease and macular degeneration, has written in the third volume of his autobiography: 'I don't want to go on existing as a shadow of myself. Human beings have a right to die when they see no hope of continuing to live according to their very own understanding of how to go on living in a humane way.'

After the session, a couple of writers expressed bewilderment how Tony Abbott and his fellow Jesuit alumni could espouse their refugee policy and still profess their Catholic faith. Law and religion, politics and policy are always a complex mix.

Dr Philip Nitschke was on the panel promoting his autobiography *Damned if I Do*. He spoke with some ambivalence about the policy objectives of reformers in this field. On the one hand, he agitates for the right of any person to control their life and to take their life regardless of their physical health or pain.

He suggests that the state should not impede the provision or availability of

substances like Nembutal so that citizens might always be assured a simple, dignified way of ending their lives, even if they be simply sick of living. He gave the example of the Victorian couple who decided to consume Nembutal together because one did not want to go on living were the other to die of cancer.

On the other hand, Nitschke concedes that the only prospect of legislative change will be with the design of a law which contains stringent safeguards and preconditions. Presumably he thinks the safeguards can be removed over time once we cross the medico-legal Rubicon of 'Do no harm'.

The focus of the discussion was principally on the needs of those wanting to end their lives. But Nembutal is better than hanging not just for the deceased, but also for those who are left behind. Concerns about others feeling pressured by relatives to consider death as an option were discounted. Many were dubious when I quoted UK research which showed that 35 per cent of persons with a significant disability were worried that a euthanasia law might put pressure on them to end their lives, and 70 per cent feared for others with disabilities.

Recalling the Northern Territory experience in 1997, Nitschke told us that Chief Minister Marshall Perron, who spearheaded the short-lived euthanasia law, did not want to put in too many hoops for people to jump through before requesting a doctor to administer a lethal injection. Many in the audience were dubious about my claim that Aborigines on remote communities were afraid about what doctors might do to them once this law was in place. There was a suggestion these fears were whipped up by the churches and other conservative groups.

I came away wondering why the perceived urgency for changing the law. With the internet and a patchy Customs service, people are able to import Nembutal fairly readily, keeping it on the shelf for their hour of need. Fellow panellist Lionel Shriver gave the salutary warning, 'Don't put it next to the baking soda.'

Attempts at legislative change have recently fallen over in Tasmania and New South Wales. Having failed on the same sex marriage front, the ACT Legislative Assembly this week will consider a motion on dying with dignity. Chief Minister Katie Gallagher reflecting on the recent deaths of her aged parents has said:

If I was ever in a position where I had to make a choice about supporting a proposed model of voluntary euthanasia, I would have to be convinced about a range of safeguards as part of any model. I'm overwhelmingly of the view that the debate about euthanasia should be refocused on improving end-of-life care, understanding the individual person's wishes about their end-of-life care choices and how we as a community ensure that people are able to die with dignity.

Given that the number of Australians aged over 85 will quadruple in the next 40 years from 400,000 to 1.8 million, discussion about euthanasia will continue.

Even though Nitschke was accompanied by security guards, I thought it a good sign that we all engaged in a civil, good humoured discussion, and that there was

room at a writers festival for one religious person happy to raise questions about the vulnerable and the common good, though being outnumbered by those who think that the issue should be primarily, if not exclusively, focused on the autonomy of the mentally able, resourceful, determined person wanting a death of their choosing. No doubt we will solve it all at the next writers festival.

\$6 co-payment not what the doctor ordered

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

Health minister Peter Dutton has [said](#) he would like to 'start a national conversation' about how to meet Australia's spiralling health costs. Many believe he is really saying that a \$6 'co-payment' fee for GP visits is on the table and likely to be announced in the Federal Budget in May.

Nobody denies that the government needs to do something to address rising costs. The \$6 co-payment is a quick and easy temporary fix that would put off the day when the government has to tackle the vested interests that are arguably the major cause of the inefficiencies that have made our health care system prohibitively expensive.

Just one [example](#) of these vested interests is the pharmaceutical industry, which supplies 86% of the medicines that are available in Australia under the Pharmaceuticals Benefits Scheme. (PBS). A Grattan Institute study has demonstrated how the industry body Medicines Australia has been able to manipulate compliant governments to inflate prices to the extent that Australia is paying sixteen times more than the UK and New Zealand for seven key drugs.

Supporters of the \$6 co-payment argue that 80 per cent of patients are bulk billed and make unnecessary visits to their GP because there is no financial disincentive. The problem is that the co-payment would also act as a disincentive to *necessary* visits, especially for the poor. Co-payments already account for 18 per cent of Australia's total health funding, and a 2012 Australian Bureau of Statistics survey [found](#) that one in 15 sick Australians has put off seeing a doctor because it cost too much.

More than \$100 billion of public money [goes to](#) fund health services each year. Clearly a significant proportion of the amount is not going to where it's needed most. It's up to governments to ensure certain groups cannot legitimately derive excessive remuneration for their provision of health care services while ill taxpayers are denied value for money.

[Experts](#) argue that the system needs to be better organised to give more priority to preventative health, and to rein in waste and duplication. Why subsidise private health insurance when insurers such as Medibank Private are [making](#) annual profits as large as \$185 million? How can we justify the existence of nine separate government health care bureaucracies in a country of 23 million people? It's not fair to the Australian people to overlook these questions while giving priority to dubious easy solutions like the \$6 co-payment.

For their part, all those involved in the health care sector may look into their hearts and examine their motivation. What does the 'care' in health care mean to them? Are they more attracted by the substantial economic benefit (available to

some but not all), or do they have a genuine vocation to care for their fellow human beings who have fallen ill?

In his [message](#) for the World Day of the Sick earlier this month, Pope Francis seemed to propose the Good Samaritan as a role model for health care providers. The Good Samaritan did not have personal financial gain on his mind when he opened his heart and bandaged the injured man on the road. Not even a co-payment.

Rise of the right in Japan

INTERNATIONAL

Walter Hamilton

Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Tony Abbott was in an ebullient mood when he met his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, on the sidelines of the East Asia Summit in Brunei in October.

Abbott repeated his view that Japan was Australia's 'best friend in Asia' (he had said so before, in 2010), and, more significantly, he endorsed the 'normal country' mantra used by Japan's conservatives to promote their nationalist agenda. (According to this formula, the war-renouncing constitution Japan adopted during the postwar occupation made it 'abnormal'.) For his part, Abe declared an ambition to take the bilateral relationship into a 'new phase', emphasising the 'basic values and strategic interests' shared by the two countries.

