WICKED PROBLEMS, EXQUISITE DILEMMAS

BARBARA GUNNELL
Assange’s trials

MATTHEW CONDON
after the flood

WENDY McCARTHY
women and power

GREG LOCKHART
an Australian defence cover-up

JOHN VAN TIGGELENI
true-blue Tamworth

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Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city’s second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

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Griffith REVIEW 32

Wicked Problems, Exquisite Dilemmas

Edited by Julianne Schultz
INTRODUCTION

8 Really surreal
   JULIANNE SCHULTZ: Information tools of a new generation

ESSAY

14 Rebel, public nuisance and dreamer
   BARBARA GUNNELL: Julian Assange standing alone

33 Dilemmas, disasters and deliberative democracy
   LYN CARSON: Getting the public back into policy

41 Three for all
   TONY BARRELL: Reasons to be wary of the trinity

62 The flood
   MATTHEW CONDON: History reclaims the chain of ponds

72 Grasping the audacity of risk
   PAUL D WILLIAMS: A tale of two problems

80 Across the Divide
   ROBYN BALLINGER: Learning from the local, and from history

90 Turning dirt into soil
   ANDREA KOCH: Killing two birds with one carbon stone

105 Race fear, dangerous denial
   GREG LOCKHART: Japan and the great deception in Australian history

144 The relevance of irrelevance
   ROBIN HEMLEY: Sharing the imperial pie

153 Learning from Norway
   JOHN LANGMORE and JAN EGELAND: Independent middle-power foreign policy

167 The silence
   SUSAN VARGA: Australian Jews and Israel

174 Global migration
   SERGIO MARCHI: The need for a global response

177 Invisible innocence
   LYNNE WEATHERED: It happens here too

196 Love, social networks and other avatars
   MICHAEL BLUMENSTEIN

201 Struggling in the face of complexity
   CHRIS MILLER: Water reform in the Murray-Darling Basin

210 Learning like a forest
   SALLY MACKINNON: Adapting, creating and evolving together

217 A new Enlightenment
   VALERIE BROWN: The rise and rise of collective learning

224 Wicked problems, wicked delight
   MILLIE ROONEY: Developing a creative approach to change
If wishes were fishes
DEBORAH CLELAND: Hope sustaining action in sustainable marine management

Places for feeling
ELLA MUDIE: Towards an architecture of sensory engagement

The rise and fall of infant reflux
PAMELA DOUGLAS: The limits of evidence-based medicine

MEMOIR

Daughters of the revolution
WENDY McCARTHY: In a documentary without a script

Mud, mud glorious mud
DEB NEWELL: The flood’s bequest

REPORTAGE

Too blue
JOHN VAN TIGGELEN: A tale of two countries

The dispossessed
BRONWYN ADCOCK: The decline of a coastal Koori community

FICTION

Dying, laughing
SUSAN JOHNSON

Five across: Puzzle
MORRIS LURIE

POETRY

Vanellinae
JOSEPHINE ROWE

Missing persons
CRAIG SHERBORNE

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INTRODUCTION

Really surreal
Information tools of a new generation
Julianne Schultz

THE monstrous wave that engulfed the north-east coast of Japan, sweeping the means and products of decades of industrial production and centuries of cultural and social life into its evil black waters, was a terrifying and heartbreaking reminder of proportion. Even the most careful planning and extensive warning systems, produced by one of the richest and most ingenious peoples on earth, were as naught when confronted with nature’s full fury.

Coming after months of increasingly intense floods, cyclones, fires and earthquakes around the world, each described by those most affected as ‘really surreal’, the Japanese tsunami and its after effects demonstrated that reality can be infinitely scarier than any Hollywood special effects studio can conjure: real and surreal (in the sense of happening on a screen) at the same time.

There was nothing abstract or make-believe about the devastation, as the before and after images of towns and cities up and down the Japanese coast demonstrated. While the scale may not have equalled the earthquake in Haiti, or the tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, that Japan – which only a month before slipped from second- to third-richest country in the world – could be revealed to be so vulnerable added to the shock.

The Japanese have done more than their share of heavy lifting in taming wicked problems and grappling with exquisite dilemmas. It is particularly poignant that a country which has suffered more than any other from the impact of nuclear weapons should have come to rely so heavily on atomic power and again confront the apocalyptic edge of its capacity.

While attention has shifted to China and India in recent years, for many decades Japan was a global inspiration, building a new future from the rubble of war, finding a way to maintain cultural traditions alongside modernist global production and edgy cultural expression.
But after the wave hit, pushing over barriers, roads, bridges, houses, schools and factories, racing up valleys at the tail end of its extraordinarily swift journey across the ocean, it was clear that a new generation of problem-solving geniuses would be needed to pluck hope from the debris. And in the context of the times, this will demand a new style of leadership to that of their grandparents, not least because of information. In the immediate aftermath of the nuclear crisis the suspicion that authorities were being less than frank compounded people’s anxiety.

NEVER BEFORE HAS there been so much information about looming and current disasters, and never before have people expected and demanded to be kept so informed. Rather than triggering a retreat, this seems to be encouraging activism – and the expectation of a different form of leadership, one that engages transparently and openly. It is a test of leadership that the Queensland Premier, New Zealand Prime Minister and the mayors of Brisbane and Christchurch passed.

Premier Anna Bligh set the bar high by the way she managed the cascade of disasters that inundated her state. Her direct and calm communication of the details of what was happening, what was likely to occur, and the recommended ways of responding to the floods and cyclones, ensured people had confidence that they were being treated as adults, being given the information they needed to make informed decisions and react accordingly.

This undoubtedly contributed to one of the most striking reactions to the natural disasters that befell the region early in 2011: the almost entirely spontaneous organisation of community support.

The response to the floods in South East Queensland was different to that of thirty-seven years ago, when people retreated and complained that ‘the guvn’mnt ortta’ sort out the mess. This time the much-criticised ‘Gen Ys and Xs’ stepped in and responded to the directness of the Premier’s message and the immediacy of the threat. They used the networks they have created, the social media tools at their disposal, and the muscles and energy of youth to help clean up. Within thirty-six hours Volunteers Queensland took 60,000 calls from people offering to help – most of them aged under forty.

A similar pattern occurred in Christchurch, where young people were at the fore; students from the local universities applied their brains and brawn to helping make life bearable after the horrifying earthquake. At the time of writing it was too early to know whether the pattern would repeat in Japan – even if the information blockages of the first few days did not clear, my hunch is that the pattern will repeat. This is a highly connected and engaged cohort.

In all these emergencies there were sporadic stories of looters and low-lifes taking advantage of the vulnerable, but this was spectacularly outweighed by the preponderance of people responding with generosity and humanity.
The baby boomers had been told that there was no such thing as society, and that self-interest would always prevail. And while many were sceptical about these messages, for decades in the West it was the orthodoxy. Yet, when confronted with extraordinary disasters, their well-educated children – who have collectively witnessed more surreal disasters than any other group in history, as worlds repeatedly collapsed, collided and imploded on screen – demonstrated the fallacy of both theories. They were highly connected to their local and virtual communities, and drew a link between self-interest and collective interest. Clearly for them there is such a thing as society, and they want to help shape it.

THIS IS A sentiment neither confined to natural disasters nor to Australasia. Well-educated young men and women were at the forefront of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and on the receiving end of the bullets and rockets in Libya and Bahrain. Night after night they appeared on television, arguing in perfect English for the democratic and civil rights the rest of us have long taken for granted. The ability to network facilitated by social media played its part, but as a tool, not a proxy for action.

The importance of the information in the secret US cables revealed by WikiLeaks must not be underestimated in unleashing this process, for good and ill. It is a new phenomenon: never before have people known so much about the behind-the-scenes opinions and decisions that shape events. The cables demonstrated that the political corruption in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and others was not a figment of the imagination or merely the personal experience of disgruntled individuals, but an assessment shared by well-informed diplomats who had been trained to make judgements.

As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton observed with some pride last December, soon after the US diplomatic cables were published: ‘What you see are diplomats doing the work of diplomacy: reporting and analysing and providing information, solving problems, worrying about big, complex challenges. In a way it should be reassuring, despite the occasional titbit that is pulled out and unfortunately blown up.’

In a world where journalists are regularly expelled (or worse) from countries for gathering such observations and reporting them, the insight from the US cables was invaluable – they pointed to essential truths that can often not be said out loud. In the tumultuous months that followed, the WikiLeaks cables helped make sense of the extraordinary events in North Africa.

Again, information was the key, despite all the noisy outrage about threats to life and limb, and the angry accusations of treason against Assange. Of the 250,000 cables only 24,000 were classified secret or not to be read by foreigners, and the rest
were merely ‘confidential’. The release of the information could be classified as an
exquisite dilemma – who is opposed to freedom of speech and inside information? –
but the lack of security of the cables, allowing them to be leaked, pointed to a
systemic, if not wicked, problem.

IF THE TIMES produce the leaders and icons they need, Julian Assange is surely an
embodiment of his generation. Flawed, obsessive, brilliant, he is the product of his
time and place and the tools at his disposal. He has, with customary grandiosity,
promised that his book will be a manifesto for a generation.

Just as the baby boomers reacted against their parents and at the same time were
a product of their parents’ (especially their mothers’) longing, ambition and hope for
a different world, so their children are responding to contradictory signals absorbed
when young.

The more I read and heard about Julian Assange, the more I was reminded of the
kids with sleep-matted hair and runny noses who sat silently in the living rooms of
the 1970s and early 1980s, listening to the faux-revolutionary talk of their (often
stoned) parents. Peter Carey created a portrait of such a child in His Illegal Self
(Viking, 2008). In this novel, drawn from Carey’s experience in the hippy communes
of the Sunshine Coast and from the story of the revolutionary American
Weathermen, the boy Che floats on the wave of his parents’ dreams and fantasies as
he struggles to make sense of an environment that is chaotic, paranoid and replete
with danger.

While the parents of Che and many children like him gradually jettisoned their
youthful dreams and obsessions, the values that originally motivated them
endured and have found expression in their children.

It is easy to forget how our world has changed since 1971, when Julian Assange
was born. As the celebrations of a century of International Women’s Day reminded
us, the equality and openness, standards of living and education of today were once
unimaginable, are without parallel in history. Remarkably, this transformation has
been achieved incrementally, without chaos and, despite an at times rancorous
public domain, without major disruption. Change is a non-negotiable part of life,
sometimes within our control, but often not.

WHEN WE BEGAN commissioning for this edition of Griffith REVIEW, in
October last year, the aim was to explore a series of wicked problems that resist
simple linear solutions, the big, complex issues that morph into their unintended
consequences. We wanted to examine some exquisite dilemmas, when dreams were
almost, but not quite, realised. We also planned to explore the possibilities of design-
led thinking to produce new innovative, resilient and exciting solutions. The events of the past six months messily intruded, but the prism of the wicked problem remained relevant. In this world the most complicated human problems are nothing compared to the power of nature. That in itself is both a wicked problem and an exquisite dilemma.

17 March 2011
And I know now, about the birds – their Latin name, their population and international distribution. I know their migratory patterns and have watched footage of them in flight; could write about the slow, irregular beat of wing or shrillness of call, but still do not know how to write about you standing at the window that morning at the repatriation clinic, grey in the early light alongside the other old soldiers and all of you just watching the birds in the grass outside. Seven of you there at the window, not speaking only smoking as you’d smoked through decades of daily crossword instant coffee, broken families, anger management, repeat prescriptions, therapy through wood and leather work and all those things nobody talks about. You stood smoking and watched the birds build a nest, and though I know the word Vanellinae I still do not know how to write about what you and those grey men were waiting for.

Josephine Rowe is a Melbourne-based writer of poetry and fiction. Her collection of short stories, How a Moth Becomes a Boat, was published in 2010 by Hunter Publishers.
BELMARSH Magistrates’ Court sits behind a tall steel-picket fence in the precinct of a high-security prison in the unlovely south-east London suburb of Woolwich. On a drab Friday in February, journalists from several continents arrived there to hear the closing statements in the case of Director of Public Prosecution Marianne Ny, Swedish Prosecution Authority, Sweden v Julian Paul Assange. They were all used to the drill now, and queued for security, removed mobile phones from bags, took off coats and shoes for scanning – and derived some satisfaction from watching a handful of celebrities and expensively shod barristers having to do likewise.

You would have concluded that the defendant was a dangerous terrorist. In the eyes of several high-ranking American politicians, he was. In fact, this was the third day of a straightforward, if rather technical, hearing on the validity of a European Arrest Warrant. The case had been relocated from Central London because of the large number of satellite trucks and broadcasting teams that had to be accommodated near the court. A two-day hearing had been scheduled to decide whether Julian Assange, Australian founder of the WikiLeaks organisation and responsible for the biggest leaks of classified information in history, should be extradited to Sweden to answer charges of sexual assault and rape.

The case, due to finish on 8 February, had gone into a third day – to the intense and evident irritation of Clare Montgomery, QC, acting for the Swedish state. Assange’s defence counsel, Geoffrey Robertson, QC, Australian-born and the best known human rights lawyer in Britain, had attended in considerable detail to each of a long list of objections to the arrest warrant. Montgomery, who shares chambers with Cherie Booth (the wife of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair), made it clear she found his objections trifling. For Montgomery, a former world-class fencer and an expert in extradition, this might be a standard strategy. In 1998 she had successfully defended Augusto Pinochet from extradition to Spain, where he faced
charges of genocide, arguing that if the former dictator of Chile (who had done a deal for immunity in his home country) were removed to Spain for prosecution it would encourage future tyrants to stay in power.

AS THE BELMARSH court reconvened for the two barristers to sum up, the Assange team raised a new objection to extradition. The night before, the Swedish Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, had made an unexpected intervention, accusing Assange and his legal representatives of making remarks that were ‘condescending and damaging to Sweden’ and, in particular, disrespectful of the rights of Swedish women. Robertson argued that a political intervention of this kind further damaged Assange’s chance of a fair trial and had vilified him in Sweden as ‘an enemy of the people’. Montgomery countered that it was the Assange legal team’s intemperate out-of-court public remarks that had provoked the Swedish Prime Minister. Judge Howard Riddle, who Assange’s Australian lawyer Jennifer Robinson labelled ‘a hostile judge’, appeared to agree and refused Team Assange’s request for time to get the remarks properly translated. As a result, we never learned whether Prime Minister Reinfeldt specifically referred, as Robertson did, to Henrik Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People.

If he didn’t already know the work, Julian Assange might have been disconcerted to discover that Ibsen’s play, about a small town in Norway, serves as a short synopsis of his own recent troubles. The nineteenth-century drama involves a whistleblower, a newspaper, and political and business interests determined to retain their power and wealth. The morally driven Dr Stockmann has obtained scientific evidence that an epidemic of sickness is caused by polluted water at the town’s public baths. He intends to publish details in the local paper and thus force the baths to close. But the spa also brings the town jobs and wealth. Stockmann is betrayed, first by the mayor, then by the newspaper and finally by the capricious public he has championed. They prefer to stick with the devils they know than with the troublemaker whose campaign threatens their livelihoods. ‘Yes, yes! He is an enemy of the people! He hates his country! He hates his own people!’ they shout as they desert him.

Watching the 11 February hearing come to a ragged and bad-tempered close from a glass enclosure in Court 3, Assange might well have felt the tide of public opinion similarly turning against him. Whatever Judge Riddle decided, Assange would be remaining under ‘mansion arrest’ in rural Norfolk, possibly for months. Both sides had indicated that if the verdict on the validity of the arrest warrant went against them, they would appeal. Two weeks later, when the caravan returned to Belmarsh to hear the decision, Assange looked defeated even before the decision came. Riddle ruled that Assange could be extradited under the warrant. His team duly put in their appeal.
The case will go to the High Court. Assange might or might not have to go to Sweden. He might or might not face charges of rape and assault there. His worst fears, that he could be extradited from either country to the United States and face lengthy imprisonment or even execution, could even be realised. But the immediate horror for Assange must have been the painstakingly slow legal process. A man used over many years to having ‘no fixed abode’, to answering and explaining to no one and living out of a backpack, is under house arrest, tagged electronically until a legal argument about the validity of European Arrest Warrants is resolved.

THE BELMARSH HEARINGS revealed, but left unresolved and untested, graphic details of the testimonies of Julian Assange’s two accusers taken from leaked police evidence, to which he cannot legally respond. With no resolution in sight and no official charges yet laid, everybody but Assange was now entitled to debate, or at least have a view on, his morals, behaviour and character. Books have been written and published, commentators have opined, documentaries made and broadcast: Assange has become the most extensively discussed, reported, blogged and tweeted-about man in history.

It is one of the many tensions between secrecy and openness in the WikiLeaks story that a major objection to extradition from the Assange legal team has been that rape cases in Sweden are usually heard in secret, with press and public excluded – thus, they argue, compromising Assange’s right to a fair hearing. And yet, almost every detail of the events in Stockholm in August 2010 that led to two women making complaints to the police has now been made public, first as police evidence leaked to journalists and then, in the magistrate’s court, as part of the legal argument over the validity of the arrest warrant. Everyone with any interest or curiosity in the case will have heard the accusers’ versions of events, and most will have come to a firm opinion on what happened in Stockholm.

The exchanges between Claire Montgomery and Geoffrey Robertson on the alleged rape reveal the irreconcilable and subjective viewpoints of the case Assange will have to answer to if he goes to Sweden. In Judge Riddle’s court, the allegations of the two women, which have been widely reported, were not put forward as evidence for examination or testing. The two barristers were concerned only with interpreting whether the women’s complaints amounted to a definition of rape that would hold in both countries.

In the legal arguments of Robertson and Montgomery, the claims of the Swedish women became the same story, of the same events, told twice over with totally different emphases. ‘He pinned her down with his body weight,’ said Montgomery. ‘That is what is usually described as the missionary position,’ countered Robertson. ‘She was asleep,’ Montgomery said. ‘Ms A claimed to be half asleep. That is also half awake,’ was Robertson’s version. ‘Sexual encounters have their ebbs and flows.
What may be unwanted one minute can with further empathy become desired,’ he suggested.

‘In popular language, that’s violence,’ said Montgomery. ‘No doubt rough consensual sex is something on which he [Robertson] is able to give some useful information to the court,’ she concluded, eliciting a gasp from the assembled journalists.

Assange, whose version of events we have yet to hear, sat still in the dock, occasionally leaning forward to better catch a mumbled phrase from Robertson. The two benches of the public gallery, able to hold twenty-five to thirty people, over several days accommodated Assange’s celebrity supporters – the veteran left-wing politician Tony Benn, Bianca Jagger, Jemima Khan, John Pilger – and campaigners and colleagues from WikiLeaks. Assange acknowledged them as he entered court.

Outside, members of Anonymous, an anarchist group that is very publicly supporting Assange and WikiLeaks, waited beyond the perimeter fence, wearing sinister Guy Fawkes masks. I had wondered what they thought they had in common with the Roman Catholic plotter who attempted to blow up the English parliament in 1605, but the masks were in fact replicating the face on the cover of a five-part cult graphic novel, V for Vendetta, set in a dystopian fascist future.

DURING THE TWO months before the court case that Assange had already spent under house arrest at the Norfolk country house of Vaughan Smith, a former army captain and the owner of the Frontline Club for foreign correspondents (slogan: ‘Championing Independent Journalism’), the world witnessed the greatest geopolitical upheaval since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The critical role of WikiLeaks disclosures in the revolutions and uprisings of the Middle East and North Africa is not much debated. It is taken for granted by some and ignored by others. Even as Assange’s extradition was contested in Court 3 on 11 February, Egypt’s President, Hosni Mubarak, announced his resignation. An uprising in Tunisia had already led to the resignation of President Ben Ali, whose corruption and lavish lifestyle had been the subject of a (Wiki) leaked diplomatic cable. By the time of the extradition decision, on 24 February, Libyan protests and reprisals were underway. That day, several of the international broadcasters who had been covering Assange’s trial were absent, diverted to a new story.

In the first days of March, Assange found himself back in the news, though in a way that would have displeased him. The satirical magazine Private Eye published an account of a bad-tempered telephone exchange between Assange and the magazine’s editor, Ian Hislop. Assange complained about a story that had accused a WikiLeaks associate of anti-Semitism. (Israel Shamir, who has ties to WikiLeaks in Sweden, is widely accused of being a Holocaust denier.) According to Hislop, he
then accused the *Eye* and other well-known journalists of being part of a Jewish-led conspiracy against WikiLeaks. Hislop is a trusted and well-liked journalist, with a reputation for mischief-making but not for dishonesty. The kerfuffle would blow over but Assange seemed to have judged it badly.

A second story was that Stephen Spielberg’s DreamWorks had announced it would make a film about Assange, alas based on two not very complimentary books about him. The character flaws of the man had become the only story, the substance of his actions pushed aside, and the transition from hero to villain was swift even on speeded-up internet time.

A third story put both these in perspective. On 3 March, further charges were laid against Bradley Manning, the young soldier who is alleged to have confessed online to being the source of the enormous cache of US military leaks. Among the new charges was ‘aiding the enemy’, which can incur the death penalty in the US.

**ON 5 APRIL 2010** Julian Assange travelled from Iceland to Washington, DC, for a press conference to launch the online release of an American military video shot in 2007. The footage revealed a group of civilians in Baghdad being fired at from two US Army Apache helicopters in July 2007. More than a dozen people were killed in the incident, including a child and two staff of the Reuters news agency. Reuters knew the video existed but had failed to obtain a copy under US Freedom of Information legislation. WikiLeaks received the material in encrypted form and had been decoding it for three months.

As Assange prepared to leave for the American capital he would probably have had no more than a few hours’ sleep in the preceding five days. He had been in Iceland less than a week, working night and day on editing the forty minutes of video down to seventeen with a team that included two professional film editors, local activists, two journalists and Birgitta Jónsdóttir, the Iceland MP with whom Assange had been co-operating on a wider project to make Iceland a haven of media freedom. His arrival in the capital, Reykjavík, had coincided with the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull. This became the team’s alibi as they worked on the video. Anyone interested in the comings and goings at their overcrowded short-let house was told that they were journalists, in Iceland to report on the volcano.

Raffi Khatchadourian’s study in the *New Yorker* of these five days, written before WikiLeaks’ own internal eruptions had become the story, is one of the friendlier accounts of Assange’s modus operandi: ‘WikiLeaks is not quite an organisation; it is better described as a media insurgency. It has no paid staff...no office. Assange does not even have a home. He travels from country to country, staying with supporters...WikiLeaks exists wherever he does.’ During the video editing Assange barely left his desk. Jónsdóttir, under protest, even cut Assange’s hair as he worked.
There is open debate, but according to the June 2010 article it is clear that Assange makes the decisions.

WikiLeaks had been operating for three and a half years and was steadily gaining media attention – sufficient interest for the New Yorker to travel to Iceland. A growing catalogue of scoops included the handbook of operating procedures at the Guantánamo Bay military prison, exposure of the corrupt diversion of billions of dollars of public funds in Kenya and Sarah Palin’s private emails. There had been threats of legal action, but no hits. No one had succeeded in closing down the site. WikiLeaks.org, with its sophisticated architecture and ability to replicate its contents on mirror sites across the world, was beginning to seem invincible. In Assange’s own words, he had created ‘an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking and public analysis’. A government or company that wanted to remove content would have to practically dismantle the internet itself, Assange told Khatchadourian.

But the team in Iceland knew that the Iraq video would incense the military establishment, and that they were entering a dangerous and difficult new phase. They talk of what should be done in the event of arrests. Khatchadourian wrote of a collaborative, purposeful few weeks assembling the film. But the cracks were beginning to appear. Assange’s former close ally Daniel Domscheit-Berg was not in Iceland. They had already started to quarrel and DomscheitBerg would shortly terminate the friendship in a bitter exchange later posted online. The adrenalin rush of engaging with a powerful enemy is a close cousin of paranoia.

The shared euphoria of comrades working on a great cause can, without some order, food and sleep, degenerate swiftly into fractious distrust. Jónsdóttir was still a friend but said later that she saw then the beginning of the organisation’s collapse. ‘Working with computer geeks, it is creative chaos...[Assange] had to have the final word. There was a lack of transparency.’

At the time they were co-operating on something inspiring, the creation of the Iceland Modern Media Initiative – a state that guaranteed absolute freedom for the media. Shortly before Christmas 2010 Birgitta Jónsdóttir told the BBC of those days. ‘I had seen the film when collaborating with WikiLeaks on a project to turn Iceland into a haven for journalists. I was so shocked, I was crying.’

Khatchadourian watched the editing of Project B, as the Iraq video was then called, and was also shocked. The source is never referred to and Khatchadourian doesn’t learn the name. He listens to Assange’s philosophy of ‘scientific journalism’ – which, it is explained to him, offers viewers or readers the raw material with which to verify what they are being told. He listens to the debates between the team about the nature of the editing and notes: ‘Assange saw these events in sharply delineated moral terms, yet the footage did not offer easy legal judgments.’

The release of the Iraq video represented an important change of direction, of purpose even, for Assange and for WikiLeaks. Contrary to the earlier practice of
releasing raw material that spoke for itself ‘comment-free’, with the sole intention of adumbrating the secret activities of governments and corporations, this video is without question a journalistic endeavour – a short documentary, in fact. It is professionally edited, with an accompanying ‘initial analysis’ and the tendentious title, from Assange, Collateral Murder. Furthermore, it relies on additional research and verification. Before he and Kristinn Hrafnsson, later to take on the role of WikiLeaks spokesman, take it to Washington, a cameraman and journalist go to Baghdad to find and interview the families of some of those killed or injured in the attack. Faithful to Assange’s theory of ‘scientific journalism’, however, the WikiLeaks site offers not just the edited seventeen minutes but also the full, unedited version.

If releasing the video was a pivotal moment for WikiLeaks, it was also a watershed for the media as a whole. Collateral Murder was followed in July 2010 by the release of a huge database of secret documents relating the event-by-event progress of the Afghanistan war. By this time, journalists were anxious to collaborate with the organisation. For the first time, WikiLeaks formed a direct partnership with the press, working initially with The Guardian to make sense of some two million pages of documents, later bringing in the New York Times and Der Spiegel. The Iraq war logs came later in the year and were again shared by several media outlets. Finally, in late November, amid well-documented rows between WikiLeaks and its media collaborators, ‘the biggest leak in history’ was published: a quarter of a million cables from US diplomats to the State Department began to trickle into the public domain.

This astonishing rate of revelations was a game-changer on many fronts. At the beginning of 2010 WikiLeaks was a sophisticated but small online secrets dump with a mission to force governments to greater transparency – ‘We open governments’ was one of the site’s mottos. By the end of the year, WikiLeaks had become a byword for debate about the very nature of journalism and the role of journalists. Assange, the public’s choice for Time magazine’s Person of the Year (the editors overrode their readers and chose Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg), has become one the best known faces in the world.

The nature of leaks and secrecy, and the high-tech hacking that generated this material, became a matter of urgent concern to the US military. This at first delighted the media, which thrives on tales of the mighty humbled. And it continues to thrill young anarchist-hacktivists who see WikiLeaks as the David who will fell the US imperialist Goliath.

But there have followed more cautious analyses, which ask whether it is right or democratic that one small organisation should become the monopoly distributor of so many government secrets and be the arbiter of what gets published. What of the wider casualties? This was a point put to Assange after the publication of
unredacted Afghan war logs. He has been accused of being insufficiently diligent about protecting local allies of the US Army. In fact, to the surprise of many, there were no reports of harm to individuals mentioned in the logs.

Assange’s celebrity and notoriety are now inextricably linked. He is a hero who defies the powerful while championing open government. And he is an enemy of the people who endangers the free world. Before the April 2010 launch of Collateral Murder in Washington, Assange had already poked one hornets’ nest: in March he had posted on the website a leaked document relating to the US military’s interest in WikiLeaks itself. Assange entitled it ‘US intelligence planned to destroy WikiLeaks.’

The Pentagon and intelligence organisations had been clearly riled by the leak of the Guantánamo operating procedures handbook. Its document considers ways of exploiting vulnerabilities in the group’s ‘obscuration technology’, and speculates about whether WikiLeaks activists and associates would enjoy the journalistic freedom-of-speech protection that exists in the US. In the light of several public arguments later, about whether Assange could be described as a journalist, this seems more sinister. That aside, it is an oddly restrained document and could be laughed off. But WikiLeaks was acquiring notable enemies.

JULIAN ASSANGE SAYS that he registered the site leaks.org in the late 1990s but had been nurturing the idea since his mid-twenties. Yet the mix of idealism, computer expertise and rejection of old-style activism that created WikiLeaks was surely the story of his generation of teenage computer geeks. These are the teenagers, mainly boys, of the 1980s who, on low-capacity Commodores, in networks around the developed world, learned to program and develop computer games, thus staking a permanent claim in the developing information technology systems on which governments and corporations were to become increasingly dependent. When Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web, in the early 1990s, a generation of young computer enthusiasts embraced not only his brilliant invention but also his idealistic philosophy of ‘net neutrality’ and of creating systems that ensured that the internet could never become the monopoly of any one class or group. Even teenagers in those years who were less interested in the high-end technology saw themselves as part of a new world of free music, shared games and programs, and a new attitude to copyright and ownership of ideas.

WikiLeaks’ political co-parent was the growing disaffection of Generation X, teenagers of the 1980s and early ’90s who shaped their political ideals just as the old left/right certainties collapsed with the Berlin Wall. Unlike their baby-boomer mothers and fathers, this generation had no automatic allegiance to left-wing or right-wing political philosophies. They tended instead to become involved in global issues such as environmentalism, third-world poverty, trade domination by the rich, human rights, the destruction of cultures. All these were of more interest than
whether the state or private corporations owned a nation’s utilities. The successful politicians of the 1990s were the Third Way adherents, who acknowledged the disappearance of tribal certainties among this generation and nodded towards the idealism. What emerged – and remained – was a fundamental rejection of the old power structures and information hierarchies.

The generation now entering its forties is more likely to be anti-authoritarian, to distrust elites and to believe strongly that the people have a right to the information that informs the decisions of the powerful. In the political sphere no leader – whether Barack Obama, David Cameron, Julia Gillard, Nicolas Sarkozy, Hosni Mubarak or Muammar Gaddaf – can ignore the expectation that they will govern transparently, must not lie, and should expect to be found out and dishonoured if they do. That WikiLeaks exposed US diplomacy caused fury in high places, but the actual cable leaks – their content, as opposed to wider concerns about the security of military secrets – have not shocked the public at all.

IN A LENGTHY and perceptive essay for The Monthly Robert Manne, a professor of politics at Melbourne’s La Trobe University, suggests a more precise progenitor of WikiLeaks: the cypherpunk movement that emerged on America’s west coast in the early 1990s. The uniting philosophy of the group, whose email list Assange joined in 1995, when he was twenty-four, was that ‘the state’ had developed the capacity to crush individual freedom through surveillance, and that the internet could and should be used to fight it. According to Manne, the cypherpunks were predominantly anarchists and very much of the right, supporting, among other things, laissez-faire capitalism, tax avoidance, insider trading and even a free market in military secrets. A core activity was to devise cryptographic software to enable web users to operate unwatched by the state.

It is easy to see that a one-time hacker and first-class cryptographer would be attracted to the cypherpunks, but hard to find much political similarity between their program and anything that Assange has said. WikiLeaks does have an anarchist following in Anonymous, the group that demonstrated at Belmarsh and which launches reactive attacks on the websites of organisations they consider to be unfriendly to WikiLeaks. When PayPal, Barclays and Visa withdrew from financial co-operation from WikiLeaks in the aftermath of the cable leaks, threatening the organisation’s donations, Anonymous launched denial-of-service attacks – co-ordinated efforts to flood a website with requests, so that it fails. This is anarchist hacking at its most basic.

WikiLeaks, though, has a clearly described political philosophy of working for good governance, not no governance. The mission outlined on its website is that leaking calls governments and corporations to account, and that ‘public scrutiny of otherwise unaccountable and secretive institutions forces them to consider the
ethical implications of their actions…Open government exposes and undoes corruption. Open governance is the most effective method of promoting good governance.’

Like many of the San Francisco cypherpunks, Assange was a gifted coder and hacker, but he linked his skills to a different developing political philosophy. Like the cypherpunks he strongly believed that governments used secrecy as a powerful weapon to the detriment of their citizens. To him, exposing the illegal or immoral behaviour of governments and corporations to citizens is an indisputably noble end: a means of breaking open government secrecy. The concept of drawing in collaborative pinpointing of corrupt practice is spelled out in the name – Wiki (a collective venture, such as Wikipedia) + leaks – and became Assange’s political mission.

WOULD WIKILEAKS HAVE happened without Assange? Bill Keller, executive editor of the New York Times, in his ungenerous account of the cable leaks story, writes: ‘Frankly, I think the impact of WikiLeaks on the culture has probably been overblown. Long before WikiLeaks was born, the internet transformed the landscape of journalism…’

But, rather as Facebook now seems an inevitable extension of chatrooms and college email groups, and Twitter an extension of texting, it is easy to think that a system for gathering and disseminating government secrets while protecting sources was inevitable.

The development of copycat sites such as OpenLeaks (Daniel Domscheit-Berg’s post-Assange project), FrenchLeaks (run by the independent Paris-based organisation Mediapart) and UniLeaks (an Australian site focusing on higher education), and the announcements by a variety of newspapers and television channels that they too intend to develop their own dumps for secret data, reinforce the idea that nothing could be simpler. But, as the Mark Zuckerberg character says in the film The Social Network, which recounts the legal fight with the Winklevoss twins over the ownership of Facebook: ‘If you guys were the inventors of Facebook, you would have invented Facebook.’

WikiLeaks earns its place in history not just by being first but by the daring and scope of the concept, and the technical mastery that keeps it going, despite the very best efforts of the world’s most skilful ‘cyercops’ and anti-terrorist organisations. It is hard to separate that audacity and resilience from the personal history of Julian Assange.

Accounts of this differ, including his own accounts, but it is still probably best told in his own words. In January came the news that Assange would write a memoir. After the announcement of a lucrative publishing deal he stated his intent
with typical grandiosity: the book would, he hoped, be ‘one of the unifying
documents of our generation’. But at the time of writing it seemed unlikely to
appear in April, as planned. Details of his early childhood and teenage years are,
however, outlined in an autobiographical contribution that Assange made to
Underground: Tales of Hacking, Madness and Obsession on the Electronic Frontier, by
the story of the Melbourne hacking community of the late 1980s and ’90s.

Assange was Dreyfus’s researcher and also a character in the book, Mendax, his
computer identity in his hacking days. Assange wrote: ‘By the time he was fifteen
Mendax had lived in a dozen different places including Perth, Magnetic Island,
Brisbane, Townsville, Sydney, the Adelaide Hills, and a string of coastal towns in
northern New South Wales and Western Australia. In fifteen years he had enrolled
in at least as many different schools.’ He describes ‘turbulent years moving from
town to town as his parents explored the ’70s left-wing, bohemian subculture. As a
boy, he was surrounded by artists. His stepfather staged and directed plays and his
mother did makeup, costume and set design.’

The school system held no interest for him and he became involved in serious
hacking, but he does not write of it with bravado. Instead, he describes the paranoia
it invoked, which led eventually to a breakdown: ‘Mendax dreamed of police raids
all the time...He dreamed of waking from a deep sleep to find several police officers
standing over his bed. The dreams...accentuated his growing paranoia that the
police were watching him, following him.’ Mendax was hospitalised but ‘hospital
was definitely making him crazier’. Not wanting to return to live with his ‘strong-
willed’ mother, he slept rough. ‘Mostly, he haunted Sherbrooke Forest in the
Dandenong Ranges National Park...the temperature dropped well below the rest of
Melbourne in winter. In summer, the mosquitoes were unbearable and Mendax
sometimes woke to find his face swollen and bloated from their bites.’

In a coda describing Mendax’s post-hacking life, the 25-year-old Assange wrote:
‘Mendax donates his time to various international programming efforts and releases
some of his programs for free on the Internet. His philosophy is that most of the
lasting social advances in the history of man have been a direct result of new
technology.’ The Melbourne hackers were ‘quintessentially Australian, always
questioning authority and rebelling against the Establishment. They’re smart – in
some cases very smart. A few might even be classified as technical geniuses. They’re
mischievous, but also very enterprising. They’re rebels, public nuisances and
dreamers.’

This pleasure in rebelling recurs. In an interview in July 2010, shortly before
WikiLeaks published Afghanistan war data, Assange was asked by Der Spiegel
why he had chosen WikiLeaks – instead, they suggested, of living in Palo Alto
with a swimming pool. He replied: ‘We are obligated to make good use of the
time that we have and to do something that is meaningful and satisfying…I enjoy helping people who are vulnerable. And I enjoy crushing bastards.’

For a while, Assange wrote a personal blog. It contains several references to the problems of gifted children. One, in June 2006, quoting from an academic study, is particularly poignant. ‘A lesson which many gifted persons never learn as long as they live is that human beings in general are inherently very different from themselves in thought, in action, in general intention, and in interests. Many a reformer has died at the hands of a mob, which he was trying to improve in the belief that other human beings can and should enjoy what he enjoys. This is one of the most painful and difficult lessons that each gifted child must learn, if personal development is to proceed successfully…Failure to learn how to tolerate in a reasonable fashion the foolishness of others leads to bitterness, disillusionment, and misanthropy.’


The story of the leaks and the US reaction to the ‘theft’ of classified material at first tended to overshadow the content and consequence of the cables. It became commonplace, particularly for media outlets that had not been part of the collaborative effort, to dismiss them as the humdrum gossip of diplomats. The diplomats merely stated known truths, it was claimed, or repeated stories and gossip that had originally come from the press anyway. A fair representation of that point of view was put to Julian Assange on 21 December by John Humphrys, anchor of the BBC’s main morning radio news program, after three weeks of stories based on the leaks: ‘A lot of it’s fascinating. A lot of it’s intriguing. But it’s tittle-tattle. It’s the kind of thing an ambassador would tell his boss at home just because it’s something he’s found out.’

‘With respect,’ Assange replied, ‘it is not tittle-tattle…When the head of the state or an ambassador is reporting what you call tittle-tattle, it is no longer tittle-tattle. It is either very dangerous poisonous political gossip, or it is the truth.’

‘What does it mean for the future of diplomacy?’ John Humphrys asked. ‘In whose interest is it that diplomats can no longer speak freely to their own foreign office?’

‘They can speak freely,’ Assange replied. ‘They just have to start committing things to paper that they are proud of.’
Re-reading his Tunisian cables Ambassador Robert Godec might have good reason to feel proud of his contributions. They are immensely readable and if, in the American jargon, he was merely passing on scuttlebutt, it is very revealing scuttlebutt. He observes that Tunmians are frustrated by lack of political freedom, and that the ruling family is corrupt and widely despised for its lavish lifestyle. It is certainly subjective - but Godec is presumably appointed for his ability to make good judgements. And when the US ambassador reports that there are ‘serious human rights problems’ and that the ‘risks to the regime’s long-term stability are increasing’, then, in newsroom parlance, that’s a story.

WHY, THOUGH, IF journalists and diplomats were regularly exchanging information, did so few stories of this kind emerge from the Middle East before the release of the cables? The answer is deniability. A couple of decades ago, a freelance journalist friend of mine working in Kenya was asked to leave the country after doing a series of broadcasts for the BBC that were not seen as sufficiently respectful of President Daniel arap Moi’s increasingly corrupt government. I was there reporting on the construction of a major dam and, coincidentally, was also the president of the UK National Union of Journalists, so I arranged a meeting with the British High Commissioner. He nodded and agreed that it was a bad business, and suggested I use my influence to get the BBC to give H*** a nice job in London. Problem solved. He spoke openly of bribery of government officials (by non-British companies, naturally) to secure major construction contracts. It was understood that I could not have reported such comments, as he would have denied them. A subsequent High Commissioner, Sir Edward Clay, finally became very undiplomatic when he accused Kenyan politicians of ‘vomiting on the shoes’ of donor countries, a graphic reference to the siphoning-off of international aid.

Sir Edward aside, that is how things work in diplomacy and in journalism. The traditionalists in both trades defend the need for operating thus; shoot-from-the-hip diplomacy would have its contradictions. However, as long ago as 1918, Woodrow Wilson undertook that ‘Diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.’

There remains a puzzling mismatch between the response to ‘the biggest leak in history’ and its actual impact. It is as if there have been two quite different events. One has been a breach of security that has provoked outrage and some panic among US politicians, inducing calls for Assange’s arrest and even extradition execution. An apparently quite separate event has been a tough but manageable problem for the State Department, which Hillary Clinton has handled calmly, expressing a bit of anger and restrained menace, along with a carefully calibrated dollop of sadness that the good work of diplomatic honesty could suffer.

As the Middle East uprisings and power struggles unravel, the US has appeared to be, mostly, on the side of the better angels. Some Washington voices have
suggested dangers in the new power balance, and that it might not be good for America to ‘lose Egypt’, which provoked The Economist into a wonderfully unrestrained blast on 2 March: ‘Nobody lost Egypt! Egypt just ousted its dictator in a non-violent popular revolution! It’s going to have democratic elections in six months! In what perverse universe does this count as a defeat for American foreign policy, for the West, for enlightenment civilisation, for lovers of human rights?’

The predominant issue for the US has not been security; it has been embarrassment. In a briefing on 30 November 2010, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told the press: ‘Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for US foreign policy? I think fairly modest.’

In a longer statement, Gates added: ‘I’ve heard the impact of these releases on our foreign policy described as a meltdown, as a game-changer, and so on. I think those descriptions are fairly significantly overwrought. The fact is, governments deal with the United States because it’s in their interest, not because they like us, not because they trust us, and not because they believe we can keep secrets.’

The revelation probably most damaging to the US was that its officials had routinely spied on senior United Nations leaders. The leaks that have had the greatest significance are those concerning the Middle East. Taken as a whole, the US State Department comfortably survived what US Vice President Joe Biden initially labelled ‘high-tech terrorism’.

A PLANK OF the case against Julian Assange’s extradition has been the question of open justice. In seeking to highlight the injustice to their client of being tried for rape and sexual assault in Sweden, his lawyers have emphasised that the proceedings there would be held in ‘secret’. When Judge Riddle gave his decision that the extradition should go ahead, the word he used was ‘private’— the Swedish system protected the privacy of witnesses, he said. Secrecy has negative connotations; privacy is something most of us value and safeguard.

Just as it now appears easier to disclose the information governments wish to hide, it is becoming more difficult for individuals to protect themselves, both from government surveillance and from other intruders. Yet the early hacktivists were more concerned with the right to privacy than with exposing secrets. The cypherpunk mission was to devise programs for the use of all, to encrypt communications beyond government surveillance.

A would-be ethical investigative journalist could do worse than to adopt the rule of thumb expose secrets, respect privacy, particularly since that appears to mirror the instincts of the public. In most democracies, citizens are certain about their right to know (and the right of journalists to expose on their behalf) the secrets of governments, of powerful institutions and even, in some circumstances, of
influential or powerful individuals. However, in the rich world at least, people are equally emphatic about their right to privacy. This is not contradictory, but nor is it clear-cut. At what point does the ‘campaigning journalist’ exposing the secrets of power become the ‘seedy hack’ snooping into strictly private concerns, particularly when celebrities play fast and loose with their own ‘privacy’, one day staging ‘spontaneous’ photo opps, the next crying foul when a journalist or paparazzo catches them in an unflattering situation?

Australia and the United States have had freedom-of-information legislation much longer than Britain has, and also have stronger laws protecting privacy. In the UK the emphasis is heavily on avoiding the disclosure of official secrets; individual privacy is treated quite carelessly. An industry body, the Press Complaints Commission, is charged with protecting the latter by self-regulation. Its pursuit of breaches of privacy is so languid that for months on end it is possible to forget the commission exists.

Nothing illustrates this bias better than the extreme intrusions, over several years, into private lives by Rupert Murdoch’s News of the World, which is only now the subject of a proper police investigation. In 2007, a private investigator and the News of the World’s royal reporter were jailed for intercepting voicemail messages of members of the royal family. Andy Coulson, the Prime Minister’s press secretary until he resigned in February, was the newspaper’s editor at the time. The royal reporter was described as a rogue operator; likewise the investigator. But no one believed the phone-hacking was an isolated incident or that senior editors at the paper at that time were ignorant of its use in getting many of the paper’s stories. Earlier this year, a handful of the hundreds of celebrities and public figures whose phones (and children’s phones) had been regularly hacked went to court to seek damages for illegal intrusion. The only major papers that have followed the story with any diligence are the Financial Times, Guardian, Independent and New York Times.

Brian Cathcart, a professor of journalism at Kingston University, wrote of the silence: ‘Editors who routinely invoke the public interest when it suits them have in this case systematically abused the public interest. One leading player in the story has been in Downing Street for nine months; another [Murdoch] dominates our media landscape; a third is our most powerful police force. If their conduct is not a matter of public interest, what is?’

An unexpected elision of secrecy and privacy came in John Humphrys’ radio interview with Julian Assange. Four days earlier The Guardian had published a story based on leaked details of the police evidence of the rape allegations against Assange. It was a tough interview, which at first appeared to be about politics, until Humphrys raised this disclosure. Assange said he had not yet been charged and that the prosecution’s leaks to the papers had been selective. Humphrys asked:
Can’t you see that it’s a bit run for you to be sitting there under these circumstances? You, Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks man, who’s become terribly famous, as has your organisation, for leaking material that other people didn’t want to see published and here you are saying: ‘They’ve leaked something about me.’

Not at all. We are an organisation that does not promote leaking. We’re an organisation that promotes justice…

You hardly discourage it when you print a couple of million private cables.

…That promotes justice through the mechanism of transparency and journalism.

This is now public. So I’m asking you the question. Did you have sex with those women?

It’s a matter of public record as far as the courts are concerned but I am not going to be exposing other people’s private lives or my own more than is absolutely necessary. That is not what a gentleman does, that is why I have also never criticised these women.

How many women have you slept with?

That’s a private business. Not only does a gentleman not tell, not only does a gentleman not like to talk about his private life, a gentleman certainly doesn’t count.

[How] many, without being specific?

JULIAN ASSANGE HAS changed journalism. To debate the good or otherwise of organisations such as WikiLeaks, or to ask whether its staff are data thieves or real journalists, is to miss the point. Secure, anonymous leaking is now part of the media landscape, as is disseminating large amounts of leaked information through the mainstream media.

No government or institution or corporation can be certain that their secrets are safe. States and citizens will, as many do already, operate on the assumption that nothing can reliably remain hidden. New data dumps are announced daily; WikiLeaks currently has the most advanced and best tested security system, robustly protected against outside interference or hacking. But even if the organisation were to close tomorrow, such data dumps for whistleblowers and secret sources are here to stay. As fast as governments encrypt and hide, whistleblowers and hackers will decode and seek places to publish. Phillip Knightley, a highly regarded journalist, has argued that the WikiLeaks saga represents ‘a sea-change in the way we are ruled and the information we are entitled to expect’.

We should, then, take for granted the inevitability of future leaks of previously secret data. What is still very much up for debate is how the mainstream media and
traditional journalists respond to this. We are not faced with a ‘WikiLeaks or Journalism’ dilemma; there is no likely future in which undigested data becomes our preferred way of taking news. Even Assange, who wanted to offer a new ‘scientific journalism’, has retreated from that purist position. His initial ambition was to offer raw material unmediated by bias or personal views. But editing Collateral Murder was a mainstream journalistic activity. He also offered viewers the original material in order to judge for themselves whether the editing was fair or biased. Most of us would quickly tire of that double-checking. In the end, we rely on the papers, editors and writers we have come to trust. As always, newspapers – in whatever form – will continue to compete for that trust.

The mainstream media publication of large amounts of raw data is not a new phenomenon: there are school test scores and election results, for starters. But it would take a trainspotter to read the minutiae of every election result to verify that the summary ‘Opposition Victory’ was correct. As with all stories, we look for more information when we have a special interest, and the internet makes that easier than ever. News organisations use hyperlinks to send the enquiring mind further. Most of us, though, are happy that someone has provided the edited highlights.

As the Guardian, New York Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Melbourne Age and other WikiLeaks partners over recent months discovered, the task of analysing, corroborating, contextualising and presenting information remains essential. Anyone who has ploughed through a fraction of the US diplomatic cables on the WikiLeaks site (and the searchable database on the site is itself a major triumph of journalistic intervention) will know that this is not a good way to take your daily news. It is easy to underestimate the value of being able to read complicated stories in well-designed modern newspapers – in print or online.

WikiLeaks did not sail into a calm sea. Governments, media owners, journalists and lawyers have been negotiating stormy waters for some years as a result of the internet. In addition to the reluctance of newspaper readers to pay for what they read online, new problems have arisen in areas of defamation – it has become increasingly easy to sue across jurisdictions – and national broadcasting controls.

WikiLeaks found the answer, or something like it, to one problem. It became possible, for example, for a British citizen threatened by its stringent libel laws to share revealing documents with WikiLeaks without fear of being traced or prosecuted.

According to Brian Cathcart, who also writes on media affairs, some of the concerns we have now will quickly evaporate: ‘My gut feeling is that, like a lot of technological developments, this will soon all look simple. The tunnels will be cloned and cloned again. They will be commonplace; not significant in their own right.’ The brands behind the media organisations – Der Spiegel, El Pais, The Age – will be what matter. Whistleblowers and leakers will be able to shop around and choose based on the reputation of journalists and organisations. It will no longer be
limited by geography: I could push my documents into a New York Times tunnel, announce it on Twitter and people would be able to read it in Brisbane.

The issue of democratic control remains. The relationship between the press and the state is an elaborate fretwork of obligations and duties carved out over decades in constitutional and other battles between editors and politicians. When the New York Times decided to publish the cables, it informed the White House and met with representatives of the CIA, FBI, Pentagon and others. It was not a question of not publishing the cables: the meeting was to warn, to listen, to agree on procedures. From this vantage point, WikiLeaks’ self-regulation is a fragile safeguard against the misuse of state secrets. WikiLeaks has not yet developed codes of conduct and subjected them to wider scrutiny and democratic debate.

In the open society that WikiLeaks and Assange believe they are working towards, checks and balances are essential, as Facebook found recently when it changed its privacy settings. In many nations, the scales are weighted against free expression. But it is not a change for the better for those with great technical expertise to wield their power with no peer-agreed controls or democratic mandate. This is more important than the particular personality of Julian Assange that has so absorbed the western world. If the days of state control of information and official secrecy are over, and data leaking is to become an important part of the media landscape, the new kids on the block will have to work out ways to demonstrate they are trustworthy.

ASSANGE AND HIS lawyers have claimed that if he is sent to Sweden it could be a prelude to onward extradition to the United States, where he could face a number of charges. A prosecution under the latter country’s Espionage Act is said to be unlikely, as no evidence has emerged that he hacked, or that he encouraged hacking or leaks. Mere publication of material would be difficult to prosecute in the US, where free speech is zealously guarded. An unsuccessful attempt to prosecute him could even strengthen the movement for open government – as occurred when the attempt to prosecute Daniel Ellsberg, who in the early 1970s leaked the top-secret Pentagon Papers containing military secrets about America’s war in Vietnam, failed. That US Supreme Court judgment, which allowed full publication of the papers, is now a foundation stone of press freedom.

Disabling WikiLeaks will not change the tide of history. The genie is out of the bottle – there will be more leaks. No government anywhere, even the most powerful, can protect itself from greater public scrutiny and a new age of whistleblowing.

In An Enemy of the People the citizens of Ibsen’s Norwegian town turn against their would-be champion, but that is not quite the end of the story. As the townspeople desert Dr Stockmann and his brother accuses him of being motivated by personal greed rather than altruism, his wife suggests that he is now well and
truly thrown to the wolves. Not at all, claims the doctor: ‘The strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone.’ It is the sort of grandiosity that Assange himself might make use of in one of his rallying addresses. He certainly stands ever more alone. And that is perhaps the mark of both his failure and his success.

Political campaigners and journalists – Assange sees himself as both – are obliged to hunt in packs. The most successful swerve and bend to necessity, keeping their focus on the ends. Even those whose ambition is to stand out from the pack first acquire the arts of collaboration. Assange’s energy and exceptional intelligence attract allies and supporters. But he lacks personal collaborative skills. He alienates close friends and seems not to understand how this happens. His humanitarian concerns and conscience are consistent themes in his early writings as well as more recent interviews, but these are abstract ideals, and his anti-American dogma seems to blind him to the necessary compromises that the poor in all countries make to survive.

And yet, Assange’s nerve, his lack of compromise and his coding brilliance have permanently changed the debate on freedom of information, government transparency and journalism. Even those who will no longer work with him acknowledge this. In a recent interview one of them, the MP Birgitta Jónsdóttir, described WikiLeaks under Assange as an ‘icebreaker’. ‘If you look at real icebreakers, they all look very dented, and you never know when they will be holed, but they have created space for others.’

ENDNOTE: BRADLEY MANNING, the young American soldier who was arrested in May 2010 and charged with passing on classified military information in July 2010, is alleged to have confessed in a chatroom to being WikiLeaks’ primary source. He has been in solitary confinement at the Quantico Marine Corps Base in Virginia ever since. WikiLeaks is campaigning for his release. He suffers a rigorous routine of 24-hour observation, according to the one friend who is allowed to visit him. At the time of writing, Manning is being forced to sleep naked and to stand by his door for rollcall in the morning before having his clothes returned. The American military says this prevents him committing self-harm or suicide. Campaigners for his release argue that his treatment amounts to torture.

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THE January floods in Queensland and Victoria were a disaster but also a showcase for civic engagement. Thousands of volunteers – strangers to each other – spontaneously came together, made collective decisions about what to do, and then got on with doing it. The evidence on our TV screens was not just that nature is powerful and unpredictable but that action for the collective good comes naturally to most people.

So why, when Julia Gillard announced a citizens’ assembly on climate change during the 2010 election campaign, were there howls of protest from the media, from opposition parties and from environmental groups? Not from me: I leapt out of bed with excitement at the news. A small band of us – academics, activists and professionals – were thrilled that, at last, a national government would let the people provide advice about how to resolve a wicked problem. We had faith in the process that was proposed. I’d seen it work dozens of times, in my work with deliberative democracy in Australia and around the world.

My optimism lasted a day at most. I watched with sadness and then horror as commentators condemned the idea. Silly and pathetic, they said. Even the Greens, an alternative party proudly advocating on its website the routine use of citizens’ juries and assemblies, were scathing.

True, it was arguably too late for a citizens’ assembly on this issue, given the urgency of the problem and the surrounding politics. But the criticisms went further, lambasting the whole idea of involving citizens in the resolution of the complex challenges they face daily. Gillard’s critics condemned citizens as ignorant and incompetent.

When did we lose faith in our combined ability to address large-scale problems? When did we decide that politicians and parliaments and governments know best and that we can be trusted only to clean up the mess afterwards? Would-be Prime
Minister Gillard was simply advocating an organised expression of that same willingness to meet together, to wrestle with difficult decisions and circumstances, and, collectively, to recommend actions, that six months later was on display with such effect in the floods.

THE EXISTING POLITICAL system is not ideal for addressing wicked problems – the kind that require more than one agency to fix them, the kind that cross state or national borders, the kind that have taken generations to surface. These intractable problems include climate change, asylum seeking and depleted river systems.

Parliament is inadequate for tackling such problems, for all the obvious reasons: the election cycle, politicians’ fear of policy difference and their parties’ obligations to vested interests (unions, donors). Parliamentarians are dedicated to debate. They are adversarial and feed a media that thrives on drama. Consequently, citizens have lost faith in elected representatives. Academics call it a ‘democratic deficit’.

Good decision-making needs exploration of agreement as much as disagreement. The trick is to find a way to create shared meaning during the process. There is an untapped resource that we can use for making the best decisions around wicked problems – decisions likely to attract a high level of support among the wider population and among elected representatives. This untapped resource is the people. Not ‘the usual suspects’ or ‘the squeaky wheels’, not even special interest groups, but everyday citizens.

The roots of democracy lie in ancient Athens and Aristotle’s ‘all free citizens rule over each, and each rules in turn over all.’ Lot, meaning random selection or lottery, and rotation were both considered essential to Athenian democracy. These methods were seen as a guard against misused or excessive power. We have inherited a passive form of governance sometimes described as ‘audience democracy’. But this passivity need not continue. Citizens are capable of being collectively responsible for resolving wicked problems. They can help make difficult decisions together.

Critics of Gillard’s citizens’ assembly fear the result would be a free-for-all, with the loudest voices winning. But deliberative democracy processes are a way to find out how randomly selected citizens, without vested interests, think about an issue when presented with detailed information from differing viewpoints and given support to discuss it in a non-adversarial way.

Imagine small groups – microcosms of the population – being selected by an Athenian lottery, as needed. They would meet to deeply consider a problem, learning enough to tackle the issue and providing a carefully considered set of recommendations before returning to their own lives.

It has been done – surprisingly often, both in Australia and around the world. Citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies and Australia’s largest deliberative democracy
event, the 2009 Citizens’ Parliament (not to be confused with the more glamorous Australia 2020 Summit), have all contributed to political decision-making in Australia, with varying degrees of success.

Two things are essential for this deliberative democracy to work well. Firstly, deliberative processes need to involve what is known as a ‘mini-public’. According to John Adams, the second President of the United States, a legislature should be ‘in miniature an exact portrait of the people at large’. A mini-public can create an almost exact miniature of an entire population, using random selection and transparent procedures to match population demographics for gender, age, education and race. Matching the population in order to create a microcosm helps build confidence among citizens that the mini-public consists of ‘people like me’ and that the decision-making is in good hands, beyond vested interests and political ambition.

This approach to sampling is in some ways similar to that used by market researchers in opinion surveys and focus groups. But there the similarity ends. Deliberative democracy is about gathering together a cross-section of a population to do something quite magical together: deliberate. It’s a process that involves learning, change, agreement and – importantly – disagreement. Deliberative democracy takes citizens beyond public opinion, to public judgement.

The second vital component of deliberative democracy is harder to achieve. It is helping decision-makers understand the strength and value of public deliberations to a democratic system of government. It involves helping Australians understand the robustness of the educational and decision-making processes being used. Then, both governments and the wider population can have confidence in the recommendations that arise.

GIVEN THE PASSIONATE and adversarial nature of its national assembly, and its political instability, Italy is an unlikely country to be leading the way with deliberative experiments, but at least one regional government there is flirting with an unusual piece of legislation that encourages and guarantees the right of citizens to engage with contentious projects or issues. The regional government funds these engagements and has an independent person overseeing the public deliberations to ensure their robustness. The public agency at the centre of the issue is obliged to genuinely consider the citizens’ recommendations.

Denmark has been convening mini-publics in the form of consensus conferences for decades through its Danish Board of Technology, a government-sponsored agency. It randomly selects groups of citizens to consider contentious or emerging technologies and offer recommendations to the Danish parliament. The Danish
Board of Technology has also shown how even global public deliberation is possible through its initiative World Wide Views on Global Warming, which was timed to coincide with the Copenhagen climate talks. It involved 4000 everyday citizens in thirty-eight countries on the same day in September 2009. Citizens came together to learn about climate change, then delivered a strong message regarding the need for action.

Australia has not been idle either at the state level. Alannah MacTiernan, when Minister for Planning and Infrastructure in Western Australia, convened more mini-publics than perhaps any minister in the world. These mini-publics helped to resolve controversial road, rail and land-use planning matters, and she acted on the recommendations of many of them.

THE NEW SOUTH Wales Community Climate Summit is an example of an Australian mini-public tackling a wicked problem: climate change. It was coordinated by a non-government organisation (the Nature Conservation Council of NSW), funded by the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW through its Environmental Trust, and involved local governments throughout NSW. I was co-designer of the process and co-facilitator of the final event, in Sydney in February 2009. It involved hundreds of citizens initially randomly selected in local areas, then joined by citizens with an interest in the topic. The citizens’ recommendations went to the state government and a policy advisor noted their usefulness and easy application within the current budget. Participants learned a great deal about a complex problem and went back to their communities to enact their own recommendations. Many remain active today.

The preamble to their recommendations is an outstanding example of citizens taking the opportunity, through a deliberative process, to speak to their government:

We, the summit participants, endorse a NSW climate change action plan and welcome the opportunity to provide input into the development of climate change policy in NSW. We strongly support meaningful community engagement around government decision-making on critical issues such as climate change and particularly encourage the continuation of the deliberative democracy approach.

We expect the NSW Government (and other levels of government) to make climate change a high priority in all decisions; take urgent and decisive action to drastically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions; urgently implement planning measures for sea level rise and urgently implement measures to adapt to the impacts of climate change, which are already occurring in Australia.
The current NSW Government response to climate change is inadequate and we call for much greater and more significant action. We look forward to the recommendations in this report, representing the views of the wider NSW community, directly influencing the NSW Climate Change Action Plan and other climate change policy initiatives in NSW.

One of the interesting things about this summit was participants’ willingness to act. They insisted on an extra group to consider how they could implement the recommendations after the summit – something we organisers had not considered, because we were so focused on the recommendations. The participants came up with a range of local actions, then went home or back to their workplace and put them into practice.

ONE OF AUSTRALIA’S biggest deliberative democracy events was the Australian Citizens’ Parliament, which began in 2008 and culminated in face-to-face deliberations in Old Parliament House, Canberra, in February 2009. One hundred and fifty randomly selected people from across Australia, one from every electorate, spent four days discussing our democracy and how it could be improved. I was lucky enough to be a co-designer and involved in the facilitation of regional meetings. We began with regional meetings and online discussion. Participants were asked to suggest ways in which the Australian political system could be reformed to serve us better. Because this process was documented extensively, it provides a fascinating example of how deliberative processes work in the flesh.

One of the early ideas put forward by participants was to create a more transparent voting system: for example, first-past-the-post voting. Political commentators may wonder about this suggestion, because it is a system that has been largely discredited. That this suggestion arose from everyday citizens participating in the event might confirm an observer’s prejudice against using uninformed citizens for public deliberations. Yet it shows how deliberation can unfold and reason can prevail.

Many Australians are confused by our voting system and the participants were no different. The original online proposal put forward by participants contained a number of inaccuracies and confusions. For example, some participants believed that altering the voting system required constitutional change. Despite muddled exchanges, there were clear expressions about the need for a fair and transparent voting system that mirrored voters’ wishes. Wisdom was evident. Knowledge needed deepening.

As the first stage of a longer process, any factual confusion is an important aspect of adult learning. Some knew more than others. There were expert speakers who were available should questions arise. Citizens in the face-to-face sessions moved
from table to table (usually a table held seven to nine people, along with a neutral moderator). Ron Lubensky, a doctoral candidate at the University of Western Sydney, analysed conversations at every table to begin to understand what people were doing together when placed in a deliberative space. He tracked the discussion about first-past-the-post voting from the original discussions online to the conclusion of the deliberations.

Here are some of the transcribed statements from an early conversation, which indicate frustration with the present system at the federal level:

I just think the preferential, once it starts it starts to get complicated and time consuming and I don’t see why it just doesn’t simplify and direct what you want.

It may not be what people want when you’ve got to do preferences.

It sort of takes the control away from the voter.

It’s not a true vote then is it.

No it’s sort of strange, strange complex.

And it’s bloody confusing.

Well I suppose it opens up for more wheeling and dealing behind the scenes as well as between political parties. They can make all these agreements with each other…

Because of the movement between tables, which provided a cross-fertilisation of ideas as well as exposure to expert speakers and the ideas of others, the support for this system began to fall away. Discussion gradually moved to canvassing other ways to meet the original need for a fairer system.

