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Pope Francis the smiling revolutionary

RELIGION

Neil Ormerod

It is now over a month since the election of Pope Francis and it is clear that he has a strong agenda of reform in mind. From his symbolic refusal of the red cloak on his election by the conclave, to his washing of the feet of young offenders in detention, both male and female, believers and non-believers, he has set a path of change in the Church starting from the top, but with ramifications for the Church as a whole.

Of course it is difficult to get into the mind of a person who *might* have been pope eight years earlier, when it appears he requested those who were voting for him to direct their votes to Cardinal Ratzinger. Would the intervening years have been filled with 'what ifs'? Would he have viewed the direction taken by Benedict XVI and wondered how he might have dealt with the issues that arose?

While we are not likely to know the answers to this without some personal revelation from Francis himself, it is clear that he came to the preconclave debates with a strong sense of purpose. As the cardinals gathered prior to entering the conclave they were given the opportunity to present their case for the qualities needed in the new pope. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, Archbishop of Buenos Aires, gave a speech which was ecclesiastical dynamite.

He spoke of the dangers of a Church becoming 'self-referential' and 'sick'. He warned of the dangers of a 'theological narcissism' overtaking the Church. He referred to the Gospel image of Jesus knocking on the door wanting to enter our lives. 'But think of the times when Jesus knocks from within to let himself out. The self-referential Church seeks Jesus Christ within and does not let him out.

'The Church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only in the geographical sense but also to go to the existential peripheries: those of the mysteries of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and of religious indifference, of thought, of all misery.'

Statements such as these do not arise in a vacuum. They are not a disinterested statement of timeless theological truths. They arise from an analysis of the current situation of the Church and the direction it had taken in the last eight and possibly more years.

For all the personal respect and deference Francis has shown to his predecessor, these words read like a repudiation of the direction in which the Church had moved under his reign.

What is more, this is the very man elected by cardinals handpicked by John Paul II and Benedict XVI with an agenda of reining in what was perceived as the excessive openness of the post-Vatican II Church. This is a truly remarkable

occurrence, to the point of defying ecclesiastical logic.

Francis has continued the same themes in homilies and talks, as well as through symbolic actions. In a recent homily reported by the *Vatican Insider*, Francis spoke of the need for the Church to build bridges, not walls.

Christians who are afraid to build bridges and prefer to build walls are Christians who are not sure of their faith ... When the Church loses this apostolic courage, she becomes a stalled church, a tidy church, a church that is nice to look at, but is without fertility, because she's lost the courage to go to the outskirts.

The Church is called to be inclusive in its mission:

I remember when as a child one would hear in Catholic families, in my family, 'No, we cannot go to their house, because they are not married in the Church.' It was as an exclusion. No, you could not go! Neither could we go to [the houses of] socialists or atheists. Now, thank God, people do not say such things, right? [Such an attitude] was a defence of the faith, but it was one of walls: the Lord made bridges.

He acknowledged that taking this path may lead to the Church making mistakes. But 'if you make a mistake, you get up and go forward: that is the way. Those who do not walk in order not to err, make a more serious mistake.'

It was not uncommon during the reign of Benedict XVI for people to speak of a 'smaller but purer Church'. While there was some debate as to the provenance of this phrase, and whether Benedict saw this as desirable or merely an observation of the direction the Church was heading, it would seem that to Francis such an outcome would represent a failure of courage on the part of the Church.

He knows mistakes might be made in keeping the Church more inclusive, but he is not afraid of this. He knows too that it is difficult to evangelise a world that one constantly demonises. He wants to build bridges to the world, bridges of dialogue and cooperation.

Whether they knew it or not the conclave cardinals initiated a quiet revolution in electing this man.

Labor goes from Robin Hood to the Sheriff of Nottingham

POLITICS

John Falzon

When Labor handed down its first Budget in 2008 many in the social welfare sector felt that Robin Hood might have just fired off his first humble arrow.

There are some good things in this week's Budget announcement: major reforms that should be warmly welcomed such as DisabilityCare and the Gonski school education funding.

But if you are an unemployed person or one of the single parents who at the beginning of this year was forced onto an inadequate Newstart payment, you could be forgiven for feeling that this Budget is less Robin Hood and more Sheriff of Nottingham.

The Newstart payment is now so low that it has become, for many, a path to despair instead of a path to employment. At around only 40 per cent of the after-tax minimum wage, our unemployment benefit has not seen an increase in real terms since 1994.

In an effort to catch up, we implored the government to lift it by \$50 a week. We also sought a stronger investment in helping people into jobs. We argued that a modest redistribution of resources would result in a massive redistribution of hope.

The failure to do this is yet another kick in the guts of the people who are doing it tough.

We accept the fiscal constraints the government is under. We do not accept that people who are living in poverty should pay the price.

We accept, in the main, that a job is the best path out of poverty. We do not accept that people in poverty have only themselves to blame, or that you can help a person find work by making life hard.

You don't build someone up by putting them down. You don't help someone into employment by pushing them into poverty.

By keeping the unemployment benefit low, successive governments have deliberately humiliated people rather than improving their chances of employment.

To turn around and say that we'll give a few crumbs but only to those who are able to find some work, completely ignores the underlying structural causes of unemployment.

Along with the human cost of poverty comes the long-term economic cost of squandering, rather than harnessing, the enormous productive potential of 800,000 people.

The time is ripe to abandon the bipartisan politics of punishment. Tackling poverty should have been a budget priority. But as things stand we are looking down the barrel of entrenched exclusion for those who wage a daily battle for survival from below the poverty line.

Making an example of asylum seeker children

POLITICS

Andrew Hamilton



The plight of children who seek protection in Australia has recently been in the news. A *Four Corners* program on Manus Island (click image to view in full) showed them confined under conditions that produce mental illness in their families, and seeing people act out their despair by trying to take their lives and sewing their lips.

Last week, too, the Minister of Immigration announced that families with children would be given bridging visas that denied them the right to work and left them to find accommodation and feed themselves on an allowance, less than the dole, which could be withdrawn. For many families, too, even the allowance would be unavailable.

Neither predicament is in the best interests of children. It may be helpful to look at the various conditions under which Australia makes children who seek protection live, and ask why it happens some are chosen for Manus Island and others for penury in the community.

The factors that affect the treatment of children, as of other asylum seekers, have nothing to do with their merits or needs. The salient factors are whether they arrived by plane or boat, which point they have reached in the processing of their claims, and whether they arrived before or after 13 August 2012.

Those arriving before 13 August 2012 faced three possible destinations. Some were confined in detention centres on Christmas Island or the Australian mainland.

But more recently, many children and families, among other asylum seekers have been placed in community detention, administered for the most part by community organisations. They live freely in residential accommodation in the community and are eligible for free medical treatment and prescribed medicines.

Although they are not allowed to work, they receive 70 per cent of the special benefit out of which they had to pay for all expenses except accommodation. Children are entitled to free education until they turn 18.

A third group live in the community on bridging visas. Most have been able to work and receive 89 per cent of the single benefit, out of which they have to pay for accommodation, food and transport, until their case is reviewed at tribunal level. They are entitled to Medicare but must pay for prescribed medicines.

If their cases are rejected by the tribunal, their benefit is cut off. If they cannot work — and few employers will employ people with only elementary English on short term visas — they are destitute. Many families who have arrived by plane to claim protection are in this condition.

People who arrived by boat after 13 August 2012 must wait at least five years before their cases are processed. They were to have been sent to Manus Island or Nauru, but because the number of arrivals has far exceeded the capacity of these centres some, including children, remain in detention on Christmas Island and the mainland.

Others, including families and unaccompanied children, are put in community detention under the same conditions as those who arrived earlier, except that they receive only 60 per cent of the basic benefit.

Other single adults live in the community on bridging visas, with no right to work. They receive 89 per cent of the single benefit to pay for accommodation and all living expenses. On turning 18, many young people are often placed immediately on bridging visas.

From now on families with children, regardless of when they arrived, will routinely be placed in this predicament. For many it may mean living without income.

Not simply on Manus Island, but in all these arrangements, children are at risk.

The trauma suffered in their own nations, the dangers on the way to Australia, the responsibility unaccompanied children feel for the families who sent them out of danger, their anxiety and guilt at the danger still facing their families back home, the uncertainty and fears intensified by the delay in being able to get on with their lives, and the family stress expressed in domestic violence and other ways, all threaten their mental and physical health.

And now they face the reality and threat of indigence.

The rationale for this cruelty lies in the No Advantage policy, by which people who come by boat seeking protection from Australia must not be seen to get ahead of those who choose to remain in Indonesia. The corollary of this principle is that any disadvantages of coming to Australia by boat should be expanded and made clearly visible. Children too are conscripted to act in this play of human suffering.

To that end it was essential that families with children be sent to Manus Island and Nauru. What was glimpsed on Manus Island was doubtless not intended for Australian audiences. But it was scripted to impress families weighing the merits of coming to Australia against staying in their home countries, Malaysia or Indonesia.

