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Angry ghost of Gillard past

REVIEWS

Book chat

***The Stalking of Julia Gillard*, Kerry-Anne Walsh. Allen & Unwin, 2013. Website**

Barry:

If the plural noun for owls is parliament, and crows go about in a murder, then the ideal collective description for rats may well be 'press gallery'. Or 'cabinet'. Kerry-Anne Walsh may be happy with either or both uses.

As a former press secretary for Bob Hawke, veteran journalist and member of Canberra's 'commentariat', Walsh has waded through rivers of shite. But as she makes perfectly clear in *The Stalking of Julia Gillard*, she feels we've have been compelled of late to tread water between the sycophantic shallows of vested-interested reporters and the murky depths of political manipulation.

A sharp operator who knows her way around paragraphs and parliament, Walsh writes with gruff disbelief. Her subtitle, 'How the media and Team Rudd contrived to bring down the Prime Minister', suggests a certain fellow feeling for former PM Gillard; yet from her earliest pages, Walsh makes it clear she isn't engaging in a 'defence of Gillard' nor 'a definitive account of her government' — 'I didn't talk to her for the book, and I don't gloss over her mistakes.' (Methinks, Jen, that Walsh doth protest too much.)

Walsh does, however, in 300-odd pages, deliver a nuanced, authoritative acknowledgement of Gillard's policies and achievements despite a chickenbone-flimsy majority and the catch-22 'Chinese whispers' of both Gillard's colleagues and her inquisitors. Having worked both sides of the street, Walsh acknowledges 'what a bastard of a business politics and journalism can be'. Therein lies the tome's value for me. Frank, incisive analyses, ruthless observations and skills delivering a spanking for pollies and pundits alike.

Perhaps Walsh's most admirable achievement, Jen, is her depiction of gutter politics, sexism, cowardice and plausible deniability. But she's doing more than flogging books.

An 'expanded personal diary', *The Stalking* makes no pretence towards objectivity. Walsh's dismissive contempt for both Rudd and Tony Abbott (among many others) is to be relished or relinquished, depending on the reader's bent.

Walsh is a True Believer. Her final, over-written lament resonates with her emotional truths; Rudd's return as PM means the government has 'collectively surrendered its principles and its fate to one of the great wreckers in modern Labor', and 'all Labor supporters across the country have been able to do for three years is sit and watch in horror as a once-great party has been devoured alive from the inside'.

Jen, a sticking point for me, amidst the righteous anger and peekaboo insider insights, is Walsh's lack of a historical perspective. Representatives have been behaving like, well, 'members', since day one. As she concedes, politics is a blood sport. Gillard (to whatever extent of involvement) helped slay Rudd yet rendered no *coup de grÃ¢ce*. Misrepresentation of individuals and a lack of loyalty is hardly new, nor is it really news. Ditto hypocrisy, and pollies' self-serving pursuit of power.

Walsh's book is both well-placed and well-paced; informative and often entertaining. For me, however, beyond its basic instinct for transparency and (hah!) impartiality, it is

indistinguishable from other angry memoirs.

Jen:

An angry memoir? You bet your sweet bippy it is, Barry. Kerry-Anne Walsh — otherwise known as 'KA' or perhaps 'Kapow' after this book — sure doesn't pull any punches. *The Stalking of Julia Gillard* could have easily been re-titled *The Character Assassination of One K. Rudd*. Or, considering recent events, *The Ghost of Gillard Past ...*

What we have here is a memoir of a woman wronged. And by that I don't mean our former PM. Well, not exclusively, anyway. KA may deny either a relationship with Gillard or an outright allegiance, but they're connected where it counts: at the heart of injustice. Both have been let down by a party that has seen much, much better days. But for Gillard, the loss was profound and terribly public.

As KA forensically chronicles, this story begins on 24 June 2010 when Gillard was sworn in as prime minister. The same day that, according to the author, a bruised Rudd began plotting his revenge.

Of course, the uncouth manner in which Gillard became PM has been seared onto our collective memory. Who can forget the tearful speech by our ousted PM? Our hearts went out to him and his family. The woman — and make no mistake, Gillard's gender was used mercilessly against her — who knifed him had blood on her hands.

The truth was far more benign. As KA writes, 'impeccable sources' confirmed 'that Gillard was deeply reluctant to take the job. Even former Hawke government minister Graham Richardson — no friend of Gillard's ... has debunked conspiracy theories that Gillard was either the architect or complicit in a planned attack'.

No matter: the media subsequently declared it open season on the rarest of breeds — female PMs. Gillard was attacked for her 'hair, clothes, accent, her arse, even the way she walks and talks'.

Even by past standards, Barry, you must agree that Gillard was mercilessly lambasted; yes by right-wing 'commentators' but also by the inner sanctum of her own party. And yet, despite having the lowest public approval rating ever, she fronted the cameras with each strand of flaming hair miraculously in place (thanks, in no small part, to the support of her equally beleaguered partner Tim Matheson).

No, you certainly can't accuse KA of objectivity. Actually, I get the distinct impression that she approached this project with gay abandon. After more than three decades in the trade, she'd had enough. If it was her role to air our most shameful period in politics, then so be it. KA knew it would cause a stink and, yet, stood her ground; not unlike her subject. And that's why, Barry, this book gets my vote.

Corruption and other stumbling blocks to PNG solution

INTERNATIONAL

Walter Hamilton

The anti-corruption movement Transparency International [reports](#) that 70 per cent of respondents from Papua New Guinea believe the level of corruption in the country has increased over the past two years, including 46 per cent who said it has increased 'a lot'. Without wishing to join any 'PNG bashing', it is worth trying to gain a clearer understanding of what Kevin Rudd has promised and whether it is in the interests of either Australia or PNG.

The Regional Resettlement Arrangement Between Australia and Papua New Guinea consists of 11 paragraphs of text. Although it is labelled a 'regional' arrangement, it is actually a bilateral deal with no other signatories. Under the arrangement, for a period of 12 months PNG agrees 'to accept unauthorised maritime arrivals for processing and, if successful in their application for refugee status, resettlement'.

The implication is that PNG is liable to resettle all those deemed by it to be refugees, though the document refers to other unnamed (and uncommitted) Pacific nations sharing this burden. Prime Minister Peter O'Neill has since used the word 'quota' to imply a limited PNG resettlement commitment, without explaining further. The agreement bears all the marks of a hastily conceived, ill thought out plan — unlike the blockbuster taxpayer-funded advertising campaign that has accompanied it.

The agreement asserts that both countries are abiding by the 'non-refoulement' obligation under the Refugee Convention. It means they must not put refugees in harms way by sending them to a third country. Some commentators have suggested that PNG — for cultural, religious and economic reasons — is not a destination Australia can genuinely say meets this concern, notwithstanding that PNG is a signatory to the convention.

In this regard, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea stated on 21 July: 'This country [PNG] does not have the capacity at this time in its history to welcome a sizeable influx of refugees and provide for their immediate needs and a reasonable hope for a new and prosperous beginning. The leaders of Papua New Guinea and Australia surely know this and therefore appear to be making a very unwise decision.'

The agreement says all necessary arrangements will be paid for by Australia. Since, under international rules, the money cannot come out of the existing aid budget it must necessarily be new spending. No estimate has been offered of the amount of money likely to be involved. In addition to the costs of moving, housing and processing asylum seekers on Manus Island (and elsewhere), the deal reportedly has been sweetened by Australian promises of additional infrastructure aid. It is in this context that the issue of governance in the country is hotly debated.

Australia's assistance program to PNG is its biggest overseas aid commitment, worth almost \$500 million this year. Prime Minister O'Neill said the benefits of the new deal for PNG are 'very, very clear. For the first time we are realigning our aid program ... with the Australians, where we, the Papua New Guinean government, will now set all the priorities under which Australian aid program will be now directed towards [sic]'. By 'realigning' he means taking back control, which has been a major ambition since his government seized office in 2011.

In October last year an analysis by Task Force Sweep, a national corruption watchdog,

[found](#) that up to half of PNG's 7.6 billion kina (about \$3.5 billion) development budget from 2009 through 2011 was lost to corrupt practices or mismanagement by public officials and government departments. The Transparency International report quoted above suggests the situation has got worse.

New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade states, concerning PNG: 'Poverty is pervasive and income disparity is growing, despite several years of macro-economic improvement.' Law and order problems and the highest prevalence of HIV infections in the Pacific are cited as serious threats to development. These, of course, are compelling reasons for Australian aid. How the money is really used, however, is also pertinent. Graham Teskey, an AusAid specialist, [wrote](#) about PNG on the Development Policy Centre blog in January:

Politics is shaped by the 'big man' culture, where elites and politicians provide benefits to clients and supporters. MPs spend big to win office and are expected to reward family and supporters appropriately. There is no constraining authority at the political centre to discipline this system of rent management ... More aid may make the problem worse by weakening the incentives to raise revenue domestically and undermining domestic accountability.

O'Neill has made it clear that, flowing from this new deal, he expects Australian funding for a wish list of roads, airports, hospitals and schools. While infrastructure projects are top of the agenda, according to some with first-hand experience of these schemes, poor implementation is a major issue. Philip Hughes, writing for the ANU's 'State, Society and Governance in Melanesia' project, [warned](#) :

The state's ability to exercise its functions in this area must be improved dramatically. This undoubtedly would require a suite of major interrelated administrative and legislative reforms ... In reality, in the present economic, political and social climate in PNG it is unlikely that there will be a rapid change in the situation.

A constitutional challenge in PNG to the resettlement agreement could quickly destroy any disincentive value as far as people smugglers are concerned. Under the country's constitution, foreigners may not be detained unless they have broken the law in entering the country. Since the asylum seekers are being sent there against their will they cannot be held to have entered illegally. This may be surmountable in the longer term, but it suggests — as does the commentary quoted above — that the agreement will go the way of Labor's other 'solutions' to border security.

Reshaping the Church with Bishop Robinson and Pope Francis

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Culture has become a popular word to analyse organisations whose members do bad things: football clubs whose players dismantle bars and their patrons; political parties whose members are paraded before courts; and churches in which sexual abuse has been rife.

The culture of an organisation comprises the shared attitudes, values, patterns of relationship and practices that make it more likely that members will act in particular ways. In an army unit where there is a culture of binge drinking and contempt for women, more incidents of sexual assault may well occur than in other units where these features are absent.

Bishop Geoffrey Robinson's recent [book](#) on the culture of the Catholic Church carries on his critique of the factors that have contributed to clerical sexual abuse of children and to denial and concealment of it. The aspects of Catholic culture that he believes conducive to it include: a relationship with God dominated by fear; immaturity; compulsory clerical celibacy, an exclusively male caste standing over the church; a lonely way of life; a cult of privacy and secrecy; a compulsive need to defend the actions and attitudes of the Pope.

Together these things made it more likely that priests will be tempted to abuse children, will have the opportunity to do so, will abuse with impunity, and have their actions denied and covered up by others.

