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## Questioning the limits to freedom

EDITORIAL

Published 30-Oct-2006

Author and former priest Paul Collins put himself on the line earlier this month while [talking](#) about his new book, [Burn: The Epic Story of Bushfire in Australia](#). Usually known for his left-of-centre views, Collins openly advocated draconian, anti-civil libertarian measures to control pyromaniacs, who are believed to start a large proportion of bushfires.

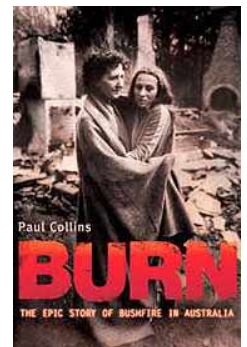
“Part of the problem has been that I think many people tend to take this therapeutic approach. You know, something must have happened to them in childhood or whatever,” he said. “So basically what I’m suggesting is that the police, if they suspect that a certain person is a fire lighter, in periods of high fire danger they need to go to a judge and get permission to have that person tagged with a GPS bracelet of some sort.”

Last Wednesday, Clive Hamilton of the progressive Australia Institute raised a few eyebrows when he [told](#) the ABC’s Stephen Crittenden that it is the churches—long regarded as bastions of conservatism—that offer the best hope for progressive politics in this country.

“I think the error of post-modernism which is so dominant, is that it has no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique,” he said in an interview which prompted a longer essay in this issue of *Eureka Street*.

He remarked that the Institute’s traditional supporters were puzzled when one of its reports criticised pornography not only from a factual basis, but a moral basis. The supporters saw the Australia Institute entering “territory that’s more often associated with those of the moral right”. But Hamilton believes that the ideology of the left is not equipped to help Australians “transcend the individualism and materialism and selfishness of modern affluent societies”.

Over the past week, the al-Hilali comments controversy has demonstrated that there must be limits to free speech. As far as we know, no advocate of democratic freedoms has defended al-Hilali’s right to compare immodestly dressed women to “uncovered meat”. The message from these examples is that freedom is not an end itself, but that upholding it often—but not always—a valid means of recognising values that enhance individual and collective humanity.



## Lakemba and Werribee lessons for the media

### COLUMNS

Summa theologiae

Published 30-Oct-2006



This last week has seen two stories about the treatment of women. One focused on young men who had made a DVD depicting their humiliating abuse of a young woman. The other focused on a Muslim cleric who had said that if women did not dress conservatively, they could provoke rape. The conjunction of these two events raises questions about Australian cultural life, and not simply about the local community at Werribee, west of Melbourne, or the Muslim community in Australia.

The best response is to ask ourselves the questions that parents in Werribee and Sydney's south-west will have been grappling with. In conversation with our children, what would we want to say to them about the way in which they should relate to other people? And what should they keep in mind as they shape their dress and appearance?

I would want to say, first, that they should respect others, and that there is never a valid excuse for showing lack of respect. This means that the way in which women or men dress, speak or look never entitles us to make assumptions about their intentions or desires. Still less does it entitle us to treat them abusively. Nor should these incidentals of dress and appearance be considered a mitigating factor in the guilt of rape and sexual abuse.

To put it concretely, if we pass on the street corner a woman who is scantily clad and heavily made-up, we should treat her with the same courtesy and respect as we would treat an elderly and conservatively dressed woman standing nearby.

I would want to make that statement without qualification, not allowing it to be undercut by this next point. I would want also to say that we communicate something about ourselves by the way in which we stand, sit, dress and behave. People will read our character and dispositions from our external appearance, independently of what we intend to say about ourselves.

In a society like ours where these signs are not strongly coded, I would want my children to be aware of the range of signs that we present, and of the ways in which they may be read. I would particularly wish them, both boys and girls, to be aware of the way in which some styles of dress and appearance will commonly lead others to identify their persons with their sexuality, rather than their sexuality with the person. I would want them to expect and demand respect however they dress. But I would also want them to be realistic about the existence of people who show no restraint in indulging their sexual urges.

I would also encourage them to be open-eyed about what they can expect of the media if they find themselves involved in these firestorms. The media make money from their advertisers, many of whom promote their products by aggressively identifying men and women with their sexuality.



It is to be expected that the media will also treat people with disrespect in order to titillate their audience or to confirm their prejudices. Young people should know that if they are serious about demanding respect and treating others with respect, the media will generally not be their friends.

Both in Werribee and in Lakemba, among Christians and Muslims, respect for human beings always needs encouragement. In the media treatment of the recent events, it has been notably lacking.

## The bloke with a book at the bar

COLUMNS

Simple Pleasures

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If ever you've been to a pub or bar in North Melbourne or West Melbourne, it's likely that you've seen Phil McInerney. Some of you might also have spoken to him.

Phil, as he's always known, is the bloke at the end of the bar with his head in a book or, occasionally, a newspaper. A small, bespectacled man with thinning hair pulled back in a ponytail, he seemingly never tires of reading in company, with a drink—either a vodka and Coke or a Cascade Light—just off the page, and a packet of Longbeach cigarettes in easy reach.

I always wondered what Phil was reading. One night, after years of observing his nightly ritual, I asked him. At the time, he was poring over an ad in the *Herald Sun*. The ad outlined positions available at the City of Swan Hill, in northern Victoria. Phil said he's always interested in the little details in such ads.

I was also fascinated by Phil's reason for reading amid the hubbub of a bar. Most of us read in the privacy of our homes; it's supposed to be an intimate experience. I assumed that Phil reads in bars because he likes the company. If a conversation takes his fancy, he can always join in.

Phil is non-committal on these things. It seems the appeal is the hubbub itself. "I hate silence," he says. "I can't stand silence."

Every night, he goes to sleep with his radio tuned into BBC World Service, which is broadcast after 11pm on the ABC's NewsRadio.

"It's on low, but it's on," he says.

I sit down for an interview with Phil about his bar-reading habit at the Jawa Bar, in Victoria Street, West Melbourne, which has become a favourite reading spot since opening a couple of years ago. Phil sits just behind the 1951 Jawa motorbike, after which the bar is named, that sits in the front window. The bar's owner, Darina Philpot, who grew up in the Czech city of Brno and married an Englishman, adds to the area's store of eccentrics. Jawa motorbikes are from her homeland.

Phil collects change to make Darina's life a bit easier. On this night, he has \$36 in coins arranged in neat stacks on the bar. Darina will give him the commensurate figure in notes. It's one of the symbiotic features, part of a genuine friendship, part of the relationship between the bar owner and the barfly.

Although the word was never mentioned during the interview, I imagine Phil would not blink at

the description of barfly. Since leaving school at nearby St Joseph's College, a Christian Brothers school in North Melbourne, he's spent most of his life in bars, usually as a bar manager. After stints working here and there, including as a chef at Pine Gap, near Alice Springs, and as a barman in Chelsea, London, he returned to live in North Melbourne in 1982 and has stayed there ever since.

North Melbourne was until fairly recently a tough, industrial suburb. On the whole, Phil likes the changes to the area, which have accelerated markedly over the past five years. "It's a better place," he says.

Phil's father died of war injuries in 1947, when Phil was 11 days old. The son grew up knowing that Melbourne University had a bursary waiting for him. During his years at school in North Melbourne, where he was a promising student, he intended to use the bursary to study medicine. He put off going to university in the immediate years after school and then got married at 22. In later years, he got married again. He never did take up that bursary.



