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## The wondrous life and death of Japanese cherry blossoms

### INTERNATIONAL

*Catherine Marshall*

**Cherry blossom season in Japan is anticipated all winter long but when it finally arrives it is nothing more than a tease. A flush of pale pink blossoms emerges in flirtatious sprays and hangs around just long enough to evoke such deep longing in their admirers they will memorialise these blooms forever more.**

Brides and grooms converge on Japanese gardens to have their wedding pictures taken amid the flush of blossoms, weeks and sometimes months before the actual nuptial date. Families spread tarpaulins beneath the vaporous blooms and set out their picnics, even though the wind is cold and a faint drizzle seeps from the sky.

Japanese visitors stroll beneath the trees, selfie sticks held aloft, their thumb-clicks casting in aspic (or in digital format, at least) that moment when the blossoms hold fast upon the stem for an endless moment, showing no intention whatsoever of ending their brief lives in an earthwards plummet.

Cherry blossom season is glorious. Soul-stirring. Wondrous. Life affirming. For, fragile as they appear to be, the blossoms' emergence is forceful, decisive; there is no stopping it. But they are unpredictable, too, for no imperial order can command them to emerge before they are ready to do so.

When the time is right - not a minute too soon - cherry trees hither and yon will erupt with blossoms clustered in miniature bouquets of the palest pink. Drab city streets will come alive with splashes of pink; featureless lots will tremble with baby blooms; carefully sculpted gardens will blush, on time and as planned, with clouds of frothy, tissue-thin buds.

The cherry blossoms are more than a mere beautifier, and perhaps this is why the Japanese hold them so dear. They signify in swift succession the beginning, the middle and the end. They convey in their pastel petals the brevity of life, the fleeting nature of our days, the urgency - and acceptance - with which we must live our lives.

Cherry blossom season is a kind of new year in Japan, a starting over, a washing clean of the slate and beginning afresh. But these blossoms hold in their very being the promise of death. 'With cherry blossoms, we start things over,' translates my guide, Jasmine, from a haiku. 'And we find beauty not only in the cherry blossoms but also in how they flutter to the ground.'

And it's from that fluttering that we can derive the most valuable of lessons: youth and perfection are fleeting; time marches on inexorably, and unless we follow purposefully in its wake it will leave us far behind; and budding is only that: a laying down of the foundations from which much stronger shoots will emerge once our inexperience, our

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na&iuml;vet&eacute;, is cast off.

"It is not wise to focus too intently on one attribute, for if we broaden our gaze we will find that in every season of life there is something to celebrate."

There's another, perhaps altogether more important, truth implicit in the blooming of the cherry trees as spring spreads across Japan: there's more to nature - and to life - than cherry blooms. Though they are exalted above all on the Japanese horticultural calendar, and are beloved of foreign visitors desperate to time their travels so as to catch the unfurling blooms, they do not define this landscape. Indeed, they are but a fleeting part of a tableau in which the black pines and red pines stand strong and noble all year long, their needles bending beneath the weight of snow and bouncing upwards again as spring breathes upon them.

They are part of a floral symphony in which irises and wisteria and peonies and azaleas alike will flush the towns and cities with colour, and in which Japanese maples - now just starting to unfurl their fragile, scarlet baby-leaves - will turn yellow and orange and blazing red and will then lose their autumnal coats and become mere skeletons come winter.

Cherry blossoms are the harbinger of spring, to be sure; their petals are pinpricks of light illuminating a winter-darkened landscape. But spring is just the beginning, a birth which could not occur without the sowing of seeds and the nourishing of roots generations earlier. Perhaps, then, the true lesson is this: it is not wise to focus too intently on one attribute, for if we broaden our gaze we will find that in every season of life there is something to celebrate.



Catherine Marshall is a Sydney-based journalist and travel writer.

## **We are all neoliberals now**

### **AUSTRALIA**

*Tim Robertson*

**Marooned on a traffic island in central London, Robert Maitland, the protagonist of JG Ballard's *Concrete Island*, comes to inhabit a world that he always, on some level, knew existed, but that he never really knew.**

He drove past it everyday to and from the office, but its subaltern inhabitants were, until he too finds himself trapped there, as removed from his life as they are from 'civilisation'. He initially doesn't appreciate the gulf between these two worlds, but, unable to escape the traffic island, he comes to lose touch with the old world and is subsumed by the new one. 'I am an island,' he mutters to himself during a fit of delirium.

This inversion of John Donne's famous line could well suffice as a maxim for modernity: an increasingly atomised society, populated by alienated individuals who are beginning, like Maitland, to realise that all is not right, but are unable to conceive of any alternative.

As neoliberalism has emerged as the hegemonic worldview it's come to encompass far more than a market-centred economic theory - neoliberalism, for example, now shapes discourses about liberal rights, government bureaucracy and the rhetoric of choice.

So, when Paul Keating recently said it had 'run its course', he was articulating an economic reality that, for economists who've objectively analysed the post-GFC data, has long been self-evident.

Since 2008, Keating added, 'we have a comatose world economy held together by debt and central bank money'. Over at the [Guardian](#), the always-meticulous Greg Jericho ran the numbers and, passing judgement on Keating's comments, determined the correct response to be: 'well, duh'.

What is more significant, though, is the second part of Keating's statement: 'Liberal economics has run into a dead end and has had no answer to the contemporary malaise.' That the dominant responses by western governments, particularly in Europe, to the neoliberal crisis has been a series of neoliberal 'solutions' (austerity, business tax cuts, public sector job cuts) speaks to its ideological dominance.

Even now, nearly ten years on, centre-Left political parties can only offer solutions that fall somewhere between looking back to old Keynesian solutions and tinkering around the edges of the already existing neoliberal framework.

"The Left's failure is not so much that neoliberalism has failed, but that when it did there existed no alternative that could challenge its dominance."

It's staggering that such a profound systemic failure hasn't fomented any serious systemic change. The contrast with the rise of neoliberalism couldn't be more pronounced. It came to prominence during the 'stagflation' (rising inflation and rising unemployment) crisis of the 1970s; it provided an economic theory to deal with a problem in the absence of a Keynesian one.

The Left's failure is, therefore, not so much that neoliberalism has failed, but that when it did there existed no alternative that could challenge its dominance. Keating, even now, proposes no solutions; he offers, simply, a critique. This has long been more comfortable terrain for the Left, but with crises being the rule rather than the exception under capitalism, it's worth thinking about what such a response would entail.

One of the challenges for progressive parties is to look beyond the existing neoliberal framework for solutions to the current malaise. Labor's chief propagandist, Van Badham, suggests the ALP is uniquely positioned to do this because 'its union base is reinvigorated' (union membership is at historic lows), and it won an election in WA (hardly a ground-breaking result in a two-horse race), which has 're-consolidated its primary vote' (last federal election the ALP's primary vote was 34.9 per cent - its second lowest since 1949).

The inter-party discussion about the 'Buffet rule' isn't, as Van Badham spins it, a sign of Labor's progressivism; rather, the fact that what's essentially a redistributive tax isn't already part of their platform is a reflection of their inherent conservatism. These days Labor MPs have far more in common with their colleagues across the House than they do with the workers they claim to represent.

While much of the intellectual heavy lifting in forming a picture of what a post-neoliberal future may look like will be done outside organised politics, Labor remains completely unengaged with almost all of these debates. Books like Thomas Piketty's *Capital*, Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism* and Nick Srnicek's and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future*, which have found far wider audiences in the last couple of years than economic tracts ordinarily would, present ideas for a future exponentially more radical than anything the nihilist technocrats of the Labor Party have shown a willingness to entertain.

The party is so steeped in neoliberal orthodoxy that, even if it was willing to evolve, it's likely incapable of doing so. One can see a version of this inability playing out in liberal democracies around the world - traditional political institutions are unravelling apace. This is, in part, a result of the neoliberalisation of the bureaucracy - many of the roles traditionally filled by government have been outsourced. The irony is that this quest for efficiency has stripped governments of many of the levers they once had to adapt and deal with change - they're more inefficient now than ever before. Bill Shorten's response, to date, hasn't extended beyond doubling down on his economic nationalist rhetoric.

Labor is, undoubtedly, aware of the dystopia that exists just off the motorway. They're even aware that more people, like Maitland, who once moved in their world are finding themselves marooned there. They may even appreciate that it's almost impossible for him to escape. But these two worlds remain more separate than ever and, even if there was the will to rescue those trapped, they no longer have the tools.

