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Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

Requests for permission to reprint material from the website and this edition should be addressed to the Editor.

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Responsibility for editorial content is accepted by the publisher.

Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned.

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Veteran muckraker wrestles with God

REVIEWS

Barry Gittins and Jen Vuk

Living With a Wild God, by Barbara Ehrenreich. Hachette, April 2014.

[Website](#)

Barry:

Post-colonial Australians have historically been sceptical about 'Godbotherers'; the book we're discussing walks the knife edge of faith and doubt. Depending on when you asked her, militant atheist, scientist, author and investigative writer Barbara Ehrenreich would either dismiss any notion of a god, or admit the questions and experiences she's harboured since her teen years.

In *Living With a Wild God*, Ehrenreich notes many reasons for her exploration of an 'ancient, childish quest ... the huge weight of my unfinished project'. There's her own possible expiry date (the author's a breast cancer survivor), alongside depression and 'emotional luggage accumulated over the journey' such as familial alcoholism.

There's also long-delayed reactions to her mother's coldness and self-abnegation; her father's anti-Semitism and destructive tendencies ... Personally, I think it is her laudable intellectual honesty that drives this sometimes humorous, often moving memoir. Ehrenreich herself (tongue doubtless wedged firmly in cheek) credits the book to despair ebbing from 'a couple of disasters [and] an act of God' (Hurricane Wilma) that swept away 'most of the evidence of my existence — the paper traces anyway' but left her girlhood diary intact in storage.

The book rises or falls on the readers' grasp of Ehrenreich's God encounters in earlier years, chiefly on a strange skiing trip (influenced to whatever extent also by an episode of being unknowingly drugged by an acquaintance).

I warmed to the teen angst as revealed, just as I do the mature reflecter; her flirtations with Hinduism, her varied religious experiences beautifully and clinically recaptured, her defiant intellectualism and defensive ripostes (her dismissal of human beings as 'hive animals' must have provided comfort to her as an alienated young intellectual).

Feisty young Barb's search for meaning can't and won't be dismissed as the combination of teen sorrow, loneliness and acne — she will not dismiss her 'adolescent's weepy confessions'.

How does a budding young scientist deal with the fallout of 'seeing God'?

The author has the guts to acknowledge that perception of life is an uncertain permutation; and 'the problem might be me'. She posits the 'buried possibility that

there exist other beings, agents, forces other than those that are visible and agreed upon' while making classic mystical observations ('sometimes, out of all this static and confusion, the Other assembles itself and takes form before our very eyes').

Ultimately, while noting science can and does 'dismiss anomalous 'mystical' experiences as symptoms of mental illness', Ehrenreich wrestles her discontent and mistrust of self into submission by boldly declaring that it 'is not unscientific to search for what may not be there — from intelligent aliens to Higgs bosons ... It is something we may be innately compelled to do.'

While acknowledging universal moral truths ('Mercy is left entirely to us'), Ehrenreich says contending with God may in fact be obligatory; as 'ultimately we may have no choice in this matter ... it may be seeking us out'.

Jen:

Known as one of the greatest minds writing in America today, Barbara Ehrenreich was a name that had somehow escaped me. And then came the day that her latest book landed in my letter box.

But, oh, what a discovery. *The New Yorker* calls the 71-year-old 'a veteran muckraker', a label the 'social critic, journalist, author, activist' probably wears happily enough. After all, Ehrenreich sees herself as 'a myth buster by trade', cemented by her best-known book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, in which the author went undercover — la George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*.

And that's just for starters. Ehrenreich also shows herself to be no slouch in the area of the confessional arts. This is her story (although it's less of a retelling and more of a revelation) and she unloads heart and soul. But it's Ehrenreich's mind that challenges and confounds in equal measure. Hers is an intellect that can't be contained or tamed.

That said, alongside this formidable intellect sits an uncomfortable memory. As Barry writes, when Ehrenreich was a young woman she came face to face 'with something vast, terrifying and unknowable'.

'In the next few minutes, on that empty street, I found whatever I had been looking for,' she writes. 'Here we leave the jurisdiction of language, where nothing is left ... But there is one image, handed down over the centuries, that seems to apply, and that is the image of fire, as in the 'burning bush' ... '

We mustn't take for granted the courage this took coming from such a committed atheist (and former dedicated solipsist). What's more, in leaving behind 'the jurisdiction of language', the author stumbles toward oblivion, having to clutch at clichés (how that must have hurt); laying herself bare to denigration and outright ridicule.

But what struck me most about these passages is how present the young Ehrenreich is here (the author does draw liberally from the tortured thoughts of her adolescent self via those recently chanced-upon diaries). It's probably also one of the few times that the author lets us see the chink in her veneer. This is revealing, yes, but it's also more than that. It's touching.

The questions are too big, Ehrenreich seems to say, to play games. 'What is the point of our brief existence?' she writes. 'What are we doing here and to what end?'

What can be more human than to be haunted by these questions? But it's in the 'straining to understand' that we come to realise that the line separating atheist and believer is far more blurred than it first appears.

The Pope, the President and our pro-coal PM

ENVIRONMENT

Neil Ormerod

Pope Francis is creating a seismic shift in how the Catholic Church talks about climate change. While both John Paul II and Benedict XVI made reference to climate change in passing, Francis is planning an entire encyclical on environmental questions, which is expected to be released later this year. It is not difficult to predict that climate change will be on top of his agenda.

This will be a timely intervention by the Pope as Australia is rapidly retreating from its small gains in carbon pollution reduction. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has not only promised to cancel any pricing mechanism on carbon, he is dismantling anything that resembles government investment in renewable energy production.

In his recent speech to the Minerals Council of Australia he argued that it is 'particularly important that we do not demonise the coal industry', adding that the Government wants to keep mining strong because 'it is our destiny in this country to bring affordable energy to the world'.

Significantly the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has just taken steps to align itself with US federal government action on climate change. It has written a letter to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) addressing the issue, and making the link between carbon emissions and climate change.

Noting the EPA's 'efforts to develop standards to reduce carbon pollution from existing power plants and thereby mitigate climate change', it says:

The USCCB recognises the importance of finding means to reduce carbon pollution. These standards should protect the health and welfare of all people, especially children, the elderly ... poor and vulnerable communities, from harmful pollution emitted from power plants and from the impacts of climate change.

While acknowledging that they are not 'experts on carbon pollution or on the technical remedies to address climate change', they do speak as pastors, recalling Francis' call that 'Creation ... is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude.'

It notes that coal-fired power plants have often been located near low-income neighborhoods and 'communities of color' and that 'air pollution from these plants contributes to respiratory problems, especially in the young and the elderly'. It highlights the 'damaging impacts from climate-related events in the United States and across the globe, particularly on poor and vulnerable communities'. Internationally it notes that:

the communities served by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) are already experiencing the tragic consequences of climate change. Increasingly limited

access to water, reduced crop yields, more widespread disease, increased frequency and intensity of droughts and storms, as well as conflict over declining resources — all these are making the lives of the world's poorest people even more precarious.

Far from seeing cheap coal as the solution to the world's energy problems, the bishops note that it is the poor of the world who are being most affected by climate change, not in some foreseeable future but in the here and now. Cheap coal comes at too high a price.

This letter is remarkable for two reasons. Like the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, the US Conference is not without its climate change sceptics. Yet here they have acted in unison in writing to the EPA supporting action on this issue.

Moreover, in doing so they are supporting the policy of President Barack Obama, who is seeking to use environmental regulation to impose stricter limits on carbon emissions. He was forced to take this direction in the face of opposition from Republicans in the legislative arena. So not only are the Catholic bishops supporting Obama on this issue, they are doing so in the face of Republican opposition.

The bishops have often been portrayed as staunch opponents of the Obama agenda and continue to oppose aspects of its healthcare program, but here they are clearly aligning themselves with this policy direction.

During Abbott's forthcoming visit to Obama he will find a president not only willing to take strong action in relation to climate change, but doing so with the public support of the US Catholic bishops. This is not a situation he will find comfortable given that in the Australian context he has always previously been able to count on the support of Cardinal Pell to muddy the waters on climate change.

The letter from the USCCB comes a week after the joint statement by Francis and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (known as the 'green' Patriarch) after their historical meeting in Jerusalem, marking the 50th anniversary of the meeting between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras. In a brief statement of ten paragraphs an entire paragraph is devoted to the environmental question:

We acknowledge in repentance the wrongful mistreatment of our planet, which is tantamount to sin before the eyes of God. We reaffirm our responsibility and obligation to foster a sense of humility and moderation so that all may feel the need to respect creation and to safeguard it with care.

Together, we pledge our commitment to raising awareness about the stewardship of creation; we appeal to all people of goodwill to consider ways of living less wastefully and more frugally, manifesting less greed and more generosity for the protection of God's world and the benefit of his people.

In penning his encyclical Francis will be emboldened by his meeting with

Bartholomew, with whom he shares a 'profound conviction that the future of the human family depends also on how we safeguard — both prudently and compassionately, with justice and fairness — the gift of creation that our Creator has entrusted to us'.

Vatican perspective on Australia's refugee brutality

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Very few Vatican documents on world events are exciting. Most are broad, stress continuities, offer a detached, almost bloodless, view of the state of the world and give the Catholic Church a central and serene role in it. But these qualities can be helpful when local response to these events is febrile and anxious.

So the Vatican [guidelines](#) on ministry to forcibly displaced persons provide a helpful mirror to reflect the public Australian response to asylum seekers. It offers a long view of Catholic reflection on refugees and a broad perspective on the human reality of having to seek protection.

The consistent core of Catholic teaching has been the insistence that people who are forced to leave their homes are human beings who matter. For that reason the document brings together categories of people whose are usually artificially separated: those persecuted both within and outside their own nations, those trafficked for sex and work, those in the refugee camps and cities in neighbouring countries, and those living in developed nations. All are seen as human beings who make a claim on other human beings by their precarious plight.

The political reality of forced migration is also described in broad terms.

Most people who flee their own nations remain in adjacent countries, hoping to be able to return home. These countries carry by far the greatest burden of supporting refugees and are usually the least equipped to do so. But in the host country they are also often forced to live precarious lives in fear of violence and extortion.

Those who do find their way to developed nations also find increasing hostility and lack of acceptance. These attitudes are often rooted in xenophobic and racist attitudes that are encouraged by politicians.

Against this background the document sets the way we as individuals and societies should respond to people forced to flee their own nations. The principles guiding the response are that each human being matters and that their human dignity should be respected. 'The first point of reference should not be the interests of the State or national security but the human person.'

Central to this is 'the need to live in community, a basic requirement of the very nature of human beings.' Human beings are linked by their shared humanity, and our solidarity means that as individuals and as societies we are responsible to each other and particularly to those in need. It is not right to exclude and to treat brutally those who claim our protection.

These principles are grounded in the biblical tradition of hospitality to those in need embodied in the best Christian practice through history.

The document provides a simple and striking description of what protection of refugees entails. 'Families should enjoy personal and family privacy, and the possibility for family reunification in the country of asylum; earn a dignified livelihood with a just wage, live in dwellings fit for human beings; while their children should receive adequate education as well as health care.'

The guidelines for the Catholic care of refugees and asylum seekers in receiving nations present a calm and accepting way of dealing with difference. Church communities should welcome them, respect their culture and language and where possible coordinate their care with the churches in the nations from which they have come.

Overall the document presents a clear and humane approach to people who seek protection from persecution. Its significance does not lie in its political appeal or its immediate practicality but in its internal consistency. A habit of seeing refugees as people, not as problems lies at its core.

This is reflected in the priority given to people and their needs within policy, and so in the way in which they are received. This respect for humanity controls the care taken to adjudicate the claims of those who make a claim on us and in their humane treatment. It is also reflected in the ways in which they are spoken of.

For all its limitations this is a humane document. It provides a mirror in which we can see reflected variously the anxious, narrow, self-preoccupied and brutal faces of the Australian treatment of people who come to us seeking protection. It pleads silently for a better way to our more generous selves.

It's time Parliament had a say on 'disgraceful' PNG solution

AUSTRALIA

Frank Brennan

On Monday night, this exchange took place on ABC 4 Corners between presenter Kerry O'Brien and Archbishop Mark Coleridge about Australia's new system of offshore processing and resettlement for asylum seekers arriving on Australian territory without a visa.