At school, Phil was fascinated by science. He now reads magazines such as *New Scientist*, *Scientific American* and *Cosmos*, as well as popular-science books. Everything is bought from MacGill's newsagency in Elizabeth Street in the city, where he gets a 10 per cent discount.

Phil has about 400 popular-science books on the shelves of his flat in North Melbourne behind the Comics' Lounge, where he helps with the running of the place. On the night of the interview, he's reading *The Infinite Book*, a 2005 publication by Cambridge University professor John B. Barrow.

"Think of a number," he explains. "You can always add to it."

He likes equations, but it's never struck him to make a life in mathematics. When asked why, he says: "I like what I'm doing now."



The only non-science book Phil has attempted to read in recent years is *The Da Vinci Code*. He got halfway through it before putting it down because he felt he knew what was going to happen. Darina has recently read and enjoyed *The Da Vinci Code*, as have others in the bar. It seems I'm the only one who hasn't read it.

The *Da Vinci Code* conversation is punctuated by the arrival of two patrons. Phil always checks out who walks in.

"I like seeing people," he says. "I like studying them."

Sometimes Phil talks to the arrivals, but he feels no obligation. People generally sense when to talk and when to leave him alone. If they fail to sense it, Phil resumes reading and the patrons drift off.

When his eye returns to the page, it always falls back on to the sentence he left off. "I don't know how," he says.



## Environmental complexities of the modern dishwasher

COLUMNS

Archimedes

Published 30-Oct-2006

Recently our faithful dishwasher of 17 years sprang more leaks than a soaker hose, and the summoned repairman began mumbling the last rites. Sorting out an environmentally friendly replacement in these water and energy-starved times was not a simple exercise, however. Would that I had the decisiveness the Prime Minister and his colleagues in the National Party show in approaching such matters.



You see, our ancient machine came from an age when dishwashers only had one or two cycles, and were plumbed directly into the hot water system. These days, I found, almost all dishwashers start with cold water, and heat it to precisely the temperature necessary for a specific wash or rinse in a specific cycle programmed to clean dishes in any one of a dozen different ways. So, the repairman told us, a new dishwasher would require changing our fitting to the cold water tap, and involve a plumber.

But isn't it wasteful of energy to have to heat the water inside the dishwasher each time?, I naively asked. Oh, no, said the repairman, shocked at my ignorance. These modern units use so little water, that it barely makes any difference in energy use. And, having the water at precisely the right temperature does a much better job, and cuts the amount of polluting detergent you have to use.

When the delivery man arrived with the new dishwasher, he discovered he couldn't install it, because we needed a plumber to change the fitting to the cold tap. Why don't you just put it on the hot like before?, he asked. I virtuously repeated what the repairman had told me. No need to worry about that, he said. The machine will only use pretty much the water that's already in the pipe from the hot water service, and it will be cold. And if you're concerned that you can't make full use of all your different cycles, nobody I know uses anything but the normal cycle anyway.

The only thing that was obvious to me was how little I knew of the environmental complexities of the modern dishwasher. How would I cope with buying a new microwave, let alone a nuclear reactor? So, imagine my admiration when I read that the Prime Minister has already determined that nuclear power is clean and green, and can't understand why everyone isn't behind it.



Where I would have been left floundering, asking questions about the greenhouse gas emissions of producing the concrete to construct a safely-contained and terrorist-proof power station; or how much energy it takes to isolate and protect high-level nuclear wastes for hundreds of thousands of years; or how much fossil fuel is used to mine and enrich uranium, Mr Howard has already determined the answer. Nuclear power is green. And he's done it weeks in advance of the report of the expert panel convened under Dr Ziggy Switkowski.

And where I—and evidently Dr Switkowski, judging from reported comments—am confused about just how we can prevent Australian uranium from contributing to the seemingly inexorable spread of nuclear weapons, the Prime Minister assures us that nuclear power is clean. Which means he must also know how we are going to dispose of the nuclear waste and decommission the power stations at the end of their useful life.

His clear-sightedness seems to be matched by the National Party who at their last national conference passed all sorts of measures encouraging the production of bio-fuels. Aside from boring old concerns about employing arable land to produce energy, rather than food, in a world where people still starve, the National politicians must have “done the numbers” on the environmental gains of producing ethanol from crops in Australia.

That means taking into account the consumption of water, the energy content of applied fertilisers and insecticides which are typically made from fossil fuels, and just how much petrol and diesel are used in growing and processing biofuels. In the studies I've seen, the estimated greenhouse gas emission gains from bio-ethanol vary from zero to about 15 per cent, with a typical figure of below 10 per cent. It doesn't seem vast.



Because of the intricate nature of all the interactions involved, the best course of action in environmental matters is rarely clear or obvious. I'm just grateful we have such decisive political leaders who can sort their way through these complicated issues, and carefully weigh up the consequences of their actions, which usually extend far, far beyond the time to the next election.

So, Prime Minister, having already advised us all of the material benefits of uranium mining and nuclear power, perhaps you could now devote some time to helping me out with my dishwasher... |



## Andrew Denton's very Christian anti-Christian film

### PERSONALITIES

Published 30-Oct-2006



Say what you like about Andrew Denton—just don't accuse his documentary, *God On My Side*, of being anti-Christian.

"I think that's a misstatement," retorts the television veteran and interviewer extraordinaire. "It's a film about some of the beliefs of Christianity, but it's far too broad to say it's an anti-Christian film."

To be fair, *God On My Side* deliberately takes a very specific demographic as its focus group—one that's not intended to be representative of Christianity in general.

"Evangelical Christians make up 40 per cent of US President George W. Bush's vote—they have the ear of the most powerful administration in the world," says Denton. "They're part of the jigsaw puzzle of the clash of civilisations."

"I would never suggest, and nor does the film attempt to, that they're running US foreign policy, but it would also be disingenuous to suggest they don't have a voice at the table. That's why it's relevant to look at them."

With that in mind, Denton and his production crew headed to the 63rd National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Dallas, Texas, where the delegates comprised some 6,000 Christian communicators. It was a predominantly evangelical, fundamentalist gathering, whom Denton queried not only about their personal faith stories, but also about how faith affects their perception of their world, their country—and their president.

The responses, as seen in *God On My Side*, are alternately moving, baffling and infuriating. It's difficult not to be affected, for example, by one man's story of finding faith amid the carnage following the 1947 explosion of the SS Grandcamp, which claimed 576 lives. On the other hand, it's hard to sympathise with viewpoints that blithely hitch faith to George Dubya's warmongering bandwagon.

"The thing that most surprised me was that everyone I spoke to believed George Bush is 'God's man,'" says Denton. "It's one thing to support him politically, or to like him, but to suggest he's been put there with God's approval is a pretty frightening concept. I have deep respect for people's individual faith, but when faith gets connected to the machinery of state, or the machinery of hate, I find it very confronting."

Equally confronting is the segment of the film dedicated to the ...œEnd Times... (i.e. the end of the world), which many of the talking heads believe is imminent.



“A poll earlier this year showed that 42 per cent of Americans believe we’re in the End Times,” says Denton. “The movie contains footage from a mainstream news story on CNN about End Times. All the major networks in America ran stories about Armageddon and End Times—serious stories in prime time.”