On day two, after hearing from the expert panel, which included no less an authority than Antony Green, participants reflected on how their ideas were changing and whether or not they could trust the process:

But do you think we’re softening because of these people coming and speaking to us?

It was cut and dried really, when I went to the first one it was cut and dried…so they just seemed to be up there to sway your way of thinking. We’ve got to have this because, we’ve got to have that because. Why bring us all together where we were, why can’t you do C instead of having A and B?

I don’t think it’s swaying but I think it’s they’re telling us in a way that we can understand…we’re getting more educated as we talk to different people in different groups.

I think the reason for, good thing about them was that they showed almost a more practical side of what the proposals are. They’re showing you know is it even possible what you’re suggesting to be done within the Australian system?
It’s giving us expert viewpoints because we don’t know and we don’t have that background and we can’t see why something will work and why something won’t work. Because we don’t have that knowledge whereas they’ve probably been through some of these processes before or think tanks or whatever.

Such critical moments regularly arise in public deliberations. Can the experts be trusted? Is the information accurate? Are the organisers trying to manipulate? A group does well to stay on high alert until it is convinced it can proceed. Groups have been known to ask a moderator to leave if he or she is insufficiently neutral and trying to take them in a direction they don’t want to go. They find various ways of maintaining their integrity as a decision-making forum.

In the plenary session at the end of day two, a female participant observed the process of learning and growth in the group:

I came back in and I happened on this group that were discussing, change the electoral system to first past the post and I was so impressed with them that they withdrew that one and then they put one in to recommend optional preferential voting and I thought they had absolutely grown tremendously in this period of time and I commend them. I wasn’t really part of it but I just happened to come in on that one. Fantastic.

As Peter Senge says in The Fifth Discipline (Doubleday, 1994): ‘Each person’s view is a unique perspective on a larger reality. If I can ‘look out’ through your view and you through mine, we will each see something we might not have seen alone.’

Sometimes this is hearing from an academic expert. Sometimes shifts occur because a fellow participant offers a viewpoint that makes more sense. Preferences don’t always shift; they can become firmer. The important thing is to provide the space to test ideas and views, and to do it with a spirit of inquiry. This is the great strength of deliberative democracy, the commitment to true deliberation rather than holding to a fixed position.

HOW MIGHT WE routinely tackle wicked problems using this untapped resource, the typical Australian citizen? What if we could take the best of the criminal jury process, for example, and remove its worst aspects?

I’m imagining policy juries of twenty-five citizens, in every electorate, simultaneously across the country (making nearly 4000 people, ‘an exact portrait of the people at large’), all linked electronically to shared information – including expert witnesses. An independent authority like the Australian Electoral Commission could oversee the process in collaboration with a professional association that understands the mechanics of public deliberation, such as the International Association for Public Participation.
This would deliver the goods. These policy juries would demonstrate that everyday citizens can make excellent recommendations, if given the opportunity to learn a great deal about an issue and puzzle it out with other citizens. These typical citizens would evolve into community leaders because they would be helping all of us deal with the difficult work of solving intractable problems.

Policy juries, like other deliberative methods, are not meant to resolve conflict or build consensus. There are other tools for that. They would be designed for decision-making. Their function would be to weigh up options and provide broad policy direction.

Timing is everything, as Gillard’s announcement of the citizens’ assembly illustrated. Had the previous Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, heeded the recommendations from the Governance stream at his 2020 Summit, a citizens’ assembly would have been convened in a timely manner. This would have strengthened the case for action and – who knows? – possibly helped him avoid, or cushion, his fall from grace.

Policy juries, citizens’ assemblies, mini-publics of any kind can strengthen our representative system of government. If politicians would recognise their potential and commit to accepting the recommendations that arise from these processes – or justify why they have not – we could, together, address the complex challenges that abound.

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Three for all
Reasons to be wary of the trinity
Tony Barrell

FROM the three bears and wise men to the enduringly mundane ‘sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll’, the neat and weighty triple has for centuries been the choice for a multitude of individuals, religions, lobbies and interest groups to package and sell their ideas. Literary, cultural, philosophical and political strategies are made to seem more substantial, ruses and conceits more respectable, inevitable even, as if ordained by the mysterious appeal of the ‘perfect’ number.

In ancient Sanskrit there were only three numbers – one, two and many – and it seems we are still not hardwired to understand anything more complex than three of anything, any more than we are born with the ability to read and write or play cricket. Long numbers are a cultural construct that has to be taught and learned. Moreover, the number three (the biggest a babe can recognise) seems to be imbued with mystical properties: if a whole is in three parts, each third expressed as a decimal is 0.33333 recurring, a number that has no end. We can only count up to three but isn’t it encouraging to know it includes infinity?

In 2004 Peter Gordon, a behavioural scientist at Columbia University, published a paper that declared us to be innately innumerate. He had been living with a small Brazilian tribe, the Piraha, whose concept of numbers was also ‘one, two, many’. They had no written language and could not use their fingers for counting. Gordon decided that the rest of us probably would be the same if we weren’t taught the words for numbers greater than three – human comprehension of number is linguistic.

So, the rhythmic resolution of the three-part list, the seductive appeal of the metaphorical triangle, the symmetrical trio, the mysterious trinity are imbued with the allure of paradox. Three defines our conceptual limitations but points to limitless options beyond. It is the simpleton’s infinity. Thirds, triangles, trios and triples are natural links to deeper cosmic puzzles. Any third thing encourages our desire to burst out of the constraints of bifurcated reality – good/evil, up/down, wet/dry, left/right, then/now – that seems to be in our DNA.
Then there’s the continuous recycling of the three-element joke that conflates choice to certainty. In the old Yiddish version: the world stands on three things – on money, on money and on money. Orson Welles was reported to have said that his favourite film directors were ‘the old masters’. When asked by the British critic Kenneth Tynan to identify them, he replied: ‘John Ford, John Ford and John Ford.’ The better to accept the singularity of a truth we are encouraged to imagine it threefold. The contemporary equivalent is location, location, location. Media traffic in threes is busier than bicycles in Amsterdam.

Any day of any week our attention is drawn to three key points, pillars, reasons – the construction is as essential to journalism as the three-act play is to drama, the three men who walk into a pub are to comedians or the trinity to Christians. Prime Minister Julia Gillard identified the problem when she accused her opponents of reducing their policies to ‘three-word slogans’ (like ‘stop the boats’). The Tea Party Movement loves them (TEA is an acronym for ‘taxed enough already’), as in: ‘lower taxes, less government, more freedom’. The only one I value is the old Hell’s Angels motto: three can keep a secret if two of them are dead.

MOST RELIGIONS HAVE practices that relate to doing things three times. Muslims are supposed to wash before praying in a ritual known as wudu: hands, feet, face, all and each separately, three times. A pre-Christian rite performed on the longest day of the year sees some Greek women light small fires in the street, over which they jump three times, lifting up their skirts to feel the heat between their legs – a charm designed to promote fertility. At Greek Orthodox baptisms the infant is dunked into the font three times. It’s good form to throw three stones on a Mongolian burial mound, and a Christian cathedral is always consecrated three times with holy water. A friend told me that when she visited her ancestral home in Ghana, the elders insisted she be inducted by ritual cleansing, and so she was submersed in the local river three times – on three separate occasions. And we all know about third time lucky.

There’s something else going on that even connects cultural traditions of seeing things in groups of three, or preferring a third option, that could explain the connection between Buddhism – routinely described as one of the world’s ‘three great religions’ and itself packed with many three-based precepts – and the thoughts of Chairman Mao. Buddhism has ‘three treasures’ – the Buddha, the Buddhist law and the Buddhist priesthood – and for liturgical complexity you can’t beat Buddhism’s three kinds of three-part time (past, present and future in the past; past, present and future in the present and past; present and future in the future), or for simplicity its claim to be the ‘middle’ or ‘third’ way to enlightenment. Even the Buddha’s lotus position formed an isosceles triangle, its apex at that spot in the middle of the forehead where the ‘third eye’ was supposed to be, while the base was the line between the knees of his folded legs.
The Communist Party of China as led by Mao used Buddhist-style three-part mottos and slogans. In the early 1950s it identified ‘three evils’: corruption, waste and bureaucracy, all of which were to be eradicated by ‘the three ants’. The Great Leap Forward was launched with a campaign under ‘three banners’. Much later Deng Xiaoping devised three ‘benefits’ to allow the development of capitalism and market practices within the state-governed structure, whereby anything ‘beneficial’ to the Chinese economy must be ‘socialist’ including letting favoured enterprises rip, encouraging consumerism and maintaining one-party state control.

I don’t think he ever admitted to it, but maybe Tony’s Blair strategy to reconfigure Britain’s New Labour as the ‘third way’ (somewhere between socialism and capitalism) might also owe something to Buddhism. After all it was invented in the afterglow of New Age rave culture.

The Third Way’s main protagonists, Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell, formed a pragmatic trinity – not so holy, and hardly Buddhist, but I expect the natural seeming order of a trio would have had resonance for them. Trinities are deeply embedded in western culture. The legendary Greek bard Orpheus supposedly said, ‘all things were made by god in three names’ – meaning the celestial trinity of sun, moon and earth. Perhaps all our trinities derive from the celestial order of ancient Egypt, when Osiris Isis and their offspring Horus ruled heaven and earth.

For Christians the difficult abstraction (and physical fact) of God in three persons is the ineffable mystery which makes their belief system so powerful and mysterious. Most theologians are reluctant to explain it too well and it is rejected as heretical by Islam, which believes only in one unitary God. Easier to understand are the holy family of Jesus, Joseph and Mary, the Three Wise Men who came to visit them and the trio of ideals in the Catholic Catechism: faith, hope and charity.

We can only guess from which of all these three-based traditions emerged the subconscious of the three wise men of New Labour but, while it lasted, they were determined to take advantage of whatever latent potency the Third possessed in western culture. It’s worth remembering that the post-hippy era also gave us the quasi-religious mind-body-spirit movement.

The radical American critic Norman Birnbaum (‘Is the Third Way Authentic?’, *New Political Economy*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1999) spotted what he called a ‘redemptive note’ in Tony Blair’s discourse – the ‘doctrine of uplift’ as extolled by Evangelical Protestants – and he noted that Bill Clinton, who proclaimed the Third Way for US Democrats, was a Baptist who drew heavily on the ‘heart’ of black American Protestantism. They were reviving Christian Utilitarianism, which decreed any human activity could be redefined ethically by its worth or value – so ethical quantification could be added to the market as a determinant of price and value. What was missing, Birnbaum concluded, was ‘the concept of active citizenry’: ‘The
Third Way is not a modernisation of American social reform and European socialism; it represents their liquidation.’

Blair’s way began as a response to the devastating work done to Labour by the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. The Tories and their press successfully vilified state policies that gave subsidies or grants to the less well-off as ‘social engineering’. Thatcher expected users to pay market prices for services and, if they were too poor, they would have to apply for government grants or pensions dispensed through means tests and contracts to ensure the state got something back from the supplicant, preferably in the form of work.

There was something deeply paradoxical at the centre of Third Way thinking that aspired to the miraculous. It was devised to reverse Thatcherism but at the same time absorb it, without being seen to do so.

Thatcher had changed Britain’s laws to put more people into a middle-class frame of mind and discourage them from paying taxes to subsidise non-achievers. Nothing collective, only individuals pursuing ‘choice’ through the discretionary expenditure of their own income, taxed to the minimum. People were to become small shareholders in privatised public utilities like Telecom and the water boards: if the majority had a vested interested in the ownership of capital through stocks they would abandon outmoded allegiances to trade unions and their creature the Labour Party. They could criticise capitalism from the inside, at shareholders’ meetings. Tenants of public housing, originally built by local authorities, were encouraged to buy the roofs over their head – which most then sold for ready cash to pay for services no longer provided out of taxes.

To let them down lightly the government relaxed laws controlling gambling and brought in a colossal national lottery from which came the opportunity, once a week, for at least one individual to become a multi-millionaire. So, for a while, there was a craze for casino capitalism, as ordinary working people became temporary stock market ‘winners’ and property owners. Thatcherism was the assertion that there was only one way and we were all in it. There was no alternative.

Labour’s Third Way was the pursuit of something similar within the rhetoric of ‘mutual obligation’. Anthony Giddens, former director of the London School of Economics, defined it in his marquee title The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy (Polity, 1998) as the ‘radical centre, the place where individualism and collectivism folded together as equals into the social mesh’.

Blair did nothing to deny capitalism was inevitable and natural, and instead eagerly set out to prove there would be no return to ‘Old’ Labour socialism. The Third Way would banish class struggle, revolution, collectivism, Stalinism and sectional interest, and accept the victory of free market capitalism to be irreversible. It just needed the human touch. His ally and chief political organiser, Peter Mandelson, liked to call it the Project (see The Third Man, HarperCollins, 2010),
which would recreate Britain as a (democratically elected) one-party state. Their first goal was to change the attitude of welfare recipients. Thatcher’s policies had made them bitter and resentful; Blair wanted them to be ‘responsible’.

However, the Third Way was never much of a project until Labour gained power, and like many third options its promises of something new proved to be illusory. It suggests to me that wherever there is talk of ‘three’ it might be wise to think of One. In other words, you are being persuaded by covert means to go along with the original idea disguised as an alternative.

For its theoretical appearance in Australia we have to acknowledge the enthusiastic (if temporary) and secular advocacy of Mark Latham, who probably isn’t a Buddhist. Latham tried to argue the Third Way’s merits from Opposition: the only way the Left could modernise itself was to re-embrace the ‘mutualist ideals’ of ‘co-operative and ethical socialism’, which had been destroyed (almost) by the twentieth century’s ‘socialism of the state’.

THERE WERE OVERT religious threads in Tony Blair’s eagerness to declare support for Christian virtues. In 1993 he told the Third Way magazine (published by a Christian trust) he was in fact a ‘Christian socialist’ influenced by the thinking of the theologian-philosopher John MacMurray (who was first brought to his attention by an Australian pastor and friend, the philosopher-theologian Peter Thomson). During the decade of Bob Hawke’s Accord, Blair’s posse had already paid close attention to what was happening in the antipodes and well before that in the 1970s, as Australian political economist Tim Harcourt reported, Tony Blair spent formative years in the company of Australians at Oxford, where he was exposed to the concept of ‘community’ by Thomson. The West Australian Labor politician Geoff Gallup was another ally, and the connection came full circle late in 2003 when Mark Latham was elected to lead federal Labor. Latham admitted on television he had long been a supporter of Gallup’s policy of ‘parental responsibility’.

Only a few years into his career as an MP Latham had produced Civilising Global Capitalism (Allen & Unwin, 1998) to redefine the ALP’s natural constituency – and sold the serial of the idea to the Australian Financial Review which, for well over a year, paid him to write a monthly ‘Third Way’ column. In it Latham explained how the old Left was Keynesian (code for too much public spending) and the new Right wanted too much ‘deregulation’ and ‘individual freedoms’ (greed and trickle-down), whereas ‘thirdists’ like himself put ‘education, entrepreneurialism and rewards for effort’ at the core of their philosophy (code: mutual obligation and risk-taking). The rider to the good news was that only those who engaged in ‘active citizenship’ would qualify. ‘Unless welfare recipients are willing to take responsibility for improving themselves and the society in which they live, they have no right to permanently live off society.’ It was ‘the only way forward’.
In Opposition, Mark Latham had no power to implement Third Way policies. The closest John Howard got was to open up the management of welfare to the ‘third sector’ (coined by Jeremy Rifkind in 1995), whereby charities and NGOs managed mutual obligation. However, the most enduring and costly legacy of Third Way thinking in Australia is the ubiquity of PPPs (public-private partnerships) designed to reduce public debt: state Labor governments encouraged the private sector to build toll roads, bridges and tunnels, only to find their losses had to be topped up by taxpayers. In Blair’s Britain schools, hospitals and prisons were also built this way (by PFIs, private finance initiatives) to make it look like the government wasn’t spending much on infrastructure.

The aggressive marketing of mutual obligation was more insidious. Blair’s team was desperately keen to wean individual stragglers off the public purse. Antony Giddens wanted them to take risks. The poor could be brought ‘in’ through something he called the IDA – ‘individual development accounts’ linked to another three-word cachet, ‘asset-based welfare’. The poor should cash whatever assets they had – including their latent talent – for the common good of the market. Tony Blair suggested that every newborn baby be issued with a life ‘bond’ (or ‘life asset account’), parts or all of which could also be realised, or invested, at various times during their life to pay for education, child care and other needs including welfare.

Mark Latham came up with a similar idea: when they reached maturity at age eighteen, young Australians could take control of a means-tested ‘endowment’ allocated at birth, which they could then spend on education or training, home ownership, business start-ups, superannuation or pension requirements. In July 2003 he promised a $500 grant to young parents to put it into a trust account for their child – ‘to start it in the savings habit’.

The Howard government minister for children and youth services Larry Anthony thought that parents (single or otherwise) in receipt of any government benefit should show their commitment to society by attending compulsory parenting ‘classes’.

Then Latham declared a Labor government would bring in legal requirements for parents: ‘the poor are actually the solution’ and could ‘do things for themselves’, he said. Governments would be ‘junior partners’ and ‘communities’ would take over the main role in developing support programs for former public welfare recipients. Such was the ubiquity of these ideas around the world that by the end of the 1990s, journalists and commentators were using ‘Third Way’ as a shorthand descriptor for any policy devised to move people out of welfare into work and reduce the size and power of government.

In May 2004 Latham told the parliament that Labor’s new youth education policy would be based on ‘learn or earn’ – young people could either attend school and college courses or get a job. There was no ‘third option’ (his term) of sitting around
doing nothing. A couple of years after Latham was dumped as leader the AFR invited him to resume his column and in February 2010 he deployed the rhetoric of the left-leaning outsider, gloomily concluding that a ‘social reformer’ (like himself) had no choice but to either stand up to ‘the power elites’ (and die on his feet) or become part of the establishment (and live on his knees). There is no third way.

I should add that despite all the media hype and political blather about it I have never heard anyone talk elsewhere about the Third Way. Perhaps most assume it’s a phantom, no such thing, just a gimmick. However, aside from the Hells Angels creed, I did find something worth remembering in JRR Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings trilogy about the denizens of, yes, Middle Earth. In ‘The Two Towers’, Chapter 3 starts on page 660 in the paperback version. Six pages later, on page 666 (a number that is eagerly circulated by conspiracy theorists as evidence of the Devil’s involvement), there occurs a conversation between Frodo the hobbit and the wily, slimy creature of the abyss, the fallen ring-wearer Gollum. When confronted by a choice of possible routes through the subterranean labyrinth, Frodo suggests they take the third route. Gollum’s reply is firm and unequivocal. No way, he says: the Third Way is the ‘road to the left’.

Tony Barrell (1940–2011), best known as one of the most influential and innovative ABC broadcasters, was also a regular and highly regarded contributor to Griffith REVIEW. This was his final piece, written in the months before his untimely death in April, 2011. His essays explored a wide range of areas, which reflected some of his diverse interests: Japan, Greece, his English childhood and the life of British expats.
Missing persons
Craig Sherborne

Peacetime or war
there are deserters to round up,
warrants to be issued
by the clerk of rules.

In the riotless city
of fashionable slums
no one staggers through jungle
to reach the border,
uniform ditched in the grass,
rifle upside down for a crutch.
No body bags accrue
in Parliament Gardens,
just the nightly sarcophagi
of plastic and rags –
the blacks and drinkers
who are never you.

Unless of course
you have come to join them:
has some endlessness hooked your gaze
and called ‘follow’?
You cannot say why or what for?
Throw your ID off the jetty
to fake drowning. Disappear
among the undergrowth of crowds,
the air for your premises.
Enter it through some pilgrimage door
and in the process become invisible.
You might as well be far off
as Canada for all the hope
of you being found.
They can pin up your photo
at the post office all they like
but you have gone from your name,
your face only a beard,
toes blue in rotten sandals.

Craig Sherborne is the author of The Amateur Science of Love, a novel, to be published in June by Text.
FOR five years from 1970 I pushed a stroller, with a baby or two or three, in passionate street marches with hundreds of other women. As our voices grew stronger it was easy to believe that the future would deliver equity and equality for women. With the assurance of a youthful true believer I told Edna Ryan, one of my heroines who had been at the forefront of many battles, that I was confident 24-hour child care was just around the corner. She responded that if my three children’s children had access to quality child care it would be a miracle.

I was shocked that she could think that. I now know she was right about the complexity of providing quality child care across Australia. It is a dream yet to come true.

1975 was International Women’s Year; the luxury tax had been removed from the contraceptive pill and family planning was federally funded, there was an office of women’s affairs, political parties were listening, the Girls, School and Society report was underway. Government was addressing the agenda of feminism. We were on a roll. Gender roles were changing: in the words of the posters, ‘Girls can do anything.’

The balance sheet is positive in terms of the change agenda of the women’s movement, but the cultural change that maintains it has not happened – women are still falling short. So forgive me for being fatigued by well-known men and women discovering the issue of gender. I do not want to become a grumpy old woman, but I am having some challenging moments.

Women might be prime minister, governor-general, governors, premiers and heads of key interest groups, but discussions about targets and quotas, women on boards, work-life balance and affordability of child care feel like reruns of old conversations. Rather like shopping for clothes and all you see are things you have worn before. Many of my friends are now working grandmothers. This was not part of our original ambition – we could not contemplate being old – but what did we really change and what have our daughters inherited?
I RUN A mentoring practice with my daughter, and corporations seeking advice on how to mentor women for leadership often approach us. The companies complain that although they hire the best graduates – that means 60 per cent are female – within a decade the proportions change and women vacate the leadership and promotion track. ‘How do we retain and develop this talent?’ they ask.

Despite decades of progress, and high-profile women in political life, women are under-represented as senior leaders in many sectors. The word frequently used to describe women’s progress is ‘glacial’. Many of the women who join such firms after they graduate, these daughters of the revolution, have not been victims of discrimination – but at the point when they could lead they choose not to. As a group they are reluctant to organise and agitate for change. While recognising that every generation needs to do its own thing, I worry that they may squander the fruits of feminism.

The early women’s movement framed female participation as a rights issue. Policies for equal employment opportunity were developed and, particularly in the public sector, they helped significant numbers of women gain senior jobs. In general, though, these guidelines have not delivered as much as we hoped they would – and, while this does not mean they should be abandoned, they are not sufficient to deliver women leaders.

Change for women has not occurred in the way those of us who campaigned so hard imagined it would. The early assumptions that the glittering prizes would be ours if we followed conventional male pathways have not proved correct. Leadership cultures have been slow to respond to the aspirations and styles of female leadership. Yet women notice, and the new political role models – Quentin Bryce, the first female Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Force; Julia Gillard as Prime Minister; Anna Bligh, Kristina Keneally and Lara Giddings as state premiers – have remarked on the spontaneous messages they have received from women expressing delight at their appointments. They provide strong images for all women, and are particularly influential for young women who watch and see how to be a political leader, while others worry more about what these leaders wear than what they say.

Educational achievement stands out as the remarkable success of the past forty years. More girls than boys complete secondary school, and female graduates now outnumber males in most faculties. Law, medicine and business, once the provinces of young men, now have more young women who consistently outperform their male peers. The lack of educated women for leadership roles is no longer a supply issue. There are plenty of suitably qualified female candidates, so the question remains: why are they not selected?
Women still struggle with leadership issues and career paths, for there are few role models to choose from. The systemic barriers have been removed, but many cultural barriers remain. Understanding them helps us appreciate the context of young women’s aspirations and achievements.

I GREW UP in Australia of the 1950s, when words like ‘career’ and ‘leadership’ were not part of a polite girl’s vocabulary. A leader was a male hero directing from the front, military-style, the antithesis of a well-raised girl, who learned to wait to be asked to dance and not be bold or pushy. This remains a powerful cultural imprint for women today.

Few girls of my age would have thought that leadership was a suitable role for a woman. There were hardly any significant female leaders. Princess Elizabeth became Queen Elizabeth in 1952, but her role was a product of birth. Olympic athletes like Marjorie Jackson, Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland were local role models in a sporting nation – physical skill was more highly regarded than brains even for women. It took years before we understood and valued Shirley Strickland’s intellectual and academic achievements.

Teaching was considered a suitable occupation before marriage. For many girls the only way to attend university was by winning a secondary-teacher’s scholarship, which provided four years of university education and a five-year bond. The bond could be waived after three years, with no penalty, if a female teacher married. Male teachers could not waive their bond when they got married. This confirmed the cultural expectations that work, let alone a career, was not the norm for women. The message was clear: marriage was a woman’s full-time career.

I obediently did the right thing and married after three years. Like many young Australians we immediately left for London, and we spent the next three years working and travelling. That experience changed me forever. I realised that the Australian model of women was not universal but a cultural invention of our own. I also realised that there were better role models.

By the time we returned I knew that the classroom was my natural habitat and looked forward to a teaching career. I presented myself to the New South Wales Department of Education as a teacher with six years’ experience. I was also newly pregnant, and after I told the interviewer the tone immediately changed. The clerk explained slowly, perhaps in recognition of my new brain tissue, that I could only be a casual teacher and my overseas experience would not be recognised. This meant I would be paid the same as a new graduate. He explained that although the marriage bar no longer applied, it was neither wise nor possible for me to make more than a casual commitment. After all, I was to be a mother.
It was my first confrontation with the intractable thinking and policy contradictions of the state. The commitment to the education of women of academic merit had been made and expressed by the scholarship. It recognised the need for skilled and dedicated teachers, but allowed women to return to their profession only as casuals, which meant they could not become principals. The message about leadership may have been implicit, but it was clear.

As I left the interview after agreeing to be a casual, feeling even foolishly grateful for the job, I wondered how a child-centred business could discriminate against motherhood but not fatherhood.

This double standard became a call to action for many and the reason such a large number of activists in the women’s movement were teachers. They represented the biggest group of educated women, and they experienced discrimination first-hand.

The women of that era are now the tribal elders, but our daughters in their forties are making decisions that often surprise us. Problems that we thought had been addressed are re-emerging. Maternity leave is a good example. It was on the women’s movement’s first shopping list and this year, thirty-six years later, paid maternity leave became a right.

Yet I still see women struggling and walking away from work, deciding it is all too hard. Child care remains problematic, part-time work limited. As many women took the advice to establish their career, births are occurring later; paradoxically, it is more difficult to take long leave from a high-level position, so motherhood presents an exquisite dilemma.

This is typical of the cases we confront in our mentoring practice. A client I will call Mary was expecting her second child. She no longer felt highly valued at work following the birth of her first child, eighteen months earlier. The quality of the work was lower, and because she worked fewer hours she felt marginalised, no longer part of the team she loved.

At the placement interview, Mary expressed concern about accepting a mentor; she thought it highly unlikely that she would return to work after the birth of her second child. I stressed that this was precisely the right time for a mentor, as it would give her time to think about herself (a luxury for women with small children) and take a longer view. Even if she felt undervalued, her company was declaring its wish to retain her by investing in the program.

Mary decided to accept the offer, and after three years with a mentor (and another baby) she now feels valued and works part-time in a creative way. Maintaining the mentor relationship during maternity leave has subsequently become company policy, and made a difference to the retention and return-to-work rates. It has also increased their loyalty to a company that seems to care about families.
Mary is grateful that with her mentor she was able to find the reflective space that enabled her to consider her options and speak up for them. ‘The main benefit is that I have a much more heightened awareness of steering my own career, rather than just waiting for things to happen to me.’

The mentor was one of my peers, an older woman, who encouraged Mary’s career. We also had mentors who wanted us to inherit more than they had – and to value the social contract that went with a government-provided tertiary education. There was always an older woman in my early professional life, to encourage me to take risks and be prepared to change.

The daughters of the revolution have inherited new dilemmas and many see themselves as we did: in a documentary without a script. I ponder this as I see smart, savvy young women opting for the mummy track despite maternity leave, unable to comprehend the reality and consequences of women’s increased longevity.

I wonder why they opt for full-time wifedom when the odds for enduring marriages are not good, especially in unequal relationships with one income. I am surprised at the ‘new’ decision to change your name and take the name of the man you married in your thirties after you have established your own ‘brand’. When I raised this with the fabulous young women at our family Christmas they said, as I did in 1964, ‘It’s better for the children’; or, ‘He wanted me to.’ In my head I screamed, ‘Take a long view – reconsider.’

AS THE NEW teacher in the school staff room I listened to my well-educated women colleagues discussing Betty Friedan’s Feminine Mystique with extraordinary passion. Friedan had identified the frustration and sense of worthlessness of women who were university-educated but trapped in suburbia. My colleagues were primarily casual employees but considered themselves lucky to have a good job, while recognising that aspiring to become a principal was only for unmarried women. They had come to terms with their lot, and were committed professionals, yet they were also ambivalent and yearned for something different.

In 1964, in the staff room of a girls’ high school, it was hard to imagine what a successful life might look like. A decade later, consciousness-rising through Women’s Liberation and the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) had changed the way we saw the world. Most activity was directed towards government leadership and, through the 1970s and 1980s, equal-opportunity guidelines and government machinery of equity improved the education and careers of many women. We were encouraged to think that such change was inevitable and incremental, and linear.

I no longer believe in its inevitability. It has not delivered in the way I had hoped and expected; the cultural barriers remain impermeable.
In those days women’s groups kept busy with housekeeping matters such as equal pay, maternity leave, family planning and the education of girls, and spent little time thinking about leadership. The WEL and Women’s Liberation and many of the not-for-profit government organisations they influenced experimented with organisational structures. The pyramid hierarchical model was dismissed, and flatter structures were created. Leadership was to be everybody’s business and all were encouraged to gain experience in key positions.

In Making Women Count (UNSW, 2008) Marian Sawer relates a story that, as a participant in the national WEL conference in January 1973, I can verify. WEL groups from all over Australia were asked to prepare papers on how the lobby should be organised. The NSW branch presented an argument that won the day, despite the opposition of those from Canberra: ‘We are determined to avoid having leaders – either convenors or permanent spokeswomen – or any form of power hierarchy. Like many other radical feminist organisations, in setting up a structure we want to move on from competitive masculine power politics, involving aggression and back-stabbing to true egalitarianism.’

The thinking behind this was both instinctive and reactive, as women sought to find new structures of accountability, and the voices of community-based groups grew louder and more confident. It was also profound, because it assumed implicitly that leadership could be learned and that the best learning came from shared experience. It recognised leadership as a position on a continuum, and that people could move from leader to follower and back again. This is the conscious and subconscious inheritance of many leading women, and it continues to influence the way they do business.

After the shopping list of concessions and policy changes was fulfilled, women emerged or were anointed as leaders and had to grapple with new paradigms of behaviour while trying to hold on to the values so eloquently expressed by Mahatma Ghandi: ‘we must be the change we wish to see.’ Leadership remains an unresolved issue as women seek both to lead and influence change. As Leonie Still pointed out in her 1994 study of leading women, it is hard, if not impossible, to be a change agent when you are relatively powerless in an organisation.

THE WORLD BANK is fond of saying that education is the best contraceptive in the world, but the pill is a close second. Australian women of my generation were keen to take it and make it what it remains: the contraceptive of choice. I remember the day, in March 1964, that I swallowed my first oral contraceptive, thoughtfully provided by a friend. I was twenty-two, in love and had already survived one unplanned pregnancy. The idea that I could control my fertility by taking a pill that protected against pregnancy, unrelated to the sexual moment, was breathtaking.
Many women of my age will remember visiting the underground abortion clinics: furtive phone calls from public telephones to arrange the visits, driving to distant suburbs, passing through double doors after pre-paying cash for the operation. It was humiliating, shameful and degrading – an experience to bury in the deep recesses of consciousness. It was our fault, and if infertility followed it was punishment we would bear. Nobody counselled us; that was not part of the package. We did not know we had a right to it.

Creating public debate about abortion, contraception and childbirth choices was my passion. In the 1960s the Childbirth Education Association lobbied hospitals and doctors to allow fathers to be present at birth, and for natural childbirth. It is hard to imagine that birthing would ever return to an event involving only a woman, her doctor and nurse. It has become something for the extended family. Our gift to our daughters was the reproductive choices we did not have, so it is now possible to choose whether to be pregnant and whether to continue with an unplanned pregnancy.

We did not anticipate the demographic shift that followed. My mother was eighteen when I was born, I was twenty-six when my daughter was born and her first child was born when she was thirty-two. The exquisite symmetry is that each of us bore the last of our three children at the age the next generation began.

Margaret Sanger, the American social reformer and founder of the birth-control movement, said in 1883, ‘No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether or not she will be a mother.’ The words remain true even as the unanticipated consequences of access to birth control, IVF and abortion continue to play out.

HOW DID THE F-word become so scary, despite gender being back on centre stage and women holding important public positions? I often hear the chorus ‘I am not a feminist, but’ – followed by a litany of concerns that sound like gender issues yet are not identified that way. That feminism still makes sense comes as a shock to those who for the first thirty years of their lives have been one of the boys, or at least not hampered by being female. It is the shock of noticing that your voice is not heard, or discovering you are paid less than your male peers.

It is often suggested that this happens because ‘women lack ambition’. When I was a young woman having a job that could become a career seemed ambitious. Anna Fels, in her April 2004 Harvard Business Review article ‘Do Women Lack Ambition?’, wrote: ‘I came to realise that although the articulate, educated group of women I interviewed could cogently and calmly talk about topics ranging from money to sex, when the subject of ambition arose the level of intensity took a
quantum leap...the women hated the word as it implied egotism, selfishness and self-aggrandisement or the manipulative use of others for one’s own ends.’ In their words, ‘It’s not about me; it’s the work,’ and, ‘I hate to promote myself.’

Fels concluded that women refuse to claim a central purposeful place in their own stories, shifting the credit elsewhere and shunning recognition; without earned affirmation, long-term learning and performance are rarely achieved. Ambitions are both the product of and, later on, the source of affirmation.

Women now experience the most powerful social and institutional discrimination during their twenties and early thirties, after they have left the educational system and begun pursuing their dreams – and ambitions. This obstacle occurs at precisely the age when women are likely to marry and have children. At this point they must decide whether to try to hold on to their ambitions, downsize them or abandon them altogether. Often a young woman must make this decision when she is learning to be a parent, with its attendant pleasures, fears, insecurities and exhaustion.

As with the past obstacles women have faced, the current ones are stressful, confusing and painful. Institutional changes and cultural norms lag behind social realities. The lack of adequate social support, ongoing career opportunities and financial protection for women who provide child care is the contemporary phase of women’s long struggle for equal rights.

My own experience is that we do not identify our ambitions until later in our professional lives, when children have been raised, sexual identity has settled, and the capacity to manage relationships and do the things described as feminine are no longer in doubt. It is often then that the mastery and resilience required for mature leadership is within our reach.

Creating the demand for that leadership is the challenge.

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Dying, laughing
Susan Johnson

KYLIE Thomas’s children had been on the roof since early morning. She had heard them, vaguely, tapping at the edges of her consciousness, as she tried to hold on to sleep, even as it disappeared. She loved sleep, loved the act of being unconscious to pain, to trouble, to each and every tap that felt like a demand. Children wanted everything! All the time, all at once! If she’d realised what a child was before she accidentally made one, she would have run a mile. She would have run so fast that Russell Woodbridge would never have caught her, would never have kissed her rushing-by face or grabbed her flying-in-the-wind hair. His skinny white body would never have pinned her flat.

She heard Nixon crying. Bloody Nixon, born whinger, crying when he came out, starting as he meant to go on. Nixon, her first born, skinny and long as a rabbit, crying on the roof. Why not cry in the kitchen instead? On the floor, where he usually laid himself, full-length in front of the fridge to be exact, his mouth open so that you could see the black pit leading into his gullet. Sometimes she wondered what she could stuff in there to stop the sound: honey? Lollies? Her fist? He had the largest pair of tonsils she had ever seen: two fat glistening nubs of flesh decorating either side of his throat, two undulating, pulsing, alien attachments that fascinated her. Whoever thought tonsils could appear so alive, so full of their own intentions? At least, she assumed they were his tonsils – she couldn’t think of what else they might be. She knew she didn’t know much about anything, not really, so now she thought about it she wasn’t even sure they were tonsils.

Anyway, how did she come to be thinking about Nixon’s tonsils? How did she come to be lying in bed at eight o’clock in a hot house in Ningi, her children above her on the roof? When she was pregnant with Nixon, holding herself in secret readiness and nursing fond hopes that Russell Woodbridge wasn’t a dickhead, she pictured herself by a window in one of those baby’s rooms all kitted out in blue-checked curtains for a boy, pink for a girl, with those painted wooden alphabet numbers dotted about the room. She imagined a room much like the one in Mrs Reynold’s house she had seen when, briefly, she had a cleaning job there. The baby was called Charlotte or Madeleine or Henrietta, some name out of an old-fashioned...
book, and her room was like something out of a magazine or a movie, all fresh and uninhabited, as if a baby never shat itself or vomited up its food or had a pair of slick, fleshy, undulating nubs of flesh in its throat. Whenever she caught a glimpse of that lucky baby, dressed in clean clothes with a hat on its fat head, going out to happy-clappy music class or playgroup or wherever it went with its pretty blond nanny, Kylie thought it looked more like a doll than a baby. She bet Nicole Kidman’s baby looked like that too, with a trillion nannies looking after it so that Nicole never saw shit or vomit or tonsils or heard her children crying above her on the roof.

She sat up and reached for a fag. She hadn’t smoked, not once, during the whole time she was pregnant with Nixon. She waited for him as if waiting for Christmas or her birthday, for some special treat that would have her up before the sun, expecting everything. She was a nong like that, always thinking that this time her mum really would remember to get her something she really wanted, a bloody Barbie when she was eight or a pair of those sunglasses everyone had when she was sixteen and she was the only one who didn’t. You’d think that by now her high hopes would be low hopes but she knew that even right this very second, smoking a fag in bed with the whole useless day stretched out empty ahead, some part of her still believed in deliverance.

God, she hated living in Ningi. She hated its flat, boring streets of nothingness, punctuated only by the sound of cars passing through on the way to somewhere else. She’d come here as a stopgap, because the rent was so cheap, and now she knew it was cheap for a reason. It was cheap because no one wanted to live here, no one except no-hopers or people like herself, down on their luck, chicks whose blokes had disappeared or ugly blokes whose missus had run off with a truck driver. Ningi, nowhere, on the road to Bribie Island, full of pensioners and down-and-outers or English people who mistook it for paradise because they didn’t know what a proper beach was. A proper beach had proper waves, not piddling flops of water from an expanse resembling a bay rather than an ocean, a beach hemmed in by Moreton Island.

Kylie had once been the prettiest girl in Ipswich. While there had been no actual judging of this fact, no competition that lined up girls to measure the rise of cheekbone or the fleshy curve of a lip, for years it had been generally accepted that Kyle Graham, of 14 Forbes Street, Ipswich, was the prettiest girl in town. Before she’d put on weight after she had the boys, she had taken pleasure in walking up and down Ipswich Road wearing her smallest shorts low on her hips, and she remembered the hinge of her hips, the way she could feel each happy part of herself, all fitting together, propelling her into some unknown happiness up ahead. She might have been walking straight toward it, so easy and sure and confident was her step, the swing of her legs, the arch of her feet. She had white, even teeth, straighter than Debbie Hogan’s, who’d worn braces for a whole year. She had thick black eyelashes that didn’t need mascara, and when she smiled at Russell Woodbridge
who had yet to reveal himself as a dickhead he ducked his head as if something hard had been thrown at him. She was prettier than any of those chicks on TV! She was full of her own power, not yet humbled by children on the roof or the fat that appeared on her upper thighs so that now when she walked her upper thighs rubbed uncomfortably together and she would never again in a million years wear a pair of small shorts and stride out, fearless, along Ipswich Road.

There was a knock at the door. She finished her fag, stubbing it out in the upturned peanut butter lid she kept on the bedside table for that purpose. There was another knock, louder than the first.

‘Kylie?’

It was bloody Melissa from across the road.

‘Kyles, are you there? Nixon and Jarrah are on the roof again.’

She lay back down, flat, in the bed.

‘Kylie! Your kids are on the roof! If one of them falls off he’s gunna crack his skull. Open the fucking door.’

She hoped she’d locked the fucking door or else Melissa would walk straight in like she usually did. Kylie quickly calculated whether the back door was also locked, since Mel was likely to storm around the back when she had no luck at the front.

She heard Mel rattle the handle and give the door a good shove. Kylie’s bedroom was next to the front door and she was gripped by the irrational thought that Mel could see her through the wall, lying there in her nightie, flattened against the pillow. She heard Mel’s mobile go off, two loud beeps that made Kylie jump.

‘I know you’re in there. I’m going round the back.’ Mel sounded so close she might have been speaking into Kylie’s ear.

The kids never used the doors to climb onto the roof anyway. They climbed out Nixon’s window instead, standing on the chest of drawers, balancing on the window ledge, then jumping onto the water tank outside. The tank had a pipe leading to the roof that they easily scaled.

‘Kylie.’

Mel was outside her bedroom window. She hadn’t gone round the back at all.

‘I just want to say one thing. You’re a crap mother.’

Kylie felt a sick, Startled lurch. A crap mother! Was she a crap mother? She made them clean their teeth every night and she washed their clothes and put nit cream in their hair every time they caught lice from dirty children. She hardly ever made them wear the same T-shirt twice, scrubbing stains from dripped ice-creams and dropped chunks of spaghetti bolognaise or from where they’d wiped the backs of their hands or their fingers when they had a runny nose. Kids were so dirty,
dripping, running, leaking vessels of tears, and Kylie kept the spill in as best she could. She hugged them and pulled funny faces so that Jarrah laughed so hard his stomach hurt and once, memorably, Nixon laughed so hard he let out a great big bang of a fart that made them all start laughing so hard all over again that Kylie feared they might never stop and all of them would start bursting from laughing, splitting their stomachs open, everything spilling out of them, rush, rush, rush, so that they really would die laughing. The three of them, dying, laughing on the floor, crying with tears, farting helplessly, and never, never stopping.

A crap mother! She was so tired of vigilance. She was tired of having eyes in the back of her head and of getting up from the chair to turn off the television because she knew she couldn’t let them keep watching it for another three hours even though if she could she would have let them keep watching their entire lives. They fought all the time, endlessly, when they weren’t watching it, and sometimes even when they were. Either Jarrah got a bigger slice than Nixon or else Nixon kept stealing Jarrah’s favourite pillow, and every time she got in the car (when it wasn’t broken and when she had enough money for petrol), every single time, they squabbled about who was going to sit in the front. Kylie wasn’t even sure they were big enough to sit in the front, anyway, since neither of them could see over the dashboard and she remembered hearing somewhere that kids that small shouldn’t sit in the front, because if she had an accident because she couldn’t stand them screaming or crying or fighting a minute longer the kid in the front would go flying through the windscreen, a perfectly aimed missile of flesh.

Kylie could never make her kids do anything they didn’t want to do. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t tried to stop them from climbing on the fucking roof. She had got them down a million times, over and over, even moving the chest of drawers away from the window, but then she couldn’t open the bedroom door properly and she had to move it back again. How did anyone think they could stop the will and desires of another human being, when Kylie knew that neither her mother nor her best friend Donna nor an iron wall could have stopped her walking towards Russell Woodbridge and her wrecked future? People did what they wanted to do, even a five-year-old who had only been at school for a single term, who could force a mother to give him anything he wanted by lying on the kitchen floor, in front of the fridge, rigid, crying, showing his pulsating tonsils, so that a mother would do anything to make him stop.

Kylie heard a familiar sound, a siren, coming from a television or from real life – she couldn’t be certain which. In Ningi in summer there were often grass fires and regular controlled burns, but Kylie couldn’t smell smoke. The urgent wah-wah drew closer and closer, louder and louder, so that Kylie knew it must be headed somewhere near. From the sound of it, the fire engine might have been headed straight for her street. Curiosity made her get up from the bed and sneak a peek through the bedroom curtains.
It was stopping outside. Firemen rushed toward the house, three or four of them. She saw Mel run down to the street towards them, pointing up at the roof. The firemen kept running and Mel stormed along behind them, stomping through the overgrown grass as hard and as fast as she could. But she didn't go in the direction of the men, instead fixing her eyes on the curtains where Kylie was peeking out. Kylie quickly shut them.

‘For your information, your kid is trying to swing on the electrical wires. You’d better come out.’

Kylie pulled off her nightie and pulled over her head the dress crumpled at the end of the bed. She twisted up her hair and secured it with a hairclip.

Before opening the bedroom door she looked at her reflection in the mirrored wardrobe: tired, overweight, sadder than any 24-year-old had the right to be. Nixon loved fire engines.

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The flood
History reclaims the chain of ponds
Matthew Condon

JUST a few kilometres west of the brass lions and clock tower in Brisbane city’s King George Square, over a patchwork of corrugated iron and great crowns of poinciana and fig trees, is a little crosshatch of streets on the floor of a suburban valley. The streets – Nash, Elizabeth, Baroona, Beck and a handful of others – are flanked on three sides by the steep ridges and folds of nearby Paddington, Bardon and Auchenflower. The fourth, and open, side runs through neighbouring Milton and down to the banks of the Brisbane River, less than a kilometre to the south-east.

This crosshatch used to be a suburb: Rosalie. Latin for rose, some say. Yet it lost its official status in 1975, downgraded to a locality and subsumed into the renovated century-old houses, boutiques, restaurants and bars that today constitute trendy Paddington, with which – since the demotion – it has shared a postcode.

It is still known to locals as Rosalie, named after a pastoral station owned by John McDougall, a member of Queensland’s first Legislative Council of 1860. McDougall, when in Brisbane, lived in nearby Milton. The word Rosalie lives on in neon and paint down in its dogleg shopping village. Here, the residents still talk about taking a trip ‘to town’, even though you can see the CBD’s mirrored towers from some of its streets. Old-timers will recall blacking out their windows during World War II, as if it happened yesterday. There are photographs of men and women performing gas mask drills in Gregory Park, opposite the Milton State School. While the trams have disappeared, the tracks still following their old line beneath layers of bitumen, Rosalie has a passenger shelter from that era that suggests, just by looking at it, overhead sparks and small hole-punched cardboard tickets. In Rosalie, this vanished suburb, the past is powerfully there, and it’s not.

I have known this place my whole life. My grandparents Freda and George – both migrants from England – married and moved into 120 Beck Street in the 1940s. Both lived there until they died. It was my mother’s only home until she married. My great-aunts and great-uncles lived across the road. Growing up, I knew the names of just about every family in every house on that street, and what went on in
those dwellings, dark beneath the house at night and upstairs the windows filled
with dull yellow light.

As a child in the 1960s and ’70s I explored the suburb’s few streets. I had my hair
snipped at the local barbershop, sitting up on a little worn wooden plank placed
across the chair arms, and I remember being entranced by the jar full of combs and
scissors leaning in a pale green liquid. I gawked at the petrol station because
somewhere along the line I had picked up family talk that its owner, a racing car
enthusiast, had been beheaded in an accident. Sometimes my grandmother and I
took the long trek up Elena Street to Woolworths, a fancy modern supermarket
complex with an escalator. She carted a two-wheeled shopping trolley up those
steep hills. At the top of the ridge you could look back and see the miniature valley
that opened onto the river, and the sun hitting the tin roofs of Rosalie.

I played in the old Buick under the house that my grandfather left behind when
he died, eight months after I was born, in 1962; climbed the great poincianas; heard
the woosh of gas from the burner in the bathroom when my grandmother prepared
a bath. I can close my eyes now and see the precise shape of the long dark scar on
the tub beneath the single squeaky tap, where the water had over time worn
through the enamel.

Beck was a broad street of tin and wood Queenslanders full of families who had
not moved for decades. From the top of the street, at the foot of the gardens
belonging to the grand white and pink-trimmed Government House, across Nash
and on to the T-junction at Baroona Road, where Beck ran into Gregory Park and
ended, everybody knew each other.

Rosalites yawned over the back fence. They shared food when things were tight,
painted each other’s houses, fixed a broken toaster at number 110 or made a
dressmaker’s dummy for the lady in number 73. They had vegetable patches and
chickens. One had a resident horse, the flatulent Lizzie. Men worked late at their
benches under the house, and drank XXX in tall bottles at the kitchen table as they
studied the race guide. Sometimes they’d catch the Governor, Sir Henry Abel Smith,
walking his dogs down the street. They always said g’day.

And the women, in memory, all wore floral nylon dresses, some with stockings
hitched to just below the knee. They wandered about the suburb like rolling blooms.
They smelled of 4711. They still worked a copper under the house and pegged
clothes to lines that sagged on wooden props. The migrants, like my grandmother,
were soft as clouds, in constant retreat from the sun and heat. The locals were made
of leather and wire.

THIS PLACE, OVER time, became a foundation landscape for me. It became my
Brigadoon. It was a place that I knew, even as a child, held the myths and secrets of
my family, and to understand it was to understand myself. I have spent a lifetime attempting to unlock its hold on me, so much so that when I returned to live in Brisbane several years ago I set up home just a few hundred metres from Beck Street.

Today there are just a few survivors from that older Brisbane living in the street. One, Mrs Guy, still sits at the open front window of her Queenslander, as she has done for as long as I can remember. I can drive past and look up and see her, and know that beneath that puff of white hair there are memories of my mother as a child, and my grandfather, who I never knew; and observations, in another time, of the gestures and transactions and drama and repose of the family across the road, my family, that all contributed to who I am.

Her view from that window is now of blocks of flats and renovated homes and sail shades and bifold doors. And down at Rosalie Village the old cinema and the local butcher shop with its sawdust floors and the barber with his spinning red and white pole have been replaced by American-style burger grills, fine dining and organic meat outlets.

Gentrification washed through Rosalie in the 1990s, and left old Mrs Guy alone on her treeless corner block, peering out at a different world. She was there during the great flood of 1974 when, after weeks of rain, the river broke its banks and poured through the back of Milton, that fourth, open side to the valley, up Frew Street and into Gregory Park. Then it kept coming, along Baroona, up Nash, and finally into Beck.

I was eleven at the time of the flood. I had never experienced one. Nobody in Beck Street had either. The last major flood disaster in Brisbane had been in 1893, so there were very few people, if any, alive in the city who held memories of that event, which washed people and bridges and homes out into Moreton Bay.

It was for a time exciting, as new experiences can be, to see the water creep up Beck Street. My grandmother, who had known only European weather as a child before landing in the tropics at the bottom of the world, did not appreciate the gravity of the event. She had railed against Brisbane’s blast-furnace heat and sticky humidity since she came off the boat, in 1925. It needleed at her, this annual torment, and despite her best efforts she and Brisbane weather never reconciled. (She died in a mercifully frosty air-conditioned hospital room on the Gold Coast.)

In 1974 she naturally reacted to the flood not as someone who had forgotten the history of this little herringbone of streets in Brisbane, but as someone who did not know that history existed. She was completely unaware of what the river could do. She stood her ground, high up in her stumped workers’ cottage, with her dark English stand-up piano and battered aluminium teapot beside the Kooka stove and her caged blue budgerigar, Bluey.
She would not be moved. For good or ill, this was her home. Even when the river water, a soup of silt and brown-edged frangipani flowers, lapped at her bottom front step, the girl from Reading was not leaving.

Then the water rose to such a depth that rescue workers were crossing her front garden in a tin dinghy, calling for her to evacuate, and in a flash she was scurrying down those steps, the caged Bluey and his noisy mirror bell in hand, sailing away in only the second boat in her life in which she’d been a passenger.

FOURTEEN PEOPLE LOST their lives in that terrible event. In a city of just 900,000 people, those who weren’t directly affected knew of somebody who was. Our dining table, for months afterwards, was full of stories of family friends and my father’s work colleagues who had ‘gone under’ in the flood and lost everything.

The people of Beck Street soon returned to their usual routines. Up in the big white governor’s house, through the trees, Air Marshall Colin Hannah resumed his garden parties. Children went back to school.

I look back on those few days now as a memory sealed off and preserved forever. For that brief moment the people of Brisbane were removed from their own lives, reeled from them, and focused just on the river, and the survival of their fellow citizens and their houses and the goods and chattels they’d accumulated over a lifetime. The clock didn’t measure work hours and tram timetables during those suspended days, but the rise and fall of water.

For a period, the city’s context vanished. Gone were thoughts of the bombing of the local nightclub the Whiskey Au Go Go and the murder of fifteen people just the year before, or Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s consolidation of power following his hard stand on street protest marches and the work of the Special Branch, or Valley Diehards’ thrilling last-gasp rugby league premiership win over Redcliffe a few months earlier.

Instead it was relentless rain, dark water, yellow car headlights, emergency vehicles, boats and life jackets, candles and sandwiches. And objects, hundreds, thousands, cut loose from their contexts. Then it was over. It left, in the minds of everyone who had witnessed it, a feint sepia watermark.

The floods of 1974 were epochal for dull, dreary Brisbane, so much so that we have celebrated the water’s height in public art, signs and plaques across the city. Houses affected thirty-seven years ago still have ghostly high-water lines on stumps and beams under the house.

Rosalie went under in 1974, and I have always had a suspicion that the flood was in some way responsible for washing away its suburban status the next year. That the huge, unthinkable volumes of water that January, down from the Brisbane
Valley, the Stanley and Bremer rivers, and countless creeks and rivulets en route to the city, simply swept through Milton and into Beck, and erased it from the map.

The only way Rosalie could return – in the way of Brigadoon – would be for another flood to pay a visit, to reconnect it to 1974 and 1893 and 1890 and all the other floods that, following an ancient template, had visited this little pocket of the world at the bend of a brown, unremarkable river.

Then came January 2011.

BRISBANE TODAY IS a city of more than two million people. As old Mrs Guy has been sitting at her front window the city has hurtled ahead and become something she wouldn’t recognise. It has confounding traffic problems, supermarket queues, gang and drug violence, stratospheric rental costs, elite suburbs and their opposite, and a suburban creep that is heading north for Noosa, west to Toowoomba and south to the New South Wales border.

It is a city with a young demographic. It is a city that takes back many of the expatriates that shunned it early in life and gifts them a family-friendly metropolis without the frenetic edge of a Sydney or Melbourne. It is a city that takes in early career professionals who can’t find an open door in the southern capitals, and who can short-cut their way to practical experience in the sunshine.

Brisbane, with these multiple points of flux, feels like a young place permanently looking for itself – the opposite of what used to be true in the 1960s and ‘70s. In my children’s lifetime it will be part of a massive conurbation from the Sunshine to the Gold Coast.

It is not there yet. It is still a place where the multi-billion-dollar CLEM7 tunnel, Australia’s largest underground motor vehicle carriageway, can open and almost immediately teeter at the edge of financial ruin through lack of use. Who’s going to pay a few dollars for a road toll in Brisbane? Hobos still live in the old Botanic Gardens in the city, as they have done since the government gardener Walter Hill started tilling the soil there in the mid-1800s. The XXXX brewery in Milton still, when the wind is right, sends out a bouquet of hops that can blanket several suburbs. And the river still floods, given the right conditions.

Brisbane sits on a flood plain. The Indigenous people always knew this. Surveyor-General John Oxley, charged with founding the colony of Moreton Bay, first nosed a rowboat into the Brisbane River in 1823, then returned in 1824 to found the place proper. Indigenous elders told these white explorers of floods that submerged today’s West End.

During that first excursion, in 1823, Oxley journeyed up the river to Goodna, near Ipswich, then turned around and headed for the bay where his ship, the *Mermaid*,
lay at anchor. He came back in 1824 with the colony’s founding party, and looked for a suitable site for the future city.

Oxley once more traversed the river and on 28 September came ashore east of what would become known as the Old Western Creek, a stream that ran beneath today’s Coronation Drive at Milton. He wisely followed the creek inland for about a kilometre in search of fresh water for the future city, and came upon ‘a chain of ponds watering a fine valley’, as he recorded in his Field Books.

Part of this ‘chain of ponds’ would later be dubbed Red Jacket Swamp. Today it is Gregory Park, across from the Milton State School, and the chain covers the grid we know as Baroona Road, Nash Street and Beck Street, all the way up to the pinched gullies of Birdwood Terrace. The ‘fine valley’ was created by the ridges of Paddington, Bardon and Auchenflower. Oxley had wandered into Rosalie. He deemed it a suitable location for the settlement.

The following year, however, in 1825, Moreton Bay’s first commandant, Lieutenant Henry Miller, set up camp on a high bluff downstream from Oxley’s recommendation, and that elbow of land became the future CBD. An obelisk, inaccurately placed, was erected at North Quay to commemorate Oxley’s landing. It still stands today, a sandstone pin about 700 metres from Oxley’s actual landfall.

BRISBANE AND HISTORY have a complicated relationship. It is, for whatever reason, a forgetful city. It has no great attachment to historic buildings and monuments, yet howls indignantly when they are demolished. It has legislation ostensibly to protect its past that reveals hidden loopholes when it is actually tested. Brisbane, the young city, is more interested in tomorrow than yesterday.

Of course Oxley followed the water when he stepped ashore near the Old Western Creek. Of course he found swampland and a chain of ponds. For millennia, that’s where the river, on this coastal floodplain, has always rushed into on breaking its banks. Just as it has always washed over areas we now know as Jindalee, Brookfield, Fairfield, Rocklea, Yeronga, Graceville, Indooroopilly and West End. That’s precisely where it inflicted its greatest damage in 1974, and 1893, and 1890, and on deep into the past.

Rosalie has always had problems with water. It was inundated in the great flood of 1893. The Queenslander reported: ‘Going from Milton towards Rosalie one finds most of the houses on the left have suffered, and that the whole of Rosalie flats have been underwater. Far up...in the paddock is a building lying on its side, deposited like a matchbox in that position by the silent but overwhelming force of the flood. In Rosalie the general appearance is as though a mighty hand had played chess on the flats, with houses for pieces, and in a moment of anger brushed them carelessly into a confused heap.’
In February 1925 the Brisbane Courier carried the article ‘Drainage Matters. Neglect at Rosalie.’ At a meeting at the local tram terminus a council candidate, LH Tooth, expressed dismay at the appalling state of the drainage and playgrounds in Rosalie, and how the suburb had to continually address water channelling. In 1932 the Brisbane City Council investigated the need for a stormwater drain beneath Beck Street.

But we forget, especially in this restless place where history finds it hard to take root. And here, in the young city, we are at least two generations from 1974, and all of the city’s new inhabitants, squinting into tomorrow, just wouldn’t know about the floods of 1974; and if they did happen to see one of the many plaques and markers around the city they might find it cursorily interesting, but it wouldn’t be something that triggered in them a change of life every time the rain fell hard across the city. There are more people in the city today without the watermark of 1974 than there are people with it.

Which is why – with the exception of Mrs Guy, sitting at that window, her yard saturated, the water rising and rising further down Beck Street beyond Nash Street – the floods of 2011 took almost everyone by surprise, again.

THE 2011 DISASTER had its origins last year in North Queensland, drenched throughout September by what meteorologists called a ‘La Niña effect’. Then it just kept raining all the way to Christmas, when Cyclone Tasha crossed the coast at Cairns.

For the next two weeks the people of Brisbane turned on their nightly television news and watched as regional towns on the coast and in the west slid under the floodwaters. It was impossible to see a pattern, to join the dots and know that the end point of this catastrophe would be the city of Brisbane. Something happening in distant Theodore or Emerald couldn’t logically conclude in Brisbane. It wasn’t a narrative that made sense.

On Monday, 10 January, though, it is not an exaggeration to say that the collective consciousness of Brisbane altered. That’s when we saw the images of the carnage in Toowoomba, up on the Great Dividing Range and just a ninety-minute drive away. The pictures and stories of children being swept to their deaths, and cars lifted and thrown through the town, and then that horrifying weight of water cascading down into the Lockyer Valley towards Brisbane did, in an instant, tell everyone in the capital that something deadly was on its way.

By chance, the afternoon before I had taken my family for a stroll along the banks of the Brisbane River at West End, close to the heart of the CBD. The children had been cooped up in the house for weeks with all the rain, and we jumped at the first opportunity of a break in the weather. We walked about a kilometre to the Gallery of Modern Art, perched on the river bend at Kurilpa Point.
Already the river was nipping at the concrete pedestrian walkway and it was running at a pace I had not seen before. Perhaps it was the old watermark in me, but I knew something unusual was happening. I told my son dozens of times to stay away from the edge of the river. Don’t be so overprotective, my wife said; let him run. My wife was born and grew up in Sydney. She didn’t have the history.

WE GOT DRENCHED and my son, wet to the bone, declared it the best day of his life. Then, the next day, came Toowoomba.

On the Tuesday I went back to West End to see how high the river had come. It was impossible to retrace the path of our Sunday walk – it was well and truly underwater. The rowing sheds on the river’s edge were going under. Hundreds of people were stacking sandbags.

I looked to the river again, and it was faster than when I last saw it. This time it was carrying debris.

What astonished me were the numbers of young Brisbane people gathering to photograph the rising waters. They stood in groups and watched it in silence, as if taking in a movie. They took pictures of each other in front of it. I met a Buddhist monk on her regular afternoon walk. Was she concerned? I asked. What can you do, she said; life goes on. She was from interstate. She didn’t have the history.

Wednesday, 12 January was a magnificent summer day. It was hot and humid and exactly what you’d expect of Brisbane at this time of year. But the river was roaring through the city now, and the lower sections of GOMA and the State Library of Queensland were submerged, and numerous streets in West End were closed and guarded by police officers, and in the CBD there was frantic sandbagging and business men and women packing equipment, computers, crates of wine and even sides of beef into vans and utes.

Much of the CBD had lost electricity. Parking meters had been removed. Underground car parks were filling with water, or already full. I spoke with a restaurateur who’d just opened his latest eatery at the bottom of Edward Street. He was pale and sweating, and he had the look of a person who could not comprehend what was happening, and why the day before his downstairs kitchen was producing Wagyu steak and duck ragù and now it was underwater.

I asked him if, when he embarked on his Brisbane restaurant adventure, he was aware of what had happened to the bottom of Edward Street during that other major flood, in 1974. He was from England, he said, and didn’t have a clue about what happened in Brisbane in 1974. He didn’t have the history.

On that Wednesday, around 1 pm, I was standing at the railing of the Victoria Bridge with hundreds of other onlookers, peering down at the river. Pontoons
swung around Kurilpa Point and smashed into bridge pylons. Whole tree trunks sailed past. The water, a cacky brown, seethed and hissed and caught the sunlight. It smelled like dirt.

As I watched my mobile phone rang. It was my wife in tears. She said a friend had just heard a rumour that Wivenhoe Dam, eighty kilometres up the Brisbane Valley and built after the 1974 flood to help protect the city from another similar disaster, was not going to hold. What should we do?

She was at home with our two children, just a few kilometres away in our wooden house near the chain of ponds, and I felt nauseated. Should I have evacuated the children? What if the dam wall breaks? Would the millions of litres held by Wivenhoe traverse this far if they were suddenly let go? Had I doomed my family without thinking ahead and making adequate preparations?

The river peaked on the Thursday. Thousands of homes were inundated. Evacuation centres were full across the city. That weekend the river finally went down, and once again left us covered in a sheet of mud that gave off not an odour of mud itself but of garbage.

By early the next week the river was its quiet, dull, brown, dreary old self. For the first time since I’d returned to live in this bright young city that constantly tries to reinvent itself, it looked to me shabby and ordinary and tired. If the city had to be identified by colours, Brisbane was ordinarily green and silver and purple and red. Now it was brown and grey. The flood had leached its palette and stolen its sparkle.