O'BRIEN: Archbishop Coleridge, one of the most powerful moments in the new Pope's reign was his very pointed and poignant visit to the Italian island of Lampedusa to see and be seen with the north Africans who risked their lives on leaky boats to seek asylum in Europe. Now, have you wondered what Pope Francis might think of Australia if he were able to visit the Manus Island detention centre?

COLERIDGE: I think he would be appalled. Just recently, Australian bishops put out a very clear and strong, but measured statement on this very point and I think Pope Francis would subscribe to that statement very strongly, saying that the current policy, supported by both sides of politics, is morally unacceptable and shames our country. And, the need for it to be reconsidered is urgent and what is puzzling and indeed troubling in all of this is that you have politicians who are not themselves cruel people, quite the contrary, but they are presiding over a policy which has to be named cruel.

This cruel arrangement cannot be scrutinised by our courts and it has never been approved by our Parliament. In the name of democracy, in the name of Australian self-respect, and in the name of human rights protection and the rule of law, it is time this arrangement was presented to our Parliament for its approval by our elected representatives or for immediate ditching. This arrangement constitutes a flagrant exercise of wanton executive power without any checks and balances. It's a disgrace.

In his second reading speech for the Migration Legislation Amendment (Offshore Processing and Other Measures) Bill 2011 on 21 September 2011, then Labor Immigration Minister Chris Bowen said:

This bill amends the Migration Act 1958 and the Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act 1946 to clarify the framework for taking irregular maritime arrivals, who arrive in Australia at an excised offshore place, to another country **for assessment of their protection claims**. The purpose of this bill is clear: to restore to the executive the power to set Australia's border protection policies, specifically the power to transfer asylum seekers arriving at excised offshore places to a range of designated third countries within the region, while ensuring protection from refoulement, **for the processing of their claims**.

Importantly, he then went on to spell out the political accountability entailed in the Executive providing materials to the Parliament. He said:

In order to strengthen political accountability, the new section 198AC requires the minister to lay before parliament several documents for the purpose of informing the parliamentary — and public — debate on **the designation of a country as an 'offshore processing country'**.

These documents include:

a statement of the minister's reasons for considering the designation to be in the national interest;

a copy of any written agreement — whether binding or not — with the designated country relating to the transfer of persons;

a statement about consultations with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees;

a summary of any advice received from UNHCR about the designation; and

a statement about any arrangements that are in place, or will be put in place, for the treatment of transferees.

These are criteria that do not go to the validity of the designation. They go to political accountability. In enacting these amendments, this government is plainly intending to re-enliven the arrangement entered into with the government of Malaysia. It is also intending to allow the coalition, opposite, to re-enliven its proposal to transfer boat arrivals to Nauru, should it one day carry the responsibilities of government.

The government believes the Malaysia arrangement is far the superior, removing, as it does, the essential product people smugglers are able to sell their vulnerable customers: the prospect of likely resettlement in Australia.

By comparing the Malaysia and Nauru options, Bowen was suggesting that Malaysia was superior because it included a requirement that those moved to Malaysia were not permitted to return to Australia. He envisaged that any resurrection of the Nauru option would entail the possibility of a durable solution being provided by way of resettlement in Australia.

But for the intent of getting around the High Court decision in relation to the Malaysia solution, members of Parliament and the public were led to believe that any other designation would be for the purposes of **temporary offshore processing** and not for the purposes of **permanent offshore resettlement**.

Neither the PNG Agreement nor the Nauru Agreement negotiated by Kevin Rudd before the commencement of the 2013 election campaign have been scrutinised or approved by the Parliament. It's time they were.

The Nauru agreement depends for legality on the fig leaf of parliamentary coverage given by the tabling of documents by Minister Chris Bowen on 10 September 2012 when he told Parliament:

By presenting the designation and accompanying documents in accordance with the legislation, we are providing the parliament with the opportunity to be satisfied that they are appropriate. Again, I call on both houses of parliament to approve this designation, to enable the first transfers of offshore entry persons to Nauru and to provide the circuit-breaker to irregular maritime arrivals called for by the (Houston) expert panel's report.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) tabled by Bowen provided: 'The Commonwealth of Australia will make all efforts to ensure that all persons entering Nauru under this MOU will depart within as short a time as is reasonably necessary for the implementation of this MOU'.

The Parliament did not disallow the designation of Nauru as a 'regional processing country' in September 2012 but that was because all parliamentarians including Bowen thought that the proposal was that Nauru be a temporary processing country, not a permanent resettlement country which it now is.

On 3 August 2013, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, appearing with Baron Waqa, the President of Nauru, said, 'Today we are pleased to announce that we've reached a new Regional Resettlement Arrangement, one that supersedes the Memorandum of Understanding we signed last year.' Rudd was conceding that this new arrangement bore no resemblance to the one presented to Parliament in September 2012.

The requirement to table such documents in Parliament was legislated when the Parliament decided that it wanted to exclude the High Court from scrutinising future arrangements like the Malaysia Solution. The substitute was that the Parliament itself would have the chance to disallow any arrangement entered into by the Minister for Immigration acting in what he considered to be the national interest.

Rudd went on to say, 'Our Governments have agreed that the Republic of Nauru will not only maintain and extend its regional processing capacity, but it will also provide a settlement opportunity to persons it determines are in need of international protection.' On the eve of the 2013 election, government did this, spared all scrutiny by the High Court and the Parliament.

The Rudd Cabinet purported to be completely immune from all supervision by the other arms of government when deciding to ship asylum seekers, including genuine refugees, across the Pacific Ocean to very precarious futures. The Abbott Cabinet has simply pursued the Rudd policy without feeling any compunction to present this enormous policy change to Parliament despite its doubtful legality.

Presenting the Instrument of Designation of PNG to Parliament on 9 October 2012, Minister Bowen said: 'By presenting the designation and accompanying documents, in accordance with the legislation, I provide the parliament with the opportunity to be satisfied that what is in place, and will be put in place, is appropriate.' He told Parliament: 'Today's designation of Papua New Guinea is a

further step in the government's task of implementing the (Houston) panel's recommendations.'

The accompanying documents included the MOU with PNG which was very specific in dealing only with an Assessment Centre at Manus Island. It stated: 'Papua New Guinea will establish an Assessment Centre in Manus Province for the purposes of this MOU. The Government of Australia will guarantee that all persons entering Papua New Guinea under this MOU will have left within as short a time as is reasonably necessary for the implementation of this MOU.'

Members of Parliament who decided not to disallow the instrument of designation would now be surprised to know that they were agreeing to the establishment of the PNG Solution. The PNG Solution was no part whatever of the Houston Panel recommendations.

It is important to recall that the Houston Panel envisaged that UNHCR and other resettlement countries would be approached with a view to resettling those found to be refugees in Nauru and PNG. It explicitly provided that 'If such refugees require resettlement in Australia, this would be provided at a time comparable to what would have been made available had their claims been assessed through regional processing arrangements.'

Answering a question from the Chief Justice of the High Court about the PNG solution on 13 May 2014, Mr Donaghue QC for the Commonwealth said:

Our submission is that this scheme established by Subdivision B does authorise the taking of persons who may or may not have protection claims to a regional processing country and that it does so whether or not that is consistent with Australia's obligations as a matter of international law.

In saying that, I should point out to your Honours that in the Malaysia Declaration Case at paragraph 117, your Honours acknowledged that the content of international law in that scenario, with respect to persons who have claims that may not have been assessed, is a matter upon which opinions differ.

But, in the event that it is found that such removal is contrary to international obligations, we submit that it is, nevertheless, specifically authorised by this scheme which is why the scheme emphasises that it is for the Minister and for the Parliament to decide, subject to political accountability, whether or not a designation should occur and be allowed to operate in accordance with the scheme.

Parliament has never been asked about the Rudd or Abbott PNG solutions of 2013 and 2014. It's high time the scheme was brought back to Parliament for the application of a fig leaf of political accountability.

At least it would give the Greens, Clive Palmer's senators, the DLP and disaffected ALP members the opportunity to state their principled case against the new scheme which is not for temporary offshore processing but for permanent

offshore resettlement. Our senators should insist that only activities consistent with the documentation provided to them in 2012 be maintained on Manus Island and Nauru.

If the Executive government wants to conduct on Manus Island and Nauru long term detention and resettlement with no option of settlement in Australia rather than short term processing with an option of settlement in Australia, they should seek parliamentary approval. If we are to maintain an arrangement which is 'morally unacceptable and shames our country', we should at least do it with parliamentary approval.

White messiah rides Rwanda's cycle of hope

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Rising From Ashes* (M). Director: T. C. Johnstone. Starring: Jock Boyer, Adrien Niyonshuti. 79 minutes**

In 1981 Californian cyclist Jonathan 'Jock' Boyer became the first American to compete in the Tour de France. In 2002, just four years after being inducted into the United States Cycling Hall of Fame, he was convicted of lewd behaviour with a minor after, in his words, 'crossing the line' with an underage girl. He copped a one-year prison sentence and served out several subsequent years on probation.

Rising From Ashes is a documentary about second chances, and takes 'hope' as its theme. It finds Boyer immersed in his post-prison vocation, as coach of Team Rwanda, a team for Rwandan cyclists, associated with aid organisation Project Rwanda. It is Boyer's story of 'rising from the ashes' of his dark times, paralleled with Rwanda's own resurgent hope, epitomised by the experiences of Boyer's talented but traumatised charges.

It is a redemption story for Boyer, but he is also cast somewhat uncomfortably as a softly spoken 'white messiah'. By his own admission, when he arrived in Rwanda he knew little of the 1994 genocide that saw almost 1,000,000 minority Tutsi and moderate Hutu slaughtered. Less still of the direct personal impact upon the young men he had begun training, all of whom were living witnesses to the slaughter, and lost family members to it.

He draws comparison between the hope that cycling offers these men in the wake of such horrific experiences, and the hope he rediscovered after prison by literally getting back on his bike. It is a sincere if naïve observation. A likeable, flawed hero, he shares an account of the day when, as a six-year-old, he watched his father walk out on his family, and tearfully explains that this experience underpins his commitment to his team.

The film follows the drafting of the 'original five' members of Team Rwanda — Boyer is a firm coach who demands not only a high level of skill but also the right personality traits to achieve excellence — and their initial incursions into competitive cycling in South Africa and America. It captures the bond shared by the team members, who are united not only by their sport but also by their shared, bleak history.

It is a weakness of the film though that they are largely footnotes to Boyer's story. The wife of one cyclist is murdered in an attack apparently provoked by his perceived wealth as a member of Team Rwanda. The film fails to tease out the cultural sensitivities that might have been involved, and gives scant consideration to the young man's life. In this the film is almost myopic in its gentle but persistent adulation of Boyer.

Most prominent of the film's supporting characters is Adrien Niyonshuti, who through his involvement with Team Rwanda went on to receive a professional contract with a South African cycling team. His journey to representing Rwanda at the 2012 London Olympics provides the film with a stirring climax, that cuts between Niyonshuti at the Games and the hopeful faces of ordinary Rwandans clustered around their televisions.

That Niyonshuti finished 39th in that race is beside the point. Boyer is realistic in saying that his work with Team Rwanda and Project Rwanda today is about laying foundations for tomorrow's generations of Rwandans. *Rising From Ashes* is a useful backgrounder for this work but only shows a part of the picture. The real work in Rwanda is ongoing and long-term. For now though, there is always hope.

Australia's siege mentality viewed from Greece

INTERNATIONAL

Gillian Bouras

I left Australia decades ago. Migration was not my idea, but I had it easy, practically speaking, in the Peloponnese: I was not fleeing for my life, I had a family and a house to go to, and there were no threats of death, rape, or imprisonment. Nor were there threats of starvation or poverty. I was the wife of a Greek, and so my rights were acknowledged and my papers in order. I got a job, and my children were always with me.

But still, it was hard, so hard that to this day, putting dreamers and pleasure-seekers aside, I cannot understand the whole process of migration. Still less can I understand official attitudes towards it, for it seems to me that very few people leave their homes and their home countries unless circumstances drive them to it. Circumstances involving desperation, like the Irish potato famine, the Highland Clearances, and the failure of tin in Cornwall that had such an influence on 19th century patterns of migration to Australia.