We can expect to hear more expressions of mutual regard when Abbott journeys to Japan in April and Abe reciprocates the visit in July, at which time it is expected that a free trade agreement will be signed. Australia and Japan are also moving to cement closer defence cooperation — a not-insignificant aspect of what Abe calls the 'new phase', or the new 'normal'.

When I was a correspondent in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s I was sometimes asked by visitors whether the country was swinging back to the right. Perhaps they had witnessed one of those vans belonging to a right-wing group cruising the streets of Tokyo broadcasting martial music and patriotic slogans.

I can remember interviewing Bin Akao, a notorious rightist, who was then in his 80s, and being struck by just how idiotic these throwback fascists sounded and appeared. The white-haired Akao squatted in front of an altar dedicated to the young fanatic who assassinated Japan's Socialist Party leader in 1960, with several of his aides lined up along the adjacent wall. It was more sickening than menacing, and seemed far removed from the prevailing attitudes and interests of the great majority of Japanese.

When I appeared in 1992 before a Senate committee in Canberra looking into these issues, I argued that Japan's defence ambitions were modest and profoundly constrained by a public aversion to all things military. No, Japan's extreme right might be noisy but it was largely irrelevant.

After 35 years following Japanese affairs I am coming around to a different view of the present situation. The danger comes, I think, not from the shady bellicose fringe, with its links to the yakuza and their fellow travellers, but from the political mainstream, supported by a broad shift in public opinion. Bellicosity is fast becoming an approved style of public discourse.

The years between 1992 and 2012, Japan's so-called 'lost decades', took a toll

on the morale of the nation that has been both underestimated and misunderstood. We may think we can grasp the meaning of rising unemployment, budget deficits, deflation and anemic growth rates but such indices tell us little about how a particular people will react to their effects.

The Japanese have been living, as it were, under a dark cloud, battered by falling real incomes, confronted daily by the impact of an ageing population, and disillusioned by the responses of their political leaders. A proud and industrious people, they are appalled by the thought of descending to second-class status. The assumption, prevalent among outsiders, that Japanese would accept their 'inevitable' decline, was just plain lazy.

Now, for the first time since the emerging generation of Japanese voters became politically sentient, they are being offered, in Abe's new nationalism and so-called Abe-nomics, a 'feelgood' solution. It is among the young, not geriatrics like (the now deceased) Akao and his ilk, that we must look for signs of patriotic resurgence.

Abe is offering to cut the Gordian knot of the piled-up problems of decades. Instead of a future of lost vigour and purpose, he wants to preserve Japan's greatness by standing up to China, acquiring a more credible military capability, breaking down structural impediments to growth (such as monopoly capital and barriers to female advancement in the workplace), burnishing the historical record to recast the nation's past in a better light, emphasising cultural and social uniformity in preference to diversity, and championing symbols of national pride that range from Yasukuni Shrine (which honours the war dead) to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Opinion polls suggest that most Japanese are happy to be told they should feel better about themselves, to resume using the phrase 'we Japanese' with all the complacency of former days.

There is a certain manic-depressive tendency in the national psyche, and a major mood shift can be detected. While many Japanese possess an enormous capacity for endurance, they are also capable of swift changes of direction (e.g. from seclusion to imperialism in the 19th century, or from aggression to pacifism last century). I would not wish to reduce this phenomenon to the old 'chrysanthemum and sword' trope, which closes off the ways in which the dichotomy can express itself. I think, nevertheless, a tipping point has been reached.

The ideological stasis that has characterised Japanese public life for 70 years is giving way. Old restraints and taboos are toppling and what will emerge when the dust settles is hard to predict. Certainly it will not be the same one-dimensional, mercantile state Australians have been satisfied to know since the war. We face a tougher, not an easier, foreign policy challenge as Japan's self-declared 'best friend'.

Morrison's law of intended consequences

AUSTRALIA

Tony Kevin

The news from Manus Island is dreadful. We know that at least one asylum seeker has died as a result of injuries sustained in disturbances over the past three days. Many asylum seekers have been wounded, some seriously, in reported gunshot, club or knife wounds.

There is still much we do not know. We do not know if these deaths and injuries were sustained within the perimeter wire i.e. on Australian-administered camp territory, or outside the wire i.e., on PNG sovereign territory. We do not know if asylum seekers had voluntarily left the Australian-run compound, or demonstrated (or rioted) within it; we do not know if the compound was then invaded by angry or out-of-control PNG police or security forces, and if asylum seekers then fled the compound trying to escape attacks by armed men.

There is the official story so far, as told by Scott Morrison, and the unofficial counter-story as told by Ian Rintoul of the [Sydney Refugee Action Coalition](#), based on many telephoned reports by detainees. They are very different stories.

There are two official enquiries announced so far: an Australian Immigration Department enquiry, and a PNG Government enquiry. Labor has called for an independent enquiry. Labor should therefore support Gillian Triggs (Director of the Australian Human Rights Commission) in her reasonable call for access to the site and to witnesses, to enable her to prepare a thorough independent enquiry. If the two governments have nothing to hide, they should promptly grant Triggs' request for access.

Whatever story or stories emerge as to how the violence and deaths happened, there is the underlying basic question; did the Australian Government violate its duty of care, by sending to a detention centre in a poorly-policed foreign country people who had arrived in Australian waters and made asylum claims there under the Refugee Conventions? Many decent Australians would contend that it did.

Whatever bad things have happened at Curtin, Woomera, Baxter, Maribynong and Villawood detention centres, these places were or are subject to Australian law and public accountability safeguards. The truth usually eventually comes out. Manus is not, or very imperfectly. Cover-up of atrocity is a lot easier in Manus than it would be in an Australian detention centre.

And this of course is what was intended. Manus is part of the asylum-seeker deterrent system. The fear of death at sea, and the fear of death by security force brutalisation at Manus, are intended to deter asylum-seeker voyages. To stop the boats.

And, awkwardly, this was Labor's view too, when it reopened Manus late in its

final term of government. And this is why Labor is impotent now to do more than call for the facts of what happened. It cannot evade policy responsibility for Manus being in operation.

Tanya Plibersek is reported to have said words to the effect that a few deaths or injuries in riots at Manus is better than hundreds of drowning at sea. Well yes, but wrong comparison. First, because Labor's record of asylum seeker deaths at sea in 2009—2013 is far greater than since the Coalition regained power, and more than double the death toll under Howard. Second, because asylum seeker deaths at sea haven't been inevitable, but are usually the result of negligent or dilatory Australian agency responses to known distress situations.

Labor's problem — and we see it again in its first responses to the awful news from Manus — is that it is neither principled enough nor brutal enough. It suffers from conflicting objectives: in government it wanted to deter, but to stay within the law and decency as far as possible. So it sent mixed policy messages to the Border Protection Command, ADF, and Australian Maritime Safety Authority.