I wondered then, and still do, whether Brisbane’s status as some New World City, its flash and twinkle, its grasping for some sort of cosmopolitanism and modernity with a subtropical twist, wasn’t all a surface illusion. It felt, momentarily, like the city I couldn’t wait to escape from in the mid-1980s. With the trimmings scoured off and hurtling into Moreton Bay the place had, to my mind, returned in an instant to its perhaps inescapable and immovable bedrock. This has always been a tough and extreme landscape, its white settlement born of hard graft, violence, incarceration and death. Since the flood, much of the city felt dead too.

RECENTLY I WANDERED through Rosalie, the village ravaged by the floodwaters and businesses still closed more than five weeks after the flood, and I thought of modern Brisbane and its phenomenal growth and how, with a built environment that much bigger than 1974, it seemed logical, despite the muscle of Wivenhoe up in the valley, that flooding would continue to beset this place.

I turned the corner into Beck Street – something I have done countless times over the past forty years or more – and thought of Oxley’s chain of ponds beneath my feet. When there was no Brisbane city, the river flooded the same way. And it followed its template not long after settlement, and when I was a boy, and in January just past. That’s history, even in a place staring into tomorrow.
I approached my grandmother’s old house, now renovated and almost a different building to the one that sits on concrete stumps in my memory. I stood out the front and looked through the fence at under the house, where the old Buick used to sit, flat tyres and all, alongside my grandfather’s workbench. It’s been built in now, with rooms and French doors. There’s a carport too, filling most of what used to be the front yard. But to the right, as high as the top step of the house, the same frangipani tree I knew as a child continues to grow strong. Much of its trunk went under in 1974, and it’s still here throwing off its perfume.

I turned and looked across the street to Mrs Guy’s house. There she was, sitting at her front window.

I waved. She waved back. She may no longer recognise much beyond that little white wooden window frame. But Mrs Guy and me? We have history.
ESSAY

Grasping the audacity of risk
A tale of two problems
Paul D Williams

POLITICS, according to one definition, is about reconciling conflict. That necessarily includes decision-makers confronting risk as they chase socio-economic solutions as well as the primary political goal: winning and holding high office. The core political problem for voters is little different. They, too, are forced to reconcile interests as they chose whom they consider fit to govern. But political elites measure risk, and voters perceive it, as very different propositions.

It appears voters’ desire for bold choices is almost always at odds with the parties’ fear of audacity. In pre-television days of ‘stump’ political campaigning, blunders on the other side of the country could be contained, the parties chased votes and championed ideas with little fear of faux pas. But in today’s media-saturated environment, where broadband competes with broadsheets and every candidate’s statement is potentially catastrophic, parties face more potential political problems. Parliamentary politics once embraced risk, as each side put its ideas for a better world into the campaign marketplace. But the ideas market is now tilted to caution and politics is more about ‘risk aversion’ than risky solutions.

This is a tale of two political problems. The first was faced by a long-term Queensland Labor government as it war-gamed strategies to revive its dwindling electoral fortunes. By the close of 2010, with an election still fourteen months away, the Bligh Government languished with record low levels of support. According to Newspoll, Labor attracted 26 per cent of the primary vote, and just 24 per cent of Queenslanders were satisfied with Premier Anna Bligh’s performance. Unusually in Queensland politics, an Opposition leader, the mild-mannered John-Paul Langbroek, had overtaken an incumbent as preferred premier. The Government’s decline – one almost universally attributed to Labor’s unpopular commitment to state asset sales (arguably a crisis of Labor faith) – was as rapid as it was steep. Just two years before, the relatively new Bligh Government had peaked at 60 per cent of the after-preference vote, with 64 per cent approving of Bligh’s leadership.
By late 2010, Labor tacticians toyed with several potential approaches: to positively ‘spin’ the government’s achievements; to undermine the resurgent Opposition with negative reproaches; and to hope external forces intervened. The first and second solutions are standard fare. Yet trumpeting the claimed benefits of privatisation, progress toward its creating 100,000 jobs, and an attack on the Opposition as a policy-free zone fell on deaf ears.

BY LATE DECEMBER, floodwaters were lapping central Queensland communities. By early January, much of the state had been ravaged and then Brisbane was inundated. With three-quarters of Queensland disaster-declared, and after thirty-five fatalities and damages of more than $20 billion, this was the state’s worst moment for thirty-six years.

It is often said the fires of crisis forge the most durable leadership mettle. Subsequent accusations of political opportunism aside, this was certainly the case in post-flood Queensland, with Anna Bligh and Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman enjoying a particular buoyancy.

For Bligh, a descendant of the maligned Bounty captain, the turnaround in personal stocks was unprecedented. As she delivered round-the-clock updates, Bligh relaxed before the camera and impressed audiences with her technical grasp. The performance climaxed on 13 January when the premier tearfully delivered a landmark address. ‘As we weep for what we have lost, and as we grieve for family and friends and we confront the challenge that is before us, I want us to remember who we are...we are Queenslanders. We’re the people that they breed tough, north of the border.’

Evocative and laced with just enough populism, the address humanised Bligh. There were detractors, of course, but Bligh’s reputation was resurrected and, other Australians wanted to know the Bligh story. Ironically, the Women’s Weekly’s cover story on Bligh which addressed this interest, later eroded some of her goodwill in Queensland.

Newspoll had never recorded a more dramatic turnaround. By March, Bligh’s approval had soared to 49 per cent, and she became preferred premier over Langbroek with a 27 per cent margin. Labor’s primary vote also climbed twelve points, and the Government’s after-preference support was now four points above the Opposition’s. On the back of a calamity, Labor had broken through. Strategy three: external forces intervened.

THE TALE’S SECOND political problem remained: what could a now-marginalised opposition do to counter a resurgent government? Again, the LNP faced three options: laud itself as an alternative government; harshly judge the
Government’s post-flood reconstruction; or find a solution outside the political square. Again, the first and second options were routinely engaged. Each was risk-averse. Some LNP stakeholders felt that the status-quo that had endorsed a tepid leader and his ‘small target’ strategy threatened a sixth election loss. For the organisational wing – traditionally docile (at least among Liberals) in its relationship with MP’s – defeat was not an option; the time for risk had arrived.

The potential hazard of unorthodoxy in a conservative state cannot be overstated. If it failed, not only would individual careers end, the entire future of an amalgamated LNP would be in doubt. Crash through or crash politics are not uncommon in state politics but, even by those standards, interstate observers remarked that these events could only occur in Queensland – a place where we do our politics differently.

The caravan moved quickly. In late March, leaked internal LNP polling suggested John-Paul Langbroek would lose an election against Anna Bligh; the same poll insisted Campbell Newman would win comprehensively. After a succession of mediocre leaders, the Lord Mayor’s move to state politics had previously been mooted, but always ruled out; Newman was interested in serving only the people of Brisbane. This time the usual denial was not issued. Instead, a few days later, Newman convened a media conference to affirm that he would, in succession, contest LNP pre-selection for the inner Brisbane (and fairly safe Labor) seat of Ashgrove, resign as Lord Mayor, and assume the LNP leadership – all before his election.

Newman, heavily backed by LNP President Bruce McIver, was now painted as not only the LNP’s saviour but also state’s. In his characteristically populist style, ‘Can Do’ Campbell Newman brushed aside Westminster conventions of an opposition ‘leader’ not holding a seat in the lower house of parliament, erroneously comparing this to his 2004 Lord Mayoral campaign, which he fought as a private citizen.

Brisbane lord mayoral ballots are quasi-presidential contests, conducted by popular election. But the speciousness of the argument, and commentators’ criticism of the plan, was lost in the community’s embrace of a popular alternative premier. Langbroek stepped down as opposition leader, and former Nationals leader and Callide MP Jeff Seeney assumed – despite some party disquiet – the role of LNP parliamentary leader. The inherent paradox of the plan – a party boasting two chiefs, one inside the parliament and one on the hustings – confounded commentators.

For most Queenslanders, though, the unorthodoxy was welcome. A late March Galaxy poll found that Newman was now the clearly preferred Premier with 51 per cent to Bligh’s 38 per cent. The poll suggested that government would fall to a Newman-led LNP, as Labor trailed the Opposition by sixteen points after preferences. Despite occasional inconsistencies between Newman and Seeney, over frontbench and deputy leader appointments, the electorate embraced the risk.
AN ELECTION IS still up to ten months away, and it remains to be seen how the LNP will mitigate that risk. There is still the question of LNP unity as old Liberals and old Nationals parade tribal loyalties and vent petty jealousies. There is also the question of whether Newman can defeat popular cabinet minister Kate Jones in Ashgrove, which she holds with a 7 per cent margin. And there is the even more capricious variables: a state-wide Labor resurgence, LNP or Newman stumbles.

A key lesson of these tales is that risk is often the only catalyst sufficiently powerful to break entrenched cycles. Occasionally, in politics as elsewhere, protagonists must think outside the square.

Another lesson is that risk, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. For many commentators, eschewing of political convention seemed foolish – a risk of the highest order for the LNP. For the electorate, at least according to early opinion polls, the risk is largely illusory.

Sometimes the experts get it wrong. We have less than a year to see if 2011 was one of those occasions.

19 April 2011
SHE was coming towards us with a broad smile, proffering a plate of golden round buns. She said they were meat pies, as if to explain to the army of muddied helpers – young and old, from all backgrounds – that they were good to eat. ‘Piroshky,’ I called to my team of friends and volunteers as we crowded around ‘Nataschka from Wynnum’. Soon this delicious gift of fragrant, still-warm Russian meat dumplings was gone. We paused, greedily eyeing the nearly empty plate, but Nataschka just laughed and pointed to her husband, standing in the middle of the road we know as The Corso with a trolley of plastic boxes filled with more piroshky.

One friend held back. Chris asked if there were any vegetarian piroshky, but Nataschka had none. This wasn’t a new dilemma for Chris, as she had taken a vegetarian pledge forty years ago – so, sadly, her volunteering effort went unrewarded. My dietary resolve was nowhere near as robust, and I accepted sandwiches and barbecued sausages wrapped in blankets of bread as well as the delicious Russian offerings.

My pledge, my mission, is to explain to others by word and example that of all the foods which aren’t naturally part of the human diet, cereals top the list – that we are and always will be hunter-gatherers, by anthropological description and dietary evolution. But how do you say no to these piroshky, or the freshly grilled sausages, or the BLT sandwich, when you are tired and hungry? How do you hold to a principle of the mind saying No! when your hungry body craves the closest refuelling? That is the dilemma. It becomes exquisite in its longing when faced with Nataschka’s piroshky, or the smell of freshly baked bread, or the light crisp pastry now missing beneath my tarte au citron.

IT WAS 14 JANUARY 2011. We were at my house on Brisbane’s Corso, Fairfield, a riverfront esplanade just 500 metres downstream from where the Brisbane River first broke its banks in ‘the flood that was never going to happen’. I was in the midst of an army of friends and volunteers who had come to sort and wash furniture and things; to gurney, move and shovel tonnes of fine sticky mud from my house and garden terraces back into the river.
Moving the mud back to the river that had couriered it some sixty kilometres from the fertile ‘vegetable bowl’ that is the Lockyer Valley presented another problem, a huge problem. We were throwing away valuable fertile soil – in a country that Mary White long ago identified as having the shallowest of topsoils – and dumping it in a river already too shallow. I joked about losing my vegetable garden’s unofficial organic status and the likelihood of becoming the unwilling producer of GM canola.

Jokes aside, this shovelling and fire-hosing of millions of tonnes of topsoil into a river already seriously compromised under deluge conditions will make a bad situation much worse. But the really wicked problem is not the changes to the river: it is the loss of soil. This soil is valuable – fertile soil is the most valuable commodity on the planet, and it underpins life. Around early primordial water soups, algae and cyanobacteria-rich crusts formed over the tiny, weathered rock particles fixing nitrogen for mycorrhizal bacteria, creating a home for microscopic fungi and then lichens, starting the cycle of life on Earth.

Just as the answer to the trick question ‘What is the largest organ in the human body?’ is not the lungs or liver but skin, so soil is the earth’s epidermis, drawn from ancient rocks and mixed with organic detritus over billions of years to deliver the algae, seaweeds, grasses, trees and shrubs that sustain all creatures. It is this new dawning on the human consciousness – that soil isn’t an inanimate object, a convenient carpet protecting us from stubbing our toes on sharp rocks – that has to be factored into all our future decisions of environmental management. Our soil, our earth is alive – or rather, it needs to live if the rest of us are to live.

As EO Wilson, an emeritus professor of ecology at Harvard University, explains, ‘Together with the bacteria and other living micro-organisms swimming and settled around the mineral grains of the soil, the ground dwellers are the heart of life on Earth…the entire ground habitat is alive…Earth is the only planet we know that has a biosphere. This thin, membranous layer of life is our only home. It alone is able to maintain the exact environment we ourselves need to stay alive. Most of the organisms of the biosphere, and the vast number of its species, can be found at the surface or just below it. Through their bodies pass the cycles of chemical reactions upon which all life depends.’

To grow vegetables we need at least forty centimetres of living soil. To grow drought- and flood-resistant perennial pastures we need about one metre of soil, and to grow most fruit, nut and forest trees we need many metres of it. Recent calculations estimate that it takes a century to replace thirty millimetres of carbon-rich soil. This puts this fabric of life into the seriously endangered, non-renewable category. When we changed some 6,000 to 10,000 years ago from a purely hunter-gatherer diet to a largely cereal-based one, we changed the face of the planet. The steppes, open woodlands, grasslands, savannahs, prairies were flattened, artificially
watered and the soils chemically adjusted under the all-powerful machine that is modern agriculture. This all started before we realised that our soil was a living thing, that the planet’s skin needed care and protection just as our own does. We didn’t know; we took it for granted and treated it like dirt – something beneath our feet and our contempt.

Now only about 3 per cent of the planet’s surface is covered with fertile soil, the result of modern cereal agriculture, which flattens landscapes, removes viable ecosystems and destroys soil chemistry in its global march. The supply of fertile soil has peaked and is now being run down at an alarming rate. We are now in the age of peak soil – and nothing is scarier, for not only is the fertility of soil seriously compromised but, by altering local ecosystems, these farmland soils lose their grip on life.

What we saw in January 2011 was a massive water-driven movement of soil. Tonnes of farming soils no longer kept in place by deep-rooted trees and perennial grasses were being hydraulically shunted to a city that could no longer make use of it. In the momentous floods of the past, the floodwaters swept over soils held in place by trees, shrubs and native grasses.

The difference with this flood was the mud. I lived on the river in 1974 and there was nowhere near the same amount then. The Lockyer Valley, upstream from Brisbane, is one of Australia’s key vegetable- and salad-producing regions and, over the past thirty years, more and more of this region has been converted to food horticulture. What chance does a short, soft-rooted lettuce or sweet corn plant have against a wall of water?

BACK AT THE Corso, watching tonnes of fertile soil being washed into the river or scraped off roads and parklands into trucks heading who knows where, we realised that the problem was how to return it to its previous role of food production. Were I and my neighbours up and down the Brisbane, Bremer and Lockyer riverine zones not here, if there were no suburb called Fairfield – named for its fair fields – if there were no Brisbane, then all that happened in January would have been a massive natural act of soil redistribution, and not soil waste. Now, rather than The Corso looking almost as good as new (after that amazing effort of volunteers, and state and council services), it would be a field covered with an extra twenty to thirty centimetres of very rich alluvium. The landscape would be dark brown with this layer of drying mud, and it would be dotted here and there with green shards: the first shoots of grasses and trees breaking through the cracks. Seeds from the Lockyer Valley and the upper reaches of the river system would come alive and change the local flora, which in turn would attract new fauna. In time, Fairfield would have become more fertile and even fairer, like the farmland it was when it fed the early settlement of Brisbane its meat, dairy and vegetables.
But we got in the way. Should we bring back river dredging? If we do, how do we breathe life into this reclaimed soil? This modern-day mud isn’t as glorious as the old-fashioned stuff that Flanders and Swann sang about in their ode to the hippo and the pig. Now it carries a hidden, somewhat toxic legacy of agricultural chemicals mixed with industrial waste and topped off with sewage overflow. This ex-farm soil will need rest and recuperation before it can get back to the job it does best.

So, do we create even bigger dumpsites where these soils are gradually layered with both green and organic waste in a speeded-up facsimile of that original, deep-time soil-producing process? Do we strengthen the resolve of local councils not to let people build on food-producing soil? (Those rich volcanic soils of Redlands through to Sunnybank could have supplied Brisbane with most of its fruits and vegetable needs to this day.) Or do we save the fertile soils across the planet by changing our food choices from the contemporary diet, reliant on soil-destroying cereals, back to our original (and more nourishing) hunter-gatherer one?

The problem of peak soil is of such magnitude that anything which helps keep our soils alive and well and in place or restored must be pursued. For me, that means reducing the cereal-based foods in my diet. For a long time I have been a foodie, an ex-caterer and chef proud of her home-made bread, light-as-a-feather puff pastry, flaky croissants and sweet crisp pâte sablée pastry, posing an exquisite dilemma: how to say no to some of my favourite foods? But the spectre of peak soil is so much greater; there isn’t really a dilemma, although I do weaken, just a little...every now and then...especially when offered delicious piroshky in the middle of a natural disaster.

I dedicate this article to all those who came to my assistance after the January 2011 flood. Their names are listed at www.griffithreview.com

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Across the Divide
Learning from the local, and from history
Robyn Ballinger

IT’S summer, and I decide to drive the length of the Waranga Western Channel. I want to see for myself the canal system that carries water from the Goulburn River to the plains north of where I live, in Bendigo, Victoria.

I start at the weir on the Goulburn River. Built between 1887 and 1891, the Goulburn Weir was the first major diversion built for irrigation in Australia. It also contained one of the first hydroelectric turbines in the southern hemisphere. In the depths of the night men, women and children came to view the marvellous sight of the weir illuminated by electric light. So remarkable was the weir for its time, it appeared on the reverse of the ten-shilling and half-sovereign banknotes from 1913 until 1933.

I read all the statistics that engineering projects so reverently display. The Goulburn Weir holds 25,500 megalitres when full; it submerges an area of 1,130 hectares; its embankment is 127 metres long and 15 metres high. Listening to the power of the water gushing through the gates below, I am impressed by the engineering skills of State Rivers and Water Supply chief engineer Stuart Murray and supervising engineer William Henderson, who designed the imposing granite and concrete structure. It is not difficult to imagine the great promise the weir held for delivering water to people farming land on the semi-arid northern plains of Victoria.

The Goulburn Weir raises the Goulburn River to a height that enables water for irrigation to be fed by gravity along the Stuart Murray Canal, Cattanach Canal and East Goulburn Main Channel. The backwaters created by the weir are called Lake Nagambie. Melbourne people are buying up land around the lake and building houses with waterfront vistas. I drive over a crooked old timber bridge that perhaps once crossed the Goulburn River when it followed an earlier course. Amid the landscape of expensive houses, watered green lawns and willow trees, dead limbs stand as testimony to the red gums that once grew there. It is difficult to imagine the original river, or even where it ran.
I follow the Stuart Murray Canal to Waranga Basin. Once known as Gunns Swamp, in 1853 it was described as ‘a desolate, wild district of arid bush’ that sheltered ‘a huge and melancholy lagoon’. Waranga Basin was constructed in the swamp between 1905 and 1915 to store Goulburn River waters. When I visit there is little water to be seen. The now mostly vacant caravan park and swimming signs stand isolated, stranded by the receding waters. In 2009 Goulburn-Murray Water pumped water from below the normal minimum operating level of the reservoir, an event that has occurred only four other times: in the drought years of 1926, 2002, 2007 and 2008. I spot the Waranga Western Channel that exits the end of Waranga Basin to start its 375-kilometre journey to the Mallee. I follow its purposeful path through the country.

At Colbinabbin the signs begin to appear. Roughly painted corrugated iron wired to fences, etched tin mounted on the back of trucks, handwritten notices erected in paddocks, phrases painted on a huge tractor tyre suspended from a tree. Their words protest the diversion of northern Victorian waters, via a pipe across the Great Divide, to satisfy the needs of Melburnians: ‘Plug The Pipe’, ‘Stealing Water Is An Offence’, ‘No Water No Future’, ‘Take Our Water Eat Our Dust’.

And further on I do just that, as swathes of soil billow in the air – the bed of Lake Cooper heaven-bound. I call in at the shop at Corop to buy a bottle of local wine made from the grapes grown on the nearby Mount Camel range. The woman behind the counter jokes that the fine powder which covers the bottle comes at no extra cost. Except it’s a joke that’s not that funny. When I look around at the shelves, everything is coated in the earth of Lake Cooper, and I am told that these dust storms have become frequent over the past eleven years.

On to Rochester, where I cross the old coach road to Echuca that mirrors the Aboriginal pathway for the trade of greenstone. The Waranga Western Channel, in a remarkable engineering feat, burrows beneath the Campaspe River to magically reappear on the other side. The country here looks weary after more than a decade of low rainfall. People have sold their irrigation water and paddocks stand abandoned, neglected.

Following the roads made of gravel that was once Mount Hope, I come across McColl Road – a monument to Hugh McColl, Bendigo resident and politician, who initiated and kept alive the idea of irrigation for the northern plains of Victoria. McColl would be pleased, I think, to know that the road taking his name parallels the course of the Waranga Western Channel, an incarnation of the Grand Victorian North-Western Canal that he and Benjamin Dods so vociferously promoted from 1874.

And here is the township of Ballendella: a cluster of houses, a community hall, a closed school and a maze of channels. Surely in this name there is a link to the Aboriginal woman Turandurey and her daughter, Ballendella, members of Surveyor-
General Thomas Mitchell’s expedition party that traversed the northern plains in 1836. And here also is the home of the Waterman family. The Watermans – Harold, Lilian and their children – farmed fifty acres in Ballendella for thirty-two years before coming to own their block in 1943. Their timber home and a newer 1930s concrete block house testify to the lives of two generations of Waterman irrigators.

I cross a bridge. Underneath once flowed a coursing waterway called Piccaninny Creek. Now it is known as Bendigo Creek and is nothing but a dry channel, its banks bare.

Further north, a sign that reads Sillmans Road is all that remains as evidence of the lives of Elizabeth and Henry Sillman and their son, British migrants who arrived in 1924 under the Empire Settlement Act. I stand in front of their block, now planted to saltbush to offset the effects of salinity. In the background stands Pyramid Hill, the granite rise from which Mitchell described the verdant plains of his land so inviting. For the Sillman family, though, it was a place of broken promises. In the drought year of 1927 they received only one-fifth of their irrigation water right, and lost all their crops and sheep. The next year heavy rains flooded their farm. Bitterly disappointed by the realities of trying to make a living from the land of the northern plains, the Sillmans left in 1933 to return to England.

These signs in the landscape tell a story of how people and country have co-evolved to make the landscape of the northern plains of Victoria. They are small monuments to the intersection of human dreams and environmental realities.

THE SEMI-ARID NATURE of the plains has always directed patterns of human settlement. The Baraba Baraba, Wemba Wemba, Dja Dja Wurrung, Ngurai-illam-wurrung, Wergaia, Daung Wurrung and Yodayoda peoples hunted and collected, adapting natural systems to exploit the resources of a variable climate. As they moved between the swamps, creeks, rivers, hills and grasslands of their homeland they etched physical and spiritual pathways into the landscape. They farmed land through fire-stick burning and engineered waterways to catch fish. Water attracted life and also marked the vestiges of its end. The places where populations congregated were the same places they buried their dead: beside lakes and swamps, in lunettes, near rivers.

Into this humming country in the high rainfall year of 1836 came the Surveyor-General of New South Wales and explorer Thomas Mitchell. Under his pen, fine chains of creek ponds, deep running streams, extensive tracts of grasses and abundant trees were brought into being for settlement by farmers and graziers. The watered landscape stood in stark contrast to the drought conditions of the unwelcoming New South Wales Darling River region where, earlier in 1836, Mitchell noted in *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, his party had
had to ‘wander in the beds of rivers...to seek in vain for water’. Mitchell’s widely promoted vision of the plains brought to life the potential of the region for white settlement. But it relied intrinsically on the negation of Aboriginal experience of the plains as homeland.

In search of Mitchell’s country came the squatters with their herds and flocks. In assessing the capacity of the northern plains for the grazing of sheep and cattle they dismissed the explorer’s glowing accounts. Alexander Campbell rejected as too dry the ‘barren plains of the Loddon’ and Richard Grice described the Loddon River as wasting ‘in the sandy desert’. Beyond bringing a more realistic orientation to Mitchell’s effusive view of the plains, these squatters also judged the country in the low rainfall years of 1839 and 1840. By contrast, high rainfall in the mid-1840s brought to life the large expanses of native grasses on the plains and the country was judged as some of the best winter lamb-fattening land in the colony. To ensure a water supply, squatters dammed rivers, enlarged Aboriginal soaks and cut channels from creeks. But mostly they adapted to the variable climate by moving both people and stock to land elsewhere when dry seasons occurred.

The determined push to replace the transient squatter with a settled, industrious yeomanry was legislated in a number of Land Acts introduced in Victoria in the 1860s. Coinciding with the 1869 Land Act came plentiful rains, and selectors followed them to the plains of northern Victoria. The destructive qualities of the copious waters of 1870 were described with fear as stories traced the tragedy of drownings at Echuca, and damage to roads, bridges and property. But for Hugh McColl and Benjamin Dods of the Grand Victorian North-Western Canal Company, the floodwaters offered immense opportunities. Through the construction of an extensive storage and irrigation system, McColl and Dods imagined the northern plains as another productive ‘Mississippi Delta’. They planned a large canal, running from a weir on the Goulburn River almost to the border of South Australia: a ‘new river’, with townships located at ten-mile intervals near elevated reservoirs filled by steam pumps using water from subterranean sources. The reclamation of the ‘arid and desolate waste’ of the northern plains, claimed McColl and Dods, would see bountiful harvests, the improvement of the regional climate through the introduction of so much water, the fertilisation of the soil by sediments brought from the Goulburn River and a much-boosted population.

Over six months from December 1884 Department of Water Supply Chief Secretary Alfred Deakin travelled overseas to witness first-hand the changes brought to the western United States by irrigation projects. Back in Australia, Deakin referred to the American concept ‘duty of water’ to calculate the volume of rainfall required to convert the northern plains of the colony of Victoria, with its ‘unsatisfactory’ rainfall and ‘water famines’, into an irrigated landscape of production. There was no doubt in Deakin’s mind that the need for irrigation on the plains was ‘most pressing and most urgent’. Unless the region was irrigated, he
argued in his speech to introduce the 1886 Irrigation Act, ‘the population will be swept away, and the land must go back simply to sheep-farming.’ No doubt influenced by the nomenclature applied to the Great Plains of western America, Deakin named the region the Northern Plains and, in his more expansive moments, the ‘great Northern Plains’.

Elwood Mead, chairman of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission (SRWSC) from 1907, embraced Deakin’s vision of a regulated irrigated water supply. An engineer and a former chief of the Irrigation and Drainage Investigations Bureau in the United States Department of Agriculture, Mead had experience in remaking landscapes. In 1896, as the state engineer of Wyoming, he argued that the arid lands of the West could be ‘redeemed’ only through the conservation of an irrigation water supply accompanied by adequate laws attaching water rights to land. On arriving in Victoria he was quick to condemn the irrigation landscape of the northern plains. The scattered plots over a large area, ‘where one could ride for miles without meeting a man or seeing a horse’, watered by costly channel systems, did not marry with his vision of intensive irrigation settlements serviced by central pumping facilities located on higher plain country.

In his 1909 Policy to be Followed in Irrigation Development, Mead noted the trend in America to smaller blocks. He recommended a program of acquiring large landholdings in every existing irrigation district in Victoria and subdividing them into allotments of between 20 and 200 acres. Farm labourers would make do with blocks of two to five acres, fruit could be grown profitably on 20- to 40-acre blocks, and 30- to 200-acre blocks would best serve dairying and mixed farming enterprises. By subdividing land into small irrigated farms on which crops could be grown all year round, Mead claimed, the unpredictable income of the dryland farmer would be done away with. Just as importantly, his proposal to introduce a compulsory water charge would guarantee a regulated financial return to the state. However, despite Mead’s best efforts, by 1916 the total liabilities of closer settlement irrigable areas were calculated at more than one and a half million pounds. The parlous state of irrigation was due in part to very strong El Niño events that brought severe droughts to much of Australia in 1914 and 1915.

Reactions to the lack of reliable rainfall were typified by a chapter in the 1914 Handbook to Victoria titled ‘The Problems in the State of Victoria Which Await Scientific Solution’. Special mention was made of investigations necessary to overcome ‘the disasters...owing to drought’, including the collection of accurate observations ‘to show whether drought cycles can be predicted with certainty’, the storage of ‘the immense volumes of water that pass to the sea every year’ to provide for irrigation, and the implementation of improved methods of farming that utilised the rainfall more efficiently.
In 1916, announced the agricultural scientist Thomas Cherry in his book Victorian Agriculture, the environment of Victoria had been brought under control by applying the principles of scientific cultivation. Using available statistics, Cherry argued that the highest rainfall years did not necessarily correspond with the best wheat harvests, proving that ‘increased production of recent years is due to improved methods’. Cherry sought to bring about ‘the passing of the unknown’ by replacing ‘speculations, guesses and uncertainties’ with ‘assured knowledge’. In so doing, he defined three agricultural rainfall zones for Victoria: the Wheat Belt, delineated by an average annual rainfall of 11 to 25 inches; the Closer Settlement Country (where irrigation was not needed), by an average rainfall of 25 to 40 inches; and the Hill Country, by an average annual rainfall of 40 to 75 inches. Cherry maintained that land with a summer rainfall of ten inches or fewer, such as the northern plains, should be made to produce both winter and summer harvests by equalising the wet and the dry months of the year through irrigation. Already in these districts, he claimed, scientific cultivation facilitated by machinery, fertilisers and international markets had enabled ‘the farmer to change the soil into a factory, where the output is proportional to the amount of labor bestowed on the land’. The Victorian Department of Agriculture foresaw another advantage of irrigation: it would put paid once and for all to making a living by utilising ‘faulty native grasses’.

But widespread floods in 1916, 1917 and 1918 proved that the environment had not been brought under control. Due mainly to ‘the progress of settlement within the catchment of the rivers’, the SRWSC maintained, floods ‘may be regarded as inevitable, though in certain cases special measures may be practicable to control the streams and minimise damage’. In 1921, floods came again. Requests poured in from landowners to form flood protection districts. Levee banks, drainage channels and siphons were constructed to control floodwaters, and settlers on irrigated blocks were instructed to plant willows to secure channel banks. Over these years, it was the idea of too much water that contributed to constructions of the plains as a region that challenged human endeavour.

In the dry El Niño years of 1925 and 1926 the SRWSC initiated an entire ‘remodelling’ of the irrigation districts administered by the Kerang, Cohuna, Rochester and Loddon centres. The language of irrigation became interspersed with the measurements of diameters, circumferences and cubic yards as the modern replaced the antiquated. Reinforced concrete head checks, siphons, subways and stops replaced old, worn-out timber structures. Outmoded irrigation outlets were swapped for modern Dethridge meters. Pipe culverts took the place of bridges. New channels were excavated and silt removed from existing channels by a locally designed and built two-way mud scoop. Sludge, silt and ‘water weeds’ – native lignum, combungie and rushes – were removed from channels with bucket dredges. In 1928–29 the beds of the Loddon River, Pyramid Creek and
Reedy Creek were ‘improved’ by cutting and grading. As a result of the remodelling, reported the SRWSC in 1929, ‘an increased and more uniform demand for water’ and a ‘reduced variation in areas watered through dry or wet seasons’ had brought greater stability to the area. The landscape prior to irrigated closer settlement, typified by ‘sparse population, crude irrigation methods, and the grazing of stock on native pastures and annual crops’, the commission said, had given way to the development of ‘real irrigated agriculture’ and, as a consequence, improved ‘social conditions in country life’.

A CONCERTED EFFORT has been made over time to check environmental fluctuations through the application of science, technology and international trade – to convert the northern plains from ‘outside country’. Outside country, the environmental historian Tom Griffiths writes in Words for Country: Landscape and Language in Australia (UNSW, 2002), lies ‘beyond the limits of established settlement, a land as yet unredeemed by the hopefully advancing frontier, and therefore full of the freedom, promise and danger of such liminality’. Because the semi-arid northern plains defied official expectations of the patterns of ordered white settlement, the region became a particular focus of economic and political institutional agendas that sought to exploit the opportunities and minimise the challenges of a variable climate. Like other semi-arid places in Australia described by the historical geographer RL Heathcote in ‘Images of a desert? Perceptions of arid Australia’ (Australian Geographical Studies, 1987), the northern plains were used as a kind of ‘laboratory for the geographical processes of land settlement and resource management’.

The experiment goes on. In response to a drying climate current government policies are attempting to modify historical legacies. The North-South Pipeline has been constructed to ship water from the Goulburn River in northern Victoria to Melbourne. As part of the Food Bowl Modernisation Project, the former Brumby government argued, the pipeline will not draw on the already stretched resources of the Goulburn River but will rely instead on 225 gigalitres of ‘new water’ found through modernising irrigation systems in northern Victoria. But the environmental effects of the North-South Pipeline are likely to be significant. Only receiving 23 per cent of its long-term average rainfall in 2006–07, the Goulburn River is under stress. With climate change it will become more so. Temperatures in northern Victoria are predicted to increase between 0.8 and 5 degrees Celsius on average, bringing higher evaporation rates and reduced rainfall.

What’s more, some northern Victorian residents believe they are subsidising the ascendant institutional view that has adopted the market principles of demand to determine water price and allocation. By promoting the economic and social benefits of water piped to a growing Melbourne population, they argue, the costs of
it being taken away from less populous regions has been downplayed. On the subject of the 225 gigalitres to be saved and the 75 gigalitres guaranteed for Melbourne, there is mounting concern that this water may not be actually found – that it will be taken instead from irrigation entitlements.

The fear of losing water runs high on the northern plains, where large communities have formed and developed over 127 years. In addition to the North-South Pipeline, the Murray-Darling Basin Plan proposes radical changes to the landscape of the northern plains. Because of concerns about diminishing inflows into the rivers of the basin, guided by the 2007 Water Act the plan sets out to determine the volume of water required to maintain and restore the environment. At the same time it seeks to address the social and economic effects on communities of removing water.

AT A COMMUNITY meeting convened by the Murray-Darling Basin Authority in Echuca in late 2010, I listen to hostile community responses to the plan. Lined up at microphones placed around the room, members of the crowd of over a thousand people give voice to pent-up frustration. They challenge the science of climate change. They describe the impact on local communities of cuts to irrigation water. They detail the consequences of reductions to irrigation allocations on food supply and prices. ‘The environment is the joker in the pack,’ cries one farmer. ‘It trumps everything.’ Another declares, ‘You have made implacable enemies of us.’ It makes no difference that water for the environment will be either purchased from willing sellers or delivered from irrigation efficiencies. For irrigation communities in northern Victoria, communities that are the outcome of active government promotion and support of the irrigated landscape since 1883, water is a fundamental right.

In late 2010 and early 2011 another transformation occurs. After thirteen years of drought, heavy La Niña rains cause waters to spill from the Campaspe, Loddon and Avoca rivers, turning the country into a shimmering, shifting landscape. This is an age-old phenomenon, but because of the altered hydrology and the closer settlement of communities water has turned up in unexpected places. Houses are flooded and crops ruined by too much water. Some businesses in towns do not know if they will reopen. The rains provide concrete evidence, some locals say, that the drying climate predicted by scientists is not happening – and, therefore, the science behind the prediction is a furphy. Tony Abbott maintains that $600 million of water buybacks in the Murray-Darling Basin should be deferred to pay for damage caused in the Queensland floods. Victoria’s Baillieu government is mooting the building of more dams to capture the water ‘wasted’. It has challenged the environmental flows suggested by the Murray-Darling Basin Plan, stating that, if introduced, they will not only impinge on the livelihoods of irrigators but flood extensive areas of private land in northern Victoria. Not a difficult scenario to
imagine in the current wet. It seems too many inches of rain have altered not only the physical country, but are contributing also to conflicting visions for the future landscape of the plains.

It would be disingenuous to be buoyantly optimistic about the future of the plains country and its people. To do so would deny the evidence in the landscape.

A decreasing rainfall and associated scarcity of water for irrigation, ongoing economic restructuring of agriculture, and the need to return water to the rivers is affecting the people who live there. As reported in *The Age* in March 2009, Campbell Fitzpatrick, the executive director of Victoria’s Department of Sustainability and Environment, believes northern Victorian communities may well be Australia’s first climate change refugees. The once abundant plains country has been fallowed, ploughed, sown, fertilised, irrigated and harvested almost beyond recognition. The vegetation is one of the most depleted in Victoria. Only 1.8 per cent of native vegetation remains, growing mostly on the public land of stock routes, cemeteries, aerodromes, roadsides and rail reserves. Of this remnant, 8 per cent is deemed vulnerable and 45 per cent endangered. Removal of vegetation has led to land degradation on a grand scale and the wholesale destruction of fauna habitat. A hot climate, weed invasion and rabbits hamper regrowth of native plants. Naturally high in salt because of earlier sea inundation, and fine in texture on the surface but slow to drain because of clay subsoils, the soils of the plains are being degraded by sheet erosion and rising saline water tables. In 2007–08 the volume of water in the Campaspe River was 89 per cent lower than average, and in the same years the Loddon River ceased, in parts, to flow altogether.

The dynamic processes that have created this landscape can tell us much about human and ecological adaptation to a semi-arid country. The reality of rainfall is determined by a combination of factors that affect the capacity of meteorological conditions to supply water to an area. Factors include air movement, the global pattern of solar oscillation, and the geometry of land and sea. Typified by a climate of variable rainfall and frequent dry periods extended by El Niño events, the northern plains of Victoria are not a place of norms or averages. Median annual rainfall ranges between 423 millimetres at Serpentine in the south to 369 millimetres at Kerang in the north. But to speak in terms of medians does not describe the downpours that double those figures, or the sporadic showers that halve them. Like much of Australia, aridity is a natural feature of the northern plains, and has been for thousands of years.

Yet successive governments have viewed the climate of the northern plains as an aberration. They have applied technology and science to ameliorate it, to make good what is termed the ‘deficiency’ of the country, to deliver certainty to a landscape described by its unreliability. There is no denying that the engineering by the state of an extensive channel and storage system has enabled a white population to settle the
semi-arid country, or that agricultural diversification on the northern plains facilitated by science has contributed to the national economy. But by attempting to make the environment more certain in times of political, economic and climatic uncertainty, government schemes have actually increased unpredictability in many ways. They have put stress and strengthened reliance on a fragile environment, raised cultural expectations of rainfall, neglected local memory and experience, separated people from their waterscapes, prevented people from coming to terms with environmental uncertainty, and taken away personal responsibility.

Institutional visions presume uniformity. But plains dwellers do not know the country as a homogenous entity. They live instead on Powletts Plains, Salisbury Plains, the Terrick Plains, the Loddon Plains, the Torrumbarry Plains, the Patho Plains. They have the right idea. The northern plains are made up of regions of distinctive microclimates that sustain dynamic ecosystems. The rainfall at Kerang is not the rainfall at Echuca. The soils in Rochester are not the soils in Boort. Yet local knowledge is ignored, overlooked or considered only at the periphery by governments intent on remaking the landscape according to the priorities of the day.

The northern plains have had thousands of years of Indigenous settlement and more than 170 years of non-Indigenous settlement. Their people, individually and collectively, have adapted to climate variability over time through the practices of mobility, resilience and opportunism. They have an intimate understanding of the country and are well placed to imagine the future. One way of understanding the dynamic local ecology is to tap into the vast resource of historical knowledge held by the people who live there. Inclusion of local experience is vital if responses to the issues of water allocation on the semi-arid northern plains of Victoria are to be meaningful. Embracing local intelligence in the protection and restoration of the country of the plains provides the best opportunity for the environment to adapt. Seeking local interpretations of how irrigation has created the current social order is imperative.

As populations in Australia have increased their vulnerability to climatic variation by moving into semi-arid country, official policies have relied on science, technology and international markets to bring certainty to these places. But in doing so governments have contributed to local landscapes of scarcity. If future landscapes are to be imagined in any meaningful way this history must be studied and learned from.

Robyn Ballinger is a writer and historian who lives east of Bendigo, a place where this summer, in contrast to the average summer rainfall of 98mm, 434mm pelted from the skies. Her book An Inch of Rain: A Water History of the Northern Plains of Victoria is to be published later in 2011 by Australian Scholarly Publishing.
Turning dirt into soil
Killing two birds with one carbon stone
Andrea Koch

WORKING in sustainable food and agriculture means confronting some of the biggest wicked problems of our time: climate change, declining fresh water, a projected global population of nine billion people, and the planet’s ability to supply their needs for food, fibre and energy. Solutions to any one raises problems in solving the others at the nexus of water, energy and food production.

For some time I have had a hunch that remedies lie in things that grow, that come from the soil: things of an agrarian nature. Can we harness the prolific and continuous energy from the sun, through nature’s mechanism of photosynthesis, to meet our needs for food, fibre and energy? Can the planet support a healthy population half as big again? Biomass for green energy production, algae for oil, closed-loop agricultural systems for the production of nutritious food and fibre – these are the kind of things-that-grow scenarios with which I am preoccupied.

In early 2011 I participated in an extraordinary meeting of twenty of the world’s leading soil and plant scientists. The scientists came to Sydney from North America, the United Kingdom, Europe and Australasia for the inaugural Soil Carbon Summit to deliberate the science of soil carbon sequestration and its potential in improving soil function, abating climate change, and girding water, food and energy security. What made this meeting unique was the calibre of the people in the room: six centuries of combined experience, the very top minds in soil science in the world. This esteemed group very quickly established consensus on the state of the science of soil, and concluded that soil carbon sequestration has the potential to secure the future of the world’s soils.

This is the story of what emerged: the conclusions reached and the message of hope that it produced. We can solve these big wicked problems. This is the story of soil.

MOST OF US now know that too much carbon in the atmosphere is a bad thing, but few realise that the reverse is true in the case of soil: carbon in soil is a good thing. Carbon in soil is essential for life. The carbon in soil holds it together. Without
Carbon, soil is dirt that grows nothing. Carbon in soil powers the nutrient cycle, nutrients in dead organic matter turning back into a form that promotes the growth of food and fibre. The carbohydrates we eat in various forms every day depend on how the soil in which they are grown interacts with carbon and the plant. The other terrestrial foods in our diet also rely on soil carbon: without it, it is impossible to grow protein and fats – meat, plants or dairy.

Carbon in soil is a great indicator of the fertility and resilience of the soil. Soil that is high in carbon retains more water, is resistant to erosion and produces more food. Carbon in soil is unambiguously a good thing.

Unfortunately, low and declining carbon stocks in soils are a global phenomenon. Scientists are desperately concerned about soil degradation. The idea of ‘peak soil’ is emerging: that, if we continue on current trajectories, we may only have between sixty and a hundred years before we run out of functional soil. The recent flooding and erosion of Queensland’s agricultural soils on a massive scale may have brought the peak a little closer.

This decline in soil carbon is occurring because agricultural practices in the developed world focus on high yield. ‘Yield’ is the language of the modern farmer. The green revolution gave birth to the industrial agricultural system that provides food and fibre. This is a highly sophisticated system of plant and animal breeding, with inputs in the form of synthetic fertilisers and pest management in various –icides, all designed to maximise yields. The goal of the green revolution was to produce more food to feed the hungry. It has been one of the great innovations of modern times. It has released people from subsistence farming to pursue fulfilling and productive urban lives.

It was not designed to conserve soil carbon. Over the decades the world’s farmers have produced more and more food and fibre, while inadvertently mining soil carbon.

WE CAN, THOUGH, get the carbon out of the atmosphere into the soil where it is needed. As I learned at the Soil Carbon Summit, there is sufficient scientific knowledge to make a start. The summit marked a turning point when scientists were happy to say, ‘the science can now predict soil carbon sequestration and stabilisation.’ The mathematical models of soil carbon transformations are well enough developed. We know roughly what inputs will make a difference. We understand the interactions between the microbial communities in soils with soil carbon, and how this affects the movement of carbon between its various forms or pools within the soil. We also know – for different soil types, under various climatic conditions – a range of technologies and farming practices that increase soil carbon, while producing food and fibre. Australian farmers have led the world in developing a new range of innovative practices that appear to do this. The science is
sufficiently developed to underpin a refocusing of agricultural practice to produce food and fibre that builds rather than mines soil carbon. This is a paradigm shift on the scale of the green revolution – finding solutions to wicked problems in things that grow.

Building carbon stocks in soil will future-proof food production. We cannot continue to mine soil carbon to produce food: when the soil carbon runs down, the productivity of the soil goes too. Restoration of soils by managing soil carbon is the key to future food security. This relies on enhancing natural processes; it can’t happen just by throwing bricks of carbon into depleted soil.

A lot of other good things happen when we start to secure our soils by replenishing soil carbon stocks. The carbon that goes into the soil comes from the atmosphere. This is basic biology: photosynthesis. Plants take in carbon dioxide from the air, and release oxygen. The plant uses the carbon to grow, and if the conditions are right the carbon goes through the plant’s root system and into the soil – this is the beginning of soil carbon accumulation. Creating the right conditions can be achieved by adjusting land-management practices. Some of these, such as minimising tillage or ploughing of the soil, manuring and composting, and growing deep-rooted pastures, are well established. Up to four-fifths of Australian cropping farms already practise minimum tillage; seed is ‘direct drilled’ into the soil without ploughing. Increasing numbers of graziers are switching to intensive ‘cell-grazing’ techniques, with high rotations of livestock through small paddocks. Pastures are grazed intensively and then the stock moved on, so that the top of the plant regenerates, leaving the root systems intact. Natural, biological fertilisation occurs through the manure. Some innovative farmers are adding ‘poultry tractors’ into this mix, bringing large mobile chook runs in to feed on the bugs associated with cow manure, and add nitrogenous chicken manure to the system.

Other land-management practices need calibration with the science. Australia leads the world in the development of innovative new farming systems that build soil carbon. Pasture cropping, planting crops into deep-rooted native perennials, is one such practice. Making and using compost and compost teas as alternatives to commercial fertilisers is increasing. Some Western Australian farmers have converted their cropping system to grazing, using deep-rooted shrubs as fodder that hold down the soil and sequester carbon to depth. Biochar will play a role in adding soil carbon to some systems, but it is not a silver bullet – rather a piece of silver shrapnel. Black carbon is one form of soil carbon; healthy soil requires many forms. Innovative, localised pyrolysis (heat-driven decomposition) techniques may be part of the mix of solutions to be developed as the new paradigm emerges.

Soils that contain high levels of carbon have better structure and retain more water, while soils low in carbon are more likely to erode as wind or water move across them. Soils have a critical role in triaging rainfall. Carbon-rich soils effectively
partition rainfall into infiltration and runoff; carbon, together with weather and crops, determines this partitioning. The amount of water that runs over the surface and causes floods and erosion, as well as the amount that flows into the soil profile, is directly related to the soil carbon. This underground hydrology is important, as it contributes to the recharge of water into groundwater systems, and the storage of water in soil to make it available for plants to grow. Soils that are low in carbon don’t have this sponge-like capacity, so they are less productive during dry periods. Farmers who are using practices that build soil carbon are already realising the drought-proofing benefits.

SOIL AIN’T JUST SOIL. There are many different types, reflecting the diverse geological and climatic environments that they have been built from across the millennia. Soils are made up of complex mixes, including carbon and minerals in various forms, sophisticated and diverse communities of living organisms. Australia has the widest and most comprehensive range of soil types. The diversity of our agriculture reflects the fickle climate and variety of soils, from the sandy soils of the west to the red-brown earths of the grain belt, the fertile alluvial black-soil flood plains and the iron-rich soil of the north-east. These are depleted in carbon. Australian soils under cultivation have lost at least half their soil carbon since the introduction of European agricultural methods.

Australian agriculture has been honed in these tough conditions. Replacing the carbon in our soils will require a range of different land-management practices and technologies. Our farmers are the most innovative, professional and competitive in the world: we have the capacity to make the necessary adjustments. Australia leads the world in soil science, and has done so for some time. We attract the best international talent, because of the diversity of soils, which need such attention. We are well positioned to lead the world in the new paradigm.

The science is ready, and we know what to do: there are five key measures. First, building soil carbon in soils must become a priority in the drive to increase food production to feed the growing world population. Second, public policy must recognise agricultural soil as a national asset, and protect and rebuild this vital resource. Third, farmers must be recognised as the stewards of the asset, and supported through policy measures in their role of managing the asset to rebuild soil carbon in addition to maximising yields of food and fibre. Building better connections between farmers and the science of soil carbon will play a critical role. Fourth, agricultural research and development must recalibrate to address yield maximisation within a framework of soil security, preservation and conservation. Fifth, and critically, we must continue the scientific endeavour to understand soils and soil carbon. Soil science has been dismally underfunded for decades, partly in lieu of water and landscape research. When I say the science is ready, it is really the
starting point. For soils to be the solution, we must pursue scientific knowledge of soils relentlessly and not rest on our laurels.

Soil security deserves as much attention as climate change, if not more. To aim for soil security, by managing soil carbon stocks in the world’s soils, is a roadmap to helping solve not only climate change but also food, water and energy security. While the world has been dumbstruck in response to climate change, we have failed to look down and see that the solution may lie beneath our feet.

A FEW DAYS after the summit, my mind still buzzing, I visited a friend whose husband is a keen plant collector. Their garden overflows with an unrivalled botanical collection. As I stepped out of the car I saw a small sign hanging to the branch of a rose bush: ‘To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves – Gandhi.’

It was as though those words were placed there as an affirmation of what I had learned. They encapsulate the brink on which we stand, a moment in time where we can refocus our intent on things that grow, with a new respect for the soil that gives them life. The goal is to secure our soils; the way to achieve it is by managing and increasing soil carbon.

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REPORTAGE

Too blue
A tale of two countries
John van Tiggelen

TAMWORTH’S ten-day Jayco Country Music Festival is preceded by a ten-day Festival Countdown for those so excited about the impending shebang that they need the extra time to settle in and plan. That’s Tourism Tamworth’s thinking, anyway. Very likely it has the full encouragement of the festival’s sponsor, a maker of caravans. Twenty days in that January heat and you’d be looking to ditch the tent for a van, too.

The Festival itself counts down to Australia Day, and the vans, and fans, arrive festooned with flags. Country music is by definition more nationalistic than other genres, and visitors like it to be known they’re true blue – to the extent that, to those of us a lesser shade, Tamworth can seem not so much a festival of music as a festival of the flag. Lee Kernaghan, the country’s biggest name in country, and Kevin Rudd’s 2008 Australian of the Year, is known to use the Australian flag as a backdrop, and even to drop to one knee before it, hand on heart, as part of his act. But it’s not all bad: an elder of the folk music scene, whose invitations to more hip festivals have been drying up of late, wistfully describes Tamworth as the country’s most democratic music festival. He means anyone can go to Tamworth, busk on the street or hire a hall, and keep the change.

The downside is that anyone does.

This year a singer-songwriter friend of mine was planning to drive up from Melbourne and try his luck on Peel Street, the famous buskers’ strip where Keith Urban, Kasey Chambers and Troy Cassar-Daley found theirs. He was taking his band’s banjo player and driving up with another alt-country band mid-festival, on the Tuesday. Did I want to come along?

I was starting a new job in February, one that required me to naturalise, and I couldn’t think of a sterner test of my devotion to this country. There was a red-eye flight on Friday, to spirit me back to Melbourne in time for my citizenship test.
Immigration gatekeeper: How’s your day been?

I just got back from Tamworth.

Okay, you’re in.

At the eleventh hour, however, my friend pulled the pin. Couldn’t afford to take the time off work, he said. I asked if he minded if I still went, with the other band. There was a pause. ‘Go ahead,’ he said, but not like he meant it. I googled the other band. The Graveyard Train, according to MySpace, are purveyors of ‘horror country’. They are a hirsute bunch. Spooky Records is their label, and their songs are about monsters, mummies, scarecrows, shadows, rabid dogs and randy witches. They didn’t much sound like the kind of band that Tamworth types – ringers, ute hoons, grey nomads – would appreciate.

Excellent.

_They say there has been murder_

_Way down on music row_

_Don’t let them murder Tamworth_

_Or our country music show_

from ‘Don’t Let Them Murder Tamworth’, by Reg Poole and Keith Jamieson

‘JUST BRING A sleeping mat, some vitamins and Panadols,’ advises Nick Finch, the member of the Graveyard Train with the biggest beard, and thus its leader. Over the phone he tells me we will be dosing down in a classroom. To accommodate the festival’s 40,000 visitors Tamworth hires out what space it can, and the six-piece Graveyard Train have arranged lodgings at a primary school called St Nick’s. Sharing the room will be another Melbourne band, a thrash-rockabilly four-piece called Cherrywood, as well as two solo alt-country acts, Eaten By Dogs and Cash Savage. Thirteen bodies, I count. Plus special guests. And no teacher. I try to remember if primary schools come with showers. ‘There’ll be plenty of drinking fountains,’ says Finch. ‘Whole troughs of them.’

We meet a few mornings later at his house, in North Melbourne, ahead of a notional 9 am departure. Tamworth is waiting, 1200 kilometres away, but Finch is slow to get going. He worked till 4 am, pouring beers at a rollicking establishment called the Old Bar, on Fitzroy’s busy Johnston Street. It’s where and how the Graveyard Train was formed, pretty much: two barmen, four drinkers, many sessions.

Finch looks more like a rabbi than a bushranger; his face is too young and sensitive to be framed by a beard so thick and unruly. I fetch him a coffee as he finishes making arrangements. As well as the band, there will be a ‘merch girl’
travelling. Finch is happy about that. ‘A merch girl increases your sales,’ he says. ‘She’ll sell T-shirts for thirty-five dollars when we’d take fifteen, and she’ll sell more of them.’

We’re to head north in two vehicles, a car and a people-mover, but neither is here yet. It transpires a junkie has smashed into the car overnight and stolen a case of microphones. The band members are out looking for replacement mikes and another car. Meanwhile, the merch girl, a friend of the band’s washboard player, calls to say she’s no longer coming. Cherrywood, the other band, who’d planned to follow in convoy, have taken off. We head south in the people-mover, then west, to Hoppers Crossing, a suburb that makes Tamworth look inner-urban, to pick up someone’s dad’s car. By the time we’re pointing north again, it’s well after midday.

*Take your hands off Tamworth*

*Leave our country name alone*

*Let’s get back to our roots*

*Not that rockin’ thumpin’ moan*

WE SWING THROUGH the trucking town of West Wyalong early evening. It’s not quite halfway. The inland plains are unusually green, though no lovelier for it. Josh Crawley, the Train’s banjo player, is driving; he has done so for the past 500 kilometres and will do so for another 300 before handing over. Finch is in the passenger seat, in charge of the CD player. This is very much the way the band works. Crawley drives, Finch directs, and the rest make noise.

We stop at West Wyalong for petrol and a copy of *Bacon Busters*, the pig-hunting magazine infamous for its ‘Boars and Babes’ picture spreads. This being the band’s third road trip to Tamworth, they know the unbridled, journey-breaking joy that *Bacon Busters* delivers when read out loud, cover to cover. This year, however, everywhere we try the magazine is sold out, as are its rivals, *Boar It Up Ya* and *Wild Boar Australia*.


We catch up with Cherrywood in Dubbo and stop for a very late dinner – Hungry Jack’s, because McDonald’s don’t do vegie burgers and Finch is vegetarian. Cherrywood’s wiry lead singer, Tim Durkin, is obnoxiously drunk. He could land us in a fight in a family restaurant, let alone in Tamworth.

‘Tim seems a bit jumpy,’ I say once we’re mobile again.

Finch nods. ‘He’s a bit wild.’
Beards aside (including two red beards), the Train are a tame and friendly bunch. Only 27-year-old Crawley could pass himself off as a rocker, with his stubble, scuffed cowboy boots and street smarts. Crawley, who plays dobro guitar as well as the banjo, is the country band’s token country boy, having grown up in rural Victoria until his dad lost the farm and became a truckie.

In contrast, Finch went to University High, studied philosophy at Melbourne University (graduating with honours) and played guitar in a hapless garage-blues outfit called Johnny Curtin and the Pelmets. Finch met Crawley around the time the Pelmets’ singer tried strangling the drummer in a recording studio, and the two barmen began toying with ideas for a new project.

‘Dark country is an established genre,’ explains Finch. ‘Most good country albums have one or two dark songs, usually written in minor chords. Hank Williams’ albums were like that. We wanted to do only those songs.’

But horror country isn’t just dark; it’s more bent than that. Influences include The Handsome Family, Violent Femmes, The Cramps and Nick Cave. Finch says: ‘People think our songs are metaphors for stuff, but we’re really a lot more lowbrow than that. The monster song is not a song about rape. It’s just about a monster hanging out at a saloon and eating a woman.’

Finch and Crawley fleshed out the band with Matt Duffy, a sound recorder and double-bass player, and Beau Skowron on steel guitar. Then came Matt Andrews, an architecture student with a degree in biochemistry. ‘He’d never been in a band, he was just a drinker, but he wanted to be in it so we gave him a washboard at our first rehearsal,’ Finch explains. ‘Then we sent him off to Lincraft to get himself some thimbles.’

Finch was also happy to rehabilitate the Pelmets’ frontman, Adam Johansen. ‘They didn’t need a lead singer, which meant I needed an instrument, something affordable,’ says Johansen. ‘There’s this Johnny Cash song where someone bangs chains with a hammer. I went to Bunnings, picked a length of chain and tried out different hammers till I found one I liked.’

Our pioneers would tremble up in Heaven’s hall of fame
To hear what happens here on earth in country music’s name

TAMWORTH’S MAIN DRAG, Peel Street, is a shrieking din of cicadas. It’s a La Niña thing, evidently – locals don’t recall them ever being a problem before. Or maybe it’s revenge. Six hundred buskers have registered to perform over the ten days, and every second shop is fronted by a Katter-hat act of some sort. There’s a yodelling woman with cowbells around her waist. There’s Superman with a guitar. There are countless wannabe starlets, an eight-year-old calfboy squealing ‘Country
Roads’, mum-and-pop karaoke acts in matching shirts and an Aboriginal dwarf who uses his voice box as a didgeridoo. It’s a festival, all right.

On my first walk-through I hear ‘Sweet Home Alabama’, a grating song to start with, covered three times. I’m reminded of the initial episodes of Australian Idol, the ones where viewers get to laugh at the expense of the naif and the woeful. Except it’s not so funny when it’s unedited.

I find a bloke flogging his book among it all. It’s a good way to stand out, and he’s busily signing copies. The book comes with an endorsement from Charles Wooley, the RM Williams tragic from 60 Minutes: ‘His stories remind us that the intrinsic Australian values – mateship, perseverance, self-reliance, loyalty, community spirit and ironic humour – were all hammered out on the harsh anvil of the bush.’

Ah yes, that Aussie spirit. Two spots down is a man by the name of Dirty Pierre, well known for his ‘classic Aussie humour’ T-shirts at rodeos and festivals throughout inland Australia. His biggest seller: ‘Wipe Ya Eyes Princess and Harden the Fuck Up.’

It’s 10.30 am, too early for the Graveyard Train to make an appearance. I grab a scalding coffee at a corner café. Behind me a woman in a waistcoat and Akubra starts up: ‘I’ve been around Australia, and the kangaroo still bounds…’

I duck into the town hall to catch The Bushwackers. I was thirteen the last time I saw them, when they visited my country high school. It’s a bit early for a bush dance, now as well as then, but that doesn’t stop the punters. There are hundreds heel-and-toeing. Dobe Newton, the singer, is wearing a paint-spattered yellow suit. He offers to raffle off his trademark lagerphone – a stick rattling with stubby tops – for flood relief. Newton co-wrote an Australian anthem, the one that goes, ‘We are one, we are many…I am, You are, We are Australian’, but he’s more true bull than true blue. He has a bolshie irreverence that’s lacking among his fellow Tamworth patriots. He intentionally dresses badly, for one thing.

Emerging from the hall into the full glare of Tamworth, I run into Finch and Crawley. They’re scouting Peel Street for a busking spot, but there aren’t many left. The band hasn’t slept much. We’d rolled into town around 2 am, with only police and drunks left on the streets.

The Train once thought it would never return to Tamworth. ‘It’s very much a love-hate relationship,’ says Finch. ‘I guess it’s mutual. Some people love us, and we make good money on CD sales. But some people don’t like us at all.’ Last year, following complaints from other buskers, a council officer came to check their decibel output and moved them on.

Crawley selects a spot, in front of a novelty-wear shop that specialises in Elvis gear. It’s tight, but it will do. There’s a young bagpiper in place on the kerb. ‘He’ll
have to go,’ Finch says. As they set up, the piper steals several glances at the band, their amps, the hammer and chains. He goes.

Across the mall is a cover band, four men dressed as ringers. They can’t play very well. Perhaps they are ringers. To the Train’s right is a pot-bellied giant who calls himself Poppie O’Whooosely and whose guitar is painted, faux Aboriginal-style, like a Qantas hostie’s uniform. To their left is a rotating trio of bush balladeers. Their CDs are displayed on a card table, and they have a merch girl: Marilyn, from Queensland, who’s in her sixties. She watches me browse. ‘When you buy an album like this, all you get is pure bush ballads.’

I ask if they’re originals. ‘Oh no,’ says Marilyn. ‘It’s all dinki-di. Alan, Len and Jeanne do the Slim Dusty stuff.’

I pick up a CD with an Australian flag on it. It’s titled Don’t Let Them Murder Tamworth and claims to be inspired by ‘a ground swell of fair dinkum Australian traditional country music followers’. Marilyn tells me the song is up for Country Ballad of the Year. She gestures at the Train. ‘That lot there is what the song’s about. The rockers. Alan and these fellas are getting outnumbered now by these guys that play the big thumping music. And that’s not what we come here for; that’s not country, it’s not Australian.

‘Traditional country is pick-and-strum, pick-and-strum style. That’s what Slim did. It’s not this’ – she flails her hand up and down.

THE GRAVEYARD TRAIN are joined by Cherrywood, Cash Savage and Eaten By Dogs. Busking is intense and the plan is to rotate. Cherrywood’s double-bass player is an Irish stoner called Rob. He’s staring open-mouthed at a festivalgoer’s neck tattoo of the Southern Cross above the words ‘Aussie Mayhem’. ‘This place makes me feel very conflicted,’ he says. ‘It’s awesome, but I’m not sure it’s for the right reasons.’

The miscreant male choir that is the Graveyard Train roars into being, hammering, chanting and whooping, with Crawley’s plinking banjo lending an especially delinquent edge. People stop; a crowd gathers. Beau Skowron struts and thrusts himself at passers-by, pouting and flicking his tongue like a wino impersonating Mick Jagger. Not everyone’s amused, but Skowron knows when to back off.

After a half dozen songs of hell-raising, it’s Cherrywood’s turn. On drums, mandolin, double bass and guitar, they’re tight and fast – perhaps too fast for this crowd, which quickly dissipates. As if scripted, a man in a singlet ambles past with a mate and shouts something barely audible.

‘What?’ Tim Durkin screams into his mike. The rest of his band plays furiously, nervously, on.
'That’s not country!' repeats the lout, raising his middle finger.

Durkin throws down his guitar, bounds across and gets right in the man’s face, arms down, fists clenched, veins popping. The man raises his right fist and stands there, nose-to-nose, unflinching.