“That’s another reason for the relevance of the film: this is part of the worldview that is being heard at the table of the administration of America.”

*God On My Side* premiered at the Sydney Film Festival in June, and Denton reports that the response so far has been positive, from both the religious and the non-religious corner. “We had people come to the festival that had been at the convention in America, and when they saw the film they said, ‘That’s very fair.’”

“I think the people interviewed embody and believe they embody the Christian ideals of love,” he adds. “But one of the points of the film is that absolute faith can blind you to the consequences of the actions you allow. It can tell you it’s okay to drop bombs on another country, or that it’s okay to hate a group of people such as homosexuals.”

“What I hope people will take away from the film is a clearer ear for the absolutes of faith,” Denton concludes. “I think anyone, no matter what their faith, who says ‘There’s only one truth, I know what it is, and if you don’t ascribe to it you’ve got it coming to you’ ... | anyone like that needs to be looked at carefully.”

## Emotional and intellectual tensions rising in cloning debate

### CORRESPONDENCE

*Published*  
 30-Oct-2006



Next week the Australian Parliament will commence debate reconsidering its 2002 unanimous ban on therapeutic cloning. The Victorian government is a strong supporter of therapeutic cloning because much of the Australian research and development is likely to occur in Victoria.

The Australian Catholic University is convening a public panel discussion on the issue on Thursday (2 November), bringing together two leading medical scientists and two ethicists who disagree over the way forward on the issue of therapeutic cloning. All four are Catholic.

There has been some tension this last week as senators have reflected on the role of religious thinking in such debates. Senator Kay Patterson responded testily to Bishop Anthony Fisher: “Dear me, I might be excommunicated! Anyway, I do not think I will be, because it is my choice, not the Church’s choice, I suppose.”

The debate in Australia is focused on the use of embryonic stem cells which are derived from human embryos. There is division in the scientific community about the utility of embryonic stem cells. It makes sense for scientists to pursue both research tracks (adult and embryo) if this can be done ethically and in accordance with accepted scientific standards.

Some scientists would like a relaxation of the universal ban on embryo cloning so that they could use somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT). With this procedure, by way of example, they can take out the nucleus of a human or animal egg and implant the nucleus of an adult human skin cell. This produces an embryo.

In 2002, the majority of our politicians were supportive of experimentation on excess IVF embryos, but all who declared their position opposed the deliberate creation of human embryos only for destruction and experimentation.

The recent Lockhart review of the legislation favoured the creation of an embryo for experimentation and destruction, provided the embryo not be implanted and provided it not be permitted to thrive beyond 14 days.

Sir Gustav Nossal is a strong advocate for embryonic stem cell research. He says, “As a Catholic, I deeply value my nine years at a Jesuit school, and my career as a medical scientist has further deepened my respect and reverence for human life. Embedded in this value is the belief that everyone should be given the opportunity to live as free from serious illness as medical science can ensure.”



Sir Gustav thinks it is ethical and scientifically responsible now to permit SCNT. He says, “I cannot foretell which diseases will be cured, much less when, but it is deeply mischievous to close the door on a field that has shown so much progress in so short a time. I also find it curious that one group of people should seek to impose their views on another group of people who happen to disagree.”

The other medical scientist on the panel, Professor John Martin, says: “Since the licensing system came into place in 2002, there have been no discoveries through this work, either in Australia or elsewhere, that could support arguments that there is an urgent need for somatic cell nuclear transfer (SCNT), also often called ‘therapeutic cloning’. Since this process involves the deliberate production of a human embryo to experiment on it, SCNT moves the ethical barrier to a much higher level. Many of those who accept the idea of experimentation on excess IVF embryos do not accept the deliberate production of embryos for research.”



Martin is suspicious of the proposed 14 day limit on embryos created with SCNT. He has told the Senate Committee that “any research on embryos generated in this way for the study of disease would certainly require embryo development beyond 14 days”.

If we permit the creation of human embryos only for experimentation and destruction up to 14 days, is there any coherent ethical reason for maintaining the 14 day limit once scientists decide that their research would be assisted by experimentation beyond 14 days?

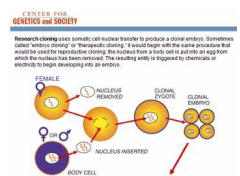
Once we permit the creation of human embryos for experimentation and destruction, are we clearing the way for experimentation and destruction on pre-viable fetuses? If we permit the creation of SCNT embryos for destructive experimentation, should we also allow scientists to create embryos with sperm and ova for such experimentation? These are some of the ethical questions that will confront the panel.

The ethicist Bernadette Tobin will reflect on her experience at the Plunkett Centre for Ethics at St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney. Professor Max Charlesworth will share some of his recent experiences in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe.

One of the poignant moments in the Senate Committee hearings this last week was the evidence of Paul Brock, a man now confined to a wheelchair with motor neurone disease. He is a strong advocate of embryonic stem cell research. Paul spent years teaching in Catholic schools when he was a Marist Brother. He comes from a strongly Catholic family, with siblings who are priests. He told the Senate Committee:

“Can you imagine looking my 90-year-old mum, my 43-year-old wife and our 15- and 11- year-old girls in the eye, and looking me in the eye—a bloke who 10 years ago was running around like a lunatic, playing golf, playing cricket, playing the piano and doing all the things in life—now reduced to two fingers that move a bit, a brain that works, a voice which obviously works too much, and telling us it is evil? I think you need to support this because it is the right thing to do.”

Paul told the committee that he was not convinced by my analogy of the fire-fighter called to a house fire where a person with motor neurone disease is trapped. Next door is a petri dish with



human embryos. There is time to enter only one room. The ethical fire-fighter will rescue the person. I had argued that this does not mean it is ethical to create human embryos only for the purpose of destructively experimenting on them in the hope of finding a cure for motor neurone disease.

The panel will confront the intellectual and emotional challenges of therapeutic cloning, contributing to an informed Catholic discussion of the issue.

Eureka Street *plans to make available the audio from this conference after it has taken place. Be sure to check the ES Extra section of the site for this, or [sign up for the free newsletter](#) to be notified when the audio is available.*

## Gut reaction aside, those on the ground know Iraq reality

INTERNATIONAL

Published 30-Oct-2006

### THE LANCET

"Health is now the most important foreign policy issue of our time."



In a month of big international news stories, Iraq has again dominated the headlines. Perhaps the most distressing report came from a British medical journal. *The Lancet* published the findings of a mortality survey conducted in Iraq by Professor Burnham and researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore and Al Mustansiriya University School of Medicine in Baghdad.

The study estimated that about 601,000 Iraqis have died from violent causes since the coalition invasion of Iraq on 18 March 2003 until July of this year. They found that the pace of violent death has accelerated every year since 2003.

President Bush immediately claimed the methodology ...œhad been pretty much discredited... and the findings were ...œnot credible... . Prime Minister Howard quickly said the results were ...œnot plausible ... | not based on anything other than a house-to-house survey... . These were personal assessments unsupported by evidence.

It is important then, to understand how the survey was done. The researchers used a sample representative of the entire country. Forty-seven residential streets from 16 of Iraq's 18 Governorates were randomly selected. In each street, residents from 40 homes were asked about deaths of family members since January 2002. 1,849 households were visited and 12,801 people were surveyed.

