

Reconciling preachers' split identities <i>Peter Kirkwood</i>	<u>1</u>
Phony Tony and the Liar's Paradox <i>Tony Smith</i>	<u>3</u>
Value lessons from Jessica Watson <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>5</u>
When adults fail children <i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>7</u>
Iceland's ash cloud of the apocalypse <i>Brian Matthews</i>	<u>9</u>
How Facebook changed my life <i>Cassandra Golds</i>	<u>11</u>
Dog poems <i>Various</i>	<u>13</u>
Labor complacent as Indigenous gap widens <i>Jack Waterford</i>	<u>16</u>
Rudd cares less for carers <i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>18</u>
Abbott's immigration paranoia <i>Kerry Murphy</i>	<u>20</u>
Making public transport work <i>Paul Mees</i>	<u>22</u>
Forgiving genocide <i>Bronwyn Lay</i>	<u>24</u>
A Christian view of budgets and burqas <i>Andrew Hamilton</i>	<u>26</u>
Child abuse fable <i>Tim Kroenert</i>	<u>28</u>
Losing Ben <i>Chris Mulherin</i>	<u>30</u>
The Budget of social exclusion <i>Frank Quinlan</i>	<u>34</u>
UK kingmaker Clegg wise to wait <i>Peter Scally</i>	<u>36</u>
Photographing Paris <i>Ian C. Smith</i>	<u>38</u>
Let the mining goose sleep <i>Michael Mullins</i>	<u>41</u>
Close encounters with Greek unrest <i>Gillian Bouras</i>	<u>43</u>



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PO Box 553
Richmond
VIC 3121
Australia

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

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Reconciling preachers' split identities

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

Gretta Vosper is one of the leading lights of progressive Christianity — a worldwide movement that seeks to update Christian beliefs and practice so that they are in line with the modern world — in North America. She is a minister in the [United Church](#) of Canada, and founder of the [Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity](#) based in Toronto.

She was keynote speaker at the recent [Common Dreams](#) conference for religious progressives held over four days at St Kilda Town Hall in Melbourne. In this interview recorded for *Eureka Street*, she defines what she means by religious progressive, why progressive thinking struggles to make a mark in Christian Churches, and the need for continual reform in all religions. (Continues below)

Vosper was ordained in 1992, and since 1997 has been minister of the United Church congregation in [West Hill](#), Toronto. The United Church is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, with three million members, and 3500 congregations spread throughout the country.

Like the Uniting Church in Australia (inaugurated in June 1977), it formed from an amalgamation of the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches. But in Canada it happened much earlier, in 1925, making it the first such union worldwide that sought to overcome the denominational divisions in Christianity.

Vosper has a Master of Divinity from Queen's Theological College in Kingston, Ontario. She often travels around Canada on speaking engagements, regularly appears on TV and radio, and is a prolific contributor to Canadian print media.

She founded the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in 2004 which 'provides a network, resources and support for those exploring at and beyond the boundaries of Christian thought'.

She says the centre caters to two groups: progressive clergy, and the 'growing pockets of believers who are well aware of the gap between scholarship and preaching'; those folk in the pews who 'hunger for more ... and yearn for connection with like-minded people and for the assurance that their thinking is not so off-the-wall after all'.

Vosper argues there is 'a lag of about 60 years between the scholarship that ministers study at school, and the words they speak from the pulpit. For many, this creates a split identity — a sense that they lead a secret spiritual life that they have to suppress throughout their active ministry.' Her Centre for Progressive Christianity offers an outlet for that suppressed spiritual life.

In 2008 she published her acclaimed book, [*With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*](#), which became a best-seller in Canada.

Phony Tony and the Liar's Paradox

POLITICS

Tony Smith



Many of Tony Abbott's most controversial ideas arise from his particular brand of Catholicism, which seems to be conservative, obedient and moralistic. Generally, media are savage towards politicians who preach their morals, but Abbott's apparent candour has probably disarmed his critics somewhat. When he thought he had discovered a child from an old relationship for example, he sought neither to conceal the fact nor to justify his actions.

His latest revelation however, was not received lightly. Asked on national television about the reliability of his sometimes contradictory policy announcements, Abbott said he often made statements that he regarded as throwaway lines. He hastened to add that when he read from a script, he was speaking the truth.

Discussion ensued about the advisability of Abbott's confession. Predictably, his critics and opponents said this admission showed Abbott was unreliable and untrustworthy. His supporters claimed Abbott was being 'up front' with the people, and Abbott himself claimed he was trying to be 'fair dinkum'.

Two issues are at stake here. First there is the general moral issue around the principle of telling the truth, usually termed 'honesty'. Secondly there is a distinctly political sense in which the people can expect to be told the truth by their elected representatives.

Individuals should aspire to be honest. We all fail in this at times, usually because we fear the consequences of telling the truth. The term 'white lie' has been coined to justify situations where we want to avoid harming others but not ourselves. Clearly, when a politician lies, he or she fears that honesty would incur political penalties such as destruction of image and loss of support.

It is at this point that the politician has the opportunity to demonstrate a sincere commitment to honesty. He or she should let the people decide whether they value the politician's honesty, even if it causes them disappointment or reveals something unpleasant about their representative.

It is not Abbott's prerogative to tell people how they should react to the truth. Indeed, lying to the people shows complete disdain for them. Taking the people for granted is a cardinal political sin. Politicians might get away with deceiving the people sometimes, but the importance of honesty in the operations of a democracy is recognised in the formal requirement that MPs speak truthfully inside parliament.

There is an ancient philosophical problem called the 'Liar's paradox'. The problem usually takes the form of a phrase along the lines of 'I am lying'. The paradox is that the speaker can only be telling the truth if they are, as they have stated, lying; but of course, if they are lying, by definition they can not be telling the truth.

For the politician, a reputation for lying creates its own deep mistrust in the electorate. Abbott's attempt to excuse his dishonesty by distinguishing written from oral statements cannot work. For a start, there is the question of whether Abbott made this pitch while speaking extempore or reading from a prepared script. The electorate can now never know when Abbott is even attempting to be honest. Apparently, he would happily accept electoral support even while knowing that he has deceived the people.

Few keen observers will be surprised that Abbott has been caught in this conundrum. During the 1999 campaign for Constitutional reform, Abbott opposed the compromise republican model in which the parliament would ultimately choose the head of state, by asserting that you cannot trust politicians with such important decisions. Clearly, this claim contained its own paradox, because Abbott proposed this political cynicism while expecting people to take his advice.

Abbott made another attempt to place himself on the side of political honesty when he began a fund and campaign to have the One Nation Party investigated for political fraud. Among his parliamentary attacks on One Nation's organisers, Abbott accused them of being 'chronic and habitual liars'. Now that Abbott has made his possibly true confession, critics will recall a more recent assertion that a man dying of asbestosis was not necessarily pure of heart in all things.

Whether or not Abbott survives the fallout from his gaffe, dishonesty in politics must not be condoned. National moral leadership should be rededicated to honesty and truth because fair dinkum democracy is impossible without it.

Value lessons from Jessica Watson

SPORT

Andrew Hamilton

The arrival of Jessica Watson back in Australia was small news in cosmic terms. But it provoked a great deal of discussion around the morning coffee pot. Most had to do with values.

Some questions really said more about the questioners than about the sailor. Did those of us who frowned when she began her voyage now owe Jessica and the human race an apology for our little faith? And was her achievement more calculating and less impressive than we were being told?



Other questions were more perennial. Should we encourage our own 16-year-old daughter or son if they were inspired to take off on a similar trip? And was it right for anyone to do what Jessica did, given that it would require great public resources to find and rescue her in the event of a mishap?

Jessica herself responded more than adequately to the first kind of question. She said she was not a hero but someone who was allowed to follow a dream. Her parents deserved more credit for encouraging her. She did not care whether she had broken a record. She had enjoyed sailing, and had done what she set out to do.

She confounded those who implied that she has measured her trip by the cash book, by knocking back lucrative but intrusive photo stories. Her own values proved to be more deeply grounded than her older admirers and critics. Indeed, her maturity made a good case for those of us who questioned her maturity to examine ourselves. And her modest words certainly suggested that many reporters and politicians might benefit from spending 200 days or so in solitude.

Whether she should have been encouraged to pursue her dream is a more interesting question. It makes us reflect on our own values and those of our culture. In contemporary culture the preservation of our own health and life is often seen as the supreme human value. My own life and health are more important than the life and safety of other human beings, more important than any other values that compete with them. Prudence demands that I protect my own life and health first.

That attitude flies in the face of the great stories of our traditions that praise those who have risked their life for something more important to them. The Christian tradition celebrates children who accepted death rather than renounce their faith. We also preserve the stories of adventurous young people like George Morrison who walked unarmed from Normanton to Melbourne in the early 1880'.

Each of us have stories that encourage us. I remember the young Jesuits sent from Europe to China from the 16th to the 18th century. Only about a third survived the journey. I also remember Ruth, who during a university holiday cycled alone through Malaysia to Northern Thailand, diverted to the Burmese Border and spent some years teaching refugees there. For these people their own life and health were not absolute values.