I feel weak with the realisation we’re expected to jump in once Durkin goes down. Fortunately, perhaps seeing numbers are not on his side, the man’s arm comes slowly down. He threatens to return with his mates. As he swaggers off, I notice the Southern Cross tattooed on his shoulder. Durkin plays two more songs, but keeps glancing down the street. ‘I’m packing,’ he admits. Meanwhile the balladeer next door goes on, and on, and on. Pick, strum, pick, strum, pick, strum.

ANYWHERE ELSE, ‘THAT’S not country!’ might be a compliment. But in Tamworth, and elsewhere where country music fills a cultural void, the accusation cuts deeper: ‘It’s un-Australian!’ The rockers are not merely impostors: they are invaders. Inland people cling to Australian country because it celebrates and cements their place in this land in a way that history and climate do not. To knock country is to knock the sentimental notion of Australia, the bush-poetry version, the true-blue green-and-gold red-blooded orange-sunsetted rose-tinted version presented every Sunday morning on Macca’s Australia All Over, like the proverbial technicolour yawn. And that’s just not on.

It is an enduring paradox that the people who claim to love this country most are those who think it’s gone to seed. But that’s the thing about patriots: they’re forever on the defensive, because in their hearts they’re less secure than the rest of us. Under siege from floods, droughts, native title, immigrants, Canberra, globalisation and now metropolitan rock music, to them Tamworth is a bastion of Australiana, a place where the bush stereotype can reign without fear of dissent. Mockers and rockers don’t belong here; they should stay down south, in un-Australia.

Yet an outsider can’t help being curious. As far as I’ve seen, the Aussie values spouted ad nauseum are pretty much global values, other than that male friendship tends not to be valued above other forms in countries such as the one of my birth. More to the point, what is Australian about taking yourself so seriously? Isn’t this conceivably un-Australian? How about over-Australian? Maybe it’s just American. After all, much of so-called Australian country music is overtly American in its style, sentiments and even, in many cases, accents.

For enlightenment I seek out Mrs Dusty, better known as Joy McKean, the woman behind Slim Dusty’s extraordinary hundred-album career. Arriving at her suite at Tamworth’s grandest motel, the Powerhouse, I’m taken aside by her friend Max Ellis, who is keen to have a word. Ellis is now eighty and ran the festival in earlier years, and he fears it is losing its way. He’s especially upset with organisers’
recent attempts to broaden the festival’s appeal to younger generations, an issue that flared last year when pop idol Guy Sebastian was invited to perform.

‘Eighty per cent of the crowd here is thirty-five plus,’ says Ellis. ‘No eighteen-year-old would want to come to Tamworth if they can go to Byron [for its Easter Blues and Roots Festival]. People grow into country music, and we need to recognise our core audience is older.’

The way Ellis defines country music, it’s a bit like identifying yourself as Indigenous: you’ve got to regard yourself as country, others have to accept you as country and you’ve got to have a bit of country in you. Crucially, the songs should also have a narrative element. ‘No peppy, crappy love songs,’ says Ellis. ‘And patriotism, that’s got to be there. I say patriotism, not chauvinism. Slim remains the standard-bearer. He was an immensely unifying element in country music, and his departure has left a vacuum at the top. People look to Joy to fill that role now. Thankfully she takes that responsibility. We call her the matriarch.’

McKean appears and waves Ellis away. ‘Max is a firebrand,’ she says slyly. ‘People say Slim would turn over in his grave to see what comes here in the name of country now, but I’m pretty sure he’d continue to support this festival if he were still here. The media attention this festival gets has always attracted what we call the bandwagon-hoppers. In the past it didn’t ruffle the surface too much. Some of these acts have a genuine respect for country, and come here in part to pay their respects. I love country rock, for instance. That’s been a great influence.’

It’s country pop she abhors. ‘All that soft contemporary stuff coming out of Nashville is just mush. Australian country is starting to go that way. Some of our major artists are writing songs to a template, with a marketing plan, to win awards.’

I ask McKean for her take on country. ‘Country is not about putting a pedal steel or a fiddle in it. It’s not all about dying dogs and cheating women. It’s not all sooky. It’s like what Louis Armstrong said about jazz, “If you can’t feel it, you just don’t know it.” The writer has to know the life they’re writing about. That’s what Slim and I did; we were always travelling and we wrote about what we saw and heard and felt. Australian country music has a rawness and an earthiness.’

A dustiness?

She smiles. ‘It’s got grit. It’s got story. And it’s got heart.’

McKean and Ellis are off to a concert by Sara Storer at the Tamworth Regional Entertainment Centre, and invite me along. Storer is a darling of Australian country music. She has lived the life, as McKean puts it, having grown up in the bush and taught at remote Aboriginal schools. She’s not your classic country-music beauty, adds Ellis, by which he must mean she’s not blond, for she is quite radiant. She is also heavily pregnant and has her brother co-starring on stage. Apparently it goes with the genre, this display of family. Mini-dynasties rule: the Kernaghans, the
McClymonts, the Chambers and, of course, the Dusty family, with their daughter Anne Kirkpatrick.

Storer is a natural storyteller with a warm, clear voice and a broad Australian accent. Her brother, unfortunately, just has the accent. His contributions aside, most songs are gently, genuinely affecting. At one stage, during a song about a man she knew as Buffalo Bill, I catch myself with a lump in my throat. I’m not alone; glancing about, I see people dabbing at their eyes. And suddenly, finally, I think I get country. The audience adores Sara Storer, but not as in other genres. Not as a star. They feel a warmth for her as one of their own, a warmth that goes beyond love, to pride. They love her as a daughter of this land. Of their land.

Backstage after the gig, Joy hears I’m flying out the next morning for a citizenship test.

She looks shocked.

‘How long have you been here?’ she asks.

Thirty-two years.

‘Oh, you lazy creature!’

BACK IN PEEL Street, I find the Melbourne gang at the pub. They’re done busking. The Graveyard Train have been offered a midnight gig at a speakeasy called Jake’s Place. Cherrywood, meanwhile, were offered $25 to leave town. ‘We thought about it,’ says Durkin, who is wearing a Bundaberg Rum flag as a cape.

Beau Skowron is in polite conversation with a bull rider from Texas, Queensland. The rodeo man is trying to explain where it is. Skowron looks blank. ‘You know, I’m from Melbourne. I don’t get out of the city much. Hell, I don’t get out of my suburb much.’

The bull rider draws his attention to a posse of sponsorship girls. As well as Bundy girls handing out flags, there are Jim Beam girls, VB girls, Carlton Natural girls, Peter Jackson girls, Tooheys New girls and even Iced Coffee Flavoured Milk girls doing the rounds. The bull rider solemnly imparts that the XXXX girls didn’t make it this year, because of the Queensland floods. ‘A tragedy,’ he says. ‘They’re always the pick of ‘em.’

He perks up when he finds out the boys are in a band. ‘No shit! What do you play? Country or pop? Pop’s killing country!’

A man in a Graveyard Train T-shirt introduces himself. He says he bought the shirt for the gun-and-bones motif. ‘I don’t know if it’s country what you fellas play, but it’s fucking good though.’

Skowron looks up in mock shock. ‘But if we’re not country, then what are we? We’re not blues, we’re not rock.’
'Youse are a concept band,' replies the fan.

'What country band isn’t?' asks Skowron. 'The hats, the boots, the buckles, the tassels – everyone’s playing dress-ups.'

Six hours and countless beers later, we blunder off in search of Jake’s Place, a second-floor photo studio cum bachelor pad, done up saloon-style, up a discreet set of steps. There are cowhides on the floor, vinyl records on the ceiling and Australian flags on the wall. The women are invited to sit on stools made out of saddles. Our host, Jake, has an enormous moustache. He shows me his book, which is titled *Shot by Jake* and has Slim Dusty on the cover.

The party is struggling for noise and vigour. A duo calling itself the Immigrant Union and featuring the drummer from the Dandy Warhols gets up to play, but the Dandy seems too spaced out to do his thing, or even to figure out what that thing might be. The Graveyard Train take their place, squeezing in the members of Cherrywood to make a ten-piece.

What follows, most raucously, is as fine a testament to Aussie values as Tamworth is ever likely to see. Mateship, resilience, bravery in the face of adversity, irreverence, the banjo – it’s all there. Only thing is, hardly anyone sees it.

Leaning on the bar next to me is Finch’s friend, Eaten By Dogs, also known as Chris Lichti. He’s a man of few words who works out considerably on his body and, it turns out, on his mind. ‘You know, I came here last year with these guys, and I left hating it, vowing never to return. I blamed Tamworth for my bad time. For not understanding my music. But it wasn’t this town’s fault, you know. What the crowd here wants is what country music is.’

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Race fear, dangerous denial

Japan and the great deception in Australian history

Greg Lockhart

For Bruce Pollard, Greg Dodds and Howard Dick

‘I still want to talk about Australia as a whole, as a nation-state…’

– John Hirst, Looking for Australia (Black Inc., 2010)

ONE of the founding myths of Australia protects a great deception – one that centres on a secret undertaking by Australian ministers to prepare an expeditionary force for military service outside the country. The myth is that the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was created in six weeks after the outbreak of war in August 1914. The reality is that the development of that force had been going on since June 1911, when a secret undertaking was made at the War Office in London. That arrangement did not come out of the blue: it was in fact the culmination of a brilliant imperial deception going back to at least 1909, when the formation of a post-federation national guard was used as a Trojan Horse to mask an imperial expeditionary agenda and subvert the independent defence policy of the new nation.

From the Maori Wars (1860s) to Sudan (1885), the Boer War (1899–1902) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900), Australians had been involved in military expeditions usually initiated by jingoistic groups. In London in 1911, the expeditionary strategy was secretly established as state policy – a policy that only became public knowledge eighty years later and is still not widely known. In the process an undemocratic precedent was set for political behaviour, in which Australian forces have been routinely committed to war by a handful of closeted ministers. For some years before 1911, British officials helped to establish the precedent by manipulating
the anxieties of Australian ministers. Contrary to their own policy, the British encouraged the Australi ans to believe that Japan was a threat to the new country, and that expeditionary support for Britain in a prospective war in Europe would best lock the Empire into the defence of Australia in the Pacific. The expeditionary decision taken in London by Australian political leaders was then protected by a political cover-up, because there was widespread nationalist opposition to imperial ventures. Many Australians also felt the army should remain home to defend the nation against the perceived threat from the north.

For those reasons, the government misled the public about the reasons for the military preparations that followed the secret decision. To cover expeditionary force preparations between 1911 and 1914, officials manipulated public anxiety about Japan at the same time as they calculated that, when Britain found itself involved in a major war, they would be able to dispatch the expeditionary contingent on a wave of popular sentiment. That happened and, in 1915, the AIF landed at Gallipoli.

As a result of the far-reaching political, social and cultural impact of the war that followed the landing, the imperial political and military deception of 1911–14 changed the course of Australian history. This has still not been acknowledged.

A compliant historiography accommodates the deception to this day. Sometimes cynical, usually naive, the Anzac expeditionary narrative is sentimental in its acceptance of the imperial romance that the AIF was formed in six weeks. When cogent research documenting the secret expeditionary decision and preparations of 1911–14 was first presented to the history profession, in 1992, it was dismissed with feigned detachment. The research had challenged an old Australian imperial myth: one that protects the deception and, more insidiously, the racial basis of the perceived threat, which sprang from colonial insecurities about Asia. Today, that myth still supports the imperial mindset and expeditionary culture of the nominally independent nation.

THERE IS A new urgency to understand this: the geopolitics of the region is changing in ways that require Australians to reconsider how the foundational myths of the nation relate it to Asian neighbours. The most important change is that China’s rapid economic growth in recent decades has led to an extension of its strategic interests and assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific region. These trends may slow in the future.¹ But whatever happens, Chinese power has already modified in some measure US primacy in the Western Pacific.² The region is, according to the Lowy Institute’s executive director, Michael Wesley, ‘becoming more complex and unpredictable’ by the month.³

For Australia’s part, this means the context for its history has been changing. The old imperial understanding that British and, since 1942, American power will
guarantee Australia’s security against Asian powers, including China, needs rethinking. This is especially so when many people also assume that China’s current mineral purchases will continue to guarantee our economic prosperity. Complacency is no doubt a factor, but the historic fear of China and other countries to the north is also part of this irrational compact.

John Fitzgerald’s important book Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia (Scribe, 2007) explains how the universal values of liberté, égalité and fraternité lost a great deal when translated at the beginning of the twentieth century into the Australian idiom as freedom, a fair go and mateship. He reveals the fallacy of the foundational premise of white Australian nationalism: that those ‘universal values are the special preserve of a particular people and that they remain culturally alien to other kinds of people’. In 1901, coloured people were excluded. This closed, racial ordering of the nation was consistent with a colonial desire to federate within the protective ambit of the British Empire.

By then, fear of the rising military power of Japan had begun to replace earlier anxieties about being ‘swamped’ by Chinese immigrants. After the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance of 1902 signalled the decline of British naval power in the Pacific, the sense of a Japanese military threat increasingly shaped official perceptions. After the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, those perceptions had an effect on the emerging Australian state. Most notably, the contradictions of liberal democracy involved a great deception that undermined the democratic interests of white Australians themselves.

ACCORDING TO CEW Bean, in The Official History of Australia’s Involvement in the War of 1914–1918 (twelve volumes, 1921–1942), in August 1914 the war fell out of a ‘clear blue sky’ on the British people. The Australian government ‘had prepared no set scheme for common action with Great Britain in case of war’. It was only the ‘high moral enthusiasm’ of the Allies that compensated for their ‘unpreparedness’ – and saw the 20,000-man AIF raised and ready to send to war in six weeks.

No one builds an army of that size and quality from nothing in that time. Yet the durability of this myth is as remarkable as the story itself: generations of Australian historians have let it pass. Then, in 1992, John Mordike published An Army for a Nation: A History of Australian Military Developments, 1880–1914 (Allen & Unwin) and showed that expeditionary preparations had been underway since 1911. That groundbreaking book described the central role that an unwarranted fear of Japan played in those preparations – an analysis developed a decade later in Mordike’s second book, 'We should do this thing quietly': Japan and the Great Deception in Australian Defence Policy 1911–1914.
The first volume of Bean’s *Official History* (1921) did not discuss the Japanese threat any more than the preparations for war. Both themes disappeared from Australian historiography until DCS Sissons recalled the sense of Japanese menace in his 1956 University of Melbourne masters thesis, ‘Attitudes to Japan and Defence, 1890–1923’. Two decades later, Neville Meaney, at the University of Sydney, drew on Sissons’ thesis to build the perception of Japanese threat into *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14* (Sydney University Press, 1976), the first volume of his history of Australia’s defence and foreign policy. Meaney’s emphasis on geography influenced Mordike, a historian in the Department of Defence, who also assumed the nation’s primary impulse to defend itself in its Pacific setting: ‘Australians did make decisions based on their geography rather than their history.’

On this basis, Mordike’s thesis offered a new approach. Historians since Bean had argued that the formation of the AIF in six weeks was a function of an irressible ‘coalescence’ of imperial and national interests. Mordike argued that Australian defence policy had been the subject of a ‘contest’ between those interests for over a decade before August 1914. In his view, the ascendancy of imperial over national policy only occurred after a long bureaucratic struggle that involved protracted manipulations by British officials of Australian anxieties about the threat of Japan. Defence Minister Senator George Pearce then clinched the imperial ascendency when he made the secret expeditionary agreement at the 1911 Imperial Conference in London. Prime Minister Andrew Fisher also attended and there can be no serious doubt Pearce had discussed the expeditionary arrangements with him. Both were then instrumental in determining the nature of Australia’s entry into the war.

In his culminating work, *Australia and World Crisis 1914–1923* (Sydney University Press, 2009), Meaney finally established the Australian perception of a long-term Japanese threat that went back to at least the Russo-Japanese War, and led to a ‘cold war’ between Australia and Japan in the Pacific. This drove Australia’s expeditionary involvement in the ‘hot war’ in Europe between 1914 and 1918. In other words, support for British global supremacy was thought to be the best means of ensuring the defence of white Australia against Japan in the Pacific. While Mordike would have little difficulty with Meaney’s statement of strategy, their theses are at odds. Meaney does not deal either with Mordike’s point about British manipulations of Australian fears of Japan, or with his key 1992 discovery of the secret expeditionary undertaking and preparations of 1911–14.

In 2009, Meaney still built *Australia and World Crisis* around a Bean-like ‘British race nationalism’. Like other historians for almost a century, he continued to assume that a coalescence of imperial and national interests created the AIF in August 1914. But there is no way this could have happened. The expeditionary strategy he describes came into play, but his account lacks a pivot. He is unable to explain how
the army that mounted the expedition was created. This is an issue of fundamental importance, because it is inseparable from the nature of the nation – and the imperial deceit in which the expeditionary army was created can no longer be denied.

Pearce’s offer of an expeditionary force was considered so sensitive that the record of the conversations detailing it has a history of its own. Imperial authorities covered up those crucial conversations, which occurred at a meeting of the Committee of the Imperial Conference held in the War Office on 17 June 1911. The War Office withheld the record of the conversations from inclusion in the ‘Minutes of Proceedings of the Imperial Conference, 1911’. There was no public knowledge of the conversations until Mordike discovered the record of them, during research into War Office planning for World War I, and published his findings in 1992.

Meanwhile, just four months before the outbreak of war in 1914, the Imperial Inspector General of Overseas Forces, General Sir Ian Hamilton, visited Australia to inspect military developments. In a letter of 14 April to the British Prime Minister, HH Asquith, Hamilton explained: ‘I had fully meant when I came out here to urge upon the Commonwealth the importance of having some small section of the army earmarked, in peace, for expeditionary Imperial service. But I see now that I would defeat my own object...were I to touch that string. The whole vital force of the country, i.e. the rank and file of its people, are standing firm together against any such proposition. Play the tune of an Australian army for Australia, and they dance to any extent. Not otherwise. Australia – not Empire – is then the string we must harp on. That is to say, we must encourage them to do what they will do willingly and lavishly, namely pay up for safeguarding a White Australia from the cursed Jap. Then, when the time comes, and when we are fighting for our lives in India or elsewhere, I for one am confident that the whole military force of Australia will be freely at our disposal.’

DECEPTIONS ARE PART of politics. What makes this one special is its continuing centrality in Australian history. Twenty thousand volunteers were enlisted in six weeks beginning in early August 1914. But, all too easily dazzled by these enlistments, generations of historians have failed to see that, without extensive prior planning, organisation and training, the AIF could not possibly have been formed in that time and could not have been constituted as it was for the Gallipoli landing.

CEW Bean claimed that, at Gallipoli, ‘consciousness of Australian nationhood was born.’ Yet his account of the AIF never imagines the nation outside the Empire. From the perspective of the independent nation, Gallipoli was, in Mordike’s words, where ‘Australia was committed unreservedly to imperial defence strategies.’ In Bean’s *Official History* the origin myth of the AIF being formed in six weeks is one of these.
To bring that myth into action, let us then see how it springs from irrational race fears that Bean built into his foundation narrative of the nation. In fact, a string of inconsistencies appear in the text that revolve around race and show how a contradiction lies at the heart of that narrative. On the one hand, local geography and imperial conquest underpin the sense of racial threat. On the other hand, that racial construction has to be disavowed because it has virtually no strategic foundation – and so presents in Bean’s narrative as a wandering silence.

Early in the Introduction, Bean weighs two reasons why Australia and its allies became involved in the war: ‘not only because of the range of its political and economic effects, but because it partook of the nature of a crusade…Not merely was their independence threatened or invaded; a new creed was being thrust on the world, a creed utterly repugnant to the humanity of Christian civilisation.’

Even though the first reason includes the prospect of invasion, the narrative plays it down – not merely was their independence threatened – in favour of the second, less tangible reason, which it plays up: the ‘crusade’ against the repugnant German ‘creed’. Throughout the Introduction and first chapter, ‘Australia’s Position at the Outbreak’, Bean juggles these disparate motives in an attempt to get around the great problem he has explaining an imperial venture that bore little relation to the Australian sense of what was strategically significant: Japan. He cannot mention the official race fear of Japan in 1911–14, because the expeditionary undertaking was secret. Even more, in 1914–18 the Japanese had not attacked but, as a photo in the Official History shows, deployed the battle cruiser Ibuki to escort the first AIF convoy across the Indian Ocean to Egypt. The Japanese supported Australasian convoys across the Indian Ocean, and defensively patrolled in the Pacific and around the Australian coast.

Yet, to compensate for that enforced silence, Bean can still play on race by making British character a central element in his account of why Australians went to war. He emphasises that Australians retained British qualities – a love of liberty, individualism and enterprise. Protected by Britain, colonial freedoms then created in Australians ‘a peculiar independence of character’ and ‘unfettered initiative’. Indeed, ‘only in one point was the Australian people palpably united, in a determination to keep its continent a white man’s land.’ Yet this assertion hardly solved his problem. He still cannot mention the perceived threat of Japan, and so still has no explanation for why Australians had to fight Germans.

Bean continues fruitlessly his alternating emphases on invasion and crusader hatred of Germany. At one point, for instance, the crusader hatred he had magnified in the Introduction is reduced to a supporting role so that he can identify Australia’s strategic interests with Britain’s: the ‘third reason’ for entry into the war was ‘the defence of Australia’, for ‘if Britain fell, Australia too must fall…if the Navy of the British Empire succumbed, Australia had no defence.’ But still, after numerous
alternations, Bean is unable to name a putative Australian enemy, because he cannot mention Japan. Nor, aside from suggesting vaguely that German cruisers might have bombarded coastal cities, does he attempt to detail a German military threat to the Australian homeland. 17

Therefore, he has to take drastic action. On the last page of Chapter 1 he retreats from the ‘third’ defence of Australia’s reason for war and returns once more to his initial emphasis on crusader hatred of German barbarism. Australians, he proclaims, ‘hated German principles, to which they were as completely opposed as white is to black’. 18

The historical significance of this emphatic metaphor is that race fears surely existed but historians have tended to deny them. The reason for this disavowal is not only that such fears involved imperial political manipulation. It is also because of cultural self-deceptions that revolved around particular aspects of Australian colonial history and geography, most notably its proximity to Asia. A pervasive political theme raised in David Day’s Claiming a Continent: A New History of Australia (HarperCollins, 1996), and cultural theme developed in David Walker’s Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939 (UQP, 1999), is that a rampant Asia might ‘Aboriginalise’ white Australians just as white Australians had ‘Aboriginalised’ the Aborigines.

Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, in Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality (MUP, 2008), also refer to people who expressed this view. Yet that work’s global elevation soars high above the local geography and clotted imperial history that plays on Australia’s involvement in the Great War. ‘Settler’ historians have been unable to contemplate those links for a different reason: their primary orientation of Australian history according to the centre-periphery pattern of imperial-colonial relations reduces to secondary importance the regional context for Australian history. Either way, the point is that involvement in the Great War was inseparable from, and an extension of, both the British imperial conquest of the continent and the continent’s geographical proximity to Asia.

NO DOUBT THE vastness of the continent, the smallness of the white population and the existence of ‘teeming millions’ to the north intensified anxiety that ‘Asians’ coveted the country. But still, there was no sign of a Japanese attack on Australia before 1914. And there is no doubt that white Australian race fears were based on what they knew had happened to Aboriginal Australia and projected irrationally onto Asia, particularly Japan.

I call this projection the ‘Aboriginal-Asia’ link that existed in the minds of many white Australians before 1914. To demonstrate it I could draw on statements by the
long-serving Defence Minister George Pearce. But a 1913 speech Billy Hughes
delivered as Attorney-General, at the laying of the foundation stone for Parliament
House in Canberra, anticipated his role as the country’s chief recruiter during the
war.

The speech raised the defence of white Australia and linked it dramatically to the
destruction of Aborigines, and was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 13
March. Comparing Australia and America, Hughes declared that ‘the Deity’ had
‘fashioned us out…to have our way’. Australia and America were indeed ‘two
nations that have always had their way, for they killed everybody else to get it. I
declare to you that in no other way shall we be able to come to our own except by
preparing to hold that which we now have. (Cheers.) We are here as the visible signs
of a continent. We have a great future before us…The first historic event in the
history of the commonwealth we are engaged in today [is being taken] without the
slightest trace of that race we have banished from the face of the earth. We must not
be too proud lest we too in time disappear. We must take steps to safeguard that
foothold we now have. (Cheers.)’

The speech was well received. The theme of banished races was popular in turn-
of-the-century literature. Even as Hughes spoke, the government was preparing to
allocate a third of the 1913 Commonwealth Budget to defence to keep Australia
white.

CEW Bean clearly shared Hughes’s sense of the struggle for racial survival, so
whatever the international sensitivities it would have looked very odd at home if the
*Official History* had admitted that unwarranted fears of Japan had launched
Australia into a war that killed 60,000 men, shattered the lives of many tens of
thousands more and destroyed the dreams of the new federation. At the same time,
the Japanese had not only failed to launch the much-anticipated Asian invasion but
acted as a reliable ally.

I agree with Mordike, who believed that Bean’s account of pre-war defence
developments was ‘effectively…a cover-up’ and ‘misleading’. This may never be
proved. But Bean’s *Official History* certainly contradicts its own assertion of
Australian unpreparedness in early August 1914 with sharply conflicting emphases
in other places. In the first volume, for example, he comments: ‘No troops ever went
to the front more generously equipped than the first Australian contingent.’

Senator Pearce appointed Bean as official historian and in 1921, when the first
volume was published, was still the defence minister. If Bean had revealed the
undertaking, the government might have fallen, or worse. Bean kept Pearce’s secret
and, wittingly or unwittingly, the deception ran on into the *Official History*.

In any case, historians were always going to have difficulties using fear of Japan
as an explanation for why Australians had fought Turks and Germans. Rushing in
to fill the political and cultural breach, babble about the AIF’s instant readiness was bound to submerge a sense of the way Japan had so inadvertently driven Australian strategic history in the first decades of the twentieth century – and would continue to do so for several more.

And so we come to the sentimental nature of most accounts of the AIF’s expeditionary involvement in the war. Suffused with Empire feeling, the myth of instant readiness was conflated with that of the unusual resoluteness and high moral enthusiasm of British-Australian colonial character. Twice in the Official History Bean noted how the Leader of the Opposition, Andrew Fisher, a man of ‘translucent honesty’, had pledged at Colac on 31 July 1914 to defend the mother country ‘to our last man and our last shilling’. That emotional phrase has since become perennial shorthand for British patriotism in Australian historiography.

Grant Mansfield recently listed six general studies of Australia published between 1944 and 2004 that recycle Fisher’s phrase. The list could be much extended. Mansfield’s point is that this literature standardises the impression of unbounded war enthusiasm in 1914. The complexity of the social response to the event is obscured. My point is that, by signifying total Australian identification with British interests, habitual use of Fisher’s phrase fulfils a related function, collapsing the imperial-national tension in a sentimental narrative of Australian history. Held together by the origin myth of the AIF, a sentimental tale of race superiority protects the imperial enterprise by creating the illusion of coalescence.

Such is the backdrop against which the secret expeditionary undertaking of 1911 remained unchallenged for seventy years after Bean bedded down the deception in the great grief of the imperial postwar nation.

JOHN MORDIKE WROTE his first book, *Army for a Nation*, while he was an army officer and a Defence Department historian. Like me he was a Vietnam veteran who had been struck by the way official Australian war rhetoric had ended in 1975, in the fall of Saigon. The new scepticism in him – and me – produced a strong respect for evidence. I sought an evidentiary explanation for the outcome of the Vietnam War in a PhD on the origins of it. After a background in mathematics, Mordike’s PhD examined the origins of Australian military involvement in the Great War. Because Australia’s involvements in both the Great War and the Vietnam War were products of the same expeditionary culture, our interests now intersect in this essay.

*Army for a Nation* is a product of the discovery Mordike made that his extensive reading in British and Australian primary documents conflicted sharply with the usual Bean-like British-race explanation of our entry into the Great War. *Army for a Nation* is indeed an exceptionally well-documented analysis of Australian military developments before 1914. Its starting point is the assumption that, in both
constitutional and emotional terms, Australia was always going to be at war in 1914 – because Britain was. The kind of participation in the war should then have been up to the Australian parliament.

Yet it is important to recall that in order to avoid this deliberation, the British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain never intended that Australia be autonomous. Mordike’s constitutional discussion quotes an 1897 Colonial Office Memorandum on how the Governor-General ‘may have to act without the advice of his ministers’ (thus foreshadowing the Reserve Powers in the Constitution, according to which the Governor-General dismissed the Whitlam government in 1975). It is also clear that an amendment Chamberlain proposed to the draft Australian Constitution in 1897 revolved around preparing for the British parliament to command Australian forces on imperial service.

Chamberlain did not prevail. In 1901, the Australian constitutional authorities John Quick and Robert Garran were clear that the Governor-General could only exercise the royal prerogative of command of the forces on the advice of the Australian Prime Minister. Australia’s first Attorney-General, Alfred Deakin, also took this view. This was a democratic advance on command of the forces by the British parliament, but it did not mean that the Australian parliament decided on the form of the country’s involvement in the Great War. Chamberlain might well have been reassured that a few Australian ministers, including the Prime Minister, working in secret and subject to imperial influence, did.

In this sense, the secret expeditionary offer was undemocratic but not necessarily unconstitutional. This may mean the Constitution contained an imperial bias that, given the string of commitments to recent wars involving no parliamentary debate, still needs to change. Nevertheless, it makes little historical or constitutional sense to argue that Australia could have avoided involvement in the war of 1914–18. Mordike’s work thus raised a national deficiency in the foundations for Australian war-making: the imperial form of both the decision-making process and of the forces it propelled into the Great War.

His star document is one of central importance to twentieth-century Australian history. Contained in War Office 106/43, it is the record of the military discussions of 1911, which details both the secret expeditionary undertaking and its political cover-up. That record was not originally included in ‘Minutes of Proceedings of the Imperial Conference, 1911’, and so disappeared from public scrutiny until 1988 when, thanks to a burst of brilliant research, Mordike found it in War Office ‘operations’ files. The document must have been put there to hide it. That would also have allowed British officials to hold the secreted document over the Australian government, should they need to produce it.
MORDIKE’S BOOKS REVOLVE around an issue Australian historiography has studiously ignored: the assumption that an army structured for the defence of Australia would have required a different kind of strategic conception and organisation than one designed for expeditions. An army structured for national defence would have had its own command and logistics elements, and been grounded in direct links with the community. An army organised for expeditionary operations would not have required those elements because it was designed to fit into a British imperial divisional formation. It would have been lighter and readily transported on ships. It would have to be organised along the more flexible brigade structure, which the British specifically designed for that imperial purpose. The Kitchener Report on Australian defence of February 1910 embraced the flexible brigade structure. And the issue of whether or not this would be implemented lay at the heart of the ideological struggle for Australian defence policy before 1914.

British strategic thinking from the 1890s had emphasised the need to organise an imperial force comprised of expeditionary components from the dominions. Australian officials had long ignored or rejected imperial overtures to contribute to such a force. After the sudden volte-face in 1911, the implementation of the Kitchener ‘reforms’ neatly covered the expeditionary preparations for three years, though they violated the intention of the Defence Act (1904). Mordike’s account of the independent national ethos of the Act should have alerted us to that imperial violation. Yet the account is still so little known that its three main points must be reprised.

First, the parliament rejected the original 1901 version of the Defence Act, which had been drafted by the imperial-minded commandants of the colonial forces. Their draft originally included clauses about the prospective ‘field force’ being called out in an ‘emergency’. The parliament could not accept this. Among other things, members felt the commandants had constructed the ‘field force’ as an expeditionary one and that the vague term ‘emergency’ could be used to call out the forces to imperial conflicts beyond the Commonwealth. When a former commandant in New South Wales, General Edward Hutton, was appointed General Officer Commanding (GOC) the new forces in 1902, he continued to support the imperial agenda. The contentious clauses of the original draft were rewritten with an independent national agenda in mind before the act finally passed in 1903 and received royal assent in 1904.

Second, the government created the Military Board in 1904 to replace the post of GOC when Hutton’s term expired. Another British imperial officer would have followed him and, after the difficulties the government had had with his schemes, it had wanted the Military Board to limit imperial influence in national military affairs.

Third, an independent defence agenda emerged after the Russo-Japanese War. In 1907, Deakin announced his plan for a ‘National Guard’. As Deakin conceived it, this would have been a force designed solely for national self-defence on the Swiss
model of universal training, rather than one based on the brigade structure for imperial expeditions. *Army for a Nation* then proceeds with detailed analysis of the main stages in the imperial deception and ascendancy leading up to the secret expeditionary undertaking of 1911.

That analysis may be summarised as follows. In January 1909, the War Office achieved its long-standing goal of establishing in Australia the post of Chief of the General Staff and appointing to it one of Hutton’s imperial-minded Australian disciples, William Throsby-Bridges. With the election in June of the fusion government (of three parties, including conservatives led by Deakin), the General Staff had the opportunity to influence defence policy by courting the conservative, imperial-minded Defence Minister Joseph Cook. Cook’s Defence Bill, enacted on 13 December 1909 and proclaimed on 1 January, introduced universal military training. But in a major and unexpected departure from Deakin’s original scheme, there would be no single force organised as a national guard. In Cook’s scheme, Deakin’s old nationalist ideal had become a Trojan Horse for expeditionary developments. The role of the universal training would be to provide a pool of trained soldiers for a voluntary militia organised as a ‘first line field force’ – which was an expeditionary force by another name.

This deception points directly to Pearce’s secret expeditionary undertaking in 1911 and is confirmed by it. Between times, the visit of the imperial superstar Lord Kitchener to conduct a military inspection and report on the defence of Australia was a critical step in the imperial campaign.

In a move engineered by Cook, Kitchener arrived in Australia on 21 December. Amid the press adulation, nationalist journals initially expressed strong misgivings. On 11 February, for example, Melbourne’s *Age* said that the universal military training scheme was being set up to provide ‘a great reserve of Australian soldiers, which can be fitted easily and swiftly into the secret plans of the War Office’, for an ‘Imperial Field Force’ available for ‘offence’ as well as ‘defence’. Deakin, who had been told nothing of an imperial force, and who was widely known for his opposition ‘to preparing for expeditionary adventures outside Australia’ felt the need to respond. He said that he expected Kitchener ‘to deal mainly with Australian forces formed strictly for the purposes of Commonwealth defence’. The nationalist line then changed after Kitchener’s report appeared in mid-February under the title ‘Defence of Australia’. *The Age* felt that ‘no patriotic Liberal will cavil at the scheme’. It was ‘an Australian scheme’. Yet the nationalist press had not properly examined the report.

Kitchener’s opening strategic assessment played on popular fears by raising the possible threat of an ‘invasion’ – most would have assumed from Japan. This was followed by a plan for establishing and training combat units comprised of citizen soldiers. But the plan provided practically no information on the composition of
logistics elements or of operational headquarters at the brigade or divisional levels.35 Despite the invasion scenario, it is clear that, contrary to what the press believed, Kitchener had not planned an independent national force.

The details of his plan dovetailed with Cook’s intentions. This imperial alignment was then institutionalised by the promotions Kitchener arranged: British and Australian military officers with imperial views were promoted to the most powerful military positions at the expense of well-qualified and influential nationalist officers such as James Gordon Legge and John Hoad.36 Fisher’s Labor government came to power in April 1910 and Pearce, who had been awed by Kitchener, became the new defence minister. Deeply impressed by Kitchener’s invasion scenario, Pearce went on to set the agenda for the military discussions at the 1911 Conference. The imperial nature of that agenda was then realised in the final alignment of Cook’s bill and Kitchener’s report with his secret expeditionary undertaking of June 1911. With War Office approval – for its own schemes in Australia – Australian funds could be allocated and the munitions factories necessary to equip an expedition established. Army for a Nation concludes that without the preparations, which dated from 1911, it ‘would not have been possible’ to enlist, equip and organise the expeditionary force in the six weeks from the declaration of war on 4 August 1914.

THE RESPONSE TO Mordike’s arguments was intellectually threadbare, but not lacking in political clout. As if lapsing into cognitive dissonance, his critics were unable even to address his arguments and, in the small field of Australian military history, this made it all too easy to suppress his insights.

With advanced knowledge of Army for a Nation, Gregory Pemberton offered a favourable preview of Mordike’s nationalist line in the Weekend Australian, 18–19 April 1992.37 But little other media commentary was positive. Taking the imperial tack, John Moses and official historian Jeffrey Grey soon had the running. In ‘Getting Australian History Right’ (Quadrant, July–August), Moses considered that Pemberton had said nothing about the ‘Prussian menace’ to Britain and the dominions, and that he was writing for the Labor Party – Bolshevik and Nazi propaganda parallels were indicated. Moses only hoped that when Mordike’s book came out it would reveal that he had done ‘his homework on the general imperial context’ of the Prussian menace.

Grey felt that he had not. He chimed in with a review of Army for a Nation in the Canberra Times on 26 August 1992, the day the book was released. That review set the tone of the anti-Mordike critique: it provided a thin, generally adverse commentary on his thesis and took no notice of the documents on which it was based. In ‘Dubious allegations of imperial “cover up”’, Grey wrote that Mordike’s suggestion about CEW Bean deliberately misleading his readers wanted substantiation. Mordike had also failed completely to provide the ‘necessary
international context’ in which apprehension of the Prussian menace had been alive at the 1911 Conference. ‘Without the right context, it is easy to construct “cover-ups” and conspiracies’, Grey said.

This was a startling critique. It overlooked the authoritative appreciation of the German threat by the Committee for Imperial Defence in 1911: with no more than 2500 German troops sprinkled between German colonies in Africa and China, a German landing in Australia was ‘to the last degree improbable’.38 Grey wrote elsewhere that, when war broke out, the bulk of the German East Asia Squadron ‘was heading across the Pacific and into the Atlantic by way of Cape Horn’ – to join the war in Europe.39 Weakening their position on the Prussian menace to Australia further, Mordike’s critics had also overlooked the driving official Australian fear of Japan – which Neville Meaney’s work establishes. They had even missed Bean’s comment that the greatest determination in Australia before the war was to keep the country white. Germans were white.

By 1993 Moses had produced a pamphlet re-announcing ‘the reality of the German threat’. As an editor of the Australian Journal of Politics and History, he had also published in the first 1994 issue (volume 40, number 1) a number of essays sympathetic to his theme. One, by Craig Wilcox, was especially critical of the way Mordike’s conclusions showed how ‘political correctness’ produces ‘avoidably unbalanced scholarship’. How droll Wilcox seemed to think it was that Mordike’s conclusions were so limited; that all he seemed to be saying was that Australians were ‘tricked’ from defending their continent into defending Britain.40 This was uncalled for: Mordike clearly understood that individual soldiers enlisted for many reasons and that as volunteers there was no reason why they could not fight in Europe.41

Wilcox’s work was soon being touted widely as the antidote for Mordike. The military historian David Horner, who had formerly supported Mordike’s work, now cited Wilcox on the 1911 conference, and referred readers to Mordike ‘for a more conspiratorial view’.42 In volume 6 of The Australian Centenary History of Defence (2001), edited by Joan Beaumont, Carl Bridge claimed that Mordike’s work was a ‘misreading’ of the available evidence as ‘demonstrated by Craig Wilcox’.43 Yet nowhere had Wilcox cited the primary British defence documents that Mordike used. There is no evidence Wilcox had seen them.44 Certainly, his essay did not address Mordike’s arguments about the national backbone of the Defence Act, the Military Board and so on. As for why the undertaking to prepare an expeditionary force was kept secret: Wilcox and his followers were silent about that too.45

MORDIKE RESPONDED BY returning to London to read again the primary documents his critics, one of whom lived in that city, had not sighted. While walking down the Strand to the Liddel Hart Centre for Military Archives one day,
he thought of Wilcox and his essay. ‘Curiously,’ Wilcox had noted, Mordike had made no mention of an agreement the dominions had made in 1911 to ‘use the services of Ian Hamilton, the Inspector-General of Oversea(s) Forces...Hamilton’s little known pre-war work deserves an historian’s scrutiny.’\(^{46}\) It was galling that *Army for a Nation* had not drawn on Hamilton’s private papers – not that Wilcox’s essay had, which made it doubly galling. Yet a day into reading Hamilton’s papers in the Liddel Hart Centre, Mordike suddenly found to his glad amazement that Wilcox’s imperious words had become a parody of themselves. Wilcox could not have known how unerringly he had guided him to crowning evidence of the great deception: Hamilton’s little known pre-war letter to Asquith, to which I drew attention earlier, on the need to deceive Australians about the threat of the cursed Jap’ so as to encourage Australians to support a force ‘for expeditionary Imperial service’\(^{47}\).

Published by the RAAF Aerospace Centre in Canberra, the outcome of Mordike’s second trip to London, *We should do this thing quietly*: *Japan and the Great Deception in Australian Defence Policy* (2002), concludes with a devastating critique of Wilcox’s attack on *Army for a Nation*. The inconsistencies of Wilcox’s followers are also detailed.\(^{48}\) Meanwhile, the earlier parts of the book presented new evidence that filled out and more sharply focused key aspects of *Army for a Nation*, particularly the central role that fear of Japan and British manipulation of it had played in driving Fisher and Pearce to make the secret expeditionary undertaking.

As usual, the analysis was rigorous – so rigorous in a few places that the prose becomes ponderous. Mordike’s use of terms including ‘clandestine imperial scheming’, ‘duplicity’, ‘hidden agenda’ and ‘perpetrate’ are part of the vocabulary of both books. ‘Conspiracy’ is used at least twice. That vocabulary can create a moralising tone. But it is also necessary to describe conspiracies and cover-ups. And we are not talking about a conspiracy theory, as Mordike’s critics suggest – rather, about the fact of a conspiracy that Mordike’s research established, a conspiracy to deceive the Australian people on matters of life and death.

To approach the proof of the conspiracy, we need evidence of the bureaucratic manipulation by imperial officials. This had been going on for at least a decade before 1914, and the threat scenario in Kitchener’s report of 1910 had been a prime example of it. But it will be helpful here to recount what Mordike shows occurred prior to the 1911 Imperial Conference, when certain Admiralty, War Office and Colonial Office papers explicitly dealt with the methods of manipulating Australian anxieties.

One paper reveals that the chief of the Imperial General Staff (IGS), General Nicholson, believed that a Japanese threat to Australia was ‘somewhat remote’. Yet he knew that Australians viewed the possibility of a Japanese invasion ‘with much anxiety’. Reasoning that, if the Australian delegates to the upcoming conference were either too little or too much alarmed by the Japanese threat scenario, they
might continue to keep their troops at home, he advocated successfully a ‘middle course’. In other words, to both frighten and reassure the Australians into making an expeditionary commitment, one combined Admiralty and War Office paper agreed on threat construction that was to be limited, not overwhelming. 49

The Committee of Imperial Defence Paper that recommended implementation of the Kitchener Report at the 1911 Conference was up to the task. The paper commented that the Japanese had ‘an army of over a million men available for overseas service’. Yet, in keeping with Nicholson’s ‘middle course’, the paper also drew on Admiralty sources to reassure readers that, in the face of the Royal Navy, no nation had the maritime power to transport such a force anywhere. 50

Meanwhile, papers and discussions kept Australian security concerns about the Pacific connected with the North Atlantic. References to ‘foreign squadrons’ of ‘great strength’ now stationed within striking distance of Britain made people wonder what the position would be in the Pacific if a war broke out in Europe – with Germany, by 1915, as the discussions implied. What if the Royal Navy might not be able to cover a threat in the Pacific for a short period? Would the Japanese attack? To achieve the expeditionary outcome, British officials were, in Mordike’s words, ‘playing on irrational fear rather than presenting reasoned strategic analysis’. 51

War Office 106/43 then contains the secret record of the War Office discussions of 17 June 1911. According to the record, Senator Pearce seems to have surprised General Nicholson by the suddenness with which he pressed on him the remarkable offer to prepare an expeditionary force. Pearce said: ‘It seemed to us that our local General Staff should know what is in the minds of the Imperial General Staff as regards what use such forces should be put to…’ Furthermore, he called for ‘the preparation of schemes of mobilisation by the local sections of the Imperial General Staff’ in Australia. Collecting himself quickly, Nicholson proceeded to pin Pearce down. He asked if Pearce really meant preparations for an ‘Expeditionary Force’ for ‘expeditionary action’ in addition to the local defence scheme as in Britain. He had. And, by meaning that, Pearce had done something about which Mordike’s critics have remained silent: joined Nicholson in secretly usurping Australian defence policy.

THE ORIGINAL DRAFT of the Defence Act was not passed in 1901 – parliament had opposed the way it incorporated imperial schemes. As a result, salient changes to the draft included the insertion of two new anti-imperial definitions of ‘war’ and ‘service’ before the Act was passed and received royal ascent.

To avoid the original use of the vague term ‘emergency’, which might have encouraged sending troops to conflicts outside the Commonwealth, the Defence Act (1904) defined war in Section 4 as: ‘any invasion or apprehended invasion of, or attack or apprehended attack on, the Commonwealth or any Territory under control
of the Commonwealth by an enemy or armed force.’ This extraordinarily limited
and idealistic meaning of ‘war’ assumed that Australian military forces could only
be used to defend the nation.

Section 49 of the Act stated: ‘members of the Military Forces shall not be required,
unless they voluntarily agree to do so, to serve beyond the limits of the
Commonwealth and those of any Territory under the authority of the
Commonwealth.’52 The clear intention of the legislation was to deny the Australian
government authority to order forces outside Australia. A body of opinion still
approved of imperial service, but overwhelmingly on a voluntary basis. Since
soldiers could not volunteer for a non-existent crisis, this precluded the preparation
or training of volunteers by the government until the crisis arose – as in the Boer
War.53 Or so the members thought.

As Nicholson pinned Pearce down in 1911 ‘to have preparations made for
mobilising’ forces ‘for overseas action’, their agreement did not necessarily
contradict the wording of the Act. Therein, the term ‘preparations’ did not appear.
In 1903–04 it had seemed unnecessary. The record of the War Office discussions in
1911 shows that both Nicholson and Pearce envisaged that, if Britain became
involved in a major war in Europe, volunteers would be forthcoming in the future.
As a result, the act itself did not preclude the preparations Nicholson and Pearce
encouraged the Australian section of the IGS to go on making, in secret, for a
voluntary expeditionary force.

But still, the ambiguity, which the politics of the situation in 1911 revealed in
Section 49, worked both ways. As Nicholson and Pearce ignored the intention of the
Act, they were bound in a knowing deception of the Australian electorate, which
justifies Mordike calling it a ‘conspiracy’.54

Aware of the political sensitivity of a scheme that had been resisted for so long in
Australia and that violated the intention of the Defence Act (1904), Nicholson
immediately shrouded in secrecy Pearce’s offer to prepare to raise an expeditionary
force. After some preamble, he detailed in the War Office discussions the cover-up
from which Australian culture has yet to recover: ‘We should do this thing quietly
without any paper on the subject, because I am sure in some of the dominions it
might be better not to say anything about preparations.’ Pearce concurred: ‘I quite
recognise that.’ 55

Fisher and Pearce considered it unwise in 1911 to take to an election the issue of
support for Britain in any war because they believed that, while many would
support preparations for military involvement with Britain, many, mostly on the
Labor side of politics, would not.
Mordike emphasises Fisher’s concern that ‘the electorate was adjusting with some reluctance to the realities of the universal military training for Australian youth’, which was a result of the Kitchener Report of 1910. Some 92,000 boys between twelve and seventeen would commence compulsory military training in July 1911. Many leaders supported such training, which had existed in various forms since Sydney’s Newington College appointed a drillmaster in 1865. But the compulsion and scale of the 1911 scheme was new, and many Labor voters and some more conservative Australians opposed it. Politically, it was prudent to use the defence of Australia (against a supposed Japanese attack) as a cover for expeditionary preparations until the outbreak of war, when it was expected that a wave of imperial patriotism would overcome any opposition. Meantime, the ‘local’ General Staff in Australia would go on implementing IGS schemes – quietly.

Back in London in June 1911, Nicholson could not have ensured more effectively a second tier to the cover-up. Not only was there no paper on the subject: the record of the War Office discussions stating the need to have no paper on the subject was not included in ‘Minutes of Proceedings of the Imperial Conference, 1911’; Nicholson’s personal proof copy of the record, which is the only record known to exist, remained in his possession until it was eventually filed on the Director of Military Operations file in the War Office – War Office 106/43. Before Mordike found it there, in 1988, there was no public knowledge that the key military discussions that determined Australia’s entry into World War I had even taken place.

UNTIL MORDIKE PUBLISHED in 1992, nothing had disturbed the sentimental consensus about the instant organisation of the AIF for war. Typically, AGL Shaw (1955) told how in August 1914 ‘the first step was to organise an expeditionary force’. To explain ‘The Formation of the AIF’, LL Robson (1970) resorted to the mystical doctrine of the society’s ‘spontaneous’ response to news of war. Chris Coulthard-Clark (1979) recalled the ‘six weeks of feverish activity’; Michael McKernan (1980) stressed the ‘mad rush to do something to help’; the size of the force ‘now had no upper limit’. Geoffrey Serle (1982) reported that in July 1914 ‘the retiring Cook government immediately committed itself to raising 20,000 soldiers’ – but did not say that pre-war figure had an imperial history, which allowed for the formation of a British-size division (18,000) plus a Light Horse Regiment (some 2000).

Not much has changed since 1992. Australian historians still think that armies are organised for war by lining men up on a start line and blowing a whistle. Wilcox (1993) proclaimed his ‘old pride in the prompt offer, recruitment and despatch of the AIF in 1914’. Beaumont (1995) reminded us of Cook’s sterling offer of the imperial
20,000 troops.\textsuperscript{65} And since Meaney’s *Australia and World Crisis 1914–1923* currently leads the field, it must be stressed that it still specifies preparations for a voluntary force ‘had to start from the beginning’ in August 1914.\textsuperscript{66} 

For all that work’s strengths – its formidable accounts of conscription, the origins of intelligence and Asian studies, the influence of Irish Catholics, the Bolshevik Revolution and the labour movement on the wartime government – it is flawed by its uncritical acceptance of the origin myth of the AIF. At one point, Meaney relates an anecdote about what it meant to be an Australian patriot and to place ‘Australia’s interests ahead of imperial sentiment’. We learn about Fisher’s little-quoted comment of 4 August 1914 during an election speech at Wangaratta: ‘My idea of patriotism, was first to provide for our own defence and if there was anything to spare offer it as a tribute to the Mother country.’ This approach to Australia’s pre-war defence was, Meaney stresses, a ‘far cry’ from Fisher’s 31 July Colac comment about supporting Britain to ‘the last man and the last shilling’.\textsuperscript{67} Yet Meaney seems unaware of certain problems his new emphasis raises.

To assess both comments and the discrepancy between them, it would have been helpful if he had not remained silent about the deception of 1911 and Fisher’s complicity in it. From that perspective, Fisher’s statements could be read as political slogans, with the Wangaratta one designed to soothe tensions in the Labor Party over the Colac one.

Meaney also misses the military problems inherent in Fisher’s awkward suggestion that Australia’s best fighting formation was ‘spare’. It is far from clear that sending the country’s best 20,000 troops on an imperial expedition to Egypt would have left much defence capability in Australia in 1914. (That a further 310,000 troops were progressively sent to Turkey, Palestine and France could not have helped either; or that, within a year, two-thirds of the country’s front line 18-pounder field artillery pieces – seventy-six of 116 – were sent overseas.\textsuperscript{68}) It was indeed fortunate that no Japanese invasion materialised.

Meaney’s argument also raises a significant cultural problem about writing Australian history. His desire to clarify Fisher’s patriotic intentions can be linked to Bean’s sentimental emphasis on British-Australian character – Fisher’s ‘translucent honesty’. The same may be said of Meaney’s discussion of the Britishness and British-race patriotism-nationalism of Australia’s war leaders early in *Australia and World Crisis*.

And however one might disagree, I should stress here a major virtue of Meaney’s work: its erudition and transparency give us so much to think about.

In a 2001 essay he realised more than most historians how the sense of having ‘a fragile hold on a vast land set in an Asian sea’ intensified existing colonial insecurities in the nineteenth century. ‘In Australia much more than Britain the
monarch became the symbol of the historic British race or people, rather than the head of a hereditary class system.’ He sensed that Asia inflated atavistic ideas of Australian Britishness – such as in the White Australia policy. Yet, because the aim of the essay was to establish Britishness as the paradigm for Australian identity, it tends to suppress the interdependence of Asia and Australia as categories of historical discourse. Both the essay and *Australia and World Crisis* are largely built, as much Australian historiography is, on an unchanging sense of the world.

Presumably, notions of Britishness do have historical significance: the British derivation of white Australian culture is real. Yet as steeped as the national discourse is in those notions, it does not confront a key point: that what was British is subject to transformation in Australian conditions; and that, therefore, Britishness is itself in significant measure pumped up by the proximity of Australia to Asia and is, in that proximity, the manifestation of a colonial anxiety.

Like Bean, Meaney needed to deny the anxiety both because it springs from political manipulation and because its related race fears are irrationally projected onto Asia. The inflation of Britishness is, in fact, the other side of that denial, which finds confirmation both in silence about Asia and in the assertion of the origin myth of the AIF. From Bean to Meaney, the Anzac and white-settler discourses of British-Australian character thus involve a level of general commentary that sentimentally resists analysis of such matters as Mordike raised: the political conspiracies and cover-ups that complicate history, the technical military matters that shape armies and wars, and the strategic analysis of presumed enemies.

Consider the main mechanism for promoting imperial influence in Australian military affairs before 1914 that, to my knowledge, only Mordike has discussed with insight: the Imperial General Staff. Meaney says that in 1912 the Australian and New Zealand governments agreed that their military staffs ‘might’ draw up plans for an expeditionary force. He also mentions that in 1913 the Australian staff officer Brudenell White presented such a plan to Defence Minister Senator Killen. ‘But,’ implicitly rejecting Mordike’s work, Meaney adds: ‘there is no evidence of the Australian government ever approving the plan. Thus in August 1914 Australia had to start from the beginning to create a military force composed entirely of volunteers…’

The thrust of the second sentence is wrong. It overlooks the myriad requirements – planning, organisation, tactical doctrine, training (of officers, NCOs and specialist arms, including artillery and engineers), supply, equipment and transport, plus medical and legal – without which the raising of such a force would have been impossible. And the first sentence reveals an elementary misunderstanding of both the way Anglo-Australian imperial military relations operated and the way they related to the Australian political process.

Typically, Meaney has overlooked the fundamental fact that the structure of an army designed for national defence and one for imperial expeditions would have
been different. It does not matter whether or not the government approved the plans. They existed. They were implemented. In 1912, Pearce himself ordered the staff officer Brudenell White to work secretly on expeditionary staff planning with General Godley in New Zealand. Also, Mordike offers much detail in both his books that shows how the main staff officers who implemented the plans – White as well as Throsby-Bridges – were disciples of the first imperial GOC, General Hutton, and how they remained in contact with him and with the War Office after he departed in 1904. Meaney was closer to the point in 1976 when he raised the ‘deferential imperialism’ of those officers.72

IN HIS ATTACK on Mordike, Craig Wilcox naively argued that the IGS would merely standardise ‘the citizen forces’ drill, unit structure, arms and equipment’ throughout the Empire, and ‘not infringe dominion autonomy’.73 He did not grasp that drill and unit structure are central to what armies do and that such standardisation was crucial to the creation of an expeditionary force. He did not comprehend that imperial-minded officers accustomed to working in highly authoritarian bureaucratic structures largely went on in the colonies implementing instructions from their superiors at the War Office; that senior Australian politicians generally had little time for or idea of the need to take an interest in the detailed technical development of the army; and that the IGS just went on as its chief, Nicholson, said it should in 1911, doing things quietly.

Nor do the vast majority of other military historians comprehend this. Wilcox can thus lead so many of them while missing the emphasis that the IGS made on advance preparations for ‘modern warfare’. Committee of Imperial Defence, Secret Paper No. 62 C, ‘Principles of Imperial Defence’, 8 July 1910, which became a basis for discussions in the 1911 Imperial Conference, is, for instance, beyond Wilcox’s ken: ‘If organisations have to be improvised, staffs created, transport and equipment provided, and plans matured after the outbreak of war...the value of any assistance given would be greatly lessened, even if not altogether belated.’74 The conception of lead-time had become a central element in military planning before World War I.

From mid-1911 the secret of the expeditionary nature of the preparations was then easily kept by a few ministers – Billy Hughes may have been inducted into it – while those considerable numbers of people who suspected what was going on could be dismissed as cranks. The imperial hijack of Deakin’s national guard based on universal military training had, with breathtaking efficiency, begun its grab for the independent ethos in Australian national defence – and the marginalisation of an independent historiography to this day. Between 1911 and 1914 the Royal Australian Navy was created, and its strength increased from 400 to 3600. The army almost doubled to about 3000 in the permanent forces and 43,000 part-time militia and volunteers. In 1911, Fisher’s government approved a special allocation of
£600,000 for defence in addition to the normal budget allocation. In New South Wales, the small-arms factory at Lithgow was established. In Victoria, the cordite factory at Maribyrnong was developed into a munitions plant, the Commonwealth Government Clothing Factories at Geelong and South Melbourne began production, and a harness and saddlery factory was established at Clifton Hill. As noted, compulsory military training was introduced as a result of the 1910 Kitchener Report. The Royal Military College Duntroon was established in 1911 to train officers. On Kitchener’s recommendation, Hutton’s man, Throsby-Bridges, became the first Commandant of Duntroon and first Commander of the AIF. 75

Meanwhile, Pearce went around doing to Australians what the British had done to him: covering the imperial military agenda by playing on the Japanese menace. Just after he travelled home via Russia and Japan from the 1911 Imperial Conference in London, he spoke at a charitable function in Brunswick. He said that his recent travels had convinced him that Australia’s future would be tied up with the countries to its north. He now realised Australia’s proximity to Asia: Europe was a month away, but it took only eight days to get from Japan to Australia. Finally, he advised his charitable audience that preparations for war were now urgent. 76

Many could not see why. By August 1912, the Labor caucus was considering a motion that ‘the expenditure on defence is excessive and should be reduced next financial year by at least £1 million.’ Pearce explained in his memoirs: ‘During 1912, the Liberal press began a campaign against alleged “Defence extravagance”.’ The May 1913 election, which the Fisher Labor government lost by one seat, was in Pearce’s words ‘largely fought on this issue’. With a staggering 31 per cent of the then-small federal budget devoted to defence, Australia was spending more per capita than any comparable European country and much more than any other dominion. Mordike observed shrewdly that pre-war tensions in Fisher’s government over defence spending foreshadowed the split that finally occurred over the conscription referenda in 1916–17. 77

The Australian General Staff was not dismayed. In August 1913, it reviewed proof copies of secret plans they had compiled under the title ‘General Scheme of Defence’. The scheme stipulated that measures must enable ‘a field army capable of acting as a mobile expeditionary force’. The whole army had to be uniformly organised, trained and equipped so that any subdivision of it ‘may be able to assume the offensive’. The staff considered that the term ‘Expeditionary Force’ could be used instead of ‘Field Army’, because the defence of Australia might require overseas service and it was anticipated that the statutory restrictions on this happening would be lifted. 78

Therefore, it is wrong to say that the AIF was raised in six weeks ‘beginning’ in August 1914. It is also at best misleading to say, as Bean did, that there was ‘no set scheme of common action with Great Britain in case of war’. The IGS implemented
the imperial scheme through the ‘local’ General Staff. Let us also recall Bean’s account of the results of this common action, which he nevertheless denied. As indicated earlier, he had commented on how ‘generously equipped’ the first Australian contingent was. We may now add the comment in volume 11 of The Official History, ‘Australia During the War’, written by Ernest Scott and edited by Bean: ‘unless forethought had been shown in regard to the provision of equipment, it would have been very difficult if not impossible in 1914 to fit out the Australian imperial force as efficiently as was done by means of the work of the Government factories.’

Which were being established by 1911.

Men of the 2nd Infantry Brigade (above) and 4th Light Horse (following page) marching through Melbourne on 25 September 1914, some seven weeks after the outbreak of war on 4 August.

Note their good order and, especially, uniforms, equipment. It would have been impossible to organise all this without the extensive lead-time that went back to July 1911 and that the historical literature ignores. (NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA)
THE STRENGTH OF the imperial force, which landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and clung to the cliffs around Anzac Cove until 20 December, cannot be separated from the extensive expeditionary preparations that had been undertaken in Australia from 1911. Bean touches the historical significance of this point when he indicates that, with no Anzac Corps capable of listing the ‘Landing’ as one of its battle honours, ‘the Australian nation would not have existed in the same sense as to-day.’ That was surely so. What he did not say was that the post-Gallipoli nation and its history were, in the sense that he supported, like the AIF, dependent-imperial as opposed to independent-national constructions.

Australia was at war because Britain was: the issue is about the form of the involvement. The form that was front and centre at the Gallipoli Landing was the imperial expeditionary one based on the portable brigade structure. Without the Gallipoli Landing, led by the Third Infantry Brigade of the First Australian Division, Australia’s military tradition would have been different. There is, moreover, strong evidence that many people right up to and after the outbreak of war would have preferred it that way.

On 30 June 1914, the day news reached Australia of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo two days before, The Age, which had long supported an independent national approach to defence, published ‘The Moloch of Militarism’. The article said that the ‘mutual distrust that had turned
Europe into an armed camp need not inspire Australia to similar insanity’, and that ‘there was no need for the Commonwealth to enter upon hysterical measures for the repulsion of an enemy who does not exist.’ 81 A glance at the *Sydney Morning Herald* for July, August and September also affirms the point that notions of ‘universal enthusiasm’ for war in 1914 are false.

An article of 16 July condemned the militarism of the Labor party for ‘the 22,000 prosecutions of boys who are unwilling conscripts’ for universal military service. 82 (In fact, a total of 34,000 boys between twelve and eighteen were prosecuted for failing to register for military training between 1911 and 1915, of whom 7000 were imprisoned.83) On 3 August 1914, the eve of the declaration of war, another article reported a thousand-strong meeting of Socialist International Workers of the World and trade unionists held in Sydney. One resolution opposed ‘militarism’, expressed ‘solidarity with all other workers in every nation’ and declined ‘to be stampeded into the ranks’. The meeting further announced that a mass rally of ‘a number of combined societies’ would be held the following Sunday. 84

Support for the recruitment of the expeditionary force did shine through many reports. Yet numerous articles in August and September also created a considerable undertow against the high tide of Empire patriotism. News of ‘agitations’ and ‘demonstrations’ relating to ‘war caused unemployment’ – owing to fewer government and building contracts – and concern about rising food prices was a common occurrence. Wild rumours emanating from ‘a friend on Garden Island’ that ships were returning to Sydney Harbour ‘with hundreds of wounded men on board’ 85 also suggested unease. So did editorials warning the government against creating conditions for ‘class war’ and ‘a possible collapse’ of the financial system. 86

I QUOTED EARLIER General Hamilton’s letter of 14 April 1914 to British Prime Minister Asquith explaining that ‘the vital force’ of the Australian people was opposed to raising an expeditionary force, but that they would ‘dance to any extent’ provided one ‘harped’ on the Japanese threat. That letter had a sequel. When Hamilton arrived in New Zealand to inspect military developments in late April, he harped on the Japanese threat. He publicly predicted that the Pacific would become the site of a vast struggle to decide whether Asiatics or Europeans would guide the region’s destinies. This angered the Japanese press, which responded by declaring that all Japan wanted was ‘equal footing with whites’. Japanese Prime Minister Okuma Shigenobu called Hamilton a ‘disturber of the peace’. 87 He was. The latest in a long line of imperial officials, he had knowingly trumpeted a bogus threat to help ensure Australians and New Zealanders would be ready for a great imperial war. Then, when such a war erupted in August, the anticipated wave of Empire sentiment enabled the Australian government to send the near-ready expeditionary army there.
NO HISTORIAN HAS done more than Neville Meaney to recover the long-forgotten Australian fears of Japan that enabled that imperial deception. Yet his work does not acknowledge the imperial deception. Just as it takes the national-imperial coalescence in 1914 for granted, it takes the original fears of the Japanese menace it has rediscovered for granted. Thus, his leading contemporary work again serves us well, because of the unrivalled opportunity it provides to understand the racial nature of the threat construction it has preserved in original denial.