The principle of No Advantage also dictates that asylum seekers should live in a world of arbitrariness, enjoying certainty neither about the hearing of their cases nor about the conditions they will live in next. The application of the principle means children will suffer, but this is seen as an acceptable price to pay.

Many Australians believe it is not decent or just to inflict suffering on people, particularly on children, to achieve the goal of sending messages to other people.

It is doubly repugnant when the policy is incoherent and inept.

At latest score almost twice the number of people has this year come by boat to seek protection than came last year. Many of them are families with children, driven to travel together because of the long delay in processing and in family reunion. To save children from dying at sea we drive more children to risk dying at sea. And then we inflict more indignities on them when they arrive. It is not a policy to be proud of.

Cheap shots at religious fish out of water

TELEVISION

Tim Kroenert

On paper this sounds like a great concept. Six young people from different religious backgrounds undergo a two-week immersion/swap with one of the other participants. They live in that person's home, adopt their style of cultural dress, interact with their family and peers and explore their religious practices.

This set-up promises both tension and inspiration; the awkward politeness of the fish-out-of-water scenario giving way to moments of conflict on the one hand, and enlightenment and growth on the other. The *Compass* special *Holy Switch* does offer these, but in truth barely scratches the surface of the intriguing premise.

The main problem is the running time. Each episode cuts back and forth between the experiences of two participants, so only half of the barely 30-minute running time is dedicated to each person. The impression is of a tantalising sketch that captures highs and lows of their experiences but not a sustained character 'arc'.

Sunday's episode saw a young Hindu man switch places with an Anglican evangelical. This fervent young woman Kim does undergo some growth; her initial sadness that good people will go to hell if they don't believe in Jesus is challenged by her confusion at sensing God's presence during a Hindu ceremony.

On the other hand, her Hindu counterpart is baffled by the unthinking platitudes and exclusivity insisted upon by Kim's Christian friends, and is rightly outraged when they earnestly imply that he is destined for hell. All this is ripe to be properly challenged and explored, but the running time and format doesn't allow for it.

This fact also lays bare the undermining simplicity of the series' format. There is a sense in that first episode that this was intended to set open and inclusive Eastern religion alongside narrow-minded, even arrogant, Western Christianity. That impression is reinforced in the second episode, due to screen this Sunday.

In it, a starchy Maronite Catholic trades places with an ebullient Buddhist monk (pictured). While Anthony the Maronite is dismissive of his hosts' beliefs, stubbornly resisting the immersion experience that is the whole point of the switch, Freeman the Buddhist finds meaning in the symbols and rituals of Catholicism.

Predictably, the third and final episode sees a young Jewish woman switch with a young Muslim woman. Both receive warm hospitality from their hosts, and while the episode barely skims the central conflicts that have divided these cultures, it implies that basic human interaction is the antidote to inter-cultural mistrust.

Jewish Jordane squirms her way through a pro-Palestine rally and wonders

aloud whether she should be there. But it is touching at the end of the rally to see her new Muslim friends surround her and remind her that right relationships can and should transcend politics. This is the best episode, although again it is all over too soon.

The real test for the participants will surely come later, once they are again surrounded by their own friends and families who share their beliefs. How deeply have they absorbed the lessons of their holy switch? Hopefully a follow-up special is on the cards to explore this equally intriguing post-script to the immersion experience.

Gutsy budget built around icons

POLITICS

Lin Hatfield-Dodds

This is a legacy budget. The further into history it recedes, the better it is going to look in terms of economic management.

From the perspective of community services agencies, it's a budget framed around three icons: a national disability insurance scheme, education reform, and welfare to work focused welfare spending.

The jewel in the crown has to be the Australian Government committing to ten years of funding for DisabilityCare, which once rolled out will make a significant difference in the daily lives of nearly half a million Australians who will be better able to participate in their community.

The budget maintains \$3.7 billion for the Living Longer, Living Better aged care package.

It's a gutsy budget in a challenging economic environment and an election year.

UnitingCare advocated for business tax loopholes to be closed, and this budget delivers on that, albeit in a relatively modest way, with savings of \$4.1 billion over the forward estimates. I say relatively modest, but that's not the message around Parliament from business representatives. They are not happy.

Another \$1.5 billion will be saved through limiting open ended personal income tax concessions related to education and medical expenses.

Some modest steps were taken to rein in middle class welfare, with the baby bonus being scaled back from \$5000 to \$2000 for the first child and better targeted by being tied to Family Tax Benefit A.

Given that monies saved through these measures are directed to DisabilityCare and education reform in the main, these initiatives are progressively redistributive.

However, the heralded superannuation reform will deliver only \$720 million over the forward estimates which annually is less than one per cent, or four dollars in every thousand, of superannuation concession by 2016—17.

For the first time in our nation's history, in the forward estimates super concessions will top \$50 billion a year. \$50 billion is *fifty thousand million dollars*. That's a lot of money, 80 per cent of which goes to the wealthiest 20 per cent of superannuants.

It's hard to believe that if we sat down with tens of billions of dollars to allocate to social priorities we would choose to fund the retirement of very wealthy Australians. It's a very poor use of public money.

It is not surprising, but is very disappointing, to see no direct increase to

unemployment benefits. While three measures totalling \$300 million will assist unemployed people transition to work through lifting and indexing in the tax free threshold, extending the pensioner education supplement and enabling access to the pensioner concession card for longer, unemployed Australians will continue to struggle to make ends meet.

If budgets are about choices, as the Treasurer said when delivering the Budget, this year the budget challenges the free ride for the top end of town while investing in iconic disability and education reform.

Pablo Neruda's prophecy in poetry

NON-FICTION

Philip Harvey

Like many great poems, life is worked out by testing both questions and answers. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' is a beautiful question, made more beautiful by the 13 line reply that follows. A poem with all the answers is as unconvincing as a poem that's never asked any questions. We seem to find ourselves somewhere between those two extremes, which is why some poems work for us now, while others bide their time.

The last poems of the Chilean Pablo Neruda are a cycle of 74 cantos called *El Libro de las Preguntas, The Book of Questions*. In fact, the poems consist entirely of questions, which act as much to celebrate as to query the world around us. They reveal the poet in his many moods — humourous, nostalgic, political, sentimental, metaphysical, absurd, realistic, passionate, wistful — and in just a few words reduced to the fundamentals.

The unquestionable marvel of the nursery rhyme lives in a line like *Dónde dejé la luna llena su saco nocturno de harina?*, which William O'Daly translates 'Where did the full moon leave its sack of flour tonight?' Neruda's child-like eye surprises us to the end.

Soon enough though his voice toughens: 'Is the sun the same as yesterday's or is this fire different from that fire?' When he asks 'How old is November anyway?' he is asking us for an answer, but do we have one? With a question like 'Tell me, is the rose naked or is that her only dress?' the human world and nature confront one another. 'Where is the centre of the sea?' could keep geographers busy for hours.

Neruda can turn a question into an image in time: 'Why do assemblies of umbrellas always occur in London?' And there are questions we have thought all our lives without putting them into words: 'What did the tree learn from the earth to be able to talk with the sky?'

Still, not everything is living for living's sake. Time is of the essence. Neruda wrote these poems on the eve of the violent overthrow of the elected government of Chile in 1973. He was a close friend of President Salvador Allende, which is why some lines unsettle the general sense of an enquiring mind at peace with the world: *Pero es verdad que se prepara la insurrección de los chalecos?*

O'Daly has this as 'But is it true that the vests are preparing to revolt?' *Los chalecos* means *vests* in Spanish, but anyone reading this poem at the time would know its military and political connotations. Vests were worn by soldiers, including top brass with lots of medals attached. When Pinochet took control of Chile in a coup d'état, it was a vindication of the fear spoken, by implication, in some of the lines of *The Book of Questions*.

Many suspected foul play when Neruda died 12 days later. In 2011 his former driver claimed Neruda had been poisoned by secret agents, contradicting the official version, death from cancer.

Due to legal action from the Communist Party, the Chilean government last month exhumed the body. This act is contentious itself; the Pablo Neruda Foundation disapproves, while the family want closure, one way or the other. Preliminary results confirm that Neruda did have an advanced case of prostate cancer, but tests continue, both in Chile and the United States. Full results could take up to three months.

The questions kept on coming. Neruda could nail his colours to the mast:

It is bad to live without a hell:
aren't we able to reconstruct it?
And to position sad Nixon
with his buttocks over the brazier?
Roasting him on low
with North American napalm?

Dantesque conjectures were a way of dealing with political upheaval inside Chile. And through those years some of his questions came to have prophetic meaning: 'Why in the darkest ages do they write with invisible ink?' This is not softened by a line like 'Is peace the peace of the dove?' We know where his sympathies are when he says:

Do all memories of the poor
huddle together in the villages?
And do the rich keep their dreams
in a box carved from minerals?

But as we return into *The Book of Questions* we find that all of life presents us, and the poet, with paradoxes that contain within them leads and explanations, if only we pay attention.

It is almost offhand when he jokes *Cuántas Iglesias tiene el cielo?* — 'How many churches are there in heaven?' Exact statistics are not on his mind when Neruda wonders, Does a pear tree have more leaves than *Remembrance of Things Past*? For these are the words of someone looking out beyond present disasters.

