# EUREKA STREET

A MAGAZINE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY
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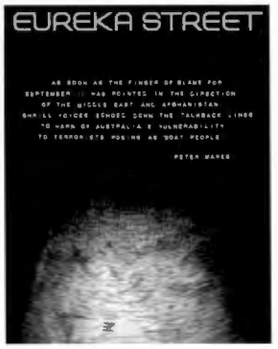
AS SOON AS THE FINGER OF BLAME FOR SEPTEMBER 11 WAS POINTED IN THE DIRECTION OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFGHANISTAN, SHRILL VOICES ECHOED DOWN THE TALKBACK LINES TO WARN OF AUSTRALIA'S VULNERABILITY TO TERRORISTS POSING AS 'BOAT PEOPLE'.

- PETER MARES





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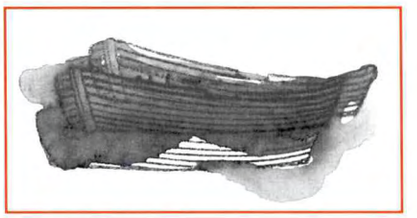




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MORAG FRASER

# Keep in mind

LAST YEAR I WATCHED a famous politician lose the trust of a school-hall-full of eager VCE students. It happened in about five seconds.

Moments before, he'd had them with him, beaming down with a footy coach's blend of authority and jocular ease. Then came question time.

VCE students close to exams are fired up. They expect to be answered as frankly as they are addressed. On this occasion their questions were the entirely legitimate ones of young women and men about to vote for the first time—questions about education funding, health and drugs issues, about equity, about jobs, about the future.

The politician, questioned sharply, shifted abruptly into hectoring mode. He bullied where he might simply and honestly have answered their questions. If he'd allowed, even for a moment, that he was fallible and that politics is a hard game, they would have listened. But he didn't. He stayed 'on message', and was obdurate. And he lost them, completely. You could hear the rasp of disillusionment all around the hall.

What was lost was not just one politician's opportunity but political idealism. Fortunately, in this case, not for long, because students are resilient, and

this group was confident enough to believe that they would do a better job, given the chance. They were also lucky students, well educated in matters beyond their own immediate advantage or social gain. I drove some of them home and, listening to their intelligent and open-hearted talk, felt happy to leave the world to them—if only they would stay broad in their sympathies and wise in their deliberations.

In Brisbane in late September, education was also the topic of conversation.

It was school holidays. Hundreds of escapees from as far away as Perth and Tasmania got together to talk about learning, teaching and fair dealing in education—the bread-and-butter issues of their profession. But they also talked about wisdom—the ancient guiding spirit of *sophia*.

The occasion was the National Catholic Education Commission's conference, only the fourth since the Commission was founded in 1974. Its five days were deepened rather than shadowed by the events of September 11. Teachers, like the rest of us, have to be able to think about more than one thing at a time. That's why wisdom was not a wild card—more the ace in the conference pack.

Education is one of the few areas where ideals and aspiration still stand in proper tension with ambition and self-interest. Teachers still think of their work as a vocation, not just a job—in their quieter moments at least. And students, encouraged and lovingly educated, understand when they are moving towards something richer and more challenging than the tabulation of facts and the calculation of advantage. Being hopeful and alert doesn't stop them from focusing on jobs, health and the latest rugby result, or even on being sent to a war.

We should think hard about giving our children the chance to grow wise. ■

*Photographs, left, by Bill Thomas.* **—Morag Fraser**

COMMENT: 2
ANDREW HAMILTON

# Local talk

At the recent Roman Synod dealing with the role of bishops, the Jesuit Superior-General, Fr Peter Hans Kolvenbach, spoke about interreligious dialogue. He sees it as a task hardly begun, and as an activity for the grassroots.

It involves Christians and non-Christians coming to know one another, and so sharing a common path and common commitments. They may also share convictions and an experience of God that are at once common and divergent. He underlined the responsibility of bishops to generate dialogue, and based it in Jesus' own practice. Good relationships call for a love in which violence is foreign.

This speech was not epoch-making—its rhetoric was understated and its contents appealed to what had authoritatively been said before. But it was significant for three reasons.

Much of what is said at synods has to do with internal church affairs. But Fr Kolvenbach's words will be measured against the large background of the Western cultural response, yet to be settled, to the New York and Pentagon attacks. If that response is built on dialogue and a sharing of life, it will mean that Muslims are recognised by their faces and not by labels. That kind of recognition is the best antidote to communal violence and prejudice. The attention and inattention of the Synod to the large events of the latter half of 2001 and to their human consequences will be small building blocks in the shaping of Western cultural attitudes.

The speech also addressed questions that are live within the Catholic Church. It emphasised the importance of encouraging dialogue at the local level, and also expressed confidence in initiatives taken there. Any synod on the role of bishops in the church will inevitably have to deal with tension between the poles of central control and local autonomy. A passion for centralised control usually reflects and breeds fear that identity will be lost. This speech was marked by confidence in the capacity of local churches to engage with people of other religious traditions, and in the ability of bishops to encourage them sensibly.

Finally, the speech was confident and practical. The recent church attention to interreligious dialogue has generally been preoccupied with perceived theoretical errors and with the dangers of the enterprise. As the consequences of the US attacks play out in relationships between people and cultures, it will become clear that the Gospel can be commended only by a conversation between equals based on trust. In a striking phrase, Fr Kolvenbach grounds this in 'a love, humble and often humiliating, which nurtures dialogue'. To be humiliated without standing on one's dignity or marching to war, does demand great love. ■

**Andrew Hamilton** sj is *Eureka Street*'s publisher.

# SNAPshot

## Expedient sitings

As the election tornado assumed its traditional funnel shape, the marginal Liberal seat of Eden-Monaro suddenly became the chosen spot for the new Defence operational headquarters.

Apparently, Australia's Army, Navy and Air Force will co-ordinate and communicate there for all they're worth, and the local builders, drivers, cleaners and caterers are busily hanging John Howard's picture on their living-room walls.

However, the proposed site is about five kilometres from the Molonglo Observatory Synthesis Telescope—a powerful, crucial player in the world of star and quasar discovery. It seems the Defence communications technology will wreak havoc with the sensitive workings of a radio telescope. Oops.

Cartoonist Gary Larson might have something to say here, with his parachuting club next door to the crocodile farm, or his Centre for Migraine Studies whose neighbour is in the brass band instruction industry. But outgoing Defence Minister Peter Reith is confident his department can sort out such trivial details. Perhaps by forming an acrobatic pyramid to block the interference?

## In a word, or two

As the code words for a mission against terrorists, Infinite Justice always seemed a bit rich. Many Christians applauded the distaste of Muslim states for the military takeover of one of God's attributes (and welcomed the change of title).

In Christian theology, infinite justice has been rich in meaning and controversy. Infinity causes difficulties because it removes the limits and boundaries that make human life bearable.

Early Christians wondered how God's infinite justice could be reconciled with infinite goodness. Justice implies that consequences must follow from our actions: virtue must be rewarded and evil punished. Because human justice is not infinite, we expect compromise, neglect and inconsistency in its administration. But nothing is overlooked in God's justice, which consequently becomes appalling to contemplate.

The Gospel, however, describes a God who forgives evildoers and offers favour to the undeserving. This goodness seemed inconsistent with infinite justice.

Various Christians offered resolutions of the conflict, most notably Marcion, who claimed that there are two Gods—the just Old Testament God, responsible for creation, and the good God of Jesus Christ who saves sinners from the inexorable law of retribution.

Some Christians opposed Marcion's theology simply by emphasising God's justice, and emptying God's goodness of any content. The echoes of this solution are heard in a political rhetoric in which the infinite goodness of a nation is perfectly consistent with visiting infinite retribution on the 'children of a lesser God'.

For better theologians, however, God's infinite goodness and justice were reconciled when God stood with the victims of injustice. That too has political consequences.

## The ripple effect

You don't invite Salman Rushdie to an international writers' gathering if you are a festival director looking for a quiet life. Things have a way of happening in his vicinity.

Pity then the ordinary mortals in charge of the recent event in Vancouver. Post September 11, airlines were not keen to carry Rushdie. Hotels weren't conspicuously hospitable either. But ultimately, and ironically, it was a break in the US commercial publicity chain that robbed Vancouver of its Booker Prize-winning star. Canada catches many of its high-cost literary visitors after they have done their stint on the United States promotion circuit. It pays to have powerful neighbours. But not this time.

## Chip off the old block

It was soon apparent that wood-chopping is not a sport for the slim whipper-snapper. In the finals of the September Royal Melbourne Show's 300mm Underhand and 300mm Standing Block Combination Handicap, contestants were ranked from short handicaps up the end of the shed to long handicaps near the entrance. From our seats at the door we seemed to be looking through a wide-angle lens narrowing at the far end to a slender chap of about 20 brief years, who clearly had no chance.

David Foster, world champion axeman, is a 44-year-old Tasmanian, 6'4" tall and weighing 25 stone. He was up our end.

A full thirty-two seconds into the event, Foster and his team-mate, David Bolstad from New Zealand, were finally allowed to start. Up the far end, the slim short-handicapped things—time-rich but girth-poor—were still toiling over the first stage, the standing block (or horizontal log, as it seemed to the uninitiated). Bolstad sorted that bit of wood into two pieces much as the rest of us would divide two squares of Cadbury's Dairy Milk. Then it was Foster's turn, poised at the standing block.

Understand, he's a big man. And it's not all muscle. So the force he unleashed was expected—body-weight momentum alone would be impressive. But it was his speed that was shocking. More mongoose than elephant. Hinging at the waist (who would have thought?), Foster swung his torso back and wielded it and the axe at what you might have guessed by now was not a standing block for very long. Chips flew, the audience leant back; half-a-dozen chops on each side and the job was done.

Foster and Bolstad came second. Names of the first-prize winners? Can't remember.

Capital Letter

Jack Waterford

# Cry havoc

THE MATHEMATICS STILL FAVOUR a Labor victory, though time and bad calculation seem to be working hard against Kim Beazley. Perhaps, had there been no war against terror, and no refugee crisis, the strategy calculated two years ago—of making the Coalition the issue and holding back on policy detail—might have succeeded. As it happened, however, Howard had issues running, while Labor, struggling to shift the focus on to health and education, was left with ground to catch up.

The numbers are on Beazley's side nonetheless, if only because Labor (as it did in 1969 before its 1972 election win and in 1980 before its 1983 election win) has already cleared most of the hurdles between it and the seats it must command in order to form government. If its share of the vote is no greater than in 1998, it should scrape home. Even if its vote slips—but in the right places—it could still get home. The Coalition has many more seats on a razor's edge than Labor. A uniform swing of one per cent would see Labor with a majority of eight. Three per cent would give it a majority of 30. By contrast, a uniform one per cent swing to the Coalition would have Labor losing only five seats; a two per cent swing, only a further two seats.

Five of the most vulnerable Coalition seats are in Queensland, almost all coastal and provincial seats that were showing, only six months ago, some of the strongest alienation from the Howard government. The two most vulnerable NSW seats, Richmond on the north coast and Eden-Monaro in the south-east corner of the state, have strong similarities. The two Liberal South Australian seats which would fall with a swing of only one per cent are more city-oriented, but are in an area which has little reason to be pleased with the Coalition. Beyond those, the preponderance of the Coalition seats at risk are provincial ones. They are in areas where, in the past, Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party was strong; perhaps they are more susceptible to a Coalition willing to kick refugees in the teeth while rallying to a crusade against Islamic terrorists. But they also represent alienation, disaffection with the running down of government services and infrastructure, job insecurity, and concerns about education and health. It will, in short, be Beazley's fault if he cannot hold them.

I cannot claim to be a great predictor of election results—though I was right in 1996 and 1998. Six months ago, I thought there was little that Howard could do to avoid a crushing defeat and that only Beazley could win it for him. The mere fact that public opinion shifted quickly demonstrates, of course, how quickly it can shift again. It has long been my theory that, all things being equal, voters tend to swing sharply in both directions for several months before an election, but that most will end up roughly where they were about six months earlier. If this proves to be the case, Labor will be safely home. But this time, perhaps, not all things are equal.

Electors have more to complain about than the fact that there is little debate about policy. It has been one of the laziest campaigns in Australian political history. Rarely have political leaders been so presidential, and less accessible to voters. On most days, the leaders are effectively in bed by 4pm, having devoted themselves to two or three carefully scripted appearances at which the thought for the day has been merged with some images for television. Senior frontbenchers have been largely sidelined, treated (in some cases reasonably) as liabilities who threaten to send the campaign 'off message'.

Itineraries have been closely guarded secrets and, so far as real news is concerned, political journalists have found themselves better off in Canberra, reading the transcripts and finding meaning—such as can be found—from elsewhere. It has been some time since much real news could be found on the campaign trail, but attendance could be justified because of access to the spinners and to some sense of the 'mood' out there. There is almost no opportunity for questioning—the doorstops which pass for it are designed only to produce quotable 'grabs' for radio and television; analysis of the policy unveiled is better done from a desk than a bus seat. The quotes for the day, of course, come from non-stop focus groups, polling and almost minute-by-minute analysis of what is happening in the key marginal seats.

ONE RESPECT IN WHICH Australia's politics differs from most other countries' is that here we have compulsory voting, with the efforts of politicians focused primarily on getting electors to vote their way. In nations where voting is voluntary, as much effort is devoted to persuading followers to make the effort to vote at all—a reason why, sometimes, strategies borrowed holus-bolus from overseas do not sell well in Australia.

With each party so little deserving of a vote this time around, one might think that borrowing tactics designed to attract some enthusiasm, however false, might do democracy a favour. But even then it would not necessarily be right to say that Howard, pitching himself as the plucky leader called on by circumstance to take Australia through its grave peril, had the edge on Beazley, the visionary offering to remake a community whose social and physical infrastructure is in tatters.

Both fabrications are implausible. It's not yet clear which will disintegrate first, or which deserves to, but it would be foolish to think that either is naturally more capable of being sold. ■

**Jack Waterford** is editor of the *Canberra Times*.

# THE MONTH'S TRAFFIC

## Water ways

LIBYA GOES UNDERGROUND

Conflict in the Middle East has traditionally flared up over historical disputes about land, religion and oil. These disputes, which go to the heart of daily life for the region's inhabitants, are unlikely to disappear. But with such compelling issues in the foreground, it is easy to overlook the most likely threat to the long-term peace and security of the region—lack of water.

Control over water resources has already become a critical factor in the failure of peace negotiations between Syria and Israel.

The freshwater Sea of Galilee provides much of Israel's water supply, but its northern shoreline forms part of the Golan Heights (occupied by Israel but traditionally part of Syrian territory). Informed sources agree that a peace treaty between the two countries was very close. The ultimate sticking point was the location of any future international border—Israel wanted it a few hundred yards from the shore, thus keeping the Sea entirely within Israeli territory, while Syria, also a country with scarce water supplies, wanted the border to run through the water itself. No agreement was reached. Consequently, these two regional powers remain technically at war.

Further north, relations between Turkey and much of the Arab world remain tense as a result of Turkish plans to dam the Euphrates River. Western media attention has focused on the consequences for the ancient village of Hassankeyf (which would be submerged by the waters along with priceless archaeological treasures). Less attention has been paid to the consequences for Syria and Iraq, both downstream of the Euphrates. Even with the Euphrates' existing volumes, these countries struggle to meet their water needs.

Elsewhere in the region, Libya's government has tackled the issue by going ahead with the Great Man-Made River Project (An-Nahr Sinai). This project, arguably the world's largest, is visionary and innovative, or environmentally irresponsible—depending on your perspective.

Over 95 per cent of Libyan territory is covered by desert. Libya has no permanent rivers or above-ground sources of fresh water. But it has huge underground basins (some as large as 20,000 cubic kilometres in size) beneath the Libyan Sahara, which contain enormous supplies of fresh water. These subterranean reservoirs were filled during periods of temperate climate between 7000 and 38,000 years ago, when the Saharan landscape was given over to savannah and abundant wildlife roamed plains watered by regular rainfall. Since then, the water has remained undisturbed, preserved in porous rocks between impermeable geological layers.

The Libyan government's deceptively simple solution is to pump the underground water from deep in the Sahara to Libya's thirsty coastal cities, where the majority of the population resides. This complex project is breathtaking, both in its conception and the scale of its ambition.

Commenced in the mid-1990s, it is not due for completion until at least 2010. By then, four underground basins will be linked up to cities from Tripoli in the west to Tobruk in the east. The resulting national water grid will rely on more than 4000 kilometres of pre-stressed concrete pipes (up to four metres in diameter) criss-crossing the country in trenches nearly seven metres below the ground, with a daily capacity of six million cubic metres.

The Great Man-Made River's short- and medium-term benefits are obvious in a country whose pipes previously carried only undrinkable salty water.

Nonetheless, opposition to the project has been mounting. Political opponents of Colonel Gaddafi have claimed that the project is rooted less in sound scientific decision-making than in the Libyan leader's desire for a grandiose personal memorial. According to their theory, Gaddafi would like nothing better than to upstage Israel's claim of 'making the desert bloom'. He could do this *and* emulate his childhood hero, former Egyptian President the late Jamal Abdel Nasser (who built the Aswan Dam), by creating his own great 'river'—'the Eighth Wonder of the World', as Gaddafi, with his customary reticence, describes it.

These political criticisms are less compelling, however, than the potentially disastrous environmental consequences predicted by critics of the scheme. In northwestern Libya, one of the country's few fertile regions capable of sustaining agriculture, groundwater tables are already dangerously low. Tensions have also increased between Libya and neighbouring Sudan and Egypt because some of the underground basins cross international borders and any use of the waters beneath the Sahara will inevitably reduce the supplies available to other countries which have their own water shortages.

Those most concerned about long-term sustainability, however, have one eye on history.

The Garamantes Empire (900BC to 500AD) of the Libyan Sahara was one of the great desert civilisations in Africa. The Garamantes were voracious traders who controlled the trans-Saharan caravan routes of North Africa and had a reputation for sophisticated urban life. They succeeded in halting the southwards march of the mighty Roman Empire, and they are credited with introducing wheeled transport and camels to the Sahara. This loosely connected confederation of tribes was based at Garama (now Germa) in the Wadi al-Hayat, which is in the heart of modern Libya.

The Garamantes were renowned for their agricultural prowess in a desert region thousands of kilometres from recognised water sources. They, like the modern Libyan government, managed to tap underground water supplies through an ingenious system of underground channels known as *foggaras*. In the Garamantian innovation, however, lay the seeds of their ultimate decline. This great empire died out because overexploitation led to the drying up of underground water supplies.

In modern Libya, the most optimistic predictions have underground freshwater supplies (which took millennia to accumulate) beginning to run out in around 50 years. Ominously, this coincides with the time that reserves of Libya's other underground treasure—oil—are expected to dry up.

The other countries of the Middle East are closely watching the Libyan experiment. Meanwhile, in an environment where other sources of conflict always appear more immediate, scarcely understood 'solutions' may prove more threatening to peace than all the other conflicts put together.

**—Anthony Ham**

Right: Ancient irrigation channels in an old oasis town in Ghadomes, Western Libya. Water was distributed from a central source, first to public water 'reservoirs', then houses, then mosques and finally farms. *Photograph by Anthony Ham.*


# Book of the month

IF YOU WERE HEADING FOR A DESERT ISLAND to escape from imminent conflagration, and your devotion inclined you to include among your reading a Christian classic, you could hardly look beyond Augustine's *City of God*. A year's reading, it was stimulated by the sack of Rome by barbarian troops in 408AD.

The invasion of Rome shocked the Roman Empire as much as the terrorist attacks have disquieted the United States. Rome was the immortal city, the centre of an empire with a divine mission to civilise and govern the world. Although this destiny was accepted by Christians of the empire as much as by Pagans, Christians became the necessary scapegoats. Roman commentators blamed them for abandoning the Roman gods and Roman ways which had protected the empire.

As a political event, the sack of Rome was of little consequence. The centre of empire had already moved to Constantinople, the New Rome which endured another thousand years. But political history did not interest Augustine, for whom the invasion of Rome raised large cultural questions which, at their core, were religious.

He dismissed the claim that Roman prosperity was due to the patronage of traditional gods, by arguing that all nations are chosen for favour but that we shall never know why. God had given power to Augustus, the best of emperors, as well as to Nero, the worst of emperors; to Constantine who favoured Christians and to Julian who harried them; to Rome and to Persia, the shadow empire. In contemporary terms, it is the same God who allows President Bush to rule who allows the Taliban to have power. While nothing is without purpose, of God's political purposes we know nothing.

Augustine also dealt with the argument that happiness is found in the Roman way of life. He conceded the attractiveness of the Roman virtues—self-sacrifice, moderation and honour—which piety associated with the growth of empire. But he found at the heart of even these virtues a fatal contradiction. Although the virtues are deployed in the interest of peace and justice, they lead inevitably to wars and injustices inflicted to defend the security of Rome. The root of the contradiction lay in making the pride of empire an ultimate value.

To this ideal of the human city in which the gods have their purposes, Augustine opposed the city of God, a settlement of the heart in which power and wealth were subordinated to the incalculable love of God.

Augustine would not have favoured escape to a desert island. He believed that we should do our bit to build the peace necessary to cultivate the country of the heart. But his scepticism about identifying any political movement with good or evil, about national mission, and about the claims of security, make his insight as compelling in the beleaguered city as on the desert island. ■

**Andrew Hamilton** SJ is *Eureka Street*'s publisher and teaches at the United Faculty of Theology.

# PNG diplomacy

DOWNER KEEPS
TABS ON BOUGAINVILLE

GONE WERE THE fishnet stockings and the things that batter. Some condescension and cajoling facetiousness were still there but he was more ocker. There was no doubt that Alexander Downer had come of age and he was in election mode. With less than a two per cent majority in conscientious Mayo (SA) he needs something substantial—irenic rather than chest-thumping—to ward off Natasha's pert rationality and Bob Brown's trees. He is providing it in a 40-page glossy pamphlet, *The Bougainville Crisis: An Australian Perspective*, under the auspices of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

On 4 October at 4pm in the spacious atrium of the R.G. Casey building there was filtered coffee, Rechabite orange juice and yummy filo pastry custard tarts, like a bowl of lemon asters, to be consumed after the Downer speech. His First Assistant Secretary introduced him appreciatively, genuinely.