Such stories ask us whether we would want our children to privilege security over adventurousness, stability over possibility, maintenance of health over mission. Of course, these considerations alone do not answer whether we ought to encourage our children when they want to take great risks. There are many other questions to consider.

The question whether it is right to depend on massive public resources reveals a paradox of contemporary culture. Our culture privileges the choice of the individual to undertake demanding enterprises. But it also commits the resources of the community to protect individuals from adverse consequences of their choice. It privatises freedom and nationalises risk.

This imbalance is even more striking when the individual's adventure is supported by corporate interests in the expectation of profit. Profit is privatised, while the risk is nationalised. This imbalance encourages popular cynicism about the enterprise, and invites people to ask whether public resources might be used better to meet more pressing needs.

At first glance, this objection to adventures such as Jessica Watson's could be met fairly easily. Those organising, funding and profiting from yacht races and other activities that may involve rescue at public expense, should be required to contribute to a public fund that will defray the cost of future rescue attempts. Profits derived from such occasions should also be subject to a tax for the same purposes.

Finally should we celebrate what Jessica Watson did? Of course. She prompted good conversation about values around many coffee pots. She also made me remember Fiona, a depressive, suicidal young friend who died many years ago. For her to stay alive each day required as much bravery as anything I could conceive myself ever doing. We should also celebrate the heroism that is not robed in celebrity.

When adults fail children

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Fish Tank* (MA). Writer/Director: Andrea Arnold. Starring: Katie Jarvis, Michael Fassbender, Kierston Wareing. Running time: 123 minutes**



Fish Tank is a hard film to watch. It's a laconic, no frills drama — too long, but no less affecting and memorable for it — about the life of a troubled English teen, Mia (Jarvis). Troubled is definitely the word: the film takes us into uncomfortable corners of the cramped and grimy glass tank of Mia's life. *Fish Tank* is shot in hand-held digital video, giving rougher edges to the already rough working class Essex world in which she lives.

Mia is a precocious, ferocious teenager. Not fearless, but she masks hurt and fear with fury. During a fight with a peer, she delivers a swift head butt to the other girl's face before striding righteously away. Her interactions with her uncaring flake of a single mother, Joanne (Wareing) are verbally rather than physically violent; in this case, Mia's language would be repulsive if she did not get as good as she gave.

But Mia is also compassionate. When she sees a sickly horse chained up in an abandoned lot, she jumps the rickety cyclone fence and attempts to set the beast free. The childlikeness of this kind gesture (after all, what young girl would not be moved by the plight of a horse?) is cut short: the horse's owners, two grown and brutish men, suddenly appear and begin to menace Mia. They attack her, but, viciously, she fights them off (not bad for a 15-year-old girl), and flees.

Life begins to change for Mia when Joanne brings home a new boyfriend, Connor (Fassbender). Mia hits it off with this extroverted Irishman. He encourages Mia with her dream to become a dancer. His treatment of her is somewhere sex-ward of fatherly. The feeling is mutual, and even actively encouraged by Mia. Then again, she is only 15, and he supposedly is a responsible adult.

The film plies a murky fog of sexual ethics, but its portrayal of Connor and Mia's deeply ambiguous attraction is captivating. A scene where Connor carries Mia, who pretends to sleep, to her bedroom and removes her jeans — gently, so as not to wake her — in order to put her into bed, finds a surprisingly fine line between tender and predatory. This kind of subtle, breathless stuff is *Fish Tank* at its best.

Debut actor Jarvis' performance is astonishing. During the worst moments that confront Mia, Jarvis channels tragedy into barrages of righteous fury. Circumstances and unbridled emotion eventually turn Mia almost monstrous, but we never lose sight of the child within.

She has been failed and damaged by people who should care; people who, if not actively protecting her from harm, should at least refrain from harming her themselves. So although we can't forgive all her sins, we can understand them.

The film is a condemnation of irresponsible adults, not of misbehaving youths. The damage to Mia is not yet total. She can be safe, if she can first get free. That entails making some right, difficult choices. But that can be hard to do when you are an adolescent with no wise adult to guide you.

Iceland's ash cloud of the apocalypse

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

Eyjafjallajokul! A volcano named Eyjafjallajokul indeed. Some give this jaw-breaker an extra 'l'. Eyjafjallajokull. Some go for the slipshod diminution — Eyjafjoell — milking a name splendidly unmanageable for English speakers of all its linguistic knots and labyrinths.



And there is one more embellishment important to sound and rhythm: the umlaut on the o. Eyjafjallajǫkull. That just about nails all the intricacies of this new cult name (pronounced ay-yah-FYAH-lah-yer-kuhl) that has tangled our tongues and garbled our glottals in recent weeks while it has gone on spewing ash — a new cliché for our turbulent climatic times — all through the airways, creating alarm and confusion in airports like Frankfurt, Heathrow and Charles de Gaulle, where alarm and confusion are never very far away at the best of times and don't need unprecedented and spectacular terrestrial help to speed them along.

Not actually unprecedented, as a matter of fact. A bit of research reveals that Eyjafjallajǫkull has a long memory and an apparently unassuageable anger that broods along through the centuries and every now and then, well, erupts, spewing etc. This happened in 920, 1612 and frequently between 1821 and 1823. In the scramble to appear informed about dramatic geological phenomena, however, few have noticed that Eyjafjallajǫkull has a loyal and infinitely more pronounceable follower, a partner which dutifully echoes its (her? his?) more famous and ill-tempered mate.

Twenty-five kilometres from Eyjafjallajǫkull is another volcano named Katla. Katla specialises in subglacial eruptions that make the explosions of its consonant-heavy neighbour sound like genteel coughing. What's more, although it seems intrusively intimate to say so, Katla has a very large magma chamber. More intimate is their relationship. Every single time Eyjafjallajǫkull erupted between 920 and 1823, Katla followed a short time after with a more spectacular performance, as if to insist it was no mere footnote but actually the main text.

Icelandic President Ólafur Grímsson is in no doubt about Katla. 'The time for Katla to erupt is coming close,' he said, even as Eyjafjallajǫkull's black scowl was spreading over Europe's skies. 'Iceland', he said, 'was ready and it was high time for European governments and airline authorities all over the world to start planning for the eventual Katla eruption.'

Many Icelandic geologists and geophysicists agree. They fear that the Eyjafjallajǫkull eruption could trigger Katla, precipitating huge floods, as glacial ice melts, and building prodigious aerial escarpments of ash. The disruptions of last April would look like a half-cocked rehearsal.

Volcanoes occupy a special, ill-defined place in human imagination. Fire and flood, in the argot of our time, are 'events'. They come, they pass by. And drought creeps in, settles, grinds people down, exhausting them by its unambiguous, seemingly permanent presence. But volcanoes are aloof, squatting in the landscape, inscrutable; perhaps dead, perhaps with millennial shudders of life; perhaps seething day after day, potent, imminent their action endlessly deferred. Even for those living in their shadow, volcanoes assume a deceptive familiarity: their long drawn out threats seem too much like crying wolf to interfere with daily routines. And then they explode.

Twenty-five million years ago, the eruption at Lake Toba in Sumatra deposited metre-thick carpets of ash continents away, engendered a decade of winter darkness and massively depleted the human population. It was the quintessential volcanic catastrophe. More recently, Vesuvius ruined the great work of time and humbled an empire. Only Chimborazo, Cotopaxi and Popocatepetl, trading on their euphonious names, have a benign presence in volcanic lore.

Which brings us back to Eyjafjallajökull. True to the mould, it waited an age in suppressed fury then scorched the skyways and threatened whole economies, governments and established ways of life, with strangulation. And acolyte Katla waits its hour.

Curiously, volcanoes are not much cited by people who detect chiliastic and end-of-the-world meanings in natural disasters. This may be because while it's dramatic to assemble on a hilltop to watch the stars go out forever, it's much less comfortable hanging round the drum-rolling slopes of a magma- and fire-spitting volcano waiting for apocalypse.

Another reason is that volcanoes are mysterious. Their violent, scarcely predictable messages come from the deepest of the planet's secret places, are punctuated by sometimes centuries of deceptive silence, and are difficult to interpret. Fires, floods, droughts, tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes are like serial correspondence from the world we live in, reminders that our inhabitation of the earth is not autonomous, not a matter of being Lords of all we survey: sometimes we think we are, sometimes it seems as if we are, and sometimes, as for example in the case of climate change, we strenuously espouse denial in order to re-enforce our insistence that we are.

Volcanoes, dotting remote landscapes all over the planet, with millennia-long histories and emanating a kind of preternatural, primal, patience, are more like aloof, rarely encountered but uncomfortably persistent landLords, whose unchanging message is: you are renting; you haven't bought.

How Facebook changed my life

MEDIA

Cassandra Golds



You never read anything good about Facebook. In fact until two years ago, the impression I had gained from everything I had read about it was so poor that, if the ghost of Christmas future had told me I would one day be an active participant, I would not have believed him.

I am a writer and, like many writers, an introvert. I am also a very cautious person. I have always been hesitant to reveal much of myself. The kind of social interaction I am most comfortable with is the intense one-to-one discussion.

So why would Facebook, with its reputation for superficiality and promiscuous over-sharing, appeal to me?