This is a large sample. The death rate recorded in these households during the period before the invasion was subtracted from the rate after the invasion. This represents the excess mortality attributable to the conflict. This rate was then applied to the populations of the Governorates to estimate the total excess death-toll for the country.

Because the researchers did not visit every household in Iraq, the exact number of deaths since the invasion remains unknown. Any method less than a census—asking every household in the country—introduces a margin of error. We are all familiar with television ratings; most of us intuitively appreciate that we do not need to talk to everybody in the population to accurately estimate the true number of TV viewers.

For the unfortunate Iraqis, sadly we can be confident that the war has caused at least 426,000 excess deaths from violence and possibly as many as 793,000. The true toll, however, is far more likely to be in the middle of this range than at the extremes. Sampling, when conducted according to strict statistical criteria as in the Iraq survey, is the only tested, valid and practical way of gathering data in insecure settings.



Because surveyors actively looked for reports of deaths from Iraqis themselves (92 per cent could produce a death certificate), rather than counting corpses brought to morgues or news agency casualty reports, we expect they would record higher numbers than many other well-publicised methods of counting bodies.

Putting aside the notion of what may constitute a plausible death-toll in times of conflict—the evolution of warfare throughout the 20th century should have taught us much about the increasing impact of war on the health of civilian populations—house-to-house surveys are in fact the standard and best means of determining population mortality rates when routine systems of data collection collapse.



The US Congress should agree: in June this year they unanimously passed a bill outlining financial and political measures to promote relief, security and democracy in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The bill was based in part on the veracity of a survey conducted by the Burnet Institute (Melbourne) and the International Rescue Committee (New York) that found 3.9 million Congolese had perished because of the conflict. This survey used the same methodology as Burnham and his associates. It also passed the scrutiny of a UK parliamentary delegation and the European Union.

Other mortality studies in Darfur, Kosovo and Afghanistan have employed identical methods and their findings have been accepted by the media, UN, and governments throughout the world. The US government actually funds training of the humanitarian community in this methodology. As Burnham's colleague Les Roberts has said, "it is odd that the logic of epidemiology embraced by the press every day regarding new drugs or health risks somehow changes when the mechanism of death is their armed forces".

Although a nationwide census may ultimately be the only way of conclusively counting the human cost of this war, Burnham and colleagues have bravely given us a sound scientific estimate of the magnitude of Iraqi suffering. In the interests of the Iraqi people, of regional and global security, and of the victims of future wars, the *Lancet* survey should not be unthinkingly dismissed by any of us.

## The oxygen that breathes life into peacemaking

AUSTRALIA

Published 30-Oct-2006



There is a fair amount of fuzziness about where the line of demarcation between church and state lies.

This separation is a principle I firmly believe in, while also believing that someone's personal values should and do inform one's day to day thought processes and decision-making. But there is way too much selective following of the rule nowadays by this government. It invokes the authority and wisdom and so-called legitimate involvement of the church in politics and policy-making when that involvement is pro-government policy.

The Howard Government directly uses various congregations and speeches to promote government policies. But when the church points out human rights and humanitarian values "shortcomings" and "failures" of the government—for example, in relation to refugee policy—then the church is loudly deemed to have no place in such discussions. It is told, often not so politely, to go away quietly.

What is "Christian" about the treatment of David Hicks? What is "Christian" about the treatment of asylum-seekers? What is "Christian" about believing that sleep deprivation and other harsh treatment of arrestees is not torture?

The spectre of the West being involved in or effecting the use of torture, the forceful removal of suspected terrorists to countries not connected with the war to enable interrogation outside the legal systems of Western countries, and the imprisonment of alleged terrorists without proper legal process are troubling many lawyers, church leaders and members of the public.

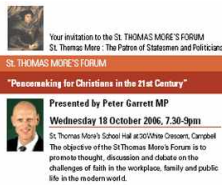
So what should our response be in these circumstances?

Other than the formal interaction between nations through the United Nations and the Security Council, the range of approaches includes initiatives both through the UN and its agencies and other international organisations, and at the personal level inter-faith dialogue between religious groups, citizen-to-citizen exchanges to increase understanding.

There is a host of options and actions that can bear fruit. And here the role of non-government organisations (NGOs) who provide the heavy lifting in aid relief and community building in war-torn regions is critical.

It is undeniable that organisations like Caritas, World Vision, the Red Cross and a host of others bring expertise and compassion to bear in troubled parts of the globe. Their work, including their advocacy for the poor and those caught in the crossfire of violence, is of enormous value.

Standing up for peace, reconciliation and healing where peace has been absent, often means working with communities through long days and nights, as for example Australian Catholic nuns did, and still do, for the people of Timor-Leste during their darkest hours and as they continue the difficult task of rebuilding their nation.



At all times the exercise of citizen's voices both here and overseas, and the involvement they have with the political processes of their country, is the oxygen that breathes life into peacemaking.

My reading of Jesus' call to turn the other cheek, is that not only is it a clear rebuttal of the literality of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but it is also a practical insight into how arguments that justify the use of violence on the grounds that violence has already occurred can be countered.

The "just war" principle evolved to address the question of what happens when there is a greater evil that will be committed if violence is not countered. Christian doctrine is not comfortably numb to the scenario of unmitigated, unlawful aggression. Even Gandhi, the champion of non-violence, demurred that sometimes violent resistance to evil was better than no resistance at all. And Bonhoeffer, the great Christian pacifist my colleague Kevin Rudd wrote about recently, joined the plot to assassinate Hitler.

We now come to a new crossroads, for the exercise of the war in Iraq has meant that the principles that govern just war-making have been thrown over. And the Christian response should be to challenge this reversal of principle and practice.

In the meantime, the existing "just war" framework can serve as a basis to develop new peacemaking actions where justice and commitment to the poor is central.

And here what better example than the worldwide "Make Poverty History Campaign", which originated out of the movement for Jubilee Debt Relief and others, and involved numerous young people, including many Christians, and which resulted in the UN adoption of the Millennium Development Goals.



The rule-breaking that defines Christ's mission as recorded in the gospels is the ushering in of an age where peace is pre-eminent, not one where war is justified. We shouldn't lose sight of this mission as we contemplate peacemaking in the new century.

*This is an edited excerpt from a speech delivered on 18 October at the St Thomas More Forum at Campbell in Canberra. The full text is available [here](#).*

## The best dialogue cherishes difference

AUSTRALIA

Faith

Published 30-Oct-2006



At a time when diplomacy seems to be a dying art in the arena of international relations, the concept of “dialogue”, and especially inter-faith dialogue, has experienced something of a rebirth within local government, the university and civil society.

Because the concept of dialogue seems self-evident, very few of us ever really take the time to think about what dialogue may actually mean, what it entails and what we can legitimately expect from it.

The first thing we tend to think about whenever dialogue is mentioned, is talking. Yet the key to successful dialogue is listening.

A good listener is someone who can hear what another person has to say without letting prejudice get in the way, or, put differently, it is someone who can attach the same importance to another person’s beliefs and opinions as they do to their own, no matter how different the two are.

But what is the measure of successful dialogue?

Whilst many see and use dialogue as a way to identify our similarities, its true value often lies in the way it can teach us to recognise and respect other people’s differences, and to see difference as valuable, in and of itself.