Like Henry II with his troublesome priest Thomas A'Becket, it wanted its officials to deal firmly with the mounting asylum seeker inflow, but not in ways that Australia could be held to account for violations of law or rescue failures. It sent conflicting signals to officials. It tried ineffectually to cover up rescue failures that should never have happened, if it had made clear its determination to apply correct rescue-at-sea protocols.

The Coalition's message is brutal and clear: we will stop the boats. To do this we will break international maritime and refugee laws, jeopardise Australia's relations with Indonesia, and stand at arm's length and watch as major avoidable violence and human rights abuses take place in PNG. Because all this bad stuff reinforces the deterrent message we are utterly determined to keep sending.

And so far, it is working.

Thoughts from a sanctimonious expatriate

INTERNATIONAL

Ellena Savage

There is a difference between immigration and expatriatism. I think. It's semantics, of course, but from what I have observed, whatever difference is imagined is based on class, race, and nationality.

The term 'expat' seems only to refer to the affluent, particularly (though not always) those with Caucasian ancestry. The expat has no obligation to learn the language and customs of the place they live; the language of 'assimilation' does not follow them around their daily lives. And expats always have a home they can return to where they can enjoy safety, security, and economic opportunity. If they can handle the tax regimes.

'Immigrant' on the other hand is understood to mean a person who is motivated by a lack of opportunity in their homeland, or an ousting due to war or famine or corruption. The mythology around the immigrant is that they start from scratch with about five dollars in their pocket, and make what they can of their adopted home. Some 'succeed' by adequately assimilating and doing well in the private property department; others 'fail' to adapt and live out their lives in some sad littoral space.

The terminology is accorded based on colonialist ideas about which kinds of people mean what.

I've recently accepted that in my taking a job in publishing in South East Asia, and moving into a house with other English-speaking fugitives, that I am an Australian expatriate. I'm not ashamed — not really. It's just a fact of my life. I don't know how long I intend to stay, and I have opportunities back home that I can return to if things don't work out here. I am the kind of person who gets to be thought of as an expat. That feels weird.

Not because there is anything inherently wrong with being an expat, but because my morality is so sanctimonious, so staunch, that it is always in conflict with the reality of my decision. Many people are comfortable in the expatriate lifestyle; they make the most of their host city, and they cover their footsteps when they leave. Others are basically evil incarnate: people whose private staff in their way-too-big houses force me to wonder how they made it to adulthood without the basic skills of self-sufficiency.

Being a newly minted expat in Vietnam is rife with moral dilemmas: to what extent do I accept other people's choices to employ full-time domestic labourers? And without local knowledge, how ethical is it for me to pay for help, in any incarnation? My gut says that it is not acceptable, that I am solely responsible for my own upkeep in every situation. But without a Vietnamese parent, someone who can tell me what the word for Drain-o is and where to find it, I am left with

these decisions that make me feel at once useless, judgemental, and indulgent.

There is a quote by Flannery O'Connor I relate to strongly: 'If it's a symbol, to hell with it.' She is talking about the Eucharist, which for me as a lapsed Catholic is neither here nor there. It relates more to the sense that the symbolic is staunchly grounded in the real; the difference between language and action, abstract and manifest, may as well be nil. That moral decisions that are grounded in the symbolic always have real expressions.

Participating in a labour exchange that I don't think is fair on the labourer reiterates a historical pattern of racial and class violence. But sometimes, I do it.

Coming from a country whose government is currently depriving other humans the right to security, movement, and basic human dignity, it feels a little bit wrong to enjoy my own freedom to move with such ease. In some abject way, the cost of my relative affluence, and the cultural affluence of all Australians, is the deprivation of someone else's dignity.

This is not about white guilt; is it about the struggle to find a way to live without hurting other people because of arbitrarily assigned freedoms. It's difficult to feel thankful for freedom when it is guaranteed on the basis of someone else's servitude.

I can't imagine what it might be like to not possess the ease of movement and guarantee of personal security that my passports give me. Because I experience it, I feel that this relative ease is a right. Indeed freedom of movement and freedom of security are enshrined human rights in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The older I get, though, the more I realise how 'alienable' those rights are, and how it is post-colonial privileges that prescribe who has the right to rights.

We created the Manus Island danger

INTERNATIONAL

Moira Rayner

The connection between good intentions and the road to hell is a semi-permeable membrane. We want to 'stop the boats' — ostensibly, so desperate people stop drowning en route — so the Rudd Labor government decided to 'deter' those yet to come by punishing those who had already got here.

When it set up Manus and Nauru Islands to house the camps necessary to warehouse that next wave, off-shore, that government no doubt meant to capitalise on the Salvation Army's reputation for humble charitable interventions to soften any abreaction to its harsh decision, when it contracted them to provide 'humanitarian activities' to ease the suffering of the detained.

That reputation did not match the skills or expected achievements of the Army's workforce. It seems that the maligned, perhaps unfairly, security guards did a better job of communication and community-building than those temporary staff expected to achieve the impossible goal of keeping the peace.

It was tragic and avoidable that some of those whose refugee claims have still not even begun to be processed, would protest and damage property which was meant to improve their living conditions. If we deprive a man of hope, he often goes mad.

On Manus Island, local men, police and security guards have apparently been involved in a terrifying melee, in and out of the 'campus'. The asylum seekers were not armed, yet one is dead, one has been shot in the back, and 77 have (mostly head) injuries. They say that they fled for their lives when PNG police and locals came to 'teach them a lesson' after a few of them fled the wire fence between them and their local neighbours.

We cannot say precisely what happened, but an open inquiry is required. Manus Island is what it has to be: a warehouse for the unwanted. A concentration camp, in fact, but one in which, despite the Morrison wall of soundlessness, unlike its 19th and 20th century counterparts, atrocities cannot occur. Or so we believe, because they, their purpose, and their activities, cannot be entirely hid, thanks to journalism, activism, social media and mobile phones. 'Decent people' cannot do nothing about a wrong they witness.

That is why the Nauruan camp should be closed down — locals have decided to scrap the rule of law and deal with the criminal trials of last year's rioters by exiling the Supreme Court, expelling the Chief Magistrate and forcing the Attorney General to resign, because they want to punish privately within the camp and not in the courts. And that is why we should remove the Manus Island would-be refugees: they are at great risk of death and disability because we put them at risk in a desperately poor and struggling country.

I have a painting in my home called 'Looking at What' (pictures). It portrays the horrified faces of townspeople near an extermination camp who 'did not know' the people in the cattle trucks were also the atoms in the chimneys. The allies brought them in and made them see and smell it. Their eyes and faces can't be forgotten.