By the close of Ballard's novel, Maitland, half deranged, still utters platitudes about getting off the island, but he's largely resigned to his new life. He's come to accept his own oppression.

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## Breaking down the 457 visa changes

### AUSTRALIA

*Kerry Murphy*

**After Easter, the Prime Minister announced major changes to the temporary work visa known as the 457. The changes will take place in various stages between now and March 2018. There are several significant changes which mean that for a number of occupations, the pathway to a permanent visa sponsored by an employer will be closed.**

This means that a number of people will only be able to get a temporary work visa for two years, and a further two year period after that only. It is the latest in a range of changes to immigration that have seen Australia change from being a country of permanent migration, to one of permanent and temporary migration.

This trend was well analysed by journalist and writer Peter Mares in his very readable 2016 book, *Not Quite Australian*. Mares noted that historically, permanent residence was the usual pathway, then leading to citizenship. It meant that you could migrate to Australia, and then eventually fully participate in the Australian community as a citizen.

Mares outlines the various stages in changes to migration from being permanent, to more often a two stage process, which he describes as 'try before you buy'. In fact, it is a trial by Australia of the potential migrant, and by the migrant of Australia.

This became more common in the late 1990s and from around 2000, with large numbers of overseas students arriving and the introduction of the 457 visa by the Howard Government in 1996. For a number of students, studying in Australia was the pathway to permanent migration. This pathway became bogged down, with large numbers of cooks and hairdressers waiting years for their cases to be decided.

Then it was a two stage process for the partner visa - two years as a temporary partner visa, then a permanent visa if the relationship was still ongoing. Protection visas also consisted of a two stage process, with the initial version of the Temporary Protection Visa in 1999 being a three year visa only, with the chance of obtaining a permanent visa thereafter, if you still met the strict refugee criteria.

The 457 visa has faced much criticism in the press, some of it deserved, especially in cases of abuse and underpayment of workers, although the actual extent of such cases is very hard to ascertain.

The 457 visa is also commonly used for doctors in various health services both public and private, accountants in small and large firms, engineers, and IT specialists in the many growing occupations in that industry. Stories of underpayment were more common in the hospitality industry.

"More people are living temporarily in Australia, working, paying tax, but not able to fully

participate in the Australian community: taxation without representation."

The changes announced this week will make a complex system more complex. Already there are a number of checks and balances within the system, a number introduced under Labor. Some, such as labour market testing, may be less strictly enforced, but this is one of the changes proposed. English language levels will also be raised. This is assessed by your passport (e.g. UK, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Ireland) or an English test like the IELTS or OET.

Any administrative system will have abuses and if you try to eliminate all abuses, you end up with a system so complex or tight that it can become unworkable. Systems need to maintain a level of flexibility, for the hard or messy case. It is not clear whether there will be enough flexibility in the new system.

The occupation list is quite old, going back to the Bureau of Statistics list which was released in 2006, and has had some minor adjustments since. Having a strict list is a cumbersome tool, but easier to assess by Immigration. You are either on the list or not. It can be a challenge to fit new jobs into the list. So 'robotic engineer' is not there, you need to be an 'electronic engineer'.

A point of note is the tortuous use of language in the area. The 457 visa will be replaced next March by a new visa called a Temporary Skills Shortage (TSS) visa. The TSS visa will have two streams, one for two years only, and one for four years. What stream you are in depends on your occupation.

The old Skilled Occupation List (SOL) is to be replaced by the more clumsily titled Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL). This will be the pathway to a four year TSS visa and maybe permanent residence after three years. Currently the pathway is two years on a 457 visa to permanent employer sponsored visa.

The other list, which had a much larger number of occupations than the SOL, was known as the Consolidated Skilled Occupation List (CSOL). It will now be called the Short-term Skilled Occupations List (STSOL). Those with occupations on the STSOL will be eligible for a two year visa, with one chance for another two years, but no pathway to permanent sponsorship. 216 occupations will be removed from the lists, leaving 435 occupations. The most commonly used occupations are really not affected, so it may be that nearly 90,000 visas will still be issued, but they will be for the new TSS visa, not the old 457 visa.

Temporary visas exist still for visitors, students and for some refugees, including the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). The TPV is three years only, with no pathway to permanent visas, the SHEV is five years with a limited pathway to other visas provided to work or study in certain regional areas for 42 months.

Still to come will be the new temporary parent visas. Already there is the temporary contributory parent visa which can lead to a permanent visa, but it costs around \$50,000 per person. New parent visas, as yet of undisclosed cost, will be temporary only. Whether the high cost of the contributory parent visa goes up further is still to be seen.

More people are living temporarily in Australia, working, paying tax, but not able to fully participate in the Australian community: taxation without representation. Some have

access to Medicare through the shared relationships with national health schemes in some European countries and the UK. Others need to maintain private health insurance for their time here.

Maybe for some, a 12 month working holiday is enough. However, if you are here for four or so years, and maybe with a family, you may want more security in your residence. Whether this is possible will depend on your occupation. Other countries have long had 'guest worker schemes', but part of the success of migration in Australia has been for people who come here and see a future for themselves and their family as fully part of the Australian community.

Clearly the increasing number of people on some type of temporary visa is now well established as a feature of migration. Whether it creates an underclass of people who can only work, but cannot be fully involved, is still to be seen.



Kerry Murphy is a partner with the specialist immigration law firm D'Ambra Murphy Lawyers and member of the board of the [IARC](#) .

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## Rogue relations: The US vs North Korea

### INTERNATIONAL

*Binoy Kampmark*

**At this point in time, a truculent rogue in the White House fumes at an upstart rogue in Pyongyang, both fumbling away in the kindergarten of blunder and realpolitik. The issue is to see how they measure up in the stakes of rogue behaviour.**

Unfortunately, US President Donald Trump has shown, like his various predecessors, that international law, for the bomb-heavy bully, is a convenient moral reference when needed, but will be avoided like a leper when it becomes an impediment. Power, unadulterated in purity and application, will always triumph over hollow ideals and moral reminders.

One particular tic of the US, deemed by William Blum to be the rogue state par excellence, is that of regime change. Noam Chomsky has repeatedly reminded readers the US 'holds the world championship in regime change'. All this, despite the superficial assertions of sovereign equality between states in the United Nations charter.

Even conservative commentators such as Samuel Huntington, author of the 'clash of civilisation' thesis involving the West and Islam, noted in 1999 that 'while the US regularly denounces various countries as "rogue states", in the eyes of many countries, it is becoming a rogue superpower'.

The US has made the formulation and breaking of international law cardinal features of the international system. It is hard to imagine any international covenant, convention or agreement touching on state conduct in the last century that does not have some element of influence from the legal eagles of the US.

Without the bountiful US legal contribution to international institutions and jurisprudence, there would have been no crime against peace, considered in 1945 novel and dangerously eccentric by European counterparts.

The very idea of an international criminal court seized of authority to try potential war criminals was also forged in the adventurous, if overly zealous, thoughts of US lawyers keen to view international relations as a game of moral decisions with consequences.

This inventive, maze-driven homework on the moral order of the world's international engagement has always come back to stalk, not always with the necessary menace, US policy makers keen on pushing an agenda of force at the expense of the legal order they claim to maintain. He who creates can also undo and ignore.

"The indignant missile strike on Syria, in the absence of any United Nations Security Council Resolution, could hardly count in the context of a proportionate, legal response."

A few cases come to mind. The US State Department was deeply troubled when questions were asked about whether Washington was pursuing an agenda of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Vietnam, a point raised during the proceedings of the Russell War Crimes Tribunal held in Stockholm. It arose again in the matter of the Iraqi invasion of 2003 by US-led forces, with various subsequent vain efforts to hold President George W. Bush to account for international law violations.

The problem here, as it has always been, is that the eagle of law is often blinded after its enthusiasm for finding new prey. Excuses intervene; apologies mount. There are times, goes this line of thinking, when rogue states need to be punished; their ways righted by a nuclear armed policeman who knows what laws need to be policed.

To that end, it is worth noting that the latest, indignant missile strike on Syria, in the absence of any United Nations Security Council Resolution, could hardly count in the context of a proportionate, legal response. Even humanitarian advocates struggled to identify the rationale for the strike, despite its supposedly very humanitarian pretext.

The poorly named Democratic Republic of North Korea is hardly a state to be exonerated in this theatrical farce of international relations. It punishes its populace with a ruthless regime that still endorses the brutality of forced labour camps. It murders political dissidents. Like the United States, it avoids conventions and covenants it does not like.