He keeps hope alive, pays attention daily to the value and goodness in the world, seeing in these things that which is truly life-giving. It is a South American, after all, who would ask *De qué suspende el picaflor su simetría-deslumbrante?* — 'From what does the hummingbird hang its dazzling symmetry?'

Flawed beauty in back-to-the-wall Budget

POLITICS

Paul O'Callaghan

With Labor's back to the wall due to fiscal pressure and an election only four months away, last night's Federal Budget represented this Government's last statement of its values and priorities.

We saw in evidence its values and priorities reflected in a ten year funding commitment to DisabilityCare and improved equity in school funding based on need. Similarly the oral health care commitment in previous budgets looks set to improve access to affordable dental care for many low income families. Subject to how well they are implemented, these will improve the quality of life for millions of Australians.

We also saw an effort to improve revenue at a time when tax receipts are down by \$20 billion. This includes closing some corporate tax loopholes and other tax arrangements. At the same time, much bolder steps will be needed in coming years in order to address the inexorable growth in health care funding, as well as infrastructure, education, welfare and a range of costs related to an ageing community.

Like a beautiful gem with a crack through the middle, this Budget also showed another side of the much touted Labor values and priorities.

There was only disappointment for the 680,000 unemployed Australians who might have anticipated that, after six years in office, this Government would finally acknowledge their exceptionally tough lives and offer at least some increase to the Newstart Allowance. The Senate Inquiry into allowances, including Newstart, last year was presented with overwhelming evidence of how harsh life is living on \$35 a day.

Among many sources of evidence, the National Centre for Economic and Social Modelling found that households dependent on Newstart for their income were required to go into debt to be able to take care of their families. Yet despite there having been no real increase in that allowance level for nearly 20 years, and with the business community, economists and welfare groups urging the Government to get serious, Labor chose other priorities.

The modest offer to allow Newstart recipients to earn up to an extra \$19 per week before losing benefits will be of some help to the 20 per cent who currently have access to employment. The 530,000 others will have to wait for a future Federal Budget. Similarly, the poorest Australian families are the ones to bear the brunt of not proceeding with Family Tax Benefit Part A, and of the large reduction in the value of the Baby Bonus.

The Catholic Social Services Australia network of agencies and those of other

Church providers have been experiencing an increase in demand for our services. Families under extreme financial pressure often seek assistance through our networks. This is also the case for those asylum seekers on bridging visas who have been effectively shifted into poverty by the Government and banned from gaining paid work.

The Treasurer has emphasised his belief that Labor's values and priorities are reflected in this Budget. He is keen to help the battler. Yet there is a sharp dissonance between the Government's promotion of a 'fair go' through big reforms and its evident disinterest in so many citizens whose daily financial struggles are profound.

We have regularly heard ministers respond to questions about Newstart by saying that, rather than increase the allowance, the best outcome is for unemployed people to get a job. Getting a job *is* normally the best outcome, but one third of people on Newstart have been on it for over two years and more than half have languished on this inadequate payment for over one year. Newstart was only ever intended to be a short term measure.

Notwithstanding the benefit of the big reform measures, our community is diminished by continuing to treat some of our most vulnerable households as a secondary consideration. We should judge ourselves by how we treat the most vulnerable amongst us.

A key challenge for Labor and the Coalition is to provide leadership on the revenue generation side of the ledger, including by identifying larger measures than hitherto, such as reforming our skewed superannuation tax concessions system, so that health, education, infrastructure and social programs can be adequately funded.

Time to draw the line between Australia and Timor Leste

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

Australian governments of both political persuasions have continued to reassure the Australian public that they are decent and special when it comes to dealing with the Timorese over disagreements in the Timor Sea. Time for such special pleading is over. For the good of ongoing relations between these two unequal neighbours, it is time for Australia to commit to negotiating final maritime boundaries, especially if the Timorese and the oil companies working in the Timor Sea cannot reach agreement on the mode of gas production.

First a little history of a very complex issue. While East Timor was still under Portuguese control, Australia and Indonesia finalised their maritime boundaries in 1972. Indonesia accepted Australia's claim that the Australian continental shelf extended as far as the Timor Trough, resulting in a boundary close to the Indonesian coastline. Portugal never accepted Australia's argument, claiming instead that there were not two separate continental shelves and that the boundary should be a median line between Timor and Australia.

Indonesia invaded East Timor on 7 December 1975. By the time Indonesia and Australia sat down to discuss the unresolved maritime boundary off the coast of East Timor, Indonesia no longer accepted the Australian continental shelf argument. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) had been finalised and it favoured the drawing of a median line. Not wanting to undo the 1972 agreement, Australia and Indonesia agreed to a mutual standoff, sharing any resources off the Timor coastline found between the Timor Trough and the median line.

Once East Timor gained its independence, Australia convinced the new Timorese government to maintain the previous approach of the Indonesians, leaving border negotiations on the long finger. Australia played hardball. On 24 November 2000, Australian officials were so brazen as to warn UN officials who were putting the case for a negotiated Australia-Timor boundary in accordance with recent developments in international law that Australia might opt out of UN judicial processes. The option had already been put to Cabinet and no minister had objected.

The UN officials were warned: 'The more ambitious East Timor's claim, the easier it would be for the Government to pursue this approach in terms of living down domestic controversy.' This was 'Australia's get out of jail card'. On 25 March 2002, Australia did just that. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said that 'any maritime boundary dispute is best settled by negotiation rather than litigation'.

A joint venture led by Conoco Phillips commenced development of the Bayu

Undan natural gas field just north of the median line. Both governments agreed to the joint venturers' proposal that the gas be piped to Darwin for processing. East Timor was to receive 90 per cent of the upstream revenue in taxes and royalties from any petroleum resources within the Joint Petroleum Development Area (JPDA).

On 20 May 2002, Timor Leste gained its independence. Prime Minister John Howard attended the celebrations. He and Prime Minister Mari Alkitiri had time to step aside and sign the Timor Sea Treaty giving effect to this arrangement.

On the northeast corner of the JPDA lies the Greater Sunrise deposit which lies 20 per cent within the JPDA and 80 per cent within Australian jurisdiction, 150km south-east of Timor-Leste and 450km north-west of Darwin. On 6 March 2003, the two governments signed a unitisation agreement (IUA) settling on the 20:80 split while once again leaving the issue of final boundary determination in abeyance.

To many Timorese, this deal seemed on its face unfair. While the deposit was three times as far from Australia as from East Timor, Australia was to receive more than four-fifths of the tax benefits. Most people's offended sense of fairness was not allayed by the claim that 80 per cent of the deposit was arguably closest to Indonesia and that Indonesia had given away its rights to Australia back in 1972. The Timorese government had received advice from highly regarded international lawyer Vaughan Lowe who argued that the boundary was highly contestable.

To be blunt, Timor wanted more money from the deal, and Australia wanted to put final boundary determination on the very long finger knowing that any such determination would involve Indonesia as well as Australia and East Timor. Timor's Foreign Minister Jose Ramos Horta proposed a compromise in an address to the Lowy Institute in Sydney on 29 November 2004. He then quite reasonably suggested that there should be recourse to the International Court of Justice when 'two friends and neighbours are not able to resolve' their dispute.

He contested Downer's claim that the matter could be resolved without any outside involvement: 'Well, it seems that we are not able to. So let's show good faith, faith in the legal multilateral bodies such as the ICJ, and jointly request mediation or arbitration. We are poor and in no hurry to become rich. We can wait. We are patient, proud people. We are not impressed by pressure or bullying tactics. We have self-respect and a sense of dignity.'

Another treaty, thought to be a win-win, was negotiated between the Howard Government and the Fretilin Government of East Timor led by Alkitiri. The Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS) signed on 12 January 2006 split the government revenues for Greater Sunrise 50:50 and put boundary negotiations on hold for 50 years provided that the Greater Sunrise project got the go-ahead. If agreement was not reached between the government regulators and joint venturers within six years, either government could call off all

bets.

In April-May 2006, there was much instability and violence in Timor Leste culminating in the resignation of Alkitiri. Ramos Horta then took over as prime minister.

The CMATS Treaty was tabled in the Australian Parliament on the first sitting day of the year in 2007. On 22 February 2007, Downer wrote to the Australian Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Treaties informing them of his decision to invoke the national interest exemption and proceed with binding treaty action for the CMATS Treaty without the usual 20 sitting days being permitted for the Committee to consider the matter:

Given the importance of the treaties to our interests in the Timor Sea as well as those of our close neighbour, East Timor, the Government would not wish to allow an opportunity to pass to finalise our agreed arrangements for the Timor Sea. It is uncertain when an opportunity would arise after the East Timorese elections period. I therefore consider that the CMATS Treaty action needs to be taken before the usual twenty sitting day period following tabling elapses.

The Committee was not pleased, noting:

The Committee's previous endorsement of the Sunrise IUA should not have been used to infer support for CMATS. The CMATS Treaty contains new and important obligations and raises different issues which should have been subject to the usual process of scrutiny and review. In this instance the national interest exemption should not have been invoked before the Committee was given a reasonable opportunity to consider and report on the Treaty within the Government's timeframe.