Often, dialogue is used to establish some sort of common ground between people who otherwise live and practise different faiths and cultures.

Understood in this way, if the aim of dialogue is to highlight the similarities that can unite different people, its ideal end-point is reached when two people, who start off emphasising all the things that make them different, end up recognising all the things that actually make them quite similar, their similar life experiences, hopes, dreams, shared values, morals, beliefs and so on.

This emphasis on finding a common ground between different people, cultures or faiths through dialogue is, of course, extremely important. But often the most productive forms of dialogue are those that don’t try to sweep our differences under the carpet, but instead teach us to recognise and value them.

It teaches us that our interactions with different people, cultures and religions, actually enrich our lives, and that difference is something we should openly value and promote, rather than fear and shun.

Put simply, dialogue not only offers us a way of reaching some sort of common understanding about our similarities, it also offers us a way of reaching some sort of common understanding about our differences, such that we see difference in a new and more positive light.

This aspect of dialogue is doubly important today in a world that seems ever less willing to accommodate difference.

In Australia, people of different faiths and cultures find themselves increasingly marginalised despite this country's claims to multiculturalism.

Much of what we now see, hear and read from some of our political leaders and influential opinion makers would have us believe that we live in a world divided into two camps, a world irreparably torn between ...œus... and ...œthem... , the civilised and the barbarous, good and evil.

The lines of demarcation are, of course, racial and religious.



Rather than promoting the value and strength of diversity, we are increasingly taught to see different cultures and faiths as a constant source of danger, one that chips away at the very fabric of Australian society and undermines our ...œAustralian way of life”.

Today, the most obvious example of this is the vilification of Australia's many Arab and Muslim communities. Like most others, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim vilification is rooted in a series of crude stereotypes that project our own biases, misconceptions and fears onto others.

Such stereotypes don't distinguish between different people, but simply paint all Arabs and Muslims with the same brush. Today, we demand that Arab and Muslim communities in Australia be answerable to the very stereotypes that we ourselves impose upon them. We constantly ask them to publicly reaffirm their allegiance to Australia, and yet we never really believe them when they do. We constantly see them as a source of danger, and increasingly treat them not with the dignity they deserve, but in accordance with our own paranoias and misconceptions.

There are many reasons why this is occurring, and sometimes being encouraged, but the point is that the vilification of Arabs and Muslims in Australia reveals a failure on our part to recognise them as human beings. What is also significant is that we are fast losing our capacity to listen to other people, and to accept and make room for different faiths and cultures in this country.

We are becoming less able to accommodate those who are different to us, because we are now more likely to marginalise and malign other people's differences. We are no longer able to recognise, and are no longer encouraged to recognise, the many positive contributions that people from many different faiths and cultures have brought with them to Australia.



In its demand that we learn to listen, and that we learn to value and respect difference, dialogue is perhaps the only way open to us to reverse this trend.



## 'Clash of civilisations' rhetoric distorts cultural differences

### ESSAYS

Published 30-Oct-2006



A perturbing public discourse referring to amorphous Australian values is driving contemporary politics.

The Howard Government has argued that it has no need to apologise for telling Muslims that they need to embrace Australian values. This so-called cultural war against foreign or alien influences has the intention of elevating an unwavering set of distinctive Aussie values. Yet the government's preoccupation with the "Australian way" has based itself in a binary form of identity politics. Declarations of allegiance to a unique set of Australian norms and standards reinforce a message that growing social tensions will be the result of a titanic

clash of cultures.

In recent years, Australia has been recalculating its "national interest" with newfound intensity. The protection of home-grown values has become a rallying cry for those wishing to hawk their patriotic credentials.

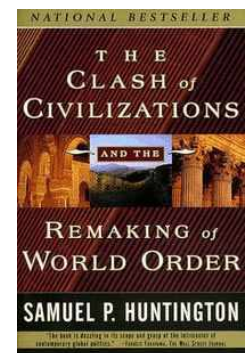
As a result of a campaign to promote Australian values, anti-Muslim hostility is increasingly being accepted as normal. The government's determination to attack "mushy, misguided" multiculturalism is intertwined, in part, with the wider strategic culture of white Australia—past historical and social experiences grounded in the "tyranny of distance" and a concomitant sense of isolation. It can be argued that Australia has always been a "frightened" country. The underlying dynamic of the government's agenda also appears to be strongly linked to a wider preoccupation with the grossly underdeveloped "clash of civilisations" thesis.

In 1993, author Samuel Huntington predicted increasing hostility between different cultures, particularly between the West and Islam. He claimed that the fundamental source of conflict in a post-Cold War world would not be ideological, but cultural. Culture would emerge to be the great divider among peoples. Islam was seen as a single bloc, aggressive and unresponsive to new realities.

While Huntington's interpretation did acknowledge some of the emerging political, social and cultural dynamics in today's world, his notion of a clash of mutually dichotomous cultures contained a number of fundamental deficiencies and biases.

Firstly, culture cannot be viewed as monolithic. Huntington's analysis presents an ahistorical and unduly simplified conception of culture.

Internal tensions are simply overlooked. Divergence exists not only between nations, but also within nations. Muslims or Catholics or Hindus, for example,



do not speak with one unified voice nor do they share a single unequivocal ideology. Within any one civilisation there are often significant differences and extensive debate.

Cultural differences continue to be important, but they cannot be usefully understood through one-dimensional stereotypes. One must be careful to avoid any oversimplified connection between Muslims, fundamentalism and Islamic culture. The cultural influence of Islam in shaping distinctive beliefs and rules has been encompassed by a diversity of contrasted forms and disputed interpretations. Monotheism is a not clear guide to faith or religion; it is complex in both practice and explanation.

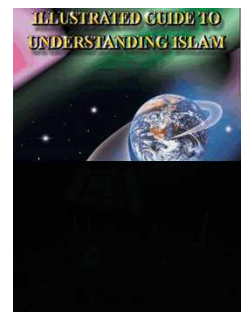


Secondly, culture is not static but a dynamic arena. Argument can be made that Huntington underestimated the widespread impact on cultural identity due to developments such as increased inter-religious dialogue, technological innovation, transportation and education. Islamic countries and Muslim peoples are part of this increasingly interconnected, interactive global system.

Finally, it can be argued that Huntington’s attempt to create a monstrous global threat was for a more cyclical, self-serving end. With the collapse of the Soviet sphere, culturally adverse and aggressive enemies were to replace the communist “evil empire”.

The extension of such a monolithic threat perception has been used to justify America’s right to operate unconstrained on the world stage and the maintenance of American hegemony. In the sense that the US remained the linchpin of the “new” world order, there is nothing original in Huntington’s shift of a global balance from the “old” world order—the preservation of American dominance remained paramount.

Islam has re-emerged as a powerful force in politics. Yet the study of Islam requires an examination beyond the simplistic idea that Australian values, whatever, exactly, they are, will be contrary to Islamic heritage. Grossly offensive outbursts such as those expressed by Australia’s supreme cleric, Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali—that include comparing women to meat—are both inciteful and deplorable. But such a primitive outlook is not unique to Islam. Further, many Muslim leaders and their congregations, including the Islamic Council of Victoria, have criticised him strongly. Rather than present the furore as proof that Australian values and Islam are incompatible, this latest provocation can be interpreted as not a clash between civilisations but one that signals the clash between progressive and fundamentalist forces within one great civilisation.