It didn't. But one night I read the blog of a friend — an extrovert, an optimist, and a ready embracer of the new. I noticed a little logo in the right-hand column proclaiming that she was on Facebook, and I wondered what her Facebook profile was like. So I clicked, realised I would have to join in order to see it, considered, decided to join just to have a look around and then depart, and signed up.

I don't remember forming an opinion before I turned off the computer and went to bed that night, but I do remember that when I woke up the next morning I had about ten friend requests. Most were from fellow children's authors whom I knew either personally or by reputation.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. With Facebook, I mean — but also with many other people, some of whom I would never otherwise have met, some with whom I had already had some contact, but whose beautiful personalities revealed themselves to me more deeply in cyberspace. Some had simply read my books.

People say that Facebook is superficial. The truth is that everybody approaches Facebook in a different way. Part of the fascination lies in the differences. Some people tell you what they are doing from hour to hour — and even those ordinary things, what one friend is cooking for dinner, what another friend's three-year-old just said, I find delightful.

Some people post links to reviews or to articles on subjects they find interesting: I love this! Many people, including myself, share music videos from YouTube. How delightful it can be to be reminded of a long-forgotten song, or to discover that a Facebook friend has similar musical taste!

Some write progress reports on the novel they are writing. And others share their lives —

their frustrations and achievements, their griefs and joys — in a way that gives much insight, inspires much compassion, and deepens one's appreciation of the human journey.

I have followed the story of a friend who took responsibility for a tribe of stray cats living in a vacant lot next door to her. I have read of the pain and frustration of a friend caring for a terminally ill parent. I have shared in the anniversary of a beloved child lost to cancer. And, in cyberspace, I have had the joy of attending several beautiful weddings.

You have only to say something a little fragile on Facebook, or even to be absent for a while, to attract well-wishes, warm support, queries about your welfare and even personal offers of help. I have found it an immensely supportive community. And if you share an achievement — the publication of a book, for example, or a good review, you are showered with encouragement and affirmation.

There is also a lot of talk about cats and other furry animals. But in my view there is nothing trivial about this. The beauty and charm of kittens, or of new born animals, is a shared short cut to joy.

In short, I haven't had so much fun in years. And I have never felt less alone.

I don't see what is 'inauthentic' about this.

Facebook has changed me. I remember I once found it difficult to cope with the idea of having a photograph of myself in a public space. I am less private than I used to be. But my personal standards concerning behaviour towards others haven't changed at all.

A couple of days ago a headline on an opinion piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* [declared](#) : Etiquette of cyberspace is simple - there are no rules. But there are rules: the rules you impose on your own behaviour, which in the end are the rules that count most.

I have been lucky in my real-life friends who are on Facebook, and in the friends I have encountered there — other people are less so. And of course, like anything, Facebook can be used for bad, even evil. But any suburban kitchen is full of implements that could be used to injure. Most people use them to cook.

Dog poems

POETRY

Various

Sharing the dog

for Pepper

Sleeping lightly on the sofa lately, I've
had the Pepper-dog beside me, sleeping
soundly on the rug: she, she knows, is keeping
promises, promises that have lasted five
days since she came here this time. I believe
that as she lies there, somehow she feels time creeping —
some inchoate sense, sense of the Grim Reaper reaping
with his scathing scythe, or Father Time with a sieve.
Pepper, O Pepper, the lady dog of Nash Street,
lady dog indeed of Northcote, alas poor grandad
walks and talks to you only when your family,
Jones-Bargh, visits places doggies aren't allowed unleashed, or
places where no welcome is extended,
Pepper, even to lady dogs, places like Brimlea.

—*Evan Jones*

dog & stick

therell always be an oxford st
with tooth marks somewhere on
its body,
it can be a sweatbox,
a downhill delight.
new media on the tv.

virtual skippy as the parky of poetry,
the vagaries of
easter & anzac day.
we are running on a theme
to do with spirit,
people still live in places
shot to hell & reeled back.
only boys that save their
pennies & shells, interest me,
bondi thunder loosely
sorts the chickens from the saving club.
you are hung,
like that pointy & upsidedown.
robert duncan had a
brave antagonism,
we talk through our phds.
the neighbours hear &
roll their ears.
—*Michael Farrell*

The standup

We agree to meet up in a busy street
Lots of feet
Marching to the beat
Totally Anonymous
Strangers everywhere
Each one undistinguishable
Coming from all directions

Love and hate colliding
A Traffic of ecstasy
Yet we skirt past one another
Not pausing
Not stopping
Protected under the busy umbrella of the street
Searching and finding
Hiding and seeking
Teardrops falling to be left alone
Left feeling like a dog without a bone
Slowly going home
Wishing the mobile phone would ring a tone
And the virtual stranger
Would mumble a series of excuses
And agree to meet up again in the busy street
Where we would finally meet
—*Isabella Fels*

Labor complacent as Indigenous gap widens

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Jack Waterford

‘But it doesn’t really feel like a Labor budget,’ complained one old-timer at what felt like one of the most boring Federal Budgets we have had for years.

There is, however, a complete riposte to that. It is to be found on page 27 of the separate budget paper, authored by Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin. It tells what she and her 4300-strong department are doing with taxpayers’ money to ‘close the gap’ between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. ‘In the Northern Territory,’ it says, ‘at the end of April 2010 the construction of over 80 new houses was underway, with seven completed.’



Seven houses — that’s not bad for three and a half years work and expenditure in the hundreds of millions. At that rate the gap will be closed in about 7000 years. It’s good to see Labor on the job. A paragraph later, Macklin remarks that a recent review of the program had shown that everything was on track. This is a measure of her complacency about the worsening disaster over which she presides.

Macklin and the department frequently redefine what they are pretending to be doing, or use weasel words and vagueness. The Minister adopts anecdotal reassurances to contradict evidence.

This time 10 months ago, for example, a number of newspapers, led by *The Australian*, were insisting that tens of millions had been squandered on planning to build houses, on talking about building houses, on consulting about building houses and liaising with each other about it. No actual houses, as such, had been built. This was hotly denied by the Minister and the department, who used houses completed under other programs, redefinitions, hopes, expectations, plans, targets, timetables, anecdotes and blah, to insist that all was well.

Delay occasioned by resistance to FOI requests, based on a failure to follow current instructions, made it even harder to find the facts, as did the ultimate production of documents which, if amounting to the department and Minister’s sum of knowledge on the matter, might account for her confusion.

At that stage, one might have said that nothing had been finished, but much was on the way. A year later, we learn that ‘much’ is not much.

Macklin remarks that the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program will deliver 750 new houses by 2013. It is supposed to effectively demolish and rebuild another 230 and do extensive refurbishments to 2500 others. Two construction companies, known as

alliances, are then to show the recipients how a clever government agency can organise things. About one in every three people on the gravy train is black, and by my guess, these people would get about 10 per cent of the bonanza provided, via the department's management processes, to the alliance.

From time to time, COAG, or the Federal Government, will talk about the money spent as though the supposed recipients received it personally, and personally wasted it. At last guess, the Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Program was budgeting about \$800,000 per ramshackle and environmentally unsuitable dwelling worth, were it at Forbes in NSW, or Echuca in Victoria, about \$100,000.

In fairness the Minister goes on to say that on top of the seven new houses built, and the 73 under way, there have been 180 rebuilds or refurbishments completed with 110 under way. Even with these added, there is no effective progress; the Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory, and the number of Aboriginal families, is increasing annually at many times the house-building achievement. The gap is widening.

This may also be so in relation to other closing-the-gap exercises, whether in getting Aboriginal children to school or in improving health profiles. But it is difficult to make a judgment, given that the Minister's approach to making a report to the people is by cutting and pasting material about education and health generally onto old press statements containing hopeful Indigenous-specific statements.

These are generally input-focused with nothing about outputs or outcomes. Perhaps that's because there are problems with statistics — even the Coordinator-General for Remote Indigenous Services is using false statistics — but that, at least, is a problem Macklin seems able to understand. She speaks proudly of allocating another \$40 million or so to white folk so as to get better statistics on black folk.

Meanwhile, on the ground, words are being used to close the gaps. Here is some language from a recent poster summoning largely illiterate folk for consultations with the latest flock of white folk sent to save them:

'The Yuendumu RSD Local Reference Group will (with the support of Government) guide the development of the Yuendumu Local Implementation Plan (LIP). The Local Implementation Plan is the roadmap to get from where services and infrastructure are now to where they need to be in Yuendumu. Governments and local people need to make this plan together and then stick to it. The Yuendumu RSD Reference Group will guide the development of the Yuendumu Local Implementation Plan.'

With things so hunky dory, who needs a specific focus on Labor interests or concerns in a Federal Budget?

Rudd cares less for carers

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



If we're to measure our greatness by the way we treat those who are most vulnerable, we also need to look after those who care for them. This is frequently mentioned in connection with school teachers, but less often to urge support for aged care workers and the efforts of their union.

Last week, aged care members of the LHMU were the first workers to use the new low paid bargaining powers of the Fair Work Act. Low paid bargaining was set up because many low paid workers, usually in areas dominated by women, have pay and working conditions that fall far short of community standards.