It is immediately apparent that the threat construction in both Search for Security and Australia and World Crisis is based almost exclusively on Australian sources – going back well before CH Kirmess’s novel The Australian Crisis (1909). Meaney constructs the sense of Japanese menace as Australian culture originally did: without significant reference to Japanese records and views of their own strategic circumstances. Such an approach certainly isolates Australian threat perceptions. Yet to appreciate the self-fulfilling racial, as distinct from empirical, bias inherent in such isolation, it will be helpful to cross-reference Meaney’s work against some other that applies a multi-dimensional method: Henry P Frei’s Japan’s Southward Advance and Australia From the Sixteenth Century to World War II (1991). Frei, a Swiss national, lived and worked in Australia in the early 1970s before going to Japan and mastering Japanese as well as Australian sources on relations between the two ‘antipodal island countries in the Western Pacific’. And an issue that highlights the antipodal approaches Frei and Meaney take to Australian constructions of the Japanese menace is the degree of security that the Anglo-Japanese Naval Alliance of 1902 afforded Australia.

Churchill and the Admiralty had argued in 1912 that the maintenance of a Pacific fleet was wasteful and unnecessary when the Alliance could be relied on to protect British interests in the region. According to Frederic Eggleston, an influential Melbourne lawyer whose opinion was a good test of the official view at the time, Churchill was mistaken. Eggleston thought the preponderance of Japanese naval and military power in the Far East was clear, and no one could predict how it might be used in ‘two, ten or twenty years’ time’. Eggleston doubted the Admiralty’s capacity to divert a naval force in time of need to the threatened outpost of the Empire. The sense of threat was unfixed in space and time. It involved a free-floating sense of crisis that was directly related to what Eggleston saw as the ‘racial difficulties’ surrounding white Australia.

Meaney felt in Search for Security that Eggleston’s analysis was ‘much sounder than that offered by Churchill and the admiralty’. Although the Australian government had not collected systematic information on Japan, the situation was ‘self-evident’. Japan, like Germany, was a coming power. The Australian government’s Eggleston-like attitude to Japan was one of ‘precautionary prudence; it was indistinguishable in this respect from that pursued by Britain against Germany’.

130 GriffithREVIEW32
Noting Meaney’s argument, Frei countered that, in dismissing Churchill’s view of the Anglo-Japanese Naval alliance, ‘Eggleston took upon himself the dunce’s cap.’ How could Eggleston have so soundly analysed the situation when his assumptions had been based on nothing more than ‘the sum-total of an Australian knowledge that was preoccupied with its whiteness’? How indeed could anyone talk about ‘precautionary prudence’ in relation to Japanese intentions without making a systematic attempt to understand from Japanese sources what those intentions might be? Driving home the point, Frei noted that a war of 1914–18 tested for four years Eggleston’s assumptions of a threat from Japan to an undefended Australia and found them to be ‘fallacious’.  

I am unaware that Meaney responded to this critique or that Australia and World Crisis mentions Frei’s Japan’s Southward Advance and Australia at all. Yet Frei’s critique may have influenced Meaney’s thinking. Australia and World Crisis stresses that, while racial perceptions of the threat may have caused Australian leaders to ‘exaggerate’ the danger of Japan, ‘the basic rationale was strategic’. Namely, Japan’s pre-eminent and expanding position in East Asia and the Western Pacific, its antipathy to the White Australia policy and its diplomatic efforts to seek every advantage from the European war crisis constituted a real danger.

To apparently ground this argument, Meaney often makes a distinction between the racial and strategic constructions of the threat. He assumes that a racial conception of a threat will involve fears and fantasies that are irrational and self-fulfilling. He realises that a rational strategic construction must be based on evidence. Yet, because his work has not incorporated a reasonable assessment of Japanese perspectives and motives based on Japanese records, it severely limits its capacity to distinguish between the two kinds of threat perception. If you could crosscheck apparently ‘self-evident’ Australian observations of Japanese strategic behaviour against primary evidence of likely Japanese intentions, you might find those observations were not so rational.

For example, early in Australia and World Crisis Meaney suggests that Australian alarm over the Japanese occupation of the Mariana and Caroline Island groups in October and November 1914 was caused by a reasonable perception of a menacing ‘downward thrust of Japan’. Fisher’s calculations were generally ‘geopolitical, not racial’, he says. Yet there is a strong counter-argument. Those island groups were very remote from Australia – as Fisher and Pearce came to realise by mid-1915. No known Japanese strategic preoccupations or plans linked the occupation of the islands with Australia. The occupation occurred within the terms of the Anglo-Japanese naval alliance. If the Americans had occupied the islands, it would be hard to imagine the same sense of Australian alarm. Arguably, official Australian anxiety was not based on evidence of hostile Japanese intentions, but on an unwarranted racial construction of the threat.
Consider further in relation to this Meaney’s account of Billy Hughes’s visit to London in March 1916. According to Meaney, Anglo-Japanese relations themselves had, at the very moment of Hughes’s arrival, reached ‘a delicate stage’. Apparently, ‘British authorities were disturbed that the Germans were offering the Japanese a free hand in China, control of the Dutch East Indies or, more generally, hegemony in East Asia and the Pacific as an inducement to withdraw from the conflict. Despite the fact that the Japanese had informed London of these approaches, the British were worried by Germany’s attempt to divide the Allies.’ Without apparent irony, Meaney quotes an under-secretary at the Foreign Office: ‘There is a good deal of Oriental mystery in the whole of this question which leaves one with an uneasy feeling.’ Meaney seems to be arguing by imperial inference that if the British seemed worried, there must have been good reasons why Hughes was. But were there? Perhaps the British were trying to manipulate Hughes’s anxieties. Without an informed assessment of the Japanese position you can hardly press a balanced view.

Meaney notes Ian Nish’s classic 1972 work, *Alliance in Decline: A Study in Anglo-Japanese Relations, 1908–23*, to support the concerns of Whitehall officials in 1916. But then he reports Nish selectively. He does not see what the very pages he notes from Nish’s work also show: that news of an apparent British attempt to negotiate discreetly a treaty with China suggested to the Japanese ‘extreme bad faith on Britain’s part’. In the end, Nish says that the incident was a storm in a teacup. Britain found Japan’s assistance indispensable, and the Japanese continued amicably to give naval support to Britain (and Australia) in the Indian Ocean without insisting on any price. Yet, in Meaney’s narrative, even the fact that the Japanese themselves had informed the British of the German approaches contributes to the ‘Oriental mystery’.

Later in the volume, Meaney’s account of Hughes’s extreme behaviour at Versailles also sustains a sense of ongoing race threat and crisis. Meaney argues that Hughes’s perverse stand against any concession to the Japanese on the issue of a racial equality clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations undermined his aim of protecting white Australia. As well as causing a serious backlash in Japan against the League and raising the spectre that Japan might ‘create her own Monroe doctrine in the Orient’, we are told, Hughes’s antics brought Australia adversely to the attention of the Japanese when it had hardly been noticed before. That seems true. But we are not told exactly what adverse effects the bad notice had on Australia. Could Meaney be pointing prospectively to 1942? Whether or not he intends that, he clearly specifies that Hughes’s assumptions were still ‘at one’ with most political leaders for a generation in defining ‘White Australia’ and in defending it in the ‘hot war’ in Europe. Meaney has thus read Hughes’s behaviour in 1919 as a regrettable public expression of a reasonable preoccupation in official circles during World War I about the emerging threat of Japan in the Pacific.
But how reasonable is such a reading of that preoccupation? The book concludes with an endorsement of the expeditionary strategy: ‘Australia had to run the risk of leaving itself vulnerable to Japan in order that the British Empire could regain its global pre-eminence – the only acceptable outcome of the war.’ There is the further conclusion that the expeditionary strategy was ‘plausible’. But it is more likely that strategy was implausible, because the threat perception underpinning it was in fact a race-based distortion of a strategic reality.

Meaney’s strategic analysis brings us back to the free-floating, Eggleston-like sense of a forever-coming Japanese menace in the Pacific that would inevitably be fulfilled in the future. This notion of unbounded threat and crisis without spatial or temporal co-ordinates had been around from at least the early 1900s and was race-based for two reasons. First, because racial perceptions of danger revolve around fantasies of a threat to the blood, racists perceive such dangers to be eternal – ‘racism dreams of eternal contamination,’ as Benedict Anderson so elegantly writes. Second, there is no evidence that Japan took any strategic interest in Australia before 1942.

Frei’s multidimensional reading of the evidence strongly supports this point. Japan’s Southward Advance and Australia shows that for at least four decades after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, ‘Australian threat perceptions were quite divorced from the international political realities that faced Japan.’ The Japanese were overwhelmingly engaged in North Asia. Then, from the mid-1930s, when the Japanese Imperial Navy pushed the Foreign Office aside on matters relating to Japan’s southern interests, Australia did become involved indirectly in that navy’s ‘southern finagling’. In 1937, for example, the Australian government was concerned about a large company that some maverick Japanese naval officers wanted to establish in Portuguese Timor.

Strategic and economic penetration of Australia’s northern sphere was implicit in official Japanese government interest in developing Yampi Sound as a source of iron ore. After initially encouraging these overtures, the Australian government rejected them in 1938, because they did not want a Japanese government enterprise establishing itself in the north. The resulting furore was much the same as when the Chinese state-owned company Chinalco tried and failed to develop mineral interests in northern Australia in 2009.

Nevertheless, Frei demonstrates that, even in 1941, ‘the southern continent did not figure on the list of war objectives prepared for the General Staff on the eve of the Pacific War.’ Ably supported from the Australian perspective in a number of works by Peter Stanley and David Stevens, Frei illuminates what happened next. When Australia finally came into Japanese strategic calculations in the first quarter of 1942, the Japanese discussed a possible invasion and decided not to do so: ‘Navy General Staff officers had made plans to invade Australia in order to deny its use as a base for American forces. But chances were slim that such plans could be realised.'
The Japanese navy itself was split over the Australia issue. Combined Fleet was not interested in extending naval battle lines as far south as Australia... [Besides] the Army General Staff firmly and persistently refused to consider any invasion of Australia because it grossly exceeded the limits of national strength and overextended Japan’s defence perimeter. Because the Army had the final say, the consistent refusal of the generals pulled the rug from beneath the Navy General Staff each time the desk-captains tried to broach the subject. 108

This is not an argument that Australians should have refrained from fighting the Pacific War. Nor does it deny the heroism of the Australian forces that stopped the Japanese advance on Port Moresby. In early 1942 Australians could not have known what the Japanese intended and how the war was going to develop.

This is an argument that, if the Japanese had decided not to invade Australia in 1942, they were never going to do so anytime before; and that, as a result, the patently absurd notion of the forever-coming invasion did not provide a plausible foundation for the war leadership’s belief in the necessity of the expeditionary deployment in 1914–18. Nor does that notion of free-floating, eternal crisis provide a plausible foundation for Neville Meaney’s historical concurrence with the original view. Rather, that notion brings us back to the ambiguity in his narrative: despite its own stress on the distinction between racial and strategic threat constructions, it needs that irrational, race-based construction of the Japanese menace to maintain for whatever reason the Anzac expeditionary involvement in World War I.

Nowhere does Australia and World Crisis raise the issues that strongly militated against the implementation of the expeditionary strategy in 1914. British naval power in the Pacific was manifestly in decline by 1902. 109 No Australian expedition of any size could have been decisive in a war between Britain and Germany. (Australia sent five divisions to the Western Front. There, in early 1915, the Allies had 145 divisions and the Germans 100. In early 1918, the Allies had some 173 and the Germans 192.) No matter how appreciative the British could have been for expeditionary assistance, they were never going to save Australia from a Japanese invasion unless it was in their interests and capacities to do so, which history shows it never was: Singapore fell in 1942.

Meaney pushed the limits of Australian historiography by demonstrating the fear of Japan it had denied for so long. He acknowledged the existence of race-based distortions in the strategic outlook, while also asserting the geopolitical reality of the Japanese threat. Then, a race-based argument finally comes out of the tensions in his complex narrative in order to maintain the official threat construction that underpinned Australia’s expeditionary strategy in 1914–18 – because he takes the Great War as given.

Now we have a reasonable explanation of why Australia and World Crisis engages with neither Mordike nor Frei. Meaney’s work remains committed to the senti-
mental narrative of Australian imperial history, while their analyses unsettle that narrative’s central elements. Mordike disturbs the imperial romance by using British-Australian records to reveal the imperial political deception and ascendancy. Frei disturbs the romance by using Japanese-Australian records to show that the threat construction underpinning the expeditionary strategy was untenable.

The fiction of a coming Japanese invasion established the expeditionary strategy in state policy by driving the imperial ascendancy of 1911–14. The ghosts of that ascendancy have haunted both the dependent politics of the state and Anzac history ever since.

In late 1941 and early 1942, the threat of a Japanese invasion fleetingly materialised and then evaporated. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and the Americans needed Australia as a base for their strategic counter-offensive against Japan. Australia’s US alliance was born. But before the invasion panic passed in Australia, that alliance was fused in Australian imperial thought as something more than it was or could ever be: the substitute for eternal British protection in the Pacific.

MANY WRITERS HAVE dealt with a variant of this theme in their accounts of Australia’s post-1945 occupation of Japan and many wars since: the Korean War (1950–51), the Malayan Emergency and Confrontation with Indonesia in Borneo (1950–66), the Vietnam War (1962–72), the Gulf War (1991), Timor (1999–2001), the Iraq War (2002–09) and the war in Afghanistan (2002–). Some idea of the role nightmares about Japan continued to play in the Malayan and Vietnam involvements, and of the imperial direction of all these wars, may be gleaned from my own work.111

On 29 April 1965 the ‘imperial’ Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies justified in parliament the deployment of combat troops to support US forces against the communist insurgency in southern Vietnam. He told parliament that the insurgency ‘must be seen as part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans’. There was no evidence then or now that the Chinese ever planned or were involved in such a move. The idea came from another fictional threat scenario that the then British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Sir John Harding, presented to Menzies during discussions in London in 1955.

This was just after the Viet Minh victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu, and the British, fearing communist subversion in Malaya, wanted Australian military support. Harding thus plied Menzies with an intelligence forecast which indicated that a 250,000-strong Chinese army would move down the Indochinese peninsula, pick up a Vietnamese force and reach Bangkok within about three months. But ‘the real prize’ would be ‘the rubber and tin of Malaya and [the] focus of sea and air...
communications at Singapore’. The power of this invention over Menzies should be clear: it closely replicated Japanese strategic thrusts through Indochina in 1941, leading to the fall of Singapore the year after.

Having been deeply shaken by that imperial disaster in 1942, Menzies responded to Harding’s spectral scenario in 1955 as Harding no doubt anticipated he might: with a commitment to send Australian troops to Malaya. Menzies was so impressed by Harding’s overture, that, again in relation to Vietnam a decade later, he conflated Japanese strategic expansion in 1941–42 with a non-existent ‘thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans’ in 1965.112 The strategic fictions that led Menzies to war in 1955 and 1965 not only recall the bogus Japan-related invasion scenarios that had encouraged Fisher and Pearce to usurp the Defence Act in 1911. They also recall how, somewhat like those ministers in 1911–14, Menzies deceived the parliament. On 29 April 1965, he made the untrue statement that he was in possession of a ‘request’ from the Saigon government to send Australian combat troops to Vietnam.113

The former diplomat Gary Woodard develops this point. Traversing the period from Vietnam to Iraq, he emphasises the growth of the ‘imperial prime ministership’ in Australian war-making. By this he mainly means the ‘dominance of the Prime Minister, [and] decisions made in secret by Ministers obedient to him’ – and their ‘conservative mindset of astonishing durability’.114

 Appropriately, in relation to this imperial mode of political thought and action, recent commentary on Australia’s involvement in Afghanistan by the former Chief of Defence General Peter Gratton115 and others has been accompanied by calls for constitutional change.116 On 27 October 2010, for example, the Greens Senator Scott Ludlum issued a press release saying that only the federal parliament should have the power to declare war. Such a change is surely overdue. Yet that is all the more reason to remember that, to be effective, reform will require transformations of great historical and cultural as well as political import.

The undemocratic exercise of power to make war by a few imperial-minded ministers goes back to 1911–14. Since then, such political behaviour has had a cultural cocoon: the origin myth of the AIF and the sentimental narrative of Anzac. These cultural self-deceptions, spun out of colonial insecurity and hardened in the suffering of 1914–18 and beyond, have also proved durable because nothing has happened to change them. Anzac Day is currently our national day.117

 Schooled to be sceptical by the defeat of Australian policy in Vietnam, the above-mentioned literature on the ongoing imperial basis for our post-1945 wars has certain virtues, including not taking its subjects for granted. This writing has often dealt with the official deceptions entailed in our dependent foreign policy orientations and decisions for war. Yet, with exceptions, including spirited books dealing with the nation’s status as a self-styled and self-imposed US protectorate by
Humphrey McQueen (1991) and Alison Broinowski (2007)\textsuperscript{118} that literature has not often taken the next step and clearly aligned itself with the alternative to the dependent state in which it finds us: the project of the independent nation. The general position thus resonates with a recent book about decolonisation in Australia since the ‘crisis’ of British identity in the 1960s: James Curran and Stuart Ward’s *The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire* (MUP, 2010). In it, post-British imperial Australian identity is constructed as a blank – and so leaves us clinging ambiguously to the absence of the original, dependent British state and identity.

Such ambiguity is understandable when, with few exceptions since the Vietnam era, Anzac historiography itself has continued to take for granted our imperial involvement in the formative event of twentieth-century Australian history: World War I. John Mordike’s work, which lends historical depth to any suggestion of a need for constitutional change, is an obvious exception. Peter Cochrane’s *Simpson and the Donkey: The Making of a Legend* (MUP, 1992) is another. It undermines the imperial saga in an excellent, witty analysis of how tenaciously self-fulfilling that legend was. Set in a different era, David Horner’s *High Command: Australia and Allied Strategy, 1939–1945* (Allen & Unwin, 1992) takes an independent nationalist line. The feminist essays edited by Joy Damousi and Marilyn Lake in *Gender and War: Australians at War in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1995) can also intellectually challenge the imperial romance. In general, however, Anzac literature is currently capped by KS Inglis’s narrative *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (MUP, 1998 and 2008). An ineffable defence of Bean’s imperial nation, the work’s leitmotif is the statue of an ‘attractive…soldier standing forever stiff and pathetic’\textsuperscript{119}

Meanwhile, even authors who are most critical of Anzac mythology have tended to remain trapped in it. Jane Ross’s *The Myth of the Digger: The Australian Soldier in Two World Wars* (Hale & Ironmonger, 1985) is a work of astute sociological criticism. It reasonably assumes that, beginning with Bean, the digger myth became ‘an integral part of our national experience’. But then, the opening sentence of *The Myth of the Digger* recycles the usual origin myth of the AIF: ‘At the outbreak of World War I Australia had little military capability, and only the rudiments of a military tradition.’ Ross has not stepped outside Bean’s imperial nation and critiqued it from the perspective of an independent one.

More pointedly, in *Big-Noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (MUP, 1987) Robin Gerster sees himself as being opposed to Bean’s ‘nationalistic zeal’.\textsuperscript{120} Alistair Thompson’s *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (Oxford, 1994) seems pitted against ‘nationalist Anzac history’.\textsuperscript{121} But it could be argued that such leading critics of what Thompson calls the ‘Anzac faith’ are unclear about what they are in conflict with. They seem unaware that, to deal effectively with Bean’s vision, they need to confront his imperial construction of the nation; that they should be the (independent) nationalists because he is the imperialist.
In relation to this, Joy Damousi in 2007 amplified the soupy ‘paradox of loyalty – at once to nation and Empire’.\textsuperscript{122} She maintains Bean’s sentimental narrative of the coalescence of national and imperial interests. She has joined the long line of writers, including Joan Beaumont, who had offered up again in 1995 ‘our last man and our last shilling’ and claimed: ‘to Australians of 1914 there was no conflict between their dual loyalties.’ But they surely did conflict in defence policy before 1914 and later in the war. Twenty-five pages after Beaumont’s claim of dual loyalty, she even manages to mention ‘the distrust of the British which many Australian soldiers felt during the war’.\textsuperscript{123}

Most recently, Craig Stockings, editor of \textit{Zombie Myths of Australian Military History} (UNSW, 2010), emphasises the need for a ‘rational’, ‘analytical’ approach to military history. Most of the book’s ten essays thus suggest frustration with the sentimental narrative. As far as \textit{Zombie Myths} goes, it is a stimulating read. But still, Stockings has excluded Mordike’s work\textsuperscript{124} and neglected to even mention the origin myth of the AIF.

\textbf{THIS ARGUMENT DOES not impugn the valour of the Anzacs. It makes the point that what even critical Anzac literature has in common both with the conservative legacy of Bean and with the ongoing expeditionary reflexes of the state is silent acceptance of the imperial nation. Grounded in a sentimental, unchanging worldview, that writing continues to overlook Australian geography and British imperial power. It is yet to relate the British conquest of the continent and the continent’s proximity to Asia: the fearful ‘Aboriginal-Asia’ link, which in turn produces the link between white Australia’s Aboriginal and other Great War(s). Clinched by the origin myth of the AIF, the literature’s sentimentality protects the imperial ascendency of 1911–14 in the culture as well as the politics of the nation to this day.}

That is the great deception: Australians still have as little idea of why they were fighting in World War I as of why they are now fighting in Afghanistan. The deception has nurtured the autocratic war-making powers of a few ministers each time they decide to send off an expedition. The expeditionary strategy and related culture has saved us from nothing, caused great grief and could cause more. Given the recent expansion of Chinese strategic space in the Pacific, it makes less sense than it ever did to assume that we can depend eternally on the protection of our big and powerful friends. This does not mean we should abandon old alliances. And threats from the north could develop. But it cannot be helpful for us to have largely lost the sense, since Gallipoli (and so soon after Federation), of the most rational foundation on which we might stand as a community to face the complex challenges of the future: an independent sense of national identity.
Thanks to Ann Curthoys, John Docker, Peter Cochrane, Trevor Fuller, Jennifer Phipps, Rae Jones, Ross Sydney, Danny O’Neill, Eric Aarons, David Walker, and Alison Broinowski. I am also grateful to Julianne Schultz for suggesting I write on the way Australian historians deal with Asia and our discussions on this essay.


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6. *Official History*, vol. 1, pp. xviii, 8 and 11. Bean seems to have received some criticism for some of these words by from his editor, George Robertson. Beside the sentences in the typescript of Chapter 1 about the war falling out of a ‘clear blue sky’ and how ‘a hundred years of peace, sheltered by the British Navy, had rendered the Briton guileless and unsuspecting even whenever there was a threat’, for example, Robertson had written ‘a perfect example of misconceived and misbegotten’. Exactly what he meant by this is unclear. This is especially when the published version is very close to, but not identical with, the wording in the typescript. Angus & Robertson – papers relating to CEW Bean’s *History of World War One, 1919 – 1933*, Mitchell Library (MLMSS7309).
8. ‘We should do this thing quietly’, p. 95. Meaney already had this geographical focus in *The Search for Security in the Pacific 1901–14*, pp. viii–ix and 10.
9. David Day’s *Andrew Fisher: Prime Minister of Australia* (HarperCollins, 2008) lists both of Mordike’s books in the biography. Yet his account of the 1911 Imperial Conference remains silent about the military discussions, thereby missing the political deception and Fisher’s implication in it.
10. Hamilton to Asquith, 14 April 1914, Hamilton 5/1/87, Hamilton Papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London, quoted in Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, p. 90. Mordike’s discovery and publication of the Hamilton letter was a big find for Australian history. Yet Reynolds also quotes from the same letter in Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds with Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi, *What's Wrong With Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History* (2010), p. 64, offers a garbled citation for it in note 27, and does not refer to Mordike’s work.
11. As an act of literary myth-making, that narrative was designed to shore up the insecure sense of Australian colonial identity. In ‘The Anzac Tradition’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, March 1965, p. 28, his supporter KS Inglis noted that both his pre-war journalism on British-Australian character and his war history is ‘factual reporting and imagining’. In *Big-noting: The Heroic Theme in Australian War Writing* (MUP, 1987), Chapter 3, his critic Robin Gerster has discussed the history as one of the ‘books of the tribe’ and emphasised its ‘idealisation’ of the soldier.


Ibid, pp. 18–19.

Ibid, p. 13. Guilliatt and Hohnen, The Wolf, shows how slight the German naval menace turned out to be. Furthermore, if the Australian government really did see a German threat, why didn’t it change the Defence Act and introduce conscription? If it considered the possibility, it would have concluded that the electorate would not have supported such a change, because it did not perceive a German threat either. Additionally, when the British pressured Hughes to introduce conscription in 1916, they indicated that Japan was the threat and failed to refer to Germany. And, of course, the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917 failed.

See also Neville Meaney, Australia and the World: A Documentary History from the 1870s to the 1970s, p. 203.

We should do this thing quietly’, pp. 98–100; Army for a Nation, p. xvii.

Official History, vol. 1, pp. 34–35; see also vol. 11, p. 239.


Mordike, Army for a Nation, pp. xvii–xx. In the Constitution’s words, the Australian colonies were federated ‘under the Crown’.

Ibid, especially pp. 50–51.

Ibid, pp. 72–74. Deals with the precise debates surrounding the two ways of referring to the Governor-General in the constitution. See also p. 22, pp. 30–32, pp. 36–39 and pp. 49–53.

An exception is Stuart Macintyre, A Concise History of Australia, 2009, p. 158, which encompasses differences of opinion over the need for a militia designed for national defence and an expeditionary force designed to serve abroad. However, the secrecy issue is not raised.

Army for a Nation, pp. 219–21.

Ibid, pp. 220–21. There are a number of other circumstantial and procedural points. Deakin himself was tired and not entirely in control of the conservative factions in his government – least of all Cook. Cook introduced the bill on a suspension of standing orders before the opposition had time to examine it and offered no clear explanation of his thinking. He was thus able to see off opposition members as formidable as Fisher and Hughes, who questioned it but did not really know what was going on.

Ibid, p. 226. On 5 January the Sydney Morning Herald had also said the inspection was ‘not so much for Australia’s sake as for the good of the empire’.

Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, p. 35.

12 February 1910.

The report is not exactly dated. However, the first press commentary seems to have been on 19 February.

19 February 1910.

Army for a Nation, pp. 228–29.


Quoted in Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, p. 39.


Mordike, Army for a Nation, p. 247. See also pp. xvii and xx.

See Horner’s testimonial on the dust cover of Mordike’s Army for a Nation and David Horner, The Gunners: A History of Australian Artillery, 1995, p. 62 and n. 32. See also note 45 below.

p. 83. Bridge refers to Wilcox’s For Hearths and Homes, 1998. But Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, pp. 137–38, shows that Bridge misreads Wilcox’s simplistic, ‘tension-free account of Australian preparations for war’.

Wilcox provided no analysis based on the records in which Mordike’s work was steeped. These voluminous records included those of the British Colonial Office and War Office files and correspondence. They included the extensive records of the committees, which were the powerhouses of imperial defence policy: the Colonial Defence Committee, the Overseas Defence Committee and the Committee of Imperial Defence. Ignoring the records of all these Offices and Committees – and the private papers of all the key British officials – Wilcox felt qualified to comment adversely on Mordike’s work on the basis of such authorities as the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911.

Citing Wilcox’s work, which had not cited the primary documents, Horner, The Gunners, p. 62, said Pearce promised to have mobilisation plans ready if an expedition had to be sent to an overseas war, but did not mention the secrecy issue or that Mordike had discovered and discussed the primary documents – which raised the secrecy. Grey may have read War Office 106/43 by 2001. However, Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, pp. 136–37, notes that in The Australian Centenary History of Defence, vol. 1, ‘The Australian Army’ (2001), p. 34, Grey quoted from ‘the very War Office records that my research unearthed some 14 years ago’ to raise the secrecy issue, but did not mention Pearce’s complicity in the secrecy or Mordike’s original discovery and discussion of the War Office records – which first raised the secrecy.

Wilcox, ‘Relinquishing the past’, p. 60.

Story based on an interview Mordike gave me.

pp. 95–139. On Wilcox’s followers see pp. 136–38.

Mordike, ‘We should do this thing quietly’, pp. 47–51.

ibid, pp. 50–52.

ibid, pp. 52 and 56–59.


Mordike, Army for a Nation, pp. 83 and 199.

ibid, p. 241.


Mordike, Army for a Nation, pp. 242–43; Thomas W. Tanner, Compulsory Citizen Soldiers (1980). The term ‘boy conscription’ is used and explained in Gilbert Roper, Labour’s Titan: The Story of Percy Brookfield, 1878–1921 (1983), pp. 27–28. This socialist author also says that secret war preparations ‘were guessed at’ by those who already opposed imperial militarism.

See ‘Imperial Conference Minutes of Proceedings [Cd. 5745] and Papers [Cd. 5746-1], July 1911’, NAA 359660; and ‘Imperial Conference 1911, Dominions No. 9. Papers laid before the Imperial conference: Naval and military defence, Cd. 5746-2, 17 July 1911’, NAA 693872. The omission of any reference to the expeditionary undertaking is particularly glaring in this second document.

See Memo Major CM Maynard to MO 1, 12 January 1912, WO 106/53, PRO, London.


64 Wilcox, ‘Relinquishing the Past’, p. 52.
66 Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis 1914–1923* (2009), p. 31. The bibliography lists *Army for a Nation* but not ‘We should do this thing quietly’.
68 Bean, *Official History*, vol. 1, p. 56.
70 This was during Cook’s Liberal government, which succeeded Fisher’s Labor one on 24 June 1913. Pearce resumed the defence portfolio when Labor was re-elected on 17 September 1914.
71 Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis*, p. 31.
72 *Search for Security in the Pacific*, p. 76. See also p. 63 n., p. 156.
74 Quoted in Mordike, *We should do this thing quietly*, p. 34.
75 Mordike, *Army for a Nation*, pp. 242–44.
76 Ibid, pp. 241–42.
77 Pearce, *Carpenter to Cabinet*, pp. 98 and 104–05; Mordike, *We should do this thing quietly*, pp. 87–89.
79 *Official History*, vol. 11, p. 239.
80 Ibid, p. 32.
81 Quoted in Mordike, *We should do this thing quietly*, pp. 91–93.
84 ‘Socialists’ Protest’, p. 10. For more on the meeting see Roper, *Labor’s Titan*, p. 30.
85 War Notes – Wild Weekend Rumours’, August 17, p. 8.
86 *Australia at War*, 16 September, p. 10.
88 Frei, *Japan’s Southward Advance*, p. ix.
91 Frei, *Japan’s Southward Advance*, p. 90.
92 Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis*, p. 162.
95 Ibid, p. 133, also comments that in early 1916 Pearce was advising Hughes that the occupation of the islands by ‘another Power’ could ‘not be of much danger…because of their distance’.
96 Ibid, p. 144. For a different analysis see Frei, *Japan’s Southward Advance*, pp. 94–95.
Meaney, *Australia and World Crisis*, p. 379.

Ibid, p. 503

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, 1983, p. 136, also stresses that the nation exists in time and thinks in terms of ‘historical destinies’. From this perspective, the race-based sense of an eternal threat would tend permanently, in the Australian case, to reinforce the imperial nation and undermine the independent one.

Frei, *Japan’s Southward Advance*, p. 67.


Ibid, p. 150.


Ibid.


*Asian Alternatives*, pp. viii and 5.

General Peter Gratton, ‘We need an exit strategy for Afghanistan’, *The Australian*, 19 October 2010, casts doubt on the official threat construction for being in the war.

I am grateful to Dr Alison Broinowski for alerting me to this.

Mark McKenna, ‘Anzac Day: How did it become Australia’s national day?’, in *What’s Wrong with Anzac?*, pp. 110–134.


Sacred Places, p. 6, quoting DH Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (1923). See also pp. 169 and 421.

p. 63.

p.195.


The relevance of irrelevance

Sharing the imperial pie

Robin Hemley

1901 Mark Twain battled America’s imperial designs in the pages of an American literary magazine. Remarkably, the North American Review still exists, though its influence, at least in geopolitics, has long since waned. Twain’s foray into American foreign policy created a dust-up in the US as soon as the piece was published, with thousands of people in equal number deriding him as unpatriotic and lauding him as a hero.

The issues that so outraged Twain and stirred him to write his controversial article, ‘To the Person Sitting in Darkness’, not only seem irrelevant to a contemporary audience at first glance, but nearly unintelligible. The personalities of whom he writes were household names in his day, but no more. For a contemporary audience to appreciate Twain’s essay a history lesson is in order. And isn’t this exactly the problem with political essays: like political poems and stories, don’t they quickly become dated and irrelevant?

According to James D Smelkoff of the Harvard Institute of Relevant Studies, in 1901 current events remained relevant for an average of 900 years for the majority of the reading public. That means that the First Crusade’s capture of Jerusalem in 1099 had just lost its relevance to Mark Twain’s audience. In 1960 Relevance had eroded to a mere 350 years (the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth Rock in 1620 was still safe, but barely). For the past ten years, Relevance has held steady at six weeks. With the disappearance of most news outlets, major events might soon be irrelevant before they happen, according to Smelkoff.

‘Not that it really matters,’ the Boston Globe quoted him as saying, two weeks before I began this essay.

So, a brief history lesson. It won’t be boring. You won’t die. Please stay with me. Breathe. Breathe, damn you!

IN 1898 AMERICA declared war on Spain because of the explosion onboard and subsequent sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Bay. The resulting war, created in large
part by the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst, lasted all of three months. That’s what it took for the brash republic of the United States of America to defeat a doddering empire. The US, founded on principles of self-determination, sided with the Cubans and freed them from the Spanish yoke, but didn’t quite know what to do with the Filipinos, which had been a colony of Spain for more than three centuries. Filipino rebels had been fighting against the Spanish for two years when the Americans came along and said, ‘Hey, let us help you.’ By this time the Filipinos had pretty well surrounded the Spanish garrison in Manila and didn’t need much help. The US escorted the leader of the Filipino resistance, Emilio Aguinaldo, from exile in Hong Kong and made short work of the Spanish, who surrendered to Admiral Dewey.

Simply put, the US wanted a share of the imperial pie in Asia that the Europeans had been feasting on for centuries; but in order to project their power, which in those days was only naval, it needed coaling stations to fuel ships on the long trip across the Pacific. That’s why it needed Hawaii (acquired in 1893, when a group of American businessmen, supported by an American battleship, staged a coup and imprisoned Hawaii’s queen) and Guam (also won during the Spanish-American War), and why it needed the Philippines.

But the notion of empire seemed to conflict with the principles on which the US was founded. How could the bastion of liberty – the Statue of Liberty was a mere fifteen years old in 1901, and therefore still decidedly relevant – deny liberty to another country?

The argument went like this: the Filipinos were not ready to govern themselves. Americans’ ‘little brown brothers’ needed help. They needed to be Christianised – with a different brand of Christianity from the Catholicism they had practiced for three centuries. The Philippines were not a colony. We repeat. Not a colony. America does not colonise. They were…something else. A purchase. A possession.

America bought the Philippines from the Spanish because you can’t buy love but you can buy land, and sometimes with the people thrown into the bargain. But the idea of buying the Philippines, in a kind of legal contract, was simply a ploy. We might illustrate the idea in this way: a thief breaks into a house and steals a treasured urn. The police capture the thief, but, instead of returning the urn to its rightful owner, decide instead to buy it from the thief. The original owner protests, so the police, outraged, jail the owner and execute his family members.

Filipinos, as it turned out, didn’t need such analogies. They wanted nothing other than liberty – though they wanted their own brand of liberty, which is widely considered inferior to American liberty, so America had to show them. It was a matter of quality control; in contemporary terms, the US was fighting liberty piracy. Liberty is America’s intellectual property. When fighting broke out between American soldiers and Filipino soldiers, the Americans slaughtered them by the thousands, as well as thousands of Filipino civilians.
THIS DID NOT sit well with Mark Twain, who as vice-president of the Anti-
Imperialist League wrote his critique of American foreign policy. Twain’s attack was
multi-pronged. It was first of all aimed at Reverend William Scott Ament and his
comments on the recent Boxer Rebellion, in 1900, in which the Chinese had risen up
against the colonial powers and murdered hundreds of missionaries and Chinese
Christians. Reverend Ament, the director of the American Board of Commissioners
for Foreign Missions, supported making suspected Boxers (as the peasant movement
was known) pay exorbitant damages, which he claimed wasn’t as tough as the
Catholics, who he asserted were demanding Chinese heads along with money.
Ament, in any event, justified the missionary presence in China, claiming they were
simply bringing the light of the Gospel and civilisation to those who sat in darkness.
Twain saw it differently. He saw the missionaries as scouts for imperialism.

In 1928, Twain’s literary executor republished the essay minus the attack on
Ament, the most controversial aspect of the essay. Twain had dared attack the
motives of the clergy. Expunging the opening salvo against Ament made the piece a
little less of a personal attack. Curiously, it also made the essay stronger, more
focused on the Philippines, which in 1928 was still an American possession, not to
be wrested from its grasp until World War II, when the Japanese invaded and
occupied it for four years.

The version of Twain’s essay most often reprinted begins: ‘Extending the Blessings
of Civilisation to our Brother who Sits in Darkness has been a good trade and has paid
well, on the whole; and there is money in it yet, if carefully worked – but not enough,
in my judgement, to make any considerable risk advisable. The People that Sit in
Darkness are getting to be too scarce – too scarce and too shy. And such darkness as is
now left is really of but an indifferent quality, and not dark enough for the game. The
most of those People that Sit in Darkness have been furnished with more light than
was good for them or profitable for us. We have been injudicious.’

Those who sit in darkness are becoming suspicious of the blessings we bring,
Twain adds. The ways in which we entice the darkness-sitters out is by showing
them what the Blessings of Civilisation entail – namely love, law and order, justice,
liberty, gentleness, equality, Christianity, honorable dealing, protection of the weak,
mercy, temperance, education.

Who could resist such blessings? But there’s a catch. These blessings are reserved
for home consumption, while another kind is packaged for export (albeit with a
pretty cover: the above list of blessings), which the sitters in darkness pay for with
their ‘blood and tears and land and liberty’.

I can’t say I fully admire Twain’s essay for his criticism of the powers-that-were.
One of the main problems with his dark satire is his criticism of countries such as the
US, Britain, Russia and France for making flimsy excuses for land grabs the world over. Flimsy or not, at least they bothered making excuses! That’s a kind of progress, isn’t it? Wasn’t there a time when no excuse was needed? As King, if I wanted your land, I just went in and murdered you to get it. But since Twain’s day, countries have made of point of coming up with reasons for grabbing land, so as not to alarm their citizens. The countries Twain was writing about set precedents in this manner that modern relevant nations still adhere to today.

Take the Second Boer War (1892–1902), a conflict between the Dutch settlers of South Africa, Boers, and the English, after English settlers began flooding into Boer territory in search of gold. The British government, seeing its greedy subjects treated as second-class citizens stripped of their rights by the Boer government, sent in troops. When the Dutch farmers, realising they couldn’t defeat the better-equipped Brits on the battlefield, went guerrilla, the Brits decided to break the back of the Boer resistance by imprisoning their families in concentration camps. The strategy worked. After more than 26,000 women and children starved to death or died of disease in British custody, the Boers surrendered. The British didn’t invent the concentration camp, but they helped perfect it. A mere forty years later, prisoners at Auschwitz were welcomed to its gates with a slogan extolling the work ethic, a blessing of civilisation if there ever was one: Arbeit Macht Frei.

Twain points out in his essay that the British seemed a tad hypocritical when the head of the Colonial office, Joseph Chamberlain, complained about Boer atrocities on the battlefield. He quotes one British private triumphantly recounting a battle in which his compatriots took a hill from the Boers. When the Boers saw the situation was hopeless they threw down their guns, went down on their knees with clasped hands and begged for mercy. ‘And we gave it them,’ Twain recounts the private’s words, ‘with the long spoon.’ Bayonets, in other words.

WE KNOW THAT atrocities happen in war, regardless of the cause or combatants. It’s the larger atrocities that Twain was concerned with – what we might term atrocities of conscience. What concerned him was that America wanted badly to play the ‘European game’, when it was so accustomed to playing the ‘American game’. We had done the right thing by the oppressed people of Cuba, sitting directly off our shores, freeing them from their colonial bonds. President McKinley had even called the idea of forcibly annexing Cuba ‘criminal aggression’ – but within a year, Twain notes, he had forgotten these noble words because the temptation to play the European game and annex a sovereign nation, the Philippines, proved too great. Pragmatism nearly always trumps ideals: what later came to be known as Realpolitik necessitates the unpleasant task of compromising values from time to time, even frequently, to be Masters of the Game.
America was a good pupil in the ‘Blessings of Civilisation Game’ (European rules) from this point on. It became so adept at bestowing blessings right and left that hardly a country remained untouched by American blessings (Export Quality and otherwise) in what came to be known as the American Century.

It’s hard to believe that a man as smart as Twain did not fully understand that America had joined the European game at least as early as 1893, when it covertly overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy – an act for which it formally apologised in 1993. Regardless, the American game, as he describes it idealistically in the following quote, was over, finished, kaput, or at least badly tarnished in light of America’s determination to be a player in Asia at any cost. In the following words, his belief in American ideals of fair play and true liberty shines painfully through and his satiric edge dulls: ‘It was a pity; it was a great pity, that error; that one grievous error, that irrevocable error. For it was the very place and time to play the American game again. And at no cost. Rich winnings to be gathered in, too; rich and permanent; indestructible; a fortune transmissible forever to the children of the flag. Not land, not money, not dominion – no, something worth many times more than that dross: our share, the spectacle of a nation of long harassed and persecuted slaves set free through our influence; our posterity’s share, the golden memory of that fair deed. The game was in our hands. If it had been played according to the American rules, Dewey would have sailed away from Manila as soon as he had destroyed the Spanish fleet – after putting up a sign on shore guaranteeing foreign property and life against damage by the Filipinos, and warning the Powers that interference with the emancipated patriots would be regarded as an act unfriendly to the United States. The Powers cannot combine, in even a bad cause, and the sign would not have been molested.’

Even at the remove of more than a century, these words stir me. Perhaps that’s in part because I’ve spent much time in the Philippines and am married to a Filipina. But what good does it do to pick at a scab? After all, the Philippines was given independence in 1946, and the country is now an ally and has done a pretty good job of telling its former master what it could do with its military bases, which it shuttered in 1991. Still, the betrayal rings in my ears as though it happened yesterday, probably because before I first travelled to the Philippines, in early 1999, I hardly gave the country a thought, like most Americans, and had no idea of my country’s legacy there. I always had considered myself a relatively informed person, a lover of history. My great-uncle Julius had served in the Spanish American War, which I knew about. But not this other war. How could something as big as a war escape my notice?

Twain expressed shock at the casualty figures General Arthur MacArthur, father of Douglas MacArthur, reported in the ten months prior to his essay. The American casualties were 268 killed, 750 wounded. The Filipino casualties were ‘three thousand two hundred and twenty seven killed’ (Twain’s italics), 694 wounded, leading Twain to
reason that while the Filipinos showed mercy, Americans showed none. A letter from a private from Decorah, Iowa to his mother seemed to bear out his assertion: ‘WE NEVER LEFT ONE ALIVE. IF ONE WAS WOUNDED, WE WOULD RUN OUR BAYONETS THROUGH HIM.’

THE WHOLE BUSINESS flummoxed Twain. He wondered how we could say with a straight face that we were bringing the blessings of civilisation to a country by asking young men to conduct such slaughter. Here, too, Americans first used waterboarding on recalcitrant patriots, developed the 45-calibre pistol, coined the word ‘gook’ or alternately dehumanised the Filipino rebels by calling them ‘niggers’. Have we seen such ironies repeated in the intervening hundred years? Have we offered the blessings of civilisation to other countries, only to have our sweet offers thrown back in our faces? Have we expressed wonder time and time again that they have not always welcomed us as benefactors? The literary heirs of Mark Twain have expressed their doubts: Susan Sontag in her essay about Abu Ghraib, ‘Regarding the Torture of Others,’ as well as countless poets and prose writers during the Vietnam era.

What we find time and again in essays by American writers trying to reconcile the lofty ideals their nation professes with a foreign policy often at extreme odds with these ideals is a tone of utter disbelief, a kind of literary post-traumatic stress disorder in which the writer is wandering over a rubble-strewn landscape that had once seemed a haven. Perhaps that seems melodramatic and perhaps it is, but I don’t think it overstates the sense of injustice and outrage that writers of conscience such as Sontag and Twain feel when they see a country they love betraying its own highest principles. What other response could possibly be appropriate?

The real test for the writer of conscience is to rein in her anger, to resist the urge to simply weep or scream. Weeping and screaming, while cathartic, don’t have much effect on foreign policy. But neither does writing of conscience. Try as he might, Twain cannot hide his utter disgust at the atrocities the US commits in his name, in the name of all American citizens, in the Philippine archipelago, likening it to the British attack on the Boers. His irony is no match for his shame:

‘Our case is simple. On the 1st of May, Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet. This left the Archipelago in the hands of its proper and rightful owners, the Filipino nation. Their army numbered 30,000 men, and they were competent to whip out or starve out the little Spanish garrison; then the people could set up a government of their own devising. Our traditions required that Dewey should now set up his warning sign, and go away.

But the Master of the Game happened to think of another plan – the European plan. He acted upon it. This was, to send out an army – ostensibly to
help the native patriots put the finishing touch upon their long and plucky struggle for independence, but really to take their land away from them and keep it. That is, in the interest of Progress and Civilisation. The plan developed, stage by stage, and quite satisfactorily.

We entered into a military alliance with the trusting Filipinos, and they hemmed in Manila on the land side, and by their valuable help the place, with its garrison of 8,000 or 10,000 Spaniards, was captured – a thing which we could not have accomplished unaided at that time. We got their help by – by ingenuity. We knew they were fighting for their independence, and that they had been at it for two years. We knew they supposed that we also were fighting in their worthy cause – just as we had helped the Cubans fight for Cuban independence – and we allowed them to go on thinking so. Until Manila was ours and we could get along without them. Then we showed our hand.

Of course, they were surprised – that was natural; surprised and disappointed; disappointed and grieved. To them it looked un-American; uncharacteristic; foreign to our established traditions. And this was natural, too; for we were only playing the American game in public – in private it was the European. It was neatly done, very neatly, and it bewildered them. They could not understand it; for we had been so friendly – so affectionate, even – with those simple-minded patriots! We, our own selves, had brought back out of exile their leader, their hero, their hope, their Washington – Aguinaldo; brought him in a warship, in high honour, under the sacred shelter and hospitality of the flag; brought him back and restored him to his people, and got their moving and eloquent gratitude for it.

Yes, we had been so friendly to them, and had heartened them up in so many ways! We had lent them guns and ammunition; advised with them; exchanged pleasant courtesies with them; placed our sick and wounded in their kindly care; entrusted our Spanish prisoners to their humane and honest hands; fought shoulder to shoulder with them against ‘the common enemy’ (our own phrase); praised their courage, praised their gallantry, praised their mercifulness, praised their fine and honorable conduct; borrowed their trenches, borrowed strong positions which they had previously captured from the Spaniard; petted them, lied to them – officially proclaiming that our land and naval forces came to give them their freedom and displace the bad Spanish Government – fooled them, used them until we needed them no longer; then derided the sucked orange and threw it away.

We kept the positions which we had beguiled them of; by and by, we moved a force forward and overlapped patriot ground – a clever thought, for we needed trouble, and this would produce it. A Filipino soldier, crossing the ground, where no one had a right to forbid him, was shot by our sentry. The badgered patriots
resented this with arms, without waiting to know whether Aguinaldo, who was absent, would approve or not. Aguinaldo did not approve; but that availed nothing.

What we wanted, in the interest of Progress and Civilisation, was the Archipelago, unencumbered by patriots struggling for independence; and the War was what we needed. We clinched our opportunity. It is Mr Chamberlain’s case over again – at least in its motive and intention; and we played the game as adroitly as he played it himself.’

He starts restrained, ironic, but notice how it builds in intensity to: ‘Until Manila was ours and we could get along without them. Then we showed our hand.’ This is Twain showing his hand – trembling with rage. For the most part his language is plain, unadorned, but then he allows for one metaphor to contain all he feels about our behavior in the Philippines: the US ‘derided the sucked orange and threw it away.’

WHAT TWAIN IMAGINED Americans saying to Filipinos of a century ago, about the blessings they wanted to give them, the US has repeated to several other countries: ‘They look doubtful, but in reality they are not. There have been lies; yes, but they were told in a good cause. We have been treacherous; but that was only in order that real good might come out of apparent evil. True, we have crushed a deceived and confiding people; we have turned against the weak and the friendless who trusted us; we have stamped out a just and intelligent and well-ordered republic; we have stabbed an ally in the back and slapped the face of a guest; we have bought a Shadow from an enemy that hadn’t it to sell; we have robbed a trusting friend of his land and his liberty; we have invited our clean young men to shoulder a discredited musket and do bandit’s work under a flag which bandits have been accustomed to fear, not to follow; we have debauched America’s honor and blackened her face before the world; but each detail was for the best. We know this.’

Of course, now that the war in [fill in the name of irrelevant country] is over, we don’t need such reminders, such essays. They’re dated, irrelevant. We’re better now. We know this.

My suspicion is that such political essays are irrelevant primarily because they contradict the values that Americans hold dear. The People who Sit In Darkness have left the darkness for irrelevance. They have become the People for Whom We Don’t Usually Give a Thought. The People for Whom We Don’t Usually Give a Thought don’t want to be ignored, but they have no choice. We long ago pushed aside the European powers and told them the only game in town was ours; and now isn’t it ironic that China, the piss pot of Europe in Twain’s time, now bestows its own blessings upon the world and its people, whether America or the Europeans like it or not? The rules of the American game have become so confused, and have been changed so frequently, that people who formerly sat in the light have started running for the cover
of darkness again in alarming numbers. At times it has seemed that America has played the game against itself, against its own interests, as when it propped up or installed unpopular dictators in Iran and Cuba (sadly, America’s legacy in Cuba is not its liberation of the country from the Spanish in 1898, but the corrupt Batista regime in bed with the Mafia that Castro replaced), and trained the Taliban to fight…us.

I’d like to say we meant well, that we always mean well, but we didn’t – as Twain learned with such horror. We didn’t mean well because no institution means well and that in the end is what a country is, an institution, and institutions don’t feel, don’t consider the common good, even if there are good people within that institution, as there always are. Institutions simply act on their own best interests.

In some chamber of the White House in 1898, William McKinley and his advisers certainly had a map on the wall that showed the line of countries needed for the US to extend its power in Asia. Did they need to create a war in Cuba with the stated aim of freeing the oppressed people of that island, but with the real purpose of territorial expansion in Asia? Or was the conquest of the Philippines simply a happy after-fart in McKinley’s mind, an imperial backfire as it were, as is conventionally assumed? I’m not a conspiracy theorist by nature, but the circumstantial evidence seems compelling. America needed coaling stations for its navy. The Philippines sat directly on the line that included Hawaii (annexed in 1898), Guam (in 1898) Wake Island (in 1899). Perhaps the acquisition of the Philippines was not so much a betrayal as a calculated deception from the start.

In a lighter, more cynical mood, Twain penned the following parody of ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’:

Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the sword
He is searching out the hoardings where the strangers’ wealth is stored
He has loosed his fateful lightning, and with woe and death has scored
His lust is marching on.

It’s no wonder, a hundred years, later the Philippines is a blank spot in the consciousness of most Americans – given space in the press only in relation to terrorism or karaoke. I can imagine many good reasons we might want to ignore or forget the country that made the American game virtually unplayable.

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AUSTRALIANS are used to comparing their country with the United States and their countries of origin, whether the UK, Italy, China or any of the two hundred or so other nations from whence their families emigrated. Norway does not generally figure in such reflections – few Australians are of Norwegian origin; the countries are polar opposites and physically disparate. Australia and Norway are neither members of the same regional organisations, nor significant trading partners, nor even notable destinations for each other’s tourists.

Closer study suggests more similarities than might be expected with a partly Arctic country housing a population less than a quarter the size of Australia’s. Norway had the second-largest merchant navy in the world in 2001, so it is not surprising that a Norwegian ship, the Tampa, played a crucial role in the ugly drama about asylum seekers in that year. Australians have for some years been hearing about the maturity with which Norway handles income from oil and gas extraction. Many Australians were brought up eating Oslo lunches, studying Ibsen at school, hearing Grieg and identifying with the angst of Munch’s painting The Scream. More recently Australian environmental perspectives have been strongly influenced by the report on sustainable development prepared by the commission headed by the former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. Both countries have territory in Antarctica. In 2008, 1230 Norwegian students were studying in Australia.1 Mutual interest, then, is growing.

Many parameters of the foreign policies of the two countries are the same. Like most Australian governments, Norway’s are committed to the international rule of law and to multilateral co-operation through the United Nations. Neither country belongs to a multilateral political organisation that requires policy compliance, other than those which are universal: Norway is not a member of the EU, and the British Commonwealth does not require conformity from its members. Both countries therefore have greater freedom to act independently and to take international initiative and leadership than most other developed nations. Like Australia,
Norway’s pre-eminent alliance is with the United States: ‘NATO is the anchor point for Norway’s national security policy,’ as is ANZUS for Australia. Though there are differences in the characteristics of those treaties, the significance of each country’s memberships is an indicator of the importance of their alliance with the US. Both countries are members of the NATO-led force in Afghanistan. The American alliance has not, however, impeded Norway in developing a number of distinctive and influential policies relating to engagement with the UN, peaceful conflict resolution, disarmament, development, the environment and human rights. These policies have given Norway greater influence than the size of its population or economy would suggest – or, as President Obama suggested when receiving the Nobel Peace prize in Oslo, the ability ‘to punch above its weight’, a description that some Australians like to use about their own country too.

The democratic revolutions in Arab countries this year call for action from nations like Australia and Norway. The United States and the European powers are largely discredited by many years of support for, or trade with and investment through, totalitarian and authoritarian leaders. Smaller actors can actively build alliances to provide ideas for UN-approved international sanctions, recognition of the democratic forces, and support and advice to nascent democratic institutions.

Australian Labor and Coalition governments often repeat the mantra that the national interest should be the guiding light of foreign policy. Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd said in November 2010 that the core national interests which the Department of Foreign Affairs is ‘required to discharge’ are to defend Australia’s ‘territorial integrity’, maintain ‘political sovereignty’, ‘advance the national economic well-being’, ‘act as a good international citizen’ in ‘maintaining a stable and just international order’, and protect ‘the physical well-being of Australians abroad’. What concrete policies will best contribute to achieving those goals? Other countries are an interesting source of ideas and comparisons, and Norway defines its national interest in particularly broad terms. It is worth examining why it does so, how its strategy has evolved, what has been learned from its experiences and whether those lessons have anything to teach Australia.

NORWAY AND AUSTRALIA became politically independent countries not much more than a century ago, Norway from Sweden in 1905 and Australia from Britain in 1901. Both are among the four developed countries with the world’s lowest population densities, Norway with sixteen people per square kilometre and Australia with three. Both populations think of themselves as close to nature but live mainly in urban areas. Both control huge areas of ocean: Norway’s economic zone (the area inside the 200-nautical-mile zone) is the thirteenth-largest in the world, Australia’s the third.
Although one of Norway’s social characteristics is the homogeneity of its population, both countries are dependent on immigration to meet labour needs. In Norway more than a tenth of people now have origins in other countries: about half in Europe and half in developing countries. Norway is more generous to asylum seekers, taking twice as many as Australia per million of population during the past decade.

A striking similarity is that Norway and Australia have the two highest rankings on the multidimensional human development index published by the UN Development Programme. This means that they have the greatest capacity in the world to provide their citizens with a long and healthy life, access to education and high average incomes – and hence perhaps to support others seeking the same goals.

Both countries have histories of relying on farming, yet possess huge areas unsuitable for cultivation. Both have moved on from agriculture and are now major mineral exporters – and are wealthy as a result. In 2008, half Norway’s export earnings came from the recovery of oil and gas, making it the fifth-largest exporter of petroleum products. Australia was the largest producer of bauxite and mineral sands in 2007; one of the largest producers of uranium, iron ore, lead, zinc and nickel; and a major exporter of coal. Nevertheless, three-quarters of employment in both countries is in service industries.

Apart from mini-states such as Luxembourg, Norway has the highest per-capita income in the OECD. In 2006 the Norwegian annual average income per head of US$52,000 was 80 per cent higher than the EU average and 50 per cent higher than Sweden, Denmark and Australia – although Australians work 20 per cent more hours a year. Norway is one of a group of northern and western European countries that are ‘consistently ranked in the most egalitarian half’ of OECD countries, while Australia is one of the English-speaking countries that fall into the less-egalitarian group. Most impressively, Norway is the country in which the lowest 10 per cent of income earners receive the highest percentage of median income. Male participation rates in the labour force are similar but a higher proportion of working-age women are in paid employment in Norway.

As expected, the Norwegian government’s expenditure of 44 per cent of GDP is substantially higher than the 35 per cent spent in Australia. The surprising difference is the extent of central government net saving in Norway: of over 40 per cent in 2008. This astonishing thrift is made possible by investing most revenue from oil and gas extraction in the Government Pension Fund – Global, and limiting spending from the fund’s income from its investments, which is transferred to recurrent spending at a prescribed rate of return on the fund’s holdings of 4 per cent a year. Nevertheless, that supplement to other revenue enables generous public expenditure on health, education and other human services.
Social and cultural qualities in both countries are strongly influenced by
geography and history. Henrik Ibsen wrote, ‘Anyone who wishes to understand me
fully must know Norway: the spectacular but severe landscapes which people have
around them in the north, and the lonely but shut-off life in the houses often lying
miles from each other. In Norway every second man is a philosopher and those
dark winters with the thick mists outside – how they long for the sun.’ Even
contemporary affluent urban Norwegians identify with this inheritance. The
writer Inge Eidsvåg suggests ‘three values’ that ‘the majority of the population
would recognise as theirs: equality, moderation and nearness to nature’. There
have been parallel values in Australia’s evolution, though they have been eroded by
the assertive individualism encouraged by the past quarter-century of neo-
liberalism. Yet there are still similarities in the traditional kindness, directness and
lack of pretension. Australians’ delight in sport, beach and bush parallels
Norwegians’ pleasure in skiing and walking.

ONE OF THE similarities in historical experience that has had most influence on
the international perspective of both countries is in the origins of the widespread
fears that infected their policies during the Cold War. Both Norway and Australia
attempted to be neutral before World War II, though they had close relationships
with Britain. However, the sudden and undeclared German invasion of Norway on
9 April 1940 and the five years of occupation were a national trauma that
profoundly influenced Norway’s postwar society and foreign policy. The postwar
hostility between the Soviet Union and the United States caused intense anxiety in
Norway, which shares a border with Russia. Australians, who were merely
threatened with Japanese invasion, nevertheless commonly experienced similar
fears about the advance of communism to those of many Norwegians. This led both
countries to make relations with the US their most important international alliance.

The insecurity in both countries also motivated substantial levels of military
expenditure during the Cold War, but as fears receded after 1989 Norwegian
defence spending declined from close to 3 per cent of national income to the current
1.5 per cent. In contrast, the end of the Cold War had surprisingly little impact on
Australian military spending, which fell from 2.2 per cent in 1990 to 2.0 per cent in
1996, and remained at or just slightly under that for the following decade and a half.
A possible explanation is that Norwegian society was more influenced by the
dramatic changes in Europe from the end of the Cold War arms race, the massive
disarmament and demobilisation across the continent, and the newly won co-
operation with the old enemies in the Warsaw Pact. For Australia, the demise of the
Soviet Union was less noticed and the growth of Chinese armaments was witnessed
more closely. Certainly, Norwegian political leaders and advocates for defence
spending have been less inclined to fan fears than some in Australia. The difference
in military spending may also be an indicator of differences in the approach to foreign policy of the two countries.

There are, then, sufficiently strong similarities between major aspects of the two nations’ histories, economies and frameworks of foreign policy to make for useful comparisons. However, given the substantial similarities of experience, and the strength of the commitment of both countries to their alliance with the US, what has enabled Norway to develop such distinctively different orientations to those of American administrations and to have the political strength to act autonomously?

THE KEY INFLUENCES on Norwegian foreign policy are embedded in the nation’s history. Norway’s international good citizenship is an expression of the widespread national support for meeting the needs of people in other countries. This is expressed through a commitment to international aid which predates that of other industrialised nations without a colonial past. Norwegian development aid was initiated as early as 1953, in India, when Norway was still receiving Marshall Aid. The two dominant social movements, the social-democratic labour movement and Christian lay organisations, joined forces to support Norwegian activism for the international rule of law and multilateral co-operation through the United Nations: engagement with peacemaking and peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, nuclear disarmament, human rights and democracy. The more idealistic sides of Norwegian foreign policy activism have been criticised in the national press in recent years: it has been argued that the increasing investment of funds and personnel has shown meagre results and not served Norwegian national interests. Nevertheless, a recently published survey of Norwegian foreign policy sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that Norwegians commonly believe that the commitments to an activist foreign policy have ‘become Norway’s international hallmark. Norway’s image both at home and abroad has been formed by a cluster of moral projects.’

The foundations of those commitments are in four features of Norwegian society: egalitarianism, the emphasis on social justice in the Church of Norway, the international solidarity of the labour movement and a consensual approach to resolving conflict. First, a number of features of Norwegian history have contributed to the relatively equitable structure of society. Plague in the mid-fourteenth century killed most of the feudal lords. The mountainous terrain forced dispersed settlement of rural peasants, who became more independent than rural smallholders further south in Europe. Union with Denmark for almost three centuries, from 1536 to 1814, prevented the growth of a Norwegian aristocracy, and late industrialisation constrained the establishment of wealthy capitalist dynasties. Second, the Lutheran church became the state religion after the Reformation. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a lay revivalist movement ‘promoted an ideology of social justice, egalitarianism, and moral obligation to alleviate poverty that preceded the
adoption of the welfare state.  

Third, the growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the Labour Party, with its ideological commitment to the international solidarity of working people everywhere, strengthened commitment to international as well as national egalitarianism. And fourth, there is also ‘an emphasis on consensus and compromise within Norwegian society’ of which social democracy is an example, being a compromise between capitalism and socialism. Political liberalism also emphasised the contributions of free trade, neutrality and arbitration to peace. In reaction to the control from Sweden, which took over from Denmark in 1814, the Norwegians asserted that in contrast they were a peace-loving nation. A national consensus grew that ‘pragmatically synthesised Social Democratic and Lutheran global concerns for the oppressed’.  