As I write, the Euro elections have been over for a week, and the results are still being digested and debated. During the campaigns and the counting, it became evident quite early that immigration was *the* issue, even more of an issue than the state of the economy in the various harried nations of Europe.

And worry about immigration seems to be the main contributing factor to the continuing rise of the right-wing parties across the Continent. Here in Greece, for example, the neo-Nazi and racist Golden Dawn polled a disturbing 9 per cent, and has won seats in the European Parliament for the first time.

And what of Australia? Quite frankly, I'm baffled, so baffled that visiting Antipodeans take me to task. 'Get over it, Gillian. The Australia you grew up in and thought you knew has gone forever.'

So it would seem. But it also seems to me that it was a more tolerant country way back then. My parents had friends who were known as DPs, Displaced Persons, and when I started high school Hungarian children were starting to arrive, so that I was repeating the experience my father had had in the 1930s, when Jewish students were enrolling at his school. And there was no fuss.

But I'm not alone in my bemusement. Last week a friend of mine, herself an immigrant, wrote a stinging letter to ALP Senators. She pointed out that asylum seekers are not breaking any law, and went on to ask what had happened to the decency that the Labor government had shown to refugees such as her parents, who had been fleeing fascism in Europe just prior to the outbreak of World War Two.

My friend was a mere baby then, but there was never any prospect of

internment for her family. And Australia was accepting far more refugees than it does now. I'm anxious to know whether she has had any replies.

Comparisons may be odious; nevertheless, they are often instructive. Conservative estimates suggest that Greece, which has a population of just over 11 million, is currently home to 500,000 'illegals'. Australia's 'problem' is minute when put against Greece's, or against that of a country like Pakistan, which is trying, and doubtless failing, to cope with a refugee population of about 2 million. It seems that the poorer countries are bearing, as usual, the greatest burden.

I consulted another friend, also a vintage child immigrant, wondering about the change, about the development of Australia's siege mentality, which is being neatly manipulated and fuelled by politicians of every stripe. At least as far as I can observe. Why the change? I wanted to know. 'Then,' she said, 'immigrants were usually white and of Christian or Jewish extraction. Things are different now.'

She doesn't like things being different, and neither do I. What remains the same is that we are all human, and we all bleed in exactly the same way. So what has happened to The Golden Rule?

'Forgotten' Tiananmen's shadow on modern China

INTERNATIONAL

Evan Ellis

Twenty-five years ago today the tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square. The glow of commemorative candlelit vigils in Hong Kong will not warm the mainland. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains committed to driving the past, this part anyway, from its borders. While grandparents may have transmitted the deprivation and violence of the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, many educated youngsters have no idea of the events of a quarter of a century ago.

The blowtorching started early and was done with a smile as well as a stick. For the 20th anniversary, Chinese author Yu Hua [wrote](#) about the episode for the first time. From a dingy hotel room, reporting on the aftermath for a local literary magazine, he watched as the CCP began the serious business of forgetting.

Every day the television repeatedly broadcast shots of students on the wanted list being taken into custody ... I saw the despairing looks on the faces of the captured students and heard the crowing of the news announcers, and a chill went down my spine.

Then one day, the picture on my TV screen changed completely. The images of detained suspects were replaced by scenes of prosperity throughout the motherland. The announcer switched from passionately denouncing the crimes of the captured students to cheerfully lauding our nation's progress.

The national narrative on the mainland has never switched back. The overwhelming story is one of progress and prosperity. There is little room for 'despairing looks'.

The response is understandable. While the exact number of casualties is debated, one [eyewitness](#) kept a running tally of the dead that reached 2600 before hospitals went mum due to pressure from above. The official line from Beijing is that a few retrograde elements were killed in self-defense as security forces restored order.

Even the high-end figures are dwarfed by the estimated 18–32.5 million killed during the Great Leap Forward and 3 million or so casualties of the Cultural Revolution (figures for both are decidedly sketchy). Let alone the 14 million killed a few decades earlier in WWII. The 20th century has been brutal to the Chinese people.

However the legacy of 1989 shouldn't be reduced to a numbers game. Yu Hua offers a key for unlocking part of the event's significance. In the days before the massacre he cycled through an icy spring night under martial law. Drawn to an incandescent light and glowing warmth he sought out the source. This is what he

saw.

Thousands of people were standing guard on the bridge and the approach roads beneath. They were singing lustily under the night sky: 'With our flesh and blood we will build a new great wall! The Chinese people have reached the critical hour, compelled to give their final call!' ... Although unarmed, they stood steadfast, confident that their bodies alone could block soldiers and ward off tanks. Packed together, they gave off a blast of heat, as though every one of them was a blazing torch.

That night I realised that when the people stand as one, their voices carry farther than light and their heat is carried farther still.

This is the true strength of China. Not the aircraft carrier sinking missiles, bullish economy, westward expansion or other aces in the proverbial sleeve. China's strength lies in what Yu Hua calls *rénmǎn*, or the people.

China faces numerous critical challenges in the decades ahead. If it is to overcome them it must draw upon this great reserve of strength. It should study the spirit of solidarity on display that spring, seeking to cultivate it and engender it more fully into its citizenry. Instead there remains a concerted effort to forget.

This might seem like the easy option. There is no culpability if nothing happened. But the victory is illusory. The past has a tendency of flanking even the most determined of opposition. And the cost is high.

The brutal decision to disperse protestors with violence was made 25 years ago today. The decision to extinguish their memory is made daily by those in power and their censors. Doing so only darkens what should be a pathway for China's steps in this new millennium.

Regime change is fashionable this year

CREATIVE

Les Wicks

Nomenklatura Suras

The oldest river, cradle of civilisation
is now a drain. Eyes are just the lenses
for commemorative snaps.
Beside this rumour of water
more ideas are tortured away from problematic citizens,
the fools remain stupidly inquisitive despite all their schooling.
Naked in the desert, naked in their jobs — educated people
are running numbers, to survive. They fling their flattery
to peripherally bask beneath a uniformed sun.
No simple chore this ...
men carry doors on their backs
to ensure they are never opened.
With a smile over twitch, masters below masters procure —
perhaps avoid atrocity as they quietly suggest a gentler path.
Having family changes everything ... to endure is a pilgrimage.
Aromatic lamb on a bed of cous cous
stewed tea ... God's blessing of wise visitors
who paint & watch CNN. This is savage
but they are not savages. Like a mirror the fickle awes of sky
drop bombs. Regime change is fashionable this year.
There are efficiencies in the fictions of right.
The glee, that honest toil
of looting other lives.
Each tumble clears the view, just a bit.
Years are nothing, what's rebuilt doesn't work —

just as effortlessly as the dirty little system before
that so many died to defend.

But don't worry, time is a grader.

Alongside the quacking of historians
all mistakes will be buried under new initiatives.

Tabula Rasa

1. Time hangs around my place

like an errant friend who overstays, drives you mad

but then he leaves town & you grieve

for those moments of shambolic intimacy.

Can't be with him, maybe he's living in some community now

but I'm locked out of any gated communities,
still too young for retirement lifestyle villas,

too much of everything for lentils & the hippy drum.

Austerity breeds space,

space breeds foolishness which is precious.

Daniel smirks as I save the world. Ophelia says yes,

thinks loving is again possible.

There is no god, I will die.

Cultivate indifference

& a measured ethics that

even Cardinal Pell thinks will get us at heaven.

But I'm drunk again — with moment this week.

No one has been rescued.

The river's taxes spread the blame, my pains

like polite children fuster at my feet.

Above a colloquium of Pacific black ducks

I realise a jackhammer has been going on across the bay —

all morning. It is a small thing beside

remnant ideas & warming sun.

Mothers have rolled this day & are smoking it.

Hazard reduction is a universal goodity. Gilding the liver
we wear helmets to bed

our cloaks of haze are immortal.

This could (but won't) go on forever.

Local Rural Fire Service seems to have blended
a subtle mix of rum & feathers.

The secret is to peel a living from your skin.

2. Back home around the poker table ... Boredom
drinks your beer, has a take on everything.

A tottering Certainty is perennially bleak, he
needs a talking to.

Acceptance makes up the fourth, she's
already exhausted her stake

but has bet carefully & will go home
with small change in her pocket.

She lives in the past, but also in the present.

All our laughs come from her interjections.

That laughter is the real prayer

before this monstrosity filled with bone dust.

Old hippies — the treasure box retained

Doddering Douglas walks into the fire,
pretty colours.

Terri has nosebleeds, a great beast
shot sunglasses

the glare of this hole-of-life psycho-dharma.

What is important

fluid dynamics, ripe thinkings in a techno sauce

chorus chorus

coffee, baklava.

Me too. That stoned, frightened kid is
still hanging around
& I can barely carry his pen.
Goa on MasterCard.
Space, the final fashion statement.
This is multitasking, this living.
Where's the celebrity if we're all aliens?
Psychedelic enough. Enough psychedelic,
we have spiritual leaders leaking out of our auras.
Facebook day out, I link about everywhere ...
find grace in 80s horror, that song
is now playing at everyone's funeral.
The more we die the bigger pest we become.
Lollies exponential.
Dolly on his trolley, sugar hitman
nothing left but money which
grandchildren mine from our musty pits.
I have so much love now
for everything but myself.
Adopted wisdoms from the 1950s
lubricate our decline ...
Molly, after four decades,
has learnt to do the ironing drunk.
Wait till the sales season — skin —
leather, designer brands, dirt cheap.
All start walking
into that.

Uni fee changes will erase egalitarianism

EDUCATION

Paul Rodan

Higher education is an important policy area and while it has never possessed the electoral salience of school education, it can certainly arouse passion. This is apparent from the reaction to the Federal Government's proposed changes in higher education, where some of the consequences are fairly predictable, others less so.

An unregulated fee regime will result in an increase in course costs and, taken with a change in the formula for meeting HECS obligations, will mean substantially larger debts for students after their periods of study.

The prestigious Group of Eight institutions can be expected to exploit their reputational positions to charge top dollar, while those lower in the pecking order will face some challenges in determining the fee structure which reflects their market location. The ability of the top institutions to maximise revenue will only widen the gap between them and the rest, and even if this were not an intended outcome, it will surely not cause many sleepless nights for members of the Abbott Government.

The designers and defenders of HECS have long reminded critics that initial fears about debt-aversion on the part of potential students were never realised. With much bigger debt on the horizon, this feature of the system will be sorely tested. Economic logic suggests that at some point, potential students will be deterred by the prospect of what will seem like lifelong debt with its implications for family, relationships and home ownership.

How exactly does a 17-year-old decide whether selecting the degree from the prestige university over the same course at a newer institution justifies an extra decade of debt?

It seems unavoidable that many from the lower socio-economic ranks, unable to rely on any financial assistance from parents, will see no choice but to either opt out completely or plump for the cheapest option. It will take a very imaginative, targeted and generous scholarship scheme to work around that problem. One anomaly will be to open up places at prestige universities to affluent lesser-qualified applicants who previously would have missed out to a poorer but better qualified applicant now deterred by the higher fee levels.

It is difficult to predict whether these changes will affect higher education participation rates overall. But again, while this would be of concern to those who link an educated workforce with national growth and productivity, such a view is less than unanimous on the conservative side where some would contend that too many young people are attending university.

One possible unintended consequence may involve moderately well-off parents who wish to assist their children by saving to help fund their university studies. With HECS debts at a comparatively manageable level, such parents have been able to afford private school fees plus offer some level of support for tertiary costs, sometimes with upfront payments. For many parents, increased fees will mean doing both is no longer possible.

It may be that, faced with a choice, such parents will access the government school system and direct all their resources to supporting the costs of tertiary study, thus minimising the long-term debt borne by their children. This would be an interesting possible outcome, with potential benefits for the government school system.

Another area for speculation concerns the decision to allow non-university providers an enhanced role in the system, with domestic students able to access HECS for study at such institutions. Many of these are low-cost operators who might be able to offer some very attractive prices to students looking for the most economical deal, and some have a good record with small class sizes and individualised care programs.

But the quality of this sector varies and the risk that some students could find themselves receiving a less than satisfactory educational experience is not insignificant. In that context, the government's decision to cut funding to the national regulatory authority (the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) is disturbing.