An LHMU media release [said](#) dedicated aged care workers are leaving because they cannot afford to exist on the low pay rates, which range from just \$15.92 per hour for support staff to \$18.68 per hour for qualified supervisors.

'Aged care is labour intensive but labour shortages are chronic. Staff face constant stress, physically and emotionally, struggling to do their jobs properly, not just the bare minimum and it's getting worse. Meanwhile, our population continues to age: by 2056 people 65 or over will double to between 23 per cent and 25 per cent compared to 13 per cent in 2007.'

We might assume that it is greedy employers that are keeping them down. But it seems they have their hands tied by the Federal Government, which passed over the opportunity to provide for aged care workers in last week's Federal Budget which focused instead on deficit reduction.

Martin Laverty is CEO of [Catholic Health Australia](#) (CHA), which represents the largest employer of aged care workers in Australia. He believes the Budget failed to fund a pay increase for aged care workers because the Federal Government thinks there should be no increase.

'Catholic providers of aged care want the best for their staff to in turn provide the best care for their residents or clients. Better pay is key to this. But it's not our call. It is the Howard Government's 1997 Aged Care Act that finances aged care services. The Howard scheme has run out of puff on worker pay, and it should be scrapped.'

The Federal Government has requested the Productivity Commission conduct an inquiry over the next 12 months. Organisations such as CHA are currently investing much of their energy into the inquiry, in the hope that they will have increased funding to provide a range of needs including fair pay and conditions for aged care workers. But any implementation of the inquiry's recommendations is distant. Aged care workers need to be paid now, and it's fair

to ask what will happen to aged care services in the interim.

In the coming days, the Federal Government will announce the 2010 increase in funding to aged care organisations.

‘During the Budget lock up I asked the head of the Health Department how much aged care funding will increase this year to enable better pay and services. I was told there had been a zero increase in the cost of aged care labour, and not to get my hopes up. This is a cart before horse type problem where the Government is refusing to increase funding until pay rates rise, but not-for-profit aged care providers cannot increase pay rates until government increases funding.’

Abbott's immigration paranoia

HUMAN RIGHTS

Kerry Murphy

Tony Abbott has a new TV ad which, among other things, calls for 'real action to stop illegal immigration'. The graphic behind him shows a map of Australia surrounded by red arrows from the northwest labelled Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Curiously, one arrow is labelled 'Indonesia', despite the fact that Indonesians are not significant in the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat.

The arrows remind me of the old 'reds under the beds' hysteria of the 1950s and '60s.

Last week Abbott made a speech to the Menzies Research Centre entitled 'Immigration, Border Protection and Population Fundamentals'. In his speech he states:

'The increasing flow of boats has strained our capacity to deal with illegal migrants, disrupted our capacity to handle refugees who aren't 'jumping the queue' and, perhaps most seriously of all, helped to undermine the public's confidence in the legitimacy of Australia's wider immigration program.'

Abbot says the key elements of the Coalition's border protection program include a return to a temporary visa for 'illegal boat arrivals who are found to be refugees', and a return to offshore processing. He also proposed as a last resort to turn around boats 'with no right to be in Australian waters'.

None of these arrivals is 'illegal': the term does not exist in migration law. Neither is it an offence to enter Australia without a visa. Australia has agreed to process the claims of asylum seekers and test whether they meet the refugee criteria. If they do, then Australia is obliged not to send them back to where they fear harm. Resettlement is provided for the refugees and their immediate family members.

Abbott's use of the phrase 'jumping the queue' is equally spurious. There are an estimated 15 million refugees worldwide, of which Australia resettles just 6000 from UNHCR annually. There are no queues. The processing of refugee cases is complex, and to liken it waiting in a bus queue is ridiculous.



In July 2008, Minister for Immigration Chris Evans announced long overdue reforms of detention practices. These included a list of seven key immigration values. It maintained mandatory detention of unauthorised arrivals but stated that detention would be reviewed regularly and should be a last resort. The Government did abolish harsher aspects such as the Temporary Protection Visas, the 45-day rule limiting the right to work, and detention debts. They also put a stop to detention in Nauru and Manus Island.

Other reforms were promised such as a form of complementary protection for cases that fall within human rights law but outside the refugee convention.

Now, with an election on the way, the reform agenda has been put aside. Both the Government and Opposition are hardening their policies on asylum seekers. Sadly the debate is about who is the strongest on border control — the human rights of asylum seekers is not considered.

Recently Prime Minister Rudd froze processing of cases for new arrivals from Afghanistan and Sri Lanka for six and three months respectively. This is despite the ongoing problems in both countries which cause people to flee. Waiting for these countries to improve enough to respect human rights, when both have been torn by conflict for over 30 years, will take years, not months. The freeze is a political posture designed to try to slow the movement of people by boats. It fails to address the root causes of the movement.

The old detention centre of Curtin is also to be reopened. Curtin is very isolated, around 45km from Derby, and is about 6—7 km into the desert off the Broome to Derby road. It is easier to get to than Christmas Island, but that is the only positive thing about it.

Refugee Law, and humanity, require that people be treated fairly, promptly, and with respect for their dignity. These policies are not 'real action for refugees'. The Temporary Protection Visa prevented family reunion for four years or more. Asylum seekers' uncertainty about their future led to many cases of depression.

Policies were put in place to make access to English classes difficult. Offshore processing in Nauru prevented a transparent process to ensure cases were determined correctly. Offshore processing is used to avoid review by onshore tribunals and the courts, and it relies on the goodwill of the Government to be done fairly. Given the current climate, independent review and transparency of processing is warranted.

Previously people were left for months, sometimes years in detention. Some who were sent home found the persecution they feared. Labor started to reform its policies but has now panicked due to the boat arrivals (Abbott's 'red arrows') from the north and arbitrarily decided to freeze processing for some people.

Refugees want real action. They do not want the Coalition's plan to return to the punishing policy of the Temporary Protection Visa. Nor do they want the Rudd Government's inaction on Sri Lankan and Afghan cases. The real action should be to treat people with dignity and apply the law fairly and justly.

Making public transport work

POLITICS

Paul Mees



A new round of Sydney-Melbourne rivalry has broken out in the last few years. This time, it's over which city has the most dysfunctional train system.

Sydney has unreliable services, and has cancelled failed projects for a metro and a 'smart card' ticketing system. Melbourne has unreliable trains, a smart card system that wasn't cancelled but should have been, and an unfunded metro project.

Residents of Brisbane and Adelaide also chafe at problems with their rail systems. Only Perth, it seems, knows how to run trains reliably and build new lines that work.

The most common remedy suggested for Sydney's problems is to privatise City Rail, letting market forces loose to promote efficiency and innovation. But the economists and journalists advocating this course seem unaware that Melbourne has conducted an experiment with rail privatisation since 1999.

The results in Melbourne are clear: subsidies have increased, services have deteriorated and public accountability has vanished behind a wall of spin and commercial confidentiality. And reliability is still deteriorating — the figures for the first quarter of 2010 were the worst on record — while Sydney is at least seeing a modest recovery.

Challenges as diverse as climate change, insecure oil supplies and rapid population growth point to the need for effective public transport. So what is causing the problems in East Coast cities, and what can be done to fix them? The most common answers offered by Australian commentators are public ownership, insufficient funding and low urban densities.

The way to test possible causes is to compare Australian cities to those where public transport works efficiently and provides a real alternative to the car. Among the leaders in this group is Zurich: at the most recent census in 2000, 63 per cent of trips to work in the City of Zurich were by public transport, 12 per cent on foot or cycle and 25 per cent by car (down from 26 per cent in 1990).

Comparable figures for public transport in Australian metropolitan areas ranged from a low of 6 per cent in Hobart to a high of 21 per cent in Sydney, with the car shares ranging from 71 per cent in Sydney to 83 per cent in Adelaide. The difference for trips to school was even greater: in Zurich City, the car share is only 2 per cent, compared with 60—70 per cent in Australian cities.

Of course the City of Zurich is more densely populated than Australian cities, although its density is relatively low by European standards. But the city's hinterland, which houses more than two thirds of the population of the Canton (state) of Zurich, incorporates sprawling suburbs and rural towns and villages. Yet the Canton-wide share for work trips by public transport is still a respectable 41 per cent (and rising), with the car accounting for 47 per cent; the share of trips to school made by car is only 3 per cent. Even rural villages in Canton Zurich have higher public transport use, and lower shares for the car, than Australian cities.

So population densities do not explain the difference in performance. Neither do funding: the Zurich Cantonal public transport agency receives an annual subsidy of around 50 Australian cents per passenger, a quarter the rate for Melbourne.

Zurich has achieved public transport success by combining efficient public enterprise with a liberal dose of 'subsidiarity'. The Canton-wide public transport agency only has 36 staff, who concentrate on financing, marketing and planning services. Their job is to knit trains, trams, buses and ferries into a network that offers the same kind of 'go anywhere, anytime' convenience as the car.

Passengers don't need to worry about cancellations, missing connections, or paying additional fares to transfer. Actual operation of services is devolved mainly to the Swiss Federal Railways and municipal transport agencies, some of whom in turn employ private contactors.