Three of the most distinctive features of Norwegian foreign policy relate to peaceful conflict resolution, disarmament and aid. In the 1880s and 1890s members of the Norwegian parliament were active advocates of peace through international treaties. This may be the reason why the Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel decided that the peace prize he endowed would be awarded by a committee chosen by Norwegian parliamentarians. Norwegian delegates were active in the League of Nations, and the famous polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen was commissioned by the League to resettle hundreds of thousands of refugees in Eastern Europe after World War I. Still, their country having been ruled for so long by Denmark and Sweden, a majority of Norwegians have opposed joining the European Union.

The horrors of German occupation strengthened Norwegian support for the international rule of law and the UN. The Norwegian foreign minister, Trygve Lie, became the first UN Secretary-General. Norway has continued to be among the UN’s strongest supporters, as demonstrated by repeatedly making the largest financial contribution per capita.

One of the early examples of Norway’s engagement with peaceful conflict resolution and human rights was in supporting the struggle for justice in South Africa. A commitment to ending apartheid grew in the Church of Norway, solidarity groups and the trade unions in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, and this encouraged the government to take up the issue. The effectiveness of this is an example of the established pattern of co-operation between church, NGOs and the state, and this is a major element of the ‘Norwegian model’ of working for peace and justice.

The idea of a Norwegian model for conflict resolution took off after the end of the Cold War. Norway had a comparative advantage in peace promotion because of its small size, its non-colonial past, and the close relationship between the state and NGOs. As well, the end of the Cold War, and of the need to focus foreign policy on security and the risk of a threat from the Soviet Union, allowed concentration on
other issues.

The Oslo Accord facilitated by Norway between Israel and the Palestinians in 1993 established the reputation of the Norwegians as effective mediators. After the first Gulf War, in 1990–91, the Palestinian Liberation Organization started to seek a third party through whom they could approach the Israelis. This request enabled Norwegians to confidentially suggest to trusted Israelis the possibility of secret discussions. Agreement was eventually reached after intense and sometimes fractured negotiations about a Declaration of Mutual Recognition, and included arrangements for Palestinian self-rule, maximum permanent security for Israeli citizens, proposals for major infrastructure and a Marshall-style international-assistance plan. The agreement was signed on the White House lawns in September 1993, and Rabin, Peres and Arafat were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Since then the Norwegian model of peacemaking has been attempted in many conflict situations, from Colombia and Guatemala to Sri Lanka and Sudan.

There are several key features of the Norwegian model. Commonly, the process begins because one or more of the parties ask for assistance, or Norwegian NGOs propose that the Ministry for Foreign Affairs becomes involved. The ministry rarely acts alone: it often co-operates with the UN or supports other mediating organisations. It is taking a close interest in the new UN Mediation Support Unit and has also co-operated with initiatives involving the good offices of the Secretary-General. Major development assistance has commonly been a feature of post-agreement peace-building processes. A Peace and Reconciliation Section was established in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2001. It began as support for the negotiations in Sri Lanka and has expanded since then; there are now fourteen professional officers working in the section, administering an annual budget of about US$100 million in support of activities in twenty areas of conflict.

A second distinctive feature of Norwegian foreign policy has been the high priority given to disarmament. A report presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Storting, the Norwegian parliament, on 30 May 2008 begins: ‘The Government is working to promote a UN-led world order based on co-operation between states, where conflicts are resolved on the basis of international law, and all use of force is in conformity with the UN Charter. The Government believes that improved security for all can be achieved at considerably lower levels of armaments than those that exist today. This will require balanced and verifiable reductions. Furthermore, extensive disarmament will free up substantial resources that can be used for human and social development.’

This unequivocal and principled statement succinctly summarises the orientation of Norwegian disarmament policy. The report describes challenges relating to nuclear and other WMDs, and from conventional weapons, and then for a dozen pages outlines objectives, priorities and measures being used to achieve them. Many
are predictable because they are vital and well known; many are impressive because they demonstrate the imagination that is being applied. Examples include co-operating with the UK in a major research project on verification of nuclear disarmament agreements; co-operating with Germany to urge NATO to adopt a new strategic concept, in which one of the key issues is a new nuclear doctrine; and providing financial support totalling A$10 million in 2010 to multilateral and civil society organisations engaged in disarmament issues.

Humanitarian agencies such as the Red Cross were vital to negotiation of treaties banning land mines and cluster bombs. ‘Nuclear weapons are the most destructive, inhuman and indiscriminate weapons ever created,’ Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre has said, and so it is vital that humanitarian agencies participate too in activity aimed at banning nuclear weapons.

A third distinctive feature of Norwegian foreign policy is the generosity of the country’s aid to developing countries. Norway has surpassed the UN aid target of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income (GNI) continuously for more than thirty years. In 2009 Net Official Development Assistance by both Sweden and Norway exceeded 1 per cent of GNI, compared with the 0.29 per cent contributed by Australia. About a quarter of Norway’s aid is allocated through multilateral organisations, especially through UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank. In most UN agencies Norway, with a population smaller than that of the state of Victoria, is among the top five contributors and far ahead of most major powers. Thirty per cent of aid is channelled through Norwegian NGOs, making the five largest Norwegian groups among the largest in the world. Norway emphasises the contribution of aid to mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, to generating and distributing clean energy and water, and to natural resource management and sanitation. A recent and generous example is the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, the REDD program, which Norway has spearheaded and to which it has allocated several hundred million dollars to preserve the rainforests of Brazil, the Congo, Indonesia and elsewhere. There is a strong emphasis on aid being effective.

MANY FEATURES OF Norwegian history and society are very different from those in Australia. The question is whether these differences are so great or the international context of the two countries so different that no Australian government could persuade the electorate, let alone the foreign-affairs community, that such policies are likely to be cost-effective means of strengthening security. It might have once been possible for neo-realist commentators to dismiss what are sometimes called Norway’s ‘extended interests’ as the ‘soft’ policies of an idealistic nation attempting to make the world a better place – nice ideas with which a small, wealthy country can indulge itself. But in an age of strong and intensifying global integration such scepticism is unpersuasive.
The Report of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Refleks Project argues: ‘Globalisation extends Norway’s national interests in the direction of traditional idealistic politics…Those areas of foreign policy that are normally associated with idealistic politics are becoming necessary instruments and know-how that can be used to further Norwegian national interests. Or to put it rather bluntly, know-how about development policy or the development of international institutions is becoming an instrument of political pragmatism, while military efforts may take on important idealistic dimensions.’ 15

Growing global integration automatically extends the geographical areas and the range of issues about which national foreign policy must be concerned. Whether or not the social-democratic foundations of Norway’s enlightened policies appeal, traditional Australian utilitarianism is a strong enough basis for the adoption or adaptation to Australian conditions, of many of Norway’s extended interests. 16

As in Norway, most postwar governments in Australia have repeatedly expressed the same commitment to the international rule of law and to the UN as the institutional system with responsibility for implementation of that principle. The value of the Norwegian example is that it suggests expressing those commitments more fully and effectively. The Rudd government took important steps to renew and strengthen Australian engagement with the UN, including making explicit the centrality of Australia’s commitment to the international rule of law; increasing organisational engagement through attentiveness to the issues being addressed by UN forums and attendance at UN meetings; nominating for membership of the Security Council in 2013–14; setting a target for increasing aid to 0.5 per cent of national income by 2015–16; emphasising Australian participation in peacekeeping missions; and establishing the Evans-Kawaguchi Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament.

A second round of multilateral policy renewal would strengthen Australia’s effectiveness as a fully engaged UN member state. This could involve addressing the inconsistencies between the requirements of member states in the UN Charter and existing Australian policy. Six inconsistencies and opportunities are made clearer by the Norwegian example: the offensive orientation of the 2009 Defence White Paper; the continuing financial deprivation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; the neglect of practical, peaceful conflict resolution; the impoverishment of departmental and scholarly work on disarmament; the inadequacies of voluntary financial contributions to multilateral and NGO development programs; and the stringency of government support for NGOs involved in concrete programs for strengthening international peace and justice, and public education and scholarship.

The 2009 Defence White Paper moved Australian military strategy further from ‘defensive defence’ towards ‘offensive defence’. It focused on forward projection of
force, strike capability and high-technology weapons systems. It promoted enormous purchases of weapons – twelve new submarines, air-warfare destroyers and a new class of frigates, a hundred F-35 joint strike fighters and more – to be paid for by automatic annual increases of 4 to 5 per cent in military spending in each of the next twenty years, regardless of circumstances. No other type of Australian public expenditure has ever been promised such largesse for such a long period.

The White Paper discussed Australian defence as if it were in a silo, isolated from other dimensions of foreign affairs. An astonishing result was the defence budget for 2010–11, increased by $1.57 billion to $26.8 billion. In the same budget the appropriation for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade was $1.1 billion. So the increase in Australian military spending in 2010–11 is about 50 per cent greater than the total allocation for diplomacy. The strategic situation does not warrant treating the military as uniquely deserving of financial support when every other area of public outlay is constrained. It is a striking contrast to the cuts to military spending being discussed, or already underway, in other developed countries.

It is especially damaging when Australia has 18 per cent fewer diplomats posted overseas than in 1996, while in the rest of the public service there are now 12 per cent more staff. Australia has fewer diplomatic posts overseas than any other member of the G-20, with missions in only half the capitals of the world. Australia is not threatened by any country, nor is it likely to be in the foreseeable future. Yet diplomacy is the prime means of avoiding conflict as well as of representing Australian interests overseas. Why should Australia stand out among developed and large developing countries in lacking an adequately funded diplomatic service? Foreign affairs funding in all areas should be incrementally reoriented. Australian military spending should be stringently reviewed, major weapons orders should be cut or even cancelled, and total spending progressively and substantially reduced to make way for far higher priority political, diplomatic and developmental activity.

Third, the Defence White Paper fails to mention the first and principal requirement of UN member states, which is to attempt by all reasonable means to avoid the threat or use of force, and to seek non-violent means of minimising and resolving conflict. The UN Charter is the foundational document of postwar multilateral relations. The highest priority is set in Article 1 of the Charter, which describes the first purpose of the UN as being ‘To maintain international peace and security, and to that end: to take effective collective measures for the prevention and the removal of threats, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace.’

It would therefore be consistent with Australia’s obligations as a UN member state, as well as with the aim of strengthening security, to attempt to become a
peacemaker. It is far more cost effective to resolve disputes peacefully where possible than to try and settle them through war. The cost of mediation is a tiny fraction of the cost of military intervention. The possibility of minimising death and destruction through concerted peacemaking and peacekeeping is a strikingly attractive possibility wherever it can be achieved. So the humanitarian and financial incentives of peaceful conflict resolution are enormous. Does Australia have the capacity for such action?

Australians do not have a strong self-image as a peaceable people: they commonly take greater pride in military achievements, and in courageous failures such as the Gallipoli landing. Yet Australians are a tolerant people, and though there were terrible episodes in relations between the British invaders and the Indigenous population, violence has not had a major part in the national history. As well, most Australians acknowledge the benefits of a stable and peaceful society. Peaceful conflict settlement processes have been embedded in the framework of the industrial relations system for over a century. Australia has a proud record of support for peacekeeping in the region, most recently in Cambodia, Timor-Lesté, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. Several Australian universities already have peace and conflict studies centres offering training in conflict-resolution processes. The Global Peace Index was founded by an Australian international technology entrepreneur and philanthropist Steve Killelea. There are many skilled Australians already working on resolution of domestic and community conflicts within Australia, and through the UN and various international NGOs in other countries.

IF NORWAY IS working so effectively as a peacemaker, is there a need for other countries to take up this role as well? Norway acted alone in the early 1990s, but now there is more active engagement with the UN, other countries and international NGOs. Within Norway there is now more talk of the dugnad principle, of the value of community effort in building a barn or resolving a conflict. An example of such a co-operative international effort occurred after the Kenyan presidential election in December 2007, to prevent a potentially genocidal conflict between the Luos and the Kikuyu. That successful peacemaking effort involved concerted engagement by several countries and international NGOs, led by Kofi Annan, largely funded and facilitated by Norway. The engagement of several actors committed to peaceful conflict resolution may often be essential to effective reconciliation.

Not having Norway’s established tradition of engagement in peaceful conflict resolution, could Australia develop credibility in this area? The answer would depend on the processes adopted. It would have to be reticent, modulated and incremental – and without the condescension that sometimes blights Australian diplomacy. At present not a single DFAT officer works full-time on peaceful conflict resolution. The department would have to build its capacity for engagement in
conflict resolution through, for instance, establishing a branch of professional staff trained in mediation and the other means suggested in the UN Charter for peaceful settlement of disputes. It might also co-operate with international NGOs involved in professional mediation. DFAT’s funding would need to increase to establish such a unit. Peacemaking would be a far less costly approach to strengthening security than endlessly increasing military spending, and more effective as well as constructive.

The Norwegian policies on disarmament are worthy of consideration by the Australian government: there is a strong case for similar action. The principal requirement is an unequivocal commitment to nuclear disarmament. This could begin by removing the Bush-era title of the DFAT section working on disarmament – the Arms Control and Counter-Proliferation Branch – and replacing it with a title like that of the equivalent Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Section, known as Disarmament and Non-proliferation. A second prerequisite is to substantially increase funding for the branch to enable it to build professional competence in disarmament policy and on negotiation, public education and much else, so that in due course it could begin to take significant initiatives.

Norway is an inspiration for addressing the fifth inconsistency between Australia’s obligations as a UN member state and its actual performance. Australian aid in 2010–11 is estimated to be 0.33 per cent of national income – far short of the UN target of 0.7 per cent of national income, of the actual performance of the EU of 0.48 per cent, and of Norway’s of more than 1 per cent. Kevin Rudd and his Opposition counterpart, Julie Bishop, have promised to reach 0.5 per cent by 2015–16. Even if that major improvement were achieved Australia would still be notable for the restrictiveness of its support for development, restraining it from contributing its fair share to meeting the Millennium Development Goals. AusAID could also learn much from Norwegian aid policy. The aid policy bureau, NORAD, and the innovative policies and practices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should be added to the institutions from which AusAID attempts to learn, in the way they do from the UK Department for International Development.

ONE OF THE most striking features of the Norwegian model of foreign affairs is the importance of NGOs and academic bodies in contributing to Norwegian support for its foreign policies. The five largest Norwegian NGOs have a combined staff of several thousand worldwide, and are increasingly operating on behalf of the UN and with funding from outside Norway. There are six Norwegian research institutes specialising in studies on international assistance, peace research, international co-operation and human rights, each with a staff of between fifty and 120, largely funded by government grants. The UN Association of Norway has a staff of more than thirty, most involved in school and public education about the
UN, virtually all financed by government. The Australian government could learn from that, and quickly strengthen its support beyond research on military aspects of security. Far better funding of programs, scholarship and education about international relations would transform Australia’s international contribution and domestic awareness.

Surely it is not utopian to imagine that Australia could make significant moves in strengthening multilateral engagement, reducing provocative and wasteful military spending, inaugurating official work on peaceful conflict resolution, adopting official programs aimed at nuclear disarmament, being more active in support of development, and so on. Such policies are in its national interest. Norway is also leading in other areas, notably through the example of the Norwegian Government Pension Fund – Global, which works ‘to safeguard and build financial wealth for future generations through responsible management of the fund’. Australia could also learn much from Norway’s environmental and social policies. It would be appropriate for Australia to reciprocate Norway’s courtesy in maintaining a diplomatic mission in Canberra and establish an Australian one in Oslo.

Such reasonable, focused and cost-effective policies could well be attractive to many Australians. A recent refrain of commentators reflecting on national politics has been the need for strong leadership. The perception of a leadership malaise is far from unique to Australia: it is widespread, but not universal. Norway is of interest because of its relative success in moving towards specific goals. Strategic leadership requires many qualities: penetrating assessment of issues, recognition of the interests of the voiceless as well as the powerful, imagination about alternative approaches, decisiveness, and capacity for sustained advocacy. To adapt Hugh Stretton’s challenge, effective leaders must ‘offer simple visions, complex programs and competent performance’. They should be clear about goals and ethical principles and pragmatic about means. The distinctive features of Norwegian foreign policy offer possibilities for enhancing Australia’s contribution to international security through strengthening influences for peace and justice.

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1 (Statistical Yearbook of Norway, 2009, Table 176)
2 (Lunde and Thune, 2008, p79)

(Borgen, 2004)

(Aase, 2008)

(Egeland, 1988, 36-45)

(Østerud. 2006)

(Lunde and Thune, 2008, 194)

(Ingebritsen, 2006, 26)

(Bekken, 2007, 29)

(Kelleher and Taulbee, 2006, 482)

(Riste, 2005, 83)

(Egeland, 1988)

(Egeland, 2008, Ch 7)

(Lunde and Thune, 2008, 84)

(Collins, 1985)

(Langmore, Logan and Firth, 2010)

(www.nbim.no)
Many Australian Jews take an intense interest in Israel. They find it difficult to ignore the miracle of its creation so soon after the Holocaust, but also impossible to ignore the underside of that miracle: the tragic dispossession of the Palestinian people. They find themselves on the horns of a dilemma made all the more wicked by the gag so many Australian Jews impose on themselves, even when they disagree with the Israeli state’s actions and policies.

Despite recent worrying moves by the Israeli state to repress dissent, Jews in Israel who hold pro-Palestinian views are not necessarily seen as traitors to their country. They are not even thought to be very unusual. But for Jews in Australia it’s a very different scenario. Publicly admitting to pro-Palestinian views is eerily like coming out about your sexuality: there’s a similar set of worries about what your family and friends will think, who will stand by you and who will shun you. And once you are out, do you become an activist for the cause or is simply coming out courage enough? And anyway, why should it be brave for an Australian citizen to criticise the actions of another state?

For Jews of my parents’ generation who had survived the Holocaust, Israel was non-negotiable. Its creation, in 1948, was for them a kind of compensation and apology for the horrors and losses they had endured. They saw Israel’s existence as virtually guaranteeing an end to anti-Semitism, an end to pogroms and the long and uneasy wanderings of the Jews in many lands. If Israel existed, there was hope. And their own survivor guilt was lessened a little.

That generation supported Israel through everything and with everything it had, moral and monetary. In every Diaspora country there was (and still is) a version of the United Israel Appeal, to which every Jew every year gave a couple of hundred dollars or several thousand, depending on their means. If those Holocaust survivors went to synagogue they prayed for Israel’s wellbeing and survival, just as they prayed for the wellbeing of their country of nationality. They sent their children to youth camps that were Israel-focused. Many of those kids spent time in Israel in
their teens, usually on a kibbutz (as did many idealistic young non-Jews), and came home fired up by the progress and energy of the new country. They could be unambiguously proud of this democratic state whose people stood tall and kowtowed to no one, a state that won wars against its larger neighbours and made the desert bloom.

It sounded good and it felt good to many thousands of Australian Jews. But from the beginning, there was, I think, some unease below the surface.

The year that Israel was declared a state was also the year my family arrived in Australia. I was five and just wanted to become an Aussie as fast as possible.

I took little interest in Israel as I grew into adolescence. But I did agree with the catchphrase parroted then and now: Israel ‘had a right to exist’. Of course it did. And the Jews, being good, moral people who knew too well what it was like to be oppressed, would make a decent accommodation with the few Palestinians who might have lost land. Israel seemed a beautiful idea, and the young bronzed Israelis on their kibbutzim, tilling the soil, no longer victims, were a perfect antidote to a tragic history.

What’s more, Israel had from its inception undertaken never to refuse a Jew entry, so even if we Diaspora Jews chose not to live there it was, potentially, a safe place to escape to in case of trouble. Never again would we be trapped with nowhere to go and no one willing to take us.

That’s as far as it went for me. I never went to those Zionist youth camps – I was uncomfortable with their pro-Israel zeal. I dimly thought there was something amiss in being loyal to two countries. Australia was now my country and I was interested in no other. I remember my mother telling me that, when she was a teenager in the early 1930s in Hungary, some relatives tried to convert her to Zionism. She was not interested. Hungary was her home, she told them, and she wanted no other. A few years later her fellow Hungarians, in collaboration with Eichmann, killed her husband, father, brother, and would have killed her and her children had she not had the nous to go into hiding. Is it any wonder that people of her generation, once the war was over, turned to Israel as their beacon of hope?

But my case, I thought, was different. We’d come to Australia because it was tolerant, a place where the abuses of Old Europe were simply not possible. We were bemused – and delighted – to find that Protestant Australians seemed to dislike Catholics far more than Jews. And white people’s treatment of Aborigines was not even on the agenda. They were a dying race, we were told – and conveniently dying, for the most part, in remote places out of our sight. It was a long time before I saw any parallels between the British coming to take over ‘terra nullius’ and the Israeli settlers taking over a piece of land with so few Palestinians on it that it did not really count – did it?
In each case, even if there was a white lie about pre-possession, it could be rationalised by a superior claim on the land: farmers versus mere hunter-gatherers, poor subsistence farmers versus sophisticated Europeans with new techniques. Yet it struck me even back then that ‘Israel’s right to exist’ was a curiously defensive phrase. Lurking behind it was an implied question: exist at the expense of whom?

WHEN I WENT recently to hear a talk about the Israel-Palestine issue at the University of New South Wales it was the first such event I’d attended. I am in my sixties and for thirty-plus years I’ve watched with increasing unease, then concern, then horror, then shame as the Jewish state I’d been taught to believe would become a leader among nations became, in the eyes of many, a pariah among nations.

The speaker was Anna Baltzer, an American activist here on a lecture tour. Baltzer is well educated and articulate, and has nice manners and a winning smile. A slim, pretty brunette, she looks younger than thirty-two. She’s apple-pie America, with a Jewish twist – and she travels the world putting the case for the Palestinians.

I realised that, although she’s much younger than me, Baltzer grew up making much the same assumptions I did. Then, in her early twenties, she did a lot of travelling and made some Palestinian friends. She heard stories of dispossession from their farms and businesses, and removal from their homeland, but she thought these people must be prejudiced or mistaken. It was only when she became closer to a couple of families and became immersed in what had happened to them that she decided to go to the West Bank and Gaza to see for herself.

That was the beginning of a new life and a new mission – to tell the world what she had seen. She knew that a young American Jew lining up behind the Palestinians could make an impact, but she also knew she would render herself persona non grata with the vast majority of her fellow American Jews.

Baltzer did not spend too much time on her personal history because she had so much she wanted to tell us about contemporary Palestine. One of her books, Witness in Palestine: A Jewish American Woman in the Occupied Territories (Paradigm, 2006), is an account of her many visits to Palestinian villages to monitor Israeli soldiers’ behaviour at checkpoints, to record violations and to assist Palestinians to negotiate their daily lives in a non-violent way. It’s a readable and unpretentious book, yet I find it very hard going – as hard to read as the last book I reported on in these pages, Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia (Scribe, 2008), produced by the People’s Inquiry into Detention. The stories are horribly similar in the inhumanity and ignorance displayed by the powerful towards the powerless. She records, for instance, the words of one young man who spent six months in an Israeli jail for no reason other than that a relative of his was a Palestinian radical: ‘There were boys there [in the prison] only fourteen years old. And there was an eighty-year-old man
who was very sick in bed crying. I told the guard he was going to need a doctor or he was going to die. The guard answered, “He is dangerous. If he dies, then the people of Israel will be safe.”

Baltzer also cites the so-called Citizenship Law of 2003, which retroactively prevents Palestinians who marry Israelis from receiving Israeli citizenship. ‘The law also denies citizenship to children born of an Israeli citizen and residents of the West Bank or Gaza. Via special permission from Israel’s Interior Minister, children have been allowed to stay with their family in Israel till the age of twelve, when the child is uprooted and forced to leave the state.’

FOR MOST AUSTRALIAN Jews, to do what Anna Baltzer does would be unthinkable. But there is a growing number of alternative voices, and in late 2010 I became one of them. After years of agonised silence and fence-sitting, I decided that enough was enough. For others, Gaza had been the trigger; I avoided reading too much about that. But then in May 2010 Israeli troops raided a civilian flotilla trying to break the blockade on Gaza, causing nine civilian deaths. That was it for me. I decided, together with more than 130 fellow Australian Jews, to run an advertisement in the national press criticising Israel. The ad, published under the auspices of Independent Australian Jewish Voices (IAJV), appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald, The Australian and the Australian Jewish News.

IAJV, formed in 2007 and modelled on similar organisations in Europe, is a loose-knit association that aims to put forward different views to the prevailing rhetoric. There are a couple of other like-minded groups and a handful of Jewish pro-Palestinian activists – Antony Loewenstein is perhaps the best known – who are often the subject of vilification and the occasional death threat. (The IAJV website receives messages like ‘Fuck off you self-hating bastards.’) In general, though, Australian Jews line up solidly behind a pro-Israel stance. Or they keep quiet. They maintain what I call the Silence.

Here are some of the common reasons put forward:

To criticise Israel is to give fuel to its neighbours, most of whom have vowed to drive the Israelis into the sea.

We should not criticise our own; there are plenty of others doing it for us.

Israel must do whatever is necessary to defend itself. Its destruction is the great unthinkable; thus, normal moral principles can be modified or suspended.

There are other ways to change the behaviour of the Israeli state than by public criticism or even public debate – we must work from within.

Jews criticising other Jews will open the door to increased anti-Semitism.
Diaspora Jews living outside Israel have no right to criticise – leave that to people who experience daily life there.

The existence and success of Israel (and this is the huge unspoken assumption behind most of the ideas listed above) somehow makes up for the six million lives lost in the Holocaust and thus deserves the unquestioning support of every decent Jew.

Muddled and tainted as many of these ideas are, they form a powerful barrier against any Australian Jew speaking even mildly against the Israeli state.

And then there is moral blackmail or self-censorship. The moral blackmail is not necessarily spoken but it takes these sorts of forms:

*How can you do this* (i.e. speak out against Israel) *to your own father, who lost his family in Auschwitz?*

*If you speak out, your brother/mother/cousin will not speak to you again.*

*How could I face my friend with whom I agree on most things, except he's a committed Zionist and would never forgive me?*

Or as one friend said to me, fully aware of the joke, ‘I’ll sign the ad, as long as you don’t tell my cousins!’

Perhaps more than anything, the Silence reflects a painful awareness of the complexity of the situation, the perceived need to be aware of all the ‘facts’ in this tortured and ever-changing story. On both sides there is a multitude of compulsive fact-followers experts in the art of fact and counter-fact, argument and rebuttal. They can cite the number of ‘illegal’ settlements by ‘rogue’ settlers; or, on the other side, the number of ‘lethal’ rockets raining down on the ‘brave’ settlers. They believe that an objective case can be made to justify the actions of the Israelis, or the Palestinians, and that case, with all facts marshalled, will in the end win the propaganda war. They ignore the most salient fact of all – that ‘facts’ can be marshalled to win almost any argument. It happens on both sides every day.

**Who to believe? What if you are wrong?** Here I must make a confession. I don’t know all the facts. I am an amateur in this deadly and important game, and that should be, in the opinion of many, enough to silence me.

But to my mind I know enough of what matters, or what matters to me. I know that the Palestinian minority in Israel does not have full political or human rights. I know that many of them have been dispossessed of their land and livelihoods and have lived in misery for many years. I know that hundreds of Jewish settlements are eating into what is commonly acknowledged to be Palestinian land. And that the wall that is still under construction is an abomination that divides Palestinians from their farms and schools, and makes everyday life passing through checkpoints and long detours difficult and dangerous and humiliating. And then there is Gaza, where the Palestinian population has been forced to live without building supplies
and basic necessities in a kind of open-air prison. I know that there are many breaches of humanitarian law and of humanitarian standards in all the situations I have mentioned. And I know that since the 1967 military occupation of Palestine, which continues to this day, the moral credibility of the Israeli state has steadily eroded.

I know enough to conclude that the Israeli state oppresses Palestinians, both its own minority and those in the occupied territories, in significant and unacceptable ways. There are, unhappily, many countries that persecute their minorities, some in ways far more horrendous than anything done by Israel. But I do not speak out against most of them; if I do anything at all I concentrate on human rights abuses in my own country, towards refugees and indigenous Australians. Why not leave Israel and its problems alone?

Anyone born in another country will know that a residual interest in the country of your birth can last a lifetime and take generations to eradicate completely. You can feel completely Australian yet have an attachment to another nation with which you have emotional and cultural ties. Life is complicated – it’s no big deal.

That’s the kind of thinking I have used for a long time. How else to describe myself, accurately, except as a Jewish-Hungarian Australian? But there’s the rub. The Jewish part is a complex package – not exactly religion or race, but a historical and cultural mix that because of the twentieth century’s nasty trajectory has a strong pull. It’s a pull that makes enthusiastically Australian Jews – and their counterparts in countries across the world – nonetheless feel strong ties with Israel.

HOWARD JACOBSON, WINNER of the 2010 Booker Prize for The Finkler Question, is a funny man and an excoriating writer. The question in the title stands in for the Jewish Question, on which the novel is a mordant if relentless riff. Jacobson dares to go where few others would, making deadly serious fun of Jews and Jewishness, anti-Semitism, Israel, terrorism, the Holocaust – you name it.

He is especially funny on organisations such as IAJV. He invents an English outfit called ASHamed Jews (and plays with the connotations of ‘ash’). ASHamed Jews becomes the platform for his anti-hero, Finkler, to vent his rage at Israel. The joke, as Jacobson sees it, is English Jews having the gall to be ashamed of Israeli Jews.

I laughed with Jacobson, but I had a problem, too. There is a kind of intellectual evasion, a category mistake even, for the sake of the satire. He makes no distinction between the Israeli state and those who live in it. Yet to criticise a state apparatus, its policies and bureaucracies, is a vastly different thing to criticising individuals for being Jewish. Diaspora Jews like me speak out against the current political and military powers in Israel, but we do not feel shame or dislike of the country because
of them. We are not self-haters, but nor are we willing to keep quiet because the state happens to be run by Jews.

Still, the ‘shame’ some Jews feel about Israel is a peculiar beast, and needs some unpicking. It originates, I think, in the notion of the purifying, even educative, effects of suffering. Jews have gone through much: they have been persecuted big-time and for a long time. That should give them moral insights not granted others, and a moral superiority which would ensure that they do not visit on others what they have had visited on them. Or so the theory goes. And when it turns out that the emperor has no clothes, that Jews are no more insightful or compassionate en masse or as a nation than any other people, the disillusionment and shame is correspondingly intense.

At the other end of the spectrum are those Jews who simply cannot acknowledge that Israel is a state like any other. It is a special case, the land promised by God to them. Israel can do no real wrong – it’s all lies and distortions by its enemies. Thus their continued blindness in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary.

THOSE AUSTRALIAN JEWS whose unease about Israel’s actions has been mounting in recent years could start by re-examining their fear that in criticising Israel they will be abetting anti-Semitism. I believe the opposite is the case. Non-Jews often stifle disapproval of Israel’s misdemeanours for fear of being labelled anti-Semites. So when Jews speak out, as we did in the national press, there is relief, and permission given. Many responses to the advertisement came from non-Jews, asking if they could sign up.

For me, there can only be one answer to the dilemma, although to my shame I have taken half a lifetime to come to the realisation that if I see any state apparatus – run by Australians or Ugandans or Israelis – oppressing its minority and breaching humanitarian standards, I should speak out and defend that minority. If that state is important to me, even if it is not my own country, there is all the more reason to try to persuade it back to the paths of righteousness, so that one day I may again be proud of my association with it.

Susan Varga’s books include Heddy and Me, Happy Families and Broometime, co-authored with Anne Coombs. Her latest novel is Headlong (UWA Press, 2010). Her essays have previously appeared in Griffith REVIEW: Participation Society, Staying Alive and Our Global Face.
Global migration

The need for a global response

Sergio Marchi

WHEN considering international migration, most governments are predominately preoccupied by one overriding issue: ‘illegal’ migrants. The rule of law and due process are as important to a successful and fair migration policy as they are to any other public policy domain, but governments and the international community must find a way of moving beyond this single frontier. Indeed, if we are to effectively harness and manage migration forces – and provide the coherent order everyone seeks – then governments need to build an international framework for migration policy-making.

The prolific movement of peoples is a sign of our times. Migrants leave from, transit through and move to every country: big and small, rich and poor. The old world, categorised by purely ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries, no longer exists. Migration has become a global phenomenon.

Yet our responses continue to be largely national. As such, they have become outdated and indifferent to the new realities of the global village – in contrast to most other transnational issues, such as trade, human rights, labour, health, environment, intellectual property, and development. These are shared concerns of all governments, who in turn have created multilateral institutions with the mandate to manage and direct these cross-border disciplines. In other words, these pressing matters have the benefit of global governance.

Migration remains a glaring exception, and the resulting vacuum serves to only exacerbate the issue’s prevailing emotions and complexities. When I was the Canadian Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, there were no regular meetings in which you could discuss and act on the main issues of the day with fellow ministers from around the world. Seventeen years later, despite a mobility revolution, this is still the case. Moreover, there is no single overarching multilateral institution responsible for directing the policy and political traffic. Instead, the chore is currently and loosely scattered among fourteen different agencies. It means that no one is in charge of global migration policy.
I am not suggesting that a new, big institution is necessarily the answer. But the status quo is unsustainable. Global forces cannot be addressed by national policies alone. They will always fall short. Domestic programs need to be complemented by a more co-operative international regime.

There have been numerous migration reports and commissions over the years that have urged us to supplement our national-only course, but the political and policy deficit continues. I would have thought that the historic forces which have shaped our new order would have compelled us to amend our ways: an ever shrinking, interconnected world; a process of unrelenting globalisation; an integrated economic market, with a premium on labour mobility; a world community where migrants have doubled since 1980 alone, and where man-made crises and mother nature ensure that human movement – both forced and voluntary, within and across national borders – will be a constant reality.

These are the times we live in: a world ripe with great opportunities, alongside great turbulences. As human mobility has intensified and become more politically visible, citizens are demanding that their governments get it right.

If governments are to rise to the occasion, leaders must first recognise that they can neither talk about the forces of international trade, nor the challenges of world hunger, disease and terrorism, nor the dangers posed by climate change, nor indeed about global migration and development – and then proceed to deal with them in an isolated fashion. The imperative to establish and follow a coherent plan has become painfully evident. The recent creation of the G-20 perhaps best captures the paradigm shift that needs to take place in governance.

As migration decision-making continues to insist on national strategies, our policymakers need to candidly ask themselves if these are really strategies. Do they adequately address the increasing and changing patterns of international migration? Or do they now act more like straightjackets? I think the answers are rather too obvious.

WHILE NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS jealously guard their sovereignty, political leaders need to openly assess the reality on the ground, as it really is. Establishing an international framework is not principally about governments losing authority. Frankly, in an accelerating era of globalisation, employers, smugglers, migrant networks, agents – and individual migrants themselves – have already taken things into their own hands, irrespective of regulations governing admission. While governments may have won a number of battles against unauthorised migration, what about the larger, ongoing war for better control of who enters, leaves, transits and remains in their territories? After all, how did twelve million undocumented individuals enter the US in the first place?
The lesson we need to learn, I believe, is that managing migration internationally is more about countries reclaiming sovereignty and control, and exercising it collectively – to the advantage of states and migrants alike. To paraphrase Hillary Clinton, it will take a village: a global village.

I do not underestimate how formidable this is. We must think and act prudently. As well, we must recognise that the new building blocks will be part of an incremental process. But for the time being, we should begin by at least raising the relevant questions, including:

*Are national responses alone a realistic remedy?*

*How and where can governments and international agencies enhance their collaboration and co-operation?*

*What are the elements for an international framework, and how would it operate?*

*And what kind of national flexibilities would this framework retain?*

I am convinced that migration remains largely an opportunity – for both migrants and nations. But as a deeply emotional and political issue, it is also freighted with fears and negative perceptions that create anxieties for people, from all backgrounds and from all lands. For these reasons – these contradictions – governments, by working together, can avoid the shortcomings of a go-it-alone migration strategy.

Governments need to be candid and courageous when realities and pressures demand that they rethink and rebuild. And political leaders must guide our governments and institutions by providing the international vision and leadership that global migration demands. Only then will we get global migration right.

Ambassador Sergio Marchi is a senior fellow with the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development in Geneva, and teaches in the international relations department at Webster University. He has been the Canadian Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, the Canadian Ambassador to the UN and WTO in Geneva, and a commissioner on the UN Global Commission on International Migration.
Invisible innocence

It happens here too

Lynne Weathered

It is hard for most people to imagine being convicted of a crime they did not commit. Yet this scenario is not only possible, but far more likely than it should be. Sometimes it is just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or witnesses mistaking what they thought they saw. Perhaps you were the last person to see the victim alive, and the police suspected you and did not follow other leads, or your lawyer did not provide an adequate defence, or the prosecution did not inform the defence of contrary evidence. Or perhaps the evidence was flawed. Many circumstantial cases still result in a conviction, despite the criminal justice system demanding guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

Systemic factors regularly result in the conviction of innocent people: incorrect eyewitness identification, tunnel vision, bad lawyering, withholding exculpatory evidence, incorrect scientific evidence, false confessions, informant/snitch testimony. Eyewitness identification, which can so convincingly influence a jury, is the major factor in wrongful convictions later corrected by DNA evidence in the United States.

Imagine if this happened to you. You know the truth: you are innocent; someone else is not. At least two people know the truth – the perpetrator and you – but to the rest of the world the case is closed and you are guilty. Your innocence is invisible. You can shout and scream to those who will listen but, even if they believe you, what can they do – how can they correct a terrible mistake in a system that has concluded through detailed, sophisticated processes that you are guilty?

The Griffith University Innocence Project was established a decade ago to assist wrongly convicted people in Australia. It is part of an international movement that involves more than fifty pro-bono organisations. Hundreds of innocent people have now been exonerated, most from the United States, but also from England, Canada and elsewhere.

The stories are compelling and heart-wrenching – stories of lives snatched away for years, sometimes decades. Patrick Nicholls told the English Criminal Cases
Rubin ‘Hurricane’ Carter was released from prison in 1985, after serving almost twenty years – many of them spent in solitary confinement, for refusing to act like a guilty man – for a triple-murder he did not commit. His story became the film The Hurricane, starring Denzel Washington, and it highlighted not only the tragic circumstances of the conviction and incarceration, but Carter’s incomparable spirit. That spirit has been devoted to working for other wrongly convicted people since his release. Rubin endorsed the Griffith University Innocence Project in 2003, and his haunting statement, ‘Freedom is something that can be taken for granted. Until it’s taken away,’ reminded us that the nightmare of being wrongly convicted can happen here.

On 4 January 2011, Cornelius Dupree from Texas was declared innocent after thirty years in prison for rape and robbery – crimes he did not commit. DNA testing finally highlighted his wrongful conviction, thanks to the long-term preservation of the evidence in his case. About a dozen fellow ‘exonerees’, following a new tradition, waited outside the prison gates to greet Dupree. Another 266 American exonerees have been released with the help of DNA innocence testing. Their experiences have enabled the criminal justice system to learn what went wrong in specific cases, and identify systemic causes of wrongful conviction.

The voices of the wrongly convicted are powerful, and they remind us not to ignore those who claim innocence. They remind us that the system needs to examine claims of wrongful conviction, so that innocent people do not languish in prison or live with the stigma of a wrongful conviction for the rest of their lives. They remind us that they too have been victims of a system that got it wrong.

IN APRIL 2002, I attended a wrongful-conviction conference at Harvard University. It was the first time I had heard the stories of the wrongly convicted. I listened to a father, wrongly identified and convicted of rape, who constantly read and researched the law, and eventually obtained a DNA test to prove his innocence. ‘Are you sure you have enough blood?’ he asked when they finally came to take a sample for the test. He met his daughter when she was fourteen. He had been in prison since she was a baby. Every exoneree has a horror story. As I listened I marvelled at their ability to withstand the injustice and their ability to forgive.

I remember listening to the beautiful Jennifer Thompson describe how she was horrifically raped, survived the vicious attack, and how her eyewitness testimony and incorrect cross-racial identification resulted in the conviction of an innocent
man, Ronald Cotton. She described her apology to Cotton, his forgiveness, and the firm friendship they and their families now share. I think of the mother who fought for twenty years to prove her son’s innocence, while raising her other children, who had to endure the tormenting comments of others.

I remember speaking to the remarkable Betty Anne Waters, whose story became the Hollywood movie Conviction, released in Australia in February this year. Waters told me of the lengths she went to in her efforts to prove her brother, Kenny, was innocent – putting herself through law school and gaining admission as a lawyer before, with the Innocence Project in New York, achieving her brother’s exonation eighteen years later. He died six months later. She emphasised that no one wins when the wrong person is convicted, and the issues last long after release. The 267 American DNA exonerees spent approximately 3,471 years in prison; seventeen were on death row – and this is the tip of the iceberg. When they are released, many face financial, emotional and psychological trauma and distress, in addition to the practical difficulties of re-entering a world that has significantly changed.

As I listened to these stories, it was apparent just how much time and effort it takes to achieve exonerations. Many won’t succeed. I remember thinking that Australia would be different. I was certain that the battle for DNA innocence testing in the United States would not be repeated in Queensland, in Australia. That our more conciliatory system would be reflected in a co-operative approach to uncovering wrongful convictions. That Australia’s approach to correcting wrongful convictions would be a model for other countries to emulate.

I was wrong.

WHEN CHRIS NYST and Jason Murakami from Nyst Lawyers suggested the Griffith Law School create an innocence project, I was excited. It appealed to my ideals of justice; I was young and idealistic. None of us imagined how difficult it would be to have post-appeal reviews of innocence claims properly considered, or that it would take a decade to establish guidelines to make it possible.

From the outset we were thwarted as we sought information about cases where DNA evidence existed. It took almost seven years after our investigations began into two cases before we were even told whether evidence existed.

Semester after semester, year after year, I told my students about countless letters; numerous meetings with government authorities; exhausted Freedom of Information avenues; meetings with Attorneys-General – five since the project began; briefs prepared for counsel; project advisory board meetings and the board’s support for DNA innocence testing; and formal submissions for law reform prepared and presented to gain information. Inevitably at least one student would ask, somewhat mystified, ‘But why won’t they tell you whether evidence exists?'
Why won’t they do a DNA test?’ I would attempt to explain the complexities involved as I understood them, but felt I never satisfactorily answered their questions, as even today I am unsure exactly what the full answers are.

WRONGFUL CONVICTIO[N IS an almost impossible predicament. It is not meant to occur in a civilised society with a sophisticated criminal justice system. But it does. And effecting even a minor change in a criminal justice system that is respected and well established is never easy.

Australia is different to the United States. The problem is not the same, for our systems are different. In many cases we have greater protections to help prevent wrongful conviction in the first place – audio or video recording of interrogations, time limits on how long a suspect can be held in custody. Our judges are appointed and not elected. But we can make terrible mistakes – Lindy Chamberlain, John Button, Edward Splatt and Andrew Mallard are just a few Australians who have endured wrongful convictions.

Commissions of Inquiry in Australia have long highlighted the potential for wrongful conviction through overzealous policing or police corruption. ‘Verballing’ of suspects was found to be commonplace by the 1980s Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland. The Wood Royal Commission in 1997 in New South Wales highlighted flaws in police practice there. There is no easy answer to the problem of wrongful conviction. It requires vigilance – by politicians, lawyers, journalists, and all others who care about the rule of law and criminal justice.

Because our criminal justice system is not perfect, wrongful convictions will continue to occur. YouTube and the internet more broadly have made footage readily available of severely inappropriate manhandling of suspects by police officers. One 2010 recording shows a police officer assaulting a man and a woman, including shoving a hose into the man’s bloodied face. Acceptance of the system’s imperfections does not equate to complacency. It moves us to recognise something must be done and the disempowered position of our applicants adds to our sense of responsibility.

ONE OF THE clear lessons from the US innocence movement was how DNA testing shed new light on old cases. Innocence projects were highlighting how much could be achieved by law students working under the supervision of experienced criminal lawyers and academics. They became a unique resource, able to undertake much of the time-consuming case review for course credit. The applicants have someone to review their case free of charge; the students gain a much better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the criminal justice system, work on real cases where principles of justice are highlighted, and become skilled in
managing files. For many, it is a return to the ideals that attracted them to the study of law in the first place.

The Griffith Innocence Project, modelled on and adapted from these projects, focuses on cases where DNA has the potential to uncover a wrongful conviction. Each semester students learn about the criminal justice system, work on real cases and, as a result of their experiences, seemingly further develop the desire to add their fingerprint to the efforts for justice.

Before it can be determined whether DNA testing could highlight a wrongful conviction, a thorough review of the material used at trial to secure the conviction is needed. Consideration of witness statements, records of interviews with police, brief of evidence, committal and trial transcripts, and any other available scientific evidence are also part of the review. The key question becomes: what biological material could be DNA tested that might show a wrongful conviction, to exclude the applicant and potentially provide the DNA profile of the real perpetrator?

To be probative, the biological material to be DNA tested needs to be sufficiently connected to the crime. For example, DNA testing of a rape kit has the potential to confirm the correctness of the conviction. If the DNA profile obtained not only excludes the person convicted but matches another on the criminal database, it also possibly identifies the perpetrator. In 117 of the US DNA exonerations, the true suspect or perpetrator has been identified.

The next step is to determine what biological material is available for DNA innocence testing and to gather any other scientific information. Queensland Health Forensic and Scientific Services, commonly known as the John Tonge Centre, is where most DNA tests in the state are undertaken, and was the starting point for the further investigation and requests for information on cases after our initial review. Early on we wrote letters requesting specific information about cases. But when the information was not forthcoming, we realised that pursuing information on behalf of our applicants was not going to be easy.

We were undertaking activities beyond the traditional legal avenues, and newness was one of our obstacles: there were no precedents for providing this information. Meetings and discussions failed, and we could not obtain information about what evidence existed for potential DNA testing.

Freedom of Information also failed, despite requests and payments by applicants who had so little money. Selected information was provided but it became clear that Freedom of Information would not provide a full review. Not only was the known available information not fully provided, but also the possible unknown documents that could make a difference. The Andrew Mallard case showed that when exonerating documents not disclosed to the defence at trial became available, new light was shed on the case. But you cannot request a document through Freedom of Information if you do not know it exists.
REFORM WAS NEEDED if claims of wrongful conviction were to be effectively reviewed. The Attorney-General would have to intervene to access information and DNA innocence testing. We have had support from five Attorneys-General since the project commenced but the process was never easy. Rod Welford was the first we met in 2002. His office subsequently began considering two cases, but while the extra information he sought was being prepared a new Attorney-General was appointed. Because no legislation or protocols formally existed, with each new Attorney-General we essentially started again – gaining support and then satisfying the additional requirements of each. Four barristers, including two QCs, provided pro-bono briefs, stating that after reviewing the cases, they considered them suitable for DNA innocence testing. From initial investigations, the process took almost seven years before we were informed whether the evidence for such testing even existed.

The answer was no. There was no evidence that could be tested in either case. We were very disheartened. It was devastating for the applicants. We reminded ourselves that despite all the setbacks we were still pursuing a just cause, and that the students were learning important lessons, including the significance of undertaking work to the best of their abilities and in the most ethical way in whatever area of law they chose – they were seeing the consequences of potential failures in the system.

Knowledge of the existence or not of evidence to test is essential and seemingly non-controversial. Our experience highlighted the need for information about the evidence to be provided in a timely fashion, and the need to preserve evidence for possible future testing.

Knowing that some American innocence projects had been told there was no evidence, and evidence was later found, we asked when the biological evidence in the two cases we were pursuing had been destroyed. Six months later we were told that biological material from one case still existed.

Immediately afterwards, Cameron Dick became our fourth Attorney-General, and our advisory board, which includes prominent and highly respected judges and lawyers, among them at that time the former High Court Justice Mary Gaudron, began to push for DNA testing. The media got wind of the investigations, and – while we had never publicly discussed cases, out of respect for victims and their families – this increased the pressure.

In December 2009, Attorney-General Dick allowed DNA retesting to take place on one piece of the biological evidence collected and tested for the original trial. The DNA testing used on this piece of evidence at the time is now considered highly subjective and new technology has dramatically improved the accuracy of testing, assuming the now twenty-year-old evidence still has integrity. The retesting in 2010 provided a
remarkably perfect match to the DNA of the suspect – yet aspects of the collection, handling and labelling of samples and evidence two decades ago unfortunately call into question its true probative value today. It is likely that other, significantly more probative evidence exists in this case that has never been DNA tested.

There are multiple dilemmas in the use of DNA in criminal courts, at the juncture between law, science and the media. DNA can absolutely exclude someone as the donor of the crime scene biological sample – but when it is used to demonstrate a person’s guilt, calculations are employed to estimate the likelihood of the DNA profile obtained from the sample originating from the accused compared with the chance of it coming from another person selected at random. Such calculations might suggest billion-to-one odds in a country of about 22 million people, and could easily lead to an inflated impression of a defendant’s connection to the crime. DNA ‘matches’ can be reported or construed by juries as conclusive evidence of guilt without their having considered interpretative error, contamination, or planting of evidence, among other things.

Even today, with more stringent procedures for the collection, transfer, storage and testing of biological evidence, errors still occur. Recently, in Victoria, contaminated DNA evidence resulted in Farah Jama spending approximately fifteen months in prison before his conviction was overturned. Despite this, Jama was fortunate. If the mistake had not been corrected at appeal he might well have languished in prison, yet another of those inmates claiming innocence but with no opportunity to prove it.

After almost a decade of lobbying, on 5 August 2010 Queensland Attorney-General Cameron Dick introduced guidelines that allow, for the first time, an official avenue for DNA innocence testing for wrongful-conviction applicants. These guidelines alone will not be sufficient to correct wrongful convictions, or address the systemic issues surrounding wrongful conviction. Much more needs to be done – possibly including a body to review all claims of wrongful conviction, akin to England’s more wide-reaching Criminal Cases Review Commission. For the small number of wrongful convictions in which DNA will be probative, these guidelines are limited and require further expansion.

Yet the guidelines are a substantial step forward in promoting justice. In the US, forty-eight states have DNA innocence-testing legislation; in Australia only Queensland and New South Wales have guidelines. More must and will be done, and these guidelines have started us on the right path.

Time is of the essence. The Queensland guidelines tacitly acknowledge that despite the state’s sophisticated criminal justice system, wrongful convictions occur – and no one wins when an innocent person is incarcerated. These guidelines will finally allow some of the wrongly convicted people in Queensland to use DNA to prove their innocence.
Our students are a success, too. A system is made up of rules, but people make those rules. I am confident some of our students will be among those who will make a difference for the better when they join the workforce.

As the film Conviction highlights, exonerations are never easy and almost always involve a long, hard-fought battle. Prisoners are some of the most disadvantaged and disempowered people in society, and those who claim innocence are easy to ignore. The project will continue to fight for proper investigation of claims, to correct errors and support reforms to reduce the potential for wrongful convictions. It will work to assist those who are wrongly convicted to make visible their innocence.

Lynne Weathered is a lecturer and convenor of the Griffith University Innocence Project, initiated and supported by Nyst Lawyers partners Chris Nyst and Jason Murakami. She is also a member of the board of the International Innocence Network. The views expressed in this article are hers, and not necessarily those of the project or network.
The dispossessed
The decline of a coastal Koori community
Bronwyn Adcock

IN mid-afternoon just days after Christmas, finding a park in the small National Heritage town of Central Tilba, on the far South Coast of New South Wales, was proving difficult. Rows of Audis, Prados, the occasional BMW and all kinds of shining new four-wheel drives lined the narrow streets. Throngs of day-trippers surged in and out of the century-old houses now converted to shops and cafés: pretty timber-clad buildings with red tin roofs, bordered by neat gardens of hydrangeas and roses.

Central Tilba is a snapshot of a prosperous early-twentieth-century rural Australian town, captured for voracious tourists. In the Old Cheese Factory I stood shoulder to shoulder with others as cheese, ice cream, fudge, books, tea towels and a mind-numbing array of knick-knacks were sold. Devonshire teas and meat pies were gobbled as people sauntered and shopped their way through the art gallery, the leather shop, and the new-age hemp clothing and crystal store.

I caught myself gaping, astounded by the display of affluence. Just a few minutes’ drive from Central Tilba is the Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Village, a community of 180 people. Here the median weekly income plummets from Tilba’s $379 a week to just $200 a week. At the entrance to the village an Aboriginal flag flutters, and a sprawl of 1970s brick-veneer homes begins. A few are well kept, but most are in various states of disrepair: broken windows, sagging gutters, overgrown lawns littered with rubbish. There are as many decaying car bodies parked on lawns as there are cars on the road. Save for two kids fighting over a bike, the streets were deserted when I visited that same day after Christmas.

Adjacent to the village is the Umbarra Cultural Centre. If Central Tilba is a snapshot of Australian history, Umbarra is a panorama. Inside is a museum and cultural centre that tells the story of the Yuin, the people who, archaeological evidence suggests, have inhabited this region for 20,000 years. Yet on this day, with
thousands of tourists nearby, the car park was deserted and the centre doors locked. Outside, a boat with ‘Wallaga Lake Cultural Tours’ emblazoned on the side sat in the dirt, covered in a film of dust.

Earlier I sat chatting with Uncle Stephen Foster on the doorstep of his house, behind us an old man coughing excruciatingly and a radio blaring. Uncle Stephen was spending the day, like most days, sitting around listening to music on the radio. At forty-four he already has the emaciated body of an old man, his face so tiny it seems all eyes and smile. Like many here, he has had a long battle with the grog. ‘I used to go seven days a week if I could. Me little girl and me diabetes slowed me down. I slowed down for me daughter – that was me main priority. I just drink once in the blue moon now.’

As we talked a voice in the near distance started yelling aggressively, the tone making me nervous, but Uncle Stephen waved away my anxious enquiries with a gentle flick of his hand. Violence, particularly drunken violence, is not unusual here; while no one likes it, most are acclimatised.

To find this pocket of disadvantage amid the rolling green farmland and tourist towns of the South Coast is incongruous, and disturbing. Like most people who live in the region, I’d never set foot in the community before. To find myself venturing in with the same sense of curiosity and trepidation I used to take into foreign countries was strange. I was motivated by a simple question, but one I suspected was unanswerable: what went so wrong here?

IT TOOK ME a few minutes to realise that the reception I was receiving was not entirely a welcome. It was about a month before Christmas and my first visit to Wallaga Lake. I had been asked to front the full board of the Merrimans Land Council to explain my project. This is Aboriginal-owned land, managed by the land council, and while I was not explicitly told I wouldn’t be allowed to work here if they didn’t agree, that was the implication. I was viewed with suspicion. Some insisted on seeing what I wrote before it was published. Talking about some government-funded service providers who’d come in to the community, one board member said: ‘They just come, use us to get funding, make money and go.’ At this, elder Aunty Shirley Foster said to me: ‘Just like you, really,’ and walked out to have a cigarette.

The impression I got was that I was just the latest in a long line of white-fellas who come in with good intentions and inevitably disappoint. I steered the conversation to conditions in the community: ‘What are unemployment rates like?’ After some discussion they could only think of two people who worked full-time and only two kids who’d finished Year 12. As our meeting drew to a close, one person said: ‘I should just record this, and play it every time someone comes and asks. It never changes.’
THE WALLAGA LAKE community is a former Aboriginal Reserve, created from a government desire in the late 1800s to control and isolate the dwindling and increasingly marginalised Aboriginal population of the state. The ageing weatherboard cottage that the council now operates from is the former office of the last reserve manager, the man who once controlled every aspect of their lives. It was in this building that I sat down to speak with Aunty Shirley Foster – a tall, silver-haired, indomitable woman in her seventies – of a time when her people ‘were treated no better than cattle and sheep’.

After the Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Reserve was established, in 1891, for seventy years people from the local tribes, but also from the north and west of the state and even as far as Victoria, were rounded up and sent here. Residents were housed, and given rations in return for work. The manager controlled everything: who was and wasn’t allowed in, who worked and when, what language was spoken (no Aboriginal languages), even how people’s houses were kept.

Most people over fifty living on Wallaga today remember this life. Lorraine Naylor was a young girl in the late 1950s and ’60s: ‘The houses were kept nice and clean, men used to come and inspect them every week. They were good days. We used to get the food, the rations handed out to us. We had to go to school every day or the welfare men would come and check on us. It was a good little school. Teacher didn’t teach us much – we did sewing, and a bit of reading and writing, and sport.’

Aunty Shirley also remembers her neat house with pride; before arriving at Wallaga, in 1947, she’d lived in a tent her mother made out of corn bags and government blankets. The family constantly shifted across Gippsland as her mother sought work and tried to avoid the feared ‘welfare’ taking her children. But the fear didn’t stop at Wallaga. At seventeen, pregnant with her first child, Aunty Shirley and her family were thrown off Wallaga because her mother refused to work – she wanted to care for her sick daughter. After retreating to the bush they were eventually readmitted.

A number of elders recall a day sometime in the 1960s when police arrived to forcibly remove six small children, all siblings. The elders suspect the manager tipped off police that the children’s parents had gone to town. As the crying children were driven away other parents screamed and ran after the vehicle. ‘That was the dirty things they done, you know,’ Aunty Shirley told me.

Uncle Max Munroe also saw it: ‘Sneaky bloody things they used to do here to the blackfellas. We couldn’t do anything – if you kicked up a blue about it you’d be in jail.’

LIKE MANY IN Wallaga, Jenny ‘Yuin’ Kelly can’t pinpoint the moment the decline started. ‘I think from the 1970s we all went Yeah, we’re free now, and the
government started handing out lots of money and land back. For a while we sort of went up, and then our people started going down again.’ The landmark 1967 referendum finally made Aborigines citizens of their own country, and the reserve was abolished. Individuals in the now free community fought and won some major battles for land rights; a Koori preschool was established. But in a path depressingly similar to that trodden by many Indigenous communities in northern Australia, it also marked the beginning of a slow descent into poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol problems, and violence. Violence so extreme that, at times, government service providers have refused to enter this village.

Driving much of the discord here is a decades-long enmity between two families in the village. Aunty Shirley refers to it ominously as ‘the split’, and refused to tell me more. But, as I came to understand, it is essentially a power struggle between families that originate from different parts of the country, passing on through generations and picking up new points of conflict – today, it is even played out by kids on Facebook.

I first met Jenny, or ‘Yuin’, as she likes to be called, when I visited the Umbarra Cultural Centre as a tourist, many years ago. She left a lasting impression on me, partly because of her deep passion for the stories of her ancestors, but mainly because she was a fabulous tour guide. We climbed the sacred Guluga – a deep-green forested mountain with round rocky outcrops that rises above both Wallaga Lake and Central Tilba – and walked through the places where young Aborigines were taught the ways of their people in a time before contact with white people. In late 2008 a writer in the Sydney Morning Herald called Umbarra ‘one of the enduring success stories of the Aboriginal tourism industry’.

Within a year, it had closed. ‘I miss it something bad – it was the best job,’ said Yuin, a slight, dark-haired woman of fifty. ‘Since then I’ve gotten more poorer, more lonely, more isolated, more depressed.’ Umbarra not only connected white people like me with a history I didn’t know; it also connected this isolated Aboriginal community to the wider community, and beyond.

‘I met people from all around the world. I ended up meeting new friends too,’ Uncle Stephen Foster told me of the six years he spent working for Umbarra. Like Yuin, he’s never worked since, and is frustrated it all came to nothing. ‘I should have had me own business after working over there, bloody six years of it. I came out with a small business certificate – I thought once you get a certificate like that you should be able to start your own business, but there’s nothing.’

It’s difficult to unravel what went wrong at Umbarra, but Lorraine Naylor, a long-time Wallaga Lake resident and former board member, explained to me that business was slowing down and insurance costs were high. Then the Howard government shut down the CDEP, the Indigenous employment scheme which employed most of Umbarra’s workers: ‘Once the CDEP went we had no workers.
We had only two left on full-time pay and then that money dried up, and Umbarra started to go down.’

I tracked down Richard Barcham, the man who managed the CDEP in the region, and he didn’t disagree with this assessment. Barcham, who’s now a doctoral candidate at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University, also attributed Umbarra’s demise to problems with governance at a board level: ‘It’s about the ability of people to come to grips with how a capitalist business operates, how a board of directors operates. It can be difficult for an Indigenous board, and there is no real capacity for them to access these complex and difficult skills.’

‘I don’t want to put it on the community,’ said Yuin, ‘but they did lose interest as well.’

‘I KEEP TELLING them, we’re getting too old, it’s up to you to learn things and do things so you can run the community.’ After decades of community work Aunty Shirley wants to start handing over – but like many here, she doesn’t like what she sees. A lament for the behaviour of youth is one of the most common things I heard in Wallaga Lake. ‘They are just disrespectful, they don’t listen to their uncles and aunties, they would rather let their Fs and Cs fly at a person,’ said Uncle Stephen, who is Shirley’s son. ‘They got nothing to do here. The only thing they do is drive up and down the bloody road.’

But what are their parents teaching them?

‘You don’t want to know,’ he said, and looked away in disgust.

Aaron Parsons, who’s twenty, told me the kids are just bored. There’s nothing to do, not even an oval to kick a football on. ‘Growing up here, you’re sort of away from town, there’s no shops out here, so if the boys ain’t got anything to do they just go into Narooma, they get in there and break windows, do really silly things.’ And when the kids start drinking, which now starts in their early teens, chaos follows. ‘It turns the community upside down. It’s the kids who end up getting the parents into arguments, so there ends up being a brawl. Family against family. They end up fighting around, they burn bins, they just turn the place upside down, bottles everywhere, driving around in cars, which is really uncool.’

While this behaviour is condemned, many kids are following in the footsteps of the previous generation. ‘They’re also the ones who rub it in your face, you know,’ Aaron said of the adults. ‘They are doing it in the open, they sit anywhere and drink, they’re driving cars and drinking – that’s not setting a good example for kids.’

A brush with death at fifteen turned Aaron’s life around. He and four mates were joy-riding when their car slammed into a tree. Aaron broke both arms and a leg, and bit his tongue nearly in half. Witnesses were amazed anyone survived. Now, other
than a few quiet drinks at home or at the club in town with his grandparents, Aaron stays away from the grog and the wild behaviour it induces. He views much of what he has witnessed as a cautionary tale. ‘When I was growing up I watched me aunties and uncles carry on with their kids, and then I watched them get them taken away, and placed in foster care, not with their rightful parents.’

Aaron comes across as an ambitious, bright young man – he’s just joined a youth sub-committee on the Land Council, and carries a weight of expectation. Meeting him gave me a glimmer of hope: while the intergenerational slide into destruction is common, it may not be inevitable.

ANNE GREENAWAY IS the fourth chief executive of the Merrimans Land Council in five years – an indication of just how highly politicised this community has become. She is a warm, efficient person, and as we talked in her office little kids came in and were sent away with handfuls of biscuits. While she acknowledges huge problems with grog, Greenaway believes that respect for elders has gone primarily because of ‘how we have had to live’. Decades of dependency on government services and ‘solutions’ imposed upon the community have created a new kind of servitude. ‘It’s going back to a mission kind of management; government is telling us what we need when we know what we need. Then we get into trouble if we go outside those boundaries, if we don’t accept what the program is or change it to suit our circumstances. It’s a welfare mentality.’

This method of service delivery has gutted the community, Greenaway said. ‘People think, Well, they’re not going to listen and so we’ll accept that, and that takes the fight out of us. That’s what you see in this community, the fight’s gone out of them. People think, I’m just hitting my head up against a brick wall if I continue to fight, so I’ll just accept it, just accept being on the dole; I’ll drown my sorrows, because there is nothing else I can do. It is very detrimental.’