Both parliaments gave approval of CMATS despite these reservations about process and political upheaval in Dili.

After the 2007 Timor election, Xanana Gusmao became prime minister. He was known to be a passionate advocate for the development of Sunrise onshore and to be committed to prompt boundary determination, being less conciliatory and forgiving of Australia's stand than was Ramos Horta. He was adamant that the joint venturers should submit a development plan for Sunrise with provision for onshore gas processing in Timor Leste.

The joint venturers, including Woodside and Shell, were unmoved, claiming that Timor processing of the gas was commercially less viable than the use of a floating facility (FLNG) and also less viable than processing in Darwin. On 29 April 2010, Woodside officially informed the Australian Stock Exchange that 'a floating LNG processing facility best satisfies the key development requirements outlined by the IUA'.

On 18 May, Woodside purported to deliver the development plan to the Timorese regulatory authority for approval. The Timorese threw the proposal back

into Woodside's car as it sped away from a Dili meeting. All was not well.

Shell was adamant that FLNG was the only way to go with natural gas marine projects in this part of the world. They are now using this new technology for the Abadi project in Indonesian waters and for the Prelude project in Australian waters.

The Timor Government was unhappy with the lack of movement on Sunrise and the placing of border determinations on the ever long finger. On 7 December 2012, the anniversary of Indonesia's 1975 invasion of East Timor, Timorese Foreign Minister Jose Luis Guterres met with Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Canberra and presented a formal letter indicating dissatisfaction with CMATS.

Gillard and Guterres agreed not to engage in megaphone diplomacy. The Timorese had been going to institute the legal processes earlier but decided to wait until Australia secured its seat on the UN Security Council, an appointment strongly supported by Timor Leste which prides itself on being a friend of Australia. Foreign Minister Bob Carr visited Dili on 16 December 2012 but did not raise the issue.

Having long investigated their options, the Timorese obtained legal advice from two of the world's leading international lawyers, Sir Elihu Lauterpacht and Vaughan Lowe. On 7 February 2013, Bob Carr assured the Australian Senate: 'We have received no indication from Timor-Leste that would suggest CMATS would be terminated.' This assurance caused some surprise to those in the know in Dili.

Australia's previous Ambassador to Timor, Margaret Twomey, was sent as a special envoy to Dili. Just before he resigned from the ministry, Martin Ferguson who has always worked closely with Alfredo Pires, East Timor's Natural Resources Minister, came to Dili on 22 February 2013 assuring the Timorese about his availability for ongoing discussions about resource development in the Timor Sea. Then came the bombshell announcement — not from the Timorese who had remain silent as agreed, but from the Australians.

On 3 May, Foreign Minister Bob Carr and Attorney General Mark Dreyfus issued a joint press release saying:

Timor-Leste notified Australia on April 23 that it has initiated arbitration under the 2002 Timor Sea Treaty of a dispute related to the 2006 Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea (CMATS).

The arbitration relates to the validity of the CMATS treaty. Timor-Leste argues that CMATS is invalid because it alleges Australia did not conduct the CMATS negotiations in 2004 in good faith by engaging in espionage.

These allegations are not new and it has been the position of successive Australian Governments not to confirm or deny such allegations.

However, Australia has always conducted itself in a professional manner in

diplomatic negotiations and conducted the CMATS treaty negotiations in good faith.

The political leadership in Timor Leste is losing patience with Australian claims to both decency and exceptionalism. On 20 May, Timor Leste will celebrate its 11th anniversary of independence. Their government leaders think it is now time to start the painstaking work of determining their maritime boundaries with Australia.

Australia's game of pleading exemption from UN determination processes while delaying two party negotiations for decades has run its course. Especially if the Sunrise joint venturers have no intention of processing gas onshore in Timor Leste, the Timorese deserve 'permanent certainty' about their maritime boundaries.

Mind you, no lawyer can confidently predict the outcome. But the long finger game is now generating more mistrust than room for negotiation. It's time to draw the line, seeking more legal and commercial certainty lest the gains from the resources under the sea be lost together with the friendship between good neighbours. The Timorese expect nothing more than that we Australians act decently and fairly while they consider the complex options for future resource development.

Cronies of the nudge and wink

POETRY

Grant Fraser

Corellas at Dunkeld

From our distance we saw the Corellas
hanging like a hospital's washing
in the tenements of a large Redgum,
and heard them crooning the scandals of the day
each blushing mildly,
cronies of the nudge and the wink,
until,
one watchful bird rose on a whim
drawing with him a thousand companions,
and they swung boisterously up,
then broke into raucous quorums
in a vast drunken carousel,
bringing and taking tidings,
gathering and breaking apart,
seeding the skies with gossip.
And the elect among them
rose on their high sabbaticals
until they all disappeared
beyond the sneak of their horizons,
but still haunting the evening
as a migraine staggers light
at the corners of the eyes.
Then,
with all the spanish majesty of a living Caravel,
coursed by the momentum of their thinking wings,
they soared as one in their din above us

lavish with the imperium of flight,
a great hush in the thunder of their passing.

Starlings

Half-heard before the dawn

A stirring in the eaves

As they dither out of darkness into light:

A chorus of brooding thespians

Full of domestic threats

And feathered remonstrations.

But now, mid-morning,

At the pitch of the roof

Boisterous vaudevillians muttering their patter,

Before the curtain rises,

A royal audition of starlings.

Or, perhaps, more likely,

A police line up of criminal types,

Flashy suits with beaked fedoras

Whistling up wolves,

Clearing the static from their throats,

Tuning to the frequencies of Sing Sing —

Where they all have known associates.

Occasionally, a Caruso among them

Will rise in a moment of song,

Sweet melodic;

Stolen of course.

Ibis

The wetlands at Laverton

See the wetlands where the ibis roost-

Adjacent to the railway track —

Each rookery is a Lilliput

Where a single upright bird might stand
As tall as any Gulliver
In the quiet parishes of reeds.
When ibis move
They do so in rosters of fastidious steps
Each bird as polite as a grandad
Who is looking for the salt.
Their beaks are like locksmiths' tools,
And, it is rumoured, they are keepers of great secrets.
Stooped in twos or threes like patient skittles,
They whisper quiet inventories
Of silvered figments and storied frogs.
It is said that they have abdicated all temporal power
To a parliament of owls,
And in this they may be wise.
As I pass them in the train I fancy that
I might almost connect them with a series of clicks
To form a feathered pagoda
Or a hieroglyph that stands for 'sshhhh ...'
But, despite their show of gravitas,
I have seen them rise as one
From a distant field
As clean as a plague lifting
From the shires of ancient Egypt,
To take to the air
And cruise the highest altitudes,
To break and wander on their whims,
But always to return
And swoon in languid delible lines
And make of their silences

Those long and sacred vees.

Getting a grip on our asylum seeker whingeing

POLITICS

Caz Coleman

Having been in international meetings recently as a non-government delegate for the Australian Government with the UNHCR it has been embarrassing when delegates of other countries ask why Australia is so worried about the number of asylum arrivals it is receiving. It is difficult to explain that while, yes, the numbers are nothing compared to those received by many other countries, our nation is not used to it.

There are many and varied reasons why the number of asylum seekers arriving in Australia by plane or by boat ebb and flow. Looking at the patterns over the last 20 years there are clear periods in which numbers have increased or decreased, and they are not necessarily connected to Australian government policy. Yet it is hard to grasp this in the midst of so much political debate over current asylum arrivals by sea.

But my international colleagues are right. We have not historically had the number of asylum seekers crossing our border compared to many other countries. This is because it is hard to get to Australia as a continent surrounded by sea. For a landlocked country with many entry points such as those in Europe, the chances of 'turning back the boats' or in this case 'turning back the trucks' is almost impossible.

Have we just been lucky in the past being so isolated, or is it really Government policy that affects the number of asylum seekers we receive, as we are led to believe about?

It is hard to answer this question without acknowledging our geography. As Jordan (which, along with Pakistan, is the largest recipient of refugees relative to the size of its economy) debates the challenge of having over 102,000 refugees registered with UNHCR and more arriving every day, we do need to acknowledge that with a different geographical location our political debate over who can 'stop' the flow would be irrelevant.

We would have a regular flow despite political rhetoric from either side of government. We would also need to be more strategic in how we receive and process people applying for protection.

In 2009 I led research on international and domestic models of asylum seeker housing. Travelling to the UK, Sweden and Canada to investigate why they provide resources such as housing and welfare payments to asylum seekers, it was apparent that it was grounded in a desire to manage a large number of asylum arrivals.

Housing stock was sourced through private landLords or large housing

corporations, private donors subsidised mortgage arrangements with the state and social housing associations. The provision of housing enabled the UK and Swedish governments to manage the dispersal and flow of the number of asylum seekers arriving.