But in its very psychic existence, troubled and terrified by the intrusive, regime altering powers of the United States, options are few and far between. A rogue state North Korea may well be, but there are always bigger rogues to contend with.



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

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## Ghosts of grief in modern, secular Paris

### REVIEWS

*Tim Kroenert*

**Personal Shopper (MA). Director: Olivier Assayas. Starring: Kristen Stewart. 105 minutes**

Maureen (Stewart) is a medium. At least, she might be - she's not sure. Cynical about the prospect of any kind of afterlife, she spends the early part of *Personal Shopper* holed up in an old Parisian mansion, trying to commune with the spirit of her recently deceased twin brother. Her experiences there, spooky as they may be, don't proffer any conclusive answers for her or the audience.

Maureen is currently employed by a difficult and demanding fashion model as a personal shopper; literally, she spends her paid working days buying clothes, shoes and jewellery for someone else. The juxtaposition of the pure materialistic focus of this work, and her doubt-riven incursions into the spiritual realm, is intriguing, even if it is almost too on-point not to be jarring.

Many of Maureen's interactions are mediated by technology. She has a boyfriend, but he is never physically present, appearing to her via Skype. Often we watch on as she frowns over her phone, reading and responding to text messages. Or the camera peers over her shoulder as she watches a video while travelling from Paris to London by train, disconnected from the people and places around her.

Even her most sustained engagement with the spiritual realm is so mediated. Maureen begins receiving text messages from a mysterious stranger, whom she suspects is a ghost. Assayas' direction and Marion Monnier's astute editing integrate these modern technologies into the fabric of the film, to both build suspense and to underscore Maureen's sense of alienation.

"It is a profound consideration of the processing of grief in a secular, consumerist society."

Stewart is captivating in the role. The erstwhile star of the *Twilight* franchise was once the subject of a meme lampooning an alleged lack of emotional range. But her expressiveness is in fact copious in its small details. Her deceptively opaque tone and mannerisms are perfectly suited to a character who at times appears passive but is endlessly grappling with complex ideas and emotions.

*Personal Shopper* was booed at Cannes (booing is a famous pastime at France's premiere film festival). It's easy to see why it was divisive. Its plot is a patchwork of riddles, many

of which are left frustratingly unanswered. Still, it is at worst a suitably eerie contemporary ghost story, and at best a fresh and profound consideration of the processing of grief in a secular, consumerist society.



Tim Kroenert is editor of *Eureka Street*.

## Poems for John Clarke

### CREATIVE

*Peter Gebhardt*

#### **The weather report**

(i.m. John Clarke)

It's a bleak, sad day,  
The clouds have shrouded laughter,  
The sun can only frown sadly to itself.  
Malcolm, thankfully, has blown well off-shore,  
And Bill is petering out to the east,  
While brave Scott is dribbling like a broken tap,  
And policeman Pete is freezing in a tent.

It's a bleak, sad, humourless day,  
When all there is to hear is a replay.  
The lightning is sheet not sharp  
And the winds are cold and sodden.  
The highs have all become lows  
And the mountains are deep in snows.

It's a bleak sad day,  
That special voice has been taken away  
That voice that saw so much,

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Waged war against the witless and their wrongs,  
That smothered our lives and hopes  
And that voice will still sing his songs.  
Which we are free to hear for ages on.

Today was a bleak, sad day,  
We remember and rejoice in his wonderful way.

### **Balance**

(A.B.C. Radio F.M. 105.9 - 31 December 2016)

It is the eve of the new year  
And, of course, we are not sure what blasts  
The trumpets will make, but we do know they won't be  
Alfred Hill's. It was good in the cool of the morning  
The white rabbit chose to jump  
From the superior Satie's grand piano  
Scattering correspondence, memoirs and memories  
Rattling the keyboard of the lower piano.  
Sadly we can be sure that the precious spoils  
Will reach out and touch fewer and fewer people,  
But we are lucky in the cool of the morning  
To have and hear that voice that's grown from the feet  
Of 'The Lark Ascending', heard the voice  
Of Kathleen Ferrier, the human spirit at its height,

And all that shared with the weekly chattering  
Of two men in the hope of decent crops  
Like 'The Pearl Fishers', and the joy of the disciplines  
Of vineyards and oyster farms.

'My name is John Clarke and the embrace of  
Civilisations and their makers is a glory to me,  
And the trust of the future lies in feasting on the past,  
And truly hoping that the broken cities can be mended  
Upon the foundations of the bottom hand of "Moonlight Sonata".'



Peter Gebhardt is a retired school principal and judge. His most recent book is *Black and White Onyx: New and Selected Poems 1988-2011*.

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## Solace from grief in an unfamiliar temple

### RELIGION

*Tseen Khoo*

**Last Sunday, I headed to a Buddhist temple in Springvale, in Melbourne's south-east. I wasn't going for a Songkran festival (Thai New Year), and it wasn't a part of my routine.**

I was going because my mother wanted to pray for her eldest sister, who had died on the Friday. My mum is over 80 years old. Her family here and in Malaysia suggested she should not make the rushed journey for the funeral in Penang as she would have to travel alone while grieving and it was in only two days' time.

My mother is a temple frequenter. For decades, she maintained a Kuan Yin (Goddess of Mercy) shrine in our family home. On official forms, she lists her religion as 'Buddhist'. When travelling, she'll want to visit temples, say a prayer and, usually, make a donation.

I am not a temple frequenter. I had not been to one for many years. I do not subscribe to a religion. I'm only in temples because of family commemorations or if I'm accompanying my mother. This Sunday was no exception.

When thinking about where to take her, my partner and I discussed what would be a good place for her to go - a space that would affirm the way she likes to express her faith. It needed to be a place that didn't require familiarity with those who ran it, and to which we could just turn up. It needed to be a place that had old school features and enabled traditional ways to worship.

The temple complex we went to was huge, as Springvale temples tend to be. There was a big main temple and many smaller ones, as well as shrine sites. There was an ease to the informality of the worshipping practices surrounding us.

Some people brought fruit offerings to set at the base of their preferred deity, others lit handfuls of incense and prayed on their knees, others still were there to assist in the running of the temple. A constant stream of visitors attended to their own spiritual practices, and many of them were intergenerational groups much like ours.

My mother gate crashed a service that was underway in the main temple but she wasn't excluded; the nuns just worked around her. She invited all of us to light incense and pray with her at various sites around the complex. My children had never been to a temple and had little experience of prayer rituals overall. They found the processes interesting and peaceful, and they were happy to participate.

"Even harder to explain is the comfort that familiar rituals can bring, even when the practitioners themselves don't believe in the reasons behind the rituals."

My mother concluded her visit by making a donation in the main temple. She was very grateful and satisfied with the temple experience. It gave her the atmosphere necessary to find solace when she was so far away from her family overseas, as they were attending her sister's funeral.

I was very satisfied with the temple experience because, too, as it gave my mother what she needed at a stressful and very sad time. The immediacy with which she felt she was part of a worshipping community, even though she'd never before been to that temple, was something for which I was particularly thankful.

It was also an opportunity to reflect on how I understood the practices that surrounded me, which I'd only ever experienced through following the examples of others during important ceremonies. Trying to explain to my children why incense is lit, offerings are burnt, and food placed at shrines tested the limits of my understanding of these rituals and how they have developed. Even harder to explain is the comfort that familiar rituals can bring, even when the practitioners themselves don't believe in the reasons behind the rituals.



Tseen Khoo is a lecturer at La Trobe University and founder/convenor of the Asian Australian Studies Research Network ([AASRN](#)), a network for academics, community researchers, and cultural workers who are interested in the area of Asian Australian Studies. She tweets as @tseenster.

## **Putter power**

**CARTOON**

*Fiona Katauskas*



Fiona Katauskas' work has also appeared in ABC's *The Drum*, *New Matilda*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Financial Review* and Scribe's Best Australian political cartoon anthologies.

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## Not such a super way to buy your first home

### AUSTRALIA

*Francine Crimmins*

**As a millennial, I frequently find myself being told by politicians and journalists to stop complaining about housing affordability. It's all about working harder, saving more and, for goodness' sake, keeping off the avocado.**

We're often painted as living too much in the moment with little regard for what lies further down the capitalist path. I understand where they are coming from. It's important to self-motivate and navigate personal savings - but this should not be at the cost of future wellbeing.

The Coalition in the past week has been divided over whether young Australians should be allowed to withdraw from their superannuation to make deposits for first homes. Under this scheme, Australians could use the money earmarked for their retirement to gain assets during their working life.