What makes human life bearable is our imagination and empathy. Love one another is a pretty simple concept. Dismayingly so. We are not far from our simian cousins who are affronted and become belligerent when people who look, smell and act differently from us encroach upon our personal space. We have, over thousands of years, developed symbols and rituals, protocols and palliatives to reduce what can be a state of constant warfare, to a resilient and thriving interactive 'federation' or commonwealth of self-sufficient communities.

We are bound to thrive when our social capital is high. But it cannot be, when times are tough and resources are few, as for the tribal groups and families living on tribal lands near Manus Island. Tensions build and the threat of violence is at hand.

We created the Manus Island danger. We absolutely know that when a different cultural group encroaches on the space of a people which defines itself by location, religion or visible similarities such as language, dress and attitude, tension is an inevitable result.

We cannot pretend we did not notice. Nor can we be apologists for the 'necessary' peril we created with these concentration camps, as Shadow Minister for Immigration Richard Marles did on the ABC on Wednesday.

We created this risk, intending it to 'deter' both boat people and people smugglers. As a consequence, we have created racial conflict in PNG, and the collapse of the rule of law in Nauru. Now we know, it is surely a duty to re-evaluate a policy that leads to mental illness, destruction of property, hope, imagination and civil society, and death. I think we have a duty to refugees, because we are descended from refugees and may be refugees ourselves, one day. This is a moral responsibility of thinking persons. Spiritual leaders have a duty to act.

What then should we do?

I think we already know the answer to that question.

AIDS outlaw battles Big Pharma

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Dallas Buyers Club* (MA). Director: Jean-Marc Vallée. Starring: Matthew McConaughey, Jennifer Garner, Jared Leto, Denis O'Hare, Griffin Dunne. 117 minutes**

I've long had a prejudice against McConaughey, which has not been diminished by his much vaunted [renaissance](#). *Dallas Buyers Club* has just about changed my mind. It's the first McConaughey performance I can recall that seems convincingly to get beyond the actor's indelible Texan smarminess — used, in most of his roles, either to charm or to repel — to something deeper, more dangerous and more human.

He plays Ron Woodroof, shyster, sparky, and motor-mouthed bigot, whose life takes a serious jolt when he learns that he has a significantly advanced case of AIDS. Given only 30 days to live, Ron is forced to face not only his mortality, but his prejudices; his rowdy, redneck mates associate the disease with homosexual activity, and they cut the equally homophobic Ron loose. He's scared, alone, and desperate for a cure.

He flirts with illegally obtained AZT (the antiretroviral drug still used today as part of effective treatment of HIV), which at the time the film is set (1985) is being rolled out in hasty and ethically dubious human trials. When his supply runs dry, and perplexed by the drug's toxic side effects, Ron heads to Mexico, where a disgraced American doctor, Dr Vass (Dunne), is treating patients using drugs unapproved by the FDA.

Ron finds Vass' alternative treatments effective, and begins smuggling the drugs back across the border. He opens a 'club' for AIDS sufferers — there are joining fees, but the drugs are free, so he can't be done for dealing. It's a money-making venture, but it also pits Ron against the Goliath of Big Pharma who, hastened by vested interests in the FDA, are pushing AZT with imperious zeal.

It's an ideological conflict, with the efficacy, extralegality and humaneness of Ron's approach on one side, and the profit-driven, bureaucratised approach of Big Pharma and the FDA on the other. O'Hare, who played a particularly [nasty vampire](#) in HBO's *True Blood*, here plays a more insidious villain, an ambitious doctor and willing Big Pharma puppet who becomes Ron's main rival on this battlefield.

This is a good story well told, although it does follow a formula that keeps it from ever being truly surprising. That being said, French director Vallée employs but does not labour Hollywood tropes. The death scene of a key character is not wrung for all its tissue-soaking worth. A climactic courtroom scene is clipped and

low-key; no soaring rhetoric or stirring speeches. This understatedness is both a strength and a weakness; Vallée taps but never pounds these emotional chords, and leaves the viewer somewhat detached rather than deeply engaged.

Much has been made of Leto's performance as Rayon, a trans woman and AIDS sufferer who becomes Ron's business partner and confidante. Rightly so — Leto inhabits every emotional and physical crag of Ray's slowly wasting frame. Her at times fiery friendship with Ron is central to Ron's discovery of the humanity that upends his prejudice; when Ron owns and bodily defends his friendship with Ray to one of his former friends during a heated encounter in a supermarket, it is an almost applause-worthy demonstration of personal growth.

There is no doubt this is McConaughey's film. He steers his natural charisma into the best and worst of Ron's nature, winning sympathy for a character that is at times thoroughly unlikeable. For Ron, who'd seen the world in black and white, the events of *Dallas Buyers Club* are an education in the many other colours of the human spectrum. Notwithstanding a few gratingly dimple-faced flirtations with Garner's reserved but moral Dr Saks (an underwritten and unconvincing character), McConaughey nails it. Maybe I should rethink my own prejudices.

Social justice with a smile

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Some named days are warm and fuzzy. Think of Mothers Day. Others are hard edged, among them [World Day of Social Justice](#) , which we celebrate this week. Social justice has to do with what we owe to others, and not with what we choose to give them. No one likes to think of their debts. So we instinctively paint upon the faces of social justice advocates the hectoring and badgering features of debt collectors.

Being reminded of debts owed to strangers is even more unwelcome. And when the debts are universalised so that they are owed by us as members of society, we do not want to know about them. No wonder that it is more effective to appeal to our individual generosity than to our shared duty, and for religious leaders to be less comfortable speaking about justice than about love.

In our culture it is even more unfashionable to speak about social justice because of the emphasis on individual choice and on material advancement in a competitive economy. Such an outlook leaves little room for mutual responsibility, and even less for a social responsibility to those less fortunate in society. It is more natural to ascribe your good fortune to your own efforts and to accept the misfortune of others as the regrettable but deserved result of personal failure.

Those who canonise individual free choice would not object to people choosing to be charitable and so to help those less fortunate than themselves. That would be their personal choice, seen perhaps as quixotic, perhaps as even worthy of admiration. At all events to praise charity would be legitimate, but not to demand social justice. Mother Theresa may be described as a saint; Dorothy Day must be seen as dangerously misguided.

Precisely because it is unfashionable and embarrassing to honour social justice, it is the more necessary to do so. We cannot negotiate away or soften the claim that human beings make on one another, including strangers. It was not simply a charitable and praiseworthy thing that the Good Samaritan who assisted the man who had been beaten and robbed did. He simply did what he ought to have done as a human being. He was responsible to his fellow human being just as members of society are responsible to their weaker fellows.