With the increase of the number of families arriving in Australia the Government has recently announced that families will be placed onto bridging visas and allowed to live in the community. While the opportunity to live in the community compared to a detention centre is a welcome move, families are going to struggle to find affordable housing on the 89 per cent of Centrelink benefits they are provided with.

If it is true that Australia is going to start receiving an increased number of asylum arrivals on par with those that many of our first world neighbours have dealt with for so long, how are we going to better manage these arrivals? Clearly overcrowded detention centres and the potential for community based destitution will not cut it.

We need to take a much broader perspective on this issue than what is often represented in our political debate, and investing more into the why and how of people movement across our region over time, to see if there really is a significant increase, and if so how we can manage this reality together with our neighbouring countries.

Sex abuse justice cannot be fast-tracked

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins

Victims of church sexual abuse have suffered a setback, with reports that the [NSW Victims Rights and Support Bill](#) proposes a statute of limitations for people claiming compensation for violence including child abuse or sexual assault. Under the legislation, applications must be made within ten years of the act or, if the victim was a child when it occurred, within ten years after they turn 18.

The Catholic Church's Truth Justice and Healing Council issued a [media release](#) on Thursday urging the NSW Government to reconsider the change because of the special circumstances of sexual abuse victims.

The Council's CEO Francis Sullivan said that for many reasons, victims of childhood sexual abuse often do not report the crimes for many years, and that to place any time limit on disclosure 'seems like an inappropriate way to encourage victims to come forward'.

To come to terms with such a traumatic experience as sexual abuse — and to resolve to act — is a delicate process that is likely to be undermined if there is a clock ticking.

The victim may lack the psychological strength to meet the deadline for reporting the crime, and end up feeling worse as a result. Sometimes a church culture intimidates victims into remaining silent, and this has often led to adult victims waiting until their parents have died before reporting the crime.

Following the announcement of the Royal Commission, there was widespread concern that the scale of the response would overwhelm the process, but there is general acceptance that it should not be rushed. While the Commission itself is not involved in prosecution and sentencing of offenders, the state court systems need to work in harmony with the Commission. Legislation should provide for courts to act expeditiously in order to get their job done, but a ten year statute of limitations is likely to get in the way of a just outcome.

Pat Walsh, who worked with East Timor's Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR), [wrote](#) in *Eureka Street* last year that the CAVR was faced with similar challenges but opted to take a victim-friendly approach that 'informed every aspect of the CAVR's design, structure, operation and reporting'.

'Its enabling legislation required the Commission "to assist in restoring the dignity of victims" and it employed a number of strategies to achieve this. ... The centrepiece of this victim-friendly approach was listening to victims.'

Listening to victims involves waiting until they are able to speak. If they are forced to speak before they are ready, they may undermine the justice system by

speaking half-truths or declining the opportunity to report the crime. It's often said justice delayed is justice denied. It can also be true that justice hastened is justice denied.

The best and worst of local government

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

Local government has been uncharitably described as a 'nest of vipers'. It has in modern times had the potential to be much more, and an active creator of civil society. Local government is, as I once described it, the most direct experience that most citizens have of 'democracy at work'.

Perhaps that is why, given many Australians' experience with local government in certain areas, they resoundingly voted down, in 1988, the first proposal to include local government in the Constitution as a third tier of government along with federal, state and territory governments.

And perhaps the rather impoverished history in Australia of councils and boards acting as sealers of roads, rubbish collectors and satisfying recognition (of councillors and other local worthies) to benefit property and business owners, it was a little early to expect a change in popular culture.

Some of us who lived in Fitzroy in Melbourne's inner north, for example, found it embarrassing to watch the shenanigans of its then (prior to 1992) council as personalities and egos ran riot.

And yet we have a softer view of local politics when it comes to cherished icons of a region to which we are attached: just four years after the referendum, the same people of Fitzroy arose as one and opposed the Kennett-Government-appointed commissioners' decision to shut down the run-down Fitzroy pool.

The un-valued element of local government is its capacity to lift the vision of its people from NIMBY-ism and road maintenance to a sense of community and attachment.

Australians are, however, now thoroughly disengaged from politicians at a state and federal level, a recent poll finding that only about a third of those surveyed had any interest in the behaviour of our elected representatives, compared with double that proportion just a few years earlier. We tend to be disgusted at 'politics' and bad behaviour, rather than the idea of collaboration in the common good.

But when it comes to constitutional change, we are very conservative indeed.

We have been offered another chance to raise 'local government' to the lowly status of 'no worse than the other tiers'. The referendum on constitutional recognition announced on Thursday by Prime Minister Gillard arises from the work of an independent expert panel appointed by the Government in August 2011, and a joint select committee established on 1 November 2012 to consider its recommendations.

Historically, local government was used in the early years of the military colonies, before the states gained their own status, to 'manage' the infrastructure of a growing, but sparse, settlement.

But since the property franchise was (gradually, and dilatorily) abolished, it attained — across the various states that created their own statutory versions of local government — for a short time (maybe two or three decades) an important quality of representative democracy in action, as well as a source of funding and activities that state and Commonwealth governments were unable to deliver.

Australia is already governed by often-deadlocked state and Commonwealth parliaments and public servants. Why would we want to add to that complexity?

In its discussion paper the expert panel looked at the likelihood of constitutional recognition being supported by the electorate. They decided that the options to be considered had to be able to 'make a practical difference; have a reasonable chance at a referendum; and resonate with the public'.

In its discussion paper it identified four kinds of recognition: symbolic, financial, democratic, and through federal cooperation, none of which were mutually exclusive.

And in the end the Panel came up with a horse designed by an uncooperative and non-unanimous committee (so very Australian!): a minimal scheme that would (a) recognise that only state and territory had the power to establish and manage local government bodies elected in accordance with their own electoral laws, and (b) basically, amend the Constitution to get over the High Court's decision in 2009 casting doubt on the Commonwealth's power to fund local government directly by providing (*italics are the amendments required*):

The Parliament may grant financial assistance to any State *or to any local government body formed by State or Territory Legislation* on such terms and conditions as the Parliament sees fit.

That's it. That's what the panel recommended. And it also said that there had to be bipartisan support for the amendment and an intensive marketing campaign to persuade the voters to support the referendum, because another failed one would damage the existing status of local government across the nation.

My question is, Why? Why now? Why focus on a teeny tiny constitutional change now, when the people are disengaged from modern parliamentary politics, disgusted by the way both major political parties and the mindless happily consign women and children seeking refuge in our country to indeterminate detention in gulags in other countries, and see access to justice frustrated by penny-pinching and short-sighted cuts to the institutions that are meant to reflect our national character and values of a fair go for all?

Will they do it? Will both sides of politics endorse this as a great idea? Will local councillors agree? Will the people decline to support such a referendum in the

current social and economic climate?

Yes. And it makes my stomach turn.

Not poor just broke

THE SAVAGE MIND

Ellena Savage

Friday is the final day of the Oaktree Foundation's [Live Below the Line](#) campaign, in which participants raise money for those living in extreme poverty and challenge themselves to live on just \$2 a day.

The campaign has run annually in Australia since 2009, but this year it resonates with me more than usual. After months of slights about 'welfare culture', with politicians downplaying the lived reality of the poor, gestures of solidarity with those living in extreme poverty need to increase in substance if we are to take poverty seriously.

Being broke in any Australian state capital can be painful, but for most of us not life-threatening, just depressing. There are only so many 'free' walks you can take around your own neighbourhood. When you're broke, everyone else seems to have endless disposable income, and everything interesting happens over a pint you can't afford.

Taking time out of that kind of consumer culture to live on \$10 for a working week really is a meaningful gesture of solidarity with the world's poor. Does it go far enough to challenge the structures that underpin global poverty? Probably not. It doesn't change the fact that our economic system depends on people living in poverty, people who can be confined to the cheapest, most dangerous labour.

But it's a gesture that has arisen from a sense of alienation young people have from the world of party politics, a realm in which ethics are a voter commodity.

This kind of gesture also riffs off the difference between being broke and being poor. Many students and jobseekers on welfare payments, even when they are skint, implicitly know that they are not the world's poor. They are broke, but mostly have the facility and means to eventually find their way out of their financial quandaries.

That's not to downplay the alienating effects of poverty, nor is it to pretend our economic culture is at all just. But it's important to identify that not everyone with an overdrawn bank account and low income is living in poverty.

There are ways of living on a low income that do not entail poverty, strategies that low-income earners have championed for centuries. Living in shared living arrangements, growing food and finding alternative means of sustaining oneself all help alleviate what could become poverty.

Poverty on the other hand is being locked out of the ability to make choices, or exercise autonomy.

A few years ago, when my shifts had been dramatically cut at the store I

worked at and I was waiting on a few freelancing cheques that were slow to arrive, I found myself down to \$3 for the entire week. I don't like borrowing money, so I spent it all on a 3kg bag of potatoes and got creative.

The thing to remember is that I had \$3 *and* a functional kitchen. I prepared the potatoes with olive oil, garlic, butter and spices from my cupboard, and the herbs growing in the garden. I steamed them in my microwave, fried them on my stove. My rent was up-to-date, as were my gas and electricity bills.