Tony Abbot, Craig Kelly, Ian Goodenough and Tony Pasin have all voiced support for the idea which remains on the budget agenda. Nationals Senator Matt Canavan told ABC radio this economic reshuffle has been used in other countries, but he didn't give any examples of where it has been successful.

The government has asserted the money shouldn't be used for luxuries such as overseas holidays, but thinks that if superannuation can be invested in other people's assets and equities, then individuals should be able to use it towards their own.

A mentality of individual investment when it comes to super may be a dangerous guideline for young professionals to follow. A few years of super payments in a career may seem trivial, but Industry Super economist Stephen Anthony warns that with compound interest, it could mean losing as much as 12 years' worth of payments from your fund.

As a young person, I'm concerned about using a system which was put aside for our economic welfare in retirement as another savings account for instant gratification. If anything, it seems the government is trying to solve the housing crisis not through direct action, but by encouraging young people into lifelong debt as a quick fix.

If the property market is a fire, it feels like the government is giving us all a fire blanket instead of fighting the engulfing flames.

"Perhaps under this scheme there would be an argument for young business owners to be able to withdraw to further their entrepreneurial ventures, the same way a first home is considered to be an asset."

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has been warning against using money that was intended to give Australians 'a dignified and comfortable retirement' for such a purpose. Not to mention, super was devised in the first place to alleviate economic pressure on the welfare system by eliminating a demand for retirement pensions. With life expectancy on the rise, government should be safeguarding against an ageing population and the burden this will put on taxpayers. Have we lost sight of super as a form of welfare for all Australians?

The idea behind super wasn't to save for Australians, but to secure their financial situation when they couldn't work anymore. Perhaps under this scheme there would be an argument for young business owners to be able to withdraw to further their entrepreneurial ventures, the same way a first home is considered to be an asset.

More concerning is what would happen in the case of a housing crash, if money drawn from super had been used on high interest home loans. Credit agency Moody's has warned Australia could be the next country to experience a crash like what was seen in Dublin. Young people in Ireland are still navigating financial ruin and struggling to move out of their parents' homes even years after the property bubble burst, leaving people to pay off loans for assets which were suddenly worth a pile of bricks.

When you're in your youth it's hard to visualise how your life will turn out. Perhaps I'll still be working long after my hair has turned a wispy grey. Maybe I'll be sickly and be pressured to buy expensive drugs which will keep me alive. I fear the idea of picking up the phone and calling my super fund only to be told the lifeline I need was used up by a decision I made in my mid-20s.

Francine Crimmins is studying a double degree of Journalism and Creative Intelligence & Innovation at the University of Technology Sydney. She is on twitter as @frankiecrimmins. Francine is the recipient of *Eureka Street's* Margaret Dooley Fellowship for Young Writers.

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## Digital solutions to political reform

### AUSTRALIA

*Kate Galloway*

**From time to time there is talk in Australia of parliamentary reform. Former prime minister Tony Abbott has called for constitutional reform to remove the double dissolution process. Periodically there is interest in fixed parliamentary terms for the Commonwealth parliament. This debate also canvasses whether those terms should be three or four years.**

Part of the argument around the need for reform - and in support of such proposals - is that a fragmented Senate impedes the government's program. For some, this represents an interference with democracy represented by a 'mandate' held by a government to prosecute its legislative agenda.

As for fixed, or four year terms, the argument is that the current political cycle is too short, and that this hampers government's capacity to govern. On the other hand, those against fixed terms argue that four years is too long to be stuck with a 'bad' government.

I wonder however if this discussion misses the point about what might be 'wrong' with our political system, and our system of governance.

While there are valid reasons to be concerned about the capacity of a government to govern in the current brief election cycle, and in dealing with what some describe as a 'hostile senate', the networked world we presently inhabit calls into question the way in which politicians might be accountable to the public in the first place.

This suggests the need for a different discussion. In particular, rather than focusing on changes to a system of governance derived from a different era, we should be asking what are the implications of emergent technologies on the way in which we are governed. Such questions include the way in which we vote, how political parties and lobbyists seek our vote, and how we hold politicians accountable.

E-voting

Every election now we hear televised panellists speculate on the introduction of e-voting. Delays in determining clear election winners, and the loss of WA senate ballots in 2013 in particular, usually bring forth a call for e-voting which is seen to be faster and more convenient.

"Rather than focusing on changes to a system derived from a different era, we should be asking what are the implications of emergent technologies on the way in which we are governed."

The technology for e-voting exists, and a number of countries use it. Forms of e-voting have also been trialled in some Australian elections. Overall however, apart from

concerns about hacking and security, there remain questions about 'scrutiny and verifiable evidence integrity' of e-voting itself. In other words, we have not yet guaranteed how we would build an electronic system that is open to public verification.

Despite its ostensible public support, the public needs to be aware of the complexities of e-voting before we enter into discussions about adopting it. This is part of a necessary broader public awareness of governance through technologies.

Political influence

Australian voters are used to corflutes, bunting, how-to-vote cards, billboards, and TV and radio advertising. In recent campaigns however, social media has played an increasing role both in candidates getting their message out and in citizens engaging with candidates.

The old one-dimensional broadcast form of advertising has given way to a networked conversation. However, where this might have begun as a means of freeing the citizen to interact with candidates, it has recently taken a more worrying turn.

An increasing number of reports indicate that political operatives in the US leveraged Facebook to manipulate users' timelines to favour Donald Trump. Cambridge Analytica uses so-called psychographic techniques to tailor a political message to a single Facebook user, relying on data harvested from that user's own Facebook use. The company is now reportedly in Australia for talks with the Liberal Party.

Unlike the US, voting is compulsory in Australia. Therefore, the extent to which such a program might influence Australian voters is open to question. Regardless, the ubiquity of social networks and big data - and their capacity to be deployed to understand and influence an individual user - is a relevant consideration in whether and how to regulate political campaigning.

Political accountability

Finally, we need to consider the question of political accountability. Arguably this lies at the basis of existing calls for reform. The Trump ascendancy and Brexit are both examples of what has been described as a widespread malaise with the political class. Voters feel that their governments do not adequately represent them. Richard Cooke in *The Monthly* describes the 'fading high-water mark of a particular version of parliamentary liberalism predicated on rhetoric'. Being clever with words to sell an overarching vision of society will no longer reach the people. Perhaps this goes as much to systems of governance as the lack of an articulated social vision.

The present system of political accountability relies on periodic elections. But what if we could have real-time accountability? The Pirate Party uses an online system it refers to as 'liquid democracy' to engage all its members in policy making, providing 'quantified feedback that shows ... where the majority lies on a given point'.

Advancing this idea of direct democratic participation, some see blockchain technologies as the next iteration of liquid democracy. Blockchain technology creates an online ledger that records participant transactions in a way that is auditable by the participants, making it verifiable. It would allow direct real time involvement in the democratic process. It may also allow for voters to hold politicians to their promises.

Blockchain enthusiasts Don and Alex Tapscott maintain that where politicians make promises encoded on blockchain technology, citizens can track the progress towards implementing those promises via the online ledger. Others, however, maintain that the technology is still a long way off being suitable for this purpose. Despite this, Australia

Post, now actively seeking a role for itself in e-voting, has proposed blockchain voting in a Victorian parliamentary submission.

The technology may not be ready, and social attitudes and political will might be lacking. But the point remains that if we are to consider change to our governance structures, we must consider digital contexts for implementing the democratic ideal. This may itself call for a clearer vision of our democracy and its institutions.



Kate Galloway is a legal academic with an interest in social justice.

Illustration by Chris Johnston

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## Easter is the right time to find homes for children

### AUSTRALIA

*Andrew Hamilton*

**Sometimes events coincide happily. At other times the coincidence rings strangely. This year Youth Homelessness Matters Day is celebrated the day before Easter Sunday: desolation confronts happiness, penury plenty, and deprivation plenitude.**

When events clash most sharply, they may also illuminate one another most brightly. The Easter stories invite deep reflection on home and on homelessness, on finding a home and being made to feel at home.

The stories told about Jesus' rising begin with homelessness - with people grieving for Jesus. When we are in grief we are made homeless. Our loss turns our physical home into a mere house.

The connections between the house and the person whom we have loved no longer ground and reassure us. They torment us. We mistake friends for the council gardeners. We feel alone in a world without walls or roof, where the wind blows coldly and the rain pours in.

That is what grief does to adults. It is also what homelessness does to children. It robs their present of meaning, their future of hope and their relationships of constancy. Homelessness is no place for children.