Across different cultures, climates and urban densities, a model of successful public transport is emerging. It relies on key common ingredients: central planning by a dynamic, lean, region-wide agency; extensive public accountability to prevent capture by vested interests; and skilled, motivated operating personnel. It is no accident that Perth has the best-performing public transport in Australia, because its governance and management arrangements are closest to the successful model.

Unfortunately, most governments, journalists and environmentalists in Australia are ignoring the ingredients of successful public transport, focusing instead on density, funding, privatisation or 'gee-whiz' technology. It's time we shifted our attention to what actually works.

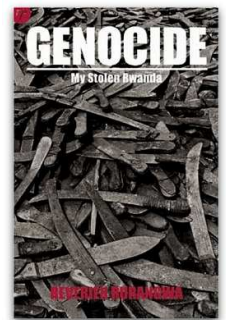
Forgiving genocide

BOOKS

Bronwyn Lay

Reverien Rurangwa, *Genocide: My Stolen Rwanda*. [Reportage Press](#) 2009. ISBN 9781906702021

Rwanda, April 1994. Reverien Rurangwa was 15 when he was hunted down by Hutu neighbours and witnessed the massacre of 43 members of his family. Missing an eye and a hand, Rurangwa lived to write this memoir from exile in Switzerland, where he still lives.



If it were fiction it would be easier to hold the book steady and marvel at the prose, but it is not fiction. The descriptions of what Rurangwa endured when he was mutilated and his family slaughtered, are spare and visceral. Sometimes, in this genre, trauma undermines narrative capacity but, in the tradition of Primo Levi, Rurangwa conveys and contemplates the horror he experienced without faltering. It is remarkable writing from a remarkable individual; his voice, clarity and determination to tell his story fuse grace and terror.

Catholic faith writhes at the centre of this book. During the minute long massacre his grandmother was murdered mid-prayer, various family members called to god for help, while the killers, fellow parishioners of the local church, struck their machetes until faith fell with precious bodies into a pile. Using terms like 'church cum abattoir' this book confronts many beliefs: in God, in humanity, in the UN, in the state, in family and community, but equally ignites belief in evil.

In the aftermath Rurangwa was protected by other Christians such as a Belgian missionary, Rwandan nuns who sheltered him from assassins, and ultimately his adopted Swiss father Luc, who guided and challenged him during many a crisis. No matter how much he is cared for, no matter how much surgery he undergoes to repair his mutilated body, abandonment remains:

'Since the genocide, I feel abandoned. Abandoned by my family — not that they can help it — and by those who should have defended me and protected me: international leaders, my own country's judiciary. Abandoned by other people's opinions. It is about being alive but dead, a solitary zombie.'

One of the most harrowing moments is when Rurangwa, having lost an arm and suffering vicious machete wounds, crawls around his village begging for someone to finish him off and kill him. The cruelty of those who drank beer and laughed at the boy crawling at their feet conveys the depravity, and abandonment, of that hell time.

The pressure to forgive is put upon Rurangwa by those around him, often by those with no experience of violence. With no patience for quick fix notions of forgiveness, Rurangwa argues that forgiveness and questions of national reconciliation often come before authentic justice and seek to erase his family, his past, his people and his culture. As the sole surviving member of his family Rurangwa is suspicious that premature forgiveness is a political tool designed to deny the truth, and that the pragmatic thirst for national cohesion makes forgetting and forgiving the same thing. He passionately expresses the need to remember and advocate for the dead.

But this is no rant. Rurangwa shares intimate details of his search for understanding and peace, as well as his struggle with unanswerable mystical questions, and all the way it is tempered with his perfectly dry humour.

Ultimately this is a book about grief. Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* writes that ‘one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes, one will be changed, possibly forever. Mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation.’ Rurangwa’s story is grief writ large; he undergoes transformation in body and spirit, confirming Butler’s argument that grief is not a lineal process to be ticked off a list — it is not a project that can be set upon productively. Mainly it is experienced in waves, because although we may start out the day with fixed ideas about how we intend to deal with loss, by afternoon we are foiled, and we find ourselves fallen, just as Rurangwa did.

Although Rurangwa’s story is not comparable with the experiences of the average person, his contemplation of loss: of his relations, his culture, his country, his trust in neighbours, remind us of the importance of the ties that bind. The great question Rurangwa’s grief poses is, ‘Who am I without you?’ And without you, without our family and friends and neighbours, we are at a loss. And when we are at a loss, who are we?

More than a decade after the Rwandan genocide Rurangwa’s story deserves to be widely read. In an age where suffering is objectified in quick news bites, his courage to face his horrific experience demands more than a polite shake of the head from the reader. It demands the kind of honest contemplation he himself has dared to share.

A Christian view of budgets and burqas

APPLICATION

Andrew Hamilton



This week's headlines have been about elections (in Britain and the Philippines), the economy (in Greece and Australia), justice and law (banning the burqa and monsterring asylum seekers).

Elections, the economy, justice and law are also central themes of Christian theology. It can be illuminating to compare the popular understandings with the theological ones.

In the popular understanding elections are the place where we define ourselves as citizens. We choose our rulers and the policies by which we shall be governed. Those vying for election try to persuade us that they are worthy and that they will have our interests in mind. We weigh their merits and make our choice. Often ungraciously.

The popular image of the economy is of an impersonal machine with its own laws and disciplines. It does not care for people. If we trust the market, we shall make, spend and accumulate wealth freely. If we scorn it, as did Greece, the result is impoverishment. People who fiddle with the machinery of the market make it less efficient.

Laws are popularly understood as a constraint, desirable or undesirable, on the liberty of the individual. They are made to prohibit practices that society considers prejudicial, and are sanctioned by punishment. If burqas are considered undesirable today, as Catholic religious dress was in earlier centuries in England, or people facing death keep arriving on our shores, we make laws to stop them.

Justice is understood primarily as ensuring that those who break laws are punished adequately. It only secondarily concerned with seeing that those who are punished are punished fairly.

The understanding of election, economy, justice and law in Christian theology belong to another world. Each of these words is used to describe God's relationship with the world. Election has to do with God's choice of human beings, not people's choice of God. God chose to make the world, chose the people of Israel, chose to share the human condition in Jesus Christ, chose to save all human beings through his death and rising. The doctrine of election says that God chooses us not because we are not worthy, but out of love. It is a matter of grace, of gift.

Economy, a word which referred to the management of the household, refers to the way in which God relates to the world in making it, choosing the people of Israel, sharing our humanity and saving us. God's economy expresses a relationship based in love. It is personal,

and ultimately about giving.

Within this framework justice has a distinctive and paradoxical meaning. It is not about God punishing lawbreakers, but about putting them right with God. Justice takes the form of standing alongside wrongdoers and forgiving them. It has to do with restoration and not with retribution.

If justice is turned on its head, law is too. Laws are important because they make us realise that there is more to life than obeying the law. Their purpose is not to penalise activities we do not approve of, nor to ensure that wrongdoers are punished, but to open wrongdoers to the possibility of transformation. Law is a tin hare that allows us to be caught by grace.

Election, the economy, justice and law are understood in very different ways in popular understanding and in theology. It is particularly striking that grace is central within theology, but totally absent in the popular understanding. In the popular understanding, the human relationships involved in these things are seen in mechanical and impersonal ways, leaving no room for love, altruism, forgiveness, restoration, reconciliation and freedom, and no space for grace. It is not surprising then that they are oppressive and depressing.

The consequences of this can be seen in an economic system that in Greece has rewarded the rich and now will punish the poor, in the Australian budget that sacrifices social inclusion to a reduced surplus, and in the competition to see which Party can treat asylum seekers in the most abusive ways.

Child abuse fable

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The White Ribbon* (M). Director: Michael Haneke. Starring: Christian Friedel, Leonie Benesch, Ulrich Tukur, Burghart Klaußner, Rainer Bock. Running time: 144 minutes**

German auteur Michael Haneke has been criticised for making films that are either cold and academic, or simply too clever for their own good. The villain in [Funny Games](#), for example, breaks the fourth wall to implicate the audience in his acts of violence. This allows Haneke as filmmaker and cultural commentator to both have and eat his cake, by at once presenting a violent film and making his audience feel guilty about watching it. This is a nifty trick, although a scene where the villain uses a remote control to rewind and replay onscreen bloodshed is a postmodern twist too far.



Haneke's latest film, *The White Ribbon*, seems at first likely to head down a similar path. It contains a voiceover narration that begins with words to the effect of 'I don't know if everything I'm about to tell you is true'. This would seem to be a red flag. Perhaps our storyteller is donning the hat of the illywhacker, warming up to a far fetched yarn where truth takes a back seat to the sensational. Haneke, in turn, seems to be warming his hands for another bout of funny postmodern games.

But there's nothing so heavy handed at play here. To an extent, Haneke is simply offering a nod to the layers of subjectivity that exist whenever stories are told and listened too. In film, events are presented from the particular perspective of the filmmaker, and in turn are interpreted through the gaze of the viewer. In this case, there is the added subjective lens of an unreliable narrator. This does provide a further complication to Haneke's convoluted period drama.