The underlying grounds for this claim are that each human being is precious and that the happiness, peace and development of each of us are dependent on others. Our birth, our nurturing, our education, our security, the position we occupy in society, and even the financial system, depend on structured relationships between other human beings which we do not create but inherit. So adulation of the self-made man is self-serving nonsense.

Different religions and philosophies will account for the unique dignity of each

human being and our interconnectedness in different ways, but without that conviction society risks becoming a jungle, bereft even of the tribal instincts that prevent animals of the same species from feasting on one another.

Because our happiness and prosperity depend on the happiness and prosperity of others in society, we are responsible to others. We can make a claim on others when in need. Those responsible for the ordering of society, too, have a responsibility not only to ensure that individuals are safe and free to better themselves, but also to ensure that the weakest members of society can live decently and grow. They must enable those of us who are better-off to pay our debt to society by contributing to the disadvantaged.

There are many ways of advocating for social justice. It is not unknown for people to be motivated by hatred and resentment to seek social justice. Indeed these motives can be very effective in forcing change, often to the moral diminishment of the advocate. Dostoevsky and others have explored this pathology in depth. But to understand it we need only to look at the mixture of motives that fuel our own rage when confronted with injustice. So it is natural, if self-serving, for those who hate reference to social justice or human rights to attribute all concern for them exclusively to resentment and displaced anger.

In the longer term if commendation of human rights is to be effective, people's hearts need to be touched by the people who make a claim for justice. That is where love comes in, not as a substitute for justice but as its lubricant. Without love the responsibilities that flow from a shared humanity will remain an abstraction and not a reality that moves us to address injustice. Social justice needs to wear the face of Santa, not the debt collector.

Toxic politics endure as Morrison gets nosy with the Navy

AUSTRALIA

Ray Cassin

If Australia ever gets over its obsession with deterring asylum seekers who arrive by boat, will anything linger from the toxic politics that entangle the issue?

The question may seem premature, since there is no indication that popular hostility to boat arrivals is likely to change anytime soon. If anything, attitudes are hardening: in a national poll last month by UMR Research, 59 per cent of respondents believed most boat arrivals were not genuine refugees and 60 per cent wanted the Abbott Government to 'increase the severity of the treatment of asylum seekers'.

Just what would be 'more severe' than using military force to intercept and turn back boats, while subjecting previous arrivals to punitive detention in offshore concentration camps, is not clear. But where the majority of voters stand is very clear indeed.

The reason for asking the question, however, is that the military 'solution' the Abbott Government has devised to deal with boat arrivals has implications that go beyond the continuing inability of so many Australians to see these arrivals as a humanitarian issue rather than as a threat to border security.

Operation Sovereign Borders, the Government's chosen instrument for deterring the boats, amounts to an unprecedented militarisation of this country's democratic politics. And the longer it continues, the greater the danger that voters will come to accept such military solutions as normal, and the more tempted politicians may be to resort to them in other circumstances.

There has always been cooperation between the Defence Force and other government agencies, of course, and it has never been limited to natural disasters and other emergencies. It is proper that the first Australian vessel to hail a boat carrying asylum seekers be an RAN patrol boat. But Operation Sovereign Borders has radically transformed the way in which the Navy, Customs and Border Protection Service, Department of Immigration and Border Protection (that phrase again!) and Australian Federal Police respond to asylum seekers.

Since the introduction of mandatory detention by the Keating Government in 1991, successive governments, Coalition and Labor, have adopted asylum seeker policies of varying degrees of severity, depending on the extent to which the government of the day was willing to defer to — or exploit — popular anxieties about the supposed threat to Australia's borders.

Whatever the government's rhetoric, however, the navy was not expected to treat people who arrived by sea but without valid travel documents differently from other civilians they encountered in the course of duty. It was up to civilian

agencies to determine the ultimate status of boat arrivals, and the Navy's job was principally to ensure that the arrivals were delivered to those agencies safely.

Under Operation Sovereign Borders, however, the Navy is actively expected to stop the boats, which in practice means turning them back. And although the official villains in the story continue to be people smugglers, it is abundantly clear that the real targets of this exercise of military deterrence are the asylum seekers themselves. They have, in effect, finally been cast in the role that Australia's xenophobes always imagined them to have, that of enemy aliens violating Australian sovereignty.

This has led not only to a further reneging on Australia's international obligations under the UN Refugees Convention, and to the disintegration of this country's always sensitive, though recently comparatively cordial, relationship with Indonesia. It has also imposed on the Defence Force, and in particular the Navy, a role that it should not have, and it is blurring the lines of civilian and military authority.

It has been but a short step from Tony Abbott's pre-election pledge to appoint a 'three star' officer to command the border-protection operation — Lieutenant-General Angus Campbell holds the same rank as the Chief of Army, David Morrison — to the bizarre spectacle of Scott Morrison becoming the first Immigration Minister to inspect ADF facilities. This week he is touring HMAS Coonawarra, the naval base in Darwin (pictured), and the RAAF base at Tindal, near Katherine, in the company of a junior defence minister, Stuart Robert.

Meanwhile the actual Defence Minister, Senator David Johnston (recognise the name? No? Most people don't) has muddied the waters, if they can get any murkier, by describing Operation Sovereign Borders as a civilian law-enforcement mission. So why does it need to be under the command of such a high-ranking military officer?

According to a news.com.au report, ADF personnel are not happy about the Immigration Minister using their bases for photo opportunities, especially while their own minister remains all but invisible. They are beginning to wonder who is the real defence minister, though they are not yet backgrounding reporters on other, more sensitive, issues such as how the Navy feels about the situation it has been placed in with regard to the much publicised incursions into Indonesian territorial waters by vessels engaged in Operation Sovereign Borders.

The official inquiry into these violations of Indonesian sovereignty found that naval and customs vessels had entered Indonesian waters six times during December and January, and attributed these incidents to miscalculation by the ships' commanders. The inquiry's report echoes the Immigration Minister's insistence that the incursions were 'inadvertent'.

Whatever the report says, however, that assertion remains almost inconceivable. The Navy has modern warships with sophisticated navigation

equipment and highly trained crews. They do not get lost at sea. But if they are following orders to harass and pursue boats carrying asylum seekers, they might find it extremely difficult to remain on one side of an imaginary line in the water.

Their Indonesian counterparts know that, and Indonesia's politicians know very well who is ultimately responsible for creating a situation that could lead to conflict between the navies. They might also relish the irony of seeing in Australia an increasing interpenetration of military and civilian hierarchies — something that Australians used to see as a fault in Indonesia.