And Moi Avei, the suave Papua New Guinea Minister for Bougainville Affairs, carefully chosen from the once-separatist Motu heartland, was there—excellent timing—to tell us how adroit Downer had been in helping to devise a path through the distrust surrounding the contingencies of granting autonomy, disposing of weapons and promising a referendum on secession. It was unfortunate, he said, that East Timor had 'taken the shine off those unsung heroes without weapons' from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomons who had monitored the peace process. He meant it.

This true believer was left wondering whether Alexander Downer was not the right diplomatic card, for the South Pacific at least, rather than Laurie Brereton, a member of Labor's New South Wales Right, and so far without laurels.

As Moi Avei pointed out, the Bougainville imbroglio persists. The Agreement of 30 August 2001 attempts to provide a new basis for both Papua New Guinea–Bougainville relations and Bougainville's future development, but the PNG parliament is quite unpredictable and may not pass the necessary legislation before general elections in mid-2002. Fear remains that other provinces will demand a similar 'high autonomy' to what is conceded to

Bougainville. As the rebel leader, Francis Ona, has not supported the peace process, the failure to act can only feed his contention that Port Moresby wants to maintain domination. There is no hope of weapons being disposed of until the constitutional amendments needed to satisfy Bougainville dissidents are passed. How autonomy can be expected to affect the economies of both Papua New Guinea and Bougainville is unclear. Ultimately the question of a set time for a referendum on secession will be the sticking point. There is a deep opposition to it throughout Papua New Guinea, some of it provided by influential advisers who underestimate its symbolic importance in Bougainville.

Downer's tract, capably ghosted by a former South Pacific high commissioner, is unexceptionable, given its purpose. One does not expect a comprehensive historical analysis. However it is disturbing to see that 15,000–20,000 is the preferred figure for the deaths due to the civil war. This is a Bougainville Revolutionary Army propaganda figure. During a decade of conflict, deaths occurred that were not just as a result of civil war. They should not be included as casualties. Nearer the mark would be 5000. Downer, moreover, likes to say his preferred figure is three times that of Northern Ireland since 1969. This may have a lurid dramatic impact but, bluntly, there is no instructive analogy to be drawn between the civil wars in Northern Ireland and Bougainville. **—James Griffin**

# Aftershock I

THE VIEW FROM COBURG

MELBOURNE'S SYDNEY ROAD, Coburg, has been strangely quiet these weeks since the US terrorist attacks. Tables and chairs outside Lebanese bakeries are empty, Halal butcher shops are deserted and tram stops are quieter without the bustle of King Khalid College students morning and afternoon. Yasser Soliman, President of the Islamic Council of Victoria, says it is important for Muslims to keep a low profile 'for their own safety'.

The Council's website now has links to a 'Hate Incident Registry' and a list of '24 Safety Tips for Women'. Details of 'hate incidents' are forwarded to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, where a list two to three pages long has already been compiled. Incidents have included verbal and physical abuse, spitting, graffiti, and stones and glass bottles thrown at cars. In Brisbane a mosque was burned down. In Sydney Road two schoolgirls were ordered off a tram by its driver, who said he refused to carry terrorists.

The Australian Muslim community is not new to damage control. In 1989, when members of the Shia Islamic community marched to protest against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, TV news footage showed children wearing 'Kill Rushdie' T-shirts and, in an interview, unofficial spokesman Jayed Chaundry threatened the lives of booksellers. The mainstream Muslim community condemned these radical reactions, but this message was lost in the public outrage and media sensation that surrounded the incidents.

During the Gulf War, anti-Muslim sentiment turned violent. Attackers set fire to an Islamic school in Coburg and a mosque in Werribee. There were many reports of physical and verbal abuse. According to Bilal Cleland, a Muslim historian and member of the Islamic Council of Victoria, media stereotyping was a large part of the problem. Much of the news from the Gulf War was taken directly from news sources in the US where, Cleland believes, hatred of Arabs has become acceptable, like 'a modern anti-Semitism'.

At a media forum organised in 1991 by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, representatives of the Australian Arab and Muslim communities voiced their concerns to radio, television and broadsheet news services. One of the misconceptions they tried to dispel concerned the meaning of the word 'jihad'. 'Jihad' means struggle, strive or fight. It has more than 30 references in the Qur'an, most of which refer to an inner struggle of faith. Extremist groups use the translation 'holy war' to justify indiscriminate violence. But the Qur'an, the representatives argued, urges peace and justice.

Anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in Australia had already been whipped up this year, prior to September 11. There were reports of a gang rape in Sydney by young Lebanese men identifying as 'Muslim'. Then the presence of the Afghan refugees on the MV *Tampa* provoked some to hostility; John Howard described them as a threat to the 'sovereignty of Australia'. As events then unfolded in New York, there were two full days of CNN. I was among the bleary-eyed and addicted, searching the reports for some understanding. There's no good way to report on tragedy, fear and grieving. But

when the 'buzz phrase' style of American television news reduced initial information to 'America Under Attack', 'Palestine Celebrates', 'Arab Threat', 'Holy War', 'Good vs Evil', the words seemed to echo in the darkness after you switched off the television.

According to Bilal Cleland, the response of the Australian media (with the exception of some talkback radio shows) has been measured and informed. Local Muslim community condemnation of the attacks has been well documented, highlighting lessons learnt from the Gulf War. He does not expect the same of the US. 'They think they are the centre of the earth, [that] American lives are more important than anyone else's.' But articles from the US broadsheet press, printed in *The Age*, show some are willing to challenge these ideas. John Powers, from the *LA Weekly*, wrote that 'the faceless coward who did the drive-by shooting of an Indian Sikh in Mesa, Arizona—because to him a turban's a turban—is also a terrorist, one of an equally uncivilised kind.' Hate is hate is hate. Mercifully, no deaths of this kind have occurred in Australia.

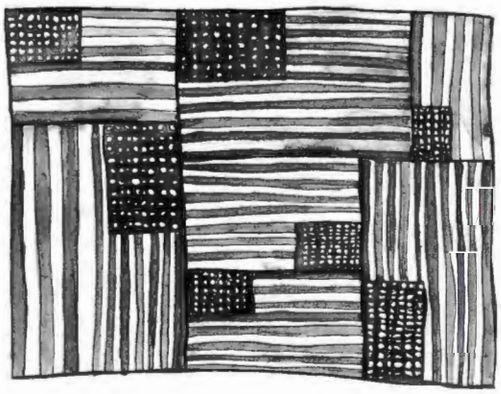
'Australians are not racist,' says Bilal Cleland. Since the US attacks, incidents against Muslims have come from a minority. For every call or email that the Islamic Council of Victoria receives about a 'hate incident', there have been multiple calls of support from the general community and church groups. Most Christians, Cleland says, are 'looking to the gospel'. Both John Howard and Kim Beazley have condemned the racist attacks. But perhaps a greater test is yet to come. War in Afghanistan will create thousands more refugees. We turned the *Tampa* away. In the future, how will we respond? **—Kathryn O'Connor**

# Aftershock II

THE VIEW FROM CONNECTICUT

From St Ronan St, New Haven, Connecticut, you can walk to Yale University's Peabody Museum in less than ten minutes, the modernist Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 25, and another five minutes to take in the splendours of the Yale Center for British Art. It is a leafy street of elegant houses and a large block of mock-Tudor apartments, domestic shelter for those with comfortable incomes. Its residents are predominantly white; blacks and Latinos clean houses, cut grass, sweep leaves and direct traffic. There are joggers and dogs walking their owners (or hired dog-minders) and parents dropping off their children at the Bethesda Nursery School. People smile and nod to each other in the street, say 'Good morning'. This is New England; only one house waves an American flag.

After September 11, two more flags appear. Despite the shock, the grief, the outrage, and the constant calls from officialdom for signs of overt patriotism, most householders in St Ronan St resist. Is this New England reserve, or evidence of a



deeper ambivalence towards Washington's rhetoric of American triumphalism?

For the first week after the fearsome attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, it seems as if most mainstream television and newspaper journalists are reading from the one script. Page after page, screen after screen is filled with constant visual reminders of the horrors inflicted by the deliberately crashed planes, the courage of the rescue workers and the drawn faces of still-hoping relatives. The words expand the pictures, but we are offered almost no analysis or explanation other than the government's conviction that the attacks were 'acts of war' against America 'and all freedom-loving people everywhere in the world' committed by Osama bin Laden and his fanatical Muslim followers, protected by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Of the few middle-of-the-road journalists who dare to vary the script, a number pay with their jobs or reputation. Dan Guthrie of the Oregon *Daily Courier* is sacked for writing that President Bush is an 'embarrassment' for 'hiding in a Nebraska hole' when the attacks occurred. The same fate awaits Tom Gutting of the *Texas City Sun* for his column headed 'Bush has failed to lead U.S.'. An ABC TV presenter, Bill Maher, apologises profusely for a remark that the suicide hijackers of the four planes, however villainous, could not be regarded as cowardly.

When President Bush addresses Congress on September 20, he speaks for 35 minutes. There are 25 standing ovations. If the television cameras do not lie, it appears that only the Justices of the Supreme Court, seated together at the very front of the chamber, choose not to rise on every occasion. Nobody on CNN, C-SPAN, NBC, ABC or Fox News, or in *The New York Times*, observes how similar the event looks to the old Soviet-era public speech by the great leader. The Democrats in Congress scrap their traditional speech in reply to the President. Instead, the Democrat minority leader declares, surrounded by solemn-faced colleagues: 'Tonight there is no Opposition Party ... We stand here as Americans ... Now we must pull together ... Tonight he [the President] said all the right things ... We will fight for freedom here and all around the world.'

But outside, in the wider America, unanimity is dissolving in questions about the hijackers' motives and concerns about the country's responses to the attacks. While a presenter on Fox News insists that a phone-in conducted by the network on September 19 indicated that everyone who called demonstrated 'patriotic fervour', C-Span offers Islamic experts to speak about their religion and also to describe disturbing attacks in parts of the country on those who look like Muslims. *The New York Times* and other major newspapers now publish both letters and articles which question America's tolerance, caution against legislation which will limit Americans' civil liberties, indict ignorance of how other nations view the super-power, and warn against simplistic confidence in a military solution to terrorism. The internet hums with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of articles analysing, often critically, America's role in international affairs and its plans for the 'war on terror'. An example is the History News Network, a non-profit organ of professional historians, whose web pages are filled with passionate argument about the whys and wherefores of terrorism, the political responses, the lack of historical understanding, and so on. Another is Rense.com, which reprints articles with titles such as 'US Deploys Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Afghanistan' and 'Our New "Friends" are Killers, Crooks and Torturers'.

If America was the last innocent nation on earth, that innocence is now wounded, perhaps mortally. A newspaper or website may soon reprint the small prose-poem

written recently by the English poet and broadcaster Michael Rosen:

Our Leaders at Work

How shall we defeat The Enemy? We shall defeat The Enemy by making alliances. Who shall we make alliances with? With people in whose interests it is to be enemies with The Enemy. How shall we win an alliance with these people? We shall win an alliance with these people by giving them money and arms. And after that? They will help us defeat The Enemy. Has The Enemy got money and arms? Yes. How did The Enemy get money and arms? He was once someone in whose interests it was to be enemies with our enemy. Which enemy was this? Someone in whose interest it had once been to be enemies with an enemy ...

**—June Factor**

# Strategy-speak

WHAT'S TO LEARN FROM WAR GAMES?

THE IMAGES OF THE United States military mobilising in the aftermath of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks have a strange resonance for me. The familiarity does not have to do with suffering and loss, nor with a passion for vengeance and angry retribution. This I am relieved about. Rather, what resonates is the cold logic of expected victory through overwhelming numbers and technological superiority. This is a logic that for the last ten years has been repeated in teenage bedrooms and university computer labs across the country. It is the basic premise underlying the genre of computer strategy games.

The computer strategy game is a development of war board games where players recreate historic battles by moving tokens representing military units around a map. Computerised, the games have become staggeringly complex. Players do not just move units around in a single campaign, but must manage an economy, conduct scientific research and engage in long-term conflicts with computer-controlled rivals. The contexts of the games vary. The popular titles, however, tend to be based either on a condensed history of human progress (*Civilisation*, *Age of Empires*) or sci-fi stories of planetary conquest (the *Command and Conquer* series). The object of the games is the complete mastery of the map through the defeat of rivals.


# High-tech liberties

IN THE US, WHOLE SUBURBS ARE sometimes secluded behind security fences in 'gated communities' inhabited by the very rich in an odd voluntary act of incarceration. This image comes to mind when one observes rich and powerful nations in the wake of September 11. Affluent democracies are considering increases in surveillance and security, and reductions in civil liberties. The purpose is to combat terrorism; the means are mainly technological.

Yet the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center demonstrated that you can't just depend on sophisticated technology to provide protection against determined and ingenious human beings. Not even the military headquarters of the world's most technologically advanced nation was safe. To achieve their aims the terrorists did not use fighter planes, missiles and electronic wizardry—just knives, commercial aircraft and meticulous organisation.

Nevertheless, many of the measures governments are proposing to prevent such acts in future involve the deployment of increasingly intrusive technology. The British government, for instance, has proposed compulsory ID cards. They could use a computer-based technology developed at Cambridge University whereby a digital image of the holder's iris is stored on the card. The image is matched with a rapid video scan of the bearer's eyes. In the UK and America where the technology has been tested, there have been no mismatches in millions of trials. Already, to keep tabs on its citizens, Malaysia has introduced similar 'smart' ID cards which have the owner's fingerprints and other biological data stored on them.

But how would such technology have prevented the actions of the terrorists who attacked the US and were clearly prepared to die for their cause? Many of them were long-term residents of the US, had never provoked suspicion and presumably had all the right ID. (And even if they did not, enough money will buy most things in this world.)

A committed terrorist could work around almost any of the other technological security measures which have been proposed—mobile phone SIM cards used for ID; Global Positioning System (GPS) chips in mobile phones so that their carriers can be tracked to within a few metres; smart closed-circuit TV systems programmed to identify 'suspicious' behaviour; increased wiretapping; infrared imagers that can 'see' through walls; computers which automatically tag messages so they can be traced. One company in Florida has even proposed inserting computer chips into citizens at birth so they can be identified in the same way as pets.

The British weekly, *New Scientist*, commented: 'Wrapped in the flag of country and outrage, much of what is being called for will only serve to pander to governments' insatiable hunger for control.' Focusing too much on technological methods of control also detracts from solutions that might, like the terrorism itself, be low-tech and entirely human. ■

**Tim Thwaites** is a freelance science writer.

To achieve this end, the same basic strategy is always applied.

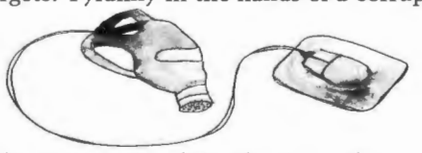
First, the gamer must monopolise available economic resources. Second, the economic advantage gained should be invested in the research program. Third, once the research program has been developed to the point that the gamer is the most advanced team on the map, production should be directed to military units. Fourth, with a production base capable of producing an endless supply of the most advanced military units, a huge and irresistible army should be massed. Fifth, and finally, the army conquers all before it through absolute technological and numerical superiority.

This story of economic superiority equals technological superiority equals military superiority equals victory has a tantalising familiarity. It seems to accord with a commonsense account of political history. For the computer programmers, however, the primary source for this story seems to be classic science fiction.

Classic sci-fi writers from the 1940s and 1950s, like Isaac Asimov and Robert A. Heinlein, routinely wrote stories where economic advancement meant technological superiority which in turn translated into military success. Asimov's famous *Foundation* series from the 1940s had as its background the economically and technologically advanced Foundation triumphing over a decaying Empire. The lesson was so simple, even computer programmers could get it: economic growth leads to advanced technology leads to political and military success. It is this narrative, popularised by Asimov, and successors like *Star Trek*, that is now a lived 'virtual' experience of many teenagers and 20-somethings as they point and click their digital armies to victory. It has become cultural prophecy—proven again and again on numerous PCs (including my own).

But there are no terrorists in Asimov.

In classic science fiction, the good guys and bad guys are always well behaved and have a respectful understanding of the difference between military and civilian targets. Tyranny in the hands of a corrupt



collective is resisted. But the classical stories had nothing to say about terror wielded by a small band of fanatics. Or to put it another way, in strategy games there are no crumbling World Trade Centers.

When the strategy gamer orders his/her overwhelming military might into a rival's territory, there is a certain known quality, a commensurability, about the foe.

First, the enemies are seen and marked. They are usually displayed in a different colour. They are represented by icons. The invading army has an identifiable enemy at which missiles and lasers can be targeted. Second, foe and invader share a strange symmetry; the critical difference is technology. The foe is where the invaders were before their economy allowed greater technological sophistication. The result is the unjust scene of 20th-century tanks slaughtering 11th-century Norman knights. Third, there are no civilians. All structures and units are military. And finally, the whole thing is just simulation anyway. Destroyed and dead things simply disappear. The victors do not see the shrines of flowers, do not have to face the families of dead soldiers and do not have to govern a resentful country overwhelmed by orphans and land mines. They just open up MS Word and get on with the lab report due tomorrow.

A closer look at the written sources might give them pause.

One of the foundational games of the strategy genre was called *Dune II* (1992), poorly based on Frank Herbert's canonical work *Dune* (1961). The game follows the basic premises of current strategy games: victory through complete destruction of enemies by greater numbers and better technology.

But the book is a different matter. Ultimately a story about fanaticism, it narrates the rise of a messianic religious and political leader among the desert-dwelling tribes on the planet Arrakis. In a religious war, the tribes defeat the technologically and numerically superior forces of the galactic order. The result: the galaxy is plunged into bloody chaos.

**–Kieran Tranter**

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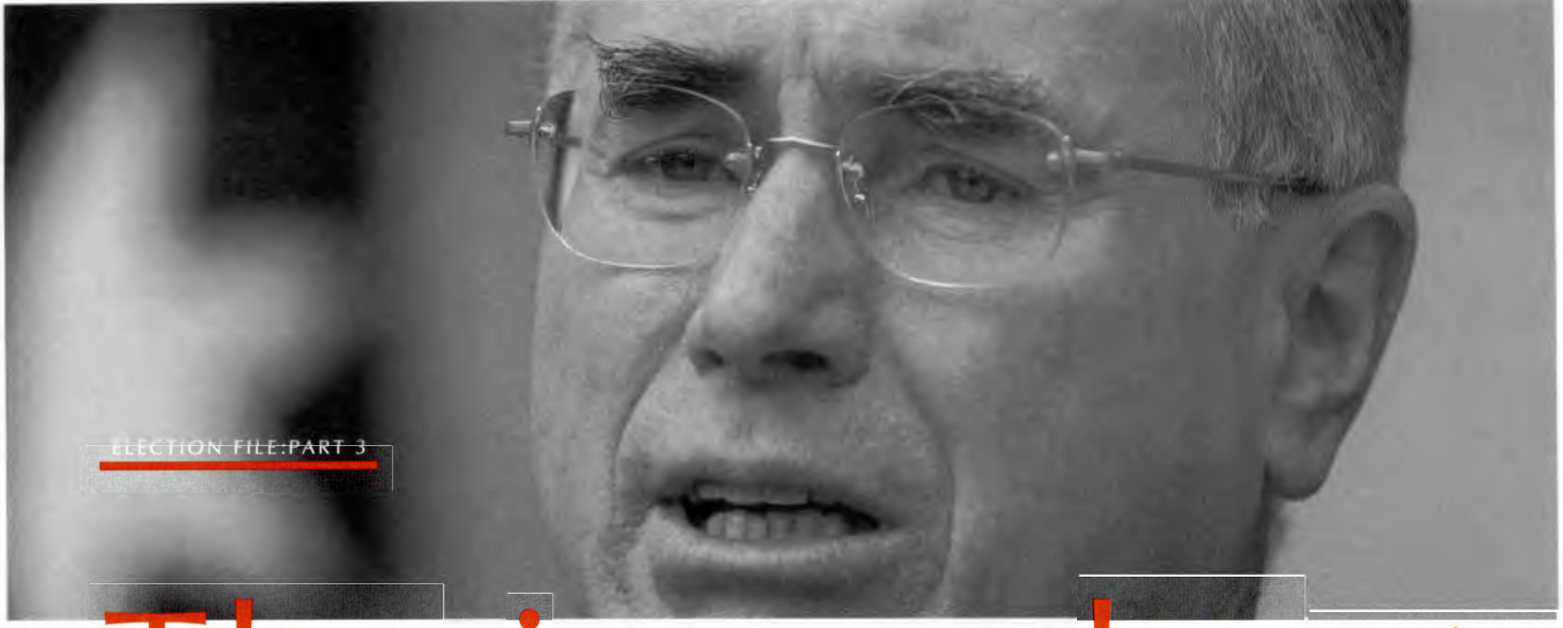

ELECTION FILE:PART 3

# The incumbents

**Jack Waterford** analyses the Coalition's record and chances.

THE JOHN HOWARD REVIVAL has been a remarkable turnabout for a politician who has never been particularly successful at making his own luck, and has generally had it run against him.

But there was more to the luck than being in power (or indeed in Washington) when terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and seizing the moment to look a statesman of sorts. Things had been inching Howard's way since the May Budget. The Aston by-election suggested that he was at least gaining ground. Major signs of a revival had begun a week before September 11, when Howard consciously manipulated events on the *Tampa* to put Labor on the defensive and to confect an atmosphere of crisis around a supposed refugee invasion.

*Tampa* wrong-footed Kim Beazley. First, he was struggling to neutralise the issue by pretending to go along with everything that John Howard was doing, even as he seemed conscious of the way Howard was manipulating xenophobia. Then, after some internal Labor protest, he took a mild spine injection, but then spent most of the next few days attempting to jump back into line with John Howard. By then Labor had forfeited, in the eyes of many of its supporters, the moral right to govern.