‘I DO NOT want to hear platitudes about bureaucrats being appointed, million-dollar programs and all of that nonsense when the outcomes in these communities are not real,’ a clearly frustrated member of the NSW parliament said two years ago. ‘The programs in these communities are not delivering better protection for children and women.’

Andrew Constance has been the local member for Bega, which covers Wallaga Lake, for eight years. That day he was trying to move a motion calling for improved services to Wallaga, but was being thwarted by government ministers listing the many things already being done. Constance is still as exasperated: there are only thirty-eight homes in Wallaga Lake. ‘A lot of money has been sloshed around but with very little outcome.’
Governments have not ignored Wallaga. A person who works in the
community-service sector locally described a recent meeting when people were
asked to raise their hands if they were funded by government to assist Wallaga
Lake. Forty-five hands went up – though, he added, ‘I’ve never seen half of those
people since.’

I approached both the state and the federal governments to ask what services
they provide specifically for Wallaga Lake. The NSW Department of Aboriginal
Affairs came back with a list of seventeen different services and government
departments. The office for the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Jenny
Macklin, listed twelve specific programs funded since 2008, including new building
projects, education and youth programs, funding for employment providers – at a
total cost of more than $2 million.

Anne Greenaway told me that while there has been some change and
governments are starting to listen, the attitude has generally been: ‘This is what
we’re going to do for you, we’re going to throw all this money at you.’ The lack of
consultation means the community ends up with programs or services that are
ineffective. Initiatives are often only funded for short periods, two-year trials, so just
as they begin to get traction the funding stops. The stream of short-term training is a
running joke. ‘We are the most trained Indigenous people in New South Wales, us
here in Wallaga,’ Uncle Max Munroe said, laughing. ‘We can do all this training and
still not get a job.’

One of the federal government’s programs to help the people of Wallaga Lake
has – very quietly – collapsed. In 2009 the government announced funding of
$402,000 for two Intensive Support Playgroups, one for Wallaga Lake and another
for Indigenous kids in nearby Bega. It sounded like a great idea: early childhood and
family support workers go into the community and set up a playgroup, and work
with children and their parents on early childhood development issues.

In Wallaga Lake the kids eagerly attended, but parents and caregivers were
not interested, undermining the central aim of imparting skills to parents. Some
parents were simply dropping their kids off at the playgroup so they could go
drinking. Tensions arose with the service provider, and the program was
withdrawn. In Bega many of the Indigenous families are related to those at
Wallaga, and live in the mainstream community; the mothers and
grandmothers came along with their children, and the program is flourishing.

A recent state initiative also had a less than spectacular outcome. ‘Weaving the Net’
is a program targeting child abuse and family violence, by training people within the
community to respond. People in Wallaga Lake requested it, but few attended
regularly and the group, which was meant to be ongoing, has stopped meeting. Anne
Greenaway said, ‘While that could still possibly happen, people were not as
enthusiastic or as committed as one would expect from eighteen months’ work.’
Placing the blame for failure on governments and ‘whitefellas’ is a commonly expressed sentiment, yet it also seems to me the community is not bad at letting itself down too. ‘There is a bit of lethargy,’ Anne Greenaway said. ‘People think nothing will change, so they don’t take ownership.’

FOR SUCH A dispossessed people, this small piece of land is of profound value, yet it has also paved the way for profound isolation. Wallaga Lake is eighteen kilometres from the nearest town, Narooma. The only public transport is the school bus. Without a driver’s licence or car – uncommon here, due to poverty and disqualification – Wallaga Lake is the end of the road. It makes holding down work almost impossible. Uncle Stephen Foster lost his licence more than ten years ago. ‘I just kept drink-driving, and driving while disqualified, so I can only blame myself for that.’ He won’t get it back until the end of the decade, well past the end of his potential working life.

Yet the isolation is not just geographic. Many of the things that occur here are so at odds with the South Coast I know that it could almost be a parallel universe. The reason most homes are derelict is because many residents don’t pay their rent, so there is no revenue to repair them. Then there is the anti-social behaviour: public drinking, destruction of property, groups of kids wagging school, absent parents, the thirteen-year-old girl with a baby. None of these things is unknown in the wider community, but here they are tolerated and more prevalent. So are physical fights, a source of amusement and entertainment for the kids, who rush over in excitement to watch if the adults start punching.

Several people who live outside the community but are familiar with it claim that sexual abuse of children has occurred. Anne Greenaway agrees that ‘one or two’ perpetrators are known: ‘The issue is that those who are witness to it, or have the facts, are not the ones willing to take the steps they have to. I will say family politics stops a lot of it being talked about or acted on. There are instances of it being generational – not necessarily here now – but it comes back to the family putting pressure on the victim. And that’s what drags the community down, the silence.’

LATE ONE AFTERNOON, about halfway though the school holidays, scores of kids were leaping about with uncontained excitement outside the recently renovated community hall. It was movie night, organised by the co-ordinator of the Outreach Centre, Bruce Macpherson, and hotdogs were about to be served. Two Aboriginal police liaison officers were there, but the only adult from the village to turn up was Yuin Kelly.

Along with the hotdogs, lavish praise was being heaped on the kids, and they were eating it up. ‘Wow, deadly! You are going to be a leader one day,’ Yuin told a young
barefoot girl who was rehearsing her speech for the night. Eddie Moore, one of the police liaison officers, told me: ‘What we’re trying to do is get them to realise they are someone, they’re an individual, and they’ve got a lot of choices to make in life.’

Teanu, a teenage boy, shyly announced that he’d decided to go on to Year 11, and was roundly congratulated. His decision was even more amazing because he’d just become a father.

The residents of Wallaga Lake have low levels of education. According to the last census only 4 per cent of those aged over fifteen have completed Year 12. The figure for Indigenous people elsewhere in the state is 19 per cent. Children leave school early, and don’t attend even when they are enrolled. Gabrielle Power, an outreach worker in the community for the past seven years, explained: ‘The kids seem to do okay at primary school, then they get to high school and the wheels just fall off.’ Many in the community I spoke to said they are desperate for their kids to stay on at school, but went on to say how terrible the local high school is: the ‘worst bloody school in the state’.

That claim is too complex to explore here – but it is true that a generation of parents at Wallaga Lake feel deeply wounded by their time at Narooma High School. They say they experienced racism, and were treated like ‘they were not very bright’. And there was the fire.

In the late 1980s, in a cataclysmic event for the community, Narooma High was nearly destroyed by fire. Three young men from Wallaga Lake were swiftly arrested for arson, convicted and jailed – including one of Aunty Shirley’s sons. She has always maintained the boys’ innocence. In her son’s appeal to the High Court the only evidence against him – a seven-line typed confession, signed without the presence of a lawyer, less than an hour after he was picked up by eight police and falsely told he’d been implicated by the two others – was ruled inadmissible and his conviction overturned. Yet the bitterness remains. Aunty Shirley said of the high school, ‘I won’t go near the place.’

Two years ago Gabrielle Power ran a federally funded program to rebuild the relationship between the school and the community. Tensions were so high the first meeting had to be held in a neutral zone, at a conference centre in town. Over time the meetings were held at the school and in the village. They were a huge achievement, and relationships improved. A large photo of the fire was removed from the school foyer and replaced by a picture of Aboriginal elders. But the funding ran out after two years, and a lingering hostility has not been extinguished.

I heard many reasons for why kids skip school – no lunch, no clean clothes, feeling uncomfortable and isolated – but the most common is that no one steps in and tells them they must attend. Last year, after hearing parents say they didn’t have desks, computers, or dictionaries at home, Gabrielle Power set up an after-school study centre in the village. Lots of kids came initially, and some parents. The
parents struggled; with low literacy and no computer skills, they didn’t feel they
could contribute. ‘It’s hard, you have three generations of people on the dole, how
do you suddenly say, this generation has to engage?’

During the movie night at Wallaga Lake, I spoke with Teanu after he was
congratulated for deciding to return to school. He said the new study centre was a
‘relief’ for him – it meant he had somewhere to go and get help with his homework.
I couldn’t tell him the funding has run out, and the centre will probably close before
he is halfway through Year 11.

THE NEED TO radically rethink how policy-makers treat discrete Indigenous
communities is increasingly being recognised across the nation – though little of this
new thinking has hit NSW. The two most notable departures from the norm have
been the Northern Territory Intervention, launched by the Howard government,
and adapted by the Rudd and Gillard governments; and the Cape York Welfare
Reform Trial, a project spearheaded by Noel Pearson’s Cape York Institute.

Of these two new approaches, the one most likely to affect Wallaga Lake is
‘welfare quarantining’ – the cornerstone of the Intervention. This requires welfare
recipients to reserve a portion of their pay for ‘essentials’, such as food and
schooling. It has been operating in the Northern Territory and will be assessed at the
end of 2011, with a view to being rolled out nationally.

In Wallaga Lake, where many locals still mutter darkly about the Intervention,
such a move is unlikely to be welcomed. Anne Greenaway said, ‘It’s like another
imposition. If the community themselves asked for it, then okay. But having it
imposed – that is not going to work. The majority of people are not involved in the
problems here, so something shouldn’t be imposed on them because of a minority. Again, you are being punished for being who you are.’

While Greenaway is circumspect about embracing Noel Pearson’s ideas in their
entirety – ‘every community is different’ – she philosophically supports his
approach of active community engagement and a requirement to accept
responsibility. A key component of the Cape York Trial is the ‘Family
Responsibilities Commission’, which sets and enforces ‘social norms’. If these norms
are broken – by not sending kids to school, for instance, or committing alcohol
offences – the offenders are offered support. If offences continue, welfare payments
are quarantined. Preliminary results of the trial indicate a marked decrease in
hospitalisation due to assaults, and an increase in school attendance. Greenaway
agrees: ‘It is getting back to how we ran things for ourselves all those years ago.
Because it was the community that ran the community, and set up the norms about
what behaviour is appropriate and what are the consequences.’ For now, however,
the Intervention model is favoured in Canberra.
While no headline-grabbing changes are underway in Wallaga Lake, significant shifts are emerging from within the community. Before Christmas the land council implemented a new policy requiring people to provide a bond when hiring the community hall for a party. The co-ordinator of the Outreach Centre, Bruce Macpherson, helped develop the policy. ‘In a normal community, if you hire a public facility then you don’t feel it’s yours and you can do anything with it. If you trash it or you don’t clean it, it will cost you money.’ This is a new concept for Wallaga Lake, so new that at its first test it failed; the keys to the hall were handed out for a Christmas party without a bond, and the hall was trashed. Yuin spent the better part of a day cleaning up, and the stench of a chicken left rotting in the oven stayed with her for days.

Bruce Macpherson is not deterred. ‘It’s a slow process, to go through all those excuses for not taking responsibility and say, I’m sorry – it is your responsibility. Like it or not, this is what has to happen.’

Over the mound of bread rolls she was buttering for the hotdogs, Yuin said: ‘It’s gotten to the point where it can be really, really bad here, but we’ve got good people, and we’re trying.’ This is true. But up against the resolve of these few are governments who are only half listening, and a community so crippled by decades of dysfunction it can barely rise above its despair.

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WHEN considering technology, few people immediately think of happiness and joy. Most find computing a challenge or irritating. It is common to hear ‘it was a computer error’ or ‘it’s the computer’s fault’. Generally, computers don’t make mistakes – people do. And computing plays such a large part in our lives, permeates virtually every facet, that it is almost impossible to go through a day without interacting with some form of computer.

The children and young adults of today are the most technologically savvy humans in history, entering classrooms and universities around the world with more technological know-how than any other generation. This generation of eager users is, unfortunately, focused on social networking and mobile computing. Social networking has caused a revolution in communication, enabling people to connect with anyone, anytime, anywhere. But are we now too dependent on technology for social interaction? How has technology influenced our social behaviour and our ability to be happy?

In the 1940s and ’50s, there were only a few computers in the world. They filled entire rooms and could only undertake basic calculations, and few people could actually use them, let alone repair or program them. Now computers are smaller and faster than ever, ready to solve any problem, undertake any chore. They have become ubiquitous. Smart phones enable us to make calls, take pictures, download music and play it, interface with commerce and share information with friends across the globe. It won’t be long before our mobile devices will interface with any appliance, any network, any building and amenity in the world. Fifty years ago, few would have thought that most people in the world could seamlessly pick up a complex computing and communications device and use it in sophisticated ways, but humans have broken the ‘technology pain barrier’.

Computing was once considered a domain dominated by geeks and nerds. The use of computing and technology was fraught with difficulties, especially for those
whose world was turned upside down when their daily business or regular work was hijacked by technology or ‘computerised’. The fear that technological progress would somehow cause the wholesale loss of jobs, as people were replaced by computers and robots, can now be seen as unfounded – or at least outweighed by the new jobs created. But, to many people, having a computer run their business or components of their workplace was petrifying. What if something went wrong, what if it couldn’t be fixed, what if years of data simply disappeared?

The hysteria of doomsday computing was never more extreme than during the feared Y2K fiasco, at the eve of the millennium. People worried that planes would fall from the sky, bank vaults would open at the dawn of 2000 and release the riches inside, transport would halt and essential computing systems would stop dead. But nothing happened – well, nothing bad. Instead something very good occurred. Countless thousands of computer programmers, technologists and specialists were gainfully employed on very good salaries in the lead-up to 2000, to ensure that the computers would run smoothly when clocks struck midnight on 31 December 1999.

All fears were allayed. Computing spawned indulgent years of investment in technology and the web, leading to the dotcom era and the bursting of the big technology bubble. The reputation of computing has still not fully recovered. The public has little faith that careers in information technology and computing science will last. There are tens of thousands, and in some countries millions, of projected job vacancies and an unprecedented skills shortage in the coming decade. But enrolments in computing courses continue to dwindle, falling by 61 per cent in Australia since the dotcom bubble burst a decade ago. Society may have crossed the technology pain barrier, people are more comfortable with their interaction with technology than ever before, but computing is so ubiquitous that it may have become mundane.

DESPITE THE LACK of interest in learning how computers work, there is a spike in their use. This seemingly miraculous technology is matching, and in some cases reuniting, people from across the world in casual and serious relationships. People are no longer walking into a bar to meet their prospective mate. The stigma of going online to find a partner is disappearing, and the cliché of the pale, frail male sitting at home staring at a computer screen is becoming outmoded. It has become a popular way of meeting people and a common way of sharing information about ourselves with close (and not so close) friends on the web. The epidemic of social networking is replacing the older modes of social interaction. While young and old enjoy their own company, they are also incessantly texting and accessing their social networking sites from their mobile phones. It appears that the company they are in is rarely enough, and needs to be supplemented by virtual friends. The ability to access anyone while in the company of friends may now be a new definition of happiness.
Given the success of *The Social Network* and the pleasure Facebook has brought to so many people, it is likely that virtual connectivity is here to stay. It is, however, certainly not in its final evolution. Many keep in touch virtually by ‘chatting’ over the internet, and increasingly by ‘video chat’. The next stage is chatting to virtual beings that can interact socially or provide assistance in a corporate setting. Technology is already available where a virtual being (cyber twin) can chat using artificial intelligence. Imagine a computer program that monitors the way you chat to your friends, and learns from your idiosyncrasies. Then, while you sleep, it can respond to ‘chat’ invitations from friends overseas and respond as if it were you… This technology is a customer service tool used by major companies around the world – an intelligent computerised ‘virtual human’ that might answer frequently asked questions about banking, for example. People love chatting, texting and social networking, but is it as fun to talk to an artificially intelligent being?

**ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE MIGHT** be considered the final frontier (so far) of computing and technology. Frequently associated with robotics, AI is everywhere, embedded in many products and places – from cars to washing machines, in so many applications that it might be considered nearly indispensable. For instance, cutting-edge technology powered by AI automates postal-address recognition for mail sorting. Computers that can read handwriting have been in development for over half a century. It has been a major challenge for researchers, and those in areas relating to automated pattern recognition. An adult human recognises a character, a word or sentence in a way that seems almost innate, but a computer requires a certain level of intelligence: of sophistication, memory and computing power. For a computer to distinguish simple shapes, or the difference between a handwritten ‘a’ or ‘b’, is highly complex; it relies on the analysis of the lines, curvature and contours written on a page. In most cases complex AI sits behind this, and the applications contribute to human happiness – such as when a child receives a birthday card from their grandparents, thanks to the rapid and efficient sorting of the mail by an automated process.

Recognition of simple shapes, such as handwritten words and sentences, is nothing compared to other real-world complex problems. Systems for detecting, counting and tracking people on our beaches are now being developed. There is a Big Brother stigma attached to surveillance cameras, as most uses of the technology have negative connotations. If the cameras that monitor beaches (locations associated with happiness and fun) could report swimmers in danger to assist lifeguards, surely the stigma would melt away and the cameras would be seen as life-savers: a good application with obvious benefits. The research in this area is advanced, but the problem unresolved – although cutting-edge work suggests that automated behaviour analysis of swimmers in the ocean is not far away.
AI and pattern-recognition technology is also far advanced in health applications such as medical imaging. Early detection of disease through non-invasive methods is already available in some spheres. In the not-so-distant future, detailed analysis of microscopic images of brain tissue may yield results for diagnosis of such neuro-degenerative diseases as Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s. The technology under development analyses 3D digital images examining individual neurons. There are billions of neurons in the human brain. The first step is to ‘untangle’ them, so that single cells can be isolated. Out of hundreds of neuron types there needs to be a way of distinguishing between the subtleties of the different cells, so that only the ones that need to be examined are separated. AI-based technology can already do this automatically. Experiments have proven that the computerised methodology outperforms human experts in distinguishing between different neuron types. This amazing technology is only the beginning of providing assistance to humans and enhancing their day-to-day happiness – thousands more examples exist.

AI FASCINATES BECAUSE of the prospect that a computer might one day mimic a human. Robots already walk, build cars, navigate and even talk, but there is a missing element. Robots cannot yet hold a normal conversation, indistinguishable from a human, or learn from experience and gather data from their environments using sensors that resemble those of a human to collate information. Robots have not yet acquired the ability to undertake creative tasks such as painting or writing poetry. They can do these things partially. The ‘cyber twin’ concept has still not passed the test formulated by the famous mathematician Alan Turing in the 1950s. He proposed that if a computer and a human were located in separate rooms and ‘chat’ through another medium, and the human is unable to distinguish whether they are talking to another human or a computer, the test has been passed. No computer system can yet pass this simple test. There is software that can learn from experience; however, it focuses on learning about, and solving, only one problem. For example, the technology can identify unusual behaviour in a crowded public place, but it certainly won’t also make a cup of coffee.

Creative computers, or those with emotions, are the final frontier. Some AI research can detect human emotion, paint pictures automatically and even make up new words or phrases in a seemingly creative fashion, but this has only scratched the surface. Exuding complex emotions or painting like Monet is beyond even the most intelligent computers. The simplest pleasures that people convey through emotional engagement to invoke happiness are far off for even the most sophisticated AI technology. The pleasure from gazing at the Mona Lisa has not yet been achieved by examining a drawing produced by a computer. But can
pleasure and happiness really be measured in this context? Just as human happiness has evolved through the introduction of ‘social networking’, perhaps we will continue to adjust our perception of happiness on the basis of technological advances.

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Struggling in the face of complexity

Water reform in the Murray-Darling Basin

Chris Miller

THE floods that swept through Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, causing death, injury and the destruction of homes, businesses and infrastructure, and threatening whole communities, were met with a determination and no small amount of community-mindedness to repair the damage and support those traumatised. The emphasis was on ‘cleaning up’, ‘bouncing back’, ‘putting the town back together again’, ‘rebuilding’ and ‘restoring things to how they were’ – no matter what it took. Julia Gillard, who often seemed out of touch with the realities and the emotions of the situation, suggested that the volunteer effort, financial donations and stoicism of those who suffered loss, as well as the numerous acts of kindness and bravery, were evidence that the Australian spirit, ‘what makes this country great’, was alive and well. Even Anna Bligh, who so impressed throughout the crisis with her leadership qualities and her capacity to provide a safe container for the anxieties of those on the front line, while making decisions based on sound judgements, felt it necessary (and perhaps it was) to call up the legendary ‘Queenslander’: ‘We’re the people that they breed tough, north of the border.’ But are such qualities sufficient to meet the range of challenges that Australia has to contend with, now and in the future?

Disaster management is an old problem, different to the uncertainties of what lies ahead. When emerging from a disaster, our priorities are to secure the injured, remove the dead, provide support for those in shock or left without basic necessities, ensure public safety, assess the scale and extent of the damage, identify and minimise potential risks, remove debris and property beyond repair, ensure law and order, and slowly begin the task of rebuilding and restoring wherever possible. Co-ordinating and delivering a comprehensive disaster-management relief and rebuilding program is a huge and complex task, requiring the skills of many; the mobilisation and organisation of multiple resources; and careful, painstaking work
in the most challenging of circumstances. Usually this co-ordination can only be undertaken through a top-down approach, by those prepared to impose order. Spirits can be broken in such recovery efforts, despite wishes to the contrary, when confronted with loss in the face of the power of nature and the temporary shattering of personal hopes. There is also a comforting degree of certainty that can accompany such work: we know what was there before and the focus is on restoring or recreating that past, even if the past has to be modified based on the learning following the disaster. But sometimes the disaster, or what it reveals, is so great that there can be no return to the past and a new beginning has to be found.

DISASTERS, WHETHER CAUSED by flood, fire, wind or drought, will remain a feature of the Australian landscape and the Australian spirit will again no doubt be invoked as a way of responding to these events. However, solving long-standing complex problems – sometimes referred to as ‘wicked issues’, because they persist or worsen despite numerous efforts over a long period by governments of all persuasions, and the not inconsiderable amounts of money thrown at them – requires a different kind of response. Problems such as the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, gambling and other addictions, obesity, and social exclusion have defied all interventions to date. And we are also facing problems and challenges that are more unpredictable and uncertain. The impact of global climate change, water reform, economic sustainability, global migration and the emergence of Australia as a truly diverse multicultural society, along with the attendant question of how to live with difference, are all challenges that take us into unknown territory, posing fundamental questions about what is valued, how we live and organise society to best develop our adaptive capacities.

Having spent years devising and protecting ever more narrow areas of specialisation, we are now confronted by these challenges with the partiality of our expertise and the urgent need to build trans-disciplinary approaches if we are to fully understand such issues and begin to develop comprehensive solutions. As To Live Within Earth’s Limits, the 2010 publication from the Australian Academy of Sciences, argued in putting a case for a new trans-disciplinary Earth System Science, the social sciences must be recognised as essential, as human responses to change are unpredictable and human interactions with the biophysical world insufficiently understood. The authors concluded, ‘We now need to realise that some far-sighted environmental stewardship is needed for our long-term wellbeing and that this may need to override our personal self-interest and market forces in deciding how resources are used.’

Yet the challenge to knowledge goes further, for such responses are still expert-driven when what is required is to put this alongside experiential, innate or practice-driven knowledge, often a product of slow maturation over generations and passed
on largely through an oral tradition. While breaking free from both disciplinary and organisational silo mentalities, and being willing to accord recognition to non-formal knowledge, are challenging enough, we must also accept that the combination of all existing knowledge will still leave us having to work with considerable uncertainty, on the boundary of knowing and not knowing. John Keane, writing in Griffith REVIEW 28: Still the Lucky Country? (2010), captured this well when he described democracy as ‘an exercise in living on the edge of future time’. Some ten years ago LH Gunderson and CS Holling, in their edited book Panarchy (Island, 2001), spoke about interconnected social, economic, ecological and evolutionary change as a combination of ‘rapidly unfolding processes and slowly changing ones – gradual change and episodic change, local and global change’, and called for an integrated response and a view of nature as evolving, requiring a process of learning and new institutions in order to be adaptive.

As our awareness grows of the complex, interconnected nature of such problems and the limitations of our existing knowledge, so our anxiety levels increase as we venture into new territory. Complexity and uncertainty, with their attendant anxieties, cannot be impediments to action; we must learn to act while not knowing, making ‘good enough’ decisions, learning from those decisions and being aware of our assumptions and emotional states as we proceed. This is what the American Donald Schon, an organisational expert, referred to as ‘double-loop’ learning – the ability to reflect upon and question the assumptions, paradigms and mindsets we operate within, which was later developed to include ‘triple-loop’ learning, reflecting as we learn on how we learn: our attitudes, values, assumptions and feelings.

DURING THE PAST two years I have been fortunate, as a recent arrival to Australia, to have had the opportunity to work closely with the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists on water reform in the Murray-Darling Basin, an area of land covering a million square kilometres, 14 per cent of the total area of Australia, a population of more than two million people and whose jurisdiction involves the Commonwealth, four states and the ACT. Water reform in the Basin is an old problem, a wicked issue that has been argued over since Federation. Yet it is also an example of a contemporary dilemma, as we attempt to grapple with future climate change as well as current water usage, and consider the transformation of reimagined Basin communities to ensure their future sustainability with less water.

On one level the problem is relatively straightforward. For more than half a century, as the Basin became known as the food basket of Australia, governments have over-allocated water to farmers. Water was not only over-allocated but also wasted, as evidenced by countless stories of water left running down the roads and the ongoing use of open irrigation channels. After all, it was ‘just water’. Insufficient
attention was given to best-practice, efficient irrigation during periods of reasonable flow. During the recent record-breaking drought, extensive efficiency measures were successfully introduced, albeit unevenly, by the irrigation industry as the primary adaptation measure to maintain production levels. As a consequence, although water allocations were reduced by 70 per cent, irrigated agricultural productivity went down by a mere 1 per cent. So much water has been extracted for irrigation purposes that the sustainability of the Basin and of iconic sites, many guaranteed by international treaties, are now threatened. After years of debate, politicians from all parties agreed on both the need for reform and the way forward, as outlined first in the 2004 National Water Initiative and then in the 2007 Commonwealth Water Act and Water for the Future program. Enough water would be returned to the environment, once agreement could be reached based on the best available science on how much was required, and the Commonwealth would buy back water entitlements at market prices from willing sellers to acquire the recommended volumes. In future, those who remain in irrigated farming, along with the Commonwealth as the environmental water holder, would each receive a water allocation relative to flows.

On another level, water reform has raised many issues: how to engage communities in an inclusive way to develop and implement policy for which they feel some ownership, rather than having it foisted on them by those with little experience of either farming or of living in the Basin; where can water be taken from economically and efficiently; how to ensure the future sustainability of communities hit hardest, and manage the decline of communities where this is not feasible. Water reform also asks that we respond to the longer-term structural fault lines within agriculture, identified more than a decade ago by Neil Barr from Victoria’s Department of Natural Resources and Environment. Barr analysed data for 1986–96 to highlight the ongoing decline of farms, farm families and farmers; the exodus of young people from farming and the Basin communities; the ageing of farmers; insufficient productivity gains to compensate for the declining terms of trade, low incomes and increasing dependence on off-farm income; the loss of entrepreneurial farmers with mid-sized farms, as a consequence of investment-driven debts; and the high costs and risks associated with entry into agriculture. These long-evident trends have been exacerbated by the drought.

THE FAULT LINES are evident, too, in above-average suicide rates, increases in domestic violence and mental health referrals – one local Victorian counselling service in 2010 reached its anticipated annual new referrals within the first quarter – and in crippling household debt. There is evidence of stress in the wider communities: local housing markets, retail and service sectors, anti-social behaviour and poor educational attainment among young people still living in the Basin. Then
there is the continuing failure to attract and retain essential professionals. In parallel, there are signs of the outward migration of those with highly valued skills and expertise, without whom regional communities face a depleted future. Experience indicates that once such trends take hold they are difficult to reverse, more likely to send the community into a spiral of long-term decline, a slow and painful death. It is these deep structural fault lines, which have little to do with water reform, that need now to be addressed as an essential part of the Basin Plan if regional Australia is to have a sustainable future.

Yet these communities have emerged in their current form as a consequence of previous policy, part of a vision by which Australia would grow, achieve food self-sufficiency and master nature. Throughout the past century successive governments employed measures, not all forward-thinking, to encourage regional migration, including underwriting major irrigation infrastructure, the extension of irrigated agriculture into land unsuitable for growing, incentives to individuals including selling too many water licenses, offering farmers compensation during difficult times, encouraging new migrants to settle in regional communities, and even enlisting the support of ABC Radio in the postwar period to encourage community-building projects with a program and 1945 booklet, The Community Can Do It: Make a Plan.

There is a paradox here, too: while federal and state governments have been orchestrating regional development in the Basin as a critical part of nation-building, unlike other economic sectors it is the farming family that must ensure its success. While those who enter farming are not motivated by altruism, at least no more than those seeking a career as a public servant might be, the added expectation that farmers are at the forefront of national sustainability is a considerable responsibility. If farming is just another business like any other, we would not expect it to benefit from government subsidy and support to any greater extent than other sectors of the economy. If farming is considered more as a public good, then what is produced, where and in what quantities becomes a matter of public concern and not something completely dictated by the market. The current ambiguity leaves farmers free to make much of their contribution, and suffer hardships in the process, but unaccountable for what they grow, how they grow it or at what cost; and for others to view farming as an over-subsidised private business from which farmers have done very well, but ignore the impact of a decline in farming.

Perhaps there are better ways to talk about an industry said to be at the heart of the nation’s wellbeing? A significant proportion of food produced in the Basin is exported and this is another part of the regional myth, encapsulated in the anti-reform slogan ‘Food 4 All’, that Australia is a major contributor to global food production. Yet if Australia is to be a serious player in a global sustainable food strategy we must develop a regional food strategy that recognises our interdependencies, thereby challenging the myth of home-grown ‘food security’.
Such a strategy would influence what was grown in the Basin for both domestic and export markets, and take greater account of what was suitable given environmental conditions.

The effects of such an overzealous pursuit of growth in irrigated farming have been increasingly apparent, and now threaten long-term sustainability and – ironically – the viability of the industry, which is sometimes guilty of too casual a disregard for this scarce resource but also so resistant to reform. The need for water reform has arisen from an environmental crisis and the urgent need to repair the damage, the outcome of previous badly conceived policies and practices. So what is the right thing to do when government-sponsored communities, given iconic status in nation-building and national identity, must now change? Like peeling an onion, an exploration of the issues reveals more layers of interconnected complexity, making policy formation ever more difficult, but no less urgent. It requires grown-up politics.

**WHEN FACED WITH** the prospect of significant change there are a number ways to react. One response involves those affected, after sometimes a lengthy period of inquiry, deliberation and reflection, accepting the necessity of change, pooling resources to adjust their lives to adapt and move in a new direction. Even in this scenario, when the change is for the greater good, the wider community has an obligation to ensure that those affected are supported in appropriate ways. Perhaps a more common approach would involve resisting change: people mobilise their resources to minimise it, allowing them to maintain business as usual. In resisting, we screen out those factors that might create self-doubt, separate people into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ camps, and project negative characteristics or motivations. While resistance might be an effective short-term response, if change is inevitable and beyond the control of the individual the long-term benefit may be limited and the impact worsened.

A variation is to do nothing, a form of passive resistance, in the hope that whatever triggered the proposed change will go away, something will intervene to make it unnecessary or someone else will solve the problem. Such a response can sometimes lead to depression or despair, a sense that we are unable to influence either process or outcomes. A fourth option would be to seek to escape the change and recreate a ‘business as usual’ situation somewhere else. In this scenario, the person realises that it is futile to resist the change but does not like the prospect of living with the predicted consequences. As a result those with the capacity, skills, resources, motivation and opportunity to relocate do so, leaving behind a community depleted of economic, social and cultural capital, and less able to embrace change or able to do so only with severely diminished resources. Communities like this cannot adapt and instead enter a cycle of decline in which they become unattractive to external capital investment and new migrants.
Which of these responses to change is adopted by individuals and social groups will depend on factors such as the level of knowledge or understanding about why change is necessary; the extent to which people feel able to contribute to knowledge generation; the extent to which they can challenge the assumptions underpinning the emergent knowledge; the conclusions drawn and any specific proposals; and their capacity to offer alternative understandings and solutions. Most importantly, reactions to proposed change are influenced by the extent to which they feel able to contribute to the decision about how change might be introduced and managed, and whether the future looks better following the change. A sense that both personal and community needs and concerns have been fully recognised, that there is support during the process of change, that the outcomes are likely to be fair and that the process does not disadvantage one relative to others involved also helps shape the response. In other words, change, especially when it involves entering an uncertain future, generates anxiety that as well as requiring the exercise of personal capacities – and sometimes that is all we have – can also be facilitated by ensuring the right process is in place to contain those anxieties and enable us to act while on the boundary of knowing and not knowing.

WATER REFORM IN the Murray-Darling Basin is a good example of the challenges that lie ahead as Australia tries to develop adult conversations about complex dilemmas. What has struck me while participating in the debate, and observing public meetings, academic discussion, media reporting, blogs, and talking with a diverse range of people living and working in the Basin, as well as politicians and public servants, has been the partiality of views expressed, the lack of generosity to the standpoints of others and the extent to which many of the stories fix people in positions from which it is hard to be extricated, a process reinforced in the world of blogging by those with similar perspectives. Conversely, there is little attempt to appreciate or acknowledge either the arguments or emotions of those who take a different viewpoint.

I have heard variously some environmentalists and city dwellers dismiss the concerns of farmers fearing for the future as them always having something to complain about, having done well previously, being over-protected by governments and subsidised through taxation generated in urban areas, of robbing the system, despoiling the environment, and being backed by wealthy and aggressive lobbies – the ‘powerful vocal agri-political minority lobby group’ as one blogger described them recently – with undue influence over local councils, mayors, state and federal MPs. Similarly, the impact on Basin communities has been dismissed as just yet another chapter in the Australian story of towns long abandoned as projects have failed and people have moved on, another episode of the ‘boom and bust’ cycle.
On the other hand, ‘environmentalists’ are seen by those in irrigation as belonging to a privileged, smug minority, an urban extremist special-interest group who know little about regional life or farming but are happy to buy the food produced, who disregard the role of food production in building the cities – ‘without irrigation 90 per cent of Australia, including its capital cities, would be uninhabitable’ – who wish to return the environment to some pre-colonial pristine state, who pursue lifestyles more harmful to the environment but disregard the heritage claims of farmers, their contribution to Landcare, the identities of Basin communities and their sense of loss in the face of change.

In my work on water reform I have become aware of even more serious concerns than these: exchanges between protagonists that occasionally descend into abuse, often conveyed in a disrespectful, threatening, macho manner, and that assume homogeneity in farmer and in environmentalist. First, there is a marked disrespect shown to ‘experts’ or ‘intellectuals’, but not technical expertise or creative ingenuity. I am referring neither to the healthy scepticism toward any claimed expertise, as advocated by Donald Horne, that is an essential feature of any democracy, nor to the fantastical conspiracy theories of the Citizens Electoral Council of Australia, who claim that the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists is a front organisation of the World Wildlife Fund under the leadership of Prince Charles to promote a ‘fraudulent’ and ‘voodoo’ science as part of a genocidal plot hatched by the Crown aimed at ‘eliminating our national food supply’, to ‘reassert complete British imperial control over a devastated nation of only 5–6 million human beings’.

Rather, I refer to the ambiguity toward the role of the intellectual. It is as though the tension between the cultural norm of egalitarianism and expertise, as described by Anthony Moran in *Australia* (Routledge, 2005), can only be managed by denigrating the latter, as in the ‘tall poppy syndrome’. Perhaps people of ‘ideas’ are marginal in a land of ‘doers’? We see it too in the retreat of academics from the role of ‘public intellectual’ to be replaced by private consultants, not as intellectuals but as people providing governments with quick and easy answers to complex questions, required to gather ‘data’, not reflect, offer a critique, or develop new insights or thoughtful policy responses. Too few academics engage in public debate, or make themselves or their ideas accessible to a broader public. Too few have learned how to work with the media. Instead, university research funding regimes emphasise writing only for academically prestigious journals read by only a few dedicated souls. Perhaps this antipathy is a product of previous experiences in which the public has been less than impressed by what academics had to offer? Trust must be earned and academe may have fallen short. Associated with this ambiguity is a reluctance to learn from experiences elsewhere, an insistence that what confronts Australia is somehow unique to itself. Equally strong is the conviction that Australia has developed its ‘own ways’ of doing things, so that proposals reflecting a ‘European sensitivity’ will gain no credibility; that some
things, such as structural adjustment strategies, do not work here and have been 
shown not to; that the expertise, values and aptitudes do not exist and governments 
lack the capacity. Yet this ‘spirit of Australia’ mentality may be less well suited, 
given the complex and global nature of many of today’s challenges.

I have been struck too by the lack of trust in government and a disturbing belief 
by Basin communities that they have little political influence. There was a strong 
sense that politicians and public servants, especially ‘bureaucrats in Canberra’, are 
‘out of touch’, ‘far removed’, rarely visible in the Basin – preferring to parachute in 
well-paid consultants – and that when they did visit they could neither answer 
questions nor reflect what they had heard in any subsequent reports, so Basin 
residents could see little value in such ‘consultation’. I might add that despite the 
rhetoric to the contrary, government agencies and departments continue to operate 
largely in siloed spaces with insufficient cross-referencing and dialogue. Both the 
Gillard and Rudd governments have been criticised for poor implementation of 
policy and, no doubt partly as a result, public servants adopt risk-averse practices. In 
the case of water reform, which requires both strategic policy-making and planning 
for change in an uncertain world, there is a concern that no single department or 
agency has the capacity to work with such complexity. Significantly, when asked to 
identify an agency or department at any level of government that could take the 
lead in water reform, respondents in Basin communities were unable to do so.

In the same vein, it was felt that the expertise, knowledge and creativity within 
Basin communities had been ignored, a sure sign that the political class had little 
respect for them. In most Basin communities it is not too difficult to identify the 
small number who are respected leaders, yet the Murray-Darling Basin Authority 
failed to identify or gain support from the local leaders who are essential to the 
change process. While discussions on the future of Basin communities need to 
extend far beyond any current leadership group, securing their endorsement could 
nevertheless be critical – and not just as a way of gaining access to others, but 
because this is an impressive, creative and knowledgeable group of people well 
aware of the long-standing issues in their local community and the need for water 
reform. Much can be learned from them about what needs doing, and the authority 
ignores them at its peril.

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Australia.
Learning like a forest
Adapting, creating and evolving together
Sally MacKinnon

I LIVE on top of a mountain on the edge of Lamington National Park, the largest protected subtropical rainforest in the world. This place is on the edge of the Gold Coast hinterland in the Border Ranges. It’s also on the edge of the McPherson Overlap where the southern tip of Queensland’s tropical rainforests meets the northern reach of Australia’s southern temperate forests. It’s one almighty edge up here and that’s why it’s one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. When ecological edges meet, expect extraordinary relationships, mind-blowing diversity and loads of novelty as ecosystems and species connect, interact and evolve in unpredictable ways. That’s why this place teems with life.

It epitomises the community of life in fact. This is a thriving, adapting, regenerating, evolving, ferocious, gigantic system without a single commanding leader. There are no managers, controllers or strategists here. The flow of sunlight energy drives the ancient carbon cycle that connects the soil, air and water cycles which support life on this magnificent edge which – if you shift your perspective for a moment – is ultimately just one tiny system within the enormous living system of the blue planet, Earth. Described in 1979 by scientist James Lovelock in Gaia: A new look at life on earth (Oxford University Press), as a self-organising, self-correcting, ever-evolving, complex and interconnected living system, Earth is the only planet we know of in the universe that supports life. Thanks to Lovelock and a host of other ecological and systems scientists we are now recognising that the earth is not a machine we can drive and control but an infinitely complex, interconnected living system within which humans are just one small thread.

Mind you, in the last two hundred years since the invention of the steam engine, we’ve been an immensely powerful thread. It is clear now that our hyper-industrialised, energy-guzzling, super-consumptive lifestyles are altering the very fabric of the life support systems on Earth including the atmosphere, the oceans, the flow of sunlight energy, the water, soil and air cycles, and biodiversity. As a result,
we’re now bumping up against an array of interconnected, complex, ‘wicked’ problems in the ecological, social, economic and political spheres. That’s what happens if you’re under the illusion you are the boss of the earth and can indefinitely plunder her resources and pollute with impunity. Eventually you will hit limits because you cannot grow eternally within a finite system.

Here on the edge of Lamington National Park, we’re increasingly aware that our human community is a living system too and that our overlapping social edges, like the ecological ones, support marvellous diversity, creativity and fascinating relationships as they intersect. Our community grows, seeds, produces, entangles, disentangles, withers, collapses and regenerates in continuing ways just like the rainforest that surrounds us. Over the years I have come to realise that communities, especially my own home community, don’t depend on any one organiser to make them work. There is room for all to contribute to this humming, buzzing life if we listen carefully, look closely, learn deeply, care greatly and see ourselves as part of a living system. At the heart of this process I believe, is our ability to learn in and from action, together, like a forest.

That’s why I’m increasingly concerned by government-led community consultation about community futures. On the surface it sounds like a worthy idea and it has now been embedded within the Queensland State Government’s Local Government Act 2009 as Community Planning, which directs councils throughout the state to develop long-term community visions and plans in consultation with their communities. But I have two concerns with this. One is about the very limited capacity of consultation to actually engage people and generate creative, visionary thinking, dialogue and learning about our collective future. And the other is the political paradox in Queensland (and indeed the rest of Australia) where state government constitutionally oversees local government and can overrule the needs, desires and aspirations of local communities and councils and impose its will upon the people, thereby rendering any previous consultation obsolete.

As we come to better understand the interesting times we now live in by bumping up against that array of systems-based, interconnected, wicked problems, described by Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon as ‘tectonic stresses’ in The Upside of Down: Catastrophe, Creativity and the Renewal of Civilization (Text Publishing, 2007), I have a feeling that government-controlled community consultation and its worthy rhetoric and glossy brochures is not going to cut it. Albert Einstein was onto things all those years ago when he said that the level of thinking which created significant problems was not the level of thinking required to solve them. He was likely referring to the fact that our world is a very large, complex, unpredictable system made up of many overlapping, interconnected, smaller systems and if we want to do more than continually create big problems out of one-track, linear, mechanistic thinking then we need to bring many minds, many ideas, much creativity and great wisdom together when we think about and act in the world.
IN THESE INTERESTING times we need to create the conditions for joined up thinking that brings a diversity of people, organisations and ideas to the table. We need to engage in ongoing, collective dialogue and adaptive co-learning to ‘solve for pattern’ – Wendell Berry’s marvellous concept about designing integrated, multifaceted solutions which address multiple, systemic problems by placing ‘health for all’ at their core. Berry, a farmer, poet and teacher suggests, for example, that sustainable local food and farming has the potential to address many serious issues simultaneously including soil and water health, carbon storage and greenhouse gas reduction, worker health and safety, productivity and yield, water conservation, biodiversity, food nutrition and local economic prosperity. Berry’s sustainable agriculture is more than a short-term linear fix. It is an evolving, systems-based approach to some of the biggest issues of our time. It also requires more than top-down leadership to implement. It’s a place-based, localised and evolving framework, philosophy and act of creativity arising from the grassroots.

These are perhaps, unusual ideas and no doubt, a big ask particularly for governments enmeshed in command and control ideology and practice. How do we bring a diversity of people, organisations and ideas to the table to dialogue and design integrated, ethical, systems-based solutions for complex problems? How do we connect layers of government with layers of community to create wise visions and ongoing adaptive co-learning in a time of emerging climate, energy, political and economic crisis? Thankfully if we look carefully within our communities, we can already find emerging examples of just such work.

On the Gold Coast for example, the health and wellbeing of young children in the early years between birth and eight years old, is seen by many non-government organisations, government agencies, community workers, general practices, doctors, nurses, childcare workers, educators and health care specialists as a priority for the long-term sustainability and functionality of this community. Picking up on international research that identifies early years health and wellbeing as a crucial component of social sustainability, two years ago the multi-sectoral gr8 START early years program was seeded by the Gold Coast Primary Care Partnership Council with funding from the Queensland Government’s Connecting Healthcare in Communities (CHIC) program. It started small and with the help of a project coordinator and fledgling advisory group, ran a short pilot program with a cluster of general practices to distribute book packs of information about early literacy, family bonding and early childhood developmental milestones to parents.

Two years down the track the gr8 START team recognises that while the distribution of information is a good start and is expanding the book packs to include developmental checklists and referral pathways, its real strength lies in the advisory group. This is a collaborative, multi-sector partnership that meets each month and communicates more regularly online, to deepen their knowledge of each participant’s work and create synergies and greater coherence between services
across the early years landscape in this region. The more the advisory group connects members’ diverse edges and creates a common language and understanding about early years health and wellbeing, the more it develops meaningful conversation, joined up thinking and systems-based solutions that ripple out to families and children in the Gold Coast region. Collective learning is now emerging within the group in ways that will continue to underpin the evolution of their work in this field in highly significant ways.

This process has taken time. It requires a core group to keep the faith and coordinate the basics. There are times when there is no clear pathway forward and people need to sit tight in fuzziness for a while until clearer perspectives and collective wisdom arise. This is not a process that fits tight timelines or regulatory tick boxes with efficient consultative outputs. It’s iterative and sometimes intuitive. It requires alignment with an overarching intention. Indeed, it requires the collective design of an overarching intention, in this case the evidence-based understanding that the health and wellbeing of children is essential to a healthy society and that this can be progressed with a more coherent, well-connected, collaborative service sector. Such alignment then allows diverse organisations and people to get on with what they do well while simultaneously supporting a higher, collective intention.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING RESEARCHER and author Peter Senge suggests it is time to take off our mechanic/driver/controller glasses which see the world as linear, simple, controllable and fixable with answers lying in the hands of just a few hero leaders. Senge suggests that organisations and communities are like gardens – complex, self-organising, organic and evolving organisms which contain many leaders, much knowledge, multiple connections and relationships, and many layers of innovation and creativity. He believes our most important task is to become gardeners who can find, support and nurture local leaders, knowledge, connections, relationships, innovation and creativity.

If we become the community gardeners of Senge’s framework I think we will also become curious learners who look to our communities of place and practice as evolving sites of learning and renewal. We will no longer see them as ‘empty vessels’ that need ‘the right’ information poured into them or as machines that need fixing. Within this paradigm of community and learning we have an opportunity to change our lens on the world from one of mechanical control to one of co-learning in and from complexity.

One of my favourite words in the English language is ‘desireline’. It comes from the landscaping fraternity and describes the informal pathways pedestrians make when they step off concrete footpaths and walk across lawns and grass. They are the routes that people take or make based on their needs and desires to get somewhere via a shorter or perhaps more scenic path and they tend to become visible over time as more feet walk them across the ground.
Within our communities, I believe there are social desirelines which connect ideas, knowledge, needs and aspirations with people, projects, organisations and businesses. If our communities are already living systems and sites of learning and innovation, then one of the most important jobs of local and state governments in particular, in their quest to enable long-term community visioning and planning, is to find those community desirelines and support their ongoing evolution because these represent what our communities most value at their core. It is important for them to grow and function alongside the more formal structures of governance too, though if we are to be community gardeners we must be careful not to put up ‘keep off the lawn’ signs or concrete over desirelines with so many layers of bureaucracy and structure that they become too rigid and uncomfortable to be useful to community any more.

Economic development researcher and practitioner Ernesto Sirolli discusses a framework in *Ripples from the Zambezi* (New Society Publishers, 1999) that aligns well with our metaphor of the community as a garden. Called ‘enterprise facilitation’, Sirolli’s framework focuses on the development of local economies and small to medium enterprises that are fuelled by people’s passions and aspirations. Economic development officers are reinvented as enterprise facilitators – community-based networkers whose job involves doing nothing until people come to them with their business aspirations. Then their role is to listen deeply to understand those aspirations and find the connections, information, expertise and leadership within the community to enable those aspirations to evolve into thriving, meaningful business enterprises.

In suggesting a learning foundation for community visioning, planning and organising we can turn Sirolli’s enterprise facilitators into learning facilitators; people who are great listeners, observers and connectors. People who have the ability to go into communities to find the local leaders, innovators, desirelines and needs and then start to connect them up. Facilitators with the skills to help people and organisations reflect upon and tell their stories, then amplify those stories across communities so others can be inspired and activated and the learnings made contagious. Learning facilitators also have the capacity to connect the grassroots with more formal governance structures so that real partnerships can be born between government and community.

IN THE SCENIC Rim region, this type of community/council co-learning and connectivity is just beginning to re-emerge, three years after the upheaval of the State-driven local government amalgamation process that created the Scenic Rim Regional Council in 2008. Thanks to the wisdom of many community leaders across the region there is now a collective recognition that it is the natural landscapes, relatively healthy ecosystems, community vitality, indigenous culture and rural
heritage that underpin the future here. An overarching intention created between community and council to protect and nourish these strengths has been crafted and Council is supporting cross-sectoral, cross-community conversations that allow the people and organisations of the Scenic Rim to meet, talk, build relationships, generate ideas, undertake innovative pilot programs and begin designing their living regional ‘garden’ into the future. The real value of this work is already being tested as Council, communities, businesses and grassroots organisations rally together to oppose the onslaught of State Government sanctioned coal mining and coal seam gas development in the region. The people of the region are entering a time of onground, real life learning to protect their forests, waterways, soils and communities and only time will tell how this emergent solidarity fares.

Internationally-recognised adult educator Michael Newman in his provocative article about the role of ‘good’ adult education called ‘Throwing out the balance with the bathwater’ (2006), suggests that it is the process of learning that requires much of our attention and that we need to engage in ‘process with attitude’. He says, ‘We should encourage ourselves and others to defy anyone laying out an unwanted future for us...we should teach and learn how to wrest our lives away from the control of others and take charge of our own moment. I am suggesting that we teach and learn how to be fully human, to use Carl Rogers’ phrase; and how to be free, to use a word given the sense I want in it by the life and example of Nelson Mandela’. Newman argues that it is entirely possible for us to learn to think clearly and imaginatively and to act and act wisely.

SOMETHING IMPORTANT NEEDS to change if we are to craft meaningful, wise futures for ourselves and our communities. We need and deserve more than a one-size-fits-all, top down, linear vision. Our communities are already well-stocked with effective local leaders, teachers and visionaries. They are already home to many effective, inspiring, locally-relevant innovations. These programs, organisations, enterprises and people arise from the ground up to meet the needs and aspirations of local areas in meaningful, authentic and appropriate ways.

If we want to support whole-of-community visioning and future making we can do so in low risk, cost effective ways simply by collaborating and partnering with the innovators already living deeply connected lives. We can learn from them and help make their stories accessible and contagious. We can celebrate them and enable their work to grow and overlap and evolve. In doing that work we help community visions expand in ways that work and work from the inside out rather than being imposed from above.

I would like to suggest the conditions that support people, communities and governments to learn like a forest – as adaptive, attentive, creative, joined-up, systems thinkers – are upon us right here, right now. Like the propensity of life to
turn on a sixpence and our inbuilt human capacity for relationship, this can happen in an instant if we shift our perspective to the local level, to the learning level, to the recognition that our communities are small living systems within the enormous living system that is the blue planet. The only one we know of in the universe that supports life.

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A new Enlightenment

The rise and rise of collective learning

Valerie Brown

ANYONE who has worked in science for the past fifty years, as I have, has experienced many changes in the way a scientist looks at the world. The growing interest in wicked problems leads to the question: are the moves to tackle such problems a fresh way of understanding how the world works, or just another passing fancy? And this leads to more questions: do we really have wicked problems in the first place – that is, problems so diabolical that they cannot be resolved by anything that we already know how to do? Are the risks to our future – climate change and nuclear warfare, for instance – any worse for today’s citizens than they seemed to those who prayed for escape from the Black Death and the lethal crossbow?

In the seventeenth century the so-called Enlightenment promised to change the way we lived in the world, and largely delivered on that promise. The resultant hygiene revolution controlled epidemics of cholera and smallpox, which in turn allowed people to live together safely in large cities. A technological revolution harnessed steam, fossil fuels and nuclear fission, providing the energy sources for twenty-first-century global flows of people, finance and information.

Entering science in the 1960s, I found my initial university training caught up in the triumphal stage of the Enlightenment era. We were taught that every topic should be approached through an objective, dualistic model of inquiry that considered that all problems had solutions which could be evaluated as true or false. Through applying this model we were assured that we could eventually know everything. A search for certainty and the banishment of ignorance was the litany of the time.

Studying the new field of ecology I had problems with the Enlightenment model from the start. Researching the ecosystems of the Queensland subtropical rainforest I found the interactions between living things and their physical environments to be dynamic and complex, often unpredictable. When humans were included in the system, issues were not readily resolved in the black/white thinking of the science of the time.
Even Darwin’s great contribution of evolution was being interpreted as a tidy ladder of continuing improvement, much to the fury of the distinguished evolutionary biologist Stephen J Gould. He and others kept pointing out that we were guessing from random pieces of evidence, ignoring the many blind alleys and links that have not survived. There is a sequence, yes, but we only have faint signals of what that is. And we certainly don’t know what might have been. At that time taxonomy, the classification of living things, was based on physical appearance.

In the 1970s, while I was still dutifully using the limited taxonomy, the discovery of the double helix of DNA changed all that. Living things were reclassified by their relationships to each other. Understanding of the mechanisms of inheritance changed from a set of mathematical probabilities to a dynamic, responsive system. A surge of imaginative and idealistic ideas about the unity of the universe, equitable global economic systems and co-operative cultures marked the decade. Belief in a predictable, mechanical world began to fade.

IT WAS IN the 1960s and ‘70s that the long-term effects of industrial by-products were first identified: the atmospheric ozone hole, DDT’s silent spring, the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth. The increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere was first measured in the early 1970s. Despite a boiling dispute on the significance, or even the accuracy, of these findings, the idea of the technological triumphs as a source of, rather than the solution to, complex problems entered social thinking.

It was at this time that Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber put forward the idea that long-term intractable problems were diabolical problems created by society itself. They contrasted wicked problems with tame problems, which could be solved by the logical methods of the Enlightenment. A wicked problem can have no clear-cut definition, since it calls for open inquiry. In tackling a wicked problem society itself will change, so there can be no final solution. Solutions cannot be true or false, right or wrong, but are the best that can be done at the time. Such problems are not regarded as morally wicked, but as diabolical in their difficulty. However, the authors declared that they found treating wicked problems as if they were tame problems morally indefensible.

It was a great relief to find an emerging acceptance that the universe is far more complex than true/false arguments can explain. Working now on the modern city as a socio-environmental system, I found that it was acceptable to acknowledge that sometimes two opposing statements are true – at the same time. Light is both wave and particles. The movement of the subject experiencing time can change how fast time goes by. We can now understand space-time. By the mere fact of observing a scientific experiment we are changing its outcome. Uncertainty becomes a fact of life. All these ideas, first produced by a group of brilliant physicists some forty-odd years ago, have finally begun to seep into the mainstream.
These changes in how we think about thinking carried social learning into another era, the so-called postmodern society. Our work as scientists is still built on the achievements of the Enlightenment and modern science, modern in the sense of the clear-cut causalities of Newton’s mechanics. It became possible, however, to acknowledge that uncertainty is an inherent part of any search for reality, and that awareness of ignorance is an essential part of knowledge. We accepted boundaries to our capacity to grasp ‘absolute truth’. This way of thinking allowed us to go beyond a dualistic worldview in which we can only deal with phenomena in yes/no or true/false categories – to a world in which we could embrace uncertainty, welcome paradoxes and accept ignorance as the source of new ideas.

As the 1980s began, this mood of questioning of the inheritance of the Enlightenment allowed me to undertake a doctorate entitled *Holism in the University: Promise or Performance?* in which I concluded that while universities expressed the aim of addressing complex issues as a whole, in practice they remained strongly partitioned along disciplinary lines. Based on a study of human sciences’ research and teaching worldwide, the thesis concluded that every significant socio-biological issue raised six different types of question: empirical, social, aesthetic, ethical, introspective and reflective. For an effective and lasting decision, answers to all the questions needed to be brought together within a holistic focus.

The university where I studied did not permit a question mark in thesis titles: uncertainty was not wanted. On hearing my topic the deputy vice-chancellor for research charged me with ‘trying to demolish the university bit by bit’. In other words, the disciplinary walls were considered essential for the university to function. On a more positive note, recognition of the validity of the thesis findings led to invitations to design a science degree in public health, and to join the national research bodies of the CSIRO and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

The task of bringing collective thinking to science-based organisations proved far from easy. The thinking of the postmodern era was travelling in three different and apparently incompatible directions, each of which continues to this day. One is the belief that the scientific methods of existing disciplines can be relied on to eventually deliver solutions to even the most complex issues of the time (as in the work of the CSIRO). Another accepts that the answer to any problem is neither yes nor no but maybe, acknowledging that the implementation of scientific findings is subject to political will and social priorities (as in the NHMRC).

By the 1990s a third direction sought solutions to wicked problems through valuing diversity and difference rather than seeking to eliminate them. Encouraged by colleagues around the world, I came to deal with socio-environmental changes as collective interactions, rather than as a set of independent events. Research projects, government policies and university courses began to explore the connections
between the biophysical interpretations of the natural and the human worlds (empirical questions) and interpretations from ethics, social justice, law, culture, arts, philosophy and religion (social, aesthetic and ethical questions). Added to these understandings were explorations into the minds of the individuals doing the thinking (introspective questions) and learning from the whole of an experience (reflective questions).

Movement in this collective direction largely operated apart from mainstream thinking, and often proved a bad career move. On the other hand, the collective approach seeking to answer the full set of questions had some significant wins. James Lovelock’s work on Gaia treated the earth as a self-balancing organism combining many systems, leading to productive avenues for atmospheric research. Lynn Margulis’s work changed the idea of a living cell as an indivisible unit to describing its components as interdependent collaborating wholes, opening the way for cures for little-understood diseases such as AIDS and some cancers.

The quick defeat of the world-threatening Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was achieved through a spontaneous global collaboration among key individuals, local communities, specialists ranging from epidemiology to clinical practice, and the relevant global and local organisations. All were joined in pursuit of a holistic goal, and driven by the dread of a repeat of the Great War’s influenza. Collective thinking was alive and well.

BY THIS TIME I was able to develop a research program in partnership with communities whose goal was whole-of-community change. More than 300 communities – place-based communities, communities of practice, and communities of interests – joined in collaborative action research over periods from one day to one year. Consistently, in seeking to address whole-of-community change, the same six types of question arose: empirical, social, aesthetic, ethical, introspective and reflective.

The Local Sustainability Project studies found that answering the key questions relied on bringing together the interests of the individual (introspective questions), the community (social questions), the relevant specialists (empirical questions), the influential organisations (ethical questions) and integrative thinkers (aesthetic questions). Examining the gamut of them all meant asking reflective questions. In practice each set of interests proved to have their own knowledge base, with its own goals and sources of evidence, and even their own languages. The knowledge generated by their shared understanding could be considered as a nested set, each building on the other; a distributed network, in which each helped the other; and a level playing field, in which each question and each interest was given equal weight. In the spirit of valuing difference, each contribution and each framework could be accepted as equally valid, and the embodied ideas as contributing to each other.
These interests were, however, more accustomed to competing with each other than collaborating. They operated within a tradition that values organisational knowledge above scientific findings, and both of these above community and individual experience. As well as starting from behind with expectations of conflict of interest, each knowledge base had learned to reject the others. Individual contributions were considered biased, a community’s as anecdotal, specialists’ as fragmented, organisations’ as self-serving and a holistic, integrated perspective as impossible. The grain of truth in each rejection made it even more challenging to find a way for the sets of interests to listen to each other.

In further fragmentation, the objectivity sought by the Enlightenment had led to the separation of ideals and facts, ideas and action. As a counterweight to these artificial divisions, human beings are a social species whose actions reflect a synthesis of ideas and facts. Individuals are familiar with answering all the questions at once. Indeed, we implicitly do so every time we make an important decision. The Local Sustainability Project team found an antidote to the fragmentation in the principles of adult learning established by David Kolb and his associates. If Kolb was right, all adults follow the same stages in learning anything new. The Local Sustainability Project found that the Kolb stages readily translated into a sequence of ideals, facts, ideas and action, thus resolving another of the divisions inherited from the Enlightenment.

A mark of the strength of the disciplinary divisions is that the reports from this collective inquiry had to be published under the auspices of public health, environmental management and organisational change, respectively. There was no field and no publisher willing to handle a set of findings that crossed them all.

WHICH BRINGS US to the original question about the move to addressing wicked problems: is a shift to collective thinking as significant as were the shifts to scientific Enlightenment in the seventeenth century and the social-relativist postmodern era in the twentieth?

The answer to that question could well be yes. The collective learning cycle developed in the Local Sustainability Project is one tool among many. Although the opposing divisive forces are strong, there are many shifts in the way we construct, share and evaluate knowledge that open up the potential for the collective thinking needed to address wicked problems.

Already in this century tools for collective thinking can be found in every applied field, although under different labels. For architecture and urban planning, a pattern language allows all interests to be included in the designs. Large engineering projects are replacing competitive tendering with alliances. In software design, so-called agile programming has underpinned the development of relational search
engines and social media. A whole professional field of knowledge management and knowledge-broking has arisen in organisations, both in government and industry.

The traditional tool for addressing global issues has been backroom meetings among specialised interests. The wide range of diverse structures now designed to deal with wicked problems includes multidisciplinary think tanks, open forums, national and international summits, dialogue centres and social media, to name but a few. These provide fertile ground for collective learning, a significant shift from the problem-solving of classical science, in which highly specialised experts work in separate fields.

The existence of such different approaches to problem-solving brings us back to the original formulation of a wicked problem – one generated within the society that created it. It follows that social learning and social change are essential components of any resolution. An objective perspective brings new insights with social change a by-product. A collective perspective brings new structures and possibilities with social change as the aim of the enterprise.

As a scientist working in the second decade of the second millennium of the western calendar, for me it remains an open question which of the three directions decision-making on difficult issues will eventually follow. It should be pretty clear by now that I have opted for the third. The widespread interest in wicked problems helps confirm that this direction has a future. Whether a future guided by collective learning is as far-reaching and longstanding as the scientific Enlightenment remains to be seen.

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222 GriffithREVIEW 32


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Wicked problems, wicked delight
Developing a creative approach to change
Millie Rooney

I AM of the generation of the wicked problem. At twenty-seven, most of my life has been lived amid global complexity, connectivity and uncertainty. I’ve watched the world become rapidly more connected, and I’ve cut my academic teeth on issues such as climate change, global poverty and viral pandemics. Like many, I’ve felt the need to be more than a passive observer, and to work towards a world of human and ecological wellbeing.

In 2007 I was working as an environmental officer at an Australian university. I’d been in this role for years, and was disillusioned about my ability to effect the kind of change that I believed in and that my job required. My task was to encourage social change and thus establish new patterns of resource consumption – a job more complex than the boss liked to believe. I was frustrated by the inaction of such a highly educated population and needed a new approach, something to energise both me and the campus community.

Around this time I attended the Australasian Campuses Towards Sustainability (ACTS) conference and there, among papers on the implementation of energy monitors, recycling infrastructure and duel-flush toilets, I attended a presentation on delight that fundamentally changed the way in which I relate to complex problems. Delight. We change by delight. I could feel my ears prick up and my mind begin to whirr.

The woman who gave this presentation disappeared, much like a genie, and my efforts to trace her have been fruitless. I hope my paraphrasing does her words justice. She said: I used to be an activist. An angry activist. I used to yell at people, bang my fist at meetings and use any chance I had to make a point. I would abuse meat-eaters at barbeques and social events, taking any opportunity to rant on about something. Suddenly people stopped inviting me to parities. And I like parties! So I began making cake. Gorgeous, in-season, local, organic, beautiful, ethical cake. And people started inviting me to parties again. To quote St Thomas Aquinas, ‘we change by delight.’
Aesthetically pleasing, ethically sound and absolutely delicious: people were more willing to engage with a person peddling pleasure than with an approach based on anger and guilt. It struck me that although I believed in the devastating consequences of environmental inaction, I didn’t need to be sombre in my approach. And I didn’t need to change the world by laying weight on other shoulders.

