

Mrs  
Mop  
Thinks . . .

By  
J.L. Herrera

A Collection, Day by Day,  
Prior to the Joys of  
Participating in the  
Democratic Process . . .

## *Mrs. Mop Thinks...*

Years ago I was at a committee meeting and to start things off someone suggested we go round the circle each mentioning something we had been doing recently. I hadn't been doing anything in particular so I said I had been thinking of writing a book based on the fleeting things I think about when sweeping and washing up and ironing. I said I thought I would call it 'Mrs Mop Thinks'. People seemed to find the idea amusing. A few weeks later I ran into someone who had been there and she asked me how Mrs Mop was faring. I had to say I hadn't given Mrs Mop another thought. At least, not the sort of thought which leads on to action ...

And yet Mrs Mop has never quite gone away. She always sits around gossiping on the state of the world while I do dull things like putting plates through hot soapy water. But the point of her company I realized at last was not that she was the precursor to tightly plotted clever essays but that she was the bringer of fleeting thoughts and responses to things all around me. Things I heard on the news, things I saw out my kitchen window, things someone said yesterday, comments on past events and future plans.

The ephemeral quality of her conversation was inevitable. It was also part of the pleasure of her company. Some people sing or whistle while they are ironing. Some people yearn for a life which does not include sweeping. Some people, with firm devotion, give their full mind to what they are doing. But Mrs Mop is my way of getting through repetitive jobs.

So I thought I would finally jot down some of her offerings and see what the end result might look like. They make no claim to being nicely-constructed short essays nor the wit and pith of aphorisms. Not even those little pars women's magazines used to request. Not profound. Not politically savvy. Not life-changing. No. They are just ... thoughts.

Hobart 2007.

## MONDAY 8 OCTOBER 2007.

Rugby ... a 'religion', it seems, in New Zealand. Such upset, such misery. Shock loss at the World Cup in France. Ditto here. But since when was 'religion' about *winning*. Come home, you dreary people, and give thanks that new nations are given their moment in the sun, their moment to bask in the fickle glare of crowd approval. Go down on your knees and thank God for knowing best. Then you can chat about religion.

The pulp mill, the frenzy. Mr Quin's resignation. Not Harley but a Ben. Quin esq. Liberal man. Done for now. (Should I put a comma after 'done'?) Pulp mills may help some candidates. But they had their process all set out though far from perfect. RPDC. It sounds musical, doesn't it. But they, Lennon and cohorts, wrecked it. It wasn't doing what they wanted. But it was the best they had and they couldn't go with the best they had. What if there had been an RPDC around when they planned the mine at Queenstown? It might've saved future generations dead rivers and denuded hills ... and very large restorative bills. But no. Future generations can, in pollies' minds, bugger off. They don't vote. They may never get to vote. There may be nothing left to vote for. They may have returned to caves and the shambles of buildings like something out of books of allegorical plagues. Human beings growing little ratty whiskers to cope with the new world they have inherited. Memo: how whiskery were we in the far past?

It won't be a democratic world. Democracy will have been destroyed by opinion polls, spin, froth, bubbles, silliness, and the hope that we are all looking the other way. Watching sport maybe. That sounds like Pinochet in Chile who thought no one would notice what he was up to so long as he gave 'em enough sport. Soccer. Soccer. Soccer. He did his share of socking. The Romans had it down pat. Gladiators. Christians thrown to the lions. But then Rome is not remembered for the quality of its democracy ...

It would be so simple. We have an election on the first Saturday in November every third year. Everyone would know what to expect. They could manoeuvre to their little hearts' content but one thing would be immutable. We can do it for a horse race but not for the future, it would seem. Children, in their last year of school, could have their names entered on the electoral roll, unless they had strong conscientious reasons for wishing otherwise, and their school would tell them the date on which they would need to confirm their details and how to go about it. Sample thing: Student puts name down end of 2008 at completion of final year; knows the exact date in 2010 when next election will fall. Takes away a small confirmation form to be filled in and sent off in September 2010. End of matter.

I just looked out my window. I wish I hadn't. A parent, with a full head of hair, carrying a small child without hair in crisp chill morning with sneaky wind about that small head. Later result. Headachey and pains in the ears. What's the matter with this kid. Won't stop grizzling. I was an ignorant parent, rarely far-seeing, but I did have enough gumption to put small heads into small caps and beanies in winter or shady hats in summer.