For those who believe that good politics comes from good policy, and that politics and policy founded upon a lie can only hurt both the nation and those who have created them, John Howard must, at the end of the day, get his just deserts. So, probably, must Labor. The *Tampa* crisis is founded upon a lie. So too is much of the sense of crisis which has emerged in Australia following the terrorist attack on the United States. The international security threat is real enough, but the danger to Australia, thus far, is minimal. (The danger to Australian troops, now committed, is, however, real.)

John Howard may have been devious and skilful in manufacturing the atmosphere of crisis. But the test he has devised for Kim Beazley is reasonable enough: can Kim Beazley present himself to the public not only as a leader better attuned to what the voters want in domestic policy terms, but also as the leader of a nation coping with crisis, the sort of person to whom people will turn for guidance? Does he have the instincts to do the right thing, a sense of what the people want and expect, the experience to know how to harness their capacity and goodwill, and the words to say the obvious things which need to be said?

If the early polls are any guide, the answer may be no. If that remains the conclusion of the voters several weeks hence, John Howard, written off umpteen times in his long career, may yet see another two years as Prime Minister.

Photographs of John Howard and Peter Costello by Martin Jones and Graham Tidy. Courtesy the *Canberra Times*.

But for many, the amazing thing is not so much that Beazley stumbled in the early display of his leadership credentials but that anyone would think it was a test that John Howard, on his own record, would want to set. John Howard is a good fighter when his back is to the wall, but has never been noted for a deft instinct in foreign affairs, a feel for defence, or for taking the nation forward. His international ventures—relations with Indonesia, the resolution of East Timor, even the *Tampa* affair—have revealed him as a person not skilled in anticipating problems or coping well with events that turn out unexpectedly. This is the politician who has always been vulnerable to criticism for his want of a vision—his incapacity to articulate a view of where Australia is and ought to be going. A person repeatedly accused of looking backwards rather than forwards. A person seemingly unable to impose his own personality or standards upon his own ministry, and responsible for overseeing some epic mismanagement and incompetence, almost all unpunished. A person who has exhausted any agenda for office he had himself ever articulated and, over much of the past year, responsible for throwing principle and fiscal rectitude out the window in a desperate attempt to stay in the race.

*For those who believe that good politics comes from good policy, and that politics and policy founded upon a lie can only hurt both the nation and those who have created them, John Howard must, at the end of the day, get his just deserts. So, probably, must Labor. The Tampa crisis is founded upon a lie.*

Accused by his own party president only six months ago of presiding over a party that was mean, tricky and not listening, he has seemingly converted many of his negatives—not least his obstinacy—into qualities, particularly of determination. The electorate might agree that what is wanted is leadership, but since when did he exemplify it?

THE COALITION WON the election in 1996 because the Labor Party, which had governed for 13 years, had run out of steam and had become comfortable with—and corrupted by—power. The Liberal Party had apparently stopped flirting with radical ideas of government and appeared, finally, to have resolved its leadership problems by going for someone sound and stable (if uninspiring). It promised good stewardship without any abrupt changes in direction. Thirteen years in the wilderness had not much improved its policies, or at least the ones it was prepared to put to the people. Labor itself had stolen most of the conservative economic policy ideas, particularly ones which had been associated with John Howard.

Both conservative parties had tried any number of leaders—some, including John Howard, several times—and each had been found wanting at elections, some to the point where their own ineptness, or obvious party disunity, had made voters unwilling to vote for them even though they were desperate to throw Labor out. Howard's final victory, in short, did not represent the triumph of his ideas: it reflected a rejection of Labor and the exhaustion of most of the rivals of Howard's own generation and those of a newer one willing to step forward. Howard was one, it was thought, who would not frighten the horses in the way John Hewson had. If Howard was a policy animal, as of course he was, the policies he stood for had become mainstream; his destiny was, at most, to see them reach their zenith. He led a party by now determined to put disunity behind it, but at the same time conspicuously lacking in people who looked to Howard for inspiration or ideas.

In 1982 and 1983, the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, and his Treasurer, John Howard, abandoned party policy and raided the Treasury in an effort to buy off the electorate. Paul Keating and Kim Beazley (as Minister for Finance) did much the same in 1996, just as John Howard and Peter Costello have done in 2001. Howard's big break (and his springboard for major change) was that the 'discovered' black hole gave him a reason for being that the electorate had not given him: getting the fiscal house back into order. That allowed him to junk vague promises of keeping things as they were.

The apparent urgency of the so-called black hole provided the mandate for major cuts to government expenditure, a tilt at a new style of smaller government, privatisation of a wide range of government enterprises, the outsourcing of many government services and attempts to remake the institutions of government and the community in the Coalition's own image. The public service underwent fundamental changes, designed to make it more politically responsive to ministers. Various hand grenades were hurled in the general direction of the third arm of government—the courts—and efforts were made to reduce the courts' supervisory powers over the other two arms. Industrial relations laws created new balances between bosses and workers, and the powers of the unions were considerably weakened.

Virtually all of the institutional lobbies which had become all too comfortable with Labor—including constituency lobbies in Aboriginal and ethnic affairs, the environment movement and the community welfare sector—were defunded and broken up. Taxation was reformed in a way calculated to reduce the amount of money available to central government, making it structurally more difficult for government to grow again. From time to time, ministers such as John Fahey would muse that an objective of conservative government ought to be holding down the revenue base so that future governments simply could not build up the size of government again. Doggedness with the goods and services tax—which he took to an election he nearly lost—reinforced Howard's natural tendency to concede little ground on issues

he regarded as ones of principle (other examples being Aboriginal affairs and the republic), while showing complete flexibility on more practical matters.

WHATEVER ONE MIGHT THINK of Howard government ministers as administrators, or as exemplars of good and ethical management, one has to allow a substantial achievement in policy change over six years. It is change, moreover, that will, in some cases, not only be very difficult to undo but which has affected definitions of reality to the point where Labor has found itself constrained to promote its own policies in the language of the Coalition government.

Change has been unsettling, often unpopular, but it has also been the source of some of the strengths of Howard and the Liberal Party. So far as John Howard himself is concerned, the fact that he proposes retirement from some point two years on is probably more of a strength for the Liberals than a deficit. Whatever some voters might think of Peter Costello, they recognise that he represents new blood and new energy going into government at a time when John Howard has clearly run out of an agenda.

Almost every idea Howard has promoted is now on the statute books. Not all of his successes have been in government, but he can claim his share of the credit in putting fiscal and monetary reform, and industrial relations reform, on the agenda, even from opposition. At this election, all that has emerged, in agenda terms, has been further industrial relations change. But, strictly, that is no longer his pitch. Rather, the pitch now is that he is a very experienced and sensible Prime Minister, better able to manage in difficult circumstances, particularly by comparison with a rival of uncertain ticker, likely to be flexible where Howard is obstinate and obstinate where Howard is flexible.

When John Howard is displaced, whether at this election by Kim Beazley, or at some time to come by Peter Costello, most of the ideas for which he himself has stood will be fairly quickly dismantled. The economic framework—including the industrial relations changes—will stay, but only because it had become largely bipartisan even before Howard became Prime Minister. Peter Costello is a republican with a different approach on Aboriginal affairs and on moral and social issues. He may not stand for big government in the Beazley sense, but he has a feel for health, education and welfare issues that Howard lacks. Over five years in government, Costello has shifted to the left on most social issues, and his chances of succession are the greater now that most of his natural rivals, such as John Fahey, Peter Reith and Michael Wooldridge, have moved on. A Liberal Party revitalised by victory will not move in the direction of Tony Abbott; by now, moreover, the once almost completely marginalised Liberal moderates actually see Costello as a champion.

Howard's sheer survival excites admiration, as does the fact that his party can actually contemplate victory. Both are remarkable given the party's struggles to maintain any semblance of organisation. The Liberal Party has never been weaker. In Queensland, where it has always been shaky, the party is not only on its knees but in marked conflict with the federal party. So far as community activity is concerned, the Tasmanian and Western Australian branches of the party contribute rather less than conservative parties were contributing before Menzies formed the Liberal Party nearly 60 years ago. Both the NSW and Victorian branches are debilitated by infighting and loss of state power. In South Australia, for the moment the sole remaining conservative state, the party is heavily factionalised. Only heavy centralisation of the federal political effort, and the role of Howard's own office in directing party affairs, have kept things going. But Howard's own compulsive involvement in party factional games keeps the temperature high, and suspicions among his colleagues, not least Peter Costello, at fever pitch.

*Over five years in government, Costello has shifted to the left on most social issues, and his chances of succession are the greater now that most of his natural rivals ... have moved on.*

The Howard style is probably best reflected in the efforts he has made on behalf of the National Party—particularly in the rural electorate of its leader, John Anderson. Howard, in hanging on to leadership and his record, is not simply working his luck. Most of the past two years has been spent on intensive fire-fighting, seeking at the least to neutralise issues that have worked against him. Consider the following: U-turns on petrol excises; major pump-priming with housing; reinvestment in rural roads and infrastructure; a gradated series of concessions on the Ansett collapse and sectoral unemployment; a major shift of funds towards older people; stealing the immigration and refugee thunder from the One Nation Party.

The handling of these issues has shown Howard at his best, and at his worst. So has the practice, abetted by his environment minister, Robert Hill, of using heritage and other funds for purely partisan purposes. No real principle, bar survival, guides them; no principle will hold them in place any longer than is necessary. Many of the ad hoc shifts, particularly the willingness to feed off xenophobia, have deeply dismayed his own followers and made it more difficult for his successors to sketch out how voting Liberal will make a real difference.

But survival is important too, and Labor, on its campaign record, is hardly in a position to claim more virtue. ■

**Jack Waterford** is editor of the *Canberra Times*, and *Eureka Street*'s Canberra correspondent.

# Pages from a New York City journal

LESS THAN A FORTNIGHT LATER, the acrid smell has gone from the air; although, at the end of our street you can still see the pall of smoke and dust rising densely from what was the World Trade Center. They have taken away 100,000 tonnes of rubble but as yet have found only a few of the 6400 bodies estimated to have been there. The pathetic personal advertisements for information about loved ones who have disappeared are beginning to peel from every lamp post and drop to the sidewalk. There are still American flags everywhere: in shop windows, on cars and trucks, flying from buildings and worn as fashion statements on torn T-shirts, leather jackets, bandannas and neckerchiefs by the *haute monde* and everyone else. Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America' has become the alternative national anthem at every gathering. The *New York Times* carries page after page of solidarity messages from the big firms and client nations. Shops of every kind display quotations from great thinkers, which are more or less wise, depending on your own philosophy. No-one has cleared away the hundreds of candle-stubs and dead flowers from al fresco shrines in places like Washington Square; they remain now as memorials of a city's grief and doubtless for later investigation by historians of that new academic discipline, material religion.

The word 'prayer' is everywhere: pastoral workers handing out cards offering to pray with you, or lamp-post ads for similar services, or the Billy Graham NY Prayer Center half-page ad in the *Times*: WE'RE HERE TO PRAY WITH YOU. The local TV station has an on-the-hour filler of Cardinal Egan intoning a prayer on the day of blood itself: curiously, at this distance, he seems to be suffering from indigestion.

The urge to pray reached a terminal point on the second Sunday after the attack, when hero mayor, Rudy Giuliani, organised a service at Yankee Stadium, the usual venue for papal Masses. It was not, insisted Giuliani, to be a 'memorial' service (since there may have been some survivors, a thin hope even then) but a 'prayer' service. And so it was: public prayer from all over the religious rainbow—Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu prayers. Only, something went wrong: the stadium, capacity 60,000, was two-thirds empty. Next day, spin-doctors tried to assert that there had been some foul-up with tickets. The empty stands need explaining. Are New Yorkers all prayed out? Or has public emotion found its way into other channels? Oddly, at Yankee Stadium each prayer was greeted by applause, as if you were at a concert.

The same weekend, Melbourne writer Lily Brett read from her Holocaust novel *Too Many Men* at a midtown library. Asked what impact the World Trade Center attack had had on her as a writer, she said she had turned down newspaper offers to write about it. She had just finished a chapter about New York City for a new book and now she would have to revise it. In SoHo, where she lived, 'regular people' looked heartbroken and there had been an outbreak of civility. 'I just hope it can last,' she said.

Maybe. Certainly the rage for revenge has subsided; but it is still there, and implacable. Colder, it will be more effective. The United States is a great imperial power which has been wounded; and as the old saying goes, you must not merely wound an emperor: he will arise and destroy you.

At the same time, there has been a conscious effort to make the US payback a just one—*not* all Muslims, *not* all Afghans. Arab-Americans and local Islamic leaders have been swift to speak, distancing themselves from any complicity. The response from the mainstream has been warmly ecumenical. When the pasha of the Brooklyn mosque prayed at Yankee Stadium, Cardinal Egan led the applause. Across the globe, in Kazakhstan, Pope John Paul II was at the same time applauding the ability of Muslims and Catholics to get on together. Yes, said his spokesman, he was thinking of New York City.

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Just now, I looked out the window and there was a policeman going peaceably by on his horse. Behind him I could hear the pock-pock of a handball against the wall of the Vesuvio playground, where boys and some girls play ball all day. It is one of the delights of this apartment that it sits on a corner, so you can watch the passing parade on both Spring and Thompson streets. At weekends, early in the morning, a

Korean family come to the corner to shake down nuts from the trees. They do this for several hours, leaving before the street wakes up. The other morning, coming back with the papers, I saw a grey squirrel foraging on this side of the street. Seeing me, he skipped leisurely away across the street and back up his home tree. I suppose they're his nuts that the Koreans are taking. Wonderful to think that squirrels survive in the heart of this fast-paced city, far from Central Park, in this old neighbourhood, where resident action saved the charming 19th-century buildings from the highway-building mania of Robert Moses, and where the little restaurants and laundries of SoHo still open their doors to the world.

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It was a proper dinner party, the sort we all used to go to once upon a time, before entertaining at home became too taxing and restaurants too affordable. The Park Avenue apartment was small but beautifully done, with a couple of paintings from the first Armory show, a mixture of chairs and the bed in an alcove, while kitchen and bathroom were tucked away off-stage. The food deserves a mention: pumpkin soup, loin of pork and choucroute, cheese and a dessert of heaped berries and cream. We drank mostly Australian wines. The company was mixed: our hostess, an attractive Viennese who now runs tours of US cities; Fred, for 12 years a congressman from Brooklyn who had kept in touch with the city's politics; Tom, an architect, now mainly resting and spending his time following world news, including Radio Australia; and my friend, a Sydney film-maker.

Naturally, the conversation kept coming back to the terrorist attacks. Outside, on Park Avenue, there was a lot of police activity, with sirens wailing, or perhaps they were ambulances—anyway, the din made these New Yorkers edgy. Was it starting again? The week before this, Fred had hosted a dinner party at a restaurant; at the corner a police car collided with a taxi; immediately other police cars and ambulances and paramedics rushed up; everyone piled out of the restaurant to gawk, but also because they needed to be outside; and when it was all over, one of the women was so distressed that she would not go back inside the restaurant, so Fred's dinner party was ruined.

The 'school voucher' case comes up before the Supreme Court this session. The US Constitution forbids any state or city to fund religious schools directly: that would be an offence against the dogma of the separation of church and state, which is a political principle passionately observed in American history. But what if the state gives parents 'education vouchers' which they use to send their children to the school of their choice? Would that breach the separation rule? For the past four years or so, this approach has been tried; and has been contested through the courts all the way to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court will throw it out, said Fred the politician; the state cannot fund religious schools. I demurred quietly: if it is so certain, why has the case gone all the way to the Supreme Court? No, no, Fred insisted, they can't do it. Anyway, joined in Tom the architect, most of the schools so far assisted had been bad, fundamentalist schools. But if they are bad schools, why do they get state registration? Political influence. It was a stimulating discussion, reminiscent of dinner parties 20 years ago. Finally, I said that I knew about the separation of church and state doctrine; but in the armed forces, who paid the chaplains? To put it mildly, Fred was gobsmacked. He opened his mouth and gasped, then he said, 'I've never considered that before' and 'I don't know what the answer is.' Did Tom know how this breach of the separation doctrine came about? No; and he had never heard this argument before, either. So we changed the subject, as one does at such dinner parties.

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The university libraries here are marvels. They have the civilised habit of letting you into their stacks, so that once you find your subject's location you are surrounded by all their holdings on it. Thus I have lucked upon many books of interest but shamefully unknown to me, even their titles. The other day I found a good little book, well written, by Eugene Kennedy, a guru of the Vatican II church, about his friend Cardinal Bernardin, whose death deprived American Catholics of a wise, irenic leader. The day Bernardin was made a bishop, his mother gave him advice which bears repeating: 'Stand up straight and try not to look too pleased with yourself.' Every bishop should have such a mother.

Elsewhere I came across stuff on Acton which I hadn't known existed. His boxes of manuscript notes at Cambridge remain an unexhausted goldmine, but some of these recent books have useful extractions from that deep mine. I've found one that seems to hit off exactly the story of my life: 'It is the professional curse of historians, that they shall grope through many dark paths and read many worthless books.'

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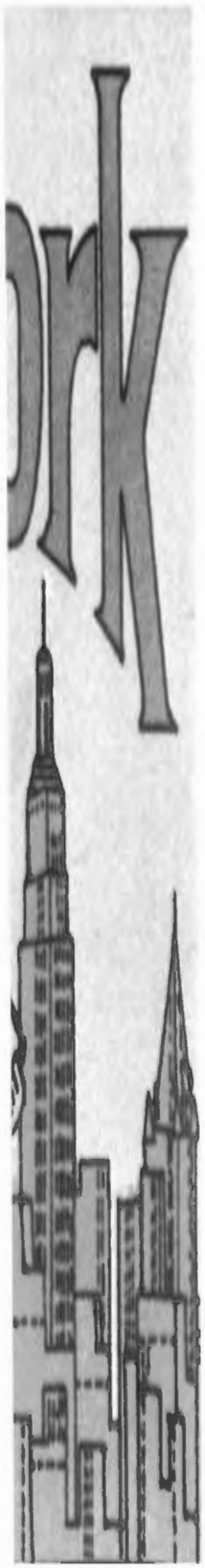
The Catholic chapel at New York University sits at the heart of things, on Washington Square, a fine A-frame building with good chunky glass, air-conditioning, and a dominating wall sculpture of the Risen Lord. In the old days, you saw many churches like this one in Maurice Levanoux's magazine *Liturgical Arts*. Apart from the air-conditioning, the chapel is quite different from the parish churches of this neighbourhood, which seem to have been transported from Naples. The Dominicans who work in the chaplaincy preach good sermons. They do not make the mistake of thinking that a sermon is an academic lecture, as others do. Yet these men have clearly done some hard work with biblical commentaries. They



have let the book work settle, until they can sieve it through their imaginations—so that they produce a sermon which is lively, engaging, witty and speaking to the world the students live in.

On the other hand, I went to a lecture at the chaplaincy one Sunday which raised hairs on my head. A historian from a New York university, the lecturer spoke for over an hour of his detestation of what he called 'modernity'. He thought that other Catholics had responded to modernity by converting to it or collaborating with it. Not he. The Enlightenment, he said, had demonised Christianity, blaming it for the Wars of Religion. In return, he demonised the Enlightenment. As I listened to that high, racing, loud, confident voice going on and on, I thought: didn't they get anything right—liberty of conscience, for instance, or freedom of worship; free speech, perhaps, or freedom of assembly? Apparently not. So this is the rollback from Vatican II, I thought, as I walked home: Taliban Catholicism.

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Coffee in Caffè Dante with David Rankin, opposite a red-fronted house where Bob Dylan once lived. Yet, unlike London, there is no plaque to tell you this. Why? Is it, David suggests, because NYC is such a *contemporary* town, living now, in this moment? Whereas London, I suggest, is not—its future is in its past.

For some time David has been painting a series on Jacob's Ladder. Last week he was visiting friends in the financial district, looked out their window and there were the remains of the World Trade Center building, looking just like a gigantic ladder. He cannot get the attacks out of his mind; neither can Lily Brett, whose work is blocked. David's friend, Tom, a novelist, says now that the NEW YORKERS ARE HEROES phase has passed, deep fears are emerging: people are frightened of what might happen suddenly again.

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When the attacks came, the TV networks were about to launch their winter programs. That political drama series which many of my friends in Australia watch, *The West Wing*, then announced that it would delay its season opening and make a special program somehow connected with the attacks. It went to air last night and I think that if I had been watching it any place but New York City, I would have turned it off. It was, in old ABC parlance, 'a schools broadcast', meant to educate more than to entertain. The plot was simple: a school group is visiting the White House when some security emergency happens. Everything is shut down, and the school group is put into the cafeteria, where staffers divert them with a Q&A session. The emergency is sourced to someone with an Arabic name who works in the White House. Nabbed, he is interrogated roughly and persistently until, at program's end, the real culprit is found elsewhere. These two scenarios allow the scriptwriters

to traverse many of the anxieties which arose here in the first days after the attacks. Now, more than three weeks later, they are a bit stale; but remain real questions of concern. When I arrived in NYC, Arab-Americans were being insulted in the streets while mosques were threatened and Islam traduced. In the 19th century Catholics copped the same treatment. Here, civil leaders of all stripes were quick to rebuke any evidences of racism or bigotry. So that potential outbreaks were contained and, I guess, negatived. Which is not to say that ugly poisons no longer run deep in the American bloodstream. But as a society, the USA has found ways to live, comfortably or uncomfortably, with its energetic diversity: this is no melting pot. It is interesting to reflect on the issues that *The West Wing* series writers avoided or perhaps failed to recognise: hard issues, like the unacknowledged baggage of hyperpatriotism, the rage evinced by the attacks ('How dare they?'), the naive belief in America's good intentions, the certainty that they are always the good guys, the absence of self-doubt.