One of the more obnoxious features of the debate has been the conservative crocodile tears for the poor low-paid worker subsidising the greedy student. Leaving to one side the offensive implication that such a worker's child could never aspire to tertiary education, the tears are nowhere to be seen for that same worker's subsidisation of private health insurance, private schools and negative gearing (none of which they will access), not to mention the abolition of the low income super contribution which such workers had enjoyed.

It would be naïve to pretend the current higher education regime is some sort of egalitarian nirvana. The ability of affluent parents to pay their children's HECS upfront means such students enter the workforce debt-free, unlike those from more modest backgrounds. The G8 universities have had no difficulty maintaining their privileged status, able to view the competition for leadership positions from the next level down with a wry grin.

But for all that, the existing system's strength has been that when the kid from the western suburbs of Sydney or Melbourne was offered a place at the city's sandstone university on academic merit, she could take up that place while incurring no greater debt than she would have done at a lesser-ranked institution.

Is it too cynical to suggest that for certain conservatives, confining the riff-raff to low status institutions is evidence of the virtues of the market? Australia

egalitarianism has seldom so lacked friends in high places.

Pope Francis and the power of tears

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

In 1969 the Victorian premier Sir Henry Bolte famously said of protesting railway workers: 'They can march up and down till they're bloody well footsore, it's nothing to do with me.' Bolte was unmoved by the protesters in much the same way that recently members of the current Coalition Government were unimpressed when students hectored Foreign Minister Julie Bishop at Sydney University and former Coalition identity Sophie Mirabella at Melbourne.

There is a place for strident but non-violent protest, but the cause is lost if the intention or effect is to intimidate or coerce. If protesters do manage to persuade authorities to agree to their demands, the change will be temporary or piecemeal unless they have also moved hearts and minds.

The best way of doing this is through meaningful symbolic gesture. We will long remember Pope Francis bowing his head in prayer during his May visit to the Middle East, at Israel's graffiti-covered concrete separation wall, with a Palestinian girl holding a flag by his side. This was an unscheduled moment that allowed him to cut through with his message that the impasse between Israelis and Palestinians is 'increasingly unacceptable'.

It needed to be matched by a further act of symbolism on the other side of the security wall, hence Francis' subsequent unscheduled stop, at a cemetery for victims of terrorism at Mount Herzl. This allowed him to go some way towards establishing trust with Israelis [skeptical](#) of 'platitudes about Middle East peace that refuse to condemn Hamas terrorism'.

Catholic Religious Australia (CRA) took its cue from Francis and his mastery of the art of symbolism, when it embarked upon a [campaign](#) of National Lament for Australia's harsh and punitive policies against asylum seekers (CRA designated 1–8 June the campaign's Week of Prayer and Prophetic Presence).

Francis had [said](#) last year: 'We are a society which has forgotten how to weep.' Heartfelt weeping, he [suggested](#), is 'the cry of the penitent, the cry of the brother and the sister who are looking upon so much human misery'.

The most potent moments in current affairs television occur when the person being interviewed is shown to cry, yet we're taught to believe that 'breaking down' shows we're not in command of the argument. In fact it reveals the humanity of the person, and often establishes an instant bond with those who witness their tears.

CRA stresses the National Lament is not a protest, but 'a symbolic action showing that we lament the treatment of people seeking asylum in Australia and are standing in solidarity with these people, our sisters and brothers'. The result

could surprise.

We will never know what impact crying railway workers might have had on Bolte, But surely Bishop could not have been unmoved if the jostling students had instead wept, in a genuine manner, over the lost educational opportunity occasioned by the Federal Budget.

Underdog PUP could bite Abbott

AUSTRALIA

John Warhurst

For all their differences the Palmer United Party (PUP) and the Greens each suffer from widespread disdain and criticism in mainstream commentary. Yet together they now boast the support of 20 per cent of the community (up from 14 per cent at the last elections). And they now hold the future of the Abbott Government's legislative program in their hands, including the Budget, failing agreement between the major parties.

The Government needs 39 votes in the new Senate but only has 33 of its own. Effectively the support of either minor party will suffice without Labor. The nine Greens Senate votes will clearly do the job and although PUP's four votes will fall short by two the Government probably will often be able to find two more from among the other four Independents and micro party senators.

The Budget will be the first test. The negotiations will set the scene for the remainder of this parliamentary term. Attention will continue to focus on PUP and the Greens. They will face the usual problems for minor parties. These include handling the stress, maintaining party unity, marshalling staff resources, keeping up with the flow of government business, and having enough articulate senators to present the party's case effectively to the public. Outside of the parliament the usual worry for minor parties is to keep their own members happy.

Back in the early Howard years the Australian Democrats stumbled in a number of these areas, especially parliamentary and party unity.

PUP suffers from a number of potential weaknesses. All their senators are new to the job. Their leader is outside the Senate. They reckon they have insufficient staff. And they have no clear unifying ideological framework.

But they continue to be underestimated by both the major parties and the media. In the past similar foolish underestimation of political figures outside the usual mould, like former Qld Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen and former Independent and then One Nation leader Pauline Hanson, rebounded badly on the major parties.

Palmer, an enigma, has already survived longer than many of his critics last September thought he would. In fact he has grown in confidence and reputation rather than walking away or falling in a heap. He has a special eye for publicity and the media are drawn to him almost despite themselves. His new senators should maintain party discipline at least in the short term because Palmer effectively 'owns' them. Individually they may show surprising competence as the Tasmanian Jacquie Lambie has already done.

The Government would do well to treat PUP more respectfully if it wants to

strike deals. That was notably missing in some of Treasurer Joe Hockey's patronising post-Budget remarks. Underdog status for PUP may well appeal to the Australian electorate.

The Greens are a larger, more experienced and professional group of senators than PUP. Like the Democrats in the late '90s they probably expected to be shunned by a majority Coalition Government from July onwards.

If things settle down that might still turn out to be the case. But at least for a while the Greens have been dealt some opportunities to play a significant negotiating role. The Budget experience may set the Greens up for a win-win situation on some government legislation.

What the Greens have to guard against are some of the traps that the Democrats fell into. They look pretty disciplined at the moment but that can't be guaranteed. At the first sign of disunity over policy or leadership the Government will try to find ways of encouraging one or two Green senators to break ranks with Christine Milne and Adam Bandt, the party leaders.

We know little about PUP members, but there is no indication that they will interfere much with their senators' work. However, the Greens have an engaged and articulate, policy-savvy membership. Success in negotiations with the Abbott Government is a two-edged sword. They cannot afford to slip into irrelevance but nor must their relationship with the Government ever look too cosy. Greens members are feisty and some of them remain more attuned to anti-government community protest than parliamentary manoeuvring.

Unheard stories of the sex abuse crisis

RELIGION

Frank Brennan

Unheard Story: Dublin Archdiocese and the Murphy Report, by Padraig McCarthy. Londubh Books, 2013.

The victims of child sexual abuse at the hands of church personnel have waited a long time to be heard, to be believed, and to be offered a modicum of compassion and justice. In the process, some church personnel, including conscientious priests of the utmost propriety, have been hurt and wronged by the broad-brush approach of some state sponsored inquiries and media responses.

In *Unheard Story*, Fr Padraig McCarthy rightly highlights shortcomings in legal-political-media processes like the Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation. Analysing the report and the responses to it, he has 'no wish, in anything that has been said, to deflect from the pain and suffering of victims and their families over the years or to excuse any professional mishandling of cases that has occurred'. But the future wellbeing of children demands that the spotlight be shone on all equally; and justice for all requires that state sponsored inquiries follow due process giving all those whose reputations are impugned the right to be heard.

McCarthy observes that it is a serious mistake to see the report emanating from such an inquiry as 'the ultimate answer on the issue of the handling of sexual abuse of children' and then to promote the processes of such a commission as providing 'a template for how commissions of investigation should be conducted'. McCarthy is right to join issue with unsourced, uncorroborated, unsubstantiated, glib, headline-seeking assertions such as: 'The volume of revelations of child sexual abuse by clergy over the past 35 years or so has been described by a Church source as a 'tsunami' of sexual abuse' — 'an earthquake deep beneath the surface hidden from view'.

But there is no getting away from the fact that in countries like Ireland and Australia, the reported instances of child sexual abuse has been greater in the Catholic Church than in other churches. In part, that is because the Catholic Church conducted far more institutions for vulnerable children than did other churches. That is not the whole explanation. That is why the Church has needed help from the State to shine a light on hidden places and to assist with designing protocols and procedures acceptable to the general community.

In Australia, a national Royal Commission which has already been running a year has conducted private sessions with 1426 persons telling their story about sexual abuse suffered as a child. 90 per cent of those presenting have been over 40 years of age, so the abuse usually dates back to the 1960s, '70s and '80s. 62 per cent were sexually abused in a faith-based institution. 41 per cent of the

institutions mentioned were run either by a Catholic religious congregation or diocese.

Justice McClellan, the chief commissioner, recently reported: 'The best available indicators, nationally produced, estimate that between 3.3 percent and 6.6 percent of all reports of child sexual abuse made to police within the last five years occurred within an institutional context.' The Australian research 'confirms the view that a great deal of abuse occurs in families', most of which is unreported to state authorities.

McCarthy has two substantive objections to the findings of the Murphy Inquiry. First, the Commission ruled out the possibility of the Church having been on a learning curve about child sexual abuse prior to the late 1990s. Second, the Commission was selective in its focus on the Catholic Church even though it was supposed to shine the light on all institutions involved with the investigation of child sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin.

It brought only a light touch to the police, the Garda Síochána, naming almost no Garda Síochána even though there was evidence of wrongdoing by individual officers failing to investigate complaints adequately. It named many priests, including some who had no opportunity to defend their good name with due process. These are valid objections.

Everyone in society was on a steep learning curve about the prevalence of child sexual abuse occurring in institutions, including churches, prior to the late 1980s. In Australia, there has been a range of inquiries in recent years. At first, the Church tried commissioning a retired judge to investigate complaints about an individual priest in a diocese. The judge found shortcomings were not restricted to the now deceased bishop and his clerical advisers. It took time for police, consulting psychologists and even the courts to become aware of the extent of the problem and the unlikelihood of offenders reforming themselves.

Back in 1988, it was possible for a psychologist to write to the bishop after assessing a suspected paedophile priest saying that 'he no longer presents any problems for children or yourself' and 'I would hope that he will be given every opportunity to move beyond the cloud that still appears to hang over his head and receive the care and support he justly deserves after all this time.'

Australia's most experienced priest in dealing with abuse allegations, Monsignor John Usher, told the Australian Royal Commission that in the late 1980s 'my experience was very limited and I was on a learning curve to understand the nature of child sexual assault, specifically child sexual assault within the Church, and I realised that there was a lot more to understand.'

Those who say there was no learning curve need to admit they were fairly silent until recently. Everyone was on a steep learning curve except those who have always sat silent, blessed with the unerring wisdom of hindsight.

It was not only the churches which had inadequate procedures for dealing with child sexual abuse. In 2013, police gave evidence to an Australian parliamentary inquiry and ran a media campaign suggesting they had long been dissatisfied with the Church's attempt to come to terms with child sexual abuse. But the Inquiry found:

The Catholic Church established the Melbourne Response (in 1996) in consultation with Victoria Police and the Victorian Government. The Assistant Police Commissioner and the Solicitor-General each approved and signed off on the process.

There was no indication that at anytime before April 2012 Victoria Police told the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne that it had any concerns about the Melbourne Response. It is clear that Victoria police paid inadequate attention to the fundamental problems of the Melbourne Response arrangements until relatively recently in April 2012 and that, when they did become the subject of public attention, Victoria Police representatives endeavoured quite unfairly to distance the organisation from them.

Imagine if the Church leaders had conducted themselves in this way before the parliamentary inquiry. The press would have gone ballistic. Everyone, not just the churches, was on a learning curve. Church and State have to take the rap when inquiries come with the benefit of hindsight saying that society can do better in offering protection to vulnerable children.

While on the learning curve, church leaders have been too slow to acknowledge personal shortcomings and oversights, to admit the need for structural and cultural change in the Church administration, and to apologise for past wrongs. This episcopal inertia has made it difficult to hear McCarthy's unheard story about the collateral damage caused to those well-meaning clergy who did all they could to address the issues in a timely manner.