If this is the culture, how can it be changed? Robinson's answer is to call for a new Church council that includes an equal number of laypeople, with women proportionately represented. Its one topic would be to identify the aspects of the Catholic culture that encouraged sexual abuse and to make the changes necessary. He together with Bishops Pat Power and Bill Morris have initiated a [petition](#) endorsing this proposal.

Robinson's analysis of harmful aspects of Catholic culture and endorsement of a Church council as the remedy are persuasive. He has the personal authority that comes from himself having been abused, and from giving many years to persuading Catholics to attend to the harm done to the victims of sexual abuse, to recognise their responsibility to them, and to begin to institute effective safeguards.

A Church council could lead Catholics to address the harm done to people by the sexual abuse of children and to endorse structural changes. It may be a necessary condition for addressing the evil of clerical sexual abuse.

But a council focused on sexual abuse may not alone be sufficient to deal with the issues Robinson raises. It would assess the contribution made to sexual abuse by the aspects of Church culture identified by Robinson and by other participants, and make the institutional changes it believes necessary. But if it decided that some of the aspects of Church culture indicted by Robinson were not material to sexual abuse, they may be inconsistent with the Gospel. They would still need to be addressed.

Institutional changes, too, are insufficient unless relationships and attitudes change. Australians infatuated with cricket will recognise the truth of this in the contrast between the measures introduced by the Argus report and the performance of the national team. Medieval reformers certainly recognised it when they described the church as always

needing reform in head and members. They insisted on the importance of good preaching, particularly embodied in the person and words of the pope, to make central what the Church is about.

From this perspective there is a happy conjunction between Robinson's project and the way of proceeding of Pope Francis. He has put his authority behind the deconstruction of a clerical culture built on the power and incontestability of the papacy. He has done so in the name of the deeper Gospel values that the church serves.

His constant description of himself as the Bishop of Rome rather than as Pope, his preference for simplicity of life, dress and liturgy, his immediate contact with ordinary people as human beings and not simply as members of a religious or ethnic group, his concern for the poor, his conversational forms of teaching and listening and his focus on the example of Christ are the antithesis of churchiness and of clericalism. They also enable people to imagine a Church culture more deeply grounded in the Gospel than that criticised by Robinson.

Institutional reform of the Church and imaginative leadership are complementary. To shape a church which reaches out effectively to victims of sexual abuse, in which sexual abuse is seen as abhorrent, and in which appropriate structures discourage it, is essential. This can happen only if Catholics' imagination is captured by something freshly discovered as well as by something abhorred. That is where radical leadership comes in.

Exploiting Van Nguyen

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

[Better Man](#) (MA). Director: Khoa Do. Starring: Remy Hii, Bryan Brown, David Wenham. Two episodes, commences Thursday 25 July 8.30pm on SBS1

Van Nguyen's story looms large in the Australian consciousness. The execution of this young Australian citizen in 2005, after being found guilty of transporting heroin through Singapore en route from Cambodia to Australia, resonated in the hearts of many Australians. Particularly young Australians who were of an age with Van, and for whom there was a sense of injustice in the severity of the punishment compared with the scale of the crime, or who even questioned whether the death penalty was ever morally justified.

I was one such person, at the time just a year younger than Van, and myself no stranger to making bad choices for what seemed good reasons. I shared the hope and anxiety that attended the legal and grassroots attempts to gain Van's freedom, and the shock and grief when his death by hanging became reality. I can sympathise then with the sense of ownership many ordinary Australians might feel for Van's story. Emotionally, they were part of it. And I anticipated the SBS miniseries as a chance for us to collectively revisit and re-examine those events.

Of course, whatever ownership we might feel for this story, it does not compare with that of Van's family, his mother Kim and his twin brother Khoa. They have objected to the production and planned broadcast of the two part miniseries — due to commence tonight — on emotional grounds. 'She is traumatised. This has opened up old wounds,' Kim's local MP, Member for Chisholm, Anna Burke, has said on Kim's behalf. It is impossible not to sympathise with Kim's objections. Which mother would want public property made of her private grief?

I have no doubt that exploitation is the furthest thing from the mind of series writer and director, Khoa Do. A spokesperson for SBS [told](#) Fairfax 'Do felt it was an important Australian story to tell, particularly in the context of ongoing international debate about capital punishment laws'. Do perhaps more than any other established Australian filmmaker has the track record and moral authority to tell such a story without being accused of exploitation. As a filmmaker he tends to prioritise compassion and strong social messages, sometimes to a fault.

In his first film, *The Finished People*, the decision to enlist real life homeless people to re-enact versions of their own lives underscored the film's bleak authenticity and its practical hope for its subjects, but also gave it an amateurish taint. His film about Vietnamese boat people, *Mother Fish*, strayed so far from sensationalism as to be almost academic. It was conceived as an educational exercise (Do's own family were Vietnamese refugees who came to Australia by boat), but this at times defeated its efforts to evoke empathy.

However if the first two episodes of *Better Man* are anything to go by, this time around he has swung too far in the other direction. The fact that it is being broadcast on the commercial SBS network does cast a shadow of doubt across any appeal to the greater good that Do and the network might make while ignoring the family's wishes. As far as the tension goes between humanism and sensationalism in crime-based TV drama, *Better Man* certainly has more in common with *Underbelly* than *The Wire*.

Episode one follows Van (Hii) as he travels to Cambodia, makes an impromptu pilgrimage to Vietnam (his mother's homeland), and embarks upon his ill-fated return journey. After he is detained in Singapore he is interrogated by a somewhat sympathetic agent, who unravels the backstory that led Van to turn drug mule. This revolves around his sense of duty to his family from a very young age as his single mother's eldest son, and from his brother's juvenile indiscretions that landed the family deep in debt.

In addition to Kim's emotional plea, Khoa Nguyen has accused the series of factual inaccuracies that further undermine its moral authority. In this, Do might appeal to the words used by fellow Australian filmmaker Robert Connolly to defend the factual imprecisions in his own film *Balibo*. He [argued](#) that in art, commitment to truth doesn't always demand slavish adherence to facts. 'Cinema can take the audience somewhere and show them a tragedy in a way that creates empathy, which is more powerful than just presenting a series of facts,' he said.

Better Man does go out of its way to build empathy for Van. As portrayed here he is a smart kid arguably vested with too much responsibility from too young an age. His sense of duty to his family is almost tortuous. This, combined with his youthful bullishness and naiveté, leads him to make a mistake that will end up costing him his life. The attention paid to Van's spiritual detour to Vietnam is particularly affecting: a fellow traveller notes that Van has come home — he has never been to the country, but ancestral and cultural roots are resilient.

BUT the depth afforded Van belies the shallowness on display elsewhere. Kim and Khoa Nguyen might rightly feel slighted by the implication that they are unwitting agents in Van's fate. The portrayal of the shady drug dealers who oversee Van's illicit expedition are all sneers and expletives and latent violence; they are the kind of one-and-a-bit dimensional villains that are shorthand for evil in the trashier brand of crime drama. Their cartoonishness undercuts the series' serious intent.

It is possible the concluding episode will offer some redemption. Presumably it will portray the three-year legal battle led by Melbourne lawyer, Julian McMahon (Wenham) and Melbourne QC Lex Lasry (Brown) to save Van's life. Hopefully the episode will also sink its teeth into the vexed issue of international capital punishment laws, in a meaningful rather than shallow way. By contributing robustly to this conversation the series might truly claim to be honouring Van Nguyen's life and death, rather than exploiting it.

Indonesia gives a Gonski

INTERNATIONAL

Pat Walsh

Fifteen years have passed since Indonesia embarked on *reformasi* following the fall of Soeharto in 1998. That year a Yogyakarta theatre company performed Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* to mark the end of the old dictator and to challenge Indonesian audiences to reflect on the absurdity of the long Soeharto years. Not only had Soeharto clung to political life like the play's central character, the wheelchair bound, overbearing and blind tyrant Hamm, but also like Hamm he had disabled much of Indonesian life around him.

This year, the company performed *Endgame* again using a new Indonesian translation from the original French. The play's director focused not on Soeharto but on Indonesia today 15 years on and what he sees as the laughable state of Indonesia's absurd democracy, a plaything of celebrity politicians and corrupt political parties. The conversations in the play, said the director, are as funny as the situation the country is facing. 'We see the 1998 movement falling into a silly whirlpool.'

The director also conceded, however, that there are bright spots amid the everyday insanity and cause for 'sober optimism'. I agree. Despite all the challenges, Indonesia is a far better place than when I first visited in 1969, just after Soeharto took over, and again today, 15 years after his departure.

Reformasi has not delivered in many ways; impunity prevails and serious issues such as Papua are being mismanaged. Indonesia has not seen 1000 flowers bloom but its garden hosts some attractive blooms and its spring has been much better news than the transitions in the Middle East. In particular, the general sense of openness, creativity, and freedom that exists is a very distinctive and refreshing change from the old days when basically only one man, Soeharto, enjoyed freedom of opinion, expression and assembly.

Many examples in support of this sober optimism can be given. That a politically charged *Endgame* could be produced and discussed publicly is itself evidence of this change.

Positive Indonesian reaction to the recent speech to the UN by the young Pakistani Muslim girl Malala is another. A leading Jakarta paper strongly endorsed her calls for education especially for girls, while pointing out that the number of female students at Indonesia's top universities exceeds that of males. It also called for an end to remaining book censorship laws in Indonesia and reminded readers that both Sukarno and Soeharto adopted what it called 'the Taliban way' regarding books, burning and banning texts and imprisoning writers 'because the government loathed differences of opinion or ideas'.

In the context of Malala's advocacy, another striking example of ongoing reformasi is the reform of the school system currently being undertaken in Indonesia. As Indonesia has the long break mid-year like Europe, the new school year has just commenced. It has attracted more than usual comment because, in addition to increasing compulsory schooling from nine to 12 years and injecting more funding into education, the government is trialling a new school curriculum and methodology.

The principal aim of the reform is to 'develop creativity, curiosity, the ability to form questions and to form a critical stance necessary for a well-developed life and for life-long learning'. It seeks to do this by dropping subjects in favour of themes and by integrating learning.

First graders, for example, will use eight thematic books in a year, one per month, such as *Myself*, *My Hobbies*, *My Family*, *Caring about Creatures*. The 'Myself' reader features Udin who, besides his family, has friends like Edo from Papua, Beni from North Sumatra, Lani, an ethnic Chinese, and Siti, a little girl who wears a headscarf. Active learning and self-expression will be stimulated by working together, telling stories, solving maths problems, making up songs and the like.

Critics including teachers complain the reform is rushed and that teachers have not been given sufficient time and training in the new approach. Catholic schools say they will not introduce the new curriculum until 2014. There is no doubt that teachers will make or break the initiative. My point, however, is not to elaborate on the new system but to point out what a break it represents with the past.

Like Australia's Gonski reforms, Indonesia's initiatives are designed to give its economy a competitive edge by upgrading its human resources. But the changes also have the potential to radically transform Indonesia in other ways. Future generations who have been encouraged to think for themselves, to question and to criticise will be very different citizens to their forbears who have been formed in more doctrinaire traditions — cultural, religious, military and otherwise.