It's subtle though, and easily forgotten once this bleakly elegant mystery begins to unfold. The narrator takes us to an early 20th century German village where as a young man (Friedel) he served as a schoolteacher. His story is punctuated by three violent events. The first is the hobbling of the local doctor (Bock) by a hidden tripwire. This appears to be a deliberate attack on the Doctor, but the motives and culprit are not apparent.

The subsequent acts of violence involve the sexualised beating of two young boys. The first of these is the son of the Baron (Tukur) upon whom many villagers depend for their livelihood. The crime exacerbates the prejudices and class envy inherent to the feudal system. The hunt for the culprit begins in earnest, but without success. When a second, handicapped boy is similarly assaulted, it is clear they have a serial offender on their hands.

The Teacher has theories, but only belatedly does he turn detective. For much of the movie, he is instead preoccupied by his courtship of a much younger (teenage) woman (Benesch). This subplot provides further hints that he is an unreliable, perhaps compromised narrator. For although according to his account her resistance is due to timidity and disapproving parents, there is something vaguely threatening in his gently forceful advances.

In fact the abuse of the young by those who are older and more responsible (read powerful) is a recurring theme in the film. There's the recovering Doctor, a widower who is implied to have been sexually assaulting his teenage daughter. Also the Pastor (Klaußner), who berates and belittles his children when they misbehave, in a way that clearly stings more than the canings he administers, and which can categorically be defined as child abuse.

The most potent example occurs when this arrogantly pious man terrifies and humiliates his barely adolescent son with tall tales about a painful, prolonged and fatal illness that can be contracted through masturbation, in which the boy has evidently been privately engaging. From this point on the boy is forced to sleep with his hands bound to the sides of his bed — to keep him pure, no doubt.

We are led to believe these secret acts of parental abuse lay at the rotten core of the more public crimes that have occurred in the village. But again we must wonder about the storyteller, the Teacher's reliability — recall his opening words. Does he know of the abuse as fact? If so, how? Is he relying on second or third hand testimony? Or, worse, speculating and gossiping as a way to fill the gaps in his own limited knowledge and understanding?

Furthermore, what is the nature of his story: fabricated alibi? witness testimony? veiled confession? or simply an attempt to comprehend the incomprehensible?

These are interesting questions to mull over, but without them the film remains a compelling and disturbing fable about the abuse of children, and the violence that is taught to them as it is enacted upon them.

It's no coincidence that news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and the resulting war, arrives like a bruise on the face of the film's final act. Violence begets violence, Haneke reminds us — although it's a lesson that remains largely unlearned by the members of this tiny village of the damned, where patriarchal obfuscation ultimately means that the shocking truth is never fully known.

Losing Ben

NON-FICTION

Chris Mulherin



In the words of a 23-year-old of the Facebook generation, 'I'll be alright. But it will be crap for everyone else.'

Ben died quietly. He had no choice really, we turned off the machine. We had no choice really, that's how it's done now. Slowly, over 15 minutes his heart stopped. I was there, my hand never leaving his chest, dry eyed then. Stunned. The tears well up as I write, almost a year later like it was a day.

I remember his still, once strong body, but his form isn't good after weeks in intensive care. Tube feeding is not for body builders.

The oldest of our five, Ben studied science, medicine in his sights, healthy, not wealthy and wise beyond his years. What's that lump on your leg Ben? A cyst? Five months later and ... God, can this be happening to us?

The cubicle is a maze of high technology, administering life but not health. He lies etherised on the bed while the nurses come and go, whispering of Mike and Angelo, while tending syringes and cannulas, monitors and drains. The respirator pumps him up and down, graphing every breath. His vital signs are a roller-coaster, bad news one day, one hour, false hope the next.

Only two days before being put back into a coma, he went for his 'walk'. Debbie the physio came with her walking frame. No, said Ben, I'm going for a walk with James.

Thank you, James, for Ben's perfect day. For wheeling Ben and bed and portable life support into the sun of the car park. This is perfect, said Ben, sunglasses perched on his shaven head. What's with the sunnies Ben? The sun can give you cancer, he said. Two days later, he was gone.

He did not tread lightly, our Ben. Brawny in body and mind, he knew the story, and if he was under illusions they were deliberately chosen. Physiology and anatomy were his loves, he read medical journals, he knew this cancerous malfunction was rare and probably fatal.

I'll be alright, he said near the end, but it will be crap for everyone else.

Ben decided how he would die. He died 'like a man' when that phrase meant something deep without offence. He found no sense in baring his heart, leaving others to suffer more. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. He did our mantra proud to the end, rejecting

the doyens of pop-psychology who would open flood gates in the name of soggy authenticity.

He was not in denial, cancer sucks, he said, but he denied himself the luxury of self-pity, and the temptations to blame, to rage, to whinge. Even at his worst, Renae said (the nurse), he always managed a smile. Or when we woke him up, she said, at least a grunt of appreciation.

Somebody sends us Bruce Dawe's poem, 'Soliloquy for one dead'. Ah Joe, you never knew the whole of it ... But you had an inkling didn't you Ben? You knew.

Dad will you make me a blog? Let friends know what's going on. Make it bilingual: English for the Aussies, Spanish for the Latin amigos. I called it Blogging Ben. No way, he said, call it BensGotCancer. He died five weeks and 40,000 visitors later, and never laid eyes on it. Ten months have gone in a blur and the counter ticks over a hundred times a day as friends and amigos hold onto him still.

Day in, day out, we open our eyes to the nightmare dream, the appalling emptiness, the constant presence of his absence. Thinking that somehow our wanting it will bring him back. Every day mother duck wakes up broken hearted. Irrationally guilty, stricken for one of her little ducks that will never come back.

Matthew his youngest brother, nine years old, has learned his lessons: if Ben can die so can anyone, Mum. He sleeps on the floor now, nursing his CD player, some distracting story endlessly looping him to sleep. There are three brothers in between, each managing it, ignoring it, hiding it, forgetting it, living with it in the ways they know and can. Getting on with living but forever changed.

I had to buy a suit for the funeral. Ben was fussy about clothes. I couldn't go to his funeral badly dressed. Shoes especially he noticed ... Oh Ben, how can you just leave us like this? Just up and off, while we wait, we weep, we wish so many things.

And in the midst of it all, so much to be grateful for.

Grateful for doctors like Hui-li, dignified, diminutive, on her knees in the corridor massaging his back as he groans in chemotherapeutic agony.

Grateful for Mileva, the mischievous Armenian, breaking the rules of the kitchen to make hospital feel like home. It started after his op as I went in search of food and begged chips. It's out of hours, Mileva said, but she'd see what she could do. Chips arrived, Ben was grateful, and he'd made a friend for life. Never again would he want for sustenance. And later, as he lay oblivious and comatose, Mileva would visit still, offering silent prayers and tears at the end of his bed.

Grateful for world's best healthcare; Ben knew how the other half live. He grew up in Latin America and was constantly amazed at his treatment as he remembered the squalor of Hospital Padilla where medicine was pricey and doctors arrogant, where patients depended on family to bring them food, and where my broken rib was not diagnosed.

Grateful for mobile phones and messages, thousands of them saved now for posterity: his conversation with the world in the last few months.

Grateful for a medical specialist who knows he is not God. Spelling out possibilities but never making promises. It's a nasty one, he says, serious but also hopeful. We don't know much about it, but I'll tell you what I know. And later: Shall we take out your spleen Ben? It's your decision in the end. And finally: Shall we put you back into a coma Ben?

Grateful for Katrina and Sally and the flock of cancer-ward nursing staff who treated him like a person not a patient, who found his favourite icy-poles in the middle of the night when he couldn't eat anything else, who kept asking when Ben was returning from intensive care, surely knowing the odds were against him, who pencil-booked his favourite bed by the window, and who laughed with us and then cried when we lost him.

Grateful to have shared for 23 years and grateful for the untimely revelation of how much he taught his father about courage in living and dying well.

A month after his death I return to my desk at the university. It is strewn with Ben notes from another time, of meetings and arrangements and contacts. A time when we strategised, against the odds, Ben from his hospital bed, as bureaucracy's human face was revealed and we battled to keep his studies alive. Special consideration, delayed exams, extensions until he was fit again.

I throw out the sticky notes, the names and emails and phone numbers of lecturers, all willing to see what slack they could cut him. Now it's done. He was awarded his degree, a posthumous fiddling of the books, and a letter from the Vice Chancellor.

How different it is to the last time I was in the office, my perspective so sharpened, so raw. I look out the window at the same view but a world forever changed. I think of my own work and wonder where's the sense? Where's life's balance between debilitating melancholia and stubborn optimism?

In the quad the students dance and flirt, oblivious to dying sons and life's fickle vindictiveness. Stop, I cry, stop and think. Stop and do now what you must to really live, and to die without regrets. Don't you know I have lost my son? Isn't it written on my face? Let me share my tears with you, let me tell you of him, of one just like you.