The stories of Jesus' death explore homelessness. As it is for all of us his home was his body. It was lived in, fed, cared for, hospitable to friends and formidable to enemies. His body was the place where dreams were nurtured, life's projects planned and personality displayed. It was the monument by which he would be remembered.

The Romans did their best to ensure that it was forgotten. They did a demolition job on his body, making sure that everyone saw it marked with whips, thorns, nails, blood and dirt and put on display like a side of beef in a butcher shop. His memory was to be a home for no one.

His friends' homelessness was compounded by the disappearance of his body. It thwarted their desire to wash and lay out his body so that they could remember his life as their home. Their last contact with him was cut. They shared momentarily the terrible suffering of those whose children have been killed but whose bodies are not to be found. They have no closure, we say. But in reality they have no opening - the door of their home is padlocked.

"It is the responsibility of society to find children a home in which they can be safe to make connections, see possibilities, heal their wounds and allow others to touch them in

love, share food and stories."

This is also true of young people made homeless. They lose their bodies: their dreams, their security, their self-respect, their connections and their address. They are vulnerable, constantly at risk of intrusion and exclusion. Their heads drop, their shoulders sag, their faces pale and their skin roughens. Homelessness is no place for children.

The Gospel stories do not end with homelessness. They are about rebuilding body and home. They remake connections in which memories turn from absence to presence, from devastation to joy. They are about shared meals by the shore, about touching wounds in consolation, not in revulsion, about angels and not ghosts waiting in tombs, about embracing, about gathering. They are about a hope that is not limited by locked doors and walls or by the intractability of the body, the obverse of Richard Wilbur's lines:  
Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones:  
But cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.

Nor should any child's story end in homelessness or in a body gone cloudy. It is the responsibility of society to find them a home in which they can be safe to make connections, see possibilities, heal their wounds and allow others to touch them in love, share food and stories. These are the things that make the stuff of bodies solid and luminescent.

Easter is the right time to find homes for children.



Andrew Hamilton is consulting editor of *Eureka Street*.

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## Easter in dark times

### RELIGION

*Fatima Measham*

**Any number of things test the fortitude of people of faith. Relationships break, failures interrupt, and sometimes we feel keenly the inexorable nature of mortality. Easter, for me, has always been a time to sit in the brokenness of things, to absorb the dread and devastation that runs through the Triduum, and reel at the inexplicable sacrifice.**

Crushing humility might have characterised my experience in previous years. This year, I feel formless rage.

I don't think Easter is meant to be entirely comforting. For people of Christian faith, touching base with our belief in salvation offers certain assurances. The scenes that we memorialise have an air of inevitability; we know how they play out to Sunday. We perform a sadness that is finite.

This can keep us from remembering to be angry. Jesus was taken, tried, tortured and tied to a tree. The human drama of Easter - with its various betrayals, moments of audacity and doubt, the machinations in shadow - bears the sting of injustice. The central narrative of Christian faith is political. Choices were made by people in power. They are still being made.

The past several months has been an exercise in managing anger at thousands dead in the Philippines, sanctioned by a president who retains popularity.

I have never been blind to the faults of my people, but it is difficult now to recognise our country. I do not understand the depth of callousness, the disregard for hard-won democratic institutions, the toxicity that runs through public discourse. It is not an inevitable state of things. People in power make choices.

The past several years has also been an exercise in managing anger at hundreds of thousands dead and millions fled from Syria.

We now know it as an intractable, multilayered conflict that has left little of Syria to govern. To think that it started as a protest against corruption, state repression and high unemployment six years ago in the southern city of Deraa. Chains of devastation are wrought. People in power make choices.

"It is good to be sad about the things that go wrong because it means we can still tell wrong from right. But it is also good to be angry about them."

The past several years has been an exercise in managing anger at more than 4444 incidents of child sexual abuse within Catholic Church institutions, as recorded by the

Royal Commission. The number of alleged perpetrators is 1880. It is no longer impossible to fathom how so many predators could set upon young children and be systematically protected by Church officials. People in power make choices.

In recent weeks, aerial surveys indicate that two-thirds of the Great Barrier Reef is bleached, following back-to-back bleaching events as well as the recent cyclone. There has been almost no respite for coral, with mortality of up to 50 per cent in the central reefs. It is emblematic of a bleak future. I feel fear and frustration at the likely impacts of climate change over the course of my child's life. These would not have been unavoidable. People in power make choices.

Unlike our Easter observances, we do not know in real life whether things work out and how. It might be hard to see through Sunday; we feel subdued in darkness. It is good to be sad about the things that go wrong because it means we can still tell wrong from right. But it is also good to be angry about them, even a little, because it means we still hope that things can be made right in some way.



Fatima Measham is a *Eureka Street* consulting editor. She co-hosts the [ChatterSquare](#) podcast, tweets as [@foomeister](#) and blogs on [Medium](#).

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## Learning to love not needing men

### CREATIVE

*Isabella Fels*

**In the sorry past when it came to men I could hardly say amen. I had really been messed up, not blessed, by them. I'm well over 40 now and no man has ever gone down on bended knee. I also have never got more than a rusty ring or even got them to sing my praises.**

I was always being put to the test. Not just in looks but in the superwoman contest. I tried to be everything to them and more, yet failed miserably as I was shown the door. Nothing worked no matter how hard I worked.

I tried everything to win over men. Invested time and effort into looking good. Was deep and well read so that I could hold down the best of conversations. Did everything for them including the cooking and the dishes. I insisted on going Dutch, but in the end paid for everything. I went for paupers who put me out every time we stepped out.

I am a giver but wish sometimes I could receive. In the past I felt all the time that each relationship was not only driving me around the bend but also soon coming to an end. Certainly not a fairy tale end. There were plenty of frogs in the pond, but I felt no strong bonds.

I often dreamt of having a stunning wedding gown but always ended up in my terry towelling dressing gown. Seen only by me. And let's not mention my sexy black knickers for my eyes only.

I thought this was my fate. I felt third rate as I tried to comfort myself with home brand fruitcake, instead of the towering iced wedding cake with a smiling bride and groom on top. Stuff dreams are made of. However not for me.

I am trying to change my way of thinking. I am a woman with the fate to live a solo life. I think now how this could be great. Who needs men with fake watches, rings, tans and even identities? The more I get to know them the more I know there never will be any wedding plans, or even fun plans for the weekend.

I used to think that not having the perfect partner and children reflected badly on me. I now realise we can still live deep and meaningful lives doing our own thing rather than having a fling.

"That nagging sensation of needing to be fulfilled by another has gone."

For me this means living in my own flat at a longterm psychiatric residence, with 14 fellow residents around me and a good support network. We are all happy and relaxed just being friends. It's a great opportunity to spend quality time with both women and men.

Living in my supported accommodation has been one of the best things that has happened to me in my adulthood. It has matured my outlook and thoughts on what is the ideal lifestyle. It has helped me find peace and balance in my life. We can all go out raving or chill out together. That nagging sensation of needing to be fulfilled by another has gone.

It is a new beginning, not the beginning of the end.