## TUESDAY 9 OCTOBER 2007.

First army death in Afghanistan. Will there be brow-beating in Canberra? Hands on hearts. I hope so. But if you have wars you have deaths; as certain as taxes. And what was the poor blighter doing in Afghanistan anyway. Apart from building a few small buildings (and I

simply do not believe that the people of Afghanistan do not know how to build a small building) and roaring to and fro across the countryside sending the sparse top-soil rolling away in clouds, I cannot see that we are doing anything useful there. Memo: wait two days and there will be announced a large boost to our military budget to support ‘our boys’ there. But parliament which isn’t sitting anyway won’t be debating the more important question: what is our point in being there?

When the planes flew in to the Trade Centre a number of things could have been done.

- a) nothing.
- b) the sort of comprehensive police investigation into culprits as in the Oklahoma bombing.
- c) a boycott of everything Saudi Arabian.
- d) deciding to invade Iraq.

Take your pick. But there was another option on the table. Pay the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden. This idea was rejected. They had paid the Taliban when it was seen as the Mujahadeen fighting the Soviets etc etc ... and the Taliban was just as unpleasant to women in those supposedly innocent days. But now this was seen as unacceptable. Making the Taliban richer would make the poor more miserable. Maybe. But the reason farmers don’t want to give up growing opium poppies is simply that the Afghan farmers who do so are some of the most comfortably off and tolerant people in the country. In other words, money regardless of its source changes the way people look at the world.

Oh but you couldn’t reward these nasty Taliban blokes; think of all the trouble they would make. They probably would. But their *raison d’être*, a supposedly pure form of Islamic living, would have been fatally compromised. And Osama sitting in a US jail would be a reminder that no such leader of no such movement is immune to the power of bribery and ‘betrayal’.

I find myself thinking about it in Iraq too. The US says 600 billion dollars and rising. Now, forgive me for being a little slow, but I am inclined to think that ordinary poor Iraqis living in mud-brick houses without running water could have done a lot with US\$6,000,000,000+ ... just a little housewifely thought ...

And what of the family of that poor *young* man? That is the operative word: *young*. Why do we send the fathers of little children off to war when there is no shortage of fathers of big children around? Why wreck the lives of little children for something so ephemeral? Ah but soldiers need to be very fit to leap out of helicopters and bash down doors with their boots. Except that of our two losses one was apparently doing something with his gun (or his mate was) and the other was driving along in a vehicle. Since when were those actions beyond the capabilities of your average fifty-year-old?

## WEDNESDAY 10 OCTOBER 2007

If we believe the death penalty is wrong we believe the death penalty is wrong. But poor old Robbie McClelland has just found himself up that murky creek without a paddle. I honestly don’t know where Kevin Rudd is coming from. Day by day he begins to look more like a John Howard clone ... all this right-wing Christian talk getting in his way ... and he hasn’t even got Howard’s one rare virtue of being loyal to his team and constantly reiterating that he has ‘full confidence’ ... but then Labor has never been famous for loyalty to the team.

The debate now smacks of racism. Fine to plead with the Singapore Government to save an Australian citizen, not fine to plead with the Indonesian Government to save a group of non-

Australians; but then the one in Singapore wasn't very likely to kill anyone ... only a minuscule proportion of heroin addicts and takers die ... compared to the proportion of people who drink alcohol or go out in cars ... and worse still the Indonesians killed nice bronzed Aussie holidaymakers ... so the big T word comes into play. That we have no deep intrinsic objection to bombs and bullets, we even have a thriving industry to make them, is clear. We just don't think that it is kosher to direct them at Aussies on holiday ... Aussies full stop. We haven't objected to them being dropped on civilians everywhere from Nagasaki to the Balkans, from Afghanistan to Iraq ... or we haven't yet ...

Oh now, hold hard! You silly old bat! You must be able to see the difference between a cute little girl in next to nothing and a woman hidden under heavy black things ... I mean, she isn't exactly ... anyone ... just a blob. You don't even get to see the blood when the bombs fall.