I rise from my desk, distracted, the emptiness in my chest rising in waves of tears again. I

cross the lawn to the library to see his face in the basement, studying long hours among the periodicals. I cry at his absence and reminisce. Ben, who loved to study, revelling in the cut and thrust of debate. Ben with a bullet, a leader, who hated mediocrity. Ben, who knew me well and kept me sharp. Ben who wrestled with arrogance and humility, with where he was going in life. Oh Ben, you can't be gone ... you were so alive, so well, bursting with plans and promise.

I wander Lygon St and smell the pizza, remembering a father's joy of lunching with his sons. The privilege of sharing with adult children, full of futures to be carved, hungry for knowledge and spaghetti marinara.

Time heals they say. But it's also a river that sweeps inexorably on. To a future, another place, far from the past that it panics us to leave. We tumble through the rapids, battered, gasping for breath, longing for peaceful waters far behind. Can't we pause for a moment, or better, go back? To savour the past and not to forget.

You'll get over it they say, those who have never known. But God forbid the sin of getting over it. Good grief is not forgetting, returning to normal, deleting. We live another normal now, and pray we always will, added lines of pain, and perhaps compassion, etched on face and heart. Greek widows dress in black. I shave my head.

As I pour my grief into the keyboard, I hear myself repeat myself. But that's how grief is, I guess. Day after day it comes and goes. For me the cycle is longer now, every two or three days returning with its vengeance. Today that heavy feeling in my chest is back. Like a black sneeze wanting out, a growing ball of tears that needs a lonely place to erupt.

His life in photos passes before me on the screensaver and I smile at the memories, forgetting for a moment that he's gone. Then it hits me again, rising from deep down, suppressed, arriving at my throat in groans too deep for words, with a fearful power, that, untethered, would wake the gods. Yes, son, it's crap for everyone else.

The Budget of social exclusion

POLITICS

Frank Quinlan

While I entered the Budget lock-up with a little excitement, my emotions quickly switched to disappointment as I began to read the approximately 25cm high stack of Budget papers. No bringing along the battler or the underdog here. No promises to end child poverty. No indignation at the of treatment asylum seekers. Just the simple economics of global risk and uncertainty, followed by fiscal caution, and a budget bottom line to bring political comfort.

With the exception of the substantial new initiatives in the Health Portfolio, this Budget presented very dry economics. That is to say, the Budget presents a vision that is based almost entirely around economic goals, rather than social goals. Unlike the previous Budget, there is very little effort made to even dress the economics in social rhetoric.

Perhaps this will be the most damaging and lasting legacy of the Global Financial Crisis. Apart from the human cost that the Global Financial Crisis has wrought in the homes of those left unemployed or those suffering under mortgage or rental stress, the Global Financial Crisis seems to have allowed a shift in public priorities. It seems a treasurer can now be rewarded (politically) for 'fiscal responsibility' as an end in itself, rather than as a means to achieving greater social goals.

I suspect that one of the reasons many voters were originally attracted to this government was because in opposition, and even as a new government, they conveyed a strong sense of a broader social vision for a more inclusive Australian society. I suspect many of those same voters may find it hard to see that vision reflected in the new Budget.

The team I work with at Catholic Social Services Australia made some very direct claims on the government in the pre-Budget process, but this Budget has not responded to those claims.

We asked for increased incomes for the poor, especially the unemployed. The Newstart allowance for the unemployed and other government benefits are too low and trap many people in poverty. This Budget fails to deliver even modest increases to the Newstart allowance. We maintain that an Independent Entitlements Commission should be established to make objective recommendations regarding an adequate level of payments from government.

We asked for more opportunities for people to enter paid work and supported employment. As the economy now begins to grow there is a risk that some Australians will be left behind. This is what happened with previous recessions. This Budget fails to deliver real opportunities to those long term unemployed who are unlikely to gain work without intensive support programs and intermediate labour market programs. A rising tide does not lift all

boats. Some are damaged and need special care and repairs before they can have any hope of floating again.

We asked for greater support for housing. While we acknowledge that the previous Budget made an historic investment in social housing and homelessness, this Budget fails to sustain that momentum. As housing affordability declines government must increase its support for those facing higher rents and higher levels of mortgage stress.

We asked for greater help with mental illness. Measures in tonight's Budget go some way to strengthening the level of clinical support for those living with mental illness, but much, much more is needed. We desperately need a National Mental Health Initiative that includes community based mental health care and support, delivered by community based workers and agencies. Many clients in our agencies need much more than a referral to a counsellor from their GP. Without intensive community based, long term support, many will continue to fall through the cracks.

We asked for support for the community sector. While our agencies are facing increased demand for services, they also face increased competition for skilled workers. The Productivity Commission Report and the Henry Review have made many recommendations to support the sector, but this Budget fails to fund any significant reforms. A plan to do nothing is a plan to place the sector under continued and unsustainable pressure. If all the government did was to cut the onerous burden of red tape and administration, many more services could be delivered to those in need.

If a 'fiscally responsible Budget' can increase spending on Australia's representatives in elite sports by \$237 million, it is hard to imagine that there is not room for our unemployed to eat a little better, or for social services to shorten their waiting lists. Consumer and peak groups will be pleased to receive \$500,000 to help them with the implementation of the National Disability Strategy, but may be disappointed that \$6.2 million is being spent on the office in the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs that will be responsible for receiving their input.

One of the concerns with budget commentary is that it can take some time to separate out new spending from old; real programs from phantoms; and to find the hidden bombshells. There was no 'Fact Sheet' printed to explain the proposed cuts to the Family Relationships Services program. We are concerned that such cuts would see troubled families with less support right when they most need it. It may take us some time to learn what this will really mean in practice.

My computer based word search did not find any reference to 'social inclusion' in any of the 16 mb of papers that we were provided with at the Budget lockup. My real disappointment is that it won't be found in the days that follow either.

UK kingmaker Clegg wise to wait

POLITICS

Peter Scally

Gordon Brown's resignation — or, to be exact, his announcement that he is ready to stand down as Labour leader — was the decent thing to do for someone who has just led his party to defeat in a general election, coming second in the popular vote with only 29 per cent, and losing 91 seats.



But, as the results came in last Friday morning, Labour were not the only losers.

The Conservatives didn't win either, despite getting more votes, and more seats. Any opposition party worth its salt, taking on an unpopular, 13-year-old government after a long recession, and with the support of most of the press, should have romped home. With the leg-up that an unsophisticated voting system gives the dominant party, a mere 40 per cent of the votes would have given them an overall majority in the House of Commons. The fact that they couldn't even manage that — nudging their vote up by only 3.8 per cent — makes it clear how few British voters have been won over by the David Cameron-branded Conservatives.

But the biggest disappointment will have been felt in the Liberal Democrat camp. Despite all the media hype about 'Cleggmania' after their leader's widely-acclaimed performance in the series of TV debates, they finished the night five seats down, and their share of the vote crept up just 1 per cent to 23 per cent.

Their vote actually fell in Scotland where, in a very different political atmosphere, support for Labour was up. The 'personality politics' that favour Clegg and Cameron in Middle England play very differently north of the border, where the Tory leader's Eton vowels are an instant turn-off and where instinctive sympathy for the embattled Brown is only deepened by resentment at the London-centred media's relentlessly negative portrayal of him.

Ironically, one of the seats the Liberal Democrats lost — to Labour — was Rochdale, scene of 'bigotgate', the Prime Minister's unhappy encounter with Gillian Duffy, which was fanned into a flame by Sky News and picked up with indiscriminate glee by the other channels. Clearly, Lancashire voters are not swayed by such media froth.

Religious leaders in Britain may take pleasure in the fact that another LibDem seat to fall was that of the National Secular Society's Dr Evan Harris, a vocal and untiring opponent of anything that gives religious belief a place in the public arena. The same fate befell another prominent secularist, LibDem MP Paul Holmes in Chesterfield.

So, what happens after an election that everybody lost?

The negotiations taking place now are due to one simple fact: given the antipathy of most of the smaller parties to the Tories, it is plain that neither they nor Labour can govern without the support of the Liberal Democrats. It was always their ambition to hold the balance of power in a hung parliament, but now, as one commentator put it, Clegg's dream has become his nightmare: he has to choose between two unattractive alternatives.

A deal with the Conservatives would appear to respect voters' desire for 'change' but has four considerable drawbacks. Firstly, the policy differences are enormous — irreconcilable, it would seem, on the key areas of the economy, taxation, defence, Europe, immigration and the LibDem touchstone issue of electoral reform, which the Conservatives have always vehemently opposed.

Secondly, the very idea of supporting the Tories would have life-long Liberal activists all over the country tearing up their party cards in disgust. Thirdly, it would be electoral suicide in many of their other remaining 57 seats. And fourthly, to be associated with a government that is going to have to make across-the-board cuts in public services in the coming months or years is not an appealing prospect.

Doing a deal with Labour is also a risk. Even with Brown out of the picture, propping up a government that has just lost a general election will be seen by many as thwarting the will of the electorate. A Labour government, too, would have to begin a program of painful cuts that the LibDems would be more comfortable opposing.

Furthermore, Labour and the LibDems do not command enough seats between them for an outright majority: they would need the support of at least two of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish parties, making any deal more complicated and fragile.