May these initiatives also contribute to the ongoing reformasi of Indonesia, including democratisation, and the blossoming of its great potential.

Royal baby's semi-charmed life

INTERNATIONAL

Catherine Marshall

If there's one thing that will remind a woman she is, at her core, no different from the rest of humanity, it is childbirth. From the second that first 'is-it-real-or-is-it-a-phantom?' contraction set in until the exhilarating moment when her son was urged and cajoled and squeezed from her weary body, Kate Middleton would have understood implicitly that childbirth is life's great leveller.

It is the one thing that unites every mother in its inescapable embrace: we have sex, we conceive, with little effort (for most) we grow within us a cluster of cells that morphs and roils and shapes itself into a human being; like some unstoppable experiment, this invisible life-force extrudes from our core and imprints upon our bones so that our skin itches with the stretch and our backs ache with the pressure and our pelvises are so bruised and heavy we can no longer bear it.

And then, just as we feel we might erupt, nature commands us to expel this animated being from our body. Whether this squashed little stranger we have incubated is born naturally or surgically, whether it emerges black, white, rich or poor, the singular experience of childbirth condenses the mother to her most primeval: we are animals who have grown within us new life and then released that new life into the great big world.

But this is where the similarities end. For Kate, the experience would have been riven with anxieties that no other mother has had to endure: the international press camped outside her labour suite; the comments on Twitter from millions of voyeurs demanding to know why her baby was 'late'; all her days of motherhood, from the very moment her pregnancy was prematurely revealed, lived under a penetrating, fault-finding microscope.

But for all the intrusions this tiny prince and his parents will have to endure in the years that stretch ahead, there will exist, as a salve of sorts, the incalculable benefits that his social status has randomly afforded him. For it is indeed by accident, or circumstance, or both, that he has arrived in this world to the salute of guns and the intense attention of a world whose otherwise cold and suspicious heart has been reduced to goo by what it believes to be a fairytale. It is through historical precedent and fortune and chance and old-fashioned elitism that this baby will grow up in a rarefied world where his every smallest need will be swiftly met.

For the other British babies who share his birthday, there will be some small recognition in the form of a gift of a 'lucky' silver penny, worth GBP28 and issued by the Royal Mint to commemorate her birth. Silver pennies clutched in their fat baby-hands, his tiny countrymen will find that their own fortune — or lack thereof — is determined by the circumstances into which they have been born, the educational levels achieved by their parents, the religion and social conditions of their community, their allotted place in the world's rigid pecking order.

And further afield, new babies will find their own futures less secure still. As the prince struggled out into a gilt-edged world filled with applause and splendour, newborns in far-off places took their own first, desperate breaths of air, unnoticed by a wealth- and celebrity-fixated world, sweetly oblivious to the lives of deprivation and neglect that lie in wait. These babies were born into squalor and degradation, condemned from the moment of their conception to a life of hardship. Some will have already succumbed to dehydration or

illness; others face a future that will never expand beyond the boundaries of a sweat shop or a rubbish dump or a brothel.

We shouldn't diminish the joy of the royal couple, nor mock the echelon into which their baby has been born. Privilege and disadvantage are, after all, largely products of fate, and this family has won a rare lottery that will ensure, if not contentment, then the consolation of limitless wealth and an assured sense of importance.

But we as an observant public should be wary of allowing our sustained and fawning attention to further entrench the idea that some people are inherently more valuable than others. We should remind ourselves that an altered history and geography might well have delivered this child into a charmless world.

Had he been born, for instance, in India — a Commonwealth country from which the British extracted great wealth, including the Koh-I-Noor diamond embedded in Queen Victoria's crown — his chances of dying in infancy would be [ten times greater](#) than in Britain, his lifetime earnings 90 per cent less; he would be 50 per cent more likely to contract HIV/AIDS, would have almost 13 years shaved off his life expectancy and would spend almost 97 per cent less money on health care.

It's this broader, ravaged world into which the new prince has been born that should contextualise for us his privilege and mediate our own response to it. There is no intrinsic honour in being wealthy or important; what matters more is that everyone — rich or poor — make good on the circumstances into which they have been born.

Crying chairs' cold comfort for refugees

AUSTRALIA

Lyn Bender

They say a week is a long time in politics, but in a day the political landscape regarding desperate refugees known as boat people encountered a politically induced ship wreck.

Only the day before Kevin Rudd's version of Howard's 'we will decide' speech, the prospects for refugees released on bridging visas had seemed bad. Now they have become even worse.

A few days before the announcement of the PNG solution I had watched my 'crying chairs' disappear into the truck. It had been time to leave my counselling office, so I surrendered my sturdy armchairs for a greater good. Many people over the years had nestled in one of those voluminous, enfolding armchairs and wept, whispered, or shouted their rage, sorrow and despair. I had sat opposite in an identical chair, feeling a range of similar emotions including empathy, hope and helplessness.

My emptying office, a former one-bedroom apartment, now began to resemble a desolate house; quite like the bare houses set aside for refugees, offered under the former Gillard Government's 'no advantage' rules to those of whom it wished to make an example for not waiting in the invisible asylum queue. This has now been superseded by the even more disadvantaging policy announced by Rudd. The rules have changed for those fleeing war, death and persecution. Now no people arriving in Australia by boat without a visa will ever be settled in Australia.

It had seemed no major sacrifice to offer my discarded material items to destitute refugees. Similar objects can be seen on their way to provide landfill across Australia. Many lie on nature strips, rotting in the rain, awaiting collection as unburnable rubbish. Our citizens are drowning in stuff, frequently disposing of it as garbage, because mere things are so easily replaced. Except when you are a refugee released on a bridging visa, who has nothing.

Prompted by my distaste for society's throwaway mindset, and by my awareness of refugees needs, I googled and found a number to call. It turned out to be the number of Mary, of the [Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project](#). Yes, I was told, they would gratefully receive my office furniture and some appliances provided they were not broken. 'We can't really fix things and we don't have much storage space,' Mary added. I asked if blankets were needed, as I have some spare at home. 'Yes we really need bedding, it's very cold.'

At 9am on Sunday morning the torrential rain had changed to a misty drizzle when the man and woman with the truck arrived. Georgina and Hakim were volunteers and they refused my offer to contribute to the cost of the truck that they had hired at their own expense. Both were cheerful as we chatted about the

politics of treating refugees badly. 'Oh I think Rudd understands the plight of the refugees,' Hakim had said. 'It's just politics for the election but Rudd understands their situation.' At the time I had agreed. Oh what a difference a day can make.

Georgina enthused that my red armchairs with printed cushions would go well with a red couch that had already been donated. We wondered what the children of another family would play with. 'I got them a soccer ball,' said Hakim. We decided not to send the portable grill. 'It looks complicated and they are worried about using too much electricity,' Georgina said. But the 'microwave would be brilliant for the father and son'. Iranian men rarely cook, Hakim confided. I imagine a dark eyed man making a cup of tea with water boiled in my donated electric kettle.

It was then that I recalled sitting in one of the many tiny huts that housed the detainees at the Woomera Detention Centre, drinking tea with an Iranian man and his sad wife. 'We long for freedom,' they told me. I remembered my feeling of helplessness as a psychologist at the centre who had little more than the power to soothe or listen. At least now I could send blankets and furniture.

My father was a dark eyed man who fled the looming Nazi holocaust in Europe, arriving in Australia with nothing. Along with his brother, he was turned out into the cold after one night spent in the home of an uncharitable uncle. 'We went to Mildura to pick fruit,' he recalled. 'We had somewhere to sleep then.' Did you have blankets? I had asked him. He laughed at me, as adults do at the innocence of a child's questions. 'The ants were our blankets.' Some words and feelings remain for a lifetime.

PNG solution at odds with international law

AUSTRALIA

Justin Glyn

Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus claims the PNG solution — featuring permanent exclusion from Australia in a small, poor and violent country already unable to accommodate the refugees from West Papua whom it hosts — complies with international law. We shall have to wait for the courts to give us their opinion, but a quick glance at the much put-upon Refugee Convention suggests this is may be a rather optimistic assessment.

Firstly, this 'solution' — like the ill-fated solutions which came before — only applies to asylum seekers who arrive by boat and whose claims have, historically, been overwhelmingly successful. This runs into an immediate problem: Art. 31 of the Convention begins: 'The Contracting States shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees ...' Given that these measures will only apply to those coming by boat, it seems to be a fairly obvious 'penalty ... on account of illegal entry or presence'.

An oft-repeated line is that those coming are only 'asylum seekers' and not, in fact, refugees. This is at least a bit misleading. True, not everyone who claims status is a refugee. On the other hand, whether you are a refugee or not does not depend on a court or other body saying that you are one — it depends on your meeting the criteria in the Convention. Fleeing well-founded fear of persecution on one of the listed grounds.

The only way to honour the Convention is therefore to assume that people have the rights in the Convention until they are shown not to be refugees (and anything up to 90 per cent of boat arrivals are known to be the real deal). Australia instead intends to deny all Convention rights to such arrivals, instead demanding that PNG assume them on its behalf. There is no provision in the Convention for such wholesale abdication of obligations.

There is international authority that a state is not obliged to provide comprehensive asylum (e.g. citizenship rights) but only to secure to refugees the rights in the Convention. Theoretically, therefore, if Australia were to use PNG as its agent in the performance of its Convention obligations, there may be an argument that it was living up to its obligations.

There appears to be some suggestion of this in the M70 judgement which struck down the Malaysia solution. The court made it clear, however, that the agent state would have to provide a comprehensive refugee determination process, and probably also have to honour the full range of rights in the Convention, including granting the same rights to education, practice of a profession, labour rights and social security as the principal state does to its own nationals. As the majority put it in M70, the obligations assumed by the agent state (here PNG):

must be understood as referring to access and protections of the kinds that Australia undertook to provide by signing the Refugees Convention and the Refugees Protocol. In that sense the criteria stated in s 198A(3)(a)(i) to (iii) are to be understood as a reflex of Australia's obligations.

Whatever PNG can offer its own nationals in this regard, it is unlikely to afford them the same rights as Australian citizens. Given that PNG is to perform Australia's Convention obligations, this would seem to be the relevant test.

In addition, PNG has made reservations to (declared that it does not accept) articles 17 (1) (right to work), 21 (right to housing), 22 (1) (right to education), 26 (freedom of movement), 31 (right to enter), 32 (protection against expulsion) and 34 (facilitation of naturalisation of refugees) of the Convention. This suite of reservations makes it doubtful whether PNG itself can be said to be a party to the Convention; international law prohibits reservations which would frustrate its object or purpose.

Whatever the answer to that question, it is clear that the obligations which PNG has accepted under the Convention are very different to those accepted by Australia.

Any 'solution' which discriminates against refugees based on the manner of their arrival, removes them to a country which has not adopted the same obligations as Australia and cannot, in any event, afford them the same rights as Australia therefore seems difficult to square with Australia's Convention obligations.