Mistaken for Jewish in cold, grand Moscow

INTERNATIONAL

Howard Willis

There are always things nobody tells you about. Background things taken for granted, only noticed by strangers. I had never been to Europe before and so discovered over my first breakfast at Schmerlenbach that German pepper and salt shakers are the reverse of what I grew up with in Australia. Heavily peppered bacon and scrambled eggs.

There are things you don't see coming — only going, when the moment has passed.

I have had a beard for at least three decades, since I went bald in my mid-30s. Once ginger blond, now silver grey, I have usually worn it Ned Kelly, ZZ Top length. I suppose I keep it out of sheer laziness, inertia, but I have settled into it. Most of my acquaintances have never known me without it and I do believe that were I to take it off and wear a hat some people would not recognise me. I admit, I quite like that prospect. It has possibilities. Who is that unmasked man?

The beard identifies, classifies me: Bushy, Bikie, Santa Claus. Once, in North Perth, an elderly Greek lady, bless her, asked if I was a papas. I get the Santa thing every year as soon as those white-gloved, red-suited phonies set up their thrones and cameras in the suburban malls. The confused, slack-jawed toddlers mostly just stare at me striding by, but every so often one gets up to speed and says G'day to Mr Ho Ho. I can live with that.

When I announced that I intended to realise a long-standing wish to visit Russia, a few well-meaning flatterers told me I'd fit right in because I looked like Solzhenitsyn. There are no two ways about it — at a certain age, in certain photographs, I have a passing resemblance to Aleksandr Isayevich. Even some Russians thought so. A down-on-his-luck artist I met one morning in Borby Square beside the statue of Venedikt Erofeev's drunken commuter told me so.

The desire to visit Russia has hovered in me for as long as I can remember. Something I heard or saw as a young child must have slipped into my imagination and took root. *Peter and the Wolf*, perhaps. Anyway, so help me, I read *Crime and Punishment* and *War and Peace* when I was 16 — swallowed them whole. Then followed all the Dostoyevsky I could get my hands on, along with Lermontov, Turgenev, Gogol, Battleship Potemkin, Pasternak, a Russian girlfriend, the poets, the music and, yes, Solzhenitsyn.

It is pointless trying to explain this other universe. Let's just say there is a category of people who are fascinated by things Russian. We are called Russophiles.

Well read (in translation) I may have been, but that was no preparation for

today's Moscow. It may be different out there at Krasnoyarsk, but in the metropolis there are not a lot of men with full beards strolling along Tverskoy Boulevard or around the grounds of the VDNKh. Muscovites took a second look at me and the box they ticked was 'Jew'. I did not imagine this. Some of them told me, mildly surprised that I was surprised.

It has to be said that circumstances sometimes reinforced their judgment. On being handed menus, my dear wife would immediately let it be known she did not want anything with pork in it: *nyet svininy*. That this aversion to the eating of pigs is life-long and non-religious was generally too complicated for translation. Meanwhile, that's me, the bearded prophet, spread out on the banquette asking for Borjomi mineral water.

There was also the fact that our apartment was a couple of hundred metres from the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue on Bolshaya Bronnaya street, where bearded men in black coats and wide-brimmed fedoras are occasionally seen coming and going from the Metro stations up at Pushkin Square. That I wore a rain-jacket rather than a coat and was bareheaded did not seem to counter that more potent symbol of my identity.

And while we are brushing shoulders on the narrow pavement of Bolshaya Bronnaya, let me plainly state that anti-Semitism has spilt blood in modern Russia. Back in early 2006 a young neo-Nazi knifed eight people in the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue.

In Oz I was only another old Santa, and so in Eastern Europe I did not see what was before me. My naiveté was bumped but not quite overturned the week before I went to Moscow. On a rainy day in south-eastern Poland, an elderly man made a show of walking out of a bakery as I entered. A complete stranger, whose sudden fury was open and unmistakable. I had never before experienced such impersonal hatred, such open contempt. It shocked me. But then, what to make of it? That old bastard in Debica could have been just a nutter, right?

In Moscow there were those who looked at me, to use Anya von Bremzen's phrase, with a scowl like frostbite. But you can misread it. One old girl approached me, her eyes glittering with apparent malice ... and politely, timidly asked directions. Muscovites have a legendary rep for brusqueness (talk to them, they melt), but over and above the background surliness, there were a few distinctly hostile stares.

On the seven or eight times I got into detailed discussions with strangers in Moscow a pattern emerged. Saying I was Australian generally prompted a polite request for clarification: 'Yes, but your ancestry?' The reply that I was fifth-generation Australian was treated as an evasion, although Erofeev's drinking companion immediately concluded, with delighted approval, that my ancestors must have been 'bandits'. That they were gold-seekers rather than convicts returned us to the question of whence they (and I) came.

Another man, who went out of his way to help me find Bulgakov's apartment, parted company with a final, cocked-head question: 'Are you really from Australia?'

Settling the matter of my origins usually led to 'the Jewish Question'. The version put to me by one of my more forthcoming interlocutors concerned those Jews who got out of the stagnating and collapsing USSR in the 1970s and '80s. These people, I was told, acquired assets in the West and then returned to fall like wolves upon poor, vulnerable Russia during the disgraceful and terrible times of Yeltsin.

History, of course, has many versions, cunning and contrived. Those Jews who forfeited virtually everything to get out of Brezhnev and co.'s Russia, to take passage with a one-way train ticket to Vienna and beyond — they have other versions. Most of them did not become wealthy and very few returned to Russia.

Russian history has many ironies, too, contrived or otherwise. Solzhenitsyn may not have chosen to go into exile, but to the West he did go and from there he returned in 1994 to Yeltsin's Russia, a relatively wealthy man.

The Russians, for good reasons, take collective memory and its manifestations very seriously. So they savour the stubborn fact that Solzhenitsyn and Lavrenty Beria are both buried at Moscow's Donskoy Monastery. Beria, who ran the State Security forces during the eight years the writer was in the camps, was shot at Khrushchev's behest in 1953. At Donskoy, Solzhenitsyn's meticulously maintained 2008 grave is within spitting distance of Beria's ashes in the mix of Communal Grave No 3.

Yes, times change; and the passage of history can bring troubling complications.

The immediate cause of Solzhenitsyn being put on a plane to Germany in early 1974 was the publication in Paris of *The Gulag Archipelago*. That book became one of the most influential of the late 20th century, but it should be recalled its author had already been awarded the Nobel Prize and that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* was first published in Russia, in Khrushchev's Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn's last major work, *Two Hundred Years Together*, a two-volume history of Russian-Jewish relations, was also published in Russia, Putin's Russia, in 2001 and 2002. It has been translated into French and German, but only excerpts have appeared in English. Many reputable historians regard it as factually unreliable — as anti-Semitic, in fact. And yet ... in Russia, it sells.