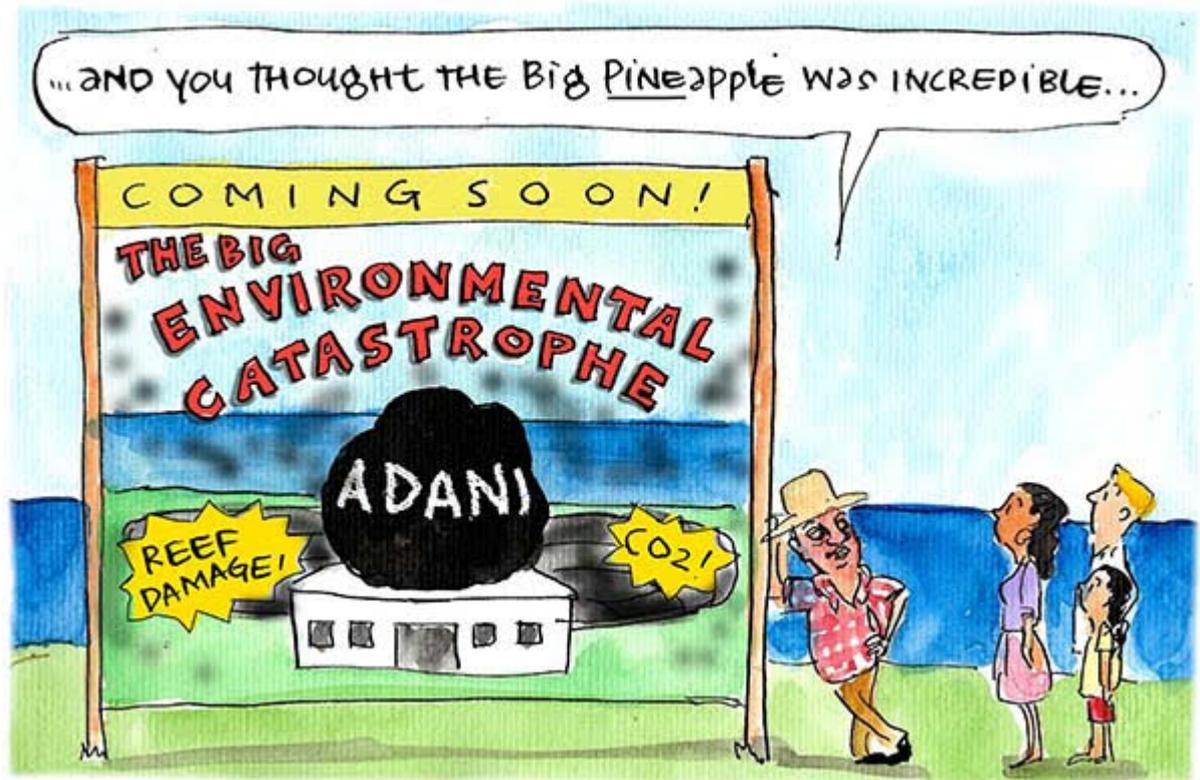


Isabella Fels is a Melbourne poet and writer. She has been published in various publications including *Positive Words*, *The Big Issue* and *The Record*.

## **Thinking big**

**CARTOON**

*Fiona Katauskas*



Fiona Katauskas' work has also appeared in ABC's *The Drum*, *New Matilda*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, *The Financial Review* and Scribe's Best Australian political cartoon anthologies.

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## The problem with Pepsi's appropriation of protest

### MEDIA

*Francine Crimmins*

**A man on a rooftop is seen playing a cello but the soundtrack features the strumming of a guitar. People on the street below march in an orderly fashion carrying signs saying nothing remotely risky - 'Join the conversation' and peace signs drawn in Pepsi blue.**

Sit back, this is two minutes and 40 seconds of your life you'll wish you could take back.

Kendall Jenner appears to save the day for the protesters when she emerges from her nearby photo shoot, pulling off an expensive gown in exchange for a 'casual' \$238 denim jacket.

Now that she looks like the commoners she can walk ahead of them until she approaches the police blocking the protest. Tensions are apparently high, but the crowd erupts into celebration as the cop takes the offering of Pepsi from the celebrity saviour.

Pepsi's new 'short film' advertisement has been widely accused of appropriating the struggle for race and gender equality in the name of its product. It makes sugar filled drinks seem like the key to stopping police brutality against people of colour. It also simplifies the way people engage and make change in the world.

Activism is often led and participated in by the most vulnerable people in our community. Often minorities aren't heard in conventional ways and have no choice but to express political opinions on the streets. These vulnerable people often include women, people of colour and the LGBTIQ community.

Having a corporation such as Pepsi cash in on these experiences for consumerism seems contradictory to the idea of protesting, and commercialising these real struggles can devalue them.

This hurt and offence was echoed on Twitter and YouTube with the video, at the time of writing, having received over 15,000 thumbs down compared to just 3000 likes. Pepsi trended on Twitter for the first 24 hours after the ad was launched; over 50 per cent was negative feedback.

"Perhaps Pepsi got more views on their advertisement than they would have if it wasn't offensive. Regardless, it seems more than likely that they tried to access consumers by seeming like an ethical brand."

Before long, memes started to circulate, such as a photo of Martin Luther King Jr with a

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Pepsi edited into his hand and the caption 'I have a Pepsi'.

Perhaps Pepsi got more views on their advertisement than they would have if it wasn't offensive. Regardless, it seems more than likely that they tried to access consumers by seeming like an ethical brand. They did so in a way which erased the importance of real struggle, perhaps even through the casting of multi-millionaire Jenner.

Jenner approaching the police has been compared to the real-life actions of Black Lives Matter protestor Leshia Evans. While Jenner manages to strike up a friendship through cola, Evans was thrown to the ground by officers when she dared to approach them.

Brands are inescapable in our world, though they shouldn't be representative of it. Pepsi shouldn't be claiming the narrative of people whose livelihoods can be enriched or changed through political protests. While it would be nice to think Jenner could in fact diffuse violence through the modern olive branch which is apparently Pepsi, depictions such as these are often setbacks in the real struggles experienced by people around the world.

Francine Crimmins is studying a double degree of Journalism and Creative Intelligence & Innovation at the University of Technology Sydney. She is on twitter as @frankiecrimmins. Francine is the recipient of *Eureka Street's* Margaret Dooley Fellowship for Young Writers.

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## Waiting for the trickle down effect

### AUSTRALIA

*Frank Brennan*

**Concluding the Senate debate on company tax changes which will allow a tax break to corporations with a turnover up to \$50 million per annum, Senator Mathias Cormann, the Minister for Finance, told the Senate on 30 March 2017:**

'Letting businesses keep a little bit more of their money to reinvest in their future success will help them hire more Australians and pay them better wages over time. That is what this reform is all about.'

More jobs and better wages, especially for the lowest paid, would be welcome outcomes, given that there are 714,000 Australians presently unable to find suitable work and a further 1 million Australians looking to increase their hours of work in order to improve their family lot.

Unfortunately the Treasurer, Scott Morrison, is not able to share with us any economic modelling to demonstrate how this round of corporate tax cuts will assist. He has urged that we use 'the pub test'.

The discerning drinker might like to consider also the government's submission to the Fair Work Commission's Annual Wage Review which was delivered the day before Senator Cormann successfully cut the deal with the Senate cross benchers. The government cautioned against any significant wage increase for Australia's lowest paid workers suggesting:

'Wage increases that are not supported by higher productivity or higher prices for customers and consumers will most likely cost jobs. Excessive increases in minimum wages are likely to reduce employment in award-reliant industries, particularly for youth, and especially when wages growth elsewhere in the economy remains moderate and inflation is low.'

The government argues the need to keep the national minimum wage low so as 'to help long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged groups enter the workforce, noting that low-paid employment is an important "stepping stone" to sustained employment and higher paying jobs.'

The government concedes, 'Inequality has risen across the developed world in recent decades, driven in large part by strong growth in wages for high skilled jobs, and slower growth in wages for low-skilled jobs.' But it continues to boast that a job, even if low paid, is the best path to beating inequality.

"No doubt the electorate in time will have its say on whether the present government's economic recipe is the correct one for increasing jobs and growth, and for arresting

inequality."

While the rich who can order their affairs through corporate arrangements get tax cuts, the poor who work shifts are losing their penalty rates and they are being unsupported by the government in claims for a substantially higher minimum wage.

No doubt the electorate in time will have its say on whether the present government's economic recipe is the correct one for increasing jobs and growth, and for arresting inequality. In the lead up to the next election, voters will have a fresh choice of options for equitable and sustainable deficit reduction. Meanwhile, as we prepare for the next Turnbull budget, those who continue to miss out in the short term have good grounds for thinking Pope Francis has a point when he says in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*:

Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.

Of course, it is always a contest between the major political parties to convince the public that they have the balance right in the run-off between capital and labour and that they have the pressure right, encouraging individuals to join the job market while regrettably leaving others to receive less than adequate welfare assistance. The politicians' economic advisers will no doubt tell them how far they need to go in addressing the budget deficit and in priming the pump for jobs and growth. But any prescription needs to comply with a basic level of equity and sustainability.

Former Reserve Bank Governor Bernie Fraser has warned that the loss of \$25 billion from revenue as a result of the corporate tax cuts will impact adversely on the poor: 'The main recipients will be the dividend holders - not traditionally a disadvantaged, vulnerable section in the community. And the other people who will benefit will be the senior executives of those companies giving themselves bonuses. All the while the vulnerable people are being squeezed at the other end.'

We Australians have moved a long way from the days when both sides of politics accepted: first, that every Australian worker should be paid a living wage sufficient for an average family to survive; and second, that every Australian is entitled to a basic level of welfare assistance when unable to work. Families and work patterns are now more diverse than in the past: we must be more responsive to the positions of couple parent and sole parent families who are unable to provide a decent standard of living for their children because of low wages and part time, irregular and insecure employment. We need more coordinated policies to ensure that minimum wage rates, taxation policies and welfare payments provide every worker with a fair wage and guarantee every family what is needed for a decent standard of living. We also need more direct measures to stimulate and protect employment rather than the reliance on theoretical trickle down policies.