Journey to the margins

CREATIVE

Various

To the margins

Magi are wise
enough to know
their certain ignorance.
Drawn to the magis,
they long, rather than know.
They follow a star,
stirring light
in their hearts
more than the sky,
To the margins, where
even goats lose their footing,
they make a silent journey,
growing in hope
that the child within
and the Child without
will recognise each other.

Marlene Marburg

The return of the Magi

To the east and further east we were counted amongst the wisest of men,
For we had mastered all the signs of the firmament,
Made wonders of our speculations.
Silken with honours, we were the Magi;
Until the night that we were drawn by that one dogged star
That ranged beyond all our scrutinies,
And by the rumour of a king that came from nowhere.
And then this Herod

Who rose to us like a stroked cat's back
Eyes shining like a fox.
And we were brought gravely down to Bethlehem,
With Herod's breath still leering on our necks,
A mean suspicious place
That ended in a sty,
Where, it seems, we were impelled to look down,
Down into a rude manger
And into the incalculable sovereignty of a child.
When we left that place we were borne away
Upon a vessel named Excelsior,
Swollen with sail, leaning lightly on the wind,
That steered impeccably through an ocean of stars.
Grant Fraser

A legal tax rort is still a rort

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

The decision to tighten fringe benefits tax (FBT) rules is causing grief for the Government, with struggling car manufacturers and more than 320,000 affected voters crying foul. To fund the bringing forward of the switch to an emissions trading scheme, those with salary packaged motor vehicles will need to log and declare the proportion of their driving that is for business.

Contrary to the spirit of the tax system, many FBT claimants use their cars for mainly private purposes. The existing formula-based calculation gives them a significant financial advantage that amounts to a legal tax rort. They will lose under the new rules. On the other hand, those who use their cars almost exclusively for business will come out ahead. That is how it should be.

Currently Australians on high and middle incomes benefit from the fortuitous nature of the existing rules. Some relatively lower paid workers rely on the loophole to balance their family budgets. Smaller businesses could suffer under the change, with the logging requirement likely to prove a costly burden. But essentially the existing system is stacked against those who are struggling. The poor are subsidising an unintended tax concession for the better off, as they do with debatable but intended tax concessions such as superannuation incentives and the negative gearing of investment losses.

Much media attention has been given to the plight of workers in the salary packaging and car manufacturing industries, some of whom are already losing their jobs as the sectors are reported to be hit hard by the announcement of the new rules. It seems churlish to think of the prosperity these industries have enjoyed due the FBT legal loophole as 'ill gotten'. But there is an argument for that if we consider the spirit rather than the letter of the tax law. Perhaps it would be fairer to put it that they have operated under a business model that is based on profiting from a loophole that they should have anticipated might one day be closed, and that day has come.

The industries resented not being consulted about the change. But as treasurer Chris Bowen said very succinctly when he shrugged off the criticism: 'This is a matter of the integrity of the tax system.' A tax system that makes compromises with sectional interests is by definition corrupt and turning its back on the common good that it has been set up to serve.

'Fundamentalist' Americans miss the point of Boston bomber cover

MEDIA

Catherine Marshall

Glory is the preserve of the patriotic American. Never was this belief more obvious than when *Rolling Stone* dared to publish on the cover of its latest edition a photograph of the alleged Boston bomber, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. The photograph — a face-on profile of the young, good-looking Chechen, his hair tousled, his chin stubbled — provoked a storm of fury so blistering Americans vowed in droves to cancel subscriptions, boycott advertisers, call for heads to roll, refuse to buy or sell it, burn the offending magazine or use it as fish wrap and toilet paper.

It wasn't the content — an insightful, tragic backstory about how a promising young man got drawn into a violent fundamentalist world — that had offended; indeed, most commentators seem not to have read [the article](#) at all. Rather, it was the fact that the American public, raised on a diet of reality shows and celebrity, instinctively conflated publicity with fame. It assumed *Rolling Stone* was glorifying Tsarnaev by placing him on its cover.

The response reflected in part the iconic status *Rolling Stone* holds in the collective American psyche: supplanting the usual subjects — cool, idolised, semi-clothed rock stars and actresses — with an alleged terrorist was just too distasteful for most.

But it was really the image itself which prompted such violent reaction, for it failed to mesh with people's perceptions of what a terrorist might look like: Tsarnaev wasn't sporting a long beard or wearing Islamic clothing, his eyes didn't glisten with malice, his persona didn't suggest aggression or sociopathic traits, he wasn't photographed sitting in the midst of some far-off Islamic conflict. Indeed, this image carries no hint that the subject is in fact Muslim, and an alleged terrorist.

Those who had already convicted Tsarnaev would have experienced uncomfortable dissonance while viewing his image, for how does one reconcile the angelic, appealing face peering out from the magazine with the heinous crimes with which he has been charged?

And it is herein that the brilliance of this cover lies: it presents Tsarnaev as the boy-next-door, and then invites readers on an investigative journey that explains precisely why he isn't. It challenges the way in which Americans perceive the world, and cleverly illustrates the danger of stereotyping by subverting the classic, benign *Rolling Stone* cover. It asks readers to consider what drives a young man with opportunities to lash out at the country that has taken him in, and encourages thoughtful reflection on how violence is bred by apparently normal people in an apparently normal society, how the US is perceived abroad, how such

atrocities might be prevented in future.

But a picture is worth more than a thousand words, and, in the case of the Tsarnaev *Rolling Stone* cover, the public has instantaneously rejected the message. Instead of engaging with the coverage and the debate that might have ensued among readers, they have seized up with anger and lashed out at *Rolling Stone* and anyone who supports it, including readers and advertisers. In so doing, they have invoked the stifflingly patriotic adage adopted by George W. Bush shortly after the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers: you're either with us or against us.

This attitude is fundamentalist in that it allows no room for nuance or dissent; it signals the drawing close of a great big curtain of moral rectitude, and highlights the tendency among Americans to unify parochially against all perceived affronts to national security. Rather than using this opportunity to gain a dispassionate understanding of the man who took lives and limbs in Boston, and to view their own flawed country through the eyes of a foreigner, these critics have closed ranks for fear of giving him glory.

But it's naïve to assume that publicity equals fame, that readers are so malleable as to believe that Tsarnaev is a martyr because he looks good on the cover of a magazine. It's an affront to quality journalism and a free press when a large chunk of the populace judges the whole story by a single cover.

How Labor lost its moral edge

AUSTRALIA

Tony Kevin

Perhaps there is no way to reconcile the conflict between the universalist ideal of a world community based on the sense of common humanity, and the narrower idea of a bounded national community as expressed by Philip Ruddock: 'I don't believe in freedom that entitles people to ignore borders and simply decide, well I don't care what you think, I'm going to live amongst you.'

As Benedict Coleridge recently [commented](#) in *Eureka Street*: 'the liberal political-philosophical tradition ... rests on that idea of the bounded community where a liberal society might thrive if effectively safeguarded. And in Australia (and elsewhere) the concepts offered by the liberal tradition have been employed by both sides of politics to give a 'reasonable' varnish to inhumane migration control policies.' This is where we are today, after Kevin Rudd on Friday cut through the Gordian knot of boat people policy dilemmas with which his party has been wrestling since 2007.

One thousand one hundred fellow human beings have drowned since 2009, trying to come to Australia in small unsafe boats without our government's permission. They did not break any Australian laws, but were intensely resented by some Australians: how dare they try to join our bounded community? This national anger has played out symbolically in a subtle story of delayed rescues and avoidable deaths at sea, and in prolonged punitive administrative mistreatment of the 97 per cent who survived the perils of the journey.

In a thousand hurtful bureaucratic ways, we made clear our national desire to punish people who dared breach the borders of our national community. But finally, reluctantly, we have allowed most of them to settle among us.

This was always the Australian way of immigration: an initially narrow Anglo-Celtic community gradually, at times unwillingly, allowing a widening of the definition of what it means to be an Australian. It happened with the Chinese who came during the Gold Rush; the Jews and Greeks who came from Europe in the 1920s and 1930s; the East European displaced persons who came after World War Two; the Vietnamese and Cambodians who came after 1975; people from Middle Eastern countries who came in boats since the late 1990s.

Gradually, the idea of what it means to be Australian has widened. We became a successful multicultural country.

Now Rudd, with a cruel but politically brilliant stroke, has ended this bigger and more noble national idea of ourselves. We are firmly back in the bounded national community.

The United States became what it is today — in many ways the world's most

successful multicultural country — by allowing essentially free immigration. Immigration controls at Ellis Island were limited and perfunctory. But Australia makes immigration control into an art form. No, we are not racist. We carefully balance our tightly controlled intakes from different ethnicities and different parts of the world. But we cannot bear to allow people the freedom to choose to live among us. We cannot let ourselves be a safe refuge for those who dare to flee.

We will now tell damaged, fearful people who try to come here: Go to PNG. Wait in fever-ridden tent camps for years to be processed. If accepted as refugees, you will stay there for life: you have no other options. Australia has used its economic power over a small impoverished and fairly unstable country to say to its political class: we will bribe your country to accept as future citizens groups of people who have no affinity with or respect for you, and for whom you have no affinity or respect either. It is a cynical, cruel and dangerous bargain for all concerned.

But it gets Rudd off a political hook. A hook of his own making, because he did not have the courage to inspire and lead Australians to a better place.

Australia's border protection and maritime rescue agencies and their personnel have since 2009 carried the burden of government policy irresolution over what to do about increasing numbers of irregular boat arrivals. Our government asked these agencies to defend the maritime borders. It wanted them to deter boat people and keep their numbers down, yet it wanted them to do so in humane and legal ways. These agencies bore the brunt of governmental timidity and indecision.

Our maritime safety authority had to torture the language of its rescue codes, inventing bizarre new definitions of boats in distress and new ways to pass rescue responsibilities to a country ill-equipped to handle them. Our agencies had to claim they knew nothing. Drownings were always the people smugglers' fault: never ours. Now, that phase has ended. Rudd has defined a new order. It will probably save lives at sea, because I believe it will curtail the demand for voyages.

But it is a solution that shames us. People who had hoped to become Australians will find other strategies for survival in a hostile or uncaring world. With the PNG solution, Labor loses whatever moral edge it had over the Coalition. The idea of a bounded national community has won. A lot of vulnerable people's lives will be blocked and blighted: people with whom I would have liked to share my country. It will be their loss, and ours.

PNG policy places politics over principle

AUSTRALIA

Kerry Murphy

Over the last two years, there has been a winding back of rights for asylum seekers in Australia by the Labor Government. This has been driven partly by the increased numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat and partly by the chanting of the Opposition. The announcement that all future arrivals by boat will be sent to PNG for assessment and, if successful, resettled in PNG, shows how far policy has gone from principle to politics.