In Australia, much of the focus in recent times has been on Cardinal George Pell who has now been promoted by Pope Francis to be Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy. Having been auxiliary bishop in Melbourne between 1987 and 1996, he told that Victorian parliamentary inquiry:

As an auxiliary bishop to Archbishop Little, I did not have the authority to handle these matters and had only some general impressions about the response that was being made at that time but this was sufficient to make it clear to me that this was an issue which needed urgent attention and that we needed to do much better in our response.

The Victorian inquiry was critical of Little and the Church processes before 1996. Many people inside and outside the church were left wondering, if Little did not respond adequately between 1987 and 1996, why did not his auxiliary bishop do something? And if the Archbishop knew during those nine years, why did not his auxiliary?

Welcoming the Victorian parliamentary report, the Cardinal admitted past mistakes by the Melbourne Archdiocese during his time as auxiliary bishop there. Signalling a change of approach, he wrote:

The report details some of the serious failures in the way the Church dealt with these crimes and responded to victims, especially before the procedural reforms of the mid 1990s. Irreparable damage has been caused. By the standards of common decency and by today's standards, church authorities were not only slow to deal with the abuse but sometimes did not deal with it in any appropriate way at all.

This is indefensible.

It is only part of the story to lay blame at the feet of deceased church leaders. The opaque hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church leaves many people wondering about the clerical culture inside the Church and its lack of transparency and accountability. In preparation for his pending appearance at the Royal Commission in March investigating how the Catholic Church had earlier contested fiercely allegations of child sexual abuse trying to block any successful legal claim in the courts, Pell admitted the need for a change of approach.

He wrote: 'Whatever position was taken by the lawyers during the litigation, or by lawyers or individuals within the archdiocese following the litigation, my own view is that the Church in Australia should be able to be sued in cases of this kind.'

The Australian Catholic Church with the forced scrutinies of the State has been assisted in getting back to its mission and basic values, espousing truth, justice, compassion and transparency. As an institution, it has been dragged kicking and screaming.

In his written statement to the Royal Commission, the Cardinal was upfront in apologising for the sexual abuse which a man Mr Ellis had undoubtedly suffered at the hands of a priest when a child. He wrote, 'I acknowledge and apologise to Mr Ellis for the gross violation and abuse committed by a now deceased priest of the Sydney Archdiocese. I deeply regret the pain, trauma and emotional damage that this abuse caused to Mr Ellis.'

Under cross examination, he had to admit that he, his advisers and his staff had fallen well short of the standards expected of a model litigant, let alone a Christian organisation. He admitted to the vast chasm between Christian decency and the tactics employed in pursuing Ellis in the courts. Having blamed various members of his staff for earlier errors and omissions, he was anxious to exculpate his lawyers who had acted on instructions and perhaps with insufficient supervision. He said:

I believe in a legal sense there was nothing done that was improper, and any reservations I might have about particular stands of our lawyers, I would not want to suggest that they did anything improper. But from my point of view, from a Christian point of view, leaving aside the legal dimension, I don't think we did deal

fairly (with Ellis).

Pell then made a long awaited apology to Ellis, not just for the initial and sustained sexual abuse Ellis suffered at the hands of a deviant priest but for the hurt which had been inflicted on him by the Church ever since he had sought compensation and closure. He said:

As former archbishop and speaking personally, I would want to say to Mr Ellis that we failed in many ways, some ways inadvertently, in our moral and pastoral responsibilities to him. I want to acknowledge his suffering and the impact of this terrible affair on his life.

As the then archbishop, I have to take ultimate responsibility, and this I do. At the end of this gruelling appearance for both of us at this Royal Commission, I want publicly to say sorry to him for the hurt caused him by the mistakes made and admitted by me and some of my archdiocesan personnel during the course of the Towards Healing process and litigation.

The Cardinal's long time critics found fault with his mode of delivery. He did not even look at Ellis who was sitting directly in front of him. And the apology came years too late.

To date, the victims of sexual abuse have been unlikely to succeed in court against anyone but the perpetrator or a callously negligent employer or supervisor who had little regard for the signs that there may be a sexual predator in their midst. There have been many hurdles for a victim wanting to sue anyone but the criminal perpetrator. Law reformers need to give detailed consideration to these hurdles, making recommendations to government about reforms which will impact on all employers and not just churches.

Until now, a victim like Ellis has faced an additional hurdle when suing for abuse by a priest or other church personnel. Often the alleged abuse occurred many years ago and now there is a new supervising bishop or superior. The previous bishop or superior will have long since died. Who is to be sued? In the past, courts have ruled that in the case of the Catholic Church, there was no point in trying to sue the 'Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church', the statutory trust corporation that holds title to all the church lands of a diocese. That corporation may hold the assets but it does not supervise, employ or oversee clergy or other church workers.

All right thinking people now accept that the Church should not give any appearance of hiding behind the corporate veil. Justice demands that present church leaders agree to satisfy any judgment debt against their predecessors or their deceased predecessors' estates when there is an allegation of past failure to supervise or adequately investigate a sexual predator in their ranks. Any damages should be paid from church assets.

To date, much hierarchical behaviour has fallen short, failing the sunlight test,

being corrected only under pressure from state inquiry. McCarthy's stringent criticisms of the Murphy Report are valid but they are but one small part of this tragic epic playing itself out in countries like Ireland and Australia.

With heart-felt apologies from Church leaders backed by commitments to structural and cultural change, there is greater prospect that McCarthy's story will be heard and that the Church might make a credible return to evangelisation in societies where the State has arguably been more attentive to gospel values than the Church when it comes to the protection of vulnerable children in our pews.

Refugee family suffers Cambodian curse

INTERNATIONAL

Catherine Marshall

It had been a long and exhausting journey for the family gathered in the Cambodian office of Jesuit Refugee Service, but their search for a safe environment amidst people who would treat them kindly was not yet over.

Minority Ahmadi Muslims from Pakistan, the father had been jailed and tortured for having the Koran in his car, and the family — including three young women — had fled together, stumbling blindly along as so many refugees do in the vain hope of putting distance between themselves and danger. Finally, they found themselves in Cambodia, one of only two countries in South East Asia that is a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

But there was one more hoop through which the family would have to jump before their protection could be guaranteed with the granting of refugee status: the eldest girl would have to marry the refugee officer working on their case. For despite Cambodia's official status vis-à-vis refugee rights, in reality it is a country still mired in the corruption and inefficiencies that distinguish developing, post-conflict societies; in truth, it offers few practical safeguards to those who seek its protection.

Nonetheless, it's into this same country that the Australian Government will knowingly, resolutely — proudly, even — send those refugees who have tried to reach its own safe and abundant shores by boat.

It's a decision thoroughly discredited by Australian Mercy Sister Denise Coghlan, who has lived in Cambodia for two decades and who, as the Director of Jesuit Refugee Service Cambodia, knows better than anyone the extent to which refugees' struggles are perpetuated there. 'Refugee families in Cambodia often live in very hot one-roomed rented places. Employment opportunities are very limited, and employers are reluctant to accept refugee certificates as legal documents that permit the person to be employed,' she says.

'Coming to Siem Reap [where Coghlan lives] you see many tourist hotels, you see the beautiful cultural heritage, but there's also another reality in Cambodia and that is the aftermath of the genocide, the aftermath of robbing people of development aid, the aftermath of being party to a proxy war, to the present reality where the disparity between the rich and the poor is getting bigger and bigger.'

It's a place where refugees' rights are swiftly buried beneath the crushing weight of Cambodia's own, more pressing social problems. Hidden from view are people like the Ahmadi family, who exemplify the damage — both physical and psychological — that all refugees carry with them; their story is a reminder that those with the greatest of needs ought to be given the most superior of treatment.

Instead, the Government is putting its power for good to diabolical use: its proposed policy to send Australian-bound 'boat people' to Cambodia drives a spiteful wedge between those in need and those in power. It points to a blinding ignorance within government about how a nation still suffering the consequences of one the most brutal periods in world history might be better equipped than Australia to care for an influx of damaged people.

Most devious of all, it leaves under-resourced NGOs in Cambodia — which can be relied on for their compassion, empathy and strong sense of rectitude — to pick up the pieces of a despicable, vote-seeking policy.

For the Ahmadi family, the debate is rhetorical, for they had no claim to asylum in Australia. But their story is universal among refugees, for it encompasses the terrors and tyranny of persecution, the uncertainty wrought by forced migration, and the inevitability that there will always be people along the way willing to either support or impede you.

This family's refugee experience had the closure that relatively few manage to achieve: they were resettled in Canada and granted refugee status in 2013. Coghlan reports that a recent letter from them says they are all either employed or continuing with their schooling. How different their tale may have been had they been forced to make new lives in Cambodia instead.

The outcome is not likely to be as heartening for those asylum seekers awaiting determination of their visa applications on Christmas Island, Nauru and Manus Island. The terms of the Australian Government's new refugee policy have not been elucidated, but we can assume that some of those granted refugee status will be settled in PNG (another under-resourced country ill-equipped to provide the healing environment critical to refugees' wellbeing) and others will be relocated to Cambodia where they'll be left to fend for themselves.

Amidst all this shirking of its own responsibility the Government will miss a salient point: genuine refugees — those who are routinely identified by this country's excellent checks and balances — don't set their compass for Australia because it has a 'first-class economy'; they come here because they expect to find the democratic, resourceful and accountable country of which they have heard, a place of justice and safety in which their suffering won't be prolonged.

With the imminent roll-out of the reprehensible Cambodia solution, it's an impression of which they, and others, will be swiftly disabused.

Who fathered the Family Tax Benefit?

AUSTRALIA

David James

In commenting on the proposal in the 2014 Budget to remove Family Tax Benefit, Part B (FTB B) from single breadwinner families, former prime minister John Howard [described](#) himself as the 'father' of the FTB scheme.

Perceptions about the paternity of the FTB B family payment could impact on post-Budget strategies and positions in the Senate. The Government might be happy to see Howard claiming paternity in the hope that it will reinforce a view that the FTB B was the product of his 'white picket fence' view of family life, and/or an unsustainable distribution of the benefits of the mining boom. The Government might hope that the other parties will not want to preserve Howard's claimed legacy.

In a sense Howard is right because the current system of family payments was introduced by his government as part of a package of compensatory messages to accompany the introduction of the GST in 2000.

FTB B is paid to single breadwinner couples and sole parents with children. The maximum FTB B weekly payment of \$51.50 per week is a very significant part of the budgets of low-income single-breadwinner families. In families where the youngest child is under five, the maximum weekly payment is about 43 per cent higher. Since 2004, families have received an annual supplement currently at \$354.05 and equal to \$6.79 per week.

The most significant change in the Family Tax Benefits system since 2000 has been to the per child Part A payments. These payments have been extended into middle Australia: a family with two children and an income moving with Average Weekly Ordinary Time Earnings (now over \$1440 per week) has had increases of over 210 per cent. This was Howard's major contribution to the family payments system.

The Budget seeks to withdraw the FTB B weekly payments from families who do not have a child under six years of age and to convert the annual supplement into a Single Income Family Supplement of \$300 per year, or \$5.75 per week. On current figures, this would mean losses of \$52.14 per week for couple parent families. The position of sole parent families is slightly different because they would pick up a payment of \$750 per year for each child between the ages of six and 12.

If paternity matters in this debate, it is Paul Keating who can claim the credit for the family payments that are now under attack.

For decades taxation law provided a rebate for taxpayers supporting a dependent spouse and children. By 1993 the rebate was worth up to \$27.40 per

week for the mostly male breadwinners.

In his Policy Speech on 24 February 1993 Prime Minister Keating [said](#) : 'We propose to introduce a new cash payment of \$60 each fortnight to be called the Home Child Care Allowance ... This allowance is more generous than the Dependent Spouse Rebate it will replace, and has the added advantage of being paid directly to the mother at home. This will provide a source of independent income for women while they are out of the paid workforce caring for children.'

In referring to the amending legislation during a speech to launch the International Year of the Family on 6 December 1993, Keating [said](#) : 'We recognise that women, throughout their lives, have a range of equally legitimate choices about being in the workforce or being at home. We appreciate the value of caring and nurturing provided by women who do choose to stay at home while their children are growing up, and the value of the unpaid work they carry out both in the household and in the community.'