I saw a handsome new edition in one of Moscow's largest bookshops. At only \$20 for the pair of case-bound volumes, it must have had a substantial print run. I weighed up the novelty of owning a notorious book I would never manage to read against something worth a tussle with the dictionary. I came away with a couple of volumes by Alexei Remizov (1877-1957) and a biography of Andrei Platonov

(1899-1951), two important writers not yet fully appreciated outside Russia. Look them up.

Pleased with my literary souvenirs, I walked back along Novy Arbat towards Nikitsky Boulevard. It was a cold afternoon and my beanie was pulled down over my ears. It was then that Moscow had its first flurry of snow for the season. It didn't settle, but it did dance in the air and momentarily rested on my sleeve. The traffic boomed and roared with happiness and the crowd on the broad sidewalk tramped on, head-down, regardless. For me, it was 'a moment', one of Moscow's casual, offhand gifts. I stood and looked around, taking in that grand city.

A middle-aged security guard, an Afghanistan vet perhaps, hands deep in his jacket pockets, regarded me from a nearby doorway. Apparently amused by my entrancement, the trace of a quizzical smile flitted across his broad, very Russian face. I nodded and greeted him in my wonky Russian. *Shalom*, he replied, clear as a bell, and looked up at the grey sky before turning away with a perfect Moscow shrug.

The theological lemming

CREATIVE

Paul Mitchell

The theological lemming

He only has faith
in waves. They are the what
in what he doesn't know.
What he knows has left him
on the edge of a cliff
and whispered, Push yourself.
Waves crash. Waves
waver. Waves waver
then crash. Waves are
the is in what is
the substance of what
he hopes for. Their uncertain
certainty gives him faith
that he's only wavering
or at least the moon
still calls for the ocean.
He turns back
through falling friends
to the river, still
then stiller, his reflection,
at last, beyond himself.

Country dad, city son

I know you're out there
endless rolling hills and valleys
perpetually out there calling
wending your topography

geographing my memory
but I have to tell you
my toddler stands beside the highway
and delights in trucks and cars.
I watch metallic tennis
dizzy
choke on chain smoke
but he counts and names and colours traffic
as if it were what it's not:
the most natural thing in the world.

poet/priest

How did I get here? said the p_____ to the p_____, announcing her disorientation with joy and longing. The p_____ took two steps back and forward and held up a leather book, the title of which the p_____ couldn't see. Thank you, she said, and the p_____ agreed it is right to give thanks and praise for what we do not know. They took turns to shake hands and nod heads, the ocean behind them mimicking; a slip here, a slide there and one would be gone or the other the other. There was sand beneath them, but where the p_____ and p_____ stood, well, that's a question more puzzling The p_____ knew the p_____ expected her to have answers, as surely as the p_____ expected the p_____ to have questions. But neither could bring herself to announce what she knew of the other. What was the use of meeting? they mused, once they'd gone their separate ways (sic) and back to their separate callings, calling over their shoulders as they left: p_____! p_____! Who's that, over there, rhyming those fish?

Changeover

In winter swimming pool change rooms
father helps his son with soft words
whispers towel the boy's white bum
dries flat chest shoulders endless
questions football God video games
peacefully unfolds his son's
dry clothes cherishes boy's
drenched beauty understands every
strand of showered hair jean pull

over damp flesh wrap arm in arm
windcheater jacket ties his son's
shoes holds his hand they leave
breathing each others breath

Thinking Christians spurn hammy creationism

RELIGION

Chris Middleton

Last week's debate in the US between popular scientist 'the Science Guy' Bill Nye and the Australian-born creationist Ken Ham attracted a live audience of 500,000 on YouTube and much media attention.

Ham argues that every human is descended from Adam and Eve, that God created man and all land animals on the same day 6000 years ago, and that there were dinosaurs on Noah's Ark. Nye, an agnostic, acknowledged that there is 'no incompatibility between religion and science', but argued that Ham is the exception. 'There are millions in the world who believe in God and accept science,' he noted.

The relationship between faith and reason — particularly between faith and science — goes to the credibility of being a Christian in the modern world. It is important that a minority view within Christianity is not allowed to frame a false dichotomy between religion and science. The vast majority of Christians belong to churches that do not share Ham's fundamentalist position against evolution.

Catholic theology certainly sees no fundamental conflict between faith and reason. St Anselm wrote a millennium ago 'that faith seeks understanding'. Even earlier, St Augustine wrote: 'I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe.' Questioning, philosophical enquiry and searching can all be part of a response in faith and values. Believers are not called to wipe their minds, only to give love primacy, so that at times they will trust in love to carry them when their understanding fails them.

Monasteries were the libraries and schools of Europe for centuries, and many of the world's great universities had their origins in the Church. Roger Bacon, one of the earliest advocates of modern scientific method, was a Franciscan; Copernicus, a cleric; Gregor Mendel, who laid the foundations for modern genetics, a monk. Blaise Pascal, a theologian, has a law in physics and a theorem in mathematics. Fr Georges Lemaître, a friend of Einstein, first proposed the 'big bang theory'. Fr Michael Heller writes on relativistic physics and noncommutative geometry. Thirty-five of the features on the lunar surface are named after Jesuit astronomers.

For me, reading (the Jesuit) Teilhard de Chardin on evolution, or watching a nature documentary, or considering the billions of stars that make up billions of galaxies, or pondering the ocean breaking on rocks on a beach, or reading the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, all point to the wonder of a God who is the author of life, whose creativity defies any understanding, and who bestows the great gift of freedom on the universe.

Evolution, however, becomes a threat to some Christians because it threatens

their basic understanding of their relationship with God, a relationship shaped by a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible as literally God's word. Many other Christians share a more complex understanding of the Bible, as a library of books with varying literary forms that need to be interpreted according to those forms. It is understood within the tradition of the community for which it was compiled.

I get frustrated at the attitude still held by some that the Bible must be literally true or otherwise everything is called in doubt. When the writer of Second Samuel describes David as 'having the heart of a lion', he is not proposing a literal truth of biology, but he is recording a truth about courage. On a much bigger scale, the Bible needs to be read in terms of its form, as history, as poetry, as apocalyptic literature, as wisdom sayings. It is addressed to thinking beings, and our response to it includes our ability to reason.

I do believe that God plays a creative role in our universe. The view that the universe displays an intelligibility through which one might argue philosophically for the existence of God, is a view scientists and people of faith could share. Australian physicist Paul Davies, in *The Mind of God*, appears to argue in this direction.