Initially it was proposed to send asylum seekers to Malaysia and accept refugees from Malaysia in return, as a way of creating a disincentive for people to get on boats. Somehow trading the bad refugees for the good refugees was politically expedient. This deal came asunder when the High Court ruled that the Government had failed to consider the human rights protections in the Migration Act before deciding to send people to Malaysia. This section had been inserted in 2001 by the former Howard Government.

The solution was to repeal the section and in its place allow the Minister to have unfettered and unreviewable discretion, so that pesky human rights obligations could be sidelined.

Other changes followed the release of the expert panel report in August 2012 and the creation of the 'no advantage' myth. Nauru and Manus Island were again to be used to warehouse refugees and also to assess their cases. People were told they would wait until the same time as those waiting elsewhere for UNHCR resettlement places. Still no one has been able to identify how long this supposed period is, and UNHCR's denial that such a period of time can be even used has been ignored.

Some say that those arriving by boat take the places of the more deserving refugees in camps. This view is flawed for several reasons. Firstly there is no real way of comparing who is or is not more deserving of a place. In reality, places are offered to those who are identified as suitable for resettlement. Every resettled refugee means less places for those remaining. There are over 45 million refugees and displaced people in the world, a growing, not diminishing, number — there will always be more refugees needing protection.

In 2012, Australia paid Nauru to take the asylum seekers; Australia pays the staff to manage the centres, trains the decision makers and seconds DIAC staff to assist, and pays the lawyers and agents to assist in the cases, but when it comes to Australia being legally responsible for the cases — this is claimed to be a sovereign issue for Nauru. Then interviews commence but no decisions are handed out in Nauru, maybe because the review process and staff have not been set up yet. Are we surprised when people protest against a system that is being created

around them and cannot tell them what will happen to them should their case be successful?

The response is not to address these realistic concerns, but to prosecute those in the protests, so we can show how tough we are on these troublemakers.

Then Senator Carr comes out and says that Iranians who have not been interviewed are economic migrants, and his Department will write reports that help refuse more such cases. This is despite the fact that wealth or poverty are irrelevant to the Refugee Convention. A new directive is issued to the Refugee Review Tribunal to take into account the country reports of DFAT. An odd directive, as the RRT was already doing that, so they might as well have said the decision had to be written in English. Nevertheless it made us look tough and not a soft touch.

Meanwhile more and more boats come and the opposition continues to chant for the return of the ineffective and punitive Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). The political pressure mounts as we approach an election and the Government looks for a 'circuit breaker', as the ill-fated Malaysian plan was once called. Thus we get the PNG Solution — all asylum seekers who arrive by boat from 19 July will be sent to PNG for assessment of their cases, and if found to be refugees, resettled in PNG.

This is despite the fact that PNG is not a resettlement country, has few if any resettlement services for a refugee population and is struggling with its own serious law and order and basic services issues. Australia has subcontracted its international obligations to a former colony. Once again the poorer countries of the world are used to warehouse refugees while richer countries cherry-pick those they deem suitable for resettlement.

None of these measures could realistically be said to comply with article 31 of the Convention which states:

The contracting states shall not impose penalties, on account of their illegal entry or presence, on refugees who, coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened ... enter or are present in their territory without authorisation ... The contracting states shall not apply to the movements of such refugees restrictions other than those which are necessary and such restrictions shall only be applied until their status in the country is regularised or they obtain admission into another country.

The neo-colonial approach is only possible because we live on an island, and have money to pay off willing poor neighbours. The subcontracting deal is signed in front of the media, Australia agrees to underwrite what must be substantial costs, and we are told by the Prime Minister that this complies with the 'legal and compassionate obligations under the Refugee Convention. Whether it complies legally is still to be tested, but clearly any compassion for the asylum seekers went long ago.

PNG move proves Australia is not special

AUSTRALIA

Frank Brennan

I've just spent the week in Myanmar, oblivious of rapid developments for asylum seekers in Australia. On Saturday morning, I landed back into Sydney to see full page advertisements simply stating, 'If you come by boat without a visa you won't be settled in Australia'. This wasn't John Howard; this is Kevin Rudd.

During my week in Yangon I had the good fortune to catch up with Fr Bambang Sipayung SJ, the regional director of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) for Asia Pacific as well as previous JRS directors for India and Sri Lanka. Talking to them, I was aware yet again that we Australians see ourselves as special. It's only the citizens of an island nation continent who can become so obsessed about the desirability of hermetically sealed borders.

So what to make of it all?

Since the Houston Panel reported almost a year ago, it has been very clear that all major political parties in Australia are of the unshakeable view that there is a world of difference between an asylum seeker in direct flight from persecution seeking a transparent determination of their refugee claim which if successful will result in the grant of temporary protection, and an asylum seeker prepared to risk life and fortune to engage a people smuggler to obtain not just temporary protection but permanent resettlement in first world Australia.

With the rapid increase in the number of boat people arriving from Indonesia this past two years and the corresponding increase in deaths at sea, I have been one refugee advocate prepared to concede this distinction, though claiming that the line is often difficult to draw.

The line could be drawn more compellingly if there was a basic level of processing and protection in Indonesia, Malaysia and throughout the region which could be endorsed by the UNHCR. That is a work which would require a lot of painstaking high level diplomacy. And it can't be done before the 2013 Australian election. I respect those refugee advocates who think such a regional agreement would never be possible. But I still think it's worth a try.

All decent Australians remain open to providing protection to fair dinkum asylum seekers in direct flight from persecution to our shores. The majority of voters think that the people smugglers and some of their clients are having a lend of us. The mantra of processing and permanently resettling all asylum seekers will not have any appeal to any major political party in Australia for a very long time to come.

Some refugee advocates in the past gave cautious approval to the Gillard

Government's Malaysia Solution. That arrangement was based on the premise that it would stop the boats because no one would risk life and fortune to be among the first 800 to arrive in Australia only to be moved to Malaysia to join the other 100,000 people of concern to UNHCR. The Malaysia deal would not have resulted in any significant improvement to the upstream conditions for asylum seekers in Indonesia. It was simply a means of trying to stem the boat flow.

Malaysia never made sense to me because no one could say what would be done with unaccompanied minors and other particularly vulnerable individuals. If kids without parents were included in the 800, the arrangement would be unprincipled; if not, it would be unworkable because the next lot of boats would have been full of kids.

In the short term, no government will stop the boats unless there is a clear message sent to people smugglers and people waiting in Indonesia to board boats. But that message must propose a solution which is both workable and basically fair, maintaining the letter and spirit of the Convention and Australian law.

When the High Court struck down the Malaysia Solution, the major political parties were united in wanting to cut the Court out of the action and in wanting to assure the public that the Parliament would maintain adequate scrutiny of the Executive. The law put in place required any proposal to be placed before both Houses of Parliament allowing our elected representatives to disallow the proposal.

When our politicians approved Manus Island as a staging post for processing a few hundred asylum seekers most of whom would be resettled in Australia, they had no idea that they would be voting to approve a plan for permanent removal of asylum seekers from Australia. This may in part explain Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's statement on Friday, 'There will be those both in PNG and Australia who will seek to attack this arrangement through the courts, which is why we have been as careful as we can in constructing an arrangement which is mindful of the earlier deliberations of the courts.' In principle, the matter should be brought back to Parliament. Politically this would also make sense, locking in all major political parties.

UNHCR and Paris Aristotle, the refugee advocate who served on the Houston Panel, have been very critical of the facilities at Manus Island. The new minister Tony Burke rightly boasted as one of his first acts that he was removing all kids from Manus Island. Now under the mantle of the Australian Parliament's approval of Manus Island, our government is planning to send there anyone and everyone who arrives by boat. It is imperative that kids without parents and other vulnerable individuals not be sent to PNG until UNHCR and advocates like Paris Aristotle can give the arrangements the tick.

When the Gillard Government resurrected Manus Island and Nauru, we all knew that this would not stop the boats. Andrew Metcalfe the previous head of the immigration department had told us so. This bold PNG move might stop the boats

in the short term. Let's hope it does. But if it does, we need after the election to recommit ourselves as a nation to providing better regional upstream processing and protection for those asylum seekers stranded in Indonesia and Malaysia. If it doesn't work, we will be complicit in visiting further social problems on PNG and the Torres Strait where in the past we have permitted PNG residents to come and go, fishing and socialising.

The Torres Strait will now have to become the most policed boundary in Australian history. So much for the delights of an island home. Just as we have undermined Australian values by placing asylum seekers in the community without work rights and without adequate welfare, so too we will now risk undermining the values of Torres Strait Islanders who have long extended a welcome to their PNG neighbours.

In the long term, we, a first world country with a commitment to the Refugees Convention, will not stop the boats until we work cooperatively with our neighbours seeking better upstream processes and protection for asylum seekers in our region and negotiating an equitable distribution of resettlement places. Let's hope the boats do stop before the election. And let's hope that after the election whoever is in government can call a truce on the race to the bottom, committing to the hard diplomatic work needed for a regional solution to a regional problem.

With every step like the PNG Solution, we Australians show the rest of the region that we are only special because we think we are; and we're not. Just judge us by our actions. When in a tight spot, we use our neighbours.

Writing and rampaging with Christopher Pearson

MEDIA

Brian Matthews

It started, both times, with a phone call.

I met Christopher Pearson when I supervised his Flinders University honours thesis, a typically erudite, dense study of the 'chthonic elements in Patrick White'. It was a very good thesis but I annoyed him when I flippantly suggested that if he published it he could call it *Breakfast at Chthonies*. And so the years passed, until ...

Early in 1985, out of the blue, Christopher Pearson phoned me. Did I have any short stories, 'pieces', essays etc.? He had bought the moribund *Adelaide Review* and was planning to transform it but, for the moment, there was a shortage of material and a pressing deadline.

Well, I had a few ideas but very little written. His enthusiasm and optimism, however, provided the spark that overcame my excuses — pressure of work, need for quiet, young children — the usual array of caveats that ensure that all those 'great books' will rot safely in the mind. So, like the others he had rallied to the cause — Peter Goldsworthy, Howard Twelvetree, who wrote about food as John McGrath, Murray Bramwell on drama, John Neylon on art and design, among a growing number — I had a shot.

In those formative years of the *Adelaide Review* Pearson was a fine editor, unobtrusive but firm; open to ideas and risk; creative and daring. And he was a tireless, persuasive entrepreneur who charmed a whole army of sponsors and advertisers.

Publication days were legendary — at first in the unadorned, carpetless spaces of the *Review's* various early editorial headquarters, later at more exotic venues like the Henley Beach jetty where a twilight oyster extravaganza and a couple of hundred supporters crowded out the local fishermen to their bemused annoyance. Or the elegant gardens of Carclew House in North Adelaide during Writers Week — this time it was the visiting writers who wondered what they'd wandered into but, more adaptable than the fishermen, participated with great gusto.

It was always in those days a razor thin operation financially. One morning I arrived at the Hindley Street office — a former brothel — to deliver an article, and found Pearson studying what looked like a business card.

'Have a look at this,' he said.