Well, Robert, I imagine you will now retreat and say you didn't mean it and of course you didn't mean to be so insensitive as to speak out against the death penalty this week ... and Christianity is about forgiving and loving your enemies ... and never mind that Martin Bryant with more kills to his 'credit' than the individuals in Indonesia is sitting down to breakfast as I write this ... but then he wasn't killing in the name of anything ... his terror wasn't Terror, he can't be invoked, there is no mileage in him ...

## THURSDAY 11 OCTOBER 2007

Religion always got lip service. But now it has the feeling of constantly lurking in the wings. Howard and Rudd going head-to-head to promote themselves as the more Christian. How ridiculous. The proof of any religious pudding is in the eating. But so long as there is the possibility of an extra vote to be picked up it is worth going through the motions.

But are there votes to be lost? Everything has been flung at us in the last few months, heavy-handed interventions in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities, doesn't matter if they were doing well or not, in goes the military, major consumers of porn and grog, to shake the black consumers. Hospitals. Water. More troops on the cards. Fewer immigrants. If they're black. Might take over this. Might take over that. A sudden shake-up of this, eg. nurse training, and of that. Is it any wonder that people are immensely cynical about politicians? But what happens when same politicians drag Christ along for the ride? Does it make people more cynical about religion, about churches, about Christianity? Is that the real aim? Not that they're wanting to wipe religion off our radar—but that they would like to wipe off this mishy-mashy middle-of-the-road mum-and-dad-and-the-kids stuff. You can't bring in the really tough hardline religion that is all about authority and punishment and a fearsome father figure.

That is the trouble with Howard and Rudd going head-to-head, locking horns, who is the more fervent devout Christian ... there's not a lot else out there on the horizon. Bob Brown? Those who have no particular reason to admire Christianity. Are there any Jewish members. Do they feel differently. Muslim candidates. Atheists. I begin to hope so. Because the Bible is not a very good guide to strengthening democracy. George Bush is out there 'imposing' democracy with Bible in one hand and bomb in the other ... but that is hardly a good example.

How do we truly create a strong democratic tradition right from the ground up? Teaching civics in school or some bowdlerized history, touting a citizenship test which asks if you've heard of Phar Lap but doesn't do anything to increase your commitment to democracy? Spare me ...

The key question I suppose is whether values equate with democracy or whether they are a hard-to-pin-down substitute. Is this what Bush really means? We have brought you Values with our Shock and Awe. Our main value is that the Market now reigns supreme ... and our second value is that we want your oil but keep it cheap ...

## FRIDAY 12 OCTOBER 2007.

Ads galore. Some moron saying we can turn off things at the wall to save money and energy. PULEESE! Are we *really* reduced to this idiotic level of response to major issues?

The P.M. saying he hasn't done enough to achieve reconciliation. PULEESE! The man hasn't done a thing except send the whole process backward. Oh but, little tap on my shoulder, my good fairy 'reminder' (it may be a corruption of Romana), there is an election coming up. Yes, I had noticed. You can go back to sleep. It is his canny progress. One minute the jackboot. The next this trite little 'aw shucks, aren't I the slowcoach'. But never forget, the jackboot is waiting.

And what might we really do about reconciliation? We could start by the recognition that every inch of Australia was and still is Aboriginal land and we the uneasy and thoroughly misbehaving tenants. The sort that if they did that to a Housing Commission place, let alone a private rental ... you know, cutting down every tree, dumping toxic waste, fouling the water supply, and killing every thing that moves, would find themselves out on their ears. But we have coped with this little problem. We have made sure that our landlords and landladies are powerless to remonstrate. The moral problem remains to trouble us in our more frank and honest moments. And John Howard is not a good leader on moral issues ...

More to and fro in our hospitals. Literally. Figuratively. But no one is engaging with the question: why do we need ever larger ever more expensive concrete and steel bunkers in which to place our sick? Because we have been told and told that it is irresponsible to deal with our own health and marginally less irresponsible to go to any kind of cheap alternative. But take out of our hospitals every one who is there because of smoking, drinking, wild driving, banned substances, metho, petrol, junk food, dog bites, and living as the proverbial couch potato ... and we could halve the appalling things. Ah but, I hear a chorus say, you can't just dump such people on the pavement and tell them to go home. No. But you can prioritize. Dreadful word but it has its uses. You can look at Fault and No Fault ideas, like car driving. I think it was Tony Abbott who was keen to do away with No Fault divorce. This, mind you, was Mr Irresponsibility to a T. The one who had his child, didn't have his child, might've had his child ... and had never thought that taking responsibility for his own procreative abilities might be a good idea. This is the man who didn't want girls, including presumably his own teenage girlfriend, to have access to morning-after-pills or other forms of abortion. I suppose he hoped his girlfriend would use a knitting needle and keep quiet about it. Or find a backstreet 'place'.