I still had friends who would feed me if I was starving, a family who would house me if I'd had an injury, some employment prospects, and good health. Although I felt sluggish and bored that week, it was an experience of being broke, not being poor.

Being broke doesn't equal poverty, but it can lead to poverty. Someone who is broke, who can't even afford basic dental health (I recently discovered that welfare payments don't go far in the dentist's surgery), is unlikely to be in a position to take on an unpaid internship that could benefit their career in the long-term.

A broke person experiencing an unplanned pregnancy might be unable to exercise a genuine choice about her own family. Broke people can't afford ongoing therapy which helps manage their mental health problems. Being broke diminishes the ability to make choices, and this can lead to poverty.

So while living on \$2 a day might be a safe, gentrified way of slumming it, at least it shows how difficult it can be to live without cash. It shows why we need to support people who are on the cusp of poverty; if they stay broke too long, they might just fall in.

Aged care and the business of gift

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

The low pay of aged care workers has recently aroused a wide response. The care of elderly relatives after they are incapable of caring for themselves at home touches all Australians at some time in their lives, whether contemplating our own future or working with relatives. The discussion is also of broader importance because it invites us to question how we think of the way we care for the aged and do business.

In our care of the aged, not only their health and security are at stake but also their self-respect and dignity. The carers who help them with their private bodily functions are called on to show deep respect and gentleness. It is impossible not to sympathise with the argument that the high skills this requires should be better remunerated.

The way this argument is formulated, however, is tailored to an audience that rewards measurable skills but disregards the intangible qualities that underpin respect. Respectful care implies a benevolent relationship. Cold or hostile nurses may be skillful, but the way they use their skills will be experienced as invasive and disrespectful. Good care is experienced as a gift, and gifts must express love as well as skill. In the serious business of business and remuneration, however, love is the skill that dares not speak its name.

That is anomalous because companies, even banks and manufacturing companies, rely on the quality of relationships between the people who work in them and also on the relationships between members of staff and suppliers, customers and the wider public. They rely also on the quality of the relationships of workers with things — on their respect for processes, for tools, and for their environment. In enterprises that offer personal service, the quality of the relationships will be central.

In companies, as elsewhere, good relationships cannot be purely contractual. They entail mutual gift. People chip in for one another, work beyond the call of duty when required, are given occasional time off, give themselves more fully to clients than required, take time to sit with workmates in distress. Managers try to keep people employed even when this causes short term loss to the business. The lubricants of any good business are also gifts: a smile, a kindly word, encouragement, flexibility.

Like relationships, companies can never be fully codified in contracts that state what one party owes to the other and make their performance measurable by empirical criteria. Just contracts are indispensable. But if a business sees itself entirely or fundamentally in terms of what is owed, its long term future is eroded. The relationships on which the shared wisdom, flexibility and reputation of the

company depend will be neutered because the central elements of gift and love are disregarded.

Company advertising makes evident the contradiction between the qualities that sustain a company and those that are conventionally regarded as determinative. Finance companies that regard employees as expendable depict them in advertisements in a friendly relationship with clients that will take them beyond the call of duty. Gift is advertised in order to make money; to save money gift is discounted.

Thus there is a systematic lack of connection between the qualities that are central to any enterprise and the empirically verifiable standards by which the health of the company is judged.

To recognise and remedy this disconnection would need a change of vision in society. A more realistic perspective would place less emphasis on competition and more on cooperation. It would not measure productivity simply by measurable output per worker but by the contribution each makes to the intangible network of relationships that constitute a company. It would value the enterprise by the quality of its culture and not simply by its short term profitability.

Some modest developments in thinking about policy are encouraging. The United Nations ranking of nations by the human development index in preference to the cruder measurement by GDP calls to mind the importance of other than financial relationships.

The support for the living wage instead of the minimum wage as a basis for remuneration also brings us back to gift. The living wage, which guarantees a decent standard of living and the capacity to plan for the future for oneself and one's dependents, recognises the importance of relationships in remuneration. The minimum wage considers workers only as isolated individuals.

Unsurprisingly, companies that subscribe to the living wage report benefits to employers, employees and the community. They relate to one another through the grammar of gift.

There is nothing surprising in these suggestions. They are simply common sense in any human undertaking. The surprise is that they are so systematically neglected or automatically rejected in business talk.

Mixed messages about exploiting girls

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***Spring Breakers* (R). Director: Harmony Korine. Starring: James Franco, Selena Gomez, Vanessa Hudgens, Ashley Benson, Rachel Korine.**

The opening montage looks like the off-cuts from an R-rated cola commercial. Boozed up, barely-dressed teens bounce to dance beats on a beach flooded with preternaturally bright sunlight. The camera picks out the young women on the crowd, clad in bikinis (or portions thereof) amid groups of leering, grinning, buffed up boys.

The 'spring break' as mythologised over decades by countless American films and TV shows is a singularly debauched occasion (its closest equivalent in Australia might be Schoolies) that on one side of the coin represents youthful freedom and a ritualised purging of innocence on the path to adulthood, and on the other the corruption of youth and the objectification of impressionable young women.

Spring Breakers is largely concerned with deconstructing the latter. Its director Korine first made his name as the 22-year-old screenwriter of Larry Clark's cult 1995 film *Kids*, notable for its bleak consideration of youth culture and its shocking realism. *Spring Breakers* is bleak too, but instead of realism it adopts a heightened sense of unreality. It is a formally ambitious film that sends mixed messages, making it both intriguing and perplexing.

The disquieting images of that opening montage, which recur throughout the film, seem to represent a kind of idealised vision of the nature of spring break. Idealised by whom? In particular, by the film's four antiheroes — ringleaders Candy (Hutchens) and Brit (Benson), suggestible Cotty (played by the director's wife, Rachel Korine) and token 'good girl' Faith (Gomez) — young women and students who see the reckless decadence of spring break as the certain and only cure for their existential malaise. It must be attended at all costs.

They are short on cash but are so desperate to escape to the haven of spring break that they commit a violent crime in order to get there. This is one of a number of far-fetched conceits that would be harder to pull off in a more naturalistic film. As it is, the pervasive, almost impressionistic tone of *Spring Breakers* suggests that this is intended as a fable for reflection rather than a thriller for seedy titillation.

The girls seem to speak, and even think, in catchphrases. Their disquietingly hollow platitudes about escaping and breaking free, about the oppressiveness of home and the unending joy of spring break, are often repeated in different contexts and in different tones (from earnest to ebullient), in voiceover or in on-screen conversation.

It isn't hard to work out what is going on here. The girls are (and in some cases, remain throughout the film) emblematic, of the end product of a culture that has commodified young women completely. By the time they throw their lot in with a troubled white gangster rapper named Alien (a show-stealing Franco) who has got wealthy off deadly criminal activity, the depth of their amorality is well and truly ready to be tested.

All of this is compelling, but *Spring Breakers* does seem to be working at cross purposes. Its R rating covers a considerable amount of female nudity (most of which is contained in those beach montages), and the four leads spend most of the film dressed in scant bikinis. It is easy to see how this plays into Korine's point about objectification, but it is also inherently ironic that the actors are objectified to achieve this end. Especially since for the most part the characters are not in the least bit well-rounded. Even their names sound like labels.

Spring Breakers does threaten to go deeper in the case of Faith. In the early part of the film we see her participating in a campus Christian group. The day's sermon on resisting temptation seems like it will stand as a defining moral test for the character, who at this point appears to be the hero of the film.

In fact Faith fades into virtual homogeneity and eventually out of the film entirely without ever being troubled by her religious faith. True, of the four it is she who is most alert to the danger signs after they are befriended by Alien, but this is more a case of intuition and an instinctive fight-flight response than any particular moral fibre.

Women's and girls' rights advocate Melinda Tankard Reist has said that 'in a culture that rewards exhibitionism, your achievements count for nothing unless you're willing to get naked'. Korine has offered us a harrowing though imperfect vision of such a culture taken to its extreme. If the characters he presents us with are indeed the end result of such a culture then Tankard Reist's warning should not be taken lightly.

The imperfect mother

NON-FICTION

Gillian Bouras

It is a terrifying and mystifying thing to be a mother. Even though motherhood itself is a state that is completely normal and natural, the passion of the maternal instinct takes many a woman by surprise.

The actual process of becoming a mother is much the same: despite all the information and education available these days, the business of giving birth is still a journey into the unknown, and no one can really accompany you to your destination. Unless it's your own mother: in Greece, grandmothers are often allowed into the labour ward in order to help their daughters.

My eldest son was born in Australia, and my mother was certainly not present at the event. But she came to stay for a week after my return from hospital, and did all those grandmotherly things: made sure there was a meal on the table, and that the washing was done, showed me how to manage the basic baby-care routines, and was always her very kind and loving self.

But I still remember the feeling of utter desolation that was mine as she prepared to leave, my helplessness at the moment of her (almost) driving off. She noticed: good mothers are adept at the business of picking up signals, of tuning into significant vibes. She got out of the car and said, 'Do not worry. You are perfectly capable of looking after this baby.'