On the back of the card was scrawled: 'Dear Mr Pearson, if you do not pay the rent by 4pm this afternoon, you will be evicted immediately.' I looked at him. 'How much is the rent?' It was \$250.

‘What are you going to do?’

Pearson smiled. He was a regular contributor to a national journal and would be paid that day \$230 for recent articles. Incautiously I asked what about the other \$20. He leaned forward, rubbed forefinger and thumb together in the time-honoured money-money gesture and said, ‘How’re you holding?’

I stumped up the missing \$20.

In ensuing years, Pearson and I scarcely ever agreed about anything, but I look back on the *Review*’s ragtag, cavalier youth with gratitude and affection.

The other phone call came in the 1960s, from my friends Laurie Clancy and John Timlin. Clancy and I were fellow postgraduate students at Melbourne University. He and Timlin, after extensive discussions in the Mayfair Hotel near the university — a venue with which I was profoundly familiar — had decided to launch a political journal. It would be called *The Melbourne Partisan*. Writers were assembled.

My task was to write a column under the pseudonym ‘Sniper’ about more or less anything that took my fancy. My first effort was on the censorship of *Oz Magazine* and the second — a satirical attack on the television footy shows of the day called *Saturday Night* and *Sunday Morning* — was especially severe on Channel 9. Clancy, posing as a cleaner, managed to deposit about 500 copies in the Channel 9 foyer. Tony Charlton, the show’s accomplished anchor man, was reportedly furious.

Meanwhile, Laurie wrote a long, researched and damning piece on unionist Tom Dougherty. Five thousand copies of that issue were distributed by Dougherty’s union enemies to influence coming internal elections. Dougherty said he would sue if the *Melbourne Partisan* did not shut down, and, while he was politely invited to join the lengthening, right wing anti-*Partisan* queue, it was clear that the adventure was over.

The *Partisan* ran for three tumultuous issues, each one brainstormed in the front bar of the Mayfair and adorned with corrosively rebellious cover illustrations — Bob Menzies as the Statue of Liberty, the American Flag with Coca-Cola bottles in place of stars. Timlin, a man of a thousand contacts, masterminded sponsorship, distribution and fought off the creditors. Clancy rounded up and supervised the writers.

They were heady days at the *Review* and the *Partisan*, fuelled by rampant idealism, up-jumped confidence, booze, and the erratic, fortunate combination of various talents. Sadly, Pearson and Clancy are gone — probably not to the same ethereal destination — and the rest of us are older, theoretically wiser, but certainly nostalgic and without regret for the rampaging days of *The Adelaide Review* and *The Melbourne Partisan*.

George Zimmerman in the Bizzaro world of US gun laws

INTERNATIONAL

Jim McDermott

Last March I was called for jury duty for the she first time since I moved to California in 2010. Among the many things I learned as I listened to the judge question potential jurors was that California has a law that allows someone who is the victim of a crime to stand their ground and respond with a proportionate level of violence. It's the sort of thing some would counsel their children on a playground — don't let a bully push you around.

You can think of circumstances where such a rule makes sense for adults, too. That a woman being abused by her husband might lash back at the jerk with a frying pan in order to protect herself does not seem unreasonable.

The problem is, depending on a jury's judgment 'stand your ground' can go much farther than that. You hear what sounds like someone breaking into your house, you feel threatened, so you shoot that person dead. (There have been cases where people did that, only to discover that the 'intruder' was their spouse.) You see a bunch of blokes charging you, looking scary, so you pull a knife and stab them, but you are acquitted of any wrongdoing, even if they didn't have a weapon among them, and even if you completely misinterpreted what was going on.

That, in a nutshell, is how George Zimmerman got released on Saturday after shooting dead 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida two years ago. The circumstances of the case are astounding — Zimmerman, who had taken it upon himself to be a sort of neighbourhood security force of one, sees a black kid in a hoodie cutting through backyards and assumes the worst. (Which is what, one wonders? That the kid was going to bust into someone's house in the middle of the day?) Though the kid shows no signs of being dangerous, Zimmerman follows him.

The kid feels threatened — as he hurries on, he tells his girlfriend he's being followed by a creepy white guy. Eventually, some kind of physical confrontation ensues. What kind is almost impossible to say, as all we have is Zimmerman's point of view. Zimmerman shoots Martin, claiming he felt his life was being threatened.

And though that threat was entirely of his own making, and nowhere near the level he believed it to be, two years later, a jury of his peers agrees. It doesn't matter that he came into the situation already terrified of having a black kid in his neighbourhood. It doesn't matter that the worst Martin did was punch him. Zimmerman had the right to stand his ground, and now he's free.

In the days that followed, protests have lined the streets of many cities. In Los Angeles a crowd descended onto a major highway on Sunday, shutting it down. Pressure has been put on the Federal Government to take on the case, claiming

that what Zimmerman did was a hate crime. It's hard to see that argument going anywhere, but it's clear that the Martin case is indicative of the race problems that persist in the US. Being black, Hispanic, Asian or Native American means being treated differently, scrutinised and profiled even when there is no cause for concern.

I would also say, this story is once again about America and its guns. Put simply, fearful men should not be able to walk suburban streets carrying a hidden revolver, whether they think they're protecting us or not.

And yet, somehow that's the Bizarro universe we live in here in the States. We are a country where every single day, people — usually minorities — are shot and/or killed. We are a country that in recent years has seen gunmen try to take out a Congresswoman, murder teenagers at numerous schools, decimate the occupants of a movie theater, even slaughter very young children. And still, we are not able to pass even the most basic of gun control legislation. Indeed, after each shooting the first thing that happens is that gun sales explode across the country; not because people don't feel safe, but because they fear Obama is going to respond by taking away their guns.

Many have cheered Obama's leadership since Newtown, especially the emotional speech he made as his gun control legislation ground to a halt. The fact remains that he, too, believes that Americans have the right to carry weapons; indeed, one of his very first comments as the cry went out for gun control legislation was to remind Americans that we have to respect other people's right to bear arms.

In conversations about climate change people talk about the tipping point, that moment when such dramatic change happens that it appears to have come from out of nowhere. In fact, the change was quietly happening all along, little by little. At the moment, when it comes to American's gun control laws, it seems like all we can hope is that such a tipping point is on its way. It certainly doesn't seem like a damn thing is happening right now.

What is clear — and a lesson for politicians and voters in both the United States and Australia — is this: if you spend your time creating a climate of anxiety, whipping up hysteria or building walls in order to score political points or justify prejudice, the inevitable eventual result is going to be children lying dead in your streets or drowned off your shores. And that should haunt our days.

Conversations about a damaged marriage

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Before Midnight* (MA). Director: Richard Linklater. Starring: Julie Delpy, Ethan Hawke. 109 minutes**

Eighteen years have passed since *Before Sunrise*, writer-director Linklater's gorgeous paean to the idealism of youth and intensity of new love. In it, American writer Jesse (Hawke) and French woman Celine (Delpy) meet on a train travelling across Europe, spontaneously disembark together and spend a long night talking life, literature and art on the streets of Vienna. At the end they part, pledging to meet back in Vienna in one year's time.

Before Midnight picks up the thread with a now middle-aged Jesse and Celine holidaying in Greece with their two young daughters. It is the third installment (after 2004's *Before Sunset*) and like its predecessors is built around a series of long and intimate conversations, this time finding the fray, familiarity and fineness in the fabric of a long-term relationship. It is minimalist dramatic cinema at its best; a work of subdued and unlikely genius.

Unlikely, because on the surface there is something repellent about the film. The characters are entitled and self-absorbed. They are in Greece on the invitation of an older writer, who is interested in the achievements of Jesse, who is by now an accomplished novelist. The sight of Jesse lolling about the grounds of the writer's rural homestead, expounding the recondite premise of his next book, might rightly induce eye-rolling.

Their experience of Greece is of the postcard variety; idyllic, and numb to the current grim reality of that country. Yet to an extent that's beside the point. Despite the film's endless large conversations, its focus is smaller. Discussions of philosophy and art illuminate individual worldviews and reveal how their conflict or confluence impacts the lived reality of relationships. 'Conversation' and 'relationship' become interchangeable terms.

In this regard, *Before Midnight* is compelling. Hawke and Delpy share co-writing credit with Linklater, and immerse themselves in the characters, probing every fierce and fragile corner of their emotional being. They follow the complex coils and contours of conversations that circumvent points of pain or conflict, or occasionally land upon them with furious, destructive honesty. Whatever their pretensions, these characters and their relationship *live*.

These are fine actors who share a palpable chemistry that is the greatest strength of Linklater's films. In *Before Midnight* a cute, sweet game of watching the sun set ('Going... going...' chimes Celine) turns abruptly to profound sadness, as the sun dips below the horizon and Celine, whose look of deep sorrow is mirrored in Jesse's, utters, '...| gone'. The powerful emotion of this simple scene

reveals the hidden complexity of the performances.

The weakest (though by no means weak) installment of Linklater's series was *Before Sunset*, in which Jesse and Celine were reunited for the first time since meeting in Vienna, having missed the original pledged rendezvous. It was engaging but somewhat unfulfilling, following the characters for 80-odd minutes through the streets of Paris in a single uninterrupted take, and coming off more like a filmmaking exercise than a complete and satisfying film.

Before Midnight is more robust, with a longer running time and expanded cast. There is a scene in which Celine and Jesse share lunch with three other couples, one older, one younger, one of similar age. The conversations here about the nature of relationships at these different stages, provide a template for Celine and Jesse to reflect upon the past and future of their own relationship; nostalgia and cynicism for the former, dimmed hope for the latter.

It provides thematic context for the conversations that occur as the film turns with voyeuristic vigour to address all the ugliness and beauty of their present. They head out to enjoy a final night in Greece, eventually landing in a hotel, where the conversation goes swiftly from lightness, to intimacy, to pragmatism, to confrontation, to something akin to exorcism. The film ends on a hopeful note, but in no doubt that the conversation is unfinished.

Pope Francis' three types of intelligence

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

I wrote last week about the [virtues](#) of Pope Francis' unbuttoned style of leadership. It was open for inspection when he visited the island of Lampedusa. This is Italy's Christmas Island, the closest point to the African coast and so the magnet for people who seek protection or a better life in Europe. As in Australia, there is much animus against people who seek asylum, and many die making the sea voyage. So the Pope's exercise of leadership there encourages reflection on how Australian public figures might respond to sea borne asylum seekers.

Giving a lead on controversial issues requires three sorts of intelligence: rational, emotional and symbolic. When policies affect people's lives, Emotional intelligence should come first into play. It is the ability and inclination to see people, not simply as the objects of policy or as problems, but as persons each with their own face and life story. It also supposes the desire to enter their experience. In this respect the Pope was exemplary. He went out to the island to mourn the dead and console the living. And in so doing he stated the priority for others.

Rational intelligence guides and offers resources to the movements of the heart. It confers the ability to recognise and to give coherent shape to what matters in a complex situation. The Pope's action rested on the conviction that all human beings are precious, and that their happiness and welfare depend on their connection with one another. Because of that we can make a claim on one another.