## SATURDAY 13 OCTOBER 2007.

So Al Gore has joined the list of leaders who retire and re-invent themselves? Speaking personally I would rather support the kinds of leaders who are in there batting from day one. If you have to wait till people feel themselves wealthy and safe from the vicissitudes of the political system or the market place then the world is truly in a parlous state. Jimmy Carter as president couldn't wait to top up the Indonesian military with more Bronco aircraft, the low-flying ones that enabled the Indonesians to wipe out highland villages and spray herbicides and terrify women and children in East Timor. Then he retired and suddenly became a roving

ambassador in trouble spots. Or Malcolm Fraser, proud of how nasty he managed to be to those same East Timorese, suddenly being described as the ‘grand old man’ ... if that’s a grand old man I’d hate to see the opposite. It raises the question: where will other superannuated men go? Will they too get on the greenhouse emission trail and jet from continent to continent leaving emission trails to float upwards? I will believe they are all serious when a) they tackle the huge emissions of the world’s armed forces and b) when they trade their limousine and corporate jet for a bicycle or shank’s pony.

I see the State Government, lobbied because of all the unwanted cats around, is consulting with ‘key stakeholders’. What, I wonder, are key stakeholders? Vets? Cat breeders? Suppliers of kitty litter? Small birds? Much simpler to give a coupon to all cat and dog owners allowing them to get discounted de-sexing and simply work to have all stray animals, after a period to be claimed in, painlessly put down. It won’t solve all the problems. But start with the obvious my old aunt would say ... if she thought of it ...

And speaking of Nobels ... Doris Lessing saying she doesn’t care. If she doesn’t care why enter? Why not let people who do care get entered? I never enter any kind of competition unless the prize is something I would like. Why enter a competition where the prize is a lawnmower, the latest Harry Potter, or a trip to Parliament House when I don’t want those things. I would rather leave the field wide open for the people who do. But it may be that she is a case of modesty rampant ... the need among older people to at least blush and give lip service to the old ‘Who? Me? Really me? I didn’t think I had a hope in hell ... etc etc ... ’

## SUNDAY 14 OCTOBER 2007.

I see that hoary old explanation for allowing government schools to run down is being trotted out yet again. Yes, they jump up and say, if there were no independent schools think what it would cost the government to educate those same children! The picture conjured up is always of bulldozers working round the clock, great new red brick schools with ‘STATE’ over the front gate rising on waste ground. But looked at frankly it wouldn’t be anything like this. Many state schools would receive as little as an extra twenty students, something which they could easily accommodate. Here and there additions would be needed, but it isn’t lack of space that worries government schools, it is lack of teachers and lack of resources ... and it would in fact be cheaper to put on a couple of hundred more teachers than to support the hundreds of little special interest and religious schools (big ones too) that are claiming to be better than state-run schools. In many country towns the choice for parents is the local government-run high school or send their children away. Given improvements in those high schools many parents would prefer not to send their children away.

But there is another issue which isn’t being addressed. Independent schools may or may not have a long life and infinite expandability. To predicate the system on their continued existence is tricky, to say the least. Many Catholic and Anglican parents were very forgiving and did not hold sexual abuse against schools as a whole. They were also sufficiently wealthy that they could afford to pay compensation. But what of smaller schools run by smaller groups? What of changing attitudes towards religions and religious styles of education?

To allow government-run schools to be increasingly run-down in the hope that other schools will always take up the slack is extraordinarily short-sighted.