"The main recipients will be the dividend holders - not traditionally a disadvantaged, vulnerable section in the community. And the other people who will benefit will be the senior executives of those companies giving themselves bonuses. All the while the

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vulnerable people are being squeezed at the other end." - Former Reserve Bank Governor Bernie Fraser

In an age of 'budget repair', social policy risks becoming just a sidebar to economic policy which is a contest of ideas about how best to grow the size of the pie thereby providing a slice for 'the deserving poor' without having to redistribute too much of the pie, while 'the undeserving poor' drop off the edge as they would have anyway. For those of us schooled in Catholic social teaching, the so-called 'undeserving poor' are the litmus test of our commitment to the human dignity of all persons. We believe human dignity is innate; it is not acquired by displaying socially attractive attributes like employability.

There is declining public trust in our major political parties which used be the primary spaces for negotiating and effecting the compromises necessary in the Australian democracy which is committed to the right balance between the popular will and the recognition of the due rights and entitlements of all citizens. These compromises are now rushed through back room deals with the growing Senate cross bench with its plurality of philosophies, or at least a variety of self-interested claims.

When the government finalised the corporate tax cuts in the Senate last month, the last group of crossbenchers to the table were Senator Nick Xenophon and his team. They made their agreement contingent on the government's concession on a raft of energy measures including a one-off payment for aged pensioners, disability pensioners and recipients of parenting payments to help them with their escalating electricity bills. A single recipient will receive a \$75 payment and couples will receive \$125.

Senator Xenophon thought this one-off payment would see these pensioners through to 1 July 2018 when changes to the National Electricity Market rules would 'bring everything to a head in order to ensure that there are lower prices for our electricity and security of supply'. After 1 July 2018, I daresay, those pensioners and parents will be left to ponder the trickle down effect of the tax breaks given to the top end of town while their power bills continue to go through the roof. They will be left confused as to how Senate horse-trading can deliver equitable, sustainable results for all Australians when the pub test on jobs and growth is clouded by a shattered hope that electricity prices would magically fall.



Frank Brennan SJ is the CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia.

Cartoon by Fiona Katauskas

## **This intimate proximity**

### **CREATIVE**

*Peter Evans and Brian Doyle*

### **Selected poems**

#### **Denial**

Yes, you did follow him  
Into the palace courtyard.  
You had boldly vowed  
To follow him to the end.  
Now you are there.  
They are torturing him within  
As you sit with the guards without,  
Outside in that damned courtyard  
And wait ...  
By the dying fire.  
'What am I doing here?'  
You ask yourself,  
Uneasy and lonely  
In the dark glow.  
'But at least I am here.'  
You tell yourself.  
Suddenly, knifelike, someone shouts:  
'Hey! You too were with the Nazerene!'

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The finger of the high priest's servant  
Jabs ever so sharply.  
And in your heart at least  
You desperately shrink towards the gate.  
'I don't know what you are talking about.'  
And you flee instead into the shadows  
Of denial.  
It doesn't work of course.  
They are on to you.  
You are cornered.  
They come at you again.  
And you deny again - a second time,  
This time with an oath.  
Then you deny him once more.  
Oh so strangely that fateful third time.  
The hideous crackle of the rooster's crow  
Cuts the still of the Friday dawn  
And with that  
You weep an inconsolable weep  
That now echoes through the ages.  
Why, Peter? Why?  
You can only ask.

In a different imperial courtyard  
In another time  
Another Peter

Another denial

And another why.

*Peter Evans*

### **This intimate proximity**

I was in an old wooden church the other day when I met  
A young man aged four or so who was cradling a plastic  
Green guitar. Seldom do you see a soft guitar all folded  
And bent and flopped such that for a moment I thought  
Maybe it had melted. He bent over it with such affection  
That you could tell he and the guitar were real close and  
Certainly spent lots of time in just this intimate proximity.  
Casually I asked him if I could strum it for a moment and  
He said quietly and seriously, No. I asked him later about  
The guitar and where he'd found it and how long they had  
Been together and we chatted about guitars for a while and  
Then he said so quietly that he was almost whispering I did  
Not know if you would hold him right. I said I understood  
Completely, and how generous it was of him to explain his  
Feelings so straight out and honest and genuine, and then it  
Was time for him to carve a pumpkin and we parted. But this  
Morning I remain moved not just by his open honesty but by  
His tenderness for his friend. Would that we all were just so.

*Brian Doyle*

Peter Evans is an Australian living in France.



Brian Doyle is the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, a longtime contributor to *Eureka Street*, and the author of the essay collection *Grace Notes*.

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## **Striking Syria and the vagueness of humanitarian intervention**

### **INTERNATIONAL**

***Binoy Kampmark***

**The US cruise missile attack on al-Shayrat airbase on Thursday, involving 59 cruise missiles launched from warships in the Eastern Mediterranean, has been framed variously by members of the Trump administration.**

The chemical attack earlier in the week, supposedly launched from the airbase in question, had left over 70 dead, producing a sequence of terrifying images of foaming bodies of all ages.

Sources connected with the Assad regime denied that Russian or government forces had deliberately deployed the nerve agent against the civilian population, citing the explosion of an al-Qaeda chemical weapons factory in Khan Sheikhoun as the source of the calamity.

Absent a Security Council resolution on this issue, the US had operated independently, adopting a policing and punitive stance against the Assad regime. 'This action,' Speaker of the House Paul Ryan insisted, 'was appropriate and just.'

In his 8 April letter to the Speaker to the House, Trump explained the action had been undertaken 'in order to degrade the Syrian military's ability to conduct further chemical weapons attacks and to dissuade the Syrian regime from using or proliferating chemical weapons, thereby promoting the stability of the region and averting a worsening of the region's current humanitarian catastrophe'.

Several elements are discernible: the national security concept of instability caused by chemical weapons proliferation; the humanitarian rationale of civilian protection, averring to the idea of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine that suffered considerably after the 2011 strikes on Libya; and plain speaking power.

International lawyer Harold Hongju Koh last year outlined a series of tests in the *Houston Law Review*, all of which are merely capitulations of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in modern, post-Libya dress. Humanitarian intervention would, for instance, be lawful to halt 'consequences significantly disruptive to international order - including proliferation of chemical weapons, massive refugee outflows, and events destabilising to regional peace and stability'.

The grounds for this would be further hardened in the face of an indifferent UN Security Council, and would have to be 'limited force for genuinely humanitarian purposes' and 'necessary and proportionate to address the imminent threat'.

"In any final analysis, there can be no humanitarianism on the tips of missiles."

Various insurmountable problems are thrown up by these formulations. If humanitarian intervention is supposedly engineered to punish a regime in breach of obligations to protect the civilian population, it starts looking, all too often, like an act of regime change. At what point is the distinction on such matters as proportion or necessity even credible?

The point was evident when it came to striking Qaddafi's forces in Libya in 2011. These acts were initially deemed to be about protecting civilians in Benghazi from imminent slaughter. The UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee report subsequently found that the then Prime Minister David Cameron had pursued an 'opportunistic policy of regime change'.

The quick crumbling of the Qaddafi regime, the capture of the enigmatic despot and his summary execution unravelled the Libyan state, leaving it prey to militant factions of brutality and intolerance. The results? Regional instability, a vast and unregulated international arms market, and a substantial boost to the rise of ISIL in North Africa. By all accounts, a disaster for the humanitarian argument.

With an eerie sense of déjà vu, statements of varying suggestiveness have come from Trump officials justifying the missile strikes. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson insisted that no one could extrapolate from the strikes 'a change in our policy or posture relative to our military activities in Syria today'. To ABC News' George Stephanopoulos, he reiterated that the strike 'was related solely to the most recent horrific use of chemical weapons'. The fate of Assad would be a matter for the Syrian people to decide.

US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, suggested that the morphing of humanitarian strikes into a mission of regime change was inevitable. Her point underlines the dangers of embracing the virtue of calculated strikes supposedly aimed at protecting civilian populations. In any final analysis, there can be no humanitarianism on the tips of missiles. There are, however, disastrous consequences on the ground which often do little for the protective principle and everything for that of realpolitik.

Whether it was Iraq in 2003 with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, or the destruction of Libya in 2011, the lessons are there for those who care to observe them: military strikes in the name of protecting civilians do not work, and in fact impair that very purpose.