Keating's allowance was introduced and, after some name changes in the late 1990s, it emerged as FTB B in 2000, having grown from \$30.00 to \$34.79 per week.

The changes championed by Keating recognised that the work of women in raising children should not be treated as tax concessions for their spouses and that the care of children has economic and social value.

There may be debate about whether the current FTB B payment is adequate recognition of the economic and social value of domestic child care. But no one can seriously argue that it should be \$5.75 per week, as proposed in the Budget. It is a pittance which will drive low paid families deeper into poverty.

Anything less than the current rate is an affront to those who perform the work, and those who have fought for so long to have proper recognition of the economic and social value of child care, whether by mothers or fathers, within the home or outside it.

The question of whether John Howard or Paul Keating was the father of the threatened family payments is, in truth, a side issue. The Keating amendments, and, therefore, the current FTB B, came about as a result of social change pressed by women across the political spectrum. It was, and remains, an important issue for women.

When the Senate debates these family payments it will not be about Howard's or Keating's legacy, but something much more fundamental: the value that is put on child care, whether in the home or child care centres, and the recognition that we give to the people who provide it.

Who cares if Abbott and Hockey are Catholic?

RELIGION

Andrew Hamilton

Much has been made of the religious faith and schooling of government ministers and the relationship between these things and government policy. To my mind the topic is a trivial indulgence that diverts attention from more important questions.

Talk about politicians' faith focuses attention on the people who make decisions and not on the people affected by their decisions. To conclude that they are influenced by their faith or are unfaithful to it may give satisfaction to the person who makes the judgment, but it does nothing for those affected by unfair policies.

Nor is this kind of judgment one that Christians may make if they wish to be consistent. At the heart of Christian faith is the conviction that we all sinners saved by Christ, and so are no better than anyone else. It follows that the proper business of Christians is to refrain from judging others. It is to try to win them. Like everyone else, they are called to judge policies by their effect on human beings, especially the most vulnerable.

By these standards the Budget was problematic. Certainly it attempted to address longer term challenges of matching revenue to proper expenditure. But it penalised the most vulnerable members of society while leaving untouched subsidies to the more affluent. It also weakened the regulatory bodies necessary to protect the longer term good of society, particularly those to do with the environment and fairness.

It will make Australian society harsher. It was rightly on the nose with Australians. The fault did not lie in the Government's failure to sell it but in the noisomeness of what was on offer.

The interesting question is why people would advocate and introduce such harmful, self-destructive policies. The framers of the Budget certainly did not lack courage. When people are surprised at the rejection of their ideas they have normally been guided by ideas so self-evident to them that they believe others will need only to hear them in order to be persuaded.

The assumption underlying the Budget, one shared by both major political parties, is that the primary responsibility of the government is to promote economic growth. This is understood implicitly to be identical with the good of society.

It is also axiomatic that economic growth is best achieved by individuals competing for economic advancement with as little regulation and taxation as possible. This implies that social goods, such as education and health care, should be largely left to the market. In this view of society, those who do not compete

economically are failing in their responsibilities and should be treated with rigour. It is echoed in Arthur Hugh Clough's couplet:

Thou shalt not kill but needst not strive
Officiously to keep alive.

This is a rigorous world in which the only morality owned by government is that of the market. Most people want more of government than this and expect more of their leaders. And they are unconvinced that competition, which naturally produces a less equal society, will lead to a more harmonious one. So it is natural that a budget enshrining these ideas will be rejected.

Still, such ideas can be conscientiously held. They are certainly held by many people with different religious and philosophical beliefs, many of whom will argue for the compatibility of their convictions with this view of society just as many Catholics argue that their faith is compatible with their conviction that same sex marriage should be legalised. It would be wrong to describe them as hypocrites and would also distract from what matters.

The central question at issue is about the value we place on human beings, and so of the claims they may rightly make on one another in society.

This is primarily a human question, and so secondarily a religious question. The ideology underpinning the Budget and the understanding of the role of government is that human beings have value measured to the contribution they make to economic growth, and that successful competitors should be rewarded while the unproductive are to be disciplined or disregarded. It enshrines the sense of entitlement of the affluent.

Others argue that human beings have a value independent of their economic productivity, and that this is expressed in their relationships, of which economic relationships are only one set. The role of government then is to strengthen the relationships that bind people together, and to ensure that the economy is ordered to the common good.

The challenge the Budget presents to its critics is to commend a richer view of economic growth and to keep before public attention the faces of those demeaned by it.

Grinding the face of the poor

AUSTRALIA

John Warhurst

*'What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?' —
Isaiah chapter 3 verse 15*

The Budget was one of most vicious attacks on ordinary people that we have seen in recent Australian history.

We are not in the throes of a fiscal crisis but if we embark on this treacherous path of US-style austerity we will be staring down the barrel of a social crisis.

We will be facing a social crisis if the people who bear the burden of inequality, especially the people who are forced into poverty and even homelessness, are made to pay so that the generous tax concessions enjoyed by the wealthy are preserved.

We will be facing a social crisis if the Government seeks to grind down people's lives, humiliating them and hurting them instead of helping them.

But make no mistake. In the face of the social crisis we have a secret weapon. It is called solidarity. And don't worry. It remains a secret weapon even though we name it openly and proudly. It remains a secret weapon because those who do not practise it can never understand it.

Solidarity is growing strong. It is being taught by the experts; by the people who suffer most from the toxic fruits of poverty and inequality, from the First Peoples of Australia to the most recent arrivals who seek asylum in this beautiful country and everyone in between, all who are attacked, all who are derided and despised.

These are the ordinary people, the great people, who have achieved on the ground the greatest and most progressive social change by analysing and agitating under the guiding stars of struggle and hope. Good social policy might be formulated and legislated from above but it is always created and fought for from below by ordinary people who will not allow the purveyors of injustice and inequality and greed to grind them down.

Our struggle is for a society in which no one is oppressed or humiliated by structures of inequality. It will be a long struggle, a hard struggle. But just as our struggle is enormous, so too is our hope.

As Brecht put it: 'The most beautiful of all doubts is when the downtrodden and despondent stop believing in the strength of their oppressors.'

This Budget will not discomfit the comfortable, but for those who struggle to make ends meet it will cause great suffering. This is not a Budget that repairs a nation. It is a Budget that has broken a nation's heart.

Our problem in Australia is not the 'idleness of the poor', as proposed by those who refuse to let the truth get in the way of ideology. Putting the boot into disadvantaged Australians might be therapeutic for welfare bashers but it will not help even one person into employment. Our problem is inequality.

This is a social question, not a question of behavior. We do irreparable harm when we turn it into a question of individual behavior, blaming people for their own poverty, as is so often the case with people who are homeless or in jail because of society's failure to provide them with opportunities and to nurture their talents.

We build massive walls around people on the basis of their race, class, gender or disability. The same people are then condemned for lacking the 'aspiration' to scale these walls.

Our task is to have the humility to listen to the people who can teach us what it is that needs to change. It is about committing ourselves to join in the long-haul project of tearing down the walls that we have built around people, locking them out, or locking them up.

'What counts today,' wrote Franz Fanon back in 1961, 'the question which is looming on the horizon, is the need for a redistribution of wealth. Humanity must reply to this question, or be shaken to pieces by it.'

Fanon wrote eloquently of the 'systematic negation of the other person and the furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity.'

Sadly, the Federal Budget will result in a further redistribution of resources away from the already-poor towards the already-rich. This attempt at wealth redistribution can only occur on the basis of that 'systematic negation' of humanity typified by attacks on people who are pushed to the margins. Warren Buffett was right when he said: 'There's class warfare alright, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.'

Unemployment, homelessness, inequality and poverty will not be reduced by reducing social expenditure. As philosopher Slavoj Zizek explains:

We are told again and again that we live in a critical time of deficit and debts where we all have to share a burden and accept a lower standard of living — all with the exception of the (very) rich. The idea of taxing them more is an absolute taboo: if we do this, so we are told, the rich will lose the incentive to invest and create new jobs, and we will all suffer the consequences. The only way to escape the hard times is for the poor to get poorer and for the rich to get richer.

But we are not easily deterred from our struggle for a more equitable society. And it would appear that large sections of the community are feeling a growing sense of solidarity and love. Brecht put it so well:

The compassion of the oppressed for the

oppressed is indispensable. It is the world's one hope.

Sex and alienation in Scotland

REVIEWS

Tim Kroenert

***Under the Skin* (MA). Director: Jonathan Glazer. Starring: Scarlett Johansson. 108 minutes**

The succubus of medieval legend is a female demonic being, sexual intercourse with whom can result in sickness or death. In popular literature, the succubus frequently appears as a beautiful woman, who employs her sexual prowess to lure unsuspecting men to their doom. This depiction resonates uneasily with biblical teaching about the role of Eve in the fall of Man; also with the attitudes of contemporary 'men's rights' movements, who view liberated women as social and sexual aggressors, and all cultures in which women are held responsible for the sexual-moral shortcomings of men. These are deeply troubling connotations.

Under the Skin, Jonathan Glazer's eerie adaptation of Michael Faber's 2000 novel, spins mythology into science-fiction, subverting the implicit 'cautionary' aspects of succubus stories into an absorbing and thoughtful consideration of alienation and human connection, sexual and otherwise. Scarlett Johansson's 'succubus' is not a demon but an alien; she dons the skin of an attractive young woman, and tempts men with the unspoken promise of sex, luring them to her lair in order to harvest their flesh. (This horrific process is realised on film largely through the use of surreal imagery that is no less disturbing for its lack of explicitness.)

The alien is on a learning curve. During an opening montage of abstract images that presumably represent her entrance to earth, we hear her, in voiceover, rehearsing the sounds of human language. The opening portion of the film finds her traversing an otherworldly urban Scotland, quietly grappling with the nuances of human interaction as she attempts to snare her prey. She is necessarily untroubled by conscience: in one scene she watches dispassionately as a woman and a man drown on a secluded beach, then kills a second man who tried to rescue them. Given the nature of her quest, it is a strength that she does not know empathy.

But this, too, she learns. One of her victims is a young man with severe congenital facial deformations. The tenderness with which she engages him is a means to an end — the man's nervous responses to her are genuinely touching, which makes the prospect of his impending doom all the more unpalatable. Indeed, her affected pity soon gives way to sincere compassion, even mercy. She breaks character and routine, at cost to her own wellbeing: her alien overseer, in the guise of a male motorcyclist, does not share her newfound 'humanity', and in fear she abandons their mission and flees from him to a secluded mountain town.

The more 'human' she grows, the more vulnerable she becomes. Alone in this

'alien' town, she is offered comfort and shelter by a stranger. His concern for the plight of this vulnerable person who is present to him reflects the selflessness she found in herself when she took pity on the deformed man. It represents the best of humanity; but in this town she is also to experience its worst. Once a predator, she now becomes prey. The outcome of this subversion is horrifying and heartbreaking: her crimes don't vindicate the dread that befalls her, especially as it is not justice but her femaleness that brings it down upon her.

Under the Skin's greatest irony is twofold: not only that her femaleness, which she had wielded as a weapon, proves in the end to be what marks her out as a victim; but also that she evolves from monster to human with the quiet fervour of a pilgrim, only to discover too late that sometimes they are the same thing.

Shorten should handle Gonski gift with care

EDUCATION

Dean Ashenden

Among the many gifts to Labor in the Coalition's Budget is Gonski. The Government doesn't want it, and Bill Shorten does. He can go to the next election with uncontested ownership of one of the most widely supported proposals of recent times.

Moreover, he can do it with the backing of David Gonski himself. In his first substantial statement since the release of his report more than two years ago, Gonski [s tood his ground](#) . Even better from Labor's point of view, Gonski attacked a rival plan [proposed](#) by the Government's Commission of Audit.

It looks like a political windfall. But is it? The risk is, as Yogi Berra put it, *dã©jã vu*, all over again.

In 1973 the Karmel committee was asked to fix a school system divided by sector, state, class, and religion. It proposed a 'national' approach, in the social sense as well as political and geographic, and laid out an elaborate design for its implementation. The resulting mess is what, 40 years later, Gonski was asked to deal with.