He’s there, getting out of his limousine. Howard P.M. Little jollies at the door. ‘Windy day, eh?’ ‘Certainly is.’ ‘I imagine I can guess why you’ve popped round, John.’ ‘Well, if you

can't you're even slower than I thought.' In they go, bit more chit-chat, then down to business. P.M. thinks he was wise to go for a slow Governor-General. Governor-General thinks it's been quite a good idea to get more focusing on 'our brave boys' dying every so often overseas. Turn the military into a tear-jerker and parents will urge their teenagers to join up in droves ...

"What was that, John? I was day-dreaming."

"The twenty-fourth. You won't get another overseas jaunt before Christmas, Mike."

"Never mind. It was nice while it lasted. And some other idiot sent those kids off ninety years ago—"

"Did you say—idiot?"

"Sorry. Slip of the tongue."

"We don't make slips-of-the-tongue, mate. We leave that to that other lot."

"So we do. Anyway, let me just dissolve parliament and we'll have a cup of tea."

## MONDAY 15 OCTOBER 2007.

Oh, the Rugby World cup is full of upsets. All these World Cups. I can't keep up. Of course there's no reason why I should. It doesn't matter in the least, in the Great Scheme of Things, whether I keep up or not. There she was, just a-standing at her sink ... of course it doesn't matter. But I always wonder why they make their third place play-offs sound like such an anti-climax. To come third is no small honour. And play-offs can produce some gripping sport. But we are brainwashed to believe only the two party system is what matters. One and Two. Everything else is really the also-rans. No wonder we get in such a tizz if anyone else looks like holding the balance of power.

Arms in the air! How can we change the situation to make sure this never happens again! A bit more tinkering! But looked at soberly and sensibly, something which appears to be quite rare in political parties, there is clearly now no way in which you can prevent that happening ... not unless you outlaw all minor parties and all independents. I'd better whisper. They might take me seriously. Before we know where we are they'll put the cost of contesting an election up so high only multi-millionaires, single and plural, can consider the matter of politics. Then like the Alternative Nobels we could have Alternative Governments. Democracy would demand no less ...

I believe it is sometimes called Anarchy ... and obviously has quite a lot going for it.

I have just heard a political commentator saying that Day One in this campaign is over. Is it? Have they all gone home to bed at the tidy hour of 7.30 pm? They might as well. (Of course another few hours of dinners *et al* will drag on.) Because looked at with the undivided eye—since when were people on the hustings offering bribes anything more than the old idea of pocket and rotten boroughs which disfigured the English landscape and always required Ye Olde Milk Buckete with bribes to be handed out to the few allowed to vote. The constituency has grown. But the mentality remains: they won't want us unless we can offer a sweetener. Something about things changing and not changing ...

## TUESDAY 16 OCTOBER 2007.

I just heard it said: 'forty sleeps' till election day. The sheer twee awfulness of equating democracy, or our limited version of same, with Christmas shopping almost makes me want to move to somewhere truly awful. Somewhere where I can say: I expected no better.

Women. That sheep-like mass. Now they are under pressure to move INTO the work force. Failure to line up in the job queue is letting your country down. They get herded in, herded out, in again. And their better selves are always getting tweaked. It makes me puke. A very puking day, by the way it has begun. Never mind. Someone might come out and say something worthwhile. Women were paid a pittance and treated very badly when they had to work in the times when they had no vote. Came World War One and they were suddenly herded into jobs, quite complex jobs at times, and, surprise, surprise, were found to be quite capable. Certainly as capable as most men. Men demobbed. All these women getting in the way. Send them home to the kitchen. Another war. Dear me. Yes, women might come in handy. Demobbed men. Back to the kitchen, you unfeminine little minxes. Have some babies. Not barefoot; the shoe and stocking lobby won't allow it. Along came Women's Lib. Women started to insist on staying in jobs after they married. (Amazing that putting a ring on a finger could make a woman become useless ... but then the corollary was that every man was a good provider and didn't drink ...) Women as unemployment went up were naughty to take work away from unemployed youths. Even worse, their children were being neglected and put in CHILDCARE! But now, suddenly, childcare is no bad thing and women not working, especially if they are single and don't have someone to be there for the kids, are prime targets and must get out to work. Bugger the kids! Let them be latchkey children. YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU! See that dreadful pudgy pointing Costello finger. I am tired. Women. Sheep. Sheep. Women.