A couple of years after attending the ACTS conference, I returned and spoke with some of the environment officers from other universities. Talk turned to previous conferences, and I discovered I had not been the only one significantly moved by the idea of delight as an approach to change. While we may never know whether the presenter has continued to bring about significant change through delight, the significance of her impact on us makes her idea worthy of further exploration.

I believed so strongly in the potential of delight as a tool for change that I began a PhD on the topic, and headed straight to the books for some sort of accepted definition. My favourite was an amalgamation of various definitions and came from Joel Davitz in his book *The Language of Emotions* (1969): a combination of joy and surprise.

**COMBINING JOY AND** surprise in practice can be found on the Fun Theory website (www.thefuntheory.com), the introductory blurb claiming that the site is ‘dedicated to the thought that something as simple as fun is the easiest way to change people’s behaviour for the better. Be it for yourself, for the environment, or for something entirely different, the only thing that matters is that it’s change for the better.’

A favourite example is an attempt to get more people to take the stairs, rather than the nearby escalator. The stairs are converted to a working keyboard and people’s reactions videotaped. The footage shows people gravitating towards the stairs and tentatively stepping on the keys. Realising they make a noise, serious, suited business people started jumping up and down the stairs, slowly making their way to the top. The experiment saw a two-thirds decrease in people using the escalators, and facial expressions showed that the experience was joyful, surprising and also a bit different. Much like the guerrilla gardening movement, the piano stairs are about subverting a norm in order to bring about change.

Yet it would be perhaps naive to think that joyous surprise is the simple answer to complexity. I’ve come to realise the importance, indeed the unavoidable nature, of the difficult, the sad and the scary, all of which are fundamental components of wicked problems. Delight on its own is far too simple a concept for such complexity and paradox. As John Law states in the opening sentence of *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Routledge, 2004), ‘if this [indicating a complex and messy picture] is an awful mess…Then would something less messy make a mess of describing it?’ I believe delight has the potential to create a far richer approach to wicked problems than merely a naive belief in joyful surprise.
Einstein is often famously quoted as saying, ‘we cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking that created them.’ As I see it, the only hope of taming the slippery and mischievous beast that is a wicked problem is to beat it at its own game. Wickedness and delight are, in themselves, slippery, surprising, unruly, harsh, edgy, mischievous and playful. By using these characteristics as strengths for strategically challenging existing problem-solving habits, and normal behaviour, I believe we might have a chance at understanding and better coping with wicked problems. Wicked delight captures this as an unexpected experience in which old perspectives and norms are suddenly viewed in a new and different light.

Arthur Koestler, famous for his anti-totalitarian novel *Dark Noon*, also wrote *The Act of Creation* (1964), setting out what he sees as the three main elements of the creative process. One is the importance of humour in creating new technologies, and also in facilitating new ways of seeing the world. Koestler describes humour as the result of two different planes of understanding clashing. Humour is essentially the experience of paradox exposed: two rational truths are presented in a context in which they both maintain their truth and in which truth cannot actually be possible.

Let’s say I have an uncle, a much-loved uncle, who has long been an authoritative, well-dressed and rather intimidating figure in my life. I am also used to seeing my nieces and nephews in neck-to-knee swimsuits, designed to protect delicate young skin from the sun. Both of those things are normal to me and I accept them. Imagine my surprise, then, at seeing my serious uncle take to the beach in a tight-fitting wrist-to-ankle sunsuit and froglike goggles – the joy and surprise at seeing this normally serious person become, in my eyes, a figure of fun. The humour in this is the combination of two normal things in a way never before experienced by me. This clash of expectation is what generates the humour in the situation, and is the creation of a new way of seeing – to me, the creation of a small new truth. My old perspective on the possibilities of my uncle is challenged. What else might he be capable of?

To my uncle this would be no laughing matter and there would be an element of wickedness in my laughter. Koestler acknowledges that in all humour there is an element of nastiness and that a laugh is always, in at least some small way, at the expense of another. Yet the truth held within this laughter is potentially of great value. Thus learning about humour helps in the exploration of wicked delight as a valuable tool for addressing wicked problems.

DAVID ENGWICHT, an artist and social innovator, draws on elements of wicked delight – intrigue and uncertainty – in his work on traffic. In *Mental Speed Bumps: The Smarter Way to Tame Traffic* (Envirobook, 2005), he argues for the removal of road markings, lines and signs, an approach at odds with traditional traffic-engineering solutions. Engwicht works on the assumption that speed signs, road bumps and
other on-road instructions and intrusions leave the motorist feeling secure and
certain about the conditions he or she will encounter. By removing these clues, the
driver is required to learn to expect the unexpected and to slow down. And to
further encourage an appreciation and awareness that something surprising may
happen, Engwicht asks people to gather in the streets: on their doorsteps, in the
front garden, on the footpath. Participants find themselves engaged in unusual
activities such as eating breakfast in the front yard, putting up decorations or
creating a temporary living room in a car space.

Motorists begin to slow down in order to try and understand what is going on, as
well as to ensure they are able to react to the unexpected, which suddenly seems
much more likely. Walking becomes an interesting and social way to travel, and
cycling safety improves. Engwicht finds ways of encouraging the unusual and the
different.

A shift towards safer and more sustainable transport is one step towards
addressing the many small parts that make up wicked problems. Such innovative
and counter-intuitive solutions need to be applied in all contexts, as well as at the
higher conceptual level. By approaching the need for change through the lens of
wicked delight, thinkers may be able to do away with some of the mental lines and
signs that shape our thinking and help us avoid the confronting and the
unexpected.

One of the most insidious elements of wicked problems is the way in which
factors that contribute to them are often imbedded into the everyday. Elizabeth
Shove, an English sociologist, uses the history of washing practices to highlight how
consumption of resources is determined by social norms. Once, bathing was
considered a risky business, something likely to increase your chances of catching
illnesses through the skin. Given this, water and energy consumption was
considerably less than it is today – and in a lecture on this subject Shove asked who
in the audience had not bathed that day. In a full lecture theatre only one or two
people sheepishly put up their hands. While only bathing every second day is not
going to kill us, it can be social suicide to admit you have not washed in the past
twenty-four hours.

The sense of being judged by others, of being constrained in our actions by our
need to conform, is one of the greatest barriers to change. Teenagers are taught not
to give into peer pressure, yet most of us spend our lives doing just that. A recent
study investigated the factors that influence whether or not a hotel guest will reuse
their towels. A number of different signs were tested near the towels: one that
pleaded with people to reuse the towels for environmental reasons, one that simply
said ‘please reuse towels’ and another that said ‘most people in this hotel reuse their
towels’. It was the last that had the greatest positive effect on towel reuse. (Of course,
when asked, none of the guests put their actions down to the behaviour of others.)
These examples highlight the power of social norms in influencing patterns of consumption and the importance of getting us to reflect on our actions. This is not always comfortable or easy. The street artist Banksy embodies elements of wicked delight in his work, and is world renowned for his confronting and cheeky tactics. His signature art involves rats depicted spilling toxic waste, climbing into forbidden areas or parachuting into unusual places. To some Banksy is an inspiring artist and social change activist, while to others he is a nuisance and a vandal. A masked rioter hurling a bunch of flowers, two policemen locked in passionate embrace, the elderly playing bowls with bombs, beautiful landscapes on the ‘segregation wall’ between the Palestinian Territories and Israel: is this wicked? Is it delightful? Does it make you stop and think? Banksy’s art constitutes a belief in the impossible, craftily exemplified in a quote on the back of one of his books: “There’s no way you’re going to get a quote from us to use on your book cover” – Metropolitan Police Spokesperson.

What’s more, many of the greatest social revolutions have been a result of breaking rules. The women’s liberation movement put forward a new story for the way in which the world could work – a story in which women were credited with equal intelligence and capability. This was a fundamental challenge to the way in which the majority of people viewed the world at the time. Similarly, additions to scientific understandings of the world have often been the result of accidents, of new ways of framing situations and a challenging of fundamentally embedded ways of knowing the world. What would have happened if the drip from Alexander Fleming’s nose hadn’t accidentally fallen into his petri dish, laying the groundwork for his discovery of penicillin? What if Archimedes had failed to glance at the dirty smudges on the bath’s edge that caused him to realise the water was rising as he lowered himself in?

In confronting wicked problems, notions of normal need to be challenged on a number of fronts. Research shows that simply telling someone about a ‘better’ behaviour is not likely to bring about a change in action. So, how about wicked delight as a tool for rule-breaking, and rule-breaking as a necessary requirement of solving problems. What about viewing rule-breaking as an exercise in practical imagination? Could wicked delight inspire us to think in different ways, across many disciplines, about change?

INSPIRED BY ONE woman and her talk of luxurious and ethical cakes, I was able to view a tired, and tiring, issue in a new light. I came back from the ACTS conference and decided to fundamentally change the way in which I approached my work. I took pleasure in defying my boss and throwing my work plan out the window – taking a seemingly less serious approach to the issue at hand. Rather than banging my head against a brick wall I was going to work on something delightful, something celebratory and something that would actually bring about change.
As a sustainability officer, it was my job to nudge people out of their existing patterns of behaviour and encourage them to act more sustainably. This is only possible if people are able to envisage and create new ways of being. Celebrate Sustainability Day was the first result of my affair with delight. It was a day to recognise just how far my university had come; to celebrate the research on sustainable technologies, the student groups, the corporate sustainability achievements; and to encourage further engagement from staff and students. On the day approximately thirty stalls were set up, displaying information about sustainability activities on campus. People could test-ride electric buggies, listen to local music, eat local produce, participate in a clothes swap and enjoy fruit smoothies from an erratically functioning pedal-powered blender. Stalls focused on protesting were asked not to attend – it was a day of possibility.

Students began volunteering on the spot, keen to be a part of the event for even just an hour between classes. It was an energising activity for many of them. The day was a huge success and our office gathered a further ten committed and enthusiastic volunteers. To those in power it had perhaps seemed a frivolous use of finance, yet the new perspective – sustainability as fun, lively and exciting – enabled the university community to engage with the idea.

While the event itself may not have fundamentally altered social practices, it was a chink in the armour of disengagement – not to mention a way of maintaining my own enthusiasm. This came from changing the rules of the game and rethinking my work plan, reframing the traditional approach to social change. The value of delight as a tool for coping with wicked problems lies not in its ability to provide an ultimate solution to the complexity of the problems, but in its value as a lens for focusing on change. There are no simple answers to wicked problems; rather, we need to begin to feel comfortable exploring new approaches, trying the unusual and creating opportunities for the unexpected to happen.

As a person who cares deeply about social and ecological sustainability and justice I’ve struggled to work out my contribution to the morass of complex arguments, emotional responses, political blocks – a slowly thinning knife edge on which the fate of the world sits. I’ve wanted to hide in despair, join the sea slugs on the ocean floor, run off to join the circus. Yet by being honest, by acknowledging the slippery nature of wicked problems and embracing their social and ecological complexity, I can throw myself head-first into the ring of a different kind of circus. The challenge of managing, or perhaps more realistically coping with, wicked problems may be the greatest challenge of human existence. It is an exciting and terrifying time to be alive – a time well worthy of our delightfully wicked attention.
If wishes were fishes
Hope sustaining action in sustainable marine management
Deborah Cleland

I LISTLESSLY trawled through endless canned quote pages, searching for a line that would capture my feelings and ideas about the links between fun, participation and problem-solving. Where I found it now eludes me, but it was this line from Harvey Cox’s *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy* (1969) that fitted the bill, and it became my refrain: ‘the comic, more than the tragic, because it ignites hope, leads to more, not less, participation in the struggle for a just world.’

Why does this sentence hold such attraction? Is it the fiery imagery, the idea that hope, once released, would spread like an inferno, extinguishing poverty and inequality? The promise of leaving behind the endless cataloguing of disasters and documenting of irreversible declines in exchange for something lighter, more palatable? Or because it evokes that irresistible mythology of the ’60s: a true people-power revolution?

Perhaps all of these, but above all it made me remember a simple commonsense affirmation, *it’s important they see hope in all of this*, that has helped me through times of feeling useless, desperate, pessimistic and irrelevant – emotions that are mirrored in the stories of workers, volunteers, researchers and activists working in environment and development the world over.

I REMEMBER THE moment clearly, as it was surrounded by the flamboyant symbolism of the series of interlocking, globalised processes that brought me, a young Australian undergraduate, together with some of the Philippines’ top marine scientists in mid-2007. We were in an American chain pizza restaurant on the top floor of one of the signature mega-malls that pepper Manila’s skyline. Disregarding our knowledge of fish biomass trajectories, we ordered seafood pizza, and discussed the dilemma. Our research group needed to create some computer models for coral reef managers, preferably useful ones, but that was secondary. Such is the vagary of international aid and research funding – the cure is diagnosed before the illness, and
we are left trying desperately to find problems that can be fixed with the medicine that we have.

Our research site was Bolinao, a coastal town in the northern Philippines. Artisanal fishers, often armed with nothing more than a patchwork sail and improvised bamboo cages, number in the thousands in Bolinao’s nearshore waters, perched between the western rim of the Lingayen Gulf and the South China Sea. Happily for Bolinao, we could characterise its situation in great detail. Generations of students and academics from the University of the Philippines’ Marine Science Institute and its international partners, based at the coastal campus just outside the township, have collected biological, chemical, ecological and, albeit in much lesser volume, socioeconomic data from the land and the sea\(^2\) that tell a sorry story now familiar to us all: the dismal failure of modern populations to effectively manage the natural resources upon which they depend.

Daily fish catches in Bolinao now number in single digits. These catches are not enough to feed an ‘average’ Filipino family, still less the often more numerous households occupying the ramshackle slum villages along the skeletal beaches. Household surveys tell us that the fishers are often functionally illiterate, and many do not complete even minimal schooling.\(^3\) Stock assessments document precipitous falls in fish populations. Habitat mapping shows mangrove deforestation, corals destroyed by blast fishing (now uncommon, thanks to an integrated effort by local officials, community leaders, aid agencies and Marine Science Institute staff, but the scars remain) and seagrass meadows cleared for aquaculture.\(^4\)

Some locals have recognised that the seas, like the forests and grasslands before them, can be converted into mechanised production systems once nature’s bounty has been razed beyond repair. However, not everyone can access the capital necessary to set up expensive aquaculture pens, nor buy the processed food (often made from the protein of wild-caught fish, whose volume exceeds that of the aquaculture’s production, but that’s another story).\(^5\) Instead of providing alternative livelihoods, the burgeoning aquaculture production has often further excluded local fishers, who now have to navigate through the murky maze of pens out to the open ocean for their meagre catches.

Back, then, to our seafood pizza, and proximate dilemma. What could be done, and could a computer model do it? Having just been acquainted with the dismal situation sketched above, I can probably be forgiven for exclaiming, ‘What’s the use? This is hopeless.’ Dr Porfirio ‘Perry’ Aliño, a faculty member of the Marine Science Institute, turned to me with an uncharacteristically serious look. ‘But Deb. It’s important that the fishers see hope in all of this,’ he said.

I can’t say I saw the significance of Dr Perry’s comment straightaway. But his words returned to me over the coming months, as our computer model took shape.
We had never intended to create a model in the global-climate-change supercomputer sense; time was too short, and our epistemological inclinations ran in a different direction. For starters, our understanding of the motivations and barriers affecting fishers’ decisions was limited, at best. More importantly, however, modelling the human behaviour at the heart of the fisheries problem reinforced the inevitability of the positive feedback loops that were perpetuating poverty cycles and environmental decline. With limited education, high immigrant populations, low social status and limited financial buffers to allow a risky move out of the fishery, subsistence fishers are often described as ‘trapped’ into further degrading their livelihood base.

Our model needed to play with this reality. Poke holes in the intractable, loosen up the strings that bind the fishers, just like the rest of us, to their everyday habits. Be fun. Be funny. Be the comedy that ignites hope.

A tall order for a computer model, yes. But maybe manageable for a computer game. Here perhaps we could get closer to Harvey Cox’s call for a return of the role of fantasy in forging better futures. Through this, I saw a new role for my supervisor’s attachment to role-play games combined with computer models as a way of encouraging learning and relationship building among diverse stakeholders. From Kiribati to the western wheat belt, to the drug dens of inner Melbourne, the technique has been used to forge connections across disciplinary and societal divides.

So we made the fishers themselves the focus of our exercise, creating a game that aimed to enable them to engage creatively with two core problems – alternative livelihoods and marine-conservation strategies – while encouraging playful interactions with their peers. Fun became an explicit aim. As noted in Westley, Zimmerman and Quinn Patton’s inspirational book about making change happen, Getting to Maybe (Vintage, 2007), ‘social innovation requires that while we may not be able to predict outcomes, certain kinds of interactions are more likely to result in transformation than others.’ While boredom is not specifically addressed, it seems self-evident that bored people are unlikely to come up with new and interesting visions for their future, nor will they form the kind of interpersonal relationships we think are important for successful resource management at the local level. Without vision and peer support, hope would truly be lost.

In the recent book Tackling Wicked Problems through the Transdisciplinary Imagination (Earthscan, 2010), Emeritus Professor Val Brown of the Australian National University’s Fenner School for Environment and Society points to the importance of ‘creative leaps’ of the imagination in finding solutions for our ‘damaged planet’. Nearby, the co-founder of the Regulatory Institutions Network research group, Professor Valerie Braithwaite, spearheaded a project that linked hope and imagination to renewal, improvement and progress in areas as diverse as
rehabilitation programs, tax systems and post-apartheid reconciliation, showing hope’s surprisingly broad utility. 10

Hope enables us (the researcher, the activist, the philanthropist) to enter a ‘problem space’ open and ready to find solutions, rather than despairing and inclined to see the fishers and their analogues around the globe only in terms of what they lack, rather than what they have and can make use of.11

This is the beginning of a framework that reaches far beyond the idiosyncrasies of our Filipino fisheries model dilemma. In a blog post from 2007 Julian Assange pondered the quandary of our bird’s eye knowledge of the planet and its problems: ‘To exercise your instinct for saving the world requires saving what you perceive to be the world. Being modern, educated and worldly, the world you perceive is immense and this is disempowering…Your perception is of a world so vast that that you can not envisage your actions making a meaningful difference.’12

Assange suggests that we often deliberately limit our horizons – choosing self-delusion in order to be able to conceive of our own impact, and then act accordingly. Braithwaite and colleagues, however, offer a more encouraging path, through ‘collective hope’ – made possible through our trust and belief that others have marked out their own patch, share our vision, and are somehow extending the reach of our impact. Such collective hope reconciles our need for global change with that for local action.

Many have recognised the importance of paying attention to the possible. After John Braithwaite’s gloomy assessment in 2004 of the preponderance of pessimism and negativity in research,13 it seems the tide turned. Positive psychology is probably the best known manifestation of a groundswell movement of people convinced of the benefits of rose-coloured glasses. It is possible that positive and pop psychology only share an unfortunate alliteration, but I’m instinctively (and perhaps unfairly) turned off by the chirpiness on display as I wander through the self-help websites produced in this vein of study. Hope seems more solid, fun more genuine and comedy more timeless than a glib justification of the pursuit of happiness.

BUT DOES IT really work? And what of our fishers? ReefGame, as our game became known, has now been played by around 250 people around the Philippines, thanks to a subsequent grant from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation’s Ecosystem Based Management Tools Demonstration program to the Marine Science Institute’s in-house foundation.14 In multi-stakeholder workshops conducted in the sub-zero environment of hotel convention centres you can feel the temperature of the room rise several degrees as people jostle for space around the game board, laughing and joking about their relative misfortunes and attempts to borrow money from neighbours. Participants would often ask to play extra rounds, even if it were...
snack time – almost unheard of in a culture that venerates its mealtimes, and in communities who have been left more than a little workshop-weary after several decades of participating in projects run by a plethora of international donor agencies.

WE SEEM TO have ticked the box for comedy and fun leading to participation. What of hope? As catches declined and incomes dropped in the initial stages of ReefGame, facilitators were often met with disbelief: ‘Why is the coral dying? What is happening to our catches – are there illegal fishers?’ Fishers have a tendency to blame other people for the problems of the sea: ‘the illegal fishers’, ‘the encroachers’, ‘the government’. But as the game progressed, fishers usually took control of their situation, inventing livelihoods and small-business activities to supplement and replace fishing income, and convincing local government representatives to pay them to become part-time coast guards.

Hope springs from a realisation of our power to act. Once we realise the world is malleable, we can begin to articulate a vision to change it. Herein lies the value of our game – if it could function as a viable metaphor for the world outside, the lessons learned would be transferrable.

However, the ‘hopeful’ reaction was not universal. Like the bird that does not perceive the open cage, some participants did not play with the open boundaries I thought we were offering. A few, faced with catch declines, chose to opt out altogether, ‘staying home to eat cassava’ rather than dreaming up alternative occupations or participating in the conservation and rehabilitation of the fisheries.

Worse was my own realisation of how limited our vision was. Yes, the fishers could capitalise creatively on their diverse skill sets to come up with their own ideas about possible livelihoods, and yes, the virtual world removed (at least temporarily) some of the barriers to change that exist in the real one. But I had been too dull, too co-opted, to recognise how we presented mixed-market western capitalist solutions as the clear, logical pathway out. The vision of trickle-down development and a worker economy was never far from the surface. We had made very little space for co-operatives, for volunteers or for cashless transactions. With such blinkers, surely we were presenting the fishers with a nail and asking them to come up with an appropriately shaped tool?

And what relationship does it have to reality, anyway? Were we just encouraging a latent ‘monopoly’ personality in our participants that had only coincidental congruence with real-world decision patterns? It was hard not to wonder whether hope, fun and comedy really have anything to offer in the face of such large-scale destruction, desperation and despair.
AM I RIGHT to continue from where I find myself, building models and playing games, or should my need to perceive ‘meaningful difference’ be relocated? My natural antonym is the community-led restoration program run in Bolinao by the visionary founder of the Marine Science Institute, Dr Edgardo Gomez. Marine biologists train locals in the delicate art of coral husbandry and transplantation. Using improvised goggles they carefully wedge the juveniles onto the reef substrate, praying they survive the next typhoon, boat grounding or crown-of-thorns starfish invasion.16 Sister projects led by Dr Annette Meñez have communities rearing high-value species, for now just to restock natural habitats and supply local buyers but with the idea of tapping into global ornamental markets. Isn’t this the altogether more practical and efficacious way to go? When the problems are so urgent, can we justify playtime – experimenting with people’s hopes and dreams, with the growing feeling that all we will achieve, in the end, is to make them laugh?

I asked myself if it was disingenuous, then, to incorporate hope into fisheries, an area where economic and environmental catastrophes are the canaries in the coalmine of our ailing planet. With the right mix of realism and optimism, action and attitude, David Ritter offered in these pages (Griffith REVIEW 31: Ways of Seeing) the perfect answer: ‘beneath the surface and sinking, with hope and will we can still strike back upwards toward the light.’17 For the researchers, development practitioners, government officials, conservationists and, above all, the fishers themselves, hope is the critical ingredient that enables the imagining of an improved future, puts wind in the sails of flagging spirits and tides us over until action is possible.18

Those of us aspiring to change have our favourite weapons that we brandish at the world. Armed with keyboards, facts, thermometers, nubbins and placards, we choose our paths and our horizons.

I think I will cling for a little longer to my armament of choice. What we are trying to do is tip the scales in favour of change: to gather together those who have the power to flip the system, and give them a chance to piece together a new image.19 If we insist that people always work within the tactile world, we lose that incendiary power of fantasy to take us to solutions ‘outside the given’.20 And even if all we are able to produce is glimpses of a radically different future, this may be enough to generate momentum in the present.

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See philcrm.org


List of References


HOW is it that sensory experiences hold a unique power to plunge us so immediately into the reservoirs of the past? Consider a young boy pushing open the door to his grandfather’s farmhouse: a simple action performed hundreds, if not thousands, of times over the course of a childhood. Looking back as an adult, the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa summons the memory and admits he cannot recall the outward appearance of the door. Yet, he writes, ‘I do remember the resistance of its weight and the patina of its wood surface scarred by decades of use, and I recall especially vividly the scent of home that hit my face as an invisible wall behind the door. Every dwelling has its individual smell of home.’

This recollection is drawn from Pallasmaa’s seminal essay ‘The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture of the Senses’, first published in 1996 and in focus once again in light of his talk at the National Architecture Conference, ‘Natural Artifice,’ in Melbourne this April. Here, the author’s attention to his inability to recall the look of this humble door is intentional. Architects are visual creatures; however, even for a long-serving professional in the field, it’s not so much the visual impression of a building that makes a deep and lasting imprint on the mind but how a space is felt, sensed and experienced through the body. It’s this type of observation that informs Pallasmaa’s challenge to the ‘hegemony of vision’ and his call for a renewed appreciation of the sensual experience of space. For too long, he argues, architecture has ‘housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories and dreams, homeless’.

Fifteen years after Pallasmaa’s candid survey of the pitfalls of privileging sight over the alternate senses, are we any closer to embracing its possibilities? If anything, given the increased proliferation of screen-based technologies – digital, televisual, cinematic – our culture is more vision-focused than ever. But on the printed page, at least, stories of the neglected senses have been recuperated in a plethora of histories, from probes into the medieval sensory imagination to the sociological approach of Mark Smith’s Sensory History (Berg, 2007) and an urban
perspective in *Sense of the City* (Lars Müller, 2005), edited by the architect and author Mirko Zardini. The ‘real world’ of built work and design has been slower to embrace a multi-sensory approach, yet recent instalments suggest a shift is underway.

The 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale had an unusually strong emphasis on the senses. Curated for the first time by a woman, Japan’s Kazuyo Sejima, architects presented exhibits alongside visual artists in response to Sejima’s theme, ‘People Meet in Architecture’, and many of the most lauded were sensual. Ever dreamed of touching the clouds? Air became architecture in a much-blogged-about vaporous installation of ‘cloudscapes’, which ingeniously combined layers of hot and cold air to envelop visitors in a dense fog. At the Hungarian Pavilion, 30,000 coloured pencils collected from schools as mementos were suspended from the ceiling by fine threads while a video played footage of architects drawing. It was rich experiences like these that led Justin McGuirk, writing about the Biennale for the UK *Guardian*, to proclaim: ‘inspiring places are full of spatial and sensory drama.’

Cynics might argue these are mere experiments with little bearing on the reality of built work. Yet an imaginative fit-out at the NAB building in Melbourne’s Docklands, which has attracted tens of thousands of visitors since opening to the public in July 2009, reveals that even the corporate sector can be willing to embrace multi-sensory design when a clear benefit to people is identified. Here, NAB, along with BVN Architecture, enlisted the multimedia designers ENESS to create a ‘transformatory’ environment. The response was a ‘Parallel Wilderness’: a ‘virtual forest’ comprised of vistas of Australian landscapes with native flora and fauna, it uses real-time 3D and digital projections to create a sense that the forest is alive within the building.

‘The learning centre, the academy, is not just about training but also about self-development and your own personal sense of self,’ the ENESS designer Nimrod Weis says. ‘We wanted to create a space that could change your perceptions and break down barriers to learning.’

Rejecting the mundane fluorescent lights and whiteboards that typically furnish corporate training rooms, the virtual forest seeks to mimic the atmospheric shifts of nature, with subtle changes in light and weather conditions throughout the day. Motion-sensing cameras detect visitors, triggering the fluttering of butterflies and the movement of birds and animals, while the sense of immersion is enhanced by a responsive soundscape, resulting in a kaleidoscope of sensual delights.

‘It could easily have just been images but the idea was to create a parallel world within the space, a virtual entity that co-exists within it and is also affected by the behaviour of the users of the space – it’s about activation,’ Weis explains. ‘We went to these lengths to create a sense that users could affect the space, which means the more they engage with it, the more the parallel world reacts to them.’
NAB’s academy is a novel case of applied multi-sensory design, but concerns for human health more generally, both psychological and physical, could be a driver of innovation in this area in the future. In the mid-1970s, the American architects Charles Moore and Richard Oliver were challenged to draw upon an array of haptic – recognised by touch – features when commissioned to design a home for a client who had lost his sight. In many ways, their pragmatic design pre-empted a growing awareness of the benefits of sensory stimulation in both the home and office. A UTS-led study completed in February 2010, *Greening the Great Indoors for Human Health and Wellbeing*, for example, found that placing plants in workplaces could significantly reduce depression, anxiety, fatigue and stress. In a similar vein, the sensual delight offered by vertical gardens – spectacular self-watering wall installations of lush, densely matted plant vegetation – has seen them rise in popularity. Their eccentric creator, the French botanist Patrick Blanc, sums up their appeal in one word: ‘optimistic’.

WE ARE SEEING an engagement with the senses asserting itself at the margins of the design world, but are these shifts merely incremental – does it matter if we continue to prefer the ‘hygiene of the optical’, in the words of the Bauhaus great Moholy-Nagy, to the messier reality of those more unruly senses of smell, touch, sound and taste? If it were simply a matter of preferences, of individuals exercising choices, perhaps it wouldn’t be of great concern. But most of us aren’t in a position to commission the design of the spaces we inhabit and which affect our psyche over the long-term. Consider the prevailing ocular-centric approach of contemporary architecture and design alongside increasingly sensory-suppressive modes of urban design and planning and the question becomes a far more political one.

As early as the 1950s, the artists of the Situationist International began spontaneous provocations that revealed a distrust of the hierarchy of the senses they saw manifested in the contemporary city. Led by Guy Debord, the Situationists’ approach took the guise of games, cut-and-paste collages rearranging maps of Paris into more sensuous routes, random strolls through dilapidated suburbs, experimental films looped from footage of city life – but there was a message behind the madness. As Brandon LaBelle argues in *Site of Sound* (Errant Bodies, 1999), the Situationists rebelled against the homogenisation of urban space and the sterility of its architecture, seeking an alternative in ‘a psycho-geographic displacement – to disrupt one’s own organisation of the senses in order to re-imagine the very nature of constructed reality.’

The moment of the Situationist International may have passed but something of its anarchic spirit remains among today’s artists working with urban space and sensory engagement. As part of Melbourne’s inaugural Seven Thousand Oaks: Festival of Art and Sustainability, in June 2010, a one-day sound-art program took place in the Heide Museum of Modern Art Sculpture Park. Taking as its theme ‘Touch at a Distance’, it
focused on the ‘importance of listening and its role in developing a more sustainable approach to our presence in the environment’. The Melbourne-based landscape architect and acoustic ecologist Anthony Magen has walked and cycled the grounds of Heide many times. For this event, Magen was invited to devise a ‘soundwalk’ around the site, which he drew up as a map and distributed in zines; the walks were conducted hourly by various co-ordinators on the day.

For Magen, the Heide soundwalk is a recent instalment in an exercise he has led for several years. Gathering small groups of people to walk through the city streets in silence, a soundwalk pauses at various stops along the way for participants to take in the ambient soundscapes. According to Magen, this quiet attention to the act of listening ‘allows you to place yourself within the landscape. Even if it’s the sound of cars, it doesn’t matter what the sound is because it’s information that’s being transmitted and it helps to locate yourself. Sound is wonderful at placing you within the landscape so you don’t grasp at it, you receive it.’

WHILE THE SOUNDWALKS have garnered something of a following, Magen, as a practising landscape architect, discerns a tension between what it is possible to achieve through small-scale actions and the more formulaic attitudes to sound that inform the planning of public spaces. ‘There’s a gaping hole between the ears and the brain,’ he says emphatically. ‘These grassroots activities are really valuable but in the bigger scheme of things, with regards to urban design, architecture…there’s no legislation coming from the top that supports a similar kind of sophistication or subtlety of thinking.’

We have absorbed much of the ideology of sensory suppression without really questioning it. In the name of safety and comfort, soundproofing and noise reduction, security gates and CCTV surveillance, air-conditioning and climate control, deodorised and non-odorous spaces have all become so normal as to appear almost natural. Yet perhaps at a subconscious level we are also inclined to seek out their sensorial other, those broken-down, dilapidated and demolished pockets of the city. Among the construction sites, abandoned buildings and industrial zones, for example, haphazard mixes of materials, discarded objects and faintly toxic smells combine in a chaotic mess. Amid the rubble, there is a strange force of attraction arising from a sense of risk, freedom and possibility.

Ignasi de Solà-Morales describes these voids as the ‘terrain vague’ in his 1995 essay of the same name. Here, he argues, ‘filmmakers, sculptors of instantaneous performances, and photographers seek refuge in the margins of the city precisely when the city offers them an abusive identity, a crushing homogeneity, a freedom under control.’ Contemporary photographers appear particularly fascinated by urban ruins. At Melbourne’s 2010 State of Design Festival Sonia Mangiapane presented Memoire, a series of images capturing transitional spaces and buildings
throughout the inner city. The Sydney photographer Tamara Dean explored that city’s wastelands in This Too Shall Pass (2010), reflecting in an artist’s statement on how such sites are ‘the last wild vestiges where there is space to roam’. And the 2010 Biennale of Sydney drew record numbers of visitors to its post-industrial Cockatoo Island venue, attributable in some measure to the free ferry rides but also to the island itself, where the charismatic architectural shells of the derelict former shipyard and convict prison have become their own attraction.

It is telling that both Solà-Morales and Pallasmaa wrote their reflections on the stifling of tactile and sensory engagement in the mid-1990s. Facing a digital revolution and already feeling the pressures that rapid globalisation exerts on the individual, designers and general readers alike were receptive to these idiosyncratic voices telling us to pay attention to the particular, the tangible and the real in ways that might encourage a more embodied experience of space. These ideas are now highly influential among writers, critics, historians, artists and even urban activists, but the degree of their impact on practising architects and designers is more contentious. Today, architecture and design that consciously seeks to stir the senses undoubtedly represents some of the most avant-garde work being produced, but is it enough to make a difference?

In late 2009, Pallasmaa curated a symposium in London on the topic ‘Sustaining Identity’ in which he called for an ‘architecture of resistance’. He was particularly critical of the architectural hubris that continues to breed visually astonishing structures that win awards but show little concern for the effects these buildings have on the psyches of their inhabitants.

More recently, he formulated these misgivings as ‘an obsession with quantitative things, rather than qualitative things,’ speaking with Australian architect Angelo Candalepas ahead of his presentation in Melbourne. Such outspoken critique suggests we are still a long way from the humane architecture of the senses proposed fifteen years earlier in ‘The Eyes of the Skin’.

In interviews Pallasmaa frequently returns to the subject of his grandfather’s farmhouse, where his interest in the ‘phenomena of life and knowledge’ first took hold. What we can take from this, in respect to the future of multi-sensory design, is that there is still much to be learned from the past. Not in a nostalgic sense, but simply from the knowledge that haptic design doesn’t need to be invented; it has existed for thousands of years. Nurturing design that touches the senses requires an open mind and an innovative approach, certainly, but also more simply a recovery of trust in the age-old capacity of the body to guide us toward creating a world with a little more feeling.

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The rise and fall of infant reflux

The limits of evidence-based medicine

Pamela Douglas

At the dawn of the twenty-first century Queensland infants were in the grip of an epidemic. Babies screamed, vomited and woke frequently at night. They refused to feed, arched their backs, drew up their knees. Parents were frantic: even if they could soothe the flailing fists and the little crumpled face, the minute they put their baby down, the piercing shrieks began again.

Once, we called this colic. We attributed it to wind, and a woman struggled through the nightmarish first months of a colicky baby’s life without much support from health professionals or even sympathy from those around her, secretly and horribly convinced of her own public failure. But by 1982, when a small group of ‘reflux mums’ formed the Vomiting Infants Support Association of Queensland, the nascent sub-specialty of paediatric gastroenterology had found in colic a cause célèbre.

The association went national in 2000 and became RISA, the Reflux Infants Support Association, aiming to give confidence and moral support to families of infants with problems associated with gastroesophageal reflux. But the epidemic appeared to be at its worst in Queensland, a state prone to statistical exaggeration. One prominent Queensland paediatric gastroenterologist pioneered the link between infant irritability and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GORD), and took to the lecture circuit to raise professional and community awareness. He subsequently relocated overseas and remains a dedicated and caring doctor, but he saw the world, particularly crying babies, through a very special – specialised – lens.

I subscribed guiltily to RISA News. Throughout the 1990s, as the epidemic worsened, my own robust offspring grew into preschoolers, then primary schoolchildren. They never cried much and, as the newsletters explained, only the parents of a reflux baby can truly relate to the exhaustion, despair, headaches and lack of sleep. But I’m a GP, and throughout the 1990s until the mid-2000s infant
GORD was rampant. Many of the babies I saw came pre-diagnosed with ‘reflux’ by the paediatrician, the hospital midwife, the child-health nurse, the breastfeeding counsellor, or the lady across the road. New mothers stepped carefully into the consulting room, manoeuvring the pram through the door or lugging the car capsule or carrying the baby, sat down in the chair by my desk, and wept.

Babies from the first days and weeks of life were being given cisapride, ranitidine or cimetidine, antacids – often in double doses – and, from the end of the decade, proton-pump inhibitors (PPIs). An American study showed that PPI use in infants multiplied sixteen-fold between 1999 and 2004.

In the *Australian Family Physician, Medicine Today* and *Australian Doctor*, diligent GPs read educational articles about crying babies and GORD written by paediatricians and gastroenterologists. Parents were angry with any incompetent practitioner who ‘missed’ the diagnosis. They were especially angry with the hapless doctor who ventured that maybe the baby was just a bad sleeper, or that the mother was unnecessarily worried. Having a new baby is not the blow-waved, lacy-white sensuality of the Lux mother: a brutal collision with reality lurks beneath the sentimental images of motherhood, shocking us early on, and it’s reasonable to expect a sensitive response from the GP. But parents came to believe that a failure to diagnose was a failure to care.

In the A4 newsletter that arrived in my mailbox every couple of months I read a stream of heartbreaking testimonials, alongside hints on sterilising medicine cups and removing the smell of vomit from clothing, or recipes for blanmange to thicken expressed breast milk or formula. There were diagrams illustrating how to change nappies with a pillow under the baby’s shoulders and without lifting the baby’s legs, or how to breast- or bottle-feed holding the baby vertical. There were ads for approved cot harnesses to secure the baby once the head of the cot was raised thirty degrees, or for slogan T-shirts, cheap and cute, for the discernible [sic] ‘reflux’ baby, alongside order forms for a fundraising drive. Contributions from paediatric gastroenterologists and GPs advised frequent burping, thickened breast milk, thickened formula, frequent breastfeeds, spaced breastfeeds, different bottles, different formula.

It felt voyeuristic, peering into the newsletters like this, browsing families’ misery and their plucky attempts to keep each other’s spirits up, all written in homey prose. But it was also clear to me that Queensland babies, at least in the first few months of life, were in the grip of an imaginary disease. It’s true that premature infants, and infants with certain underlying health problems, for example, neurological abnormalities, are prone to GORD. But in otherwise healthy, full-term babies in the first few months of life, excessive crying, crying in a piercing shriek, back-arching, turning red in the face, flexing up the knees to the tummy, disrupted sleep, vomiting, and crying when put down are common behaviours, not caused by pain.
or reflux. I could see that using the diagnosis of GORD to explain these behaviours caused harm to mothers and babies.

For a start, parents were desperately focused on performing the various odd, disruptive and time-consuming manoeuvres supposed to protect their baby’s imaginary oesophageal lesions. These preoccupations certainly didn’t help parents learn to read and respond to their infants’ cues. Yet learning to read and engage the baby’s communications (a difficult task in unsettled babies, one that may even require professional help) is a very important way of protecting the mother-infant relationship and the child’s long-term mental health.

Multiple other problems were often not identified or addressed in the frenzy of activity surrounding GORD: for example, feeding difficulty, cow’s milk allergy, maternal anxiety or depression, or lack of familial and social support. Worse still, if correctable clinical problems weren’t diagnosed, mothers and babies were at risk of developing entrenched, long-term problems, including ongoing feeding difficulties. The consequences of undetected and unmanaged feeding difficulties may be catastrophic for some, resulting in severely disrupted and anxious mother-infant relations, since it is not easy for a mother to remain calm at feed times if she believes her baby is starving.

Some babies do develop true GORD down the track. Could it be that by over-diagnosing GORD in the first few months of life, we also predisposed some babies to oesophagitis later on? This is a sensible interpretation of what we know about the multiple factors that do predispose babies to GORD, and the effects of failing to identify them.

Worst of all, cisapride (trade name Prepulsid) could fatally disrupt the beating of a tiny heart. This was recognised in 2000, after two children died. But the potential for disaster didn’t halt the GORD juggernaut: we simply substituted PPIs, even though they had not been trialled on a large scale, over time, in infants in the first weeks and months of life.

AS A GP, I specialise in generalism. I started my professional life in the turbulence of an Aboriginal and Islander Community Health Service, which alerted me to other frames of reference, including to cross-cultural differences in infant care. I have a better-than-average grasp of the physiology of lactation, of breast-milk substitution and the infant gut, because I qualified as an international-board-certified lactation consultant when I had my babies, in snatched hours while they slept. Many GPs, paediatricians and paediatric gastroenterologists remain inadequately educated about breastfeeding, and even midwives and child-health nurses have variable standards of skills in lactation support. These knowledge deficits, the problem of the health professional who doesn’t know what he or she doesn’t know, are significant for unsettled babies.
Clinical epidemiology is a branch of medicine that expanded dramatically in the 1980s. It aims to understand patterns of disease and the way treatment changes these. The most authoritative of its analyses, the randomised controlled trial (RCT), assesses the effectiveness of interventions by making two populations as similar as possible, then comparing them, with and without the added intervention, applying statistical analyses to assure us that these changes didn’t occur by chance. In 1992, a group of academics at McMaster University in Canada took clinical epidemiology and repackaged it as ‘evidence-based medicine’. In their manifesto they proclaimed EBM a paradigm shift, a revolution. They critically ranked the quality of research, eliminated much of the poor science, and developed tools for synthesising the results of multiple trials. They were ‘manning the barricades’ against the health professional who did not know what he or she did not know. They had chutzpah (hubris, their critics called it), and began harnessing the explosion of digitally available research with clever inventions like specialised data-bases, search filters, hierarchical ranking of evidence, systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

Like all good brand-makers they were revisionist, claiming to cleave the history of medicine into the pre-EBM era of dangerous, expert-led, opinion-driven, inconsistent care, and a post-EBM era that was clear-eyed and modern, pragmatic and anti-authoritarian. A democracy of evidence, except (so the critics complained) the EBM men set the rules. Brand EBM became a catchcry, a simplified and highly successful approach to health research that was rapidly co-opted by politicians and governments. Massive funds were diverted to the cause, and academic careers took off. Eighteen years later, critics are still scathing. A zombie, or a dead fish swimming, they call it, arguing that EBM has long since been exposed as a very limited approach to health knowledge: dead in the epistemological sense, but made to act as if alive because it’s inflated with funding and bouncing about.

All of this has had a remarkable effect on the culture in which I’ve practised over the past twenty-five years. Three-quarters of all medical consultations in Australia are with GPs, and most Australians consult their GP once a year, yet general practice research has always been drastically underfunded. Despite remarkable gains in the past decade, it is still, as a result, fifty times less productive than research in, say, internal medicine or surgery. From the late 1990s a handful of general practice academics in Australia became preoccupied with the fight to improve general practice’s credentials, trying to secure a foothold in a clinical research landscape utterly dominated by hospital-based specialists (who have been at times referred to in primary care as partialists). In the real world of general practice consultations, where the messy stuff of patients’ lives and contexts write into the body in dynamic and unpredictable ways, there are serious limitations to the usefulness of RCTs, but these powerful Australian EBM men were focused on making up ground. Genuine conservatives (or are they the genuine radicals?), thoughtful about the nature of evidence and its place in the complexity of primary care, struggling to articulate an
authentic clinical practice, were brushed off as out of touch. By the time the GORD epidemic really took hold in crying babies, doctors were expected to follow brand EBM unquestioningly. A vigilant moralism about how we practise came to the fore.

So what do you do when you are confronted by an expectation that you practise according to the ‘evidence’ – an agreed clinical protocol written up in authoritative, peer-reviewed journals – when the evidence contradicts what you have reason to believe, from your own transdisciplinary knowledge base, is in your patient’s best interests? Diverging from accepted best practice is professionally compromising, even dangerous. But not testing a harmful diagnosis is ethically compromising, dangerous to one’s personal integrity and peace of mind, not to mention patient health. I found this cognitive dissonance across a range of issues acutely painful. It seriously compromised my capacity to enjoy general practice. Finally, I took up research – an act of subversion.

But what madness was it to spend my limited free time, over the years, doing searches of the Medline or PubMed or CINAHL databases, poring over papers about my chosen issue: infant crying and GORD? Why did I lock myself away that warm outback Easter, when the kids played with their cousins in the red dirt amid tailings of freshly picked cotton, to read accounts of RCTs and cohort studies in the Journal of Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition, or the Archives of Disease in Childhood, or the Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology?

A set of shared assumptions that were implicit and unquestioned screamed at me from the hundreds of papers I read, like babies no one wanted to pick up. First, the research assumed that a clinical sign or problem must result from a disease: the reductionist, ‘biomedical’, cause-effect paradigm. Second, the research assumed that certain infant-care practices in our society were biologically normative: that is, they could not impact on infant behaviour and physiology, and did not need to be taken into account or controlled for in clinical trials. Third, the research assumed that findings in toddlers and children could be generalised to newborns and babies in the first months of life. These assumptions ignored entire disciplines: for example, lactation research exploring the differing effects of formula and breastfeeding on gut physiology, or research in neurology exploring the relationship between the autonomic nervous system and gut physiology, or in ethnopaediatrics exploring cross-cultural differences in infant care, or in developmental psychology exploring the interrelationship between sociocultural factors, parental health and the maturing architecture of the infant brain. Nomenclature in the literature concerning infant GORD was seriously confused, since normal physiological events were interpreted as disease processes; and, due to basic misunderstandings about the way feed-spacing affects the acidity of reflux, the usefulness of the researchers’ investigative tools were hopelessly compromised. This all seemed obvious to me, as a generalist; but I was critiquing a powerful and prestigious body of international experts.
IN 2004, I applied for funding through the Primary Health Care Research, Education and Development Strategy, which had started in the 1990s as the General Practice Evaluation Program. To date, the PHCRED Research Capacity Building Initiative has been the federal government’s main contribution to the development of primary-care research, administered by twenty-six university departments around Australia. A PHCRED Novice Research Fellowship remunerated me for a day a week of research over twelve months.

I published an analysis. The night an email arrived saying my article had been accepted, my husband uncorked a bottle of champagne and toasted me over dinner. ‘Good on you, Mum, we’re really proud,’ my adolescents chorused, having figured out that this was my equivalent of winning the soccer championship or playing a violin solo in the school concert. My son raised his glass with so much enthusiasm that his milk spilt.

But my kind of analysis was out of fashion. Nobody was much interested in thinking about clinical problems; they just wanted the results of trials. Now you’ve got to build on it, my loyal husband said, but I was disheartened. Too many Easters lost, too many novels unread, too many good movies missed. Every time I saw an unsettled baby at work, I felt a jolt of grief.

Finally, once my daughter left home, generous supervisors allowed me to devote one morning a week of my part-time university teaching appointments to research. I began the task of developing an integrated, multidisciplinary, primary-care approach to unsettled babies and their mothers. Synthesis of transdisciplinary perspectives is a unique skill of the GP, so I began reviewing the extensive bodies of literature from various disciplines dealing with crying babies. This meant challenging traditional EBM approaches and drawing on innovative new methods that were more appropriate for complex problems. Cross-professional co-ordination of care is also a unique skill of the GP, so I aimed to network, interview key informants, and develop an integrated multi-disciplinary primary-care approach to unsettled babies and their mothers.

Midwives told me that continuity of care from the early antenatal period through delivery to six weeks postpartum would address many problems that result in distressed mothers and babies. Child-health nurses told me that mothers of unsettled babies needed to be able to access their services in the community without long waits. Speech pathologists were concerned that babies with feeding difficulties should be seen before disrupted mother-infant relations entrench; lactation consultants argued that their services should be available promptly and affordably to all new mothers who need them; occupational therapists and physiotherapists pointed out that irritable infants may have sensory processing problems, and that sensorimotor integration should be considered. Psychologists and social workers wanted early identification of obstacles to mother-infant bonding and to a baby’s
healthy psychosocial development. Perinatal psychiatrists warned that early detection of and support for maternal anxiety and depression is vital.

When I presented my preliminary work at a general practice conference, a crusty old GP challenged me from the back of the room. ‘Of course GORD occurs in crying babies from very early on,’ he said. ‘You should see the relief on a mother’s face after a day or two of PPIs.’ I explained that any medication for unsettled babies had a 50 per cent placebo effect. ‘I listen to the mothers,’ he replied bluntly. As if I didn’t!

But I admired his spunk. He was the type of old-school GP driven crazy by brand EBM, which expected him to treat that mythical standardised patient, who is everybody and nobody. Many GPs felt that EBM, at least until it began to revise itself, devalued the individual needs and autonomy of the patient, and the experience of doctors, in the name of pure ‘evidence’. It’s often said that’s why GPs don’t engage in research, although it might just be that they are simply overwhelmed by patients and bureaucracy, without the kind of income that makes time for unpaid research possible.

‘So many unsettled babies are still on PPIs,’ mused a cheerful, firmly spoken social worker from a large children’s hospital down south, a woman about my own age whom I met at an infant sleep roundtable last year. ‘I thought we put a stop to that!’ Shortly after my first paper came out, she’d published a landmark study with a bunch of paediatric gastroenterologists and paediatricians showing that anti-reflux medications had the same effect as placebo in crying babies. Their widely cited RCT marked the peak of GORD in unsettled infants. But an RCT also side-stepped the need to think about why the epidemic had taken hold. I worried that if we didn’t think analytically about the GORD epidemic in crying babies, if we didn’t critique our theoretical frameworks and mistakes, the same errors would be repeated.

AFTER MY PRESENTATION at that Queensland conference, an amiable professor suggested a cup of tea at the long table set with urns, fruit platters and scones. I’d met him in 2004 when I first wandered into the Centre of General Practice talking about crying babies. He’d pulled a strange wooden contraption out from among dusty boxes and folders in a basement storeroom and offered it to me. It measured a baby’s cry, he explained. He’d invented it as a young father when his own babies screamed inconsolably all night long. In 2004 he was a rising star, one of that handful of lean, bike-riding, surfboarding EBM men who stormed the brand-new discipline of general practice research and lifted it out of its lethargic, government-induced preoccupation with surveys. In 2004 he couldn’t imagine serious research that didn’t measure things. He would stare at me blankly when I used terms like evolutionary biology. ‘Where’s the evidence?’ he would ask.
Brand EBM is better suited to the pharmaceutical, surgical and technological interventions of other narrowly focused specialties, though even there, as the GORD epidemic demonstrated, it has its limitations. General practice, however, demands more intellectual rigour of us than just that, since patients come in with complex, multidimensional and undifferentiated health problems, affected by many factors, known and unknown, dynamically interacting in that patient’s life, environment and social context. From the early 1990s I scrawled web-like diagrams on scraps of paper for my patients: multiple things seem to be interacting and contributing to this problem, I would say. The problem might be depression, or fibromyalgia. It might be diabetes, or obesity, or chronic fatigue. It might be polycystic ovary syndrome, or tension headaches. It might be unsettled behaviour in a baby.

To my mind, intellectual rigour in general practice research asks us to draw on our unique generalist skills of integration and synthesis, our exposure to transdisciplinary perspectives, the breadth and depth of our knowledge base, and our familiarity with a patient over time in their socio-cultural and environmental context, in order to think about complex problems. Then the investigative studies we draw on, or instigate, will be useful. Brand EBM is linear. A human being is not.

On the day of the conference, the professor who invented a cry-measuring machine looked up and paused as he stirred a spoonful of sugar into his tea. ‘Why don’t you just run a trial of cognitive behavioural therapy for the mothers?’ he asked. ‘That’s what’s needed when babies cry.’ But any mother – including his wife, I expect – will tell you it’s not so simple.

‘The problem with your research is that you haven’t started with an open mind,’ another senior research fellow remonstrated, just months ago. ‘You’ve got your own theories, then you choose evidence to fit them.’ Attempts at theoretical framing arouse a kind of moral panic among diehard EBM advocates, as if you are embarrassingly airy-fairy, even intellectually inferior and somehow unfit. A quack. ‘Evidence-based medicine is about the open mind, no preconceptions’ – this person made it sound like zen, a pure spirit, a state of true inquiry – ‘and then you rank the existing RCTs according to quality and do a systematic review. That’s how you get the answer.’

What could I say? This lack of insight into one’s own unconscious theoretical bias was the reason we had an infant GORD epidemic in the first place! And if we don’t develop and debate theoretical frameworks, then we don’t know which questions to ask, which ones are most targeted and cost-effective. We pluck research questions out of the air, blindly. Critics argue that EBM, so proud of its ‘pragmatism’, remains blissfully unaware of its own implicit theoretical assumptions and is, therefore, unable to engage criticism rationally. It doesn’t know what it doesn’t know. Brand EBM is, therefore, a fundamentalism. You believe in it. You don’t have to know what other disciplines, for example, the social sciences, are saying about an issue.
You can avoid the headache of complex clinical problems and focus on the simple ones, amenable to straightforward cause-and-effect interventions, which translate into more publications and a successful career. ‘EBM is a very odd approach to knowledge,’ confided another professor of primary-care research, from down south, ‘and it’s influencing policy in worrying ways.’

Then my proposed study won the RACGP Research Foundation’s most generous Easter bursary: $20,000 for research costs. I’d written the application over yet another Easter, this time on Stradbroke Island, looking out on the stormy skies and crashing surf at Main Beach, with my daughter and her boyfriend sleeping in and my son down at Cylinder Beach looking for girls. When I won the scholarship, I googled the professor who died so young and bequeathed this fund for those starting out in primary-care research. I felt a sudden burden of responsibility to make him proud, to make a difference. He was an EBM man of formidable intelligence and charisma, and I like to think that, if he were still here, he would understand what I’m trying to do.

IT WOULD BE disingenuous to frame my research into crying babies as a struggle between brand EBM and complexity in primary care, using the same tired old oppositional discourse – though I confess it has often felt as if it is that. But integrating the mass of digital-age research into unsettled infant behaviour, and generating high-quality information, would not be possible without brand EBM. Every time I search the literature, every time I appraise a study for rigour, every time I look for the highest level of evidence, I benefit from its legacy. Even the form of literature review I have used, metanarrative mapping, was first formalised in the UK by a feisty professor of general practice, wrestling publicly with both the benefits and limitations of EBM.

The GORD epidemic is best framed as a by-product of reductionism in medical research, the same reductionism that proved fertile ground for the rise of brand EBM. Reductionism is an extremely useful tool for highly specialised, hospital-based research interests, and the GORD epidemic in unsettled babies can be understood as a hot-headed moment in the youthful discipline of paediatric gastroenterology research that got seriously out of hand. But reductionism alone fails to make sense of the breathtakingly complex, stunningly unpredictable, constantly dynamic problems that a GP in the community encounters in her consulting room every day.

Perhaps we needed a final burst of medical reductionism at the beginning of the twenty-first century to sharpen our critical thinking about the way forward into an increasingly complex future in healthcare. EBM advocates have expanded definitions of the ‘E’ to address their critics’ complaints: ‘E’ includes, now, many other forms of evidence besides RCTs, including qualitative studies, and these days EBM has abdicated absolute authority and modestly aims to serve the patient and
the clinician. Perhaps it could be said that EBM in its new, revised form is helping dismantle the infant GORD epidemic like the Ouroboros, the snake swallowing its tail – what began it also ends it.

But critics remain scathing, declaring that brand EBM is intellectually dishonest in its attempts to appropriate the much greater enterprise of understanding and improving health. It was a masculinist project, they argue. It’s had its moment, left its legacy. This is the era of complexity, of personalised, patient-centred medicine, critics maintain, and brand EBM is dead.

Meanwhile, the diagnosis of GORD in unsettled babies in the first months of life is waning, although it’s still surprisingly common. Now, more and more breastfeeding mothers of unsettled infants see their GPs on complicated elimination diets, interspersed with food challenges. Mothers pore anxiously over food diaries, explaining which foods have passed through their milk and upset their babies. Or they detail the various formulas they’ve tried. Food-allergy babies are waking frequently at night, crying excessively, crying in a piercing shriek, arching their backs, turning red in the face, flexing the knees up to the tummy, vomiting, refusing to feed.

Once again, parents are frantic. Conscientious GPs read articles about food allergies written by other specialists. It’s dramatically increased in incidence over the past two decades in older children; it’s a lifelong illness; it requires constrained diets and swallowed steroids; it may result in oesophageal strictures if untreated. But we are making the same old mistake of extrapolating back, diagnosing food allergies in irritable babies and prescribing PPIs in addition, just to be on the safe side.

Using the tools generated by brand EBM, we can say with confidence that the incidence of cow’s milk allergy is increasing, and is a cause of unsettledness in babies. But the evidence that food allergies more generally cause unsettledness in babies in the first few months of life is unconvincing. This diagnosis appears to be another reductionist solution offered to distraught parents by concerned health practitioners in the absence of an accessible, multidisciplinary, primary-care approach.

Because health systems with strong primary care are more efficient, have lower rates of hospitalisation, fewer health inequalities and better health outcomes, the Australian government has promised to make primary care its central plank in health system reform. The Department of Health and Ageing is closing down the PHCREd Research Capacity Building Initiative at the end of 2011, channelling funds into a small number of Centres of Research Excellence in primary care, so that teams of mostly postdoctoral researchers can focus on multidisciplinary collaboration, the translation of research into practice, and policy, according to priority themes. But some senior figures fear that the funding pool for primary care research is contracting with the closure of the PHCREd Research Building Capacity.
Initiative, and that it will be even more difficult for researchers starting out, like me. Certainly everyone in primary care research agrees that if there is to be any seriously effective health system reform, primary care research desperately needs more funding.

IN THE ABSENCE of an easily accessible, multidisciplinary, primary-care approach, it is more likely that the mother of that crying baby next door may cease breastfeeding prematurely, that she may require treatment for postnatal depression, that the baby may be abused in a moment of terrible and frantic overwhelm, that the baby may require treatment once it reaches school age for long-term psychological and behavioural problems.

Recently two internationally prominent gastroenterologists published a paper proposing that acid-suppression medications predisposes babies to food allergies. They cite research showing that a less acidic environment in the stomach prevents breakdown of complex proteins, at the same time as the medications increase the permeability of the gut. Absorption of undigested proteins sensitises the immune system. They argue that the dramatic rise in prevalence of food allergies over the past two decades fits with the exponential increase in the use of PPIs in this time.

So, worse still, it seems quite possible that an epidemic of an imaginary disease in unsettled babies has created, through unnecessary medication, the misery of lifelong food allergies for some. This is a high price to pay for crying out.

Pamela Douglas is a Brisbane-based general practitioner, and adjunct senior lecturer in the discipline of general practice at the University of Queensland.
**MY** friend Philip enjoyed a weekly crossword.

He bought or subscribed to a magazine he freely acknowledged was of at best passing or peripheral interest—society gossip, largely, such as I could gather—but with a puzzle on its inner back page he adored.

No other word for it, I'm afraid.

An office friend.

Every Thursday.

We inhabited together a section of partitioned alcove forty business hours a week.

Hodgkins, his last name.

Not married.

No longer married.

I didn’t ask.

Nor he of me.

As I knew too to leave him alone that day with his magazine.

‘Do you mind?’ he said.

I stepped back.

‘It’s my one pleasure,’ he excused his gruffness.

Stretching a barren smile.

On Thursdays I ate my sandwich in the park.

Unless it was raining.

Then I went there or there or there.

Whatever.

I left him alone.
DO YOU DO crosswords? Neither do I. I don’t have the interest, the aptitude, I don’t know what you’d call it. The need, I suppose. Oh, stuck on a plane I might find myself reaching for my rollerball and filling in a word or two, but the answers are either so easy I feel childish or else I’m irritated not knowing so I turn to the answer on the next page and that’s the end of that.

   Good riddance too.
   No loss.
   I have other avenues for my intelligence.
   Philip, it seems, didn’t.

OUR WORK IS telephoning.
   It’s not difficult. What we say is written out for us.
   What else can I tell you?
   Work is work.

THURSDAY.
   I took my sandwich.
   Another Thursday.
   It wasn’t raining.
   I went to the park.
   And when I came back Philip had finished his crossword, as he always did, unobserved, as he required it, left alone, but this time he spoke.
   ‘They’ve made a mistake,’ he said.
   ‘The answer to last week,’ he said.
   ‘Usually I don’t look,’ he said, ‘I don’t need to look.’
   He glared at me.
   No other word for it, I’m afraid.
   He glared.
   ‘They’ve printed the wrong one.’

I WENT HOME when it was time to go home.
   Philip went to wherever he went.
He phoned me.

‘It wasn’t the wrong one,’ he said.

My telephone is on the kitchen wall. I sleep naked.

‘Philip,’ I said. ‘It’s two o’clock in the morning.’

HE WAS WAITING for me with both magazines.

‘Look,’ he said.

I wasn’t even out of my coat.

‘One across.’ He pointed. ‘Hero’s antagonist. I put villain. They’ve got badster. Then one down, using my v, the clue is repository for flowers. Vase. They’ve got bowl.’

He showed me.

‘Look,’ he said.

He was right.

‘And this one,’ he said.

Every word different.

‘And here,’ he said.

Every answer.

‘Nineteen across,’ he said.

His and theirs.

‘Fourteen down,’ he said. ‘Where I’ve got Dutch uncle.’

It was uncanny.

‘Thirty-six across,’ he said.

Both answers.

‘Triangular plate on arm of anchor,’ he read me the clue.

Everything fit.

‘WRITE TO THE magazine,’ I said.

We should have been telephoning.


It was time to be telephoning.

‘The Nobel Prize,’ I said.
THURSDAY.
I took my sandwich.
Another Thursday.
It wasn’t raining.
I went to the park.
And when I came back Philip still sat with his pencil still in his hand, the magazine open to the appropriate page on the surface of work table in front of him, the squares of the adored crossword entirely untouched, not a single space filled, virgin and immaculate, completely unmarked.
‘I can’t,’ he said.
He looked at me.
‘I just can’t,’ he said.
He wouldn’t look at me.
‘What if it happens again?’

HE BEGAN TO read books. I think he read books. He must have read books.
‘A tree,’ he said.
‘Shade from the sun,’ he said.
‘A picture for the afternoon painter,’ he said.
‘A fecund factory for the formulation of fruits,’ he said.
‘A cold man will carve it one way, a cabinetmaker another,’ he said.
‘The same tree,’ he said.

I TOOK MY sandwich.
It was raining.
I went to the park.
This was a Tuesday.

THE MAGAZINE STARED.
Two untouched months.
I asked why he still bought it.
Eight untried issues.
His mouth opened.
I suggested he not buy it.
He looked at me.
The magazine waited on his work table.
He had no words.

‘THE TREE,’ HE SAID.
Work was over.
‘The same tree,’ he said.
We stood at the corner.
‘See the tree,’ he said.
And stepped out, dead before you could even utter the word, directly into an oncoming truck.
He must have seen the light as green.

Morris Lurie is the author of some three dozen books for adults and children.
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