Of course I didn't really believe her, but the vital, pivotal matter was the confidence my mum expressed in her firm, schoolteacherly way. Because she told me I could do it, I couldn't let her down, any more than I could let my son down. I was also dimly aware, and she had helped me achieve that degree of awareness, that I now had a soul in my keeping, as my soul had been in her keeping all those long years before.

And still was then, when I was a new mother. And still is, in a sense, even though she has been dead for nearly 20 years, and even though I am now a grandmother myself. I still consult my mother about various matters, and usually receive an answer, a process that teaches me, yet again, that motherhood never really ends.

In most societies it is still women who transmit the culture and preserve significant memory, and I have seen this enacted during my life time.

I was a fortunate child in that I had three living grandparents. While I doted on my grandfather and owe a great deal to him, I can see that it was my grandmothers who gave me a strong link to the pioneering past, to the British ancestors, to the language and lore of Britain and Australia: they had the time, interest and motivation, and so thanks to them, people I never knew but are

nevertheless part of me have a presence in my imagination.

My children's Greek *Yiayia* did much the same for their Greek side. She, too, had always been there when her three daughters needed her.

Most parents, I think, just make things up as they go along, hoping for the best and doing their best as they see it at the time. Mothers seem to be held particularly responsible for the way their children turn out, but mothers are still only fallible human beings, and few people have first-class, blue-ribbon, champion mothers (although I'm quite sure I had one).

The best mothers do not expect gratitude, and know that their reward lies in seeing their children grow. And in watching and observing how they go about it.

I've lately wondered whether a woman can understand motherhood only when her baby has a baby. This has happened to me recently: my youngest son is now the proud father of his first-born son. And I, in my turn, am proud of the way in which my son is helping his wife and taking pleasure in watching his son grow: he knows, it is evident, that he has a soul in his keeping.

And I? I'm transmitting the culture: Orestes is now ten weeks old, and smiles happily throughout my croaky rendition of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Good policy comes second to voter trust

POLITICS

Ray Cassin

'Labor fails to convert widespread support for NDIS to ballot box', trumpeted *The Australian's* report of the latest Newspoll.

The failure, according to the paper's political editor, Dennis Shanahan, consists in this: an overwhelming majority of poll respondents, 78 per cent, want the proposed disability insurance scheme, for which the Gillard Government has gained Opposition approval. Yet voting intentions have scarcely shifted from the dismal prospect for Labor indicated in the previous Newspoll, taken a fortnight ago when bipartisan support for the 0.5 per cent rise in the Medicare levy that will pay for DisabilityCare was far from certain.

The two-party preferred vote for the coalition is now 56 per cent, up one per cent, and for Labor it is 44 per cent, down one per cent. These variations are within the statistical margin of error, so no change: the government is still heading for a thumping defeat, as polls have been predicting for months.

Well, yes. The puzzle is that Shanahan thinks that this translates into a story about the government's 'failure' to gain any traction from its win on disability insurance.

The reality is that an election is not a referendum on a set of policies. People typically vote for whoever they trust to govern, and the votes that decide elections are rarely cast by citizens who could give a detailed explanation of the rival parties' platforms.

There is no shortage of academic research to support this contention, but anyone who has handed out how-to-vote cards on election day knows it to be true from experience. Politicians and journalists must know it, too, but it is an oddity of modern democracy that both groups frequently act as though it were not so.

To say people vote for the party or candidates they trust — or more precisely, for those they trust more than the alternative — is not to say voters are stupid. On the contrary, it reflects their instinctive understanding that implementation of a political party's platform is not a necessary consequence of that party winning an election.

Nor, in this context, should 'trust' be understood to mean 'like'. Tony Abbott has often trailed Julia Gillard in personal approval ratings, but even when her net approval rating has been higher than his the two-party preferred vote has usually indicated that voters intend to hand him her job at the next election.

None of this means that policies don't matter, of course, or that voters always place their trust wisely. But it does mean that a transfer of power isn't to be explained simply by the fact that when policies are in dispute the alternative

government has accumulated more ticks from voters than the incumbent.

There are elections when such disputes loom large, as the Howard Government's workplace laws did in 2007, or the Chifley Government's plan to nationalise the banks did in 1949. But these were exceptional polls, and in each case it can be plausibly argued that the contentious policy assumed the significance that it did in voters' minds because it unleashed a deeper discontent.

Many people who were not union members voted Labor in 2007 because the Howard Government's radical deregulation of the workplace aroused fears about job security. And in 1949, at the end of a decade marked by war and the steadily expanding role of government, the Coalition's call for the unshackling of the economy eclipsed Labor rhetoric about the need for democratic control of 'the money power'.

Much more typical have been the defeats of governments whose store of trust among voters had run out. In 1972 the ALP under Whitlam offered Australians a comprehensive agenda of reform, but more potent in the defeat of the Coalition after 23 years in government was the most memorable slogan in Australian political history: 'It's Time'.

A similar mood for change swept Labor away three years later, and then back into office again in 1983. In each case, what sealed the incumbent's fate was a growing sense of economic insecurity among voters, rather than disputes about the merits of rival platforms.

The next change of government, in 1996, was even more notable for an absence of substantive policy debate. John Howard became prime minister chiefly by reminding voters that he was not Paul Keating.

The 2013 election campaign won't be a policy-free zone, but if voters opt for change, as polls strongly suggest they will, they will very likely make their choice on grounds other than their assessment of particular policies.

Of course most people see the need for a disability insurance scheme, and accept that they will have to pay for it. The Prime Minister's adroit manoeuvring of the Opposition Leader and his colleagues into supporting the scheme and the levy, however, was never going to instil confidence in her among voters who mistrusted her anyway.

Their lack of trust is a deeper, more intractable problem for the Government, because it ultimately derives not from policy or the legislative record or even the state of the economy. It derives from continuing unease about the circumstances in which Gillard became prime minister in the first place.

The disconnect between debates about policy and the decisions voters make also has consequences for Abbott. There have always been some on the opposition benches who think that the Coalition's plan for six months of paid parental leave should be scrapped because it is too expensive. In the past week that internal

debate became public, with the consequence that Abbott found an unaccustomed ally in the feminist advocate Eva Cox.

Most feminists, Cox wrote, only opposed Abbott's plan because he had proposed it, and they should cease supporting the Government's cheaper but inferior scheme. She is right about the inconsistency. But will feminist activists now be rushing to cast a vote for the coalition on 14 September? Somehow I doubt it.

Black hole budget will penalise the poor

POLITICS

Brian Toohey

Budgets reveal a government's priorities.

On 3 April, Treasurer Wayne Swan and Superannuation Minister Bill Shorten said Labor would no longer give priority to providing over \$438,000 a year in government assistance to retirees with an annual tax free income of \$1 million from super while an age pensioner gets \$21,000. Instead, Labor will not tax the first \$100,000 of this retiree's income, and apply a highly concessional rate of 15 per cent to the other \$900,000.

The ministers did not say so, but their new priority would assist this retiree with tax concessions worth about \$330,000 a year — a little under 16 times the size of the age pension, rather than 20 times as it was previously.

This might seem a strange priority for a Labor government that is trying to stop the budget sliding further into deficit. But Labor won't even introduce the enabling legislation before the September election. As a result, a new Coalition government will almost certainly continue to give this retiree \$438,000 a year in budget support.

As it finalises the 14 May Budget, Labor is struggling with a \$12 billion write down in anticipated revenue for 2012–13 after Treasury bungled the forecasts. The ensuing deficits will be even bigger because what Labor has committed to spending exceeds even the wildly overblown forecasts for the carbon and mining taxes. The expanding deficit, although still relatively small, can't be justified while normal economic growth is occurring.

Labor could make huge saving by cutting back on government assistance to those who can fend for themselves. But it has chosen to switch large numbers of single parents off the parenting payment of \$341.70 a week and onto Newstart (the dole) at \$268.90 a week for those with dependent children. Most single parents have part time jobs, yet the government has cut their relatively low payment to give others an incentive to follow suit.

The Business Council of Australia has observed, 'Entrenching people in poverty is not a pathway back into employment.'

The maximum rent assistance for single parents on Newstart is \$72 a week. Yet a recent Anglicare survey found that steep rises in rent mean that less than one per cent of rental properties are affordable for singles on social security benefits. Again, this is a matter of priorities.

But no increase in rent assistance is expected in the Budget; nor any change in tax policy to lift the subdued growth in the supply of new residential buildings that is one reason for the decline in housing affordability.

The supply problem is partly due to the way negatively geared investment properties get the same favourable tax treatment regardless of whether they are established or new dwellings.

The latest tax statistics show that taxpayers claimed net losses of almost \$8 billion on rental properties in 2010—11. Construction of new dwellings could be boosted (and the deficit reduced) if tax deductions on existing rental properties could only be claimed after rental income exceeded the losses, while losses on new homes could still be offset against other income.

There are many other options for achieving a surplus without harming the economy or basic social safety nets. One of the simplest has strong economic and political advantages. When Swan announced a staged increase in compulsory super contributions from 9 per cent of salaries to 12 per cent, he said it would not go ahead unless fully funded by the mining tax. Given that this funding won't materialise, Swan should scrap the increase.