For Francis, too, that conviction was grounded in the Christian story of a God who loved the world enough to join humanity, to die as human beings do, and to give life in his rising. This belief shaped the account he gave of the events on Lampedusa. For him the disparity between the societies from which people fled and those to which they came and the hostility to them expressed a lack of solidarity between people. Sinfulness was involved as well as tragedy. The proper response to this globalisation of indifference was penitential.

Leaders need not only to recognise who matters, what matters, and what is to be done, but to communicate this to others honestly and vividly. It requires symbolic intelligence to find the right words, images, silences and gestures that will invite others to reflect and respond generously. Good leadership creates surprising new possibilities that will later seem self-evident. In the Pope's case, the challenge was to choose stories, images and gestures from the resources of Christian tradition and to weave them in a way that resonated powerfully with the people he visited and with the wider audience.

Because it works through surprise, symbolic intelligence always breaks moulds.

That has been Francis' gift. Papal protocol ensures predictability by insisting on distance, formality, strict adherence to rituals, elaborate dress, controlled access and elaborately planned events. The protocol for political leaders is equally tightly scripted.

The Pope privileged spontaneity over protocols. He responded to a forgotten people by visiting them, casting into the water a bunch of flowers in the papal colours to express solidarity with those who had died, and celebrating Mass at an altar and with a chalice made of wood scavenged from abandoned boats. For Catholics the association of altar and chalice with Christ's blood poured into the wooden cross on which he was nailed and left to die, spoke of the inhumanity which we visit on one another, of the gift the misused are to us, and of the undeniable claim we make on one another.

This was leadership of a high order on an issue that troubles Australians. It hinted at what we might hope for from our leaders and ask of ourselves. Emotional intelligence means imagining ourselves on a boat with mothers and children fleeing from persecution, and looking into their faces as we board their boat, seize control and tow it back into Indonesian waters. It means looking into the face of a mother we have sent back to Indonesia as her child faces death because she cannot buy essential medicine. It means saying no to these ways of acting.

Rational intelligence means asking who and what matters in policy, and answering that people matter, and that the health of society demands we recognise the claim that others make on us in their distress. It means refraining from dishonest and pejorative descriptions of people and sanitised abstractions that conceal brutal policies.

Symbolic intelligence means finding ways to tell the human story of people who seek asylum, and ways to commend solidarity within our own society and with other societies.

This is a hard ask. But perhaps it is no harder than to thread your journey from the land where you are persecuted, through land and sea, to seek a new and free life.

Bookworm skinned by kin and Kindle

CREATIVE

Gillian Bouras

In pre-Kindle days book-lovers, perhaps fearing the fate of the bibliophile who was crushed to death by his own collapsing bookshelves, nerved themselves, very occasionally, to the torture of a cull. Torture, yes, for getting rid of books, as a dear friend remarks, is similar to peeling off a layer of skin.

I remember my parents once deciding that Something Had to be Done about their fairly unmanageable and catholic collection of books. My father nobly volunteered, and sorted through about a thousand volumes, from which number he selected six he thought he could part with: just. Then my mother happened along, and exclaimed, 'Good Heavens, Bill, we can't throw out these three!'

I have recently had to Do Something about a book cull; what agony it has been. And all the while wise words haunted me. *A life ruined by literature*: Anita Brookner. *People tell me that life is the thing, but I prefer reading*: Logan Pearsall Smith. *A book is like a garden in your pocket*: Chinese proverb.

When I, a Melburnian, knew that I was going to spend six months in Greece on a holiday that subsequently got well out of hand, as decades later I am still here, I arranged for a trunk of books to be sent over: I knew there were no libraries where I was going, and that there would be very few English books available. My illiterate mother-in-law was stupefied, but rallied quickly. 'So many books,' she said. 'Can't you sell some of them?'

I did not answer, but should have known she would react like this, as during her one visit to Melbourne she had told me roundly that too much *thiavasma*, reading, was undoubtedly the cause of my prematurely grey hair and my need to wear glasses.

Although many of my ancestors were also illiterate, once others got to Australia and acquired some education, there was no stopping them: they had caught the reading bug and never became interested in finding an antidote. Dickens was a particular favourite, and legend has it that my mother's maternal grandfather Robert used to read the current volume aloud to his wife Fan in bed at night. She, poor woman, had eight children, and was understandably drooping with fatigue at the end of each day. Robert didn't care: the reading was the thing.

'You're not listening, Fan,' he is supposed to have said fairly regularly.

'Yes I am, Robert.'

'Well then, what was the last word?'

My maternal grandmother, Robert's daughter, had her own strong opinions, and declared Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge* to be a dreadful book. She much preferred

reading her *Schofield Reference Bible*, so much so that it often travelled on the top layer of her shopping basket. She certainly read a chunk of Holy Writ every day. I, too, have a similar Bible. I cannot claim to read a chunk every day, but there The Good Book sits on my shelf, alongside the *Scottish Psalter* and *Church Hymnary* that belonged to my other grandmother.

These are volumes I will never part with. The longer you have a book, the harder it is to separate from it. It doesn't matter whether it is falling apart, or how badly foxed it is, or how badly the acid-based paper is faring: such a book is of your life. Other volumes I will never throw out are my copies of the old Victorian Second and Fifth Grade Readers, for every so often I have to remember the Hobyahs skip, skip, skipping on the ends of their toes, and re-read Frank Hudson's *Pioneers*. 'We are the Old-world people/ Ours were the hearts to dare.'

I estimate I've now disposed of about 300 books in one way or another, and I don't feel the better or the lighter for it. Instead I feel a sense of loss: part of the epidermis has gone. However, I've learned one thing. Although none of us knows where we're going, I will recognise Hell when I see it: I'll be throwing out books for all eternity. If I should be so lucky as to make it to Heaven, I'll know it, too: at least part of it will be an endless library. With not a Kindle in sight.

Australia falls for a fistful of fibs

AUSTRALIA

Elenie Poulos

If there's one thing that Bob Carr's recent comments on asylum seekers demonstrated it was that our politicians think they can say anything they want about 'boat people' and not be held to account for the truth. Our long and steady decline into the almost total victimisation of a vulnerable group of people continues. We are now at the point where it seems that the truth of people's lives counts for nothing.

Much has been written lately about the impoverishment of our public conversations and how they have become captive to political spin, endlessly repeated catch phrases and just plain, brazen lying for political and ideological gain. Well, the results are in — as individuals and as a society we have been captured by the lies and easy phrases. Our view of the world around us and our place in it bears too little resemblance to the truth of it; and in this we are doomed to live disconnected, small and impoverished lives.

We can see this at work in the pessimism about the state of our economy, one of the healthiest in the world, and the tendency of those of us with very healthy incomes to regard ourselves as somewhat 'poor'. We see it in the scepticism about human-induced climate change and its devastating effects — better to believe a comfortable lie than an unpalatable scientific truth. But in no other area of public policy have our hearts and minds been duped by this destructive rhetoric more than on issues relating to asylum seekers who arrive by boat.

It seems like truth and integrity have caught a boat and sailed right out of here.

Back in 1996 the Australian Government did what no other country in the world has done. It linked the intake numbers for the offshore humanitarian program (this is about the resettlement of refugees — not an obligation under the Refugee Convention) with those of the onshore protection program (the processing of claims for protection by asylum seekers who arrive on our shores which is the obligation we do have under the Convention).

Overnight the rhetoric of 'queue jumper' was born. By linking these two separate programs, the claim could now be made that for every person who comes 'uninvited' by boat, one long suffering refugee from the camps in Africa and Southeast Asia misses out.

It does not have to be this way, but no-one tells us this. There is bipartisan support for this policy and bipartisan abuse of the truth about this policy setting. If the concern is, as I am often told by politicians from both major parties, that the 'floodgates' would open if the programs were de-linked, then let us have that conversation. Now, all we have is a public mindset held captive to a great lie that gives us permission to treat people badly.

Carr spun a lie we have heard before — that asylum seekers who arrive by boat are not seeking protection from persecution and harm, they are seeking greater economic opportunity. There was no nuance in his statement. There was no evidence behind it. As has often been said in reply to him on this matter, we do have a refugee determination process that is designed to assess people's claims. It is a fact that the majority of people who arrive by boat are granted refugee status and that some are not (those seeking 'economic' outcomes, perhaps).

When Carr, and too many others like him, strip the truth of people's lives from the public debate, we become disconnected from the reality of those lives — the reality of what it might be like to be one of the thousands the Government dumped in limbo when it stopped processing the claims of those who arrived after 13 August 2012; the reality that to be an asylum seeker in Indonesia means you live scared; that people will continue to make perilous journeys to find security for themselves and their families; that our neighbours in Kiribati and Tuvalu are one day going to need to join that imaginary queue because we cannot wean ourselves off fossil fuels.

Along with my colleagues and my church, I am often charged with being a 'bleeding heart', which is code for being 'too soft' on people who don't deserve our compassion, or uninformed about the hard facts of life, like the importance of the economy above all else. I will wear this charge proudly because as a Christian advocate for social justice I have a responsibility to understand how our policies, systems and structures actually affect people. I look forward to the day when we stop buying the lies and start paying more attention to the truth of people's lives.

Trying hard not to die

CREATIVE

Various

Mueller River estuary

Over the curve of the dune
that bars the old mouth of the estuary
and sends the freezing
chocolate-silted water flowing east half a click
before it disgorges in the sea,
still stands the same tall eucalypt,
wind-ripped to the shape of a claw,
and to landward a coast banksia,
a black-green maw
big as a building.

For fear of that claw above,
and the deep darkness below,
we would not take that way
through the dunes at night.

All else is gone. Wind and tide destroy
and remake, traceless.

Creepers have taken

the warm stretch of sand in the lee of the wind
where we once made a man-trap
of sticks and spinifex. The wind
has flattened the dune-grassed bluff
where we sat to drink warm filched beer
with the boys from the next camp, so giddy
with the idea of ourselves
we could barely speak.

When I pierce the taut sheet of the wind

at the crest of the dunes
and stagger to the shore,
Ninety Mile Beach is entirely
itself: too bleak for beauty, salt-haze thickening
to an inconsolable horizon. But the foreshore dunes
are a dough rebaked
as a wholly different loaf;
sand fills the granite pools
where we once caught crabs in buckets,
bares unknown rocks.

Something I thought to be true
has proved to be false, and I stand holding
the charlatan's empty hat.

Such a relief, never to have had children,
not to have propped above another's door
the bucket of this foolish
desolation.

Still an angry pair of plovers patrols
the vanguard line of dunes.

Their kind lives twenty years —
this may be the same wicked pair
that made me run and scream.

Is this my consolation? It flies
straight at my eye, yellow-beaked,
crying out like a woman struck
from a height, and falling.