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

Main image: The United States fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from warships in the Mediterranean at the Shayrat airfield.

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## No easy judgement in Syrian chemicals attack

### INTERNATIONAL

*Justin Glyn*

**The pictures coming out of Khan Sheikhoun are horrific. Children foaming at the mouth, some with terrible head wounds. No wonder the reaction of the world has been outrage. 'Assad must go' has been revived as a catchphrase in the West.**

We are right to be appalled. Nevertheless, several features about the reported sarin attack in Syria's Idlib Governorate should give pause in the current rush to judgment. Firstly, while you wouldn't know it from much of the media, the facts themselves are contested.

The first reports from inside Syria (on which the world relied) came from rebel news agencies and the 'White Helmets', a group set up in Turkey by a former British special forces officer which operates exclusively in rebel-held areas of Syria and has been closely associated with rebel military formations.

These reports claim that the Syrian government attacked the town, launching the feared nerve agent sarin in airstrikes. The pictures released to prove this show first responders from the White Helmets treating the victims just after the attacks.

Sarin, like other nerve agents, disrupts the operation of enzymes involved in transmitting nerve impulses, causing the body to seize up. Death comes by suffocation. Crucially, however, it is absorbed through the skin. The pictures released show the rescuers apparently unharmed, notwithstanding their bare hands, face (except for a standard gas mask) and loose fitting clothing.

If it was a sarin attack, the rescuers would be as dead as their victims. This already casts doubt on the narrative - a doubt increased by the fact that Syria's last Category 1 chemical weapons (including sarin) were certified destroyed aboard a US warship in 2014 under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons. Later reports suggest that chlorine was in fact the agent involved.

The Russians and Syrians claim that, while there was an airstrike by their forces, it used ordinary explosives and that what was hit was a rebel munitions dump, possibly containing chemicals.

Western sources have claimed that this is unlikely because nerve agents would be destroyed by such a strike. That may be so although sarin is often launched using conventional artillery and whether or not this would be true of chlorine or other chemical stockpiles is even less clear. No independent party has yet got to the scene and so the allegations on both sides remain just that.

"So abhorrent are chemical weapons to the civilised world that no-one would consider

using them unless their back was against the wall. This is not really Assad's position."

In addition, investigating alleged chemical attacks is notoriously difficult. As I mentioned the last time Syria was accused of such an attack, an uncontaminated chain of custody between untampered-with sample and independent laboratory is required - something fiendishly difficult in a war zone. It is important to note that chemicals degrade over time and so, unless a team goes in soon, the truth may be impossible to discover. While the last attack (in the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta) was widely blamed on the government (and served as the trigger for its welcome destruction of its chemical weapons program), journalists such as the respected Seymour Hersh have cast increasing doubt on that narrative.

It is worth mentioning, too, that chemical weapons are usually the choice of desperation. So abhorrent are they to the civilised world (and rightly so) that no-one would even consider using them unless their back was truly against the wall. This is not really Assad's position. Is he authoritarian? Certainly. Is he cruel? Absolutely - he did, after all, maintain stockpiles of chemical weapons himself until recently. But chemical weapons do have a moral cost - they tend to line world opinion up against you (as Saddam Hussein found to his cost when he used them against Iran and the Kurds - even if it was with the active assistance of the West).

Assad, however, is winning in Syria. With Russian help he has reclaimed most of the territory he lost before 2015 and now controls over half of Syria's territory containing over 80 per cent of its population. The West had recently stopped repeating its demand that he go. Of what possible benefit could it be for him to launch a chemical strike now? That's not to say it didn't happen, we don't always act rationally. Still, it's a point worth bearing in mind.

Likewise, it is not as though chemical weapons have not been used as a cause for war in previous ill-thought and illegal Western military adventures. You only have to think back to Colin Powell's sonorous presentation of the absolutely airtight case for war with Iraq based on its evil stockpile of undeclared chemical horrors.

None of this, however, has stopped the rolling drumbeat towards a wider war from starting up again. Of course, it's not as if the Syrian civil war is free of foreign players as it is. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, Russia, the US/NATO, Turkey and Israel are all involved in one capacity or another along with an eye-watering array of rebel groups owing allegiance to various foreign powers.

This time, the stakes are even higher than in previous Syrian interventions (which, whatever their actual effects, have been at least nominally aimed at ISIS). Russia, too, is a nuclear power with the power (along with the US) to reduce the world to radioactive slag. It has invested much of its limited power and all of its prestige in keeping Assad in power (as a better alternative to the radical Islamist rebels). We owe it to the people of Syria - and perhaps to future generations of our own children - not to rush to easy judgment.

UPDATE: At 8.45pm on Thursday 7 April Eastern Time, the US launched a massive military strike on a Syrian airbase near Homs.



Fr Justin Glyn SJ is studying canon law in Canada. Previously he practised law in South Africa and New Zealand and has a PhD in administrative and international law.

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## Religious literacy routs Islamophobia

### RELIGION

*Ann Deslandes*

**The Harvard Divinity School calls it 'religious literacy' - that is, the knowledge and understanding of the tenets of the world religions and, in their words, 'the roles that religions play in human experience across political, economic, and cultural spheres'.**

A person with religious literacy has an understanding and appreciation of the teachings of religions in the world, is knowledgeable about the various applications and manifestations of those teachings, and, perhaps most crucially, understands how religious faith forms, informs and enriches contemporary human society.

At the same time, they are able to recognise and critique the shadow side of religious faith, such as theocratic government, forced belief, and other forms of religious fundamentalism.

In a world where Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are on the rise, endangering and taking the lives of so many innocent people of faith, it is difficult to overstate the importance of religious literacy. Hatred and fear of Islam or Judaism is often justified by misinformation about what Muslims or Jews believe - for example, that Muslims believe in terrorism or Jews believe in killing Christians.

As an adult my own faith looks more like goddess-centred witchcraft, but I grew up with Catholic religious instruction, which included some serious attention to other religious practices and the possibility of a rich co-existence. Within this, I heard from many adults about how they came to their faith and the history of their articles of faith.

One of the great benefits of such a schooling was exposure to, and education in, the presence and work of belief in the world, for better and for worse.

That is, people of faith believe in things we can't see. Some of us feel spirits on the wind and our ancestors by our side. Some of us believe in a time and space after the death of the body. We tend to worship a power that is bigger than the world, that exerts unseen and unpredictable agency over our lives and the lives of others.

When faith of any kind is attached and amassed through a human institution like an organised religion, its power is extraordinary; capable of both horrifying brutality and life-saving human solidarity. It is always cultural and also always individual.

"Maybe if religious literacy were one of the aims of mass education, it wouldn't be so easy to decide to believe that so many of our fellow humans are plotting against us."

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As well as developing my own faith, I believe my religious education generated a certain religious literacy, which helps me to live in a multi-faith world without fear. This means that when I see a person express, for example, their Muslim faith - through dress, or speech, or action - I expect that that person is part of a complex faith tradition, and that I couldn't possibly know at first glance how they personally are situated in it.

Put another way - just like I have known people of the Christian faith who are total jerks, who organise with other total jerks to make Christianity a force in the world that silences women and murders gay people, so too do I count Christians among some of the most vitally kind, loving individuals I will ever be fortunate enough to know, and who organise with other vitally kind and loving people to make Christianity a force for human liberation.

Islamophobia and anti-Semitism reduce people of faith to one-dimensional, malevolent actors. Both practices refuse to appreciate the complexity of faith's manifestation in the world; the myriad ways it is implicated in identity and action, and, particularly in highly secular societies like Australia's, the capacity of people of faith to determine for themselves how they interpret and live the articles of their faith, with others.

Such reduction and refusal is clear when a non-Muslim Australian politician publicly shouts down a young Muslim woman on the subject of that young woman's faith, telling that young woman that her faith is a threat to Australian society. It is clear when over 11,000 other non-Muslim Australians support a call for that young woman to be sacked from her job. It is clear when a young man, unknown to his attackers, is punched in the neck and called a 'fucking Jew' when walking home from synagogue in Melbourne.

Maybe if religious literacy were one of the aims of mass education, it wouldn't be so easy to decide to believe that so many of our fellow humans are plotting against us. Instead, perhaps, we'd see the mystery of faith for the complex thing that it is, and see other things that are rendered opaque and inaccessible (political power, inherited wealth, higher education) as realities we can change.

Ann Deslandes is a freelance writer and researcher from Sydney. Read her other writing at [xterrafirma.net](http://xterrafirma.net) and tweet her @Ann\_dLandes.