As entertainment, the interrogation of the Arab-American staffer was the best part of the program; but the Q&A segments in the cafeteria told you more about what was in the scriptwriters' minds. Frankly didactic, the exchanges addressed such things as the history of terrorism, its sociology, its thin agenda, its chances of success. The most striking bit of didacticism was a sentence one staffer challenged the students to complete and which he wrote on a whiteboard (so that it stayed there, as a teaching aid for the rest of the program): ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS ARE TO ISLAM AS KKK (KU KLUX KLAN) IS TO CHRISTIANITY.

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The past few weeks in NYC will prove a vast research field for anyone interested in how people handle grief. There is a really sharp question here: how do you close your grief on someone your senses cannot prove to be dead? For the fact is, many of the people thought to have died on September 11 will never be identified to everyone's satisfaction. So great was the devastation: two 110-storey buildings falling to the ground and thus—what?—squashing, obliterating, rending apart thousands of occupants. Putting them out of touch, out of sight. How do you live with this hole in your grief?

One way to fill it is to go on seeking information. Last night I watched a businessman taping to a lamp post a dodger seeking information about someone from his firm. Such home-made posters keep going up around the city, replacing the ones that fell apart. Another is to maintain the mourning shrines which appear everywhere, and are everywhere different. Coming back from the library the other afternoon, I stopped at the local firehouse. Three weeks after the event, the flowers were still fresh and the candles lit. Taped to the walls were messages sent, it seemed, from all over the USA. And at the heart of this shrine, its central icons, polaroids of a dozen or more brave young men, who will never grow old. It is impossible not to be moved. More remote, but equally effective, is the great altar just inside the main door of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, on which visitors are encouraged to place their written prayers on adjacent sheets of graph paper.

When I got here, funerals filled the newspapers, sometimes a dozen a day, many of them Catholic (for in this city, historically, the Catholics took the uniformed jobs—police, firemen, sanitation). Now you read about memorial services which people arrange in lieu of a funeral. Many of these borrow from ancillary funeral rituals which have developed in recent years: photographs displayed, stories told, jokes shared, afterwards a few drinks. There's no doubt that people have been to church more in these weeks: Mass attendances were said to be up 30 per cent. Synagogues reported twice as many as usual at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. Surely there is closure for some along those lines. As well, street missionaries from far away came to NYC to offer their services (one approached me). Perhaps future researchers will find that the single most effective initiative has been the city's offer of death certificates for families who can in some way substantiate their loss. For many, that must help to close the circle. ■

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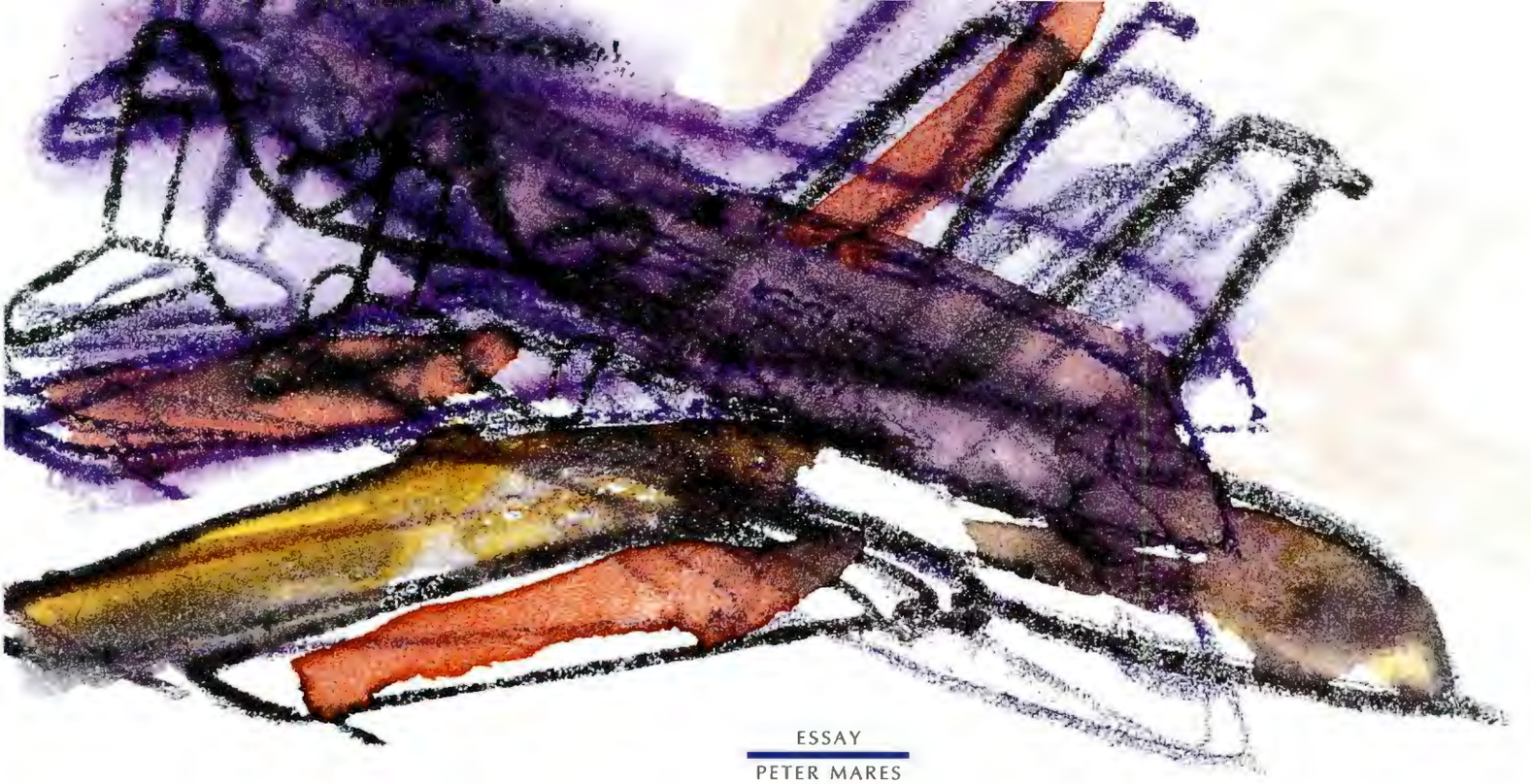
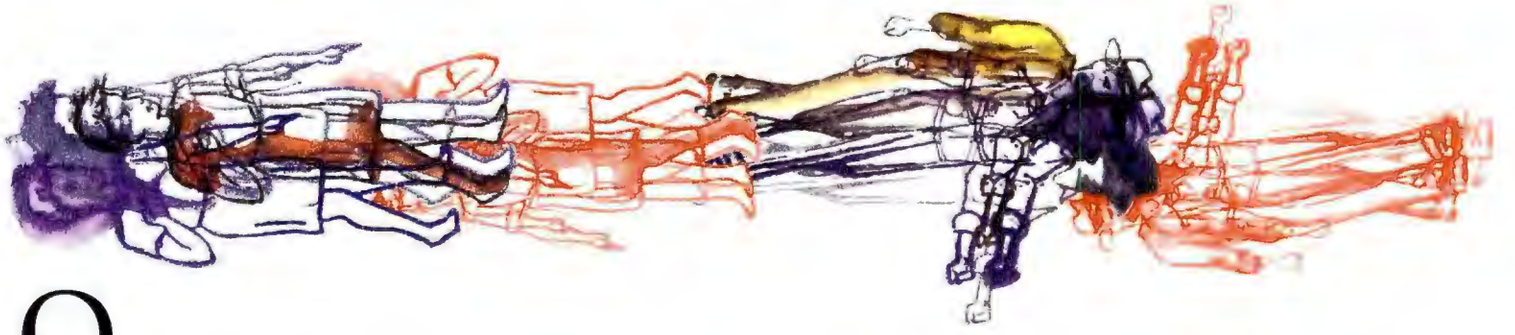


ESSAY

PETER MARES

# A Pacific solution

Reflections on the *Tampa* affair and September 11.



On September 11 I did not want to be a journalist. After hearing the news from New York and Washington, my impulse was to shut the curtains, bolt the doors, draw my family close about me in a comforting embrace and hide my head.

Journalism, for me at least, is about trying to make sense of the world. It consorts with an old-fashioned enlightenment notion, the idea that progress comes through understanding, that civilisation can advance if we clear a path through ignorance. Those of us who lack religious conviction may never have an unimpeded view of the truth, but that should not stop each of us from scrubbing away diligently at our own murky window on the world.

On September 11 it seemed that rationality and reason were dead and that commonsense journalism was a waste of effort. What is the point of logical argument in the face of suicidal fanatics who will fly a plane-load of people into a crowded skyscraper?

Of course, shock and horror responses to such events are themselves naive and illogical. After the Holocaust, the mass murders in Indonesia, the Khmer Rouge killing fields, the Rwandan genocide and countless other atrocities in living memory, why should anyone doubt the human capacity for calculated brutality? That the scenario of hijackers deliberately crashing planes into a building is like the exaggerated plot of some B-grade horror movie only shows that the idea is not really so foreign: it could have come direct from Hollywood, the heartland of the contemporary American imagination. A similar set of events plays out in

the 1994 Tom Clancy thriller *Debt of Honour*, although there the perpetrator was from Japan rather than the Middle East. A reviewer prophetically described the novel's shocking climax as 'so plausible you'll wonder why it hasn't yet happened'. And as Stephen King has noted, 'the boys who shot up Columbine High School planned to finish their day by hijacking a jetliner and flying it into—yes, that's right—the World Trade Center.'

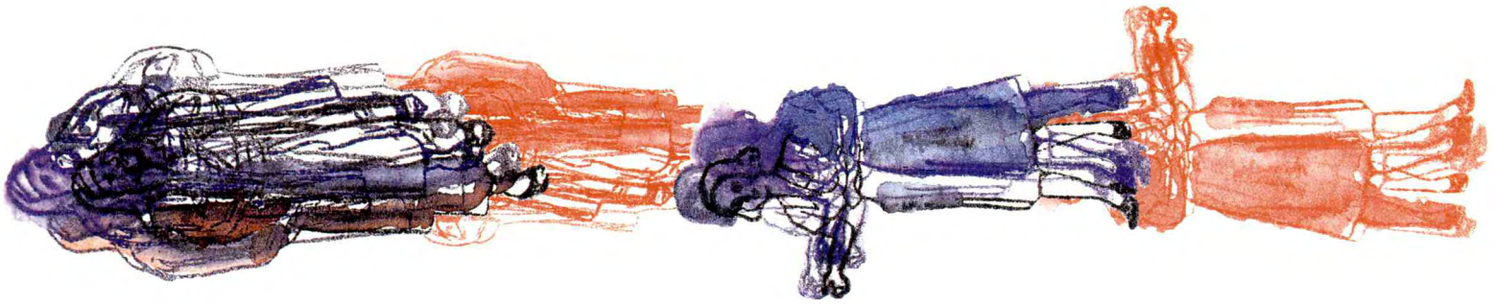
For me, the most disturbing image from September 11 was a black-and-white photograph reproduced on the front page of that sober publication, the *Australian Financial Review*. It showed a man falling head-first to certain death past the windows of a not-yet-collapsed World Trade Center tower. His dive was simultaneously a jump for safety and a leap of suicide. It symbolised our plummeting hopes for a better world, a world where peace and order may one day reign. The tower windows form a neat, geometrical pattern that suggests rationality, suggests that we can, as humans, engineer the world to suit our aspirations. The falling man spoils that image as surely as the slash of a vandal's knife shreds the canvas of a masterpiece.

observe their fate so intently, if innocent civilians perish in the retaliatory US attacks on Afghanistan, then they will suffer deaths no less horrible than the office-workers killed in New York.

THE SEPTEMBER 11 terror attacks came just two weeks after the Australian government refused to allow the Norwegian freighter *Tampa* to disembark 433 rescued asylum seekers at Christmas Island. It was inevitable that the two issues became immediately entangled. The sight of passenger jets ploughing through skyscrapers was the collision of two potent symbols of modernity, a terrifying vision that struck at the very foundations of our sense of security. Australia has great political, cultural and linguistic affinities with the United States. Our societies share a place of privilege in a world of discontent. In this sense, the savagery of September 11 was rightly perceived as an assault on our own way of life. Desperate to undo the damage, to rebuild shattered illusions, I wanted at first only to bolt the door and shut the curtains. The corollary at a national level is to close the borders, to keep out all who appear foreign.

and 'criminal'. That radio hosts should cultivate their own brand of bigotry at such a moment is reprehensible, but comes as no surprise. It is inexcusable, however, that political leaders should be so quick to dig in this garden of fear and prejudice. Within 48 hours of the attacks in the United States, Defence Minister Peter Reith was warning that the unauthorised arrival of boats on Australian territory 'can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities'.

The absurdity of this proposition is readily apparent. Asylum seekers arrive with the explicit intention of bringing themselves to the attention of Australian authorities. They expect to be detained and subjected to detailed character and background checks and there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to remain in the country. Sophisticated international terrorists are more likely to arrive disguised as students or investors, on legitimate passports and visas, or equipped with meticulous forgeries or stolen documents, as was apparently the case with the September 11 hijackers in the United States. Granted, not all asylum seekers are paragons of virtue. Some may have criminal records and



That man, identifiable but unidentified, shares the fate of unnumbered victims of senseless violence around the world. What good is reason to an Iraqi mother whose child has died of malnutrition? How does rationality console an Afghan shepherd who lost his leg to a Soviet-era butterfly mine? What logic can explain the loss of a brother who worked in a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory obliterated by US bombs after Washington claimed, wrongly, that the facility was being used to manufacture chemical weapons? Though we are unlikely to

Neither action will make us any safer, but fear fuels a futile desire to turn back time and freeze the world the way it was, or the way we thought it was, before the news hit.

As soon as the finger of blame for September 11 was pointed in the direction of the Middle East and Afghanistan, shrill voices echoed down the talkback lines to warn of Australia's vulnerability to terrorists posing as 'boat people'. This ugly flowering of public anxiety is bred out of shock-jock bile in ground well fertilised with insults like 'queue-jumper'

some may be opportunistically seeking to use the 1951 Refugee Convention as a backdoor way into Australia. If anything though, the alleged links between the terrorists and the oppressive Taliban regime should make us more sympathetic, not less, to the plight of those who would flee Afghanistan.

But logic is no match for fear-mongering, and perception is often more persuasive than fact. Even before September 11, asylum seekers arriving by boat were widely seen as a threat akin to invasion. In a letter to the editor, Sydney

identity Ron Casey warned of an 'invasion by stealth' and called for a stop to 'the disproportionate intake of Shiite Muslims':

> Recent events around the world show that as soon as Shiite Muslims become a majority, all other religions are made illegal ... What I fear is that, in another 12 years, someone will pull out these scribblings, look at a Muslim takeover and say, yet again, 'Hey, the Case was right.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Letters, 30 August 2001)

It is instructive to subject the Case's argument to some basic mathematical scrutiny. To simplify the equation let us make a number of assumptions that support his scenario of an invasion by stealth. Let us assume that all 500,000 or so Muslims already in Australia are Shiite (which of course most are not) and that all 'boat people' who arrive in the future will be Shiite Muslims (highly unlikely). Assume that they begin arriving at the rate of 1000 per month (in other words, an effective tripling of the arrival rate of around 4000 'boat people' per annum over the past two years). Then assume that all these Shiite asylum seekers qualify to stay in the country as refugees. How long before the Case's doomsday scenario of a Shiite majority comes to pass? By my reckoning, close on 800 years.

Ron Casey's comments may be ludicrous but he is not alone in harbouring such fears. Few Australians broadcast their fears and prejudices so publicly, but many, if not most, are profoundly unsettled by the sight of unauthorised boats on the horizon—they set the collective Australian pulse racing.

It seems incongruous that a nation of immigrants, a nation, indeed, born of the unauthorised landing of boats, should be so alarmed by the fact of others seeking to come here in the same manner. But this apparent contradiction is the heart of the issue. The belief that we must control the border is a fundamental strand in the weave of Australia's political and psychological fabric. The 'boat people' awaken deep-seated insecurities. Perhaps, at some subconscious level, they remind us of the way in which this land was taken from its original inhabitants, and make us fear for our own security of tenure. Unauthorised boat arrivals indicate that our long coastal borders are unprotected, reviving well-worn notions of an 'empty north' vulnerable to attack. The 'boat people' bring to the surface the same kind of anxieties that attached to Chinese immigrants at the end of the 19th century. They, like today's 'boat people', were described as 'flooding' into the territories in 'waves', threatening to 'inundate' us. The fear of Chinese migration gave rise to the White Australia policy, one of the first pieces of legislation introduced to the new national parliament after federation in 1901.

*Within 48 hours of the attacks in the United States, Defence Minister Peter Reith was warning that the unauthorised arrival of boats on Australian territory 'can be a pipeline for terrorists to come in and use your country as a staging post for terrorist activities'.*

Yet Australia also has a proud tradition of resettling refugees. Some ten per cent of the six million people who have migrated to these shores since the end of the Second World War have been received as part of humanitarian programs. Per capita, Australia continues to resettle more refugees than almost any other country—evidence, so Canberra would have it, that Australia shoulders more than its share of the international burden of displaced people. (See the statistical analysis of this claim later in the article.) Australians are generally comfortable with this off-shore resettlement program because it poses no threat to our sovereignty. Refugees are welcome, but by invitation only. We choose voluntarily to resettle a certain number each year. In that lies the proof of our generosity and our release from further obligations.

When John Howard spotted the *Tampa* on the horizon and said 'keep out!', the people of Australia roared their collective approval. At last the government was standing up to the people-smugglers and the 'illegals', the legions of 'queue-jumpers' who 'flout our generosity' (as Kim Beazley put it) and gullibility. It is a bit like the children's story about a puny kid who gets bullied on the way home from school until the kindly uncle/neighbour/older brother takes him aside and teaches him how to box. The next time the bullies swoop, the kid fights back and shows his mettle.

THE RESPONSE TO THE *Tampa* was also policy made on the run. First Australia tried to send the boat back to Indonesia, with no preparatory groundwork done in Jakarta, not even a phone call before the public announcement was made. The Indonesian government, unsurprisingly, would have none of it. Then the military's crack fighting force, the SAS, was sent aboard the ship, while the government cast about for help from our traditional ally, New Zealand, from an aid-dependent Papua New Guinea, even—of all places—from post-trauma East Timor. In the end, it was bankrupt Nauru who agreed to take the asylum seekers—for a fee of $20 million, plus costs. The government then shelled out another $20 million per week to deploy three navy frigates, two support ships and four Orion patrol aircraft in the waters between Australia and Indonesia. According to one calculation, in less than a month the government had already spent at least $70 million on the *Tampa* asylum seekers, or around $160,000 per head (see Mike Seccombe, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 September 2001).

The expense aside, this brand new Pacific 'solution' soon began to look tattered. It took two weeks to persuade 224 Iraqi and Palestinian asylum seekers rescued from the Indonesian boat *Aceng* to disembark 'voluntarily' from the troop ship *Manoora* and take up residence at their new home on a disused Nauruan sports field. No-one, to my knowledge, has yet asked the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock, what sort of recreational, educational and health facilities are being provided for the asylum seekers in Nauru, or what facilities they have for contacting relatives or friends to alert them to their whereabouts. Will they have access to telephones, for example? From

experience in Woomera, Port Hedland and Curtin, we know what can happen in immigration detention centres when people are waiting anxiously, uncertain about their future, unoccupied and cut off from the outside world. Detainees in Australia at least had access to independent advice from a registered migration agent to assist with their applications for refugee status and explain the process. No such assistance will be given to the detainees in Nauru.

What chance that future asylum seekers diverted from Australia will create further stand-offs by refusing to disembark in Nauru or Papua New Guinea or Kiribati? For its part, Nauru has insisted that they must come of their own free will or not at all. Meanwhile the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says it will not assess their claims for refugee status because it is 'inappropriate' for a country like Australia with 'very sophisticated and very well developed refugee status determination procedures' to ask the UNHCR to process asylum seekers who have come within Australian territory. The processing must now be done in Nauru by Australian immigration officials, but not under Australian law. In essence then, the federal government's complex manoeuvres on the high sea have been an elaborate effort to circumvent Australia's own rules and procedures in relation to asylum seekers.

The *Tampa* affair has done enormous damage to Australia's reputation as a good global citizen. But with an election on November 10, international criticism of Australia's actions counts for little. After the events of September 11, attention has inevitably shifted elsewhere. John Howard and his colleagues in the Coalition have their eyes fixed on the international situation and the opinion polls, and their ears tuned to talkback radio. The MPs, campaign managers and spin-doctors in the Labor Party are similarly occupied. The Coalition need no longer debate the question of whether to engage in an unseemly deal on preference swaps with Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. In the wake of the *Tampa*, the second preference of One Nation supporters, if not their primary vote, is probably in the bag.

The government's tactics totally wrong-footed the opposition. Unwilling to take a principled stand in defence of international norms and fundamental rights, the Labor Party risks losing votes to the Greens and Democrats. But Labor was more worried about the hits it could take in key marginal seats if it opposed the government's handling of the asylum seeker issue. The Coalition parties stand to garner vital electoral support as swinging voters warm to the image of a resolute John Howard talking tough. The best Labor has offered to date is damage control. The opposition has sought to minimise the electoral fallout of the *Tampa* affair by accommodating the government's increasingly bizarre attempts to restrict the operations of the Refugee Convention. Labor publicly supported the government's refusal to allow the *Tampa* to land at Christmas Island and then gave its parliamentary blessing to seven pieces of legislation that fundamentally rewrite Australia's policy towards asylum seekers. In the wake of the September 11 tragedy, the legislation was bundled up and rushed through parliament with unseemly haste. Bills that had been sent to the Legal and Constitutional References Committee for scrutiny and public debate were hauled back to the chamber to be given a quick bipartisan stamp of approval.