The government’s attachment to, and extension of, the Huntington debate exacerbates existing community tensions and runs the risk of fostering deep-rooted division and anxiety. Rebel MP Petro Georgiou has correctly warned that the war against terrorism highlights the need to support moderates within Islam in their struggle against extremist elements.

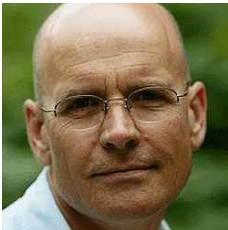
Australian values have re-emerged as a subject of political debate and controversy. Rather than painting Islam as other and separate, people of Muslim background share many cultural, religious and social norms that promote charity, peace, pluralism and “mateship”. Any “clash of civilisations” rhetoric or claim to moral authority on the matter of national values should simply be dismissed as a populist slogan that serves to distort rather than define real challenges and the facilitation rational

debate.

## Churches could hold key to salvation for the Left

### ESSAYS

Published 30-Oct-2006



After three decades that have seen neo-liberalism and social conservatism become dominant, where can we expect a new progressive politics to come from? What social movement or popular yearning could generate such a politics in an affluent society characterised by profound loss of meaning?

When we consider the existing major social movements, it seems to me that the new politics cannot be found in environmentalism, crucial though the environment movement is to our future. Nor can it be found in the social democratic model of the trade unions, important as they are in protecting the interests of their members. ACOSS and the welfare sector are to be admired for standing up for the underprivileged, but in an affluent society welfarism cannot be expected to motivate far-reaching political change.

But, despite the suspicion of many progressives, the churches could be the answer. Traditionally, the churches have attended to and represented the deeper aspects of life, those that transcend the individualism, materialism and selfishness that so characterise modern affluent societies. It is in this transcendent concern that I believe we can find the roots of a new progressive politics—not in the institutions of the churches themselves but by rediscovering those aspects of life that, at their best, the churches articulate and cultivate.

The old model of the “Left” is based on the idea that the principal problem of modern society is material deprivation. In a past era this was justified, but in rich countries like Australia the opposite is the case. So the model that many progressives have operated on is out of date and irrelevant. The principal social and personal problems we now face arise out of the sicknesses of affluence—over-consumption, wastefulness, materialism, selfishness, and loss of meaning.

For decades we were promised that if only we attended to the economy and pursued higher incomes, then we would be happy. But the tragedy is that we are not. In fact, now that most people in rich countries have conquered material deprivation we see a rash of psychological disorders and a pervasive emptiness in everyday life. This is the great contradiction of modern society.

The churches remain the repository of the deeper understanding of life that once motivated some elements of the Left. There has always been a tradition in the Left to focus on alienation, the sense of the loss of self. And we can use this idea to understand the way in which modern consumer society deprives people of the opportunity to pursue a more truthful, a more authentic life.

There are many people in the churches who still cleave to that stream of progressive thought. Although I have no connection with it, it seems to me that this is particularly true in the Catholic

Church.

What the Left desperately needs is a new approach to morality. The error of post-modernism, which grew out of the broad academic Left and now dominates Western society, is that it has no metaphysical foundation for a moral critique. Without a metaphysics that is common to humanity, any moral stance must be relative and therefore be contestable and lacking in conviction.

Yet there is a pervasive sense throughout society that we live in an era of moral decline. People want firmer moral rules that apply to them and others, particularly ones that govern sexual and personal relationships. And in a way that's the fundamental problem of modern society; it's crucial for people on the progressive side of the fence to acknowledge these concerns and engage in moral debate, which means developing new foundations for moral law.

The anxiety and yearnings which ordinary Australians have about moral decline have been recognised and articulated by people that I fundamentally disagree with, by those on the Right who often distort that moral anxiety for right-wing political purposes. The Left, for want of a better word, really needs to get over its fear of engaging in moral judgment and moral argumentation and to go back to the community with a moral vision so that the Right can no longer monopolise and distort those sorts of concerns.



After all, every political debate is a moral debate. If you open up a newspaper on any day, in virtually every story there is a moral argument going on, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise.

That applies particularly to economic issues; economic issues are really moral questions rather than analytical ones. So we need a new politics of morality, one that is rooted in some of the traditional concerns of progressive people, in social justice, in the maldistribution of power, and the way in which that affects the capacity of people to pursue a truly fulfilling life.

The churches have been re-entering political debates. Usually progressives regard this as a dangerous thing, because the most newsworthy stories concern sexual and reproductive questions where the churches often line up against the progress made by the liberation movements of the '60s and '70s.

Of course, church and state must remain separate but I regard the re-entry of the churches as a good thing. For example, quite unexpectedly, Anglican Archbishop Peter Jensen spoke out strongly against the Howard Government's IR legislation. More predictable but no less welcome criticisms were made by the Catholic bishops. Some on the Left have trouble acknowledging this support, because these Anglican and Catholic leaders have been opposed to the extension of gay rights, for example, and are seen as the enemy.

So there are re-alignments occurring that challenge our usual assumptions about where various groups stand. There should be more of this on the Left. When we at the Australia Institute produced a report three years ago, expressing alarm at the way in which teenagers in Australia are exposed to huge amounts of pornography, particularly extreme and violent content on the internet, many of our supporters were surprised and disconcerted.



Yet we believed, on the basis of our analysis, that this trend is very damaging. Some of our supporters wondered why we would have entered into territory that is more often associated with those of the moral Right. The answer is because it is a very important issue causing widespread concern in the community and a progressive voice was desperately needed. But perhaps there was a deeper puzzlement: why would the Australia Institute engage in any moral issue because doing so means making moral judgments? The answer is that we are no longer afraid of making such judgements, even in the case of the most difficult questions concerning sexual behaviour, because they are of enduring importance to ordinary people.

**Corporate Paedophilia**  
Sexualisation of children in Australia

Emma Rush  
Andreea La Naves

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The same can be said about our recent work on the sexualisation of children in marketing and popular culture. Although traditionally seen as an area of concern for the moral right, there are just as many parents with progressive political views who view the premature sexualisation of their children as very disturbing.

If it had been the so-called “usual suspects”, such as Fred Nile or Family First, saying these things, everybody would have yawned and said, “Oh yes, they would say that.” But because we at the Australia Institute are on the progressive side of the fence and are not supposed to talk about those things, let alone object to them, when we do analyse them and take a position, it attracts a lot of attention.

There is a fundamental contradiction within conservative politics nowadays, exemplified perhaps by John Howard. On the one hand, there is a strong element of moral conservatism which speaks to the moral anxiety and moral concerns of ordinary Australians. On the other hand, it also espouses economic liberalism which exacerbates the anxieties.

Moreover, giving free rein to the market very often leads to an erosion of moral values—the work we have done on youth and pornography and on the sexualisation of children is an illustration of that. So here’s a real contradiction in the heart of conservative politicians; it astonishes me that a moral hard-liner like Tony Abbott can resolutely refuse, time after time, to reign in the market forces that exacerbate the problems he complains about.

This contradiction in modern conservatism leaves a gaping political hole that must be filled. It must be said that there are contradictions in the Left too. While often being in favour of more regulation of the economy, including labour markets and income distribution, the Left has traditionally been strongly opposed to governments intervening in moral issues.