Now, I am not a fan of childcare. It is necessary. It has its place. But why have children if you would rather hand them over to a stranger? And why a government which has flogged 'family values', whatever exactly they may be, is doing its best to promote less and less family 'time' I am yet to discover.

But we have got a resources boom. Key point. The faster we can dig up Australia and flog it off to North Asia the better. The boom might end. All booms do. An historical fact. And then what? That is the sixty-four dollar question. You notice how even questions must have their price. As Australia grows lighter the world may get out of kilter, fall off its current axis, and the big cold will sweep in and solve the problem of climate change ...

And when the boom ends, as all booms do, we will find we have sent all our manufacturing 'offshore' which always gives out the pleasant image that we are merely sending businesses off to somewhere like Lord Howe Island—rather than the reality that South Korea and China and Thailand will not send them back to us when we need them. Women will be whipped back into the 'family home', mortgaged to the hilt, but interest rates might drop, and an uneasy new status quo will reign. What a lovely picture. It should warm the cockles of any truly feminine heart.

But no one, no politician I mean, is tackling the real issue: booms raise greenhouse gases which ensure that the human race has an ever more reduced time span on this lovely earth. There is a solution. Nuclear war, scientists tell us, is not a good idea because it ushers in something dreary called Nuclear Winter. I'm surprised Howard and Rudd haven't thought of it. A few hundred nuclear missiles whizzing to and fro will soon solve the problem of a hot world.

Of course we might find out, too late, that the scientists got it wrong and that hundreds of nuclear explosions actually increase global warming. Never mind. We'll mostly be dead or mutated into blobs with half-arms.

WEDNESDAY 17 OCTOBER 2007.

The bus barges on. All this talk of leadership. Since when was democracy about leadership? The voice of the people transmuted into the voice of Our Big Leader. A thoroughly-permeating sense of involvement makes leadership irrelevant. Like that adage about a good team of players beating a team of good players. No wonder we've got problems. All the focus on leaders has produced a bunch of also-rans to run the country. Because no leader keen to stay as leader wants to surround himself with top talent. Doesn't matter. They've got a lovely refrain to hand. Good managers of the economy. Worse still ... they're talking about 'growth' and 'development' in every second breath. Surely the reason we're in a mess is simply that that mantra has never been challenged. But now both sides are singing it at the top of their voices, like trained canaries. I would like to hear a 'leader' (seeing we're stuck with leaders and nobodies) come out and say: sorry, folks, growth is not on today's menu. What we have to face is that everything is going to have to get smaller. Smaller homes. Smaller families. Smaller profits. Smaller wages. Smaller superannuation. Smaller hospitals. Smaller car parks. Smaller salaries. Smaller shops and showrooms. Smaller meals. Smaller choice.

Hey, what's up with you?

You some sort of spoilsport? Some sort of party-pooper?

I am.

Then we will have to ask you to shut up.

I am only musing as I wash a few dishes ...

Doesn't matter. Someone might overhear.

*You mean you don't want me, the voice of the unimportant, to be heard in this great democracy of ours?*

## THURSDAY 18 OCTOBER 2007.

Don't you just love it when they speak of 'drug cheats' and then, almost in the same sentence, they mention level playing fields. The absurdity of it. Every Western athlete, swimmer, or team player starts out ahead of their Third World counterparts. Such people have been born to women with poor ante-natal care, they have suffered debilitating childhood illnesses no longer seen in the West, their diet has often been lacking, they rarely have first class sporting facilities, coaches, scientific diets, monitoring for heart and muscle and blood ... you get the picture.

And when they beat our athletes, from their place on this supposedly level playing field, we talk about the advantages of high altitude training or that black people were born with longer legs, or they have a special 'affinity' for some particular sport. Nowhere do we clearly and honestly point out that they have come from well behind and still beaten our pampered people.

Petty hypocrisies are merely dull. Large hypocrisies take on a life and character of their own.

Day Something-or-Other in this dull campaign. And already the insults and smears are flowing. Who cares whether Julia Gillard belonged to a radical group when she was young. What a pity she doesn't belong to a radical group now that she is middle-aged and influential. We need something more than what I have heard called 'same old same old' ... And her clothes ... dear me ... are we really reduced to discussing her wardrobe ...

Never mind. Our concrete bunkers that we call hospitals are