I am driving with my father

I am driving with my father
in a place where green and stony hills
rise like mesa, thin and steep,

like the holes in Swiss cheese inverted.
A narrow road winds up
and down and around.
We have to hurry.
My tires plough the verge:
dirt falls to nothing,
starbursts of mustard-gold.
I am trying too hard not to die, to worry
if my father is angry.
Someone else is in the car:
who?
Now we're in Port Arthur, where Mum and Dad
were once together, still in love.
A ruin of sandstone bricks
on a plateau washing away from within,
holes in the ground beneath
as if we're looking down the barrel of stalactites
from a hole in the roof of a cave.
I am so careful, so slow.
No, it's not Port Arthur, it's College Crescent and
all the students' dormitories
are falling down in the holes in the ground.
I try to drive but all the students
want to talk to me, they have a form
they had to fill out; now no-one
is taking the form, or doing the thing
they need to do with the form.
Everyone is disappointed in me. In the corner
the office has crumbled
to the green abyss.

Where is my father? By the car
by a fallen colonnade, like ancient Rome.
The other person lurks behind a column,
face in shadow. Who is that?
But we need to go: we need to drive
up a mesa thin as a needle in the distance,
ascend a narrow spiral of road
into the clouds, where surely I will miss the turn
and let us fall and die:
I am eager to begin.

Women pioneers of Aboriginal Catholicism

RELIGION

Mike Bowden

We arrived in Ernabella where I was to assume the position of Community Adviser to the Pukatja Community Council after a harrowing journey through floods and mud. On alighting from the Land Rover our family was welcomed by the Council President. Quickly a small group of Pitjantjatjara women drew me aside. 'Welcome,' they said. 'Remember that there are a lot of women here who have opinions and needs too. Don't let the men dominate!'

The word Pukatja referred to a men's *tjukurpa* (dreaming) and the women were very conscious that they also had a mutual role to play in the running of the community. Clearly they feared that I'd be captured into a male dominated agenda. In the context of our arrival the words of these women have stuck with me over many years like the mud on the wheels of the Land Rover.

Pitjantjatjara culture has two sides. As a man I was welcomed into the men's side and was invited to man-making ceremonies. My wife was similarly quickly invited to attend women's secret business. We both went on trips to exclusive places and saw things that were religiously unforgettable.

Ernabella, having experienced Christianity under the mandate of the Scottish-born Aboriginal rights campaigner Dr Charles Duguid, had morphed into a two-domain religious community. While both men and women enthusiastically follow the *tjukurpa* at 'business time', on a Sunday many attend the Uniting Church in the heart of the community.

Our family felt quite at home in this new environment, but also benefited from visits by the Catholic priest from Coober Pedy. Father Paul was almost always accompanied by Sister Karen. Given Pitjantjatjara culture this was most sensible. In matters religious Paul could talk with the blokes but only Karen had entranced into the world of the women.

On Sundays we attended the Uniting Church. While the Church had ordained Peter Nyangu he was not the only person who presided. Often other men or women led the service. Within the Uniting Church in Ernabella women played a pivotal role. The equal and complementary roles of men and women, so central to Pitjantjatjara religious practice, had been transferred to their Christian practices.

A few years later in Alice Springs I witnessed the work of Sister Robyn Reynolds OLSH in the Sacred Heart parish centre. She was a fluent Arrernte speaker and had close, warm bonds with the Catholic Arrernte women in Alice. There were other religious women such as Sister of Cluny Val O'Donnell and many other OLSH sisters who contributed to the development of a unique Catholic Arrernte spirituality. Today Nicole Traves-Johnson centres her life's work on concern for Arrernte people.

Yet the principal roles in religious practice in our Catholic experience with Indigenous groups have been negotiated by men of the cloth. These wonderful women have been in supporting roles from the earliest days, while the Church's patriarchy has prevailed.

Catholic theology sees sacraments as visible signs of God's efficacious action in the lives of the faithful. The ceremonial action of a sacrament symbolises to the community that something mysterious is occurring. In baptism, for example, the use of water, fire and oil symbolise to the community the changes (cleansed, sighted and chosen) that are experienced by the baptised.

As the Catholic Encyclopaedia says: 'we can say that the whole world is a vast sacramental system, in that material things are unto men [sic] the signs of things spiritual and sacred, even of the Divinity'. Using this definition the Pitjantjatjara ceremonies I have participated in are truly sacramental.

After Sr Robyn left Alice, Agnes Palmer, M. K. Turner and Leonie Palmer emerged as independent leaders of the Ngkarte Mikwekenhe (Mother of God) Community (NMC) of Arrernte Catholics. They included Arrernte practices such as the smoking ritual in the weekly masses. The hymns were sung in Arrernte and, while Fr Pat Mullins SJ was chaplain to the NMC in the late 1990s, the Eucharistic prayer was said in Arrernte. The scriptures were read in Arrernte and Agnes Palmer preached in Arrernte.

The few non-Arrernte present had to do their best to discover what was happening. But for the Arrernte present it was patent.

The Catholic Church has taken some enormous steps towards making its ceremonial life more meaningful to Indigenous members. In my experience it has been women in the main who have pioneered this. But today many of these women in Central Australia, Arrernte and non-Arrernte alike, are ageing or become tired and jaded from lack of recognition. Vernacular practices are decaying.

The pioneering work has been done. It is time for the gifts of women to be recognised and utilised in the religious practice of the Catholic Church, especially in an Aboriginal context.

The alchemy of Australia's personality politics

AUSTRALIA

Fatima Measham



Over the past couple years, I have observed with some sympathy the frustrations of Labor members over the apparent media obsession with leadership contests. Their argument that political discourse should be about policies rather than personalities is valid. The reality, however, is far more complex. We have always voted, with varied intensity, for personalities. We are susceptible to charisma — a quirk that has been exploited since the first televised [debate](#) between Kennedy and Nixon. We saw it at work here in Bob Hawke.

It was at play when Kevin Rudd won in 2007 and Barack Obama in 2008. If it were only a matter of ditching the incumbent and voting for change, any of their predecessors could have delivered. After all, party platforms rarely shift from one leadership change to another. These men won because they seized public sentiment in a way that preceding candidates did not. The success of their campaigns echoes Bill Clinton's image-driven run in 1992, which [mined](#) his childhood and featured an election-turning saxophone [performance](#) on *The Arsenio Hall Show*.

The straightforward explanation for this phenomenon is that we are social beings. It is in our nature to be captivated or repulsed by people. The argument recently [posed](#) by veteran journalist George Negus — that voters should vote for the ideology of a party rather than its leader — is therefore inadequate.

It ignores the fact that our attachment to ideas and organisations is often inextricable from our attachment to their leading proponents. This is as much the case in politics as it is in other areas like religion, economics and philosophy. Our belief systems or loyalties live and die according to the perceived credibility of leaders. It explains in part why questions regarding trust and authenticity are potent in elections, or rather, toxic for the hapless candidate, as former Prime Minister Julia Gillard found.

Mere ideology doesn't bind if the sense of betrayal and disillusionment runs deep enough. This is not necessarily a matter of sentimentality. In the postmodern setting, where politicians themselves seem to pick and choose which aspects of their party philosophy to stand by, it shouldn't be a surprise that voters have lost their compass. The problem is not that *they* have abandoned their ideological sensibilities, as Negus implies. Our political parties have.

Consider, for instance, how an ostensibly economically Liberal Party under Tony Abbott has been vociferous in its opposition to a market-based policy on climate change. Or an ostensibly socially democratic Labor Government downgraded single-parent payments to leverage workforce participation, when single parents

have been identified as at risk of falling into poverty. We see the same dissonance across the Pacific, where a Democratic government led by a Nobel Peace Prize winner has been far more hawkish on war and security than its Republican predecessors.

In other words, voters find it difficult to buy ideas wholesale when they don't make sense in retail. This is gritty stuff: imagine a voter who would like to see the Labor Party build on reforms in education and health but cannot abide its policy on asylum seekers. 'Ideology' has limited value under such conditions.

This is where the focus on personalities actually matters. Much of the dissatisfaction with leaders ultimately rests on a public assessment of the way policies are prosecuted. The fact is that whoever is on top does determine the policy direction for the party and the cohesiveness of its agenda. There is no clearer demonstration of this than the fact that the Liberal Party backtracked on an emissions trading scheme that had been negotiated in good faith by Malcolm Turnbull, by replacing him with Tony 'Climate Change is Crap' Abbott.

In the case of Labor, the justification in 2010 that 'the Government has lost its way' under Rudd turned out not to refer to policy but his character. Partisans can thus hardly complain that the media obsesses over personalities.

As for the electorate, the focus on personalities does not always constitute undemocratic laziness or a reality-show mentality, but a demand for leadership on specific issues. If anything has been reinforced lately it is that there is alchemy to political leadership. It turns out that one can govern reasonably well, build consensus, and institute important reform but still not convince. Maybe we're poorer for that. Or perhaps as an electorate, we have become more astute about the nuances of our choice.

Facts alone won't save Australia's fatuous political agenda

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

In the midst of widespread disillusionment with Australian politics, there is suddenly hope for improvement. Contest is a vital ingredient of democracy, and the ALP's recent change of leadership has suddenly made the party competitive during this year's federal election campaign.

In a further surprise, the contest is likely to be enriched by a standard of truthfulness that we have not seen in many years. This is the promise of new fact-checking websites, including *The Conversation's* [Election Fact-Check](#), former Fairfax editor Peter Fray's [PolitiFact](#), The Australia Institute's [Facts Fight Back](#), and the fact checking reports to be presented by journalist John Barron on ABC news and current affairs programs.

But while the fact checkers will promote a new element of rigour in the campaign, the quality of debate will remain compromised by a lack of scrutiny on what determines the political agenda, which is the necessarily limited range of topics that are debated. It is one thing to be able to trust facts that we are presented with, but another to know that they are relevant to our wellbeing as a nation.

It is pleasing that PolitiFact is able to [demonstrate](#) that foreign minister Bob Carr's claim that boat people 'are not people fleeing persecution ... they are coming here as economic migrants' is 'mostly false'. But even if Carr's claim was mostly true, how does discussion of the comparatively small number of economic migrants justify its place on the agenda, compared with issues such as the mental health of Australia's youth?

Which of these two issues has more bearing on our future wellbeing? While mental health has largely fallen off the agenda, others — such as inheritance taxes — are kept off the agenda. It has to be asked whether this is by design, and whose design it is.

The formation of the political agenda should be the result of a rational and orderly process that is transparent and based on good argument and solid evidence. But more often it's either *ad hoc*, or determined by popular media and various lobbies and sectional interests. We could use a 'PolitiAgenda' website, which would undoubtedly demonstrate the fatuous nature of what makes up much of the national agenda.

We would set ourselves up for a better future if we allowed academic researchers to become more influential, as they are able to challenge old assumptions and set out blueprints for new possibilities. Popular media, on the other hand, too often hold us back.

We only need to compare the list of articles in [The Conversation](#) — set up to communicate university research findings — with the [rundown](#) of Ray Hadley’s morning show on radio 2GB. Hadley’s agenda is no doubt informed by the ‘common touch’, which in itself is a positive. But it is not equipped to map the nation’s future in the way the academic research is.