But Gonski, like Karmel before him, simply wasn't allowed or able to propose solutions anywhere near as big as the problems the review uncovered. It is entirely possible that in 40 years' time someone will be reviewing Gonski on much the same basis as he reviewed Karmel.

The Gonski plan suggested a funding floor but no ceiling. It paid much more attention to the distribution of funds than to their effective use. It assumed that parents would contribute substantially to funding in two school sectors, but not the third.

The 'residualisation' process which Gonski mapped in close detail, and which is giving us gated educational communities at one end and educational slums at the other, is much more than a funding problem. It is also about rules, conventions, and understandings, particularly to do with cherry-picking and excluding students. These were not included in Gonski's brief.

The bullet that neither Karmel nor Gonski were permitted to bite is this: if you want a fully national approach to schooling, one that will reduce rather than entrench social division and that really does make opportunity more equal, then you can't also have three sectors that are funded, governed and regulated in different ways; two levels of government involved in all three sectors in all eight state/territories; and governments on three-year election cycles conducting reform that needs decades of steady pursuit.

Our peculiarly dysfunctional schooling structure has been with us for so long,

and is so heavily defended, that it is taken for granted. It is so familiar that it has become invisible. Let me raise for inspection five assumptions shared by the governments which commissioned Karmel and Gonski and by the Oppositions that opposed them.

First, it is assumed that the sectors are immutable. It seems to have occurred to no-one in either the Whitlam or the Rudd/Gillard governments to ask for a sober assessment of the pros and cons of the sector system. Both Karmel and Gonski were required to find ways to bend the sector system to national purposes. Both failed.

A second assumption is that 'government' schools are 'public' schools and, by implication, others are not. In fact all schools are public in several senses, including being recipients of public funds. They could be more so, in ways that would serve the interests of almost all concerned.

Hasn't the sectarianism of the 19th century, which gave us the sectors, faded to the point where the churches, and the Catholic Church in particular, could accept in Australia guarantees of the right to religion-based public schooling of the kind it has accepted elsewhere, including just across the Tasman? And isn't it clear enough now to supporters of government schools that the right to religion-based schooling is now beyond revocation? That a school need not stop becoming 'public' merely because it is not secular?

A third assumption is that some parents don't pay for schooling and some do, and should. This is surely the source of more wheel-spinning immobility than any other issue. One side says: if you don't like what you can have for free then you can go elsewhere and pay for it. The other side says: it's our right to choose, we pay taxes, so why do we have to pay when others don't? It is a futile argument, and massively distracting from real educational problems and proposals, including Gonski's. It will continue as long some pay and some don't.

In any event, the system is unfair. Either all should be eligible to pay (or to be provided with additional support) on the same means-tested basis, or none should pay — or, at least, none who patronise a school willing to play on a levelled-up playing field by broadly common rules.

A fourth assumption, apparently very similar to the second, but not, is that a 'public' school should be run by the government and other schools shouldn't be. Really, no school should be run by a government. Governments have a three-year horizon at best. Making more socially and educationally productive schools is a march of decades. Governments can't provide that. Arm's length statutory agencies can, particularly if schools aren't 'run' in the sense of being told what to do and how to do it.

Schools should run themselves, but within a framework of requirements and expectations that includes a common national core. They should be responsible for making the best possible use of needs-based resources, and for reporting on their

work in agreed ways, including countables.

Which brings us to a fifth assumption, which is at the heart of the present political problem: that a national approach is a big-role-for-the-federal-government approach.

This assumption has been sustained by governments of all stripes since Whitlam. Gonski tried to push things further in the same direction, toward an agreement between the federal government and eight state/territory governments about how they would jointly fund schools. Just as Karmel's grand Schools Commission was killed off by the resentful states, so was Gonski's proposal. Governments simply couldn't or wouldn't agree.

But do they have to? A big direct federal involvement was necessary in the 1970s, but it isn't now. Can a national approach be pursued by devolving responsibility within a national framework? The framework suggested by the Commission was lamentably weak, but it doesn't have to be. It could be much stronger in requiring and tracking needs-based funding and in monitoring what schools do and produce.

That kind of national approach would have at least as much chance of delivering on Gonski's educational and social ends as the means he proposed, and more chance of being implemented.

It would get one of the three big structural problems of Australian schooling — the direct involvement of two levels of government in every school jurisdiction — off the agenda.

It would leave the federal government free to lead on other structural and educational problems through ideas and evidence rather than via fruitless pushing and prodding with money.

It would also, however, leave Shorten with a political problem. It would ask him to stick with Gonski's goal, but not with Gonski's plan. More difficult still, it would adopt instead key parts of the Commission of Audit's plan.

That is a very big political ask. We can only hope that Shorten ponders the implications of the alternative.

Greek neighbour's grace and lemons

CREATIVE

Nick Gadd

1994: We move in to our house, a 1950s weatherboard in Melbourne's inner west. The back yard is small, and paved with grey cement bricks. There's a shed with a dented roller-door. A Hills Hoist. A patch of grass. A medium-sized gum tree. A straggly geranium. A palm tree, one metre high.

An old Greek guy is one of our neighbours. He has two hobbies: playing the bouzouki, and reporting cars for parking infringements. We're told he's a well-known musician around the local Greek clubs. We don't see much of him, but sometimes we hear plunka-plunka-plunk from the other side of the fence.

We're not very good gardeners. We plant pittosporum trees, but half of them die. We plant a passionfruit vine that never fruits, but then we can't get rid of it. I take up the grey cement bricks and replace them with pink and yellow pavers.

Sometimes I sneak a peek over the fence into the neighbour's yard. He's got loads of fruit trees. Pears, figs, lemons, olives. Rosellas scream and fight in them in summer.

1998: We have two babies. They learn to walk and ride their trikes on the grey bricks. Alicia falls and cuts her chin on the back step, requiring two stitches. I build them a cubby house. The palm tree is two metres high.

2000: I invite a mate over and together we pull down the old shed built by a previous owner. It has a crazy, irregular frame, with studs and joists at peculiar angles, and wiring out of an electrician's nightmare. I hire a jackhammer from Bunnings and smash up the cement floor, chucking the bits into a skip. Our daughters ride their bikes in circles around the newly spacious yard.

The geranium is still there. Even in years of drought and water restrictions, it lives on amid the devastation.

2002: On a night of storms, the gum tree splits and falls, destroying the cubby house and smashing the roof tiles over our bedroom. At 3am, orange-suited SES men and women climb onto our roof with chainsaws, trimming off the branches before lowering the trunk to the ground.

Our neighbour emerges in a dressing gown, waving his arms.

'Don't damage my lemon tree!'

'We're not going to damage your lemon tree.'

'Don't damage my lemon tree!'

We plant a new gum tree.

2006: Gradually we take control of the yard. We plant vegies and a lemon tree of our own, banksias and grevilleas. Sometimes the rosellas visit our backyard now. We get a trampoline and the girls spend whole days bouncing, looking over the fences and checking up on the neighbours. I build a deck and we sit with a drink, watching them bounce or shoot goals through the netball ring. The palm tree is five metres high.

2014: I am sitting on the deck reading an essay by George Steiner on the decline of classical knowledge. 'The world of classical mythology is receding from our reach,' Steiner writes. My older daughter is strumming her guitar, a melancholy Elliott Smith tune answering the plunka-plunk of the bouzouki.

Then I hear someone calling me: 'Nicholas! Nicholas!' The Greek neighbour is leaning over the fence, offering me a bulging plastic bag. 'I'll give you these lotus fruits,' he says. 'In the story, the sailors stopped at an island where they found women eating this fruit. They stayed there on the island, and the fruit made them all sleep, so they can never leave.' He hands me the bag of persimmons. 'Cut off the top and eat it with a spoon.'

I try the persimmons. The hard ones are too astringent to eat, but the soft ones are sweet, sticky and delicious. Were they really the lotuses in Homer's *Odyssey*? I decide to believe they were.

Steiner was wrong. Mythology is here, in the backyard.

God of the cracks

CREATIVE

P. S. Cottier

god of the cracks

god of the cracks, god of the bends
the segue god, joining
that which should not follow
ambiguous player
with slant rhymes
intersexting
mona lisa with monobrow
smiling past watchers
as she spots the gay god
the god who goes down
sweet curser of figtrees
just to perplex theologians —
ah, but how they will shift meanings
letting fall earth for nuggets
and the dust is the thing
the dust and the shaking
the sun's daily spotto!
peeping through cloud brows
and cracking a simile

Concepts retired as caravans

Wisdom,
Gratitude and
The Art of Pickles
bought a caravan
toured Australia.

Wisdom reads the maps —
then there's picalilli with cheese
on granny square rugs.

Thanks, says G. Thank you.

Time flows spicy and slow.

Whither Wisdom,

Gratitude and
The Art of Pickles?

They pause outside Wollongong
will trip down to Kiama
gently blowing out thought bubbles
pickled farts
and rugs of thanks.

All down the road
they play 'Spotto'.

Yellow bursts like a parable.

Yellow tangy as Branston pickle.

The infinite peace of yellow
wrapped in hugs of glee.

After hours in the op shop

(After 'The Pawnbroker's Shop' by Charles Dickens)

At last the door is closed, and down we all slither down
from our thin metal supports. Smelling of mothballs,
of sweat, of lavender, we hump towards the centre
of the shop, now cleared of customer and clerk.

Oh, we are become Medusa, but Medusa with tongues
instead of snakes, with a pillow-clump of ourselves
for head. I can taste a soupçon of peppermint
as I caress the mauve blouse that twines itself
around me. I sense the woman who wore it once

undoing sweets in church, feel her boredom assuaged
by that little marsupial jump of taste buds. Her attention
blooms back to the parson's numbing drone.
Mauve tastes me;
the weekend scales that decorated my plaid sleeves,
impart a certain memory of trout. I feel her feel
the rough arms of Jack, scratch my khaki arms
as he used his to clean his catch. She hums, and is it
that never-ending ballad about 'The Wild Colonial Boy'
mild Jack whistled crookedly through a weekend smile.
She has caught it, firm as a plump rainbow fish,
netted by my weft and weave; now passed on.
It mixes with her *former's* hymns; angels and fish entwined.
Like octopi we squirm, and taste the picnics of memories
spread like a smorgasbord amongst us. The sad violet
of a young child lost, the acrid orange anger of thug,
the occasional honey of the plainly good.
That last one wore jeans
so ugly and ordinary they might strut down a catwalk,
if fashion were to do mere patched practicality.
Denim and I meet, and recognise a tint of mutual past
as we taste each other's recipe. Perhaps we are snakes,
after all, shedding onto each other a skin of *before*;
a confetti of *used to* or a dandruff of *was*.
Hats are certainly not unknown, here, amongst us.
They scoop character, thickly, direct from the scalp.
After a night of experiment, we climb back onto our hangers.
The op shop opens at ten. Some will go out on new backs,
acquiring new chapters;
editing themselves to the library of skin.

Government blase on Australian drone deaths

AUSTRALIA

Justin Glyn

While the last couple of weeks have been taken up with thinking about the Budget and its disproportionate impact on poorer Australians, another, more spectacular, area of government disregard for the lives and rights of its citizens has gone relatively unremarked.

This is a problem that goes to the heart of democracy, revealing not only the distance between Western governments and their citizens, but also the acceptance of that gulf as a fact of modern political life.

In April, it was revealed that two Australians, Christopher Harvard and Darryl Jones, aka Muslim bin John (also a New Zealand national), were killed by an American drone strike in Yemen in November. John Key, the New Zealand Prime Minister, has [said](#) his government has taken no legal advice in relation to the drone program's legality but will, notwithstanding the killing, continue to share intelligence on its nationals with the US.

New Zealand's cavalier approach in this regard is well known. Its response to the revelation that GCSB (the NZ equivalent of ASIO) was unlawfully spying on its citizens was to amend its governing statute to enshrine the spying in law. As one wit put it: 'GCSB — the only government department that will actually listen to you.'