Politically, letting voters keep an extra 3 per cent of future salary rises would ease cost of living pressures. It would also give them more freedom to allocate their income in ways that best suit them, such as paying off a mortgage, bringing up a family, and covering education and child care expenses.

The Productivity Commission has explained that compulsory super imposes a dead weight cost on the economy by distorting the allocation of resources towards the finance sector. In essence, it is a form of industry protection that artificially inflates the size of this sector at the expense of the rest of the economy.

The 9 to 12 per cent increase also has a heavy budget impact. When fully implemented, Treasury conservatively estimates the additional cost of the associated tax concessions, plus two related measures, will be about \$5.5 billion in 2020—21.

Scrapping this increase should be a prelude to reversing the Howard Government's decision to distort the tax system by making all superannuation earnings and payouts tax-free in the drawdown phase after age 60. This creates a savage imposition on the sharply declining proportion of people in the workforce.

Until Labor or the Coalition drops this damaging mistake, hard pushed workers will have to pay for decades to provide government services for retirees who will often be better off financially than a lot of younger people who subsidise them. Rectifying this mistake is not an act of class warfare; merely a standard requirement of responsible budget management.

Sex separated from religious song

POETRY

Various

New Australian poems

Coalcliff

You knew that I would love you
and you whispered to my reach.

I lay a kiss on you
beside the sea.

I learned
that it is good
to have fallen
like an angel.

Ithaka

While I was dying I learned how to live.
I found the old red doors behind which everything
comes together silently with candles and height.
I found the water from the well, cool and holy;
the road, the dirty road, the adorable mountains, the sea-road,
the song, the lovely danger, all while I was dying,
all while I picked up this habit in my home-dirt, my hunger for the origins,
and learned here how to live.

John Falzon

Cat whisperer

wearer of itchy mohair turtlenecks
tofu cooker, stir-fryer
enthusiastic woodpusher
biter of the exposed arm or hand
contrite apologist of toothmarks
knitter of scarves

& an interminable crocheted quilt
reader of books and Facebook
nuzzler, hummer
cat whisperer
confessor of obvious secrets
practiced auto-conversationalist
mourner of other people's lost pets
bike rider and cycling evangelist
maker of exquisite duck-faces
Sean Goedecke

Sushi and the food court

How you love courting me around the food court
The court is our playground
Eating sushi grounds us
As we do the rounds
And find food abounds
Isabella Fels

To whom it may concern

'I was dreaming that I loved you, until you woke me up.
now my flowers grow in somebody else's garden, for little girls to love.
It was my imagination that you loved me back,
but you picked another flower, you kissed another girl
now my heart is empty, broken down on the side of the road,
and I wonder who will stop to help me.'
'I'm lucky to have you as a friend,
your friendship means the world to me,
like the yellow rose of friendship that was in the chapel when we meditated.
It's also the rose of jealousy, but I'm not envious,
and I won't get drunk on your champagne eyes.
It's the year of the poet, and poetry's all we've got.

I won't let myself get hurt by you.
My heart's not a sweet to be sucked.
Some are starving and some are fat,
but you think I'm some puppy dog with my tongue hanging out.'

Peta Edmonds

On wondering about the close cousin of religious passion

Their need for intimacy is what drives men on
And women too though they are better at it
So little wonder that religious song
Touching our hearts with resonance and long
History in our blood we can't combat it
Our need for intimacy driving on
With outcomes showing us where we belong
We grow to crave for more become erratic
Drunk on all that wonder in the song
And closer to each other so the throng
Brings oldest feelings down from musty attic
Their un-replenishment can drive them on
Until fully aroused they can't see wrong
From right hear no longer our didactic
That sex best separated from religious song
They're hooked no longer hear the church's gong
The stories or the insights that beget it
Real need for intimacy drives them on
A bare heartbeat from chaste religious song

Jill Sutton

'Lame duck' governments and democracy

POLITICS

John Warhurst

The last few months before an election make for strange politics, especially when the defeat of the incumbent government seems imminent. The Gillard Government is being targeted as a lame duck government. The use of such language is a tactic by its opponents to slow down government decision-making over the next four months.



Federal governments have changed from one party to another just five times in the modern era: 1972, 1975, 1983, 1996 and 2007. In some of these instances there was an expectation among the party leaders that change was imminent. Whitlam expected to win in 1972, for instance.

But in no other case did a long-term opposition leader believe their election was certain. Fraser, Hawke, Howard and Rudd had not long been opposition leader. In no case was the government in office, even Keating's in 1996, seen as a total lame duck. In 1993 the election was described as 'unloseable' for the opposition, but it lost.

When an opposition starts to think seriously about governing it realises how much it won't be able to change. Elections change governments but leave much of the institutional infrastructure in place. This includes some decisions taken by the outgoing government in its dying days.

Tony Abbott has already promised to repeal the carbon and mining taxes. He may even call a double dissolution election to enable him to do so if his plans are blocked in the Senate.

Now he is worried about other Gillard Government actions, such as the recent reappointments of the Australian Electoral Commissioner and the Governor of the Reserve Bank. To raise the stakes he has also demanded that Julia Gillard promise not to appoint a new governor-general to replace Quentin Bryce.

He raises the issue of caretaker conventions, claiming that 'no government should make decisions that are legitimately the province of a potential successor'. In the past caretaker conventions have been applied only to the period after a government enters caretaker mode upon the issuing of the writs for the next election. The legitimate province of a potential successor is unclear beyond that.

Governments should keep governing actively until a reasonably short period before the next election. Three year terms of government are already very short anyway.

A government has every right not just to keep the wheels of government turning but to continue to try to implement its program even if it is just trying to

improve its chances of re-election. In doing so they might make it more difficult for the incoming government to change direction, but that's democracy.

In the case of contract appointments the usual rules should apply. The rights of employees to security should be respected. A decision to reappoint at least six months before the end of a contract is reasonable. This means the reappointment now of Glenn Stevens as Governor of the Reserve Bank from 17 September is appropriate, while the reappointment of Ed Killesteyn as Electoral Commissioner from January 2014 is at least defensible.

But let's not be naïve. The Gillard Government is playing politics too. Stevens and Killesteyn have gained the Government's support by their performance in highly political areas. Labor wants to retain them. The Opposition is dissatisfied with the approval given by the AEC to a more open approach to electoral enrolment.

There is no doubt, however, that the Gillard Government is seen as a certainty to lose and this perception is reducing the leverage that it has at its disposal. Its inability to influence some Coalition state leaders at the recent COAG meeting is one example. The likely post-election change-over looms large in federal-state relations.

This explains the extremely personal criticism of NSW Liberal Premier Barry O'Farrell by the Opposition camp for signing on to the Gonski education funding package. He suffered condemnation for just being a pretend conservative and for giving Gillard a victory at the wrong time. That's what pre-election politics descends to, especially when just about everyone thinks the government is headed for certain defeat.

Mary MacKillop's advice for today's politicians

THE AGENDA

Michael Mullins



'Never see a need without doing something about it.' That is the principle which famously guided Australia's first saint Mary MacKillop. The 'seeing', and the resolve to act, are the primary drivers. Then comes the secondary task of working out where the necessary funding and resources will come from.

The order and the timing are crucial, and it appears that is how the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is evolving, ahead of this month's Federal Budget and the final legislative session of the current Parliament. The public is on board, and the politicians are acting while they can.

It appears most Australians see the need for disability care and are prepared to accept the 0.5 per cent levy as the best way to commence the scheme as soon as possible. Whatever the politics, there has been decisive bipartisan recognition of the need, and commitment to act.

As a result, the quality of life for Australians living with disability is likely to improve substantially and without further delay.

Conceivably Labor has learned the lesson of what happens if we see a need and *don't* do something about it. We lose an opportunity to secure something that matters, and often the faith and trust of the team that supports us.

That is what occurred in 2010, after Kevin Rudd had seen the need to act on climate change as 'the greatest moral, economic and environmental challenge of our generation', and then effectively failed to do something about it. He had led the public to a shared vision of the need to reduce carbon emissions but did not act while this was still firmly within the public gaze.

Politicians these days believe they can only act if and while the public sees the need. If this is the case, it is up to them to recognise the difference between real and spurious needs, and convince the public accordingly.

For example, we can view the 'need' to 'stop the boats' as a false need that obscures a deeper 'real' need to help refugees in situations of desperation. The politicians manipulate perceptions of need by politically expedient fear mongering instead of promoting public virtue that is linked to real need. Decades ago we were able to see and act on real need when boat people were arriving from Vietnam.

It's regrettable that perceptions of need change over time, and sometimes quite quickly. This is often on the basis of fatigue or fashion, rather than any objective criteria such as new information. Scientists maintain that the real need to do something about climate change is more acute now than it was five years ago, yet

it is effectively regarded as unnecessary and therefore off the political agenda.

A political agenda tied to real need is the only way to ensure a better society. Unfortunately it is difficult to find leaders that can see real need and successfully legislate to do something about it.