So I would argue that the Left too needs to accept that government, expressing the wishes of the citizenry after a proper debate, should also take a stronger role in some of those areas of moral concern where the Left has traditionally been too afraid to tread.

These moral concerns, spanning both personal behaviour and broader social trends in the market, are the traditional grounds of the churches. I don’t believe we should look to the churches, as institutions, as the source of a new progressive politics. But I believe that the answers will come from perceptive, inspired and compassionate individuals, whose political ideas combine social analysis with a direct apprehension of the transcendent insights that underpin all deeper human

Wind Farms: The facts and the fallacies

Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia

Statement regarding the Electronic Appendix to Corporate Paedophilia

The Politics of the Past and the Future - A talk to the National Civil Society Alliance, 9 October 2006

Baby Boomers and Retirement: Dreams, fears and anxieties

Attitudes to Happiness (Web paper)

Steve Irwin Opinion Piece

Rich Boomer, Poor Boomer, Retirement prospects for the not-so-lucky generation (Web Paper)

Baby Boomers: The not so lucky generation (Media Release)

State and territory tourism assistance: A zero-sum game

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act: An Ongoing Failure

School Vouchers: An evaluation of their impact on education outcomes



yearnings.

## A generation of online material girls

MEDIA

The Net

Published 30-Oct-2006



As the Web 2.0 revolution continues to gather steam, potential new killer applications continue to emerge on the internet.

From humble beginnings based on ideas of the public good, commerce is now driving the expansion of the internet. Even the phenomenon of social networking sites, such as MySpace and YouTube, are sponsored and paid for by advertising.

The sites comprised of user-generated content including blogs, photo and video sharing are being gobbled up by big media companies, who are desperately looking for ways to make money out of allowing the viewers and users of these sites.

Rupert Murdoch has stitched up a highly lucrative deal with the search engine Google for MySpace, after purchasing MySpace in recent months. Google has subsequently gobbled up the MySpace competitor YouTube, which means, typically, that Google is able to have a bet each way, and will profit from both.

As entrepreneurs and online “old hands” both search for the next big thing on the internet, a newly emerging concept is [Zebo](#), which combines the desire to shop with a capacity to search and to join a social network. Launched only a couple of months ago, it is planned as an online shopping community. Over seven million people have already joined the free site.

So what does this say about human society?

Like many sites, Zebo relies on user-generated content. The front page quickly provides a summary of the current cool items. Last week Zebo members were saying that they own houses, iPod players, DVDs, family and CDs—a very electronics-based set of belongings.

This week, it's computers, shoes, houses and iPods—people weren't rated so highly.

And last week, what did they desire? Friends, iPods and phones.

The predilection towards owning and gaining material possessions is rampant. Like many teenagers, Jessica of Brisbane, Australia owns a Playstation2 and wants a Playstation Portable. [Zac](#), aged 23 and from Las Vegas, Nevada USA is into music and computers and wants his own recording studio.

While the site clearly states that it is aimed at users over the age of 18, due to the commercial nature, it is teenage girls who appear to be overwhelmingly attracted to the opportunity to brag about what they own, dream about what they aspire to, and find out what other users think about products.

Members are encouraged to blog with a commercial focus, to keep a journal of shopping experiences and tips. There is also the opportunity to store photos and provide connections with friends online.

Zebo is directly encouraging the consumer society, and engaging with the development of material desires.

I am what I own, or what I aspire to own.

Fourteen-year-old Ana was recently featured on the front page. From Chicago, Illinois, she owns a cellphone, knowledge and a boyfriend, but what she really wants is love. Can this be bought?

Twenty-eight-year-old [Adelwale](#) of Lagos in Nigeria wants a partner who is Muslim, God-fearing, good-looking and intelligent.

In fact, among the many followers of Britney Spears and Nicole Ritchie, there are also many looking for something deeper in life.

And there are the outright liars, like 17-year-old [Andre](#) from Coimbra in Portugal who claims to own a Lamborghini Diablo, Ferrari Maranello, Porsche Carrera GT, Jeep Wrangler and Ferrari Testarossa. I guess you can't blame Andre for trying.

One of the features of the site is the ability to find out what others recommend, what other users want to purchase.

Can the user trust their judgment?

...œIrish Ann... , aged 23 and working in finance as an accountant in the Philippines, describes herself as a trendy shopaholic who likes exploring boutiques and independent labels for fashions.

The social-networking side of Zebo does get a look-in though, in spite of the material focus of the site. While 20-year-old [Awais](#) of London, UK, wants the latest BMW car, he also lists cricket and the Arsenal football team.

In the online world, people expect instant responses. It started with email. The turnaround time for receiving a response via "snail mail" was no longer good enough on the internet. Expectations changed and instant replies were demanded. Delivery and read receipts were used to instil a sense of urgency in the communication. This in turn lead to a speeding up of many other activities that moved to the internet.



Banking could be done at the click of a few keystrokes. Purchasing became an instant decision.

The information revolution is barely ten years old in a commercial sense, but it is still difficult to have a sense of how long it will take to complete. Sites like Zebo create an intersection of commerce and social interaction that, while not seamless, is certainly far removed from what the Web started out as. Whether or not this is a good thing, only time will tell. Certainly, one could argue that the focus on commerce clouds the original ideal; that being the free trade of information, ideas and the de-commodification of knowledge.

## Unpolished gem shines brightly

### BOOK REVIEW

Published 30-Oct-2006

**Alice Pung, *Unpolished Gem*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2006. RRP \$24.95, 282pp. Paperback, ISBN 1-86395-158-X**



The controversy over proposed English tests for prospective Australian citizens suggests an essentially selfish attitude to immigrants. When most migrants face huge cultural barriers to resettlement, it seems highly Anglo-centric to think that tests are more appropriate than encouragement and sensitive assistance. In *Unpolished Gem*, narrator Alice and her mother overcome a huge range of difficulties in their lonely efforts to pursue the “Great Australian Dream”.

Alice is born in Melbourne shortly after her parents and her paternal grandmother and aunt arrive from a refugee camp in Vietnam. Chinese Cambodians, they are already twice displaced and are desperate to succeed in Australia. The story opens with the “Wah-sers” agog at the city sights and sounds, thrilled with the cheap plastic products, and grateful for the largesse of “Father Government” and Brother Laurence. Through hard work they move from a hostel into rented accommodation in Footscray, a modest house in Braybrook, and on to the home they build in Avondale Heights.

Alice’s father manages electrical appliance franchises. He chooses this kind of retail because “every Lee and Lah” opens Asian grocery stores. Her mother however, works in more traditional Indo-Chinese style as an “outworker”, making jewellery at home and hawking it to shops. Unfortunately, Alice’s mother is unhappy because she feels oppressed by her mother-in-law. Her heart is variously described as “a little red bullet, poking around in her chest, searching for a way out”, and a “demented red bullet ... Going ballistic and making holes everywhere, holes in places where no hole should be”.

The grandmother insists on the maintenance of Chinese traditions. Alice sleeps in her bed, and addresses both mother and grandmother as “Ma” although “two tones different”. Telling tales of both, she becomes a “word-spreader” until realising that her grandmother’s words contained sharp “bones” and that being thought a spy would bring disaster.