This problem does not stop across the ditch. Jeremy Scahill, author of the book *Dirty Wars*, [makes the point](#) that the Australians are heavily implicated in sharing information leading to drone strikes, and that the Australian Government seems indifferent to what the US does with the information Australia shares with it. The deaths of Anwar al-Awlaki (who was suspected of Al Qaeda links) and his son (who was not) in 2011 showed that the US itself (notwithstanding its famous Constitution) is quite comfortable with drone strikes against US nationals.

It is worth taking a step back beyond the 'War on Terror' slogans to see what is going on here. Three governments of what are supposedly Western democracies are at best passive spectators and at worst active participants in the killing of their own citizens. These killings are conducted by intelligence and military forces with at best nominal civilian oversight, without the hint of a trial, and well outside any country with which they are at war. (The US [describes](#) itself as a 'partner' of the civil power in Yemen.)

Both Australia and New Zealand have abolished capital punishment. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this represents the most extreme violation of a state's obligation of protection towards its own nationals, people in these countries do not seem worried about their governments' indifference to or collusion in their compatriots' deaths at the hand of a supposed ally.

The mantra of 'terrorism' and the tyranny of distance doubtless have much to do with the public's lack of concern. We have, after all, been told repeatedly that we are threatened by Al Qaeda and most of us know little of Yemen, its peoples or its complex politics intertwined with tribalism and regional power struggles.

If there is one thing, however, that the Snowden revelations have made clear it is that government surveillance powers such as wholesale data collection, call recording and metadata trawling, while defended with reference to terrorism, affect broad swathes of people who have absolutely nothing to do with terrorism or (the increasingly nebulous and ill-defined) Al Qaeda.

The 'nothing to hide, nothing to fear' mantra has, once again, been revealed as illusory; a lesson we should already have learned from such debacles as the persecution of Dr Haneef and the horrors of Guantanamo. Governments feel sufficiently unconstrained by public opinion that they are prepared to violate their own legal safeguards (think the Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution), where these even exist.

Against this background, the fact that they are happy to kill us as well should not only raise questions about what our democracies have become but also fill us with real fear.

Letting Australian industry die promotes workplace slavery elsewhere

AUSTRALIA

Michael Mullins

Apple's new Mac Pro computer was supposed to be available in the second half of last year, but unexplained production issues have [delayed](#) supplies until now. Last year, consumers wishing to purchase certain Motorola phones also had to wait.

It seems the delays could have been caused by decisions to experiment and go against trend, to [manufacture](#) the products in the USA, rather than countries such as China, where more expedient production conditions prevail.

We variously marvel at the cost-effective manufacturing processes in these countries and express alarm at the knock on effect on manufacturing here. The federal government's lack of will to subsidise local manufacturers is built on a conviction that workers here enjoy conditions that are unsustainable and our work conditions must be downgraded to ensure local industry is more competitive with overseas counterparts.

We enjoy record low prices on products such as electronics and clothing and marvel at what we consider the 'miracle' of modern manufacturing in China, as if it is part of God's bounty. That this is far from the case is revealed in Baptist World Aid's recently released [Behind the Barcode](#) report. It is not a gift of God but our taking advantage of the disempowerment of fellow humans in less fortunate parts of the world.

The Baptist report focuses on widespread ignorance of the conditions of the people who produce electronic consumer goods. In other words, what we don't know won't hurt our conscience. It's our lack of knowledge of the exploitation of the workers and, more significantly, the lack of interest on the part of Australian and multinational companies in knowing about the human circumstances of the manufacture of these products.

The headline findings of the report include that fact that 97% of electronics companies could not demonstrate they were paying workers enough to meet their basic needs. Only 18% of companies had even partial knowledge of where their raw materials were sourced. Also 34% of companies had a code of conduct which included workers' rights to collective bargaining, but only one company could demonstrate that there was a collective bargaining agreement in place.

Nokia, which still managed only a 'B+' grading in the study, was the only company among 39 leading technology brands able to prove it was paying its manufacturing workers a living wage above the official minimum. The study defined a living wage as enough money for food, water, shelter, clothing and a bit

extra for discretionary spending or emergencies.

Other companies such as Australian retailers Kogan and Dick Smith did badly, and were not prepared to cooperate with the study by providing information about the systems of monitoring labour conditions they did have. Dick Smith instead issued a [statement](#) complaining that the study 'does not fairly represent Dick Smith's current practices' and insisting the company 'has policies in place to ensure that our supply chain meets our strong ethical and environmental standards'.

The lesson for Australian consumers wanting to be as confident as possible that they are not supporting child slave labour is that they should buy products from companies such as Nokia, who can demonstrate better than their rivals that caring about workers' conditions. This is, if you like, a feature of their products, and should take this into account when purchasing.

For its part, the Australian Government needs to be less cavalier and reticent to subsidise local manufacturers, who are obliged to be transparent about their work practices and bear the costs of this. For a relatively modest outlay, it could have saved the Electrolux factory in Orange NSW, and we would have confidence that our vacuum cleaners are not being produced by slaves and sold to us at bargain prices.

Planning for a good death

CREATIVE

Michele Gierck

My 88-year-old mother has been taken by ambulance to the Accident and Emergency ward at the local public hospital. I arrive twenty minutes later. That's enough time for the young doctor who has scrupulously read my mother's extensive medical history, to call me aside. (He's realised I'm Mum's Medical Power of Attorney or Medical Substitute Decision Maker.)

The doctor is concerned that the newly-arrived patient with plummeting oxygen levels, who was diagnosed six months ago with early stage Alzheimer's, has deteriorated quickly. 'If your mother continues to deteriorate, would she want to be resuscitated?'

'No resuscitation,' I respond almost automatically, and then explain. 'Years ago, not long after Mum made me her Medical Power of Attorney, we went to see her trusted general practitioner to discuss what her future health-care wishes would be if she were unable to communicate due to illness or injury. Mum said she didn't want to be resuscitated, particularly if her quality of life would be severely compromised, or if she'd end up in a vegetative state.'

In retrospect, it was only at the insistence of friends in the medical fraternity in Queensland, where 'Advance Health Directives' have been common for some years, that my mother and I visited her general practitioner in Melbourne to discuss her future preferences for medical treatment. (At the time Mum was well, in her early 80s, and still working as a school crossing supervisor.)

In answering the Emergency doctor's question about resuscitation, I'm so thankful that my mother's wishes have been made clear and documented by her general practitioner. Not only does it mean that the medical team at the hospital have clear instructions, but it's also a personal reassurance for me; I am in no doubt that I am acting as my mother would want.

The Emergency doctor seems pleased with my response — not to resuscitate. I'm not sure if that's because he has clear instructions, or because it's a view he personally shares. (What he doesn't see are the tears welling as I walk back towards my mother who is wondering about all the beeps and blips on the machine she is hooked up to.)

Five weeks later, my mother still has not left hospital. After weeks in coronary care, followed by a stint in a general ward, and a fall, she is moved to rehabilitation.

One day while visiting Mum in rehabilitation, I find pamphlets on her bedside table — for brain-tissue donation. 'What's this?' I ask, perplexed. My mother tells me that a doctor she'd never met before brought them in and talked to her about

it. 'I couldn't understand what he was talking about, so I told him to speak to you,' she says.

Soon after, I speak to the doctor in question. As the Medical Power of Attorney I need to understand what's going on.

Well, it's now starting to get complicated. Tissue donation (which includes organ donation) was not an issue my mother and I ever talked about. Had the topic been included when we discussed Mum's future preferences for medical treatment with her GP, Mum may have given a definitive answer. But that didn't happen. And now it's too difficult to have the conversation with my mother as ill health has taken a toll on her cognitive abilities.

For Mum and I, the more pressing issue is finding out if her health will improve, what capacities she can reclaim, and whether she will be able to return home. (I suspect not.) As such, I'm desperately trying to find her a place in respite until her living arrangements are worked out.

Adding a further issue, like tissue donation, is just too much at the moment, particularly when I discover that the brain-tissue donation process would require additional tests — and once she dies, a post-mortem. (The latter is an issue in our family, since my father's body was 'misplaced' after his post-mortem.)

After much consideration, I decide that my mother will not participate in brain-tissue donation — at least for now.

When my mother's medical wishes were clear, as in the case of resuscitation, the instruction I gave doctors was straight forward. The same, however, could not be said about the brain-tissue donation decision.

These days Advance Care Plans (ACP in Victoria) or Advance Health Directives (AHD in New South Wales and Queensland) are becoming more common. Not only are they extensive and convey detailed instructions for health care workers, but they are also an important guide for family who may be called upon to make major medical decisions.

But perhaps more importantly, at a time when a person is most vulnerable, ACPs or AHDs are a vital step towards ensuring a person's care preferences are respected come the end of their life. As one Queensland doctor explained, 'People should be offered the opportunity to make an Advance Health Directive because often they don't want intervention at the end of their life. But the medical and nursing staff are obliged to start resuscitation, even when it's futile, unless there's some form of Advance Health Directive or non-resuscitation plan documented in the patient's chart.'

Although AHDs or ACPs are used in states and territories all over Australia, there are a number of variables, including different document names and formats. (And this may have legal implications for one jurisdiction recognising an ACP or AHD made in another state or territory.)

Creating a standard national format for Advance Care Plans or Advance Health Directives, would be most helpful for the community, particularly when supported by broad community education initiatives.

Thai coup more of the same

INTERNATIONAL

Michael Kelly

'Same same, but different' is a common enough slogan printed on t-shirts in Thailand. And the coup called last week by the head of the Thai military, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, fits the tag.

The formal declaration of the coup is a high point in the slow but steady disintegration of Thai politics over the last two years. It has been a coup in slow motion.

The problem for anyone seeking to make sense of the whole mess is that there is really no decisive or determining issue impacting large numbers of people to create a groundswell of protest or contest. It is hard to interpret unfolding events when there is no clear set of issues about which there is a political contest.

What 'issues' there are largely come down to personalities. Corruption in Thailand is ubiquitous. It is as much a part of every activity and every transaction as taxation is in places like Australia. Its reach is literally everywhere and politics is just a different form of business with all the usual forms of corruption included in the political processes.

And all players follow the same rules. Both the Red Shirt leaders, supporting the Shinawatra family and the leader of the Yellow Shirt 'establishment', especially Suthep Thaugsuban, have distinguished records as people who have used public office for personal material advantage. There are no white knights in Thai politics.

What is even more disturbing is that the Crown Prince, a friend and alleged beneficiary of the Shinawatra family, did what he could to see that the Shinawatras' party did not lose the slender grip on power that they had. By telling the military leadership two weeks ago that they could do everything up to but not including a coup, he proposed a cognation of the existing Government. If the military enacted a coup, the Government would fall for military rule to be set in place.

Well, the coup happened. After locking up the contesting parties in a room and telling them to come up with a solution to Thailand's political challenges, the political leaders remained as intransigent as ever and no solution emerged. The army decided to act and the coup flowed.

The only question now is what comes next. This time there will be a variation on 'same same, but different'.

The difference right now is indefinite rule by the military. But as has happened so many times in the last 60 years, the military rule will be followed by an election that will see the usual suspects return to Parliament, only to await another identical dynamic in five or six years.

There is now no credible person in public life in Thailand able to provide the vision and decisiveness required and a capacity to draw the nation together in a time of crisis. That used to be done by the King, who is so old and infirm that, even if he wanted to, physically and mentally he wouldn't be able to.

Royal intervention and a directive to the military is how such political boils have been lanced in the past. The Bangkok elite of old money, elements of the aristocracy and the educated middle class of Bangkok are supported by its followers from among farmers in the south of the country. They have long claimed that they are the only Thais to be trusted as loyal citizens and subjects of the King.

However, the Shinawatra party is supported by the majority of Thai workers, farmers in the populous north of the country and the middle class outside Bangkok that has emerged over the last two decades. And the Shinawatra party have embarrassed the Bangkok elite by consistently winning by good margins in the last five national elections.

The cycle of election, opposition protest, social and political instability that provokes a Royal approved military intervention underlies how immature democracy is in Thailand. There simply is not a basis for democratic life in the values, political processes, rule of law through the courts and reliable political institutions. No one can accuse the country of having an independent judiciary and the rule of law to ground a stable and sustainable democracy.

Unfortunately, in the medium term — the next five years — it will be 'same, same' unless there is a circuit breaker. That may come with the next trigger to instability which has to be set off sooner rather than later: the death of a very frail royal person.