THE LEGISLATION INCLUDES measures that have been knocking around parliament for years, and which Labor had previously blocked in the Senate with the support of independents and minority parties on the basis that they were bad law. One of these measures is a ban on asylum seekers engaging in class actions. Another, the *Migration Legislation Amendment (Judicial Review) Act 1998*, prevents asylum seekers from challenging negative decisions in appeals to the Federal Court. A Senate Committee inquiry into that bill heard from such bodies as the Law Council and the Australian Law Reform Commission that clauses in the bill were likely to be subjected to 'a complete root and branch review' by the High Court. As the committee noted in its report, published in April 1999: 'Witnesses and submissions have emphasised that its fate before the High Court is far from certain.' The Refugee Council of Australia argued in its submission to the committee:

> To pass legislation that the government knows will be challenged in the High Court on constitutional grounds is neither good governance nor the mark of a government interested in saving taxpayers' funds.

In its dissenting report from that committee, Labor accused government supporters of the Judicial Review Bill of placing 'such great store in administrative efficiency, in the saving of money, in the husbanding of time, in the checking of applicants for judicial relief, that they are prepared to discount due process and the rule of law'. Labor argued that the bill would place 'yet another distorting strain on the balance between the three arms of government'. Nothing has changed since then except Labor's electoral prospects.

*The absurdity of this proposition is readily apparent. Asylum seekers arrive with the explicit intention of bringing themselves to the attention of Australian authorities. They expect to be detained and subjected to detailed character and background checks and there is no guarantee that they will be allowed to remain in the country.*

Another piece of legislation excludes far-flung pieces of Australian territory from the 'migration zone'. This prevents asylum seekers who land at Christmas Island, the Cocos Islands, Ashmore Reef and other outlying territories from seeking refugee status under Australian law, although the Indonesian sailors who aided their passage can still be prosecuted for people-smuggling. The world's leading authority on the 1951 Convention, Professor Guy Goodwin-Gill, chair of International Refugee Law at Oxford University, says the legislation seeks to exempt certain parts of Australia from the writ of international law. He

comments: 'There is no way international law can ignore what happens in fact in the jurisdiction of the state, irrespective of how the state classifies its piece of territory.' In other words, we cannot wish away our international obligations.

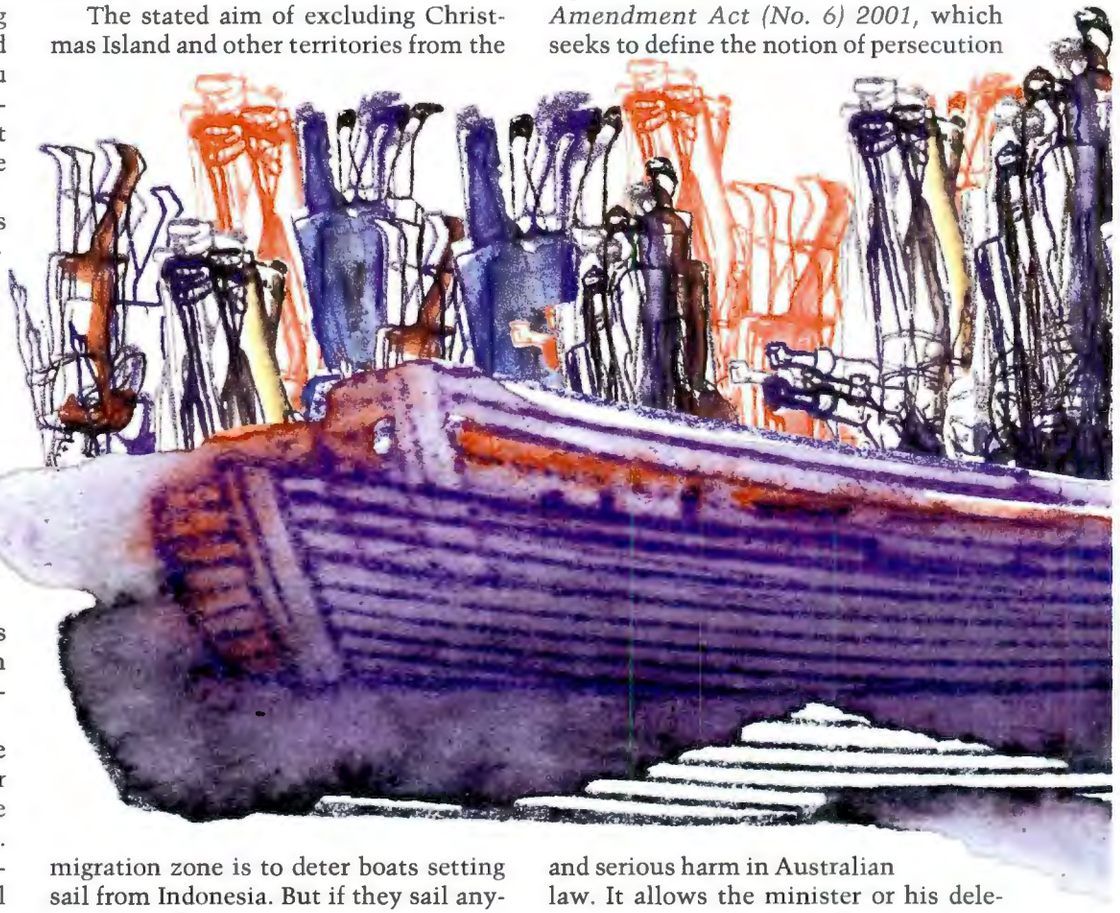
Nor does the legislation solve the problem of what to do with asylum seekers who do land at these places. Granted, they cannot seek asylum, but what is to be done with them? Indonesia will not take them back, and Nauru will surely tire of being Australia's dumping ground. Prime Minister John Howard said that people given refugee status on Nauru would not automatically come to Australia. 'We will take our fair share ... but we will expect other countries to take their fair share,' he said on 3 October.

This must have been distressing news for the UNHCR, which bears responsibility for finding resettlement places. In Indonesia the UNHCR has identified 535 Afghans, Iraqis and Iranians as refugees since January 1999, but only 18 have departed for permanent resettlement in a third country. This, rather than a more generous determination system, is the primary motivation for asylum seekers to risk the journey to Australia rather than apply for refugee status through the UNHCR in Jakarta. Asylum seekers know that refugee status granted in Indonesia means living in limbo indefinitely as they wait for non-existent resettlement places.

Authorities in Nauru are going to be even more worried when they discover how hard it is to get rid of those people who do *not* qualify for refugee status. Neither the UNHCR nor the International Organisation for Migration will be involved in repatriating people to their homeland against their will, and past experience suggests that many will refuse to return voluntarily. Of the 2887 people in immigration detention in Australia in August 2001, 969 were 'awaiting removal' from the country. Of that group 165 had been in detention for more than 18 months. Australia has agreements with some countries, like China, to routinely return nationals who arrive without authorisation, but such arrangements are largely lacking in the Middle East. Australian diplomats and immigration officials have to engage in laborious arm-twisting of foreign governments in order to convince them to accept individual returnees. Is Australia going to undertake this task on Nauru's behalf when non-refugees refuse to leave? If the prospect of indefinite detention in the Australian desert does not convince failed asylum seekers to go home voluntarily, neither will detention on a hollowed-out atoll in the middle of the Pacific. The same problems of removal will emerge at the new detention centre planned for the Australian territory of Christmas Island.

The stated aim of excluding Christmas Island and other territories from the migration zone is to deter boats setting sail from Indonesia. But if they sail anyway, then the government is ready with new Border Protection legislation. Conceived to quarantine the government retrospectively from legal action in relation to its treatment of the asylum seekers rescued by the *Tampa*, the law enables Australian authorities to board vessels, to tow them back out to sea, to detain the people on board and remove them to another place (like Nauru, PNG or Kiribati). This has dramatically ratcheted up the level of confrontation at sea. Already the Australian navy has fired across the bows of an approaching vessel and asylum seekers have jumped into the ocean, some taking their children with them. This would not have happened if the boat had been allowed to land. In future the smugglers may try to land their passengers at remote locations on the Australian mainland, exposing asylum seekers to a longer and more perilous voyage and the risk that they will be dumped at some inhospitable and isolated spot on the coast.

Yet another new legal tool in the government's emergency asylum seeker repellent kit is the *Migration Legislation Amendment Act (No. 6) 2001*, which seeks to define the notion of persecution and serious harm in Australian law. It allows the minister or his delegates to draw adverse inferences about asylum seekers who do not have identity documents, or who refuse to swear an oath or make an affirmation about the truth of their statements. It extends the government's power to exclude refugee applications submitted by asylum seekers who have committed serious crimes, and prevents a person from applying for refugee status if another member of their immediate family has already had an application rejected.



It is easy to see how a refugee at risk of persecution may be refused protection in Australia. For example, an application for refugee status is often made in the

name of the father of a family, even though the mother or daughter may have a stronger claim to protection. There could be cultural reasons for this, or it may be the case that the family is trying to protect the daughter or mother from recounting painful experiences of sexual violence. Under the new law, if the father's case fails, then the entire family is excluded. The intention is to prevent abuse of the system through the serial introduction of unfounded claims by successive members of the family. But there are other ways to achieve this

that are less likely to deny protection to refugees. In Canada, for example, each member of a family is required to testify as to why they are not willing to return to their country of origin.

*Migration Amendment Act (No. 6) 2001* also directs decision-makers to disregard anything that refugee applicants may have done while in Australia—for example, joining protests that may have brought them to the attention of the authorities of their home country. The assumption is that an Iraqi asylum seeker who demonstrates against Saddam Hussein in Australia does so only to beef up his or her claim for refugee status, and not out of any profound opposition to the regime. As international lawyer Dr Penelope Mathew has argued, 'the provision is objectionable because it is basically disallowing the exercise of human rights in Australia'.

Dr Mathew argues that Act No. 6 is about ensuring that Australia's interpretation of the Refugee Convention allows it to take in the minimum number of people. What develops, in consequence, is a kind of race to the bottom, as developed nations compete with one another to devise the most restrictive refugee policies in the world, in the hope that asylum seekers will just go somewhere else.

The new laws, and the extraordinary measures taken by the government to prevent the *Tampa* from landing, have all been predicated on the notion that Australia is a 'soft touch' for people-smugglers and would-be refugees.

On 28 August the minister told parliament that new legislation was necessary because 'generous interpretations' of Australia's obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention were 'adding to perceptions that Australia is a soft touch', and encouraging people who are not refugees to seek protection here. He said Australia's jurisprudential model—in other words, the cumulative weight of past court decisions—has so broadened the definition of a refugee that 'Australia now provides protection visas in cases lying well beyond the bounds originally envisaged by the convention.'

Is our refugee determination system so much more generous than that on offer elsewhere that Australia is a magnet for asylum seekers? Or is the reality more prosaic—that Australia is simply grappling with the same challenges posed by refugee flows and unauthorised migration that beset all developed nations? The answers are harder to obtain now because the issue has been muddied by the highly selective use of statistics.

The minister has frequently argued that asylum seekers assessed by the UNHCR in Indonesia are far less likely to be granted refugee status than asylum seekers assessed under Australia's refugee determination system. The minister comes up with low UNHCR refugee approval rates by dividing the number of people granted refugee status by the total number of applications. This ignores the fact that in a large number of cases no decision is ever made, quite possibly because the asylum seekers chose to travel on to Australia rather than complete their application with the UNHCR. These cases are officially designated as 'otherwise closed' and the UNHCR itself cautions against including them when calculating refugee approval rates.

In his second reading speech on the proposed amendments to the Migration Act, the minister told parliament that 84 per cent of Afghan asylum seekers were recognised as refugees under Australia's system, but that only 14 per cent would be approved if the UNHCR assessed the same caseload in Indonesia.

The correct figure, according to statistics supplied by the UNHCR in Jakarta, is 31 per cent. That is, 31 per cent of Afghan applicants assessed in Indonesia meet the definition of a refugee. At this point it might be objected that the exact figure is immaterial, and that the gap between the UNHCR approval rate and the Australian approval rate—between 31 per cent and 84 per cent—is still so large that it simply serves to prove the minister's point. But subjecting the UNHCR statistic to closer scrutiny reveals that it is based on just 34 positive and 74 negative decisions. It is a slim statistical foundation upon which to construct a solid argument. UNHCR regional representative in Jakarta, Raymond Hall, has cautioned that the 31 per cent number may rise as some negative decisions are still under appeal. An earlier set of UNHCR figures shows how dramatically the approval rate can change over time. According to the UNHCR website, of 90 Afghan asylum seekers assessed in Indonesia in the year 2000, 29 were accepted as refugees and 12 were rejected. This equates to a recognition rate of 71 per cent for Afghan asylum seekers where a final decision was reached (49 cases were listed as 'otherwise closed').

Does it matter that the minister's facts are wide of the mark? Yes it does. The impression they leave is that the vast majority of Afghan asylum applicants, and by implication all so-called 'boat people', are seeking to abuse the system. If only 14 per cent are approved by the UNHCR, then we are invited to assume that the other 86 per cent are all rejected.

But this is not the case. The minister's 14 per cent figure was taken up and repeated in the public debate about the *Tampa*. It was reproduced, unchallenged, in such respected publications as the British *Guardian* and the *Australian Financial Review*. I heard *Daily Telegraph* editor Piers Akerman repeating it on the afternoon show on 774 ABC Radio in Melbourne, and it was used by Australian Broadcasting Authority Chief David Flint to defend the government's actions in a debate on the *7.30 Report*. The 14 per cent figure suggests, as the minister has argued, that our system is overly generous and that our decision-makers are gullible.

The minister has repeatedly used the statistic in media interviews and on several other occasions in parliament. On 28 August, in answer to a question from the Member for Dunkley, he stated that undocumented asylum seekers claiming to be from Afghanistan had an 84 per cent chance of being accepted in Australia, but 'if those same groups with documents are assessed elsewhere, 14 per cent of the assessments by the UNHCR are accepted'. Mr Ruddock added that this applies 'not only to Afghani; *it applies to Iraqi and Iranian, and that is the fact*' (my emphasis).

This is demonstrably untrue. According to the most recent UNHCR statistics, of the 366 Iraqi applications that have been determined in Jakarta, 270 were found to be refugees—an approval rate of 74 per cent, which is not vastly different from the approval rate of 80 per cent plus for Iraqi applicants in Australia.

The minister appears to be on firmer statistical ground in relation to applicants from Iran. In 2000, Australia's recognition rate for Iranian asylum seekers was 30 per cent while the UNHCR approval rate in Jakarta was just nine per cent. But in determinations carried out by the UNHCR in Turkey in the year 2000, the recognition rate for Iranians was 63 per cent. In Pakistan it was 48 per cent and in Iraq it was 51 per cent. In Canada, where the government does assessments, 63 per cent of Iranian applicants were recognised as refugees. In other words if we broaden the comparison, Australia appears remarkably tough on Iranian asylum seekers.

Averaging out the statistics to include asylum seekers from all source countries arguably provides the best test of Australia's generosity towards refugees. If this is done, then Australia's refugee recognition rate appears to be very much in line with that of comparable nations and with the UNHCR. In the year 2000, the total average recognition rate for asylum seekers by national governments and the UNHCR around the world was 26 per cent (if the 'otherwise closed' category is removed from the statistics). Australia approved between 24 and 25 per cent of asylum claims in the same period. In other words, Australia's overall recognition rate was unremarkable.

THE FUNDAMENTAL POINT is that it is possible to read refugee statistics in all sorts of different ways and produce all sorts of different outcomes. The 1951 Convention does not prescribe the mechanisms that treaty signatories should use to determine whether or not a person fits the definition of a refugee. As a consequence, asylum seekers are assessed in different ways around the world, according to different legal and political regimes.

In many cases, particularly in countries that are not party to the 1951 Convention, national governments will hand the determination system over to the UNHCR. This results in different outcomes in different places, and means that direct comparisons between particular results in particular countries must be treated with considerable caution. For example, Sweden appears at first glance to be extremely tough, accepting less than three per cent of all asylum seekers as Convention refugees. However, Sweden allows around 40 per cent of all applicants to stay on humanitarian grounds and in the year 2000, 80 per cent of Iraqi applicants and 75 per cent of Afghan asylum seekers were allowed to stay in the country. Unlike Australia's all-or-nothing system, most European countries have this kind of fallback humanitarian category. In Britain it is called 'exceptional leave to remain' and last year the number of asylum applicants allowed to stay in Britain on that basis was greater than the number given recognition as refugees. While stepping up efforts to remove failed asylum seekers from its shores, the British government has said explicitly, and even before September 11, that it will not seek to remove Afghans, in recognition of the appalling situation that exists in their home country.

Many asylum applicants fail to meet the strict Convention definition of a refugee but that does not mean that they are out to abuse the system. As Guy Goodwin-Gill points out, among those who fail to qualify as refugees under the 1951 Convention 'we do often find a very significant number who have valid reasons, other valid reasons, for not at present being required to return to their countries'. They may fear armed conflict or social unrest or a breakdown of law and order or famine, and yet none of these things would enable them to qualify as refugees. Others may come to Australia for economic reasons. Such people must be turned away, otherwise there is no distinction between refugees and other migrants, and the 1951 Convention loses any meaning. This does not mean that economic migrants should be denied all compassion and respect. Many are driven by the core values of our own liberal capitalist society: they are risk-taking and entrepreneurial, they believe in hard work and study, they want to get ahead and they want to secure a better future for their children.

The minister argues that, quite apart from approval rates, asylum seekers see Australia as a preferred destination because of Australia's relative wealth and stability and because of the social security benefits and health services on offer to those recognised as refugees. There is no doubt that this makes Australia a more desirable destination than, say, Indonesia, which, after all, is struggling to cope with 1.25 million internal refugees of its own, displaced by the conflicts in Aceh, Maluku, Kalimantan and elsewhere. On the other hand, Australia is the only developed country that, by law, requires all asylum seekers who arrive without valid visas to be detained until their status is determined. This policy has been in place for more than a decade and can hardly be construed as a 'soft touch'. Two years ago Australia introduced a system of temporary protection visas that circumscribe the rights of those people who are recognised as refugees, restrict their freedom of travel and prevent them from applying to have family members join them in Australia

for at least three years. The government's new legislation goes even further, making it impossible for any refugee who arrives in the country unlawfully to become a permanent resident of Australia without the personal approval of the Minister for Immigration. As the minister admitted on ABC Radio National's *Law Report*, this will create a permanent population of second-class citizens. It clearly breaches Australia's obligation not to discriminate against refugees on the basis of the mode of arrival in the country. The minister says the latest amendments to the Migration Act were designed to ensure that refugee determination in Australia 'is the same process that is applied by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' elsewhere, but the government is determined to pick and choose by just which UNHCR rules it is willing to play.

It is true that people-smugglers are targeting Australia. There is no disputing this fact. But the smugglers are targeting every other developed nation as well and the smugglers' clients come from the same places as the 'boat people' who land in Australia. Three of the top five source nations for asylum seekers in Britain are Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. As long as the conditions in these countries do not improve, the smugglers will have a large pool of potential customers who are willing to engage their services, despite the huge risks and enormous expense involved, and despite disincentives like detention and temporary visas. As legal researcher Andreas Schloenhardt, an expert on people-smuggling rackets and organised crime, comments, Australia's tough measures will not stop anyone 'who is desperate for asylum, be it for economic reasons or be it for political reasons, from migrating to a country that is so much safer or so much wealthier than their own'.

The Minister for Immigration says his amendments to the Migration Act are designed to 'restore the intention of the Refugee Convention'. But tying down words and phrases, such as 'persecution' and 'serious harm', in black-letter law is putting a straitjacket on an international treaty intended to be flexible enough to deal with changing circumstances. Mr Ruddock is right when he says that the understanding of who is a refugee has changed since the text of the Refugee Convention was agreed at a meeting in Geneva half a century ago. One would hope so, given that international concepts of human rights have also evolved over the past 50 years. As Guy Goodwin-Gill points out, 'Like a law, no treaty is written in stone. If it doesn't evolve ... then it dies.'

Prime Minister John Howard says that 'Australia is the second most generous taker of refugees in the world after Canada'. This is technically correct only if one looks in isolation, and in per capita terms, at the off-shore resettlement of refugees under the humanitarian component of our migration program. If 'uninvited' refugees are included in the equation, then, as Mungo MacCallum has pointed out (*The Age*, 3 October 2001), Australia's ranking slips dramatically, to 14th out of the 29 developed nations that accept refugees and asylum seekers. And we cannot lose sight of the fact that the majority of refugees and other displaced people around the world are cared for in developing countries. Pakistan hosts more than two million displaced people from Afghanistan. Iran hosts almost the same number from Afghanistan and Iraq. Closer to home, Thailand has more than 200,000 refugees from Burma.

*Australia is the only developed country that, by law, requires all asylum seekers who arrive without valid visas to be detained until their status is determined. This policy has been in place for more than a decade and can hardly be construed as a 'soft touch'.*

The government, the Labor Party and, it seems, a majority of voters, want to close their eyes to the global reality of forced human movement. We want to wish asylum seekers out of existence. It reminds me of the nonsense poem:

When I was walking on the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish that man would go away.

We want asylum seekers to disappear, and indeed, if they are in Nauru, or Woomera, or on a navy ship off Ashmore Reef, or on their way to Europe, then they are out of our sight. But whether or not they are visible, asylum seekers and refugees will continue to unsettle us with their presence.

As the world watches the US-led retaliation for September 11, the one immediate certainty is a fresh outflow of refugees from Afghanistan. Yet for now Australia has stopped processing offshore humanitarian resettlement applications in Pakistan as a result of the withdrawal of non-essential staff from its embassy in Islamabad. The one tiny, legitimate door to safety has been closed, and the deals on offer from the people-smugglers have just become that much more attractive.

It is possible that Australia's new approach to asylum seekers will work in the narrow terms within which it is conceived. It may reduce the number of asylum seekers who land on our shores and at our airports without authorisation. This, along with winning an election, is the government's primary aim. But while it may deflect refugees, it will not reduce their number. It may force the people-smugglers on to new routes, but it will not destroy their business. In many ways the latest Australian legislation is the logical extension of established measures that prevent refugees and asylum seekers from reaching our shores, like the stiff fines imposed on airlines that fly in passengers without valid visas, or the posting of Australian immigration inspectors to vet passenger lists at overseas airports. Other countries will no doubt follow Australia's lead and strengthen their own defences. As the routes to safety become increasingly criminalised and perilous, refugees risk being left in a situation much like that of the man falling from the World Trade Center tower—forced to leap for their lives despite the knowledge that there is no safe place to land. ■

**Peter Mares** presents *Asia Pacific* on Radio National and Radio Australia and is the author of *Borderline: Australia's Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (UNSW Press, 2001).


# How will the domestic issues wash up?

*Health: Francis Sullivan*

*Jobs: Bruce Duncan*

*Regions: Toby O'Connor*

# health

# The right diagnosis

AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION is ageing, the costs of medical technologies are escalating and public health services are stretched. Health spending continues to grow, but demand still outstrips supply. The community expects access to quality care with little inconvenience; the political challenge will be to satisfy an increasingly impatient and demanding electorate when most of the handouts calculated to win over middle Australia have already been given.

At the 1998 poll, John Howard eased the public's fear of the GST with the promise of a 30 per cent discount on the price of health insurance. Minus a means test, it played straight into the pockets of the average Australian. It cost around $2 billion a year. Few economists and policy analysts supported it, yet it remains popular. It was the Coalition's main health policy and was paraded as the solution to public hospital pressures and extra doctors' fees. This election, a begrudging Labor Party supports the 30 per cent insurance rebate even though they know it isn't the solution. The scramble to win the political centre has been expensive and limits the real options for reform.

Political pollsters feverishly track community attitudes to hospital waiting times, doctors' fees and conditions in nursing homes. Despite the fact that more people have private health cover than they did when John Howard won in 1996, the discontent with public hospitals remains. Pollsters regularly report the community's irritation with unexpected specialists' fees, with the erosion of bulk-billing and with the standards of care in nursing homes. In other words, the expectations and demands on the system outweigh the capacity of the main parties to instigate reform. In a demand-driven system, politicians blanch at the prospect of instigating rationing and expect more to be done with less. The upshot is that what is done is far less than what is expected.

But the pressures on access to essential care are mounting. The capacity for hospitals to deliver high-quality services, while being funded at levels less than the real costs of care, is threatened. Emergency rooms sacrifice quality to meet demand pressures. The same happens in nursing homes. Today's residents are frailer and sicker than those in previous years, yet the homes are still funded on cost estimates that date back to the mid-1980s. 'Poor reimbursement' is the cry of general practitioners and the reason why many are abandoning rural communities or poorer neighbourhoods. The system of bulk-billing, a safety net for many lower-income families, is slowly dying.

Of course the usual chant from the health bureaucrats is that management efficiencies will improve the situation. But, unsurprisingly, some major reports say that something more fundamental is needed—money. The Commonwealth and State health ministers commissioned an independent analysis that reveals at least $1 billion is immediately required to offset the escalating costs of care in public hospitals. The Productivity Commission, as far back as 1998, recognised that the Commonwealth subsidies were falling short of meeting the true costs of providing essential care to the frailest and sickest residents in nursing homes. The shortfall equates to $70 million annually.

THE NATIONAL CRISIS IN NURSING is the subject of two reviews, one parliamentary, the other ministerial. The range of suggested strategies to improve training, the employment of nurses in rural areas, the encouraging of nurses back to the profession via better working conditions and the improvement in pay rates, will cost around $300 million a year. Add this to a realistic increase in the medical subsidy for general practitioners (which would range upward from $500 million a year), and the bill for decent access reform mounts.

But the major parties are hamstrung. They refuse even to means test the 30 per cent health insurance rebate. (To do so would deliver around $750 million a year.) They refuse to raise individual taxes, including the Medicare levy, even though a quarter of one per cent increase would furnish an extra $1 billion. Instead, they continue the farce that a high-quality health service is deliverable within existing expenditure levels. Neither party wishes to contemplate what the scenario will be in a recessed economy where growth can no longer keep pace with the real costs of health care. Neither party is prepared to tell Australians that, to care for their elderly parents properly, younger people must pay more. And neither party is prepared to put the Medicare system up before the Australian people and say that real equity will only be delivered when those who have plenty pay more than those with less.

In his last term of office John Howard found $2 billion to win over average voters with his rebate scheme. In the next it will take that and more just to keep the health system rolling forward. ■

*Neither party is prepared to tell Australians that, to care for their elderly parents properly, younger people must pay more. And neither party is prepared to put the Medicare system up before the Australian people.*

**Francis Sullivan** is Chief Executive of Catholic Health Australia.

# jobs

# Bringing them back

*The government's 'mutual obligation' regime—for the unemployed—disguises the fact that there are no policies to restore full employment.*

For 25 years Australia has endured high levels of unemployment. Hundreds of thousands of Australians are still living on the edge of destitution, in large part because they cannot find work or are underemployed as part-timers or casuals. Recent reports indicate that:

- in September 2001, 670,000 people were looking for work, seven people for every vacancy
- hidden unemployment is estimated to be as high again as the official unemployment figures
- unemployment is expected to increase significantly this coming year, following the collapse of several major companies and the effects of the US terrorist attacks.
- one in five children lives in a home where no-one has a full-time job.

These are shocking figures in a nation as rich as Australia, but it seems that we have become fatalistic and deaf to those pleading that we give the fight against unemployment a greater priority. The poor have been increasingly concentrated in depressed areas and are politically and socially marginalised.

In its latest report, *Surviving, not Living: Disadvantage in Melbourne*, Catholic Social Services Victoria depicts the distress and anxiety endured by 40 low-income people interviewed in Melbourne. The report argues that, far from choosing unemployment as a preferred way of life, these people are desperate to find suitable work so they can begin to plan their lives, settle down and support a family.

Most of those interviewed suffered from multiple disadvantages: childhood difficulties, inadequate education, lack of work opportunities, chronic ill health, insecure housing and deep poverty.

Their hardship results from the failure of economic and social policies to create enough employment. While many upper-income groups have enjoyed unprecedented prosperity in recent years, the most vulnerable groups in society have been forced to pay a disproportionate price for economic restructuring. The burden of change has fallen most heavily on those least able to carry it.

Patently, the old 'trickle-down' economic policies have failed those most at risk, who are forced to rely on social security payments to keep food on the table. Our income-support systems were never designed for long-term unemployment but for short-term transitions to once abundant work opportunities.

The poor and unemployed are now often blamed for their plight, as if they were personally responsible for a social phenomenon that is clearly structural. For the 30 years until 1975, Australia had full employment because of the demand for jobs. People will work if they can find the jobs.

Yet the federal government is currently extending its Work for the Dole programs, in the belief that the unemployment problem stems from a lack of motivation to work. No amount of coercion or incentives can fit seven people into every currently available job.

The unemployed must now meet more stringent conditions on their meagre entitlements. Instead of these punitive and coercive measures, they might more justly be offered an apology for policy failures, and indeed compensation, as has been argued by Professor Robert E. Goodin from the Australian National University's Research School of Social Sciences.

The government's 'mutual obligation' regime—for the unemployed—disguises the fact that there are no policies to restore full employment. It would seem the government has effectively abandoned full employment as a goal.

In the May federal Budget the government attempted to restore some of the $5 billion cuts it made in 1996 to previous labour-market programs, cuts which bore heavily on the unemployed. While overdue, restoring such funds will not of itself create more jobs.

We are already experiencing the effects of policies that mimic those of the United States: growing disparities in wealth, greater crime and violence, more prisons and social polarisation. Is this the way we really want to go?

In the words of *Surviving, not Living*, current policies are 'resulting in prolonged injustice and hardship for the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups.' What then needs to be done?

First, employment must once again be placed at the top of the political agenda. For many years government policies have consistently favoured anti-inflation policies at the cost of high unemployment. Can we quietly acquiesce in another 25 years of high unemployment? The burdens of economic restructuring must be shared more equitably.

Second, we must reaffirm our values of social equity and social justice. Since the 1960s, GDP per capita has doubled in Australia, yet the benefits have not been shared fairly. In addition, the costs of unemployment to the nation have been high, estimated by some economists at $30–40 billion a year. Reducing unemployment will improve living standards for everyone.

Third, some economists have proposed that the government make a major commitment to job-creation,

by expanding both the public service and labour-market programs—including human services, as in comparable OECD countries. Such a strong investment could add significantly to national infrastructure and environmental protection, and restore funding to schools, hospitals and community services, to the benefit of all Australians.

Fourth, an informed policy debate is needed to establish a firm political consensus to support the taxation necessary to reduce unemployment. The role of the media will be critical here. Recent studies indicate that many Australians are prepared to pay higher taxes if they are seen clearly to reduce unemployment. A full employment levy, like the Medicare levy, may be more politically acceptable than we currently allow.

Former secretary to the Treasury, Ted Evans, once remarked that we had the unemployment rate we chose. It follows then that the decision to eliminate unemployment is fundamentally a political and moral one, not just an economic one. Political and moral resolve is needed to determine whether Australia consolidates its values of fairness and equal opportunity, or continues to polarise into a land of 'haves' and 'have-nots'. ■

**Bruce Duncan CSsR** is a consultant to Catholic Social Services Victoria and co-author of its new study, *Surviving, not Living: Disadvantage in Melbourne.*

# regions
# On the margins

FEW NATIONAL ISSUES require such urgent and ongoing attention as rural development and the glaring regional inequalities that threaten national cohesion.

The collapse of Ansett highlighted again the vulnerable position of Australians living in remote areas. A number of communities lost air services, compounding the impact on local businesses. The crisis has cost jobs in regions where they were most needed. In recent weeks it was also announced that factory closures in Melbourne will see more than 800 workers out of a job by next March.

Across the nation a pattern has emerged—of entrenched and acute social disadvantage in places that have missed the benefits of national economic growth, or that have suffered directly as a consequence of structural economic reforms. These include former manufacturing and outer-suburban areas of cities, and some coastal regions with high population growth.

However, the worst off are those rural communities where depopulation and the withdrawal of services by the private sector and government have exacerbated hardship and contributed to a spiral of decline. They typically endure rates of joblessness several times the national average, higher long-term unemployment, lower incomes and poorer health, even as some metropolitan centres enjoy tremendous prosperity.

Since the Regional Australia Summit of October 1999, the government has taken significant, if piecemeal, initiatives across areas such as rural health, roads, salinity, dairy adjustment assistance and quarantine.

A philanthropic model for regional development has been adopted, with the establishment of the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, which uses charitable funds to support local plans for bouncing back. In addition to this philanthropic example, the government is encouraging 'bottom up' development by devolving planning responsibilities and funding community-based projects.

The centrepiece of the government's *Stronger Regions, A Stronger Australia* package, announced in August, is the Sustainable Regions program. It will allocate $100 million over four years to assist some eight regions judged to be in particular hardship.

Selection processes risk being tainted by electoral considerations, but the program does help communities experiencing high unemployment, low family incomes and major structural change. This makes it a commendable preferential option for some of the poorest areas. It also funds community-based projects—an appropriate application of the principle of subsidiarity.

The government's initiatives are welcome. But there remains a manifest need for catch-up in regional spending. Economic and social infrastructure in regional areas has been run down over a long time and this has retarded the capacity of regions to restructure, support new industries and, above all, to provide employment and restore services. Despite the considerable sums recently allocated to rural programs, the federal government's 'framework for developing the nation's regions through the next decade', announced as part of its *Stronger Regions* package, remains flawed.

In essence, the prevailing neo-liberal economic orthodoxy is hostile to government interventions for regional development. But markets do not necessarily produce efficient or just outcomes, especially in rural and remote areas. The 'get the fundamentals right' approach implies that market processes provide 'natural' outcomes that are both inevitable and inexorable.

*Markets do not necessarily produce efficient or just outcomes, especially in rural and remote areas.*

Government intervention is thus reduced to providing adjustment assistance and encouraging regional 'self-reliance'. This acquiescence to the fatality of blind market mechanisms allows little more than palliatives for distressed regional communities. The self-help ethos allows government to evade responsibility for addressing the structural causes of regional disadvantage.

Road spending, low interest rates, promoting philanthropy and self-help do not constitute a regional development framework. It is now up to the other parties to articulate their competing visions for improving the situation.

In August, Catholic Welfare Australia (CWA) issued a list of 'seven steps towards regional equity and development'. It called on political parties to embrace these steps in their regional policies for the forthcoming election. Two of the document's principles assume the greatest urgency at this time.

First, a framework for national economic development should be constructed, in which regional equity and development are declared central government objectives. This proposal is anathema to neo-liberal orthodoxy. But without such a framework, regional policy is likely to remain incoherent and ineffective.

International economic integration, structural reform, rural depopulation, and high and intractably long-term unemployment are structural causes of disadvantage that are beyond community capacity to control or even modify. Community-based development is important, but it must be balanced with the federal government's responsibility to intervene and ensure that all areas benefit from national prosperity.

The second key theme in CWA's 'steps towards regional equity' is the need for job generation. Unemployment and divergence in job opportunities are the factors most responsible for regional inequalities. Inner Sydney, for instance, currently approaches full employment, while Elizabeth in South Australia endures an unemployment rate of over 21 per cent.

Regionally concentrated unemployment requires urgent attention. There must be a renewed commitment to job creation (while protecting minimum wages), especially in the most depressed regions.

Meaningful work paying a living wage is vital for protecting the dignity of individuals, supporting families and strengthening communities. Joblessness is known to engender feelings of despair and anger, which in turn can lead to drug abuse, domestic violence and suicide, particularly among younger men in rural Australia.

Two years ago the Regional Australia Summit urged that regional objectives be embedded in federal government policy-making. As the federal election approaches, parties ought to be judged, at least in part, on their response to this still urgent call. ■

**Toby O'Connor** is the National Director of Catholic Welfare Australia (www.catholicwelfare.com.au).

# Recurring images

The terrorist attacks in the US present challenges to writers as well as security strategists. They might look to Hiroshima for inspiration, writes **Robin Gerster**.

*It was a fine morning, windless and sultry ... The midsummer morning sunlight filled the sky to the point of overflowing. The brilliance of the light glinting off the mist in the blue sky was almost painful ... and just as I looked toward the sea and noticed the way the waves were sparkling, I saw, or rather felt, an enormous bluish flash of light ... Off to my right, the sky split open over the city of Hiroshima.*

—*Toyofumi Ogura,* Letters from the End of the World *(1948)*

*I remember squinting while I stood in brilliant sunshine, waiting to cross Chambers Street. I was facing the WTC plaza ... I wished I'd brought my sunglasses. It was about 8.35am, 21 degrees, gorgeous, with not a cloud in the sky ... My imagination is not wandering to heaven ... nor is it regarding the sky as Manhattan airspace in need of protection ...*

—*Alison Summers, 'The Day the World Changed' (2001)*

Recent events in New York City and Washington have conjured many horrifying scenarios. They also prompt retrospective thoughts. Imagine this—what if CNN or any of the big television networks had been on the spot that perfect August morning when the *Enola Gay*, an American B-29 piloted by Colonel Paul W. Tibbets, dropped the 10,000-pound atomic bomb dubbed 'Little Boy' over Hiroshima in western Japan?

Not that 'covering' that calamity in any conventional media sense would have been possible. Who was left there 'on the ground'? The details of 6 August 1945 are well-enough known. In a burst of livid purple and blue, Little Boy exploded directly over the sprawling city of 250,000 people at 8.15am, during the morning rush hour. The explosion was accompanied almost simultaneously by a deafening blast—what the Japanese call the *pikadon*, the 'flash!bang!' Around the downtown area that came to be known as 'ground zero', a voracious fireball developed, incinerating the city while a gigantic cloud mushroomed into the sky. Hiroshima was destroyed; within seconds, approximately a third of its total population was dead, and many thousands more were dying—many of them slowly and in agony.

Well-known facts, as I say, but they need reiterating in these tense times. The dropping of 'the Bomb' is now so historically distant it may as well be the Black Plague. Living memory of the event is fast fading, as are the culturally remote Japanese who suffered personally. The apocalyptic idea of 'nuclear holocaust' has become the province of movie-makers and popular novelists. A fiction. This is a kind of reversal of how recent reality—the nightmare in New York City—has naturalised the predictive fantasies of Hollywood. Oh for some live film from Hiroshima! Witness what happened there on 6 August 1945 and no-one, not even the most dementedly hawkish advocate of nuking the *A*-rabs to Kingdom Come, would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons.

The atrocities of September 11 in the United States have already spawned enough perplexing linguistic and other representational signs and markers to keep thesis-writers in Cultural Studies going for years. Not least has been the American appropriation of the nuclear term 'ground zero' to describe the devastated area once occupied by the twin towers of the World Trade Center. This comes as a shock to people with some sort of historical perspective—people who do not necessarily belong to the diffuse ranks of the anti-American lobby.

But the responses to the terrorist attacks do indicate the centrality of 'Hiroshima' as a signifier of terrible destruction, including, of course, the wholesale murder of innocent civilians.

The terrorist attacks on the United States evoked other reminders of Hiroshima—notably those moving images of family members wandering in the vicinity of the collapsed towers in New York City, bearing photographs of lost loved ones. At Hiroshima plaintive messages were scrawled on bridges. But more than anything the comparison of the two events reminds us how the coverage of disasters has changed over the decades, and how technology itself has hijacked the written word. The visual imagery of the destruction of the World Trade

Center—it was, after all, televised live—has swallowed language. The 'every picture is worth a thousand words' cliché has never been more true than now.

Millions of words have already been expended in the newspaper coverage of the attacks. They have been described and dissected, their implications have been probed and their ramifications pondered. Not all the writing has been edifying. Old critical warhorses have returned to the field. Edward Said's warning of an ideologically inspired war between the West and Islam proved yet again how captive he is to the binary view of the world he criticises. In a burst of colossal fatuousness in an otherwise bracing piece published in the *New Yorker*, Susan Sontag has written of the hijackers' 'courage'—courage being in Sontag's view a 'morally neutral virtue'.

The political and cultural backgrounds to the events are so complex and inherently paradoxical that any attempt to be assertive about them is bound to look self-servingly facile, or like taking sides over the sites of mass murder. Continuing his personal mission to redeem the manifest biases of Western journalism, John Pilger (in the *New Statesman*) displays an astonishing tolerance of a host of repressive regimes when he portrays the entire Islamic world as the passive, innocent victim of US military, strategic and economic 'fundamentalism'. US dominance, aided and abetted by what Pilger calls 'the Jewish establishment', thus becomes 'the greatest source of terrorism on earth'. Never has outrage seemed so misplaced.

Pilger's uses of the term 'US fundamentalism' to make what he thinks is a tellingly ironic point is as cynical, one suspects, as it is misguided. As Salman Rushdie has recently observed (in *The Age*), laying the blame for the atrocities of September 11 at the door of US foreign policy is not just simplistic, it is a denial of 'the basic idea of all morality: that individuals are responsible for their actions'.

THE SPECIAL commemorative issue of the *New Yorker*—with its appropriately funereal, if still stylish, cover—has provided the most substantial register of responses to Black Tuesday. But 'The Talk of the Town' collection of commentaries, which included Sontag's polemical chutzpah along with reflective pieces by New York literary luminaries from the doyen John Updike to the coming star Jonathan Franzen, proved disappointing. The writers try to locate the attacks within a pecking order of disasters, from the Oklahoma City bombing to Pearl Harbor to the Holocaust (with just the most fleeting of references to Hiroshima), but seem to shrink before its immensity. There is intense pathos in Updike's struggle to come to grips with what he saw from the vantage point of a tenth-floor Brooklyn Heights apartment: 'Suddenly summoned to witness something great and horrendous, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness.' Yet this in itself is an admission of defeat. Updike's piece ends with a whimper, with the writer back at his Brooklyn eyrie the next day, observing that, for all the death and devastation, New York 'looked glorious'. Jonathan Franzen does better by placing the catastrophe within a 'small', human scale, by describing the psychic queasiness it induced, combined with a 'deep grief for the loss of daily life in prosperous, forgetful times'. Franzen also has an unhistrionic sense of historical perspective. September 11, he suggests, marked the end of what had been (in the American context) an age of complacency; the task of the future will be 'to reassert the ordinary ... in the face of instability and dread'.

Of the 'eyewitness' responses to September 11, one of the most compelling was that of the Australian expatriate, Alison Summers. In 'The Day the World Changed' (in *The Australian*), Summers juxtaposes the domestic joys and rigours of a busy life in the Big Apple with her husband, the novelist Peter Carey, alongside the pitiless brutality of the hijackers' targeting of the World Trade Center. In an echo of Hiroshima writing, Summers contrasts the beauty of a late summer morning with the hideously unnatural aerial attack, 'the bursting and ripping of a massive explosion'. When the first plane hits, 'There's nothing natural about the sound. It's not thunder; it's not an earthquake.'

But the catastrophe has thus far defeated the literary imagination of those

who witnessed it—which, after all, is most of us. Peter Carey's own maudlin, overwrought account, published in *The Age* as 'I Still Love New York', is a prime example. Perhaps it is just too soon to write about what happened on September 11. The events have yet to be properly digested. Most of the best writing to emerge from the First World War, the Holocaust and Hiroshima emerged a full decade after the events themselves. To date, only the British novelist Martin Amis, in *The Guardian*, has captured the horror and the fascination with which we watched—still watch, over and over in our mind's eye—the attack on the WTC. And even Amis only manages it by applying his prodigious descriptive gifts to the sight of the act itself:

> It was the advent of the second plane, sharking in low over the Statue of Liberty: that was the defining moment ... I have never seen a generically familiar object so transformed by effect. The second plane looked eagerly alive, and galvanised with malice, and wholly alien. For those thousands in the south tower, the second plane meant the end of everything. For us, its glint was the worldflash of a coming future.

Meanwhile, out in the worldwide web the real war of representation over September 11 is being waged. At johnpilger.com you can read the great gadfly's recent tirades against the United States (and purchase his books online), while a plethora of patriotic internet sites reveal exactly that aspect of America that so annoys its critics—its implacable parochialism, its sense of being not merely the centre of the universe, but the entire universe itself. This side of America is both smug and maddeningly forgetful. I looked up Colonel Tibbets to research this article, to discover that on his personal homepage the man who piloted the *Enola Gay* (he named the plane after his mother) is now offering to consumers a 'Special Collectors Edition Shadow Box'. This turns out to be a photograph of that mushroom cloud over poor ruined Hiroshima, signed by surviving members of the bombing mission, including Tibbets himself. That, too, beggars the imagination. ■

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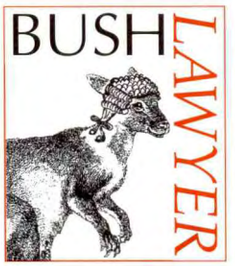


# Pre-judging

A NUMBER OF MAGISTRATES were at dinner recently when the topic of prejudice came up. Prejudice is one of those issues that troubles lawyers. Behind calls for a more representative judiciary lies the unstated presumption that judges, mostly male, educated in private schools, are prejudiced in favour of certain groups in society and against other groups.

Until the mid-1980s, the magistracy in NSW (and in much of the rest of Australia) was drawn entirely from the ranks of career public servants. The best of them were intelligent, ambitious men from working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds who had worked their way up the public service ladder. They were mostly conservative in their social, political and legal attitudes. Most aspired to be fair and judicial on the bench. Nonetheless, the legal profession generally perceived magistrates as biased towards the prosecution. The judges, drawn from the ranks of the bar, saw it as their role to even things up on appeal.

In the 1990s, successive Attorneys-General made it a policy to appoint NSW magistrates from the legal profession. Very few are now appointed directly from the public service. Does this cure the judicial prejudice problem?

The magistrates at dinner belong to what tabloid commentators call 'the chattering classes'—about as politically correct a group of baby-boomers as you could find in Sydney. Yet all confessed, with some hesitation and qualification, to prejudices. Almost all admitted that they did not like dealing with the young men of one particular ethnic group. The women, some of whom had represented the young men, reacted against their clients' sexism. The male magistrates believed the young men to be aggressive, defiant and unwilling to bend to the law of the community. Most felt a cathartic release in making these admissions.

What to do? Appointing judges and magistrates from 'non-Anglo' sections of the community, or from the ranks of women lawyers, is no guarantee of eradication of prejudice. Successful members of minorities sometimes become caricatures of the worst representatives of the dominant culture. And members of the privileged classes sometimes show far more empathy for the under-privileged than 'aspirational' high-flyers.

In the short term, the magistracy deals with the problem by training. Part of a week-long 'orientation' course for new magistrates is a session dealing specifically with prejudices. The instructors give new magistrates 'permission' to expose their prejudices to daylight. They emphasise the truisms about justice being seen to be done and the need for cultural awareness.

Most importantly, the new magistrates are taught to distance themselves from their prejudices by asking, 'If this defendant were a white, middle-class, Anglo woman, how would I view the evidence?' In other words, they are taught to deal with evidentiary issues in a clinical fashion, quarantining their prejudices from the weighing of the evidence. It's not foolproof, but it is effective.

With cultural tensions heightening between Muslims and non-Muslims, it seems a good time to audit our prejudices and to hone our techniques for confronting them. ■

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MICHAEL McGIRR

# A month of Sydneys

**30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account**, Peter Carey, Bloomsbury, 2001. ISBN 0 747 55500 1, RRP $27.95

FOR EVERY CITY, there is a stereotype. In Adelaide, they ask who your parents are. Even if your name is Brown. In Melbourne, they ask where you went to school. Even if you are 80. In Canberra they ask where you really come from. Even if you have lived there all your life. In Sydney, they ask which suburb you live in. Even which street. Every postcode has a meaning. Every property needs an auctioneer to sing its praises.

Of course, stereotyping cities is a game. It's fun to prove that the conventional image is inaccurate. Then still more fun to find that it isn't entirely wrong. There is certainly a great deal about real estate in Peter Carey's extended essay, *30 Days in Sydney*. A lot of it is subtle.

At one stage, following the fortunes of the chaotic friends with whom he catches up on his visit to Sydney, Carey finds himself helping in the rescue of a chook. The chook belongs to an inner-city squat where the residents run a small farm on the rooftop, much to the distraction of those who overlook them from expensive nearby units. Carey calls them apartments. To be fair, this is what Australian flats are fast becoming. 'Some of the most extraordinary places in which I have lived,' muses Carey, 'have been sited on land occupied by people popularly known as dole bludgers.' He enjoys the irony of this. He toys with that legendary Australian figure of fun, the defeated developer.

This figure has a long history. Carey traces back over Sydney's early colonial history. He is not the first to suggest that official corruption started back then and has never taken a day off. Figures such as John Macarthur fought with successive governors. At issue was their right to make fortunes and acquire vast tracts of land, without any regard for the public good. The design, or lack of it, of Sydney's CBD stems from the triumph of private greed over public capital. Carey applauds Governor Bligh. At least Bligh managed to wrest the area of the Domain from the developers.

Manning Clark described those infatuated by the pursuit of gold as 'the possessed'. He might well have pondered the equally maddening effect of real estate, even a bedsit in Balmain.

Carey grew up in regional Victoria and lives in New York. So he approaches Sydney from both sides of the psychological spectrum, the innocent and the experienced. He is wide-eyed when he describes the smell of eucalyptus in the car park at Sydney airport, but sharper when he describes the smell of tomato sauce at Manly.

Carey lived and worked for a time in Sydney and, on occasions, the city forces him to engage with his former selves. He struggles with this: 'I have a lifetime of turning my back on painful memories.' Carey has reason to think of Sydney as a dangerous city. In 1994, while he was in New York, fire destroyed the house he had lived in on Pittwater. It was a kind of sacred place to him. One of Sydney's famous westerlies had blown the roof off another house he lived in. In 1975, he had a panic attack while driving over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, as a result of which he has not been able to drive over it again. He was working in advertising at the time and driving a Jensen Healey. The man is both Oscar *and* Lucinda.

Perhaps it is these experiences which have created in Carey a fascination with Sydney's never-ending supply of natural disaster stories. Just about the only thing he doesn't touch on are hailstorms. He talks to men who narrowly escaped death in the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. He talks to others who had a brush with disaster fighting fires and rock-climbing in the Blue Mountains.

Carey's Sydney gets the adrenaline going. Apart from a brief interest in Parramatta Road, he doesn't get beyond the inner west, or into the endless string of suburbs and shopping centres where Sydney appears without make-up. He doesn't ponder what it would be like to bring up a family on the average wage in this part of the world. It is a grinding city.

Nevertheless, *30 Days in Sydney* does have some more reflective moments. One of them concerns Arthur Stace, the man who chalked the word 'eternity' from one end of town to the other. Carey is alert to the existential precariousness of Stace's gesture. He discusses it with an artist who has spent years enthralled by it and celebrates the fact that it appeared in bright lights on the bridge at the dawn of a new millennium. It is curious that Stace has increasingly been seen in aesthetic rather than ascetic terms. He is better known than ever, but seldom seen in the context of the evangelical Christianity which created his sense of mission. That brand of Christianity has more hold on Sydney than ever. Carey doesn't dwell on the city's religious culture. But it is evidence that Sydney, like many cities, is a place in which to survive the forces of humanity. ■

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BOOKS:2

ANDREW HAMILTON

# Making books talk

**The Unhealed Wound: The Church and Human Sexuality**, Eugene Kennedy, HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 1 74050 008 3, RRP $24.95
**The Catholic Church: A Short History**, Hans Küng, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (London), 2001. ISBN 0 29764 638 9, RRP $35
**The Bread of God: Nurturing a Eucharistic Imagination**, Tony Kelly, HarperCollins, 2001. ISBN 1 74050 001 6, RRP $24.95

THIS IS NOT a good review. Good reviews enter a book on its own terms, explore its world, and only then introdùce the reviewer's questions. In this review, I have brought three books together to ask them questions set in advance, and self-interested questions at that. And like any interrogator, I have ways of making books talk.

My question is this: what qualities must popular religious writing have if it is to illuminate for critical readers the traces of God's presence in their lives and in the world? This question touches rhetoric, the style and mode of address that the author chooses, as much as it does content. My interest is not disinterested: I share the responsibility to find such writing for *Eureka Street*, and I find distasteful much of what is currently on offer. How better, then, to begin than with a random collection of popular writing?

Of these three books, those by Küng and Kennedy are engaged with church policy and practice, while Kelly seeks to broaden understanding of belief and it symbols.

Hans Küng has engaged himself with distinction at the boundaries of church for 40 years, finding common ground between Catholics and others on theology, ecology, non-Christian religions and science. He has also proved himself a resolute controversialist, never yielding ground on any issue, most notably in debate with Vatican congregations.

*The Catholic Church: A Short History*, written with characteristic clarity and force, is a programmatic work that opposes to the authoritarian and bureaucratic centralisation of the Catholic Church the communal ideal of the Gospel. It attends to the great figures of the church. Its brevity and moral focus requires Küng to catch in thumbnail sketches their virtues and defects. His comments on a range of popes put on show sharpness and briskness.

Of the 14th-century Boniface VIII he writes:

> In the style of Gregory VII, this shrewd lawyer and unprincipled man of power, who suffered from something like papal megalomania, on 8 September 1303 planned the excommunication of the French king and the release of his subjects from their oath of loyalty'.

The 19th-century Pius IX is represented as 'an emotionally unstable man untroubled by intellectual doubt who evinced the symptoms of a psychopath'. And when dealing with Pius XII, he claims that:

> ... the actions of this expressly Germanophile Church diplomat, without pastoral experience, who thought above all in legal and diplomatic terms, rather than theologically in the light of the gospel, were fixated on the Curia and the institution instead of pastorally on men and women.

Now while each of these strongly critical judgements is defensible, together they read like a prosecutor's brief, and fit easily into a rhetoric of complaint. This rhetoric, which has had a long and worthy place in the church, is often dismissed as unspiritual because it is disloyal, arrogant, or is critical of the church. While these judgments are unfair, any rhetoric of complaint can easily lack self-criticism. It remains idealistic unless it asks the hard-nosed and secular questions we normally put when the defects of other organisations that interest us are exposed. We then ask whether we could reasonably expect the situation to be different, whether the changes advocated would have made much difference, and what changes we would wish to make for what end.

When assessing a story of an organisation in which high idealism is matched by mediocre virtue and high ambition, it is natural to ask first whether we should have

## Ivory

*For Barbara Hayes*

Gone the tall grey beast and gone the hunter,
his blade a smear on the burnt plain,
and the craft of both poured out like so much water
in time's indifferent main.

But here another couple bows to the sway
of a carried tusk, as though to sign
their hope of salvage. Day by punished day
her long fingers entwine

a lighted candle, and he, a pressing child,
offers the world, an apple made good.
They have nothing to say, or need: the wild
prospect is all they could.

**Peter Steele**

expected anything different. We normally regard as special pleading claims made by any group for the exceptional administrative competence or the unmatched virtue in its officers and procedures. On the face of it, there is no reason to take a different view of a community simply because it is built on Jesus Christ. The interesting question is how, in the interstices of mediocrity and faith, intimations of God's presence can be found.

Of other organisations, too, we would ask what difference it would have made if key people had been more virtuous and wise, or if historical events had turned out differently. Would the history of the contemporary church have been significantly different, for example, had Pius IX been the socially liberal pope for whom many Catholics hoped? Or would reaction have followed, as it did after the Paris Commune? Both pious and critical writers regularly assume that the actions of the great bear a decisive and providential significance that can easily be read. Such assumptions create such a dazzling light of certainty that the eye becomes unattuned to more subtle forms of illumination.

Finally, when we are presented with a parlous situation in organisations of which we are part, we instinctively ask what might be done that could be of help, and in what way it might be of help. These questions prompt us to name what it is possible to achieve and what it is important to achieve. Küng does not go into this kind of detail. But in its absence, it is possible to imagine that it was important for Pope Pius XII to have spoken strongly on behalf of the Jews because to have done so then would have given the church a good name now. But if what was important was solidarity with Jews, might the best help have come from Christian families and communities who risked their lives in order to shelter Jews? From that perspective, what Pius XII did and said becomes relatively unimportant, compared with the tension between fears and dreams, the claims of heroism, and the delicate ways in which the Gospel is commended and neglected in the church. In exploring the intersection between these things we might expect to find illumination of God's presence.

Küng's book is a history of a traditional style: concerned with the great and their influence. A more modern historiography, exploring the complex life of communities, may offer a more promising rhetoric for spiritual writing.

THE *UNHEALED WOUND* also represents the rhetoric of complaint, protesting against a controlling and emasculating bureaucracy in the church. To this Eugene Kennedy opposes a humane and integrated faith which welcomes human wholeness. His writing is programmatic, but he uses the rhetorical structure of myth and not of history. He ties his reflections to the German myth of the Grail King, who was wounded in his sexuality and could be freed only by being touched in love. The knight, Parzival, was unable to heal him because he had unquestioningly accepted the formal protocol and distance that he had been taught as a courtier.

Kennedy uses this myth persuasively enough in his general discussion of sexuality in the Catholic Church, claiming that Catholics, and particularly the clergy, are often wounded in their sexuality. While they could be touched by a simple and open affirmation of sexual love, they often are made victims to the bureaucratic demand, unpersuasively drawn from the Gospel tradition, that they live an unloving life. But when he applies the myth to specific situations, his oracular tone and elevated style risk collapsing into bathos. He writes of the pathos of Pope John Paul II's journeys—his restlessness and infirmity:

> And prisoner he is to this pain, as the Grail King was, because as the law of the latter's court forbade the knights from speaking healing human truths to him, so the rules of the papal court enforce silence on any who could speak truths that might at least cast light on why he cannot finish the course and be relieved of his suffering ... Pope John Paul II is ever restless because his wound is a result of thinking one way about persons as sexual beings and acting in a quite different way when dealing with them.

Kennedy here makes a sensible point about the gap between theology and pastoral practice, but when he discusses the pope's discomfort in mythical terms, he not only turns a life into myth, but also deprives the life of interest. A more prosaic discussion of the intersection of age, passion for the Gospel, and Parkinson's disease would be more helpful than this romantic myth. It might also offer more illumination.

This rhetorical mismatch diminishes the reader's hope of finding illumination about God's traces in the delicate area of human sexuality. As in Küng's work, the weakness arises out of the failure to ask whether we should expect anything different in the church, whether the reforms which Kennedy advocates would make a significant difference, and what might be done that would make the right kind of difference.

My answers to the first two questions would be sceptical. Even if sexuality were liberated from an ideology of authority and certainty, and greater respect were paid to the experience of those married than to that of clerics, a church which bases itself on the lived appropriation of scripture will still be counter-cultural and disturbing. And even if all of Kennedy's reforms were implemented, everything suggests that sexual wholeness and confidence will remain rare gifts, no more common among married clergy than among celibates, among Protestants than among Catholics, among the non-religious than among Christians.

When we ask what might be done and be worth doing in the face of this situation, it is hard to go beyond the encouragement of fidelity, with all that means of renewed dreams and warmth, of self-sacrifice, of larger hopes. Perhaps it is in the intersection between the Gospel, ways of teaching and the intransigent clay as well as the dreams of human life, that we might seek illumination on where God's traces are to be found.

In *The Bread of God*, Tony Kelly is not concerned with the institutions of the church but reflects on the Eucharist in order to inspire a deeper vision and practice. It is a book for the converted, a popular theology concerned with understanding and appreciation. His rhetoric is that of explanation and not of complaint. The most interesting feature of the book is his reference in the subtitle to imagination, which invites the reader to go beyond understanding. It implies a way of seeing the world through the Eucharist that changes both our practice of Eucharist and our other practices of life. So, he can associate Eucharist with ecology and justice and other apparently secular concerns, and end the book with a prose poem.

This is an excellent and balanced account of the Eucharist which may prove illuminating for one to whom the practice of the Eucharist is unproblematic and nourishing.

Kelly's appeal to the imagination encourages me to put the question that runs through this review: whether this book provides an illuminating rhetoric and presentation for critical people who seek intimations of God's presence in their life and world. Good spiritual writing must be imaginative, in representing the fragmentary quality of the world and finding meaning in it. Kelly writes well and clearly about the imagination:

> The Eucharist imagination is released in a conversion of mind and heart. To be involved in the Eucharist is to participate in a 'holy and living sacrifice.' It demands that we move beyond the defences and isolation of individualism into a 'holy communion' that, potentially, will exclude no one. It means exposing ourselves to searching the truth of Christ's presence that leaves no one individual, nor any Christian community, undisturbed.

I wonder, however, if the imagination here works at too great a distance from the everyday and fractured. When Kelly writes of 'a "holy communion" that, potentially, will exclude no one', the adverb *potentially* is theologically aware. For in principle, many people are excluded from the Eucharist: non-Christians, non-Catholics, rainbow sash people, the divorced and remarried, those excommunicated for torture. For the critical reader, it may be that the intimations of God's presence are to be found here in the interplay between inclusion and exclusion, and in the varied bodily ways in which we form and fail to join the body of Christ, are bound to it and resist it.

My reflections on these books suggest that the enemy of good spiritual writing is idealism, in its double sense of refusing to countenance a reality that is less than perfect, and of preoccupation with ideas rather than with embodied reality. Good spiritual writing enters the reality of the world, illuminates its complexity, and finds there signs of God's presence. Spirituality is inherently 'thingy'.

Good spiritual writing is also political in the sense that it touches and illuminates the delicate relationships that link human beings to one another and to the world. This task requires attentiveness to the messy places which, in theory, should not nourish life, but which nevertheless run green. Although both Kennedy and Küng in different ways focus on the political aspects of the church, they are not attentive to the points of interaction, the negotiations between teachers and taught, life and ideals, and the concrete and ideal communities where life is given within a church.

These are some of the qualities of good spiritual writing. Another, of course, is that it takes its conversation partners seriously on their own terms. ■

**Andrew Hamilton** SJ is *Eureka Street*'s publisher.

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JIM DAVIDSON

# Very grand opera

**Parsifal**, State Opera South Australia

A PERFORMANCE OF Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, is still an event wherever it occurs. Until 1913—as long as copyright allowed them—the Wagner family insisted that the opera could be performed only at Bayreuth. But it has not exactly broken free since. Rossini once famously said of Wagner that he has his moments, but has bad quarters of an hour. *Parsifal*'s four hours of music contains more than its share of tedium; at times there is an almost fatal convergence between the weariness of the characters and the maunderings of the ageing composer. In addition, the opera is shot through with Wagner's own brand of neo-Christian mysticism, together with a hint of Teutonic triumphalism. The work then presents a great challenge to any opera company, so one felt some apprehension when State Opera South Australia announced that, following their success with *The Ring*, they would now put on *Parsifal*. This would be the work's first staging in Australia. But then the poster appeared, with its image of Parsifal contemplating the sacred spear: its elegant projection of strength and reverence augured well.

Although first sketched by Wagner in 1845—the time of *Tannhauser*—*Parsifal* was not premiered until 1882. The pure knight had, in the interim, narrowly missed straying into *Tristan*, where he would have embodied the alternative to love's anguish. But Wagner thought better of it, and increasingly came to feel that a *Parsifal* would be his final work. Perhaps it might also secure him a safe-conduct pass to heaven. For although he introduced to the story that leftover prop from *The Ring*, the sacred spear, Wagner also turned the Grail into a vessel, and connected it with the cup Christ drank from at the Last Supper; he then enacted holy communion on stage and boldly styled the whole work a Sacred Festival Play. Some went further, identifying Parsifal with Jesus, but the composer was not one of them: 'The idea,' he said, 'of making Christ a tenor! Phew!' What he did see, as his own heroic role in the context of a decline in faith, was the need to 'salvage the true essence of religion' by going beyond its symbols to locate 'their profound, hidden truth through idealised representation'. *Parsifal* then becomes less Christian, or heretical, than an exploration of the idea of compassion.

Very sensibly, Elke Neidhardt, the director of the recent Adelaide production, approached the work with a strong sense of purpose and decided to de-Christianise it. First, there was no communion in the opening act. Instead Amfortas rose from his couch and, the embodiment of a tottering monarchy, took an opened sacred text around the circle of knights for each of them to touch. Secondly, the grail was returned to being the holy stone of medieval legend, rather than Christian communion's ur-vessel. Then, instead of there being a cathedral-like interior, with the hint of a dome, a hexagonal contraption appeared at

the top of the set, issuing a beam of lasered light at the climax of the scene. (Later, when a shortened version of the ceremony occurs at the opera's conclusion, the laser moved out into the auditorium, inclusively, suffusing the audience with a glow of compassion.) Finally, when Gurnemanz has words with the naive Parsifal—who is entirely oblivious of the significance of what he has witnessed—he does so *outside* the chapel. A wall has come down to separate this exchange from the ceremony just before. Its real function is to close off any religiosity; for with that barrier in position the Bayreuth idea of there being no applause after such a solemn scene becomes an absurdity. In these ways the Christianity of *Parsifal* becomes a metaphor; the work has never been more truly operatic. The additional advantage, for an English-speaking audience, is that the approach adopted here restores the cousinly relationship between the Knights of the Grail and Arthurian legend.

For Neidhardt has also been concerned to de-Germanicise the work. There's no hint here of an Aryan, crypto-Nazi brotherhood, and nothing to suggest—as some have—that in view of Wagner's pronounced anti-Semitism, Kundry makes best sense as a Jewish temptress. More than most directors, though, Neidhardt has sharply drawn a contrast between the two outer acts, both of which culminate in grail ceremonies, and the second.

Instead of the predominating browns and blue evident there, for Klingsor's magic castle the set foregrounded greens and yellows, the contrast in colour emphasising the contrast between the knights' stronghold and the magician's. Here a cue was taken from the composer, who himself took advantage of the Spanish setting by placing the knights on the northern (or European) slopes of the mountains, in clear juxtaposition to Klingsor and his flower maidens on the southern (or Arab). The surge of imperialism in the 1880s made this an obvious move for Wagner, complete with a European total victory.

That victory is made light of in this production. It is almost a case of Parsifal tiptoeing up to Klingsor and taking the spear from behind; similarly Klingsor's castle doesn't disappear in a cataclysm. Neidhardt's purpose in this act, where she wants a vivid sense of contrast, is quite novel in Wagner: she injects a dose of humour. The curtain rises on Klingsor, booted and bare-chested amid plush velvet, lolling about with the spear, projected in such a way that it looks like an enormous erection. It draws a genuine laugh, but given the fact that he has castrated himself, amid all the campery there is anguish, even desperation. Shortly afterwards we see Parsifal among the flower maidens—dozens of 'em. Fluffbrains all, they are decked out in Esther Williams bathing suits and sway inanely to their chorus. That can sound like Johann Strauss on ice, and since temptation in the sexual sense nowadays means a great deal less than it did when Wagner wrote, a drastic rehandling of this act is essential if it is to have any meaning at all. Neidhardt may have turned the Flower Maidens into something like sex workers, but her Parsifal is quite unchanged—which heightens the contrast. It also means that the act does not evaporate into flippancy: the scene between Parsifal and Kundry had real dramatic tension. The crucial kiss may have seemed more like a meal, but this means it can carry the weight required by the plot.

Too often the traditional Wagner production left inflection to the orchestra; singers would stand and deliver in stentorian monumentality. Not so here. Neidhardt has faith in the sureness of Wagner's dramatic instinct, and understands that although these are resonant legends borne aloft by the music, they can be earthed effectively by deft stage directions. Thus the knights, after the ceremony, take off their blue gowns and stand around in groups, as if talking; similarly Parsifal, having just witnessed the service and now alone, innocently munches on a crust—his idea of food for thought.

All the principals were actors as much as they were singers, which is what made this production memorable. The Dane Poul Elming, a true *heldentenor*, has a big frame and a big voice, and is understandably building a reputation in the title role. When first sighted, in brown jeans, blue jumper and a trendy cross dangling from his neck, Parsifal has just shot a swan with his bow and arrow—like a stray bit of hoonage hanging wheelies in the sky. Elming projects his universal qualities very well, with the necessary hint of good nature, and in the course of the opera moves him convincingly from a Papageno-like figure to the noble knight who will become Lohengrin's father. Throughout the opera he sang with emphatic delivery and, in the benedictory concluding scene, was beautifully sweet-toned.

*Parsifal* has been so carefully constructed by Wagner that its overwhelming male dominance is not anywhere near as apparent as it is in, say, *Don Carlos*. This is largely because of the Flower Maidens Scene, and also because Kundry is the only character apart from Parsifal to be present in all three acts. Nevertheless hers is the only major female role, so much depends on how well it is sung and acted. Margaret Medlyn was superb in the part, imbuing it with the strong sense of centredness it needs, since Kundry is indifferent to both good and evil. Less equivocal is Klingsor, magnificently rendered in a dark, craggy voice by Daniel Sumegi. The high camp element was more than matched by his sense of menace. The Gurnemanz, Manfred Hemm, was suitably sturdy and avuncular, a characterisation brought out by the measured way he placed his phrases. The ashen tones of Jonathan Summers as Amfortas may have been a little less impressive, but the striking thing about this production is how good *all* the soloists were, even in the minor parts.

Clearly some of the credit for this rests not only with the individual singers, but with Jeffrey Tate as conductor. People not present asked about his tempi, a very sensible question when it comes to Wagner, since in the longer acts variations of time of up to 20 minutes are not unknown. The best thing that can be said is that the music proceeded like a seamless web, the action determining the pace, adroitly varied accordingly. At the same time, the magnificent grail music of the prelude was taken daringly slowly, so that its full majesty emerged. Tate had clearly built it up phrase by phrase, so that there was wonderful definition in all that shimmering liquidity. The playing of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra left nothing to be desired.

Perhaps only Adelaide could have brought it off. Sydney and Melbourne could not put so much effort into making a single cultural statement; indeed the management of the late Victoria State Opera rejected the idea of a *Parsifal* some years ago. But there it was by the Torrens, splendidly sung and splendidly revealed. In the course of a lengthening life I suppose I have seen a couple of hundred different opera productions; this one would have to be placed in the top ten. State Opera South Australia should be congratulated. Adelaide's Festival Centre is well on the way to becoming Australia's Festpielhaus.

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## Shadow lines

*Our Lady of the Assassins*, dir. Barbet Schroeder. 'Shocking because it isn't shocking', *Our Lady of the Assassins* progressively numbs the viewer to the possibility of violence, mirroring the day-to-day realities of urban Colombia. Fernando Vallejo (German Jaranvillo, above right), a gay middle-aged writer, returns to his birthplace—Medellin, Colombia—after 30 years of excess and success abroad. The Medellin of his youth is a romantic memory, transformed by the distribution and shipping of cocaine to the USA. The death of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar has left an ever-devolving anarchy of death and depravity in its wake. Young punks from the *communas* (slums on the city's outskirts) constantly fight for rule of the streets and don't expect to live long. The police have no control and only seem to exist in order to tidy the corpses away. Fernando says he has come home to die (although he is apparently physically well)—he has played out all other options.

A wealthy friend gives Fernando a beautiful street boy, Alexis (Anderson Ballasteros, above left), as a welcome-home gift. Fascinated by him, Fernando soon moves him into his apartment. Their joy in each other transcends the money–sex barter of their relationship. Despite being a casually vicious killer willing to shoot a taxi-driver who won't turn down the radio, Alexis is an innocent because he lacks the slightest capacity for reflection. The shadow that falls between idea and action is unknown to Alexis: but it is only in this shadow that Fernando's exhausted spirit can live and breathe. Fernando suffers from an egoistic existentialism: long having disposed of God, he has now lost faith in Man. Alexis and his ilk attend church and pray devoutly to Our Lady for protection against their enemies. Fernando is erudite, cynical, and attempts to instruct Alexis, but he is the one who is corrupted, bemused, swept along in increasing moral paralysis on Alexis' murderous sprees. Fernando buys bullets for Alexis' Beretta because without them there is no chance of survival. And the one thing that could save Alexis occurs to Fernando too late. **—Lucille Hughes**

## Toothsome trash

*America's Sweethearts*, dir. Joe Roth. This film is an attempt to recreate the madcap romantic comedies Hollywood churned out 50 years ago. After an infestation of movies together, screen sweethearts Eddie and Gwen (John Cusack and Catherine Zeta-Jones) announce that their off-screen marriage is breaking up. Their latest movie is about to be released but divorce bitterness will alienate millions of adoring fans and result in death at the box office.

The studio engages a veteran press agent (Billy Crystal) in an attempt to avoid a financial disaster. A brave face has to be put on for the first screening of the new film at an all-expenses-paid press junket at a desert hotel, which takes place even though no-one has seen a final print of the movie. For the benefit of press and fans, Eddie and Gwen are begged to show affection for each other at the film's first screening.

It is a thin script. As co-writer, Crystal has given himself the best lines. However any movie in which he has to bounce those lines off a crotch-obsessed Doberman, must be suspect.

Eddie has the personality of a dead lizard and one wonders what Gwen saw in him in the first place. As Gwen, Zeta-Jones creates a flint-hard character with apparent ease.

The shining light in this otherwise pedestrian movie is the performance of Julia Roberts, who plays Zeta-Jones' previously plain (you must be kidding!) but now late-blooming press agent/sister. She smiles the film into life. I cannot believe that Roberts has only the usual human quota of 32 teeth. In a succession of movies I have tried counting them, but her lips prevent direct access to her molars. However, when Roberts brings her incisors, canines and her pre-molars into play, even the Doberman has to play second fiddle.

It's a best-in-film performance closely followed by Crystal and the Doberman. The funniest moments come at the end when the new movie is screened for the first time. It is hilarious, but 90 minutes is a long time to wait. **—Gordon Lewis**

## The family way

*Vertical Ray of the Sun*, dir. and writer Tran Anh Hung. There's a piquant scene at the start of this domestic drama. Three sisters, the film's central players, squat outside the big sister's café, preparing their late mother's memorial meal. Talk is of food and family and sex. The middle sister disagrees with the others: she doesn't believe that the male appendage is revolting at all. In fact she has long thought it would make a delicate morsel lightly fried in garlic. From that point on, whenever the three want a treat, they have a little bowl of fried snails. This mischievous and refreshingly frank motif adds an intimate edge to a tale of three sisters and their men: a brother, husbands and boyfriends.

The film moves with a languid pace and style, exploring love and betrayal and the suffocating yet sustaining nature of Vietnamese family tradition and duty. What distinguishes it is its honesty—and its visual splendour. The natural surrounds, especially in scenes where the oldest sister's husband is away on the Mekong River, are startling. Great hunks of rock, woolly with greenery, rise up out of the water, dwarfing the lives going on below. Domestic life is also deftly depicted, from the positioning of a teapot on a table to the process of popping the scaly yellow skin off chicken's feet, readying them for cooking. All this provides context for a slow and tense build-up to a romantic crisis for the oldest sister, muddled mistaken suspicions for the middle sister and a very funny predicament (no telling) for the sexually charged, but naive little sister.

There are moments when this beautiful film (from the director of *Cyclo* and *The Scent of Green Papaya*) could have veered off into trite, lazy resolutions. Instead it leaves us with a shining story about the internal dramas, the holes that passion makes in life's fabric, and the balm of tradition and time. **—Catriona Jackson**

# Hair-raising

*Legally Blonde*, dir. Robert Luketic. This debut feature from Australia's very own Robert Luketic might look like a predictable teen flick, but don't be fooled. Beneath its candy-floss veneer, *Legally Blonde* is a searing plea for tolerance with a serious message: judge not a woman by the colour of her hair—judge her by important standards, like her taste in shoes.

Elle Wood (Reese Witherspoon, above) is pert, peppy, and addicted to Prada. And though underestimated by all and sundry, we know she has a heart of gold and will triumph in the end. When the square-jawed and politically ambitious Warner Huntingdon III (Matt Davis) dumps Elle because he thinks she's too 'Marilyn' and not 'Jackie' enough, does our dedicated worshipper of shopping let her chance for matrimonial fulfilment slip by? Hell, no. She is soon leaving her degree in Fashion Merchandising at sunny California U far behind and pursuing the man of her dreams to chilly Harvard Law School.

Of course, Elle's unselfconscious and innocent ways are mistaken for ditzyness by the arrogant East Coast intellectuals—but we know better. Without having to renounce her blondeness, Elle soon trumps Warner's new girlfriend, the snobbish (and brunette) Vivian (Selma Blair); wins a major murder case because of her finely honed fashion sense, and—most importantly—scores a wedding proposal from the handsome young law partner, Emmett (Luke Wilson).

In its cartoonish way, the film expresses an admirable commitment to feminist advancement via education, but somehow the girl power philosophy gets scrambled along the way. From being a blonde who just wants to get married, Elle ends up as a blonde lawyer who just wants to get married.

Mind you, I saw this film with an audience dominated by young Australian girls, and they lapped it up. For older cinema-lovers in the mood for some harmless

distraction, I suggest you hire a video of the far superior *Clueless* instead.

**—Brett Evans**

# Twice baked

*About Adam*, dir. Gerard Stembridge. In Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 film *Teorema*, an unnamed stranger (played by an angelic Terence Stamp) manages, in the course of a short visit, to upend the beliefs and certainties of a bourgeois Italian family—seducing the maid, the son, the mother, daughter, and the father in turn, before suddenly departing. The maid begins to levitate in religious ecstasy, the mother starts to pick up hustlers in the streets ... at the very least, things are not as they were. As you'd expect from a man who made both *The Gospel According to St Matthew* (a staple of religious education classes and Easter TV programming) and the notorious *Salo, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (banned in Australia for 17 years, briefly unbanned in 1993, and now banned again), *Teorema* is a complex and challenging film.

Although the new Irish film *About Adam* clearly takes its cue from *Teorema*, it sets its sights rather lower than that—in fact, it's the film you might expect to see if the Comedy Company did a remake of Pasolini. Which, if you think about it, is a very scary thought indeed.

In *About Adam*, the film's namesake charms the pants off three sisters, while marrying the youngest and helping their brother get his unforthcoming girlfriend into bed. The film retells the events leading up to the wedding from the perspective of each of the four siblings. Presumably each retelling is meant to uncover another layer of Adam's irresistible and perfidious charm. The fact that each of the sisters is little more than a gross stereotype—the good-time girl (Kate Hudson, below right), the sexually repressed intellectual (Frances O'Connor, below left), the voracious but unsatisfied and unhappily married older woman—and that Adam's 'charm' seems largely to consist of an old Jaguar, a leather coat and a sleazy grin, means that these 'layers' go about as deep as the paper this is printed on. That might not be such a bad thing in a light comedy, if it were actually funny, or if it weren't for the execrable performances (the only exception is the older sister, played by Charlotte Bradley).

Worst of all, the underlying message seems to be that all these women really needed to be happy with their previously unsatisfying lives was a good shag. Is it just me, or does that seem faintly misogynistic? All we need now is for Con the Fruiterer to give us a version of *Salo*.

**—Allan James Thomas**


# Then and now

When I was six I asked my grandad if he'd ever killed anyone. A Boer War veteran, he opened his mouth to speak, and said nothing. Then he looked down, and I couldn't see his eyes. My aunt led me protesting away. 'You don't ask people things like that,' she said.

We'd been chatting, Grandad and I, snuggled up on the sofa. I'd been helping him fill his pipe: no poncy tinned tobacco for him. His stuff was Thick Twist, a tarry rope that looked like liquorice and smelled like a turpentined jockstrap. The ritual was as soothing, as important, as a Japanese tea ceremony: the slicing and crumbling of the tobacco, the filling of the pipe, the several goes at lighting it. All this was highly interesting, and I had bossily, clumsily, crumbled his tobacco and filled his pipe—not his best smoke that day, I think. Then I remembered that he'd been a soldier long ago and just asked him the question. As you do.

John Doyle understands this sort of thing better than any current dramatist I can think of. In *Changi*, the best program to grace television since Denis Potter's *The Singing Detective*, memories of war return unbidden on the back of chance phrases, smells, songs. Old soldiers like my grandad, undebriefed by post-traumatic-stress therapists, are helpless when their carapace of dignity, *sangfroid*, even benevolence, is pierced.

These experiences ring through *Changi*. Each man drawn for us in time and place, here and there, then and now, Doyle's six main characters are shown at Changi, and in the Australias of Curtin and Howard. The pairing of young and old actors is inspired: Matthew Newton and Charles Tingwell; Leon Ford and Terry Norris; at times the link is uncanny. Kate Woods' direction has caught and spun a look here, a mannerism there, to give a sense of cohesion that recalls the great unities while flouting them comprehensively, for the script flashes back and forth uncompromisingly. In lesser hands this would have tired the audience, but here the flashbacks are as deft and assured as in Bergman, as needful as the Porter's scene in *Macbeth*.

Our life histories have a way of intersecting with the big picture. Post-war rationing fed British children on reindeer and seal meat, put whale meat in the mouths of the generation that would try to save it later. Farm meat was scarce; the soldiers needed it more. The ones who survived combat returned relatively well nourished, dressed in bad demob suits. Prisoners of war returned too, hollow-eyed, skeletal, tight-mouthed. In the years that followed, the more resilient ones got on with things, tucked away the memories behind barriers. Changi's survivors, forbidden to talk of their experiences, got on with things, but suppression has its price. This unexpressed pain is part of Doyle's concerns. When Bill, the mathematician, returns, finding his young love married to someone else, the contrast is striking. His fine-drawn thinness shows up the plump, shiny young husband whose 'essential' job prevented him from going to war. The tension is almost unbearable, but the little tragedy is presented gracefully, naturally. There is nothing more to be said and he goes away, after polite goodbyes.

Doyle was interviewed on ABC radio about the series in early October. He sounds very different from his TV alter ego, Roy Slaven, part of the Roy & HG team (with Greig Pickhaver). You remember that he was an English teacher, and academic; the history is sound. He thinks aloud, bounces gently on prepositions ('We were going to, to, to, ah …') before accomplishing the verbal flip with double twist.

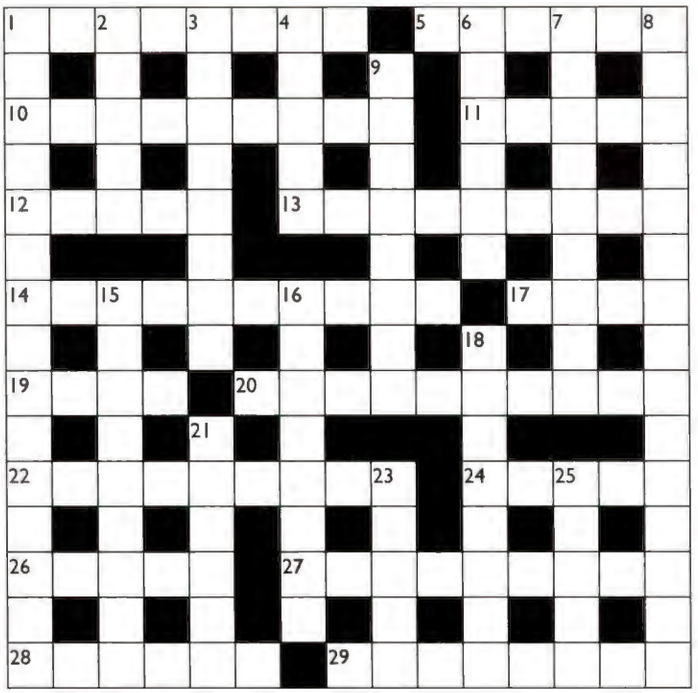
The idea was originally for a sitcom, presumably à la *It Ain't Arf 'Ot, Mum* or *Hogan's Heroes*. That lasted, said Doyle, about half a day, given the subject matter. But the humour is one of the best things about the series: what we end up with is something that has a flavour of Spike Milligan's *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall*. There is also something else: a sense of recognition, the kind of reaction you have to something that feels right, that rings true. *Changi* is all that. Alexander Pope had it pat: 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.' Many people will feel a sense of kinship with the men in *Changi*, even if they are women and not born when these things happened. It will be hard for some to confront the things that are being remembered here—the actors who play the Japanese soldiers are doing something extraordinary.

But while we're on the extraordinary: the Great Debate did the unthinkable to John Howard when it stalled the inexorable roll he'd been on with his Heir of Churchill stance. Nine's Worm gave a hands-down win to Beazley. Laurie Oakes' unminced words, born of honest surprise, gave a small but welcome hope to a battered Labor Party that was perhaps thanking the shades of Curtin and Chifley that Beazley had stayed on the topic and given lucid explanations for things that one could no longer trust the tabloid press and radio to report.

**Juliette Hughes** is a freelance writer.


# *Eureka Street* Cryptic Crossword no. 98, November 2001

**Devised by**
**Joan Nowotny IBVM**



ACROSS

1. Read the menu; it states altered constituents in food are most appetising. (8)
5. In the film world, an Oscar establishes him as best actor in spite of previous alarms. (6)
10. In stormy weather, the Rhine, time out of number, flows through a bog. (2,3,4)
11. Degree soldier conferred primarily for the sake of the glamour? (5)
12. Kevin Anderson, initially, put aside the equipment that had gone out of order. (5)
13. O, when Ella collapsed, it was the day before the feast. (9)
14. Plant the trees again, for fear Eastern Standard Time somehow brings less shade. (10)
17. Bones on a mountain in Thessaly. (4)
19. The nation bets on it. (4)
20. Arrived safely inside, out of the rain. (4,3,3)
22. Notice Russian space station has skilful crew. That's most commendable! (9)
24. Time to honour the muse of love. (5)
26. Maintain an extravagant interior? How stupid! (5)
27. Sealed agreement in plate? Could be false! (9)
28. Grey south-east clouds will dump water, probably, on the hot spring. (6)
29. Forty winks before a shower should keep tiredness in check? (8)

DOWN

1. North American children may go about doing this on 13-across. It's your choice: inconvenience or generosity! (5-2-8)
2. Do this and take notice, but don't stay put. (3,2)
3. Yet I find difficulty in discovering the name. (8)
4. Sara at first has desire to be smart! (5)
6. The recreation ground is frequently used. (6)
7. Went back, doubtfully, to red serges for military uniform material, perhaps. (9)
8. Sort of school in Britain, not of great importance but up-to-date? (9,6)
9. Declared girl, with bearing, to have lost social standing—in France, anyway. (8)
15. Go along with current syndicate. (9)
16. Figure out how I somehow hid broom. (8)
18. World communication system to bury after taxes. (8)
21. Ornamental strip on wall releases it, we hear, from the effects of the chill, apparently. (6)
23. Provide with the finish you, reportedly, want. (5)
25. Nigerian town wherein smoking, for instance, is tabu. James, however, ignores it. (5)

**Solution to Crossword no. 97, October 2001**

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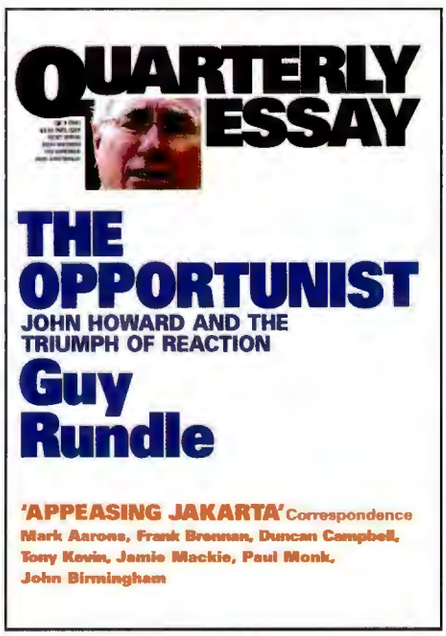


## Quarterly Essay

### The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction

By Guy Rundle

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