So would Francis Collins, the director of the Human Genome Project, who can write, as a believer: 'I see DNA, the information molecule of all living things, as God's language, and the elegance and complexity of our own bodies and the rest of nature as a reflection of God's plan.' This is a long way away from holding to a belief that Adam and Eve walked the Garden of Eden 6000 years ago!

New Zealand rocks but the poor are rolled

INTERNATIONAL

Cecily McNeill

New Zealand's status as a rock star economy with unusually high growth in 2014 is in question from commentators who say the economy has never recovered from major economic policy shifts 30 years ago.

NZ Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, Bill English, showed cool confidence at the bilateral talks with the Australian Government in early February, no doubt boosted by the HSBC chief economist's [prediction](#) that NZ is set to outpace most of its market peers in economic growth this year. With the Australian economy in disarray, the Abbott Government is showing keen interest in developments in NZ's projected 3.4 per cent growth.

Financial commentator Rod Oram [points](#) to the latest quarterly survey of business opinion, which has confidence on a 20-year high as one indicator that the 'rock star economy' epithet might stick. But while the [NZIER](#) survey shows the economy is advancing on a number of fronts, 'they are measuring the breadth of expectation [rather than] the depth — they are not measuring how big the growth is going to be', he said on Radio New Zealand.

Economist Brian Easton says New Zealand's sexy image on the global business stage does not necessarily translate to a better life for those on low incomes, particularly women and children. Easton, who's recently published a [user's guide](#) to economic inequality, says inequality is difficult to measure. One indicator might show it going up while another has it coming down or staying the same, 'so it's easy to choose the indicator you want'.

But, he says, all the indicators are that New Zealand suffered a sharp rise in inequality as a result of policy changes to tax rates and benefits 30 years ago and is now in the company of those OECD countries with the biggest gap between rich and poor. 'The simple way to put this is that in the 1980s we were in the bottom half of the OECD as far as inequality was concerned. Those above us had greater inequality. By the mid-1990s we were in the top half — among the most unequal parts of the OECD — and it's still like that.'

Easton points to child poverty as the single greatest indicator of growth in the wrong direction for those at the bottom of the heap.

A major influence on the rich-poor gap is growth in the share of income of the top one per cent of adults whose income share has grown from about six times the average in the 1980s to around ten times today. Most of the shift occurred 'between 1998 and 2003. The two major influences seem to have been a change in the tax treatment of dividends and an increase in margins for management and professionals over average workers.'

Inequality matters, Easton says, because a more equal society equates with better overall health of the nation as a whole. 'We don't fully understand why that happens.'

One argument against inequality is a higher incidence criminality. 'As far as we can judge, child inequality leads to inferior health, poor education and higher criminality for generations to come,' says Easton.

The Salvation Army's State of the Nation report, 'Striking a Better Balance', [highlights](#) continuing child poverty indicators over the last five years. Citing the incidence of one young mother of an eight-week-old baby whose benefit was halved because she did not attend a job-search seminar, the report shows government spending on income support for families has fallen 15 per cent over the period.

Child poverty has stayed at around 20 per cent over the five years, but last year the number of substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect rose 3.7 per cent and those of violence, mistreatment or neglect towards children rose 1.3 per cent.

'Too many New Zealand children are spending their lives limited by poverty and carry the harmful effects into adulthood,' [says](#) Mike O'Brien of Child Poverty Action Group. 'We need bold, comprehensive and urgent action to address this ticking time-bomb. CPAG urges the government and all political parties to prioritise children and introduce with urgency policies and programs that tackle the underlying causes of child poverty.'

Does Australia really want to cut social spending to New Zealand levels and take the country into a situation of higher crime including family violence and increased child poverty to improve the look of business figures?

Closing the Gap won't work without human reconciliation

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

The Prime Minister's [Closing the Gap](#) speech to Federal Parliament last Wednesday was a finely crafted piece of work that failed to hit the spot. It was heartfelt, but the words seemed hollow.

It has become a personal mission to help my fellow Australians to open their hearts, as much as to change their minds, on Aboriginal policy ... Even as things began to change, a generation or two back, our tendency was to work *for* Aboriginal people rather than *with* them. We objectified Aboriginal issues rather than personalised them.

Yet this objectification is what underlies the current focus of Indigenous policy, which is to 'close the gap' in statistical disadvantage.

Statistical disadvantage has, in the [words](#) of University of Queensland analyst Elizabeth Strakosch, 'become the dominant way of framing the relationship between Indigenous and settler Australia'. It is, she suggests, the sum total of 'our national Indigenous policy'. According to this view, it misses the point that human reconciliation needs to be achieved before the statistical gap can be closed.

Whether it's our Indigenous policy, or merely a campaign, 'Closing the Gap' is a media-friendly way of presenting in simple terms the complex challenge we have ahead of us. It facilitates the selling in overstated terms of any short-term improvements in the figures.

It is not policy that has been thought out and developed. Rather it is a justification for getting out the big stick to achieve short term gains that will look good on the Government's political report card when the next election comes around. An example is the initial apparent success of the truancy officers measure, which Abbott referred to in his speech:

At my first COAG meeting, every state and territory agreed with the Commonwealth on the need to publish attendance data from every school. And that's why, at 40 remote schools, the Commonwealth is already funding new anti-truancy measures that, on day one of the 2014 school year, in some communities, seem to have boosted attendance from under 60 per cent to over 90 per cent.

What will attendance figures be in five years from now? What statistical blemish is he covering with his use of the word 'seem'?

Objectifying Indigenous Australians with such an overarching use of statistics represents another half-measured stab at improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. It is akin to its predecessor, the failed paternalistic NT Intervention that began during the Howard era and was continued by the successive Labor

governments.

As Elizabeth Strakosch also points out, the Prime Minister 'has appointed his own advisory council on Indigenous affairs, rather than engaging with the elected National Congress. This sits uncomfortably with his commitment to a new engagement with Indigenous Australia.'

Close the Gap's preoccupation with statistics ignores the fractured social and political relations between Indigenous and settler Australia. It makes events such as the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations and the 2000 Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk for Reconciliation seem tokenistic. Especially when we consider ongoing hurts such as the annual Australia Day celebration, and the Australian War Memorial's refusal to recognise the death of at least 20,000 Indigenous Australians from 1788 at the hands of colonial authorities and settler militias.

The use of statistics to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians must go hand in hand with attempts to build human bonds between Indigenous and settler Australians. Building bonds is much more difficult than quoting and manipulating statistics. But it is likely to be more enduring.