Words and their importance permeate this story. When Alice goes through a stage of wetting her pants, she cannot find the language to tell the teacher she must go. She says that “foreign words do not seem to slip out of me as easily as the contents of my bladder”. In senior high school, she finds that she lost so many Teochew words that there seemed no hope of recovering them. “Although I ticked ‘English as a second language’ on all official forms, I was beginning to think in English.”

The more she studied, the less she was able to answer her mother's questions. Indeed, she was heading for a nervous breakdown and abandoned her journal writing as she "had no words left". Alice even found reading difficult as "sentences suffocated me ... | strung together like code". In these depressed times, a kind of cultural schizophrenia gives her a "false skin" and she feels stalked by a "dark shadow".



Alice's mother, who is, significantly, referred to throughout in exactly that relational term, thinks that learning "the English" will change her life. In a spasmodic campaign, she has some success. Alice notes that many of the houses of middle-class Cambodians were empty during the day because the women could not stop working, even when there was no financial necessity: "used to working for others all their lives, they did not know how to be idle without guilt". But the real spur for her mother is to try to "enter the world of her children's minds".

Despite her parents' close attention, Alice changes and adopts new cultural practices. They place great responsibility on her as a first child to set a "straight" example for those to follow because "if the head is crooked then the body gets as bent as ginseng and it is doomed". They present her with "my first love. His name was Janome. He had a beautiful cream coloured complexion, and all the pieces of my life began to fit together after I met him." But they were fearful of the "Lee and Lah loiterers" and seemed determined to make her a "darling geisha behind glass".

Alice emerges from her depressed state when she achieves good examination results, but her self-confidence remains fragile. Her grandmother warned her against "blandly-dressed banana children—children who were yellow on the outside but who believed they could be completely white inside". But Alice felt hollow, "a void to be filled by others". When her grandmother dies, Alice says "we were both going the way of the ghosts, except my ghosts were the white living ones and hers were unknown". Again, Alice's self doubts plague her. When a fellow student shows her romantic attention, she assumes that the "poor amateur Asian-asker-outer" must be a sinophile acting out a fantasy.

In less-skilled hands, Alice's bouts of adolescent introspection could make stifling reading. Fortunately, Alice Pung writes so refreshingly that the self-deprecating humour and optimism triumph. *Unpolished Gem* explores the situation of children who experience not just a generation gap but also a distance from parents whose migrant inheritance includes a "million scruples that made no sense". It examines in great balance also, the complexities of inter-cultural relationships. Alice notes that "Cambodians have a saying: 'A girl is like cotton wool—once dirtied it can never be clean again. A boy is like a gem—the more you polish it, the brighter it shines.'" All Australians must benefit from the addition of such gentle people to the local gene pool. Australian readers will find that Alice Pung's first book is so unclouded by cynicism that it shines very brightly indeed.



## Ramshackle fast food horror movie

### FILM REVIEW

Published 30-Oct-2006

**Fast Food Nation: 113 minutes, Rated: M, [website](#)**

**Director: Richard Linklater, Starring: Starring Greg Kinnear, Patricia Arquette, Ethan Hawke, Kris Kristofferson, Bruce Willis**



Poor McDonald's. First, the 2002 doco *Supersize Me* came along to remind people that, yes, fast food is really bad for you. This year Maccas is on the defensive all over again, with a major ad campaign inviting consumers to "Make Up Your Own Mind". And while the fast food giant denies any connection, it seems a big coincidence that 2006 also marks the release of another potent anti-fast food film.

Truth be told, *Fast Food Nation* is unlikely to have the implications for Maccas' PR that *Supersize Me* did.

True, it's inspired by a cult [book](#)—an insightful and shocking work of investigative journalism that caused jaws to drop upon its publication back in 2000. It was also co-written by that book's impassioned author, Eric Schlosser, and by director Richard Linklater, a maverick, eclectic independent American filmmaker.

And to be fair, the film doesn't pull any punches, and is both topical and powerful in its own way. Where *Supersize Me* approached fast food from the nutrition angle, *Fast Food Nation* concerns itself with the environmental, ethical and social implications of the industry as a whole.

It parallels three interrelated storylines. An executive (Kinnear) from fast food giant Mickey's (a none-too-subtle play on McDonald's) heads to the fictional town of Cody, Colorado to investigate the presence of cow excrement in his chain's burgers. Meanwhile, a local Mickey's counter girl (Ashley Johnson) joins a group of environmentalists and is drawn into their anti-Mickey's activism.

The most compelling subplot, and the one Schlosser and Linklater have said lay closest to their hearts, concerns a group of Mexican migrants who are smuggled across the border to work the treacherous meatpacking plant that supplies Mickey's with its burgers. At the plant, they are exposed to hideous working conditions, and are exploited both professionally and, in the case of the women, sexually.





This is certainly a worthy film, but overall it's a tad too ramshackle to have much lasting impact. It strives to avoid didacticism, but as a result lacks a clear unifying thesis. Also, by fictionalising the non-fiction book, *Fast Food Nation* leaves itself open to dismissal in a way that *Supersize Me*, as a documentary, did not allow.

Be warned: the film contains a scene shot in a real-life, operational abattoir. In interviews Schlosser has said they intended this scene to underline the humiliation and degradation of the exploited migrant workers. Fair enough, although without this foreknowledge viewers could be forgiven for interpreting the showers of bovine blood as a heavy-handed attempt to shock them into vegetarianism.

## Two oldies poems

POETRY

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### **Lutto** — [Sam Parisi](#)

I came to their plastic crucifix palace  
Wearing white shoes and what's new.  
I followed my father through the tacky timber door  
With a firm fast bolt  
He sledged his shake; angled his head  
In "condoglianze".  
I spoke softly to seal their suspicion;  
Spoke as though I hid the language  
Behind my tongue  
Then sat down on an empty chair.  
Against a white holed wall  
I watched their low to the ground slouch.  
The women sat in the second room  
Doused in black from head to toe  
Ruing Satan with his clothes.  
My mother seemed like someone else's sister  
In a lap of luxury, while they lit their grief  
With tales from light years away.  
Across the vanquished seas  
She lived and died.  
I never knew her—beyond a black and white photo.  
But all the while was learning  
How to read

The gaudy patterned floor  
Trying to pray for a woman I never saw.  
I sat instead and studied the room  
Through the prey of my periphery.  
I hunted their gestures  
Seeking to slay them  
With some sophisticated slant on things—  
But there was too much to admire.

**Renting — Graham Rowlands**

The night of the day they  
moved all their furniture in  
they trimmed the glory vine  
& partied under the pergola.  
The few oldies were old enough  
to be parents sussing out the place  
or just parents as welcome here  
as they had been elsewhere.  
The disco beat kept beating  
but low through the a.m. hours.  
How many, how many partners or  
changing partners, I've no idea.  
If I said Hello, they said Hello  
but I was the wall next door. They  
never looked to see if I was looking.  
Once, I was up & about early enough  
to hear a carload roll home &  
then a vomiting under my window.  
Are you okay? one of them asked.  
Sorry, she said quietly. That's all.  
Not wanting to be misunderstood

I managed not to open my window  
& say Bless you, my child.  
They moved out in slow stages.  
Perhaps they didn't want to go.  
After moving out, they came back  
for one small round wooden table.  
I didn't see what they opened  
I can only guess what they toasted  
but they took the empties with them  
along with the table. Vale.