On the other hand, there is more policy agreement on that side of the house — both parties see themselves as 'progressive' and are essentially left-of-centre — and, crucially for the Liberals, there is much less resistance within the Labour Party to reforming the voting system — in fact many Labour MPs have been arguing for it for years. And when it comes to the crunch, a deal with Labour would be much more acceptable to LibDem members across the country than any agreement with the Tories.

Part of the problem is that the idea of coalition government is alien to the current generation in Westminster, and associated with weakness and failure. But recent experience in Scotland and Wales is that coalitions can deliver good government. Legislation can't be forced through, it has to be argued for and negotiated. Parliamentary votes have to be won by reasoned argument. There are more checks and balances, and — in principle at least — more accountability and responsiveness to the views of voters.

So far, Clegg and his party seem to be keeping their options open. They are wise not to rush this decision. If a coalition deal can be done — and made to work — then after the election that everybody lost, it could be the British people who are the winners.

Photographing Paris

POETRY

Ian C. Smith

Eugene's Camera

The *fin de siecle* in the City of Light
sees life begin at forty for Atget
as he takes on a new profession
using techniques nearly as old as him.
He attracts no circle of followers
refuses to style himself 'artisan'
mapping the cobbled Parisian dawn
in search of juxtaposition
stairways, upturned street vendors' carts
unglamorous prostitutes, pedlars
the stillness of odd, aged architecture
angles, spaces awash with light.
He catalogues his beloved old city
a voyeur with a viewfinder, his mind
framing, preserving its vanishing history.
He makes 10,000 negatives, and a living
but earns little contemporary acclaim
his images' impassive beauty
a chronicle of a silently stated ache
a need to keep things once loved alive.

Dorman Engineering, 1970

A small sky then, beyond the roller door
wan morning light and these men wearing green

overalls, their names stitched in red over
beating hearts, who greet each other before
work. That welder, the heavy man who has
seen too much sorrow, his son will kidnap
a school bus. The lathe operator lights
a cigarette for breakfast, humming jazz.
He squints against smoke, ambition growing.
Does he dream of success, his growly blues
guitar? His mate, the sheetmetal worker,
thinks of the comfort of words, not knowing
that poems crowd his future. A bell shrieks,
machines whirr into action and these men
hunch over oiled steel hating the time and
motion study expert whose shined shoes creak.

Tango

The unprimed paint on our office peels
its colour, opulent when new, now haggard.
When I open the leadlight door
it smells of herbal mothballs
silverfish the inheritors of beloved books.
The loft, once a teenagers' poster room
houses your cobwebbed magazines.
If future archaeologists examine
the turquoise tiles on our kitchen floor
like those excavated Roman villas
the tesserae of our hectic days
shall be revealed, the chips and pits

from broken plates, glasses, promises.
The way we live will have been our life.
At night I bolster myself to read in bed
using that hand-made cushion, the one
with scenes of different dances, bought
when we used to dash around garage sales.
Who would have imagined its survival
while other items were discarded by habit
during this time since we last danced?
I love the tango. Her vivid red dress
faded now to dusky rose, her thigh split
once sensual, abraded by constant wear.
My head rests luxuriantly on her legs.
Her partner's look could suggest desire
that will never die, his serious brow
as dark as when the air smells of storms.
The hallway clock runs too fast, hangs askew.
Time tilts off-centre like a sad drunk
despite my anal perpendicular corrections.
Intolerance is still one of my many flaws.
The pine panelling we chose has mellowed
honey-coloured now, the way we had hoped.
We never did complete the task of sealing it.

Let the mining goose sleep

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins



The Prime Minister has been accused of plucking the goose that laid the golden egg. The Federal Government's proposed tax on super profits has sparked a wave of uncertainty among miners. On Thursday, *The Australian* [led](#) with the news of mining giant Rio Tinto shelving plans to spend \$11 billion expanding its massive iron ore operations in Western Australia. ABC Radio's AM [reported](#) on Canadian MP Brad Trost's glee at the prospect of his country winning the mining investment that Australia could lose.

It seems nobody has stopped to ask the obvious question of what would happen if there was less investment in Australian mining. The simple answer is that more of Australia's mineral wealth would stay in the ground. There would be less taxes of any description for the Federal Government, and less 'fat' profits for the mining companies and their shareholders.

But perhaps most significantly, more minerals would be available for future generations to use for their own wellbeing. As simplistic as it may seem, that is surely the best argument in favour of the 40 per cent super tax. For our own generation, a higher proportion of the admittedly smaller mining dividend would find its way into the public purse. For our descendants, there would be more minerals left for mining activities and wealth generation.

There is no imperative other than self-interest to extract minerals from the ground as fast as we can. China wants them now, and seems prepared to pay what is required. If they don't get them from us, they could look elsewhere. Let them. In the future, current sleeping economic giants such as India and Indonesia are likely to follow China's lead and be similarly hungry for Australia's remaining minerals. Our future generations will be relying on them.

We only need to look at the nearby example of Nauru to see a country move from being one of the richest per capita nations on earth to one of the poorest, in the space of a generation. This occurred only in recent decades, after intensive mining exhausted the island's substantial phosphate deposit. While the phosphate revenues were coming in, there was profligateness. Now there is poverty.

Recently there has been much talk of the size of Australia's future population, and whether 36 million would be sustainable. It is obvious that it would be more sustainable if Australia still had a significant deposit of minerals to fund the import of food or other essentials that we could no longer provide for ourselves.

Our economic modelling needs to move to embrace needs of future generations in addition to the present. Economist John Quiggin [criticises](#) the Henry Tax Review, which recommended

the 40 per cent super tax. He says that it is flawed by its assumption that GDP should be the primary measure of economic growth. GDP does not take into account the depletion of natural resources. Instead Quiggin prefers NNI (Net National Income), which he argues is better equipped for policies that promote our economic welfare in the long term.

In the context of the present generation and using GDP as a measure of economic wellbeing, it may make sense for us to do all we can to make Australia an attractive destination for mining investors. But it is questionable whether it is good for all Australians in the long run.

Close encounters with Greek unrest

COMMUNITY

Gillian Bouras

At 12 noon on May Day I walked through central Athens, where the usual enormous gathering of workers was taking place, for this anniversary is always celebrated in appropriate style all over Greece. Traffic was banned, people choked Syntagma Square and surrounds, and police were everywhere. It took me over ten minutes to make my polite way to the Grande Bretagne Hotel corner, a distance of about 200 m.



I become uneasy in large crowds, and this one was huge; I have been holding my breath over the Greek situation for weeks in any case. But I was lucky: the atmosphere was calm, and my luck held throughout the afternoon.

But by evening May Day had taken on the nature of the classic distress call: a violent mob had threatened the historic hotel, and the riot squad had been called out. The one MP who had ventured into the square had had to be rescued by the police and removed to a place of (comparative) safety.

How are the Greek people feeling? I have been asked. My answer is that there is no simple answer, for they do not all agree: after all, where there are two Greeks, there are always three opinions, if not more.

But broadly speaking, most people are angry, particularly the young. Greece has never treated its youth well. One Greek woman remarked to me not long ago, 'Greece eats its children' — she was thinking of taking her only child to be educated in France. Most Greek youths studies hard, both here and overseas, yet disappointment is often the result: youth unemployment is running close to 30 per cent. And Greece is not a meritocracy: corruption and nepotism rule, so that a young person can do well if he/she has the 'right connections'.

To disappointment and resentment, add the fact that young Greeks, like most of the population, are highly politicised, and the result is a volatile mixture. To young people, five years is an eternity, and this is the minimum period of austerity currently forecast. As well, the men are forced to give up at least another year to national service. Some of the young resent their parents' past actions, blame them for the current mess, and cannot see why they should have to suffer as a result.

I suppose it is human nature to try to find a scapegoat. Those same parents tend to blame politicians, and it is true to say that transparency has never been a feature of Greek politics. Neither has accountability. The average Spiros Papadopoulos, it is safe to say, knew nothing of the previous government's wheelings and dealings with international octopus Goldman

Sachs, for example, which enabled the true state of the deficit to be masked in what has been called blatant balance-sheet cosmetics.

But many of the older generation have a great sense of entitlement, and can see no fault with a system that permits the existence of an unwieldy and inefficient public service and a working life that permits many people to retire at 45 on comfortable pensions. They resent the threat to what they see as their hard-earned retirement.

There is also an undercurrent of anger towards the Germans: 'They still owe us,' is a commonly-expressed view; '65 years on from the war, they still owe us.'

For most of Greek society, the crystal ball refuses to cooperate: there is no clear vision of the future, a future, at all.

But this week, on the day of the general strike, with the Parthenon barely visible through layers of smoke and tear gas, the main emotion among ordinary people was one of shock. Riot police had foiled one mob's threat to the Parliament building and the Presidential Guard, but another mob threw Molotov cocktails into a nearby bank and set it ablaze: three innocent people died. In sombre addresses to Parliament, both Prime Minister Papandreou and Opposition Leader Samaras deplored the outbreak of violence.

Many people fear that much worse is still to come. I certainly do. And those same people fear that it will be ordinary individuals who will pay the price, as the workers in the bank building did. The great and the not-so-good may not be sleeping easily these nights, but they are still alive and their fortunes are intact. So far.