Contents

Andrew Hamilton
Elusive Easter's challenge to wider society ................................................................. Page 3

Tim Kroenert
Eye on the messy ethics of drone warfare ................................................................. Page 6

Binoy Kampmark
Greens' senate reform spin is sweetened nonsense ....................................................... Page 9

Fiona Katauskas
Bleached as ....................................................................................................................... Page 13

Brian Matthews
Running after Merv Lincoln .......................................................................................... Page 15

Bill Rush, Marlene Marburg, Maureen O'Brien, John Cranmer
Lazarus at our gate (Easter poems) ................................................................................... Page 18

Moira Rayner
Change is possible when democracy runs deep ............................................................. Page 22

Frank Brennan
Deja vu for Timor as Turnbull neglects boundary talks .................................................. Page 26

David Ishaya Osu
The Tale of Meddling Mama Daniel ................................................................................ Page 31

Osmond Chiu
A new year, a new Bill? ................................................................................................... Page 35

Ellena Savage
Queer experience is not limited to trauma ......................................................................... Page 37

Tim Kroenert
'Jilted' Brownless saga shows AFL sexism still runs deep ............................................... Page 41

Andrew Hamilton
Humility is the forgotten virtue this election year .......................................................... Page 44

David James
CommInsure exposé proves spin doesn't always win ...................................................... Page 47

Fiona Katauskas
Playing your cards (hard) right ...................................................................................... Page 49

Gillian Bouras
The epic life of the real Iphigenia .................................................................................... Page 51

Justin Glyn
Vacuous politics breeds vacuous politicians ................................................................... Page 54
Elusive Easter's challenge to wider society

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

One of the abiding human challenges is to endure with gallantry prolonged hard times. It is enshrined in Australian memories of long years of drought that drive some off the land while others stay. More jocularly, it is reflected in the mixed pity and admiration accorded supporters who never give up on their unfailingly failing football team.
But the challenge is also felt in everyday, domestic experience. For year after year, for example, a man may spend his days caring for a wife with dementia long after she has ceased to recognise him.

To many the challenge to endurance comes from a public world in which small gains by humanity are overtaken by huge losses.

How can we keep pressing for better times when we rejoice that the Berlin Wall has been excised, only to see it metastasise in the walls of Israel, Europe and the United States?

Why bother about people who seek protection from persecution or about our natural environment when the small initiatives we take are overrun by a flood tide of brutality and cynicism? What hope of building harmony in society when the Paris bombings are followed by those of Brussels?

There are many ways of responding to this challenge. We may simply get on with things, without worrying about any larger meaning or lack of it. We may instead give up on our hopes and commitments, acknowledging that it is all too hard.

We may also deny the intractability of the situation in which we find ourselves, sunnily optimistic that all will be well. Or we can live like Cassandra, daily prophesying doom from the sidelines.

Because this challenge is universal, the Christian celebration of Easter is of wider interest. At its heart it is a meditation on personal and political catastrophe that seems final and ineluctable, and on how such things are to be approached.

The key to the Easter story lies in the relationship between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

"At the heart of Easter is a meditation on personal and political catastrophe that seems
final and ineluctable, and on how such things are to be approached.

Good Friday is heavy and intimidating, full of soldiers in barracks or escorting prisoners, of high officials passing judgment, of horrid sights and sounds of a man being flogged and hammered to a cross, and of dark experiences of betrayal and abandonment. It ends in darkness come early.

There is no escape from Good Friday - it is everybody's public and personal nightmare.

Easter Sunday is as light as a feather, full of sunlight, rumours arising, angel messages, an immoveable stone gently moved, a presence barely noticed, a welcome guest wafting through locked doors, a familiar figure on the beach, a movement of air that lifts despair.

Easter Sunday is not for nailing down. The joy, energy and hope it brings blow where they will.

Although Easter Sunday is so different from Good Friday, it does not cancel it out. The two days are wired together.

Easter Sunday does not flinch from the public brutality and corruption of Good Friday, and the ripping apart of a man's hopes, promises, friendships and self-respect. All these things took place and are written in stone.

But that is not all that is to be said. Something waits, light as air, which whips and hammers cannot smash, nor can betrayal and hatred crush. Even in the smashing and unravelling, God is present, turning chains to dust and desperation to hope.

On Easter Day the darkness of Good Friday is made translucent and life-bearing. Deadly earnestness yields to laughter.

For those who believe in the Christ of the Easter story, Easter Sunday remains elusive, and happily so. They cannot prove that Christ is risen, but may smell Resurrection in the air. They may live with death, abandonment and betrayal, feeling the darkness, but trust over the horizon in a dawning they can't see.

The challenge with which the Easter story deals faces us all, whatever we believe. We have to live through it with the resources that we have to hand. But the disposition commended in the Easter story is a blessing for anyone wanting to be constant in the face of personal loss and public regression.

It consists in recognising our world for what it is, finding a hope that goes beyond the clear evidence of what seems possible, and so responding with good spirit to whatever comes.

Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of Eureka Street.
Eye on the messy ethics of drone warfare

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

Eye in the Sky (PG). Director: Gavin Hood. Starring: Helen Mirren, Aaron Paul, Alan Rickman, Barkhad Abdi. 102 minutes

With more than 30 dead in Brussels just a few short months after the horrors in Paris, the Western world again confronts an assailant in ISIS who deals in fear and bloodshed.

In contemplating our responses to such attacks we recognise the historical and current geopolitical realities that have bred the ideologies that fuel them.

At the same time we balance the desire for revenge or the abstract need to shut down a diabolical foe at all costs, against the actual costs of violent retaliation - the inevitable loss of further innocent lives, and the opening of new wounds in which old ideological hatred might fester. Violence begets violence, and the ethics are inevitably messy.

This very messiness is the stuff of a new British film that coincidentally arrives in Australia this week. Eye in the Sky is set in a world of suicide bombings on the one hand, and drone warfare on the other. Its focus is far from Western Europe, on a small house in Nairobi, Kenya, where a group of known terrorists have, it is supposed by the American and British military personnel who surveil them, sought refuge in a safe house.

When it emerges that there are in fact plans for an imminent terrorist attack, the mission objective readily changes from capture to kill. But when a small girl wanders into the blast zone, suddenly the stakes become much thornier.
This turn of events sparks a series of human and political responses from the various players.

There’s the young American drone pilot with his finger on the trigger (Paul) who won’t pull it without knowing that all the checks and balances are in place to minimise the danger to the girl.

There’s the pragmatic British officer running the mission (Mirren) who sees ethics and bureaucracy as stumbling blocks to the need to act now. Her superior (the late Rickman in one of his last performances) agrees, but has to deal face to face with politicians who are worried about the cases each scenario (to kill or not to kill) presents both for the public good and public perception.

There’s also the Kenyan undercover agent (Abdi) on the ground in Nairobi who quietly goes about being the unspoken hero of the film, winging it at times to take matters into his own hands, at risk to his own life. Not to mention the girl herself, who, oblivious to the international incident that is unfolding around her, reveals herself to the audience to be resourceful and tenacious.

As our fondness for her grows, her actual life is weighed in distant halls of power against the as yet abstract lives of a speculative suicide bombing. We gradually recognise her as the human face of any individual who might be ‘collateral damage’ in the hyper-technological ‘war on terror’.

This is the kind of film that is deliberately hard to keep pace with. It arrays these perspectives on the table and points to them one by one. Just as you feel your sympathies shifting, it points to another, and you have to rethink your position again.

This shifting of sympathies is helped by both the outstanding cast and an exceptional script which, to its credit, offers no quick fixes, instead staring its ethical quandary down to the last harrowing moment. The only certainty it offers is suggested by a commanding officer who tells the young pilot to go home and rest and come back tomorrow. When, presumably, it will all happen again.
Tim Kroenert is assistant editor of Eureka Street.
Greens' senate reform spin is sweetened nonsense

AUSTRALIA

Binoy Kampmark

And so it is underway. A High Court challenge has been announced by Senator Bob Day of the Family First Party and Liberal Democratic Senator David Leyonhjelm to the constitutional legality of the electoral reforms that last week kept Canberra's entire political establishment up for hours.
The government’s voting reforms, which passed in the Senate with the assistance of the Greens and Senator Nick Xenophon, mean that voters can allocate their own preferences above the line on the Senate ballot paper at any election after 1 July.

If considering below the line voting, electors will have to number at least six squares, a point designed to make sure the vote ‘has a reasonable life upon the distribution of preferences’. This effectively puts pay to the idea of group voting tickets, ostensibly eliminating the micro-party preference game.

Day's fighting words centred on disenfranchisement, specifically of 3 million voters. 'The Liberal Party, Nationals, Greens and Nick Xenophon teamed up to get rid of independent senators and minor parties. We think that is undemocratic.'

Prior to the electoral changes, Leyonhjelm claimed that similar reforms to the NSW upper resulted in a 'default to a "one above the line" choice for vast numbers of people, which will mean everyone who votes for anyone other than a major party' will result in that vote's exhaustion.

A point of difference to the current Commonwealth change, however, is that voters in a federal election are required to number more squares than the mere single option in NSW.

The arguments by Day may well be considered dramatic, but they are significant enough to warrant a concern about what will happen in the highest court in the country. In point of fact, when 1375 votes went missing in the official count of the West Australian half-senate election in 2013, the High Court sitting as the Court of Disputing Returns declared the result null, necessitating a re-run.

This unfortunate turn in Australian politics also reflects the continued scepticism, if not outright hostility, of traditional party machines which spout the rhetoric of political gaming as if it were unique to micro parties. Labor's Gary Gray typified this when he expressed unhappiness at his own party's opposition to the voting reforms, suggesting it
preferred 'ballot manipulators' and 'pop-up' parties.

"The notion of a 'deal free' environment that manifests actual voting intention is a patent fiction. Party machineries constantly make tactical decisions to preference individual candidates that have policies less opposed than others."

Any suggestion that the High Court challenge will favour the senators should be taken with caution. When it comes to various facets of Australia's election laws, the High Court veers between deferring to parliamentary wisdom and occasionally questioning it.

Such jurisprudence as that on freedom of speech is a poor substitute for an entrenched bill of rights provision, and it does not necessarily hold that the bench will be swayed. The High Court remains overly focused on proper procedure, rather than abstract ideas of democracy.

There is also legal authority suggesting that Day and Leyonhjelm are barking up the wrong constitutional tree. 'The argument about disenfranchisement is plainly wrong,' wrote Anne Twomey dismissively in The Australian on Monday.

Twomey's arguments betray a curiously limited view of the Senate system, largely in the way they privilege the dominant parties as wise, non-manipulative and sound. Such reforms, she argues, actually eliminate 'above-the-line preferences ... dictated by party powerbrokers'.

Additionally, 'no longer can voters be deceived by backroom preference deals that cause a vote for one party to be used to elect a person from another party with completely opposed policies'.

The notion advanced by Twomey of a 'deal free' environment that manifests actual voting intention is a patent fiction of the Australian political system. Party machineries constantly make tactical decisions to preference individual candidates that have, if not opposed policies, policies less opposed than others.

This phenomenon is repeated at every election, often based on personal matters between candidates veering between the self-serving and sordid.

The very notion of a preferential system is one that diminishes the strength of a primary vote in favour of a secondary one that accepts that second-best is necessary. While the first-past-the-post system is decidedly iniquitous, the preferential system has not served to eliminate its own set of problems.

The idea that these laws are, in Twomey's words, 'more conducive to representing the genuine choice of the people in electing their Senate' is untrue. It is a view expressed by Greens leader Senator Richard Di Natale, who suggested 'the Senate that's delivered after the next election is the one people vote for.'

What these voting reforms serve to do is give the false impression of eliminating manipulation while diluting Australia's political base in favour of monochrome party politics.
Di Natale's argument that this 'strengthens our democracy' by a redistribution of power to the elector is sweetened nonsense. The Senate will cease being a forum giving expression to voters angered by parties who have estranged the electorate, rather than embrace it.

Dr Binoy Kampmark is a former Commonwealth Scholar who lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne.
Bleached as

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas
Running after Merv Lincoln

AUSTRALIA

Brian Matthews

I suppose you could say it was Merv Lincoln who started it all.

Lincoln, born November 1933, was an Australian middle distance runner who, in the wake of the great John Landy and contemporaneously with international world record holders like Derek Ibbotson and László Tábori, helped transform the mile race into an event that drew huge crowds, the images filling the front pages of newspapers.

And so I was easily tempted away from my books in Melbourne University’s Baillieu Library this very week 59 years ago - 23 March 1957 - to stroll the short distance to the running track where Lincoln was going to attempt the four minute mile.

In the recent National Championships, Lincoln had failed to crack four minutes and been beaten by a newcomer, Herb Elliott. But now, a couple of weeks later, against a strong field and paced over the first two laps by a promising 19-year-old named Ron Clarke, Lincoln was having another shot.

As a postgraduate student with an accommodating timetable, the flexibility of which I was putting under serious strain, I went to watch the race, more out of curiosity than a committed interest in athletics. I played football and cricket in their seasons and squash most of the year round. I was not a runner.

The four minute mile had so captured the public imagination in both hemispheres that it was not surprising to find the tight surrounds of the circular track packed to overflowing.
Lincoln was ready for the challenge. It was, as he recalled it, 'a beautiful day for running, no wind, a slight dampness in the air and despite the ... huge crowd, I felt that the atmosphere was village-like'.

Anyone who saw that run remembers Clarke leading the field through a furious first two laps. Then, in Lincoln's words, 'I flew home over the last two laps, with the crowd roaring encouragement. After [the finish] there was an anxious pause of three minutes, as the timekeepers compared their times. It was unanimous; I had run the mile in 3 minutes 58.9 seconds.' In Dublin the following year he ran 3:55.9.

Though I remember with great affection that shining day at the Melbourne University track, it was not that occasion which put Lincoln firmly into my consciousness where he has remained ever since. That crucial day came in March 1970 - though I couldn't vouch for its being the 23rd.

"Once I had conquered the intense desire to give up, I gradually discovered a new personal phenomenon: I could run a long way - not fast but relentlessly!"

As the new academic year began, my second as a university teacher, I found myself overweight and unfit and in only fair health following a bout of peritonitis. Injuries had ended my football 'career' some years earlier; a young and growing family had rendered long Saturdays playing cricket both difficult and, more to the point, strangely unpopular.

I still played squash, but an hour on the squash court once a week was not the answer.

At this critical moment I heard Lincoln interviewed on ABC morning radio. His fine track career and distinctions were now, of course, well behind him, but he was still involved in athletics and fitness. Just half an hour's running each weekday, I heard him say, would soon improve your general condition and be excellent for the cardiovascular system.

Always an early riser, I was out on our quiet country road the next morning around first light intent on running just half a mile. Start quietly, I thought. Be sensible. Some days later, when I had recovered and various outraged muscles had stopped twanging, I determined to carry on.

Lincoln had made no promises. It was just good advice to take or leave. Once I had conquered the intense desire to give up, I gradually discovered a new personal phenomenon: I could run a long way - not fast but relentlessly!

In those early 1970s, however, running, especially at odd times, was still regarded as eccentric, maybe even sinister. 'Why do you do it?' the 'milky' asked me one morning, pausing for his 'smoke-o'. 'Are you a footy umpire or somethin'?' And then there was the elderly bloke who, driving past in his ute, stared back at me for so long to demonstrate his scorn and disbelief that he drove off the road.

But I was undaunted, full of euphoria and endorphins and a 'wild surmise', like Keats' 'stout Cortez', though unlike him I was no longer stout, girth and weight having been left behind on countless cross country trails and several marathons.

Then, just four weeks before the Lincoln 23 March anniversary would arrive for 2016, and 46 years after my first ragged half mile, my GP, himself a runner, looked up from his
study of an x-ray of my sacroiliac - that favourite joint of stand-up comics and pop lyric writers - and said, 'It's all over, mate, I'm afraid. You'll have to walk, or ride a bike.'

Nevertheless, you were right, Merv. I don't regret a moment of it and I'm bravely considering defying my GP if only my stupid sacroiliac would stop whingeing ...

Brian Matthews is honorary professor of English at Flinders University and an award winning columnist and biographer.
Lazarus at our gate (Easter poems)

CREATIVE

Bill Rush, Marlene Marburg, Maureen O'Brien, John Cranmer

From the Gospel of Cleophas

It was a conversation we didn't want to end.
Feet and hands washed, we talked as lamps were lit.

Bread and salted fish never tasted better;
the wine sweet as any from Herod's cellar.
It was a meal we didn't want to end.

After a prayer he lifted up the loaf,
tore it in two as if it were his own body
broken in Jerusalem.

Our slow hearts quickened;
mouths mute in recognition.
We did not want this meal to end.

Jesus, our host, then and always.

- Bill Rush

Behold the lamb

Behold the lamb,
woolly around the heart,
milk for the soul,
and gambolling spirit.
Behold the lamb
treading grain dutifully
in furrowed fields.
Behold the lamb,
obedient, docile and meek,
bewildered on crags,
alone in the desert. Lost.
Behold the hesitant lamb
homeless in Jerusalem,
crouching in Gethsemane.
Abused lamb slaughtered
without a bleat
without a sound.

Behold the lamb
whose silence in my heart says -
Come and see.
Come, become
the lion and the lamb.

- Marlene Marburg

Lazarus at our gate
The rich man was preoccupied.
Busy in his own way,
what with household affairs
and choosing the best linens for his suits,
appearance matter to him,
and organising the dinners,
endless dinners with friends and colleagues.
Fun of course, but important matters
to discuss too.
The drinks bill was astronomical,
but his purse was large
and he was generous,
while still acting responsibly.
To be fair, he wasn't a leaner,
he was one of the lifters.
Helped to keep the country running,
so to speak,
and speak he did
often, on many topics.
He was a leader,
and felt justified when others,
in the region,
followed his lead.
It wasn't that he didn't see
Lazarus,
but more that he
saw him differently.
Break the rules,
help one starving beggar
and before you know it
there will be a flood of them
on your door step.
That's how he argued
and plenty agreed.
Judgement day was a long way off.

- Maureen O'Brien
A Blessing for Easter Ongoing

May each coming of a new day
Greet you with inner light
Full of colour and joy
Immersing your eyes and your soul
With new awareness of what it means
To be alive

6th April 2015
- John Cranmer


Dr Marlene Marburg PhD is a director of Kardia Formation in Hawthorn. She is a spiritual director, formator and poet. She has two poetry collections *Grace Undone: Love* and *Grace Undone: Passion*.

A resident alien from South Australia in semi-hiding in Melbourne's outer east, John Crammer makes a profession of being grandparent and recycled Uniting Church Minister.
Change is possible when democracy runs deep

AUSTRALIA

Moira Rayner

Life is there ahead of you and either one tests oneself in its challenges or huddles in the valleys of a dreamless day-to-day existence whose only purpose is the preservation of illusory security and safety. The latter is what the vast majority of people choose to do, fearing the adventure into the unknown.

- Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals

When I received my invitation to 'lead' the Palm Sunday Walk for Refugees my first response was to ignore it. This was partly ego and partly disillusionment. I don't think marches help any more.
It’s true that in Melbourne at least 6000 people walked or struggled or strode along Spencer Street, some behind banners (Labor for Refugees, The Greens, Socialist Left), some from religious groups (from Quakers to Jesuits), and some with other agendas, such as the beefy unionists who haven’t done well in the public eye of late.

Also a fair few ordinary mums, dads and grandmothers for refugees, and dismayed Liberals offended by the cruelties inflicted in our name.

These were the sort of protestors who picketed Lady Cilento hospital in Brisbane to stop Immigration contractors from forcing a burned baby and her mum back to Nauru against medical advice. So the minister moved her to community detention whence she may be removed at any time without notice.

I no longer believe that broad marches for huge national issues have any effect on local powerbrokers. I believe as Saul Alinsky said that the most powerful force for change is local activism on local issues and generational organisation from the grass roots up.

Alinsky wrote the 'bible' for protest-led change. He was a Chicago organiser whose tactics Obama used as a young civil rights lawyer to build 'change you can believe in for local Chicago families'. He wrote a lot between the 1940s and the 1970s, when he wrote and I read his Rules for Radicals [PDF].

Some of his 24 rules are gospel today. Thirteen are rules of 'power tactics', including:

1. Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
2. Never go outside the experience of your people.
5. Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.
6. A good tactic is one that your people enjoy.
7. A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag.
8. Keep the pressure on, with different tactics and actions, and utilise all events of the period for your purpose.
12. The price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative.
13. Pick the target, freeze it, personalise it, and polarise it.

I have been involved in protests, but few. When Kennett demolished the public sector in 1992 I stayed behind and answered the phones in the Equal Opportunity Commission when 100,000 folk marched on parliament. Nothing changed.

I'd taken part in a moratorium march way way back in time, but only because I was personally affected - a malevolent colleague of my father had 'dobbed in' my brother as a draft-dodger, which forced me to look at the evils of conscription in a dirty little Asian war.

I went to a Palm Sunday march in which we sang 'We Shall Overcome' and linked hands to encircle the city centre of Perth (1972), St George's Anglican Cathedral, with love.

And in 1976 I took part in a well-attended lawyers' protest against the local law society inviting Sir John Kerr to lecture their annual dinner about constitutional law, wearing a 'Gough Whitlam' mask out the front of the Parmelia Hotel while he scuttled in the back entrance.

Nothing changed. But then, I believed. I believed in 'movements'.

I now believe that there are rules for effecting change by protest and they are meant to be adapted for efficacy - and that organisation and self-interest, friendship, and building on local centres of power such as churches are what make change possible.

"I have been involved in protests, but few. When Kennett demolished the public sector in 1992 for example I stayed behind and answered the phones in the Equal Opportunity Commission when 100,000 folk marched on parliament. Nothing changed."

Alinsky did too. He said that mums and dads around kitchen tables and local group meetings on local issues are the core of organisation, which is a generational thing and cannot be quickly raised or maintained. He said that the future of effective change is based on friendships, and small projects and small wins, which build confidence.

The most important principle is to understand the fundamental purpose of our lives, and work together to improve our own world. When the roots of democracy run deep, change is possible.

That is the principle behind the success of Melbourne citizens responding so immediately at Spencer Street when the new Border Patrol sought to co-opt the Victorian police and public transport inspectors to stop and demand passers-by to prove their citizenship and residency status. Had they not acted at once and with originality Australia could have become a police state overnight.

That is not what the Walk for Refugees can ever deliver.

We should be building on church groups as centres for community activity about the
quality of our own lives and our own streets and homes.

It is in our interests to protect the fundamental human rights of anyone who comes here in search of help. We should see the need to improve the quality of our lives by meeting them where they are, and where we may be one day, offering practical help in a spirit of love.

Moira Rayner is a barrister and writer.

Photo by Wilbert Mireh SJ
Deja vu for Timor as Turnbull neglects boundary talks

AUSTRALIA

Frank Brennan

When Malcolm Turnbull became prime minister six months ago, our Timorese neighbours thought there might be an opportunity to draw a line on the past and to kick start the negotiation of a permanent maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste. For the moment, they find themselves sadly mistaken.
Rui Maria de Araujo, the fairly new prime minister of Timor-Leste, wrote to our very new prime minister Malcolm Turnbull inviting him to turn a new leaf in the Australia-Timor relationship. It was not to be.

However the Timorese should not lose heart. They are well used to winning the hearts and minds of Australians even when Australian political leaders appear to be tone deaf to their pleas. This time they have convinced the Labor Party about the justice of their cause, and there is every chance that the Australian community will rally behind them after the federal election.

Behind the scenes, there is still plenty of legal intrigue about Australia's 2004 bugging of the Timor cabinet offices during the negotiation of CMATS, the most recent treaty delaying the negotiation of a permanent maritime boundary.

Australia has refused to issue a passport to the ex-ASIS officer, 'Witness K', who was involved in the bugging and who is happy to give evidence for the Timorese before an international tribunal. It would be best for both sides if the neighbour's dirty laundry were not put on public display.

Under CMATS, the two countries agreed to put the negotiation of a permanent maritime boundary on hold for up to 50 years. The hope was that a business plan for the exploitation of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas deposit in the contested Timor Sea could be finalised within six years and the mining completed before the need to negotiate a maritime boundary.

This was not to be. It is now nine years since CMATS came into effect and there is still no prospect of an agreed business plan.

"Turnbull will have to stop preaching on the South China Sea if he is not prepared to act in the Timor Sea."
The Timorese have a sense of deja vu with Australian politics. Back in 2002, the Howard Liberal-National Party Government decided to withdraw from the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice in relation to the determination of maritime boundaries. The Labor Party in opposition was not able to commit to a reversal of that decision.

When Howard’s Foreign Minister Alexander Downer then rushed the CMATS treaty through the parliamentary review process cutting corners with indecent haste, the Labor Party made no commitment to review the treaty when elected to government.

Labor prime ministers Gillard and Rudd never committed to negotiating a maritime boundary nor to resubmitting to the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

At last year’s ALP National Conference, the Timorese and their supporters had a partial win, breaking the bipartisan Australian consensus on delaying the negotiation of a maritime boundary. The ALP party platform was amended to read:
In Government, Labor will enter into structured engagement with Timor-Leste to negotiate the settlement of maritime boundaries between our two countries. Labor reaffirms our commitment to a rules-based international system, underpinned by a philosophy of multilateralism and institutions like the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In light of this, in Government Labor will review its reservations to the United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to the settlement of maritime boundary disputes through the ICJ and the International Tribunal of the Law of the Sea (ITLOS).

This was only a partial win because though there was a fresh commitment to commencing negotiations for a permanent maritime boundary, the further commitment was only to review the reservations to UNCLOS first put in place by Alexander Downer.

On 18 January, Turnbull went to Washington and lectured the Americans about the virtues of UNCLOS and the desirability of the Americans and the Chinese subjecting themselves to international law.

Referring to the rising tensions in the South China Sea, Turnbull told his audience that ‘unilateral actions are in nobody’s interest. They are a threat to the peace and good order of the region on which the economic growth and national security of all our neighbours depend. These differences should be resolved by international law.’

Obviously he had not considered Australia’s long term stand on the Timor Sea.

The real breakthrough for the Timorese came when Tanya Plibersek, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, told the National Press Club on 10 February:
If we want to insist that other nations play by the rules, we also need to adhere to them. The maritime boundary dispute has poisoned our relations with our newest neighbour. This must change for their sake and for ours.
A Shorten Labor Government will redouble our efforts to conclude good faith negotiations with Timor Leste to settle the maritime boundaries between our two countries. If we are not successful in negotiating a settlement with our neighbour, we are prepared to submit ourselves to international adjudication or arbitration.

That night, speaking on ABC Lateline, she told Tony Jones that Labor was now committed not just to kick-starting good faith negotiations for a permanent maritime boundary but also that ‘if we couldn’t come to a resolution [we will] submit ourselves to international
adjudication or arbitration'.

She had communicated this advice to Xanana Gusmao the previous day and 'he was very pleased to hear that'.

Four things have become clearer since Australia was taken to the cleaners by Timor in the International Court of Justice in 2014:

A commitment by Australia and Timor-Leste to negotiate a maritime boundary would be no matter of concern to Indonesia.

The situation in the South China Sea could well be improved (and definitely not worsened) were Australia to commit to the negotiation of a maritime boundary with Timor Leste.

The CMATS Treaty has run its course. It has not achieved its primary objective which was the facilitation of the immediate development of Sunrise. It is now an irritant.

The espionage case and the refusal of a passport for Witness K will be an ongoing sore in the relationship unless it be in the interests of both parties to discontinue all such proceedings.

Were Labor to win the forthcoming federal election, there would be no reason to delay any further the negotiation of a maritime boundary. If on the other hand, Turnbull is returned with a mandate in his own right, he should come to see that Australian values and sound political principles support the need for his government to draw the line on past attempts to foreclose on boundary negotiations.

Given the ALP change and his own commitment to innovation and bold, clear thinking, Turnbull is unlikely to pledge his government to a further 41-year stand-off with Timor on the negotiation of a maritime boundary. Decent Australians and Timorese expect a change. Turnbull will have to stop preaching on the South China Sea if he is not prepared to act in the Timor Sea.
Frank Brennan SJ is professor of law at Australian Catholic University and Adjunct Professor at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.

Main image: Shutterstock
The Tale of Meddling Mama Daniel

CREATIVE

David Ishaya Osu

Since the birth of human businesses, human beings have not learnt to mind their businesses - folks are always hungry to interfere in a person's private part. It's simply not advisable to meddle in other people's affairs, unnecessarily. Courtesy demands that you respect a person's decision - help if you can help, but never do because you want to make mockery of the person's intelligence.
Well, I am sounding like this because of what happened in my neighbourhood. There was a fight.

My elder sister was negotiating with a mobile seller of wears, and a neighbour, fondly called Mama Daniel, interfered, asking the seller not to sell to my sister, Elizabeth. Perhaps she was only joking.

And my sister pounced on the 40-something-year-old woman. They exchanged blows on their bodies. And my sister, who was more muscular and raging, grabbed the woman's wrapper and opened her secret. This is where everything ended and began, simple and complicated.

See this fact: my elder has been a psychiatric patient since 2006, and the entire neighbourhood and people close to us know about this. This has been a huge battle in the family, especially as the public barely have an education on the incredible intricacies of psychiatric disorders.

It appears that only I understand my sister deeply, little wonder I'm her closest friend - perhaps I'm myself psychotic. Well, telepathy and empathy are the major functional mediums available to me.

Let me tell you a little about my sister and me: My sister was the one person that processed my birth. By birth I don't mean the biological procedure; I mean something else. I mean my love for books, my love for poetry, the love that has no name. It has everything to do with water and my lifespan.

It was from my sister's pile of books that I stole poetry, or say poetry kidnapped me. Being a literature student, she had some copies of West African Verse, The Joys of Motherhood, and many other dramas. This was the beginning of my blood-relationship with my sister. We spoke through books and blood; we flooded the house with bookblood.

Flashback: before the incidence of her mental illness, my sister was the type that could
make rocks turn to something orange - her jokes and joviality were her only names.

There was this day she prepared a pot of okra. Okra wasn't a friend of mine, so I quarrelled her for cooking my enemy. Strange as her smile, she came to my ears: 'Does okra affect your masturbation?' Mad girl, always using metaphors to mend a face.

"This was the beginning of my blood-relationship with my sister. We spoke through books and blood; we flooded the house with bookblood."

Mama Daniel and Elizabeth. Of course, even if the seller had agreed, my sister wouldn't have bought whatever she had bargained. Most times, if she needed a thing direly, she comes to make a request - it's one reason she's provided with every wear and ware she will need.

My sister's behaviours are periodic, yet unpredictable and erratic - lots of mood swings, seclusions, and activities like needling, collecting eggs and arranging and re-arranging her room. Elizabeth is not harmful to humans the way the public have misconceived about folks battling with mental issues.

As a matter of truth, she makes my best company. When she is in her lighter moods, she greets and laughs with every colour of the day.

Because not every voice can pacify my sister when she's provoked to anger, we often allow her to shout out her anger and hit stuffs just to release and relief herself, and in less than 30 minutes, she forgets she ever went angry. My sister is incredible; she takes and gives us understanding.

The noise at the gate was what drew me out of the room. What I saw turned my face to the corner in our house where flowers sat. I got my mother's wrapper for Mama Daniel. I never knew it had to do with my sister.

The women who watched the fight couldn't save Mama Daniel and my sister. Nakedness was what changed the air. It pained me that all what the onlookers did was to pass gossips to their itching ears. Dangerous. When we gossip, we wound ourselves. When we gossip, we wound ourselves.

I embraced my sister, while she kept spilling heavy words. She has had her way with language and literary devices; but I can't tell you if she's had her way with people's perception about her condition - she never gives a fig! One of her statements got me teary: 'mind your injury, and let me mind my injury'. I patted her more and lured her inside the house.

I walked to Mama Daniel, spoke calmly to her. Not only is she older than me and my elder sister, she's mother to six (6) children. All I felt my respect will be to her was to say sorry to her.

Sorry.

Sorry that we go through things that disgust us. Sorry about how complicated life turns
many times. Sorry.

I ended the peacemaking with this line: 'She has no problem with anybody; she just doesn't want anyone to interfere with her.'

A new year, a new Bill?

AUSTRALIA

Osmond Chiu

The last few weeks have been good for Bill Shorten. He's been increasingly bold, has set the agenda and gotten favourable public response, putting the Coalition government on the backfoot. The polls have tightened, with two (Newspoll and Essential) recording 50-50 2PP.

Malcolm Turnbull meanwhile has been struggling. While expectations about Shorten have been extremely low, even among the party base, for Turnbull expectations are sky-high - and he is not living up to them. He is constrained by trying to keep the peace in his party room, fending off leaks and backbench revolts. In the last few weeks alone, there have been leaks about the Defence White Paper and conservative uproar about the safe schools program.

Turnbull's tax reform agenda, which was to be the centrepiece of his re-election campaign, is in shambles. Internal opposition led to the dumping of GST changes, and even modest changes to negative gearing are unlikely to get party room support. Bereft of a tax reform agenda, the government is caught between indecision and reaction.

Even with all this going on, Labor knows that a small-target strategy would not work against Turnbull. The negative gearing announcement made everyone pay attention because Shorten took a position that might be unpopular with some swinging voters in the electorate, challenging assumptions about his aversion to risk. Similarly, calling Senator Cory Bernardi a homophobe and replacing Joe Bullock with Patrick Dodson has caused people to start reassessing Shorten.

Negative gearing has been particularly potent because it is a policy that the party base really likes. Communication expert Anat Shenker-Osorio has argued that progressives should engage their base and persuade swinging voters, rather than cater to them and alienate their opponents. The Coalition's policies on immigration and refugees did this; negative gearing does it perfectly for Labor.

It's a sensible strategy. Since the Second World War, Labor has only won from Opposition three times, and in each case did so by having, a positive agenda with clear and distinctive ideas. With doubts growing about Turnbull, it gives Shorten an
opportunity to outline clear and distinctive ideas.

The big danger here is that big policy announcements this early open Labor up to attack and give the Coalition time to respond. In addition to its proposed changes to negative gearing Labor has made big commitments on Gonski education reform. If Turnbull can create enough doubt about Labor, he can get re-elected. With the conservative wing of the Coalition making it difficult for Turnbull to outline and focus on a bold policy agenda, resorting to a fear campaign may become his only option.

"Labor's narrative needs to be not only that it is the party best equipped to deal with the challenges we face, but is the only party that can ensure any changes will be just and equitable."

But Labor needs to be bold and continue strengthening its narrative. A clear lesson from the British election is that a shopping list of appealing policies is not enough. Labor has sought to establish a narrative about the future and science, focusing on jobs of the future by announcing policies on coding, renewables and start-ups. But while this has potential, as evidenced by Turnbull's attempts to neutralise it with his innovation statement, it has not been convincing, as yet.

People increasingly understand that change is necessary. They are worried about the future, not only out of self-interest but also out of concern for their children's future and living standards. They want someone to be straightforward about the challenges we face, and have a plan.

Shorten's speech at the National Press Club this week showed signs that he recognises this underlying public mood and that determining how to ensure a just transition in the face of big structural forces is shaping Labor's thinking.

Digital disruption, the ageing population and climate change will have profound effects on Australia and the world. Most people understand we need to innovate and adapt, but they also want some security and certainty for themselves. Not everyone will benefit equally from disruption. There are some big risks, and intervention is necessary to ensure opportunities and burdens are fairly shared.

While Turnbull may be ahead as preferred prime minister, the Coalition has yet to demonstrate the principle of fairness - in government, let alone in their future plans. That principle of fairness is deeply held and widely felt across the electorate, as shown by the reaction to the 2014 Budget.

If Shorten can capture this mood, he has a chance of winning. Labor's narrative needs to be not only that it is the party best equipped to deal with the challenges we face, but is the only party that can ensure any changes will be just and equitable. A plan for the future that is both convincing and seen as fair may end up being the difference between being in government and opposition.

Osmond Chiu is Secretary of the NSW Fabians. He tweets @redrabbleroz
Queer experience is not limited to trauma

AUSTRALIA

Ellena Savage

In the early naughts, I was a happy, well-balanced teenage girl who looked forward to the future; I was a moody, insufferable tween with no respect for her peers; I was a studious, engaged student; I was lazy and contemptuous; I was sweet and generous; I was an audacious brat; I was excitable; I suffered; I was the cause of the suffering of others; I wanted to kill myself; I didn't want anything more than I wanted to be 20.
Each of these statements is true. Some were at times truer than others. But which of them is the truest?

And what happens when one true statement is not believed?

If the statement not believed is a crucial one, an important factor in a person's understanding of themself, they might repeat it out loud. They might repeat it so often that the other statements begin to lose significance. Other factors are erased in order that the person can convince the listener of the trueness of the crucial statement.

What is this about? It is about the demand made of queer people to repeat statements about themselves in order to convince listeners of their truth, and the cost of this demand.

'Coming out' is one of these statements: this gesture is specifically, politically required of queer people but not of straight people. Queers are asked to do it again and again, to tell the story of how and when and why they knew and how they announced their knowledge, whereas heterosexual people are rarely - perhaps seldom - required to come up with a story to account for their sexual orientation.

Another statement demanded of queer people is that they are injured and traumatised by the fact of their sexuality or gender. For example, when advocating for basic resources such as the Safe Schools Coalition, queer people are called upon to recount the trouble their queerness has caused for them.

"Same-sex attracted Australians are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. This is the real, lived effect of homophobia."

Collecting these testimonies, such as those in the Safe Schools Story Project, is a potent strategy to build a case for representation, to articulate the ongoing harassment and discrimination queers face, and to affirm to young queer people that they are not in it
alone.

But why call on individuals to testify when the statistics are heartbreaking enough? Same-sex attracted Australians are 14 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. This is the real, lived effect of homophobia in Australia. If that does not convince you of the need for more and better education and support systems around gender and sexuality, not a lot will.

On the one hand, recalling personal narratives to address these urgent political concerns is a useful strategy of highlighting 'real life' experiences of oppression. On the other hand, this demand on queers to continually deliver narratives of oppression limits their social roles, and even invalidates their voices on matters other than their sexualities and genders.

Speaking on women's voices in western history, Mary Beard says they have only been heard when they have spoken 'in support of their own sectional interests, or to parade their victimhood'. Outside the niche of their own gender, women are presumed to have no knowledge.

Likewise Vivian Namaste, whose writing refuses the style of autobiography, justifies her choice by writing that 'autobiography is the only discourse in which transsexuals are permitted to speak'.

Parading one's victimhood is exhausting work. As Jacqueline Rose writes: 'the amount of emotional energy you have to use up in keeping the symptoms and the defence in place, in the end it's too costly, and it's too debilitating, it's sucking off too much from everywhere else, so something starts to give'.

Also at play are the limits of the general understanding of queerness - which insists that queerness and trauma are mutually entwined. In fact it is homophobia that is traumatising. It is the dominance of inflexible heterosexual norms that is damaging.

In this way, many people's feelings about their queerness will not translate into ready-made narratives of schoolyard bullying, because despite the statistics, it is possible to be queer and fierce at the same time.

Requiring queers to repeat statements about themselves - firstly, that they are in fact queer, and secondly that their queerness is a source of trauma - erases their singularity, and smudges out the multiple, contradictory fragments of themselves that are true at any given time.

The fact that our culture prioritises heterosexuality over other sexualities, and cisgender bodies over trans ones, is indisputable. Even detractors of the Safe Schools Coalition comprehend this.

This leads to other indisputables: that sexualities and genders outside this culturally-sanctioned norm can be dangerous and uncomfortable, and that the internalisation of this norm can fracture how queers express and feel their love. There are no disputes here, so there's no need for queers to stand trial.
Ellena Savage is the Editor at The Lifted Brow, commissioning Editor at Spook Magazine, and a graduate student in creative writing.

Main image from Safe Schools Story Project website.
'Jilted' Brownless saga shows AFL sexism still runs deep

MEDIA

Tim Kroenert

It's time someone called out this whole Billy Brownless/Garry Lyon saga for what it is.

Some have come close, but let's not mince words any longer. This is not merely a salacious non-story. It is the nadir of a grubby grain of sports journalism that serves as the mouthpiece for an industry - Australian Rules Football - that has a long way to go before it outruns the accusations of racism, homophobia and misogyny that it claims it is committed to leaving in its wake.
These former AFL footballers and sports media colleagues have fallen out very publicly over the past few months. The cause of this is a reported affair between Lyon and Brownless' ex-wife, Nicky.

Lyon has since quit his media duties and sought treatment for a mental illness, while much of the sympathy, especially from those in the AFL community, has been directed towards Brownless.

This sympathy hit its peak last week when Brownless participated in an interview conducted by fellow The Footy Show panellists James Brayshaw and Sam Newman. Brayshaw and Newman did their best to cast this as an act of journalistic integrity: after all, why should their colleagues Lyon and Brownless be spared the same hard-hitting treatment they'd subject anyone else to?

But this is not Insiders. This is The Footy Show - a program that among other achievements has enshrined Newman as a cult figure despite numerous documented sexist and homophobic remarks over the years. Not to mention Brownless himself, a man who a few months ago, despite being a White Ribbon ambassador, was heard making a sexist, abusive remark during a junior football club function.

To be fair, there are ethical questions around marital fidelity - which include, by the way, those concerning societal double standards regarding infidelity enacted by a man or by a woman - that bear public attention. But it is doubtful that they justify dragging painful personal sagas into the glare of a media spotlight; or that a program as puerile as The Footy Show is the forum for them.

In any case, these questions about marital fidelity are not even relevant here. Lyon and Nicky Brownless were separated from their spouses when the reported relationship took place. What we are actually talking about then is two consenting, single adults engaged in a relationship. There is no public good in the airing of this story, nor in all likelihood is any good served to the private individuals it involves.

In fact there is a significant public disservice in the extent and nature of the attention paid to this story, in which the slight committed is no greater than a contravention of a
presumed 'bro-code', regarding what is appropriate for men engaging with the romantic partners of other men.

Brownless himself invoked the underlying, archaic assumption to such a code when he said on The Footy Show: 'You don't touch another man's wallet; you don't touch another man's w...'. He stopped short before completing the word 'wife', but the underlying assumption is clear. A woman, like a wallet, is a man's possession, and his ownership persists even when the relationship ends.

This is an egregious statement, that was let slide by Brayshaw and Newman. They, as fellow 'bros', presumably understood exactly where their mate was coming from. In fact, they pushed the attitude further, to taint what was the one constructive aspect of the interview, that being the snuffing of the rumour that Lyon's affair had not been with Nicky, but with her and Billy's daughter.

As this is factually inaccurate, it was in the interest of all parties to set the record straight. But even if it were true, we'd be talking hypothetically about a 20-year-old woman engaged in a consensual relationship with a single man. He may be considerably older than her, but this itself would be no marital breach; certainly no justification for public opprobrium against either party.

Here, again, there would be no slight apart from an apparent contravention of the bro-code, according to which she's not an individual, autonomous woman, but 'Brownless' daughter'. Hands off, bro.

This is the only apparent basis for the moral outrage displayed by three men, milking the story for all its sensational worth from the highly privileged platform of a high-rating network television program, from which the women intimately involved with and affected by the story were entirely absent.

Lyon and Brownless have had a long friendship and professional relationship. No doubt this is an extremely hurtful situation for Brownless. The end of a marriage and the prospect of a former partner finding happiness elsewhere are difficult realities to contemplate, whatever the circumstances. Likewise, if Lyon's illness is as severe as reports suggest, he deserves sympathy and good wishes.

But the public treatment of this story has both amplified it out of all proportion, while reducing it to a salacious titbit that does little more than reinforce the primacy of male egos, in an industry and society where male egos are already too highly esteemed. It has done more ill than good to the individuals involved, and to a public that ought to be striving for a more inclusive and respectful narrative.

Tim Kroenert is assistant editor of Eureka Street.
Humility is the forgotten virtue this election year

AUSTRALIA

Andrew Hamilton

In a month in which some politicians have trumpeted their own virtues and others their opponents' vices, one traditional virtue has gone unserenaded. It is humility.

The reticence is unsurprising. Humility is associated with timidity, self-doubt and a reluctance to put oneself forward. It is monkish virtue. Successful politicians must project themselves, be supremely confident of their abilities, competitive, and lead like strong men.

This popular view merits challenge. It assumes a corrupted form of humility, and it also exempts politicians from ethical reflection about their craft. Effective participation in political life is governed by having the right temperament and by exercising power in pursuing one's goals.

When these views become widely accepted, adulation and contempt for political leaders alternate, both ending in disillusion.

In such a climate it may be helpful to reflect more deeply on humility and on the qualities taken to be essential in politicians. We might also profitably ask what basic approaches to the world nurture these qualities.

As a virtue humility has nothing to do with a retiring temperament. It is about being grounded and having a realistic sense of ourselves, which includes a recognition and acceptance of our personal weakness. It also implies a realistic view of the world in which we live.

It includes a view of other people as persons on whom we are mutually dependent, and
not primarily as competitors, let alone as enemies or as things.

In public life humility leads us to focus on what matters for the welfare of the world, and not on our own desires and interests. Where the common good is at stake, humility can inspire us to fight for it and to compete if we see ourselves to be in the best position to forward it. It need not be timid or self-effacing.

But it is accompanied by a reserve, arising from the realistic knowledge that our own policies are not necessarily the best policies, nor our own leadership the best means to secure what matters.

The vice traditionally opposed to humility is pride. But pride does not encompass exactly the qualities seen as necessary for success in political life: a high personal desire to succeed and to lead, a high confidence in our own judgment and ideas, the ability to bend others to our will and confidence that we can change the world.

These qualities are primarily focused on the self: on our desires and needs and on our power to satisfy them. They are about achievement.

They may come out of the realism identified with humility, but more often reflect individual needs and anxiety about fulfilling them. Our desire to justify our existence fill us with urgency to compete and to fix the world. Anxiety, which allows no space for inner reflection, breeds the certainty about our own policies and confidence in our own leadership that alone can satisfy our needs.

Anxiety can lead to success in competition and to a reputation for strong leadership. But, untempered, it also leads finally to rash policy making and to difficult relationships with others. It needs to be complemented by collaboration and cooperation, which imply that our own policies and actions are insufficient. The anxious, too, need humility to prosper.

Humility and anxiety are not elemental qualities. They flow out of more primal attitudes to the world and to our own lives. Humility is the fruit of thankfulness for our life and our world. Being thankful draws us away from ourselves to the world around us, which it sees as a gift. It encourages empathy and respect.

Anxiety reflects an attitude to the world in which thankfulness is lacking. We see ourselves and our world as plastic: they are there to be shaped as we will. Our own worth depends on the success of our efforts to shape them. We must consequently justify ourselves by what we make out of our own lives, whether by amassing wealth, earning a high reputation or by changing our society. We, other people and the world are raw material to be worked on.

In political leaders anxiety has many advantages. Because it is a quality widely shared, anxious politicians will be able to sniff the public mood. But they will also struggle to read the reality of the world and particularly to acknowledge their own weakness.

So although humble politicians are unlikely to do all it takes to gain power, they may be important in providing a steadiness and grasp of reality that their leaders may lack.
Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of *Eureka Street*.

Foot washing image: Molly Sabourin, [Flickr CC](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/)
CommInsure exposé proves spin doesn't always win

MEDIA

*David James*

One of the challenges facing business journalists in Australia is the wall of spin they face whenever they are trying to uncover an uncomfortable truth. The spin ranges from outright lying to being highly selective with the facts. Most journalists either struggle to get beyond the wall, decide it is to their benefit not to attempt to scale it, or are simply too busy to even contemplate its existence.

Consequently the spin, by and large, wins. Journalists always need sources to create stories - it is essential to their careers - and so are readily drawn into trade-offs: access to important sources in return for adhering to a certain line in the story.

Or, as is increasingly the case with younger journalists because of the thinning of the ranks in the media industry, they dutifully copy out the media release, a practice known as 'churnalism'.

That is why any reader of business news should always ask: *cui bono?* Who profits from the story running?

Most spin doctors are either former journalists, who have personal experience in how the industry works, or they are extremely well schooled in its dynamics. If a story appears in the media, it is more often than not because some spin merchants want it to be there.

Happily, there are exceptions. Gold Walkley winner Adele Ferguson did a brilliant expose of the insurance industry for *Four Corners* and Fairfax that was definitely not on any spin doctor's agenda. Indeed it was a demonstration that the craft of spin has its limitations if the journalist is skilled enough to get beyond the wall. And in recent years no Australian journalist has been better at it than Ferguson.

Ferguson’s examination of the Commonwealth Bank’s insurance arm, CommInsure, uncovered many instances of unscrupulous practices, including refusals to pay out to victims of heart attacks, multiple sclerosis, cancer and mental illness. She uncovered instances where insurers looked for additional medical opinions in order to avoid payment.

Her interview with Ian Narev, chief executive of Commonwealth Bank, was a semi-comic exposure of how the art of spin works.

Narev seemed to have been advised to mention the word ‘customers’ as often as possible. A cynic might suggest that it was spin doctor trick number one: reposition the discussion by talking about victims of the bank’s outrageous insurance practices as ‘customers’. The intention seemed to be to muddy the waters: are these people really victims, or just dissatisfied customers?

It was also designed to make it look like the bank is always acting in the interests of its shareholders. Thus we had statements like: 'The long term risk here is that satisfied customers are good for shareholders as well.' This comment, somewhere between
deflection and banality, seems intended to draw attention away from the specific issue in order to consider the 'wider context'.

The next step, which that cynic might suggest was spin doctor trick number two, was to claim that the news story was just an unfortunate exception: 'Being ethical is not the same as being perfect,' a suitably humble sounding Narev admitted. 'We need to realise we will make mistakes … one test of how ethical we are is how we respond to those mistakes.'

In other words, 'Trust us, we mean well.' It is a technique partly designed to tap into suspicion that journalists only pick out the sensationalist exceptions. The problem in this instance, however, was that, thanks to Ferguson's incisive investigation and the moral courage of Dr Koh, CommInsure's chief medical officer, it was clear that the mistreatment was not an aberration; it was business as usual.

Device number three was to introduce vagueness - more deflection. Narev insisted that the 'culture' of the bank is ethical. 'Culture' is a management buzzword that is sufficiently vague to remove any threat that someone might be held accountable. At the same time it gives the impression that management is in control. What exactly such verbiage really means is anyone's guess, but that is probably the point.

Ferguson insisted on talking about the 'human beings' affected in an attempt to push Narev beyond his corporate-speak and towards a more human response, such as shame or regret or horror, about what had been done to the sick and dying by the bloodless operatives in the company's insurance arm.

It left one wondering what it must be like to spend one's days being cruel and indifferent towards people in extreme distress. Presumably, in order to deal with it psychologically, these insurance bureaucrats find ways to de-personalise everything.

Ferguson did not succeed in eliciting a human response, but she did expose the spin. Narev started to come out with sentences like: 'The reason to do the right thing by customers is because we are here to do the right thing by customers.' Hard to argue with that. And there's that word 'customers' again.

The Commonwealth Bank chief executive unswervingly stuck to the script. The result was not edifying. It is to be hoped that when his media advisers submit their fees, they give him a discount. This time the spin definitely did not work.

David James is the managing editor of businessadvantagepng.com
Playing your cards (hard) right

CARTOON

Fiona Katauskas
The epic life of the real Iphigenia

CREATIVE

Gillian Bouras

Before I set out on my first visit to Greece, a philhellene friend said, 'You'll fall under the spell of the old.' I rather thought she was talking about the Ancient World, but she was talking about old people: she had lived in a Greek village for some years.

She was right: the spell worked. I became very attached to my husband's four uncles: Evangelos, George One and George Two, and Philopoevis. All had the relaxed charm of survivors who have struggled through hard times, but have ultimately achieved their goals, the most important of which involved doing their best by God and the Family.

They had also retained great vitality and humour: sometimes, after hearing their tales of the past, of war, poverty and death, I wondered how.

For them I had the value of novelty, as I was the first foreign woman they had ever met.

My relationship with old women, particularly that with my mother-in-law, the redoubtable Aphrodite, was often more complex. But I was still in a fair way to be magicked, and now I am sorry that the old people I became so fond of are no more. I miss them.

But then last Christmas I met Yiayia Iphigenia, my daughter-in-law Katerina's grandmother, and was enchanted all over again, by both name and person.

Anglophones regularly make a hash of this beautiful name, the correct pronunciation of which is Ifeeyainya. But the ones I know are intrigued by the mythological character, who was ill-fated, to say the least. In one version of her story, she was sacrificed by her
father Agamemnon in order to ensure fair winds to Troy

In a scarcely more palatable account, the goddess Artemis whisked her away, leaving a sacrificial deer in her place. Artemis then decreed that Iphigenia should be an acolyte at one of her island temples, where her specific job was to kill any man that set foot on the beach. Of course one fine day her brother inevitably happens along. Lots of pity and terror then ensue.

I learned that there had also been ample sorrow and trauma in the life of the modern Iphigenia.

It was a bright winter's day when we visited Yiayia Iphigenia in her village. She was sitting outside in the sun, as the old anywhere love to do. Long widowed, she was dressed in black, and was meticulously turned out: headscarf, apron, the whole traditional outfit.

Iphigenia is not sure how old she is, for in her day girls were not usually registered at birth; boys were, for purposes of later compulsory national service. She thinks she is about 86.

Iphigenia's was a hard life in anyone's book. Orphaned at six, she was then at the mercy of her aunts. Shunted from house to house, she was often beaten, and when with one aunt was forced to sleep outside with the dog. 'At least the dog kept me warm,' she said.

Her memories, too, are those of pain, war, and loss. She married at 17, no doubt by proxenio, arrangement, and two of her babies died. When the next baby happened along, Iphigenia decided to test her faith via an old custom: she left the baby by the side of the road, and the first person to pick her up became the godparent.

Iphigenia had not a shadow of doubt that this baby would grow and flourish. And so she did: she grew up to become Katerina's mother.

One of the many gifts Greece has given my three sons is that of respect and understanding of the aged. It was obvious that both Iphigenia and Niko enjoyed their conversation, and he listened carefully when she gave him advice. 'Never complain,' she instructed, 'and be thrifty: always keep crabs in your pockets.' Nik laughed and promised he would.

Time passed very quickly in Yiayia Iphigenia's entertaining company. And then we had to go. She resumed her seat in the sun; we walked down her garden path. As we turned to wave goodbye, she made the sign of the cross.

Greece has given me, too, many gifts and taught me many lessons. That brief time with Iphigenia reminded me of what I had learned long ago in the village: the supreme value of the human spirit, and how to resist the erosion of it.

I have been a teacher all my working life, but with villagers I became a pupil.
Gillian Bouras is an expatriate Australian writer who has written several books, stories and articles, many of them dealing with her experiences as an Australian woman in Greece.
Vacuous politics breeds vacuous politicians

AUSTRALIA

Justin Glyn

The standard explanation for the rise and rise of 'outsider' figures like Donald Drumpf in the US (and Clive Palmer in Australia) is that there is disillusion in democratic countries with 'politics as usual'.

There is a perception - with a fair basis in reality - that politics, especially the two-party version prevalent in the US, Australia or the UK has failed, leading to a situation where the governing party and opposition agree on most major issues: whether that be free trade, participation in the latest overseas war, legislation restricting civil liberties or the ill-treatment of asylum seekers.

This is not to say that all of these views are out of step with those of a majority of the population at large. Nevertheless, sufficient numbers of people are so fed up with the status quo that they are willing to try something different.

What that 'something different' is may range wildly within each country from more traditional socialist ideas (such as those of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK or Bernie Sanders in the US) to more right-wing forms of populism (such as the nativist rhetoric of a Nigel Farage, Jackie Lambie or Donald Drumpf) to even overtly Nazi views (such as those of groups like Golden Dawn in Greece or Right Sector in the Ukraine).

Neal Gabler has blamed the media for turning politics into celebrity theatre by refusing to ask the hard policy questions of such protest candidates and thereby allowing insurgent characters with absolutely no substance behind them to flourish.

While he has pinpointed the symptom, I suggest that he has it exactly the wrong way around. It is precisely because politics has already been hollowed out to be a slanging
match of personalities rather than a contest of ideas (or at least ideologies) that vacuous celebrities can flourish and even triumph.

What has caused this hollowing out? It results from the fact that the ideologies of both parties are practically identical. This is because, as the old adage says, the one who pays the piper calls the tune.

In the US, at least, this position is official. The Supreme Court there has held, in Citizens United v Federal Election Commission, that it would violate the First Amendment of the US Constitution to regulate political expenditure by a corporation.

This built on an earlier case, Buckley v Valeo, which said that spending money is the same thing as free speech (because it is the only way in which a corporation gets to make its voice heard).

The result is that whoever can raise the most money has the most voice at election time - and those with money have been contributing fulsomely to both political parties. The effect of the Supreme Court decision has been to put new bite into the old joke that the US has the best democracy money can buy.

No wonder politics is disconnected from the average punter or that two respected professors have concluded that the US should better be regarded as an oligarchy (or as they put it, a model of 'economic elite domination') than a democracy.

As many commentators have noted, it does not take much to see why a crisis of confidence in democratic institutions is dangerous. Worse yet, surely, is the fact that those institutions may well have ceased to be democratic.

Australia has no grounds for complacency. Unlike the US, Australia does not even have laws restricting direct donations to candidates or parties (except in New South Wales). There are state and federal disclosure regimes, but these are similarly relaxed. Donations by a single donor of under $111,600 (spread across the nation and all candidates) need not even be disclosed.

In addition, associated entities like John Curtin House Limited or the Free Enterprise Forum have allowed political parties to bypass even the weak regulatory regime which does exist.

It is therefore unsurprising that politicians do what they are paid to or that those who can afford to pay one party can usually afford to pay the other as well. In these circumstances, convergence of policies between the parties is almost inevitable.

Distrust of voters on the ground is unlikely to be lessened by the fact that the regulation of use of taxpayers' money is no better.

While most politicians purport to be horrified by reports of helicopter rides at taxpayers' expense, the truth is, as the Supreme Court of the ACT pointed out in its acquittal of Peter Slipper that whether funds are being spent on 'parliamentary business' is largely a matter for the person spending them to decide.

If the fox is the duly appointed guardian of the chicken coop, the results are not difficult to predict.
Those fretting about the decline of Western democracies should therefore look first at the health of the structures within (and especially the money which flows in their arteries). Otherwise their complaints will increasingly resemble that lampooned in Berthold Brecht's *The Solution*:

After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writer's Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

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Preselection esteems politics over merit

AUSTRALIA

Fatima Measham

The debate over the Coalition government’s proposed senate voting reforms has highlighted the inter-party brokering that brings candidates into office. It is a wonder that preferential flows and group voting had not previously elicited such high levels of inquiry, and indeed the motivation for doing so now is open to inspection.

Preselection is the area in which the distinction between politics and governance gets frayed. We only need look at the US primaries to work out how important that line actually is. There we see the spectacle of too many people convinced that ideological sentiment can pass for administration of the things that make civilised life possible: healthcare, education, work, housing, security.

Politics can't feed the hungry, or provide shelter. It doesn't put competent teachers in schools, reliable doctors in hospitals, decent police officers on the streets. It takes governance to do that, and good governance involves the best decisions that can be made honestly, within context and in the interests of ordinary people.

To some degree, this commends the US presidential system, where in theory the president is able to appoint the best possible person for Cabinet portfolios. Sometimes that person is someone on the other side of politics. Specialists, or candidates with relevant qualifications, are more likely to become departmental chiefs (secretaries) than a political careerist.
In Australia, it is much harder to be confident that the people who get handed a portfolio have relevant qualifications. In some cases, there is nothing to commend them other than that they were elected or have been around for a while - elevated to office via a preselection process that bears no resemblance to recruitment processes in other lines of work.

For example, if one were to believe that merit is genuinely the baseline in preselection, wouldn’t one then have to conclude from the composition of our parliaments that competence must be rare among women and people of colour (POC)? Who benefits from drawing such conclusions? How have low levels of diversity shaped the policy excesses that directly affect non-whites?

It is not just that preselection processes have not delivered the representational mix that we should expect from national demographics. Some of the political scandals of recent years also raise questions around how candidates are vetted and/or retained.

Craig Thomson was eventually convicted of 13 charges of theft. Mal Brough is currently under police investigation over a conspiracy that delivered him the seat of Fisher. Jamie Briggs dropped his ministerial portfolio last December over inappropriate conduct in Hong Kong.

Stuart Robert did the same in February when he was found, according to an internal investigation, to have ‘acted inconsistently with the Statement of Ministerial Standards’ in relation to a trip to China for a mining company deal involving a Liberal Party donor.

Bronwyn Bishop is recontesting Mackellar amid internal ructions over merit. Joe Bullock, who recently vacated his WA Labor senate seat over his party’s same-sex marriage stance, took the top ticket spot in the 2013 election from Louise Pratt via factional deals. These are just at federal level.

The mechanism for choosing party representatives clearly relies on powerful backers - politics - rather than merit. That is an obvious thing to say. But it carries repercussions for governance with which we have yet to grapple.

The appointment of ministerial portfolios to elected officials is beyond public input, and relies heavily on whatever talent pool the governing party can cough up. When that talent pool essentially relies on knowing enough of the right people, then what does that mean for governance?

The conflation of politics and governance has meant that in areas of high sensitivity such as immigration, national security and industrial relations, policies become vulnerable to political whims - rather than drawing from field expertise, jurisprudence and international best practice.

The AU$17B procurement of Joint Strike Fighters (F-35s) is a case in point.

Under the Abbott government, Australia purchased 58 more fighter jets from Lockheed Martin for a total of 72, despite known problems about both its software and hardware. A recent ABC Background Briefing investigation revealed extraordinary vulnerabilities involved in acquiring this plane - what US Air Force top guns call ‘the little turd’.
How did we get locked into this? Politics rather than governance.

We have a system with paper-thin delineation between the executive and legislative, which means that the quality of the people we elect to parliament is far more consequential than we let ourselves absorb.

Perhaps it would be much more important and beneficial to force our political parties to justify the credentials of their individual candidates, than to engage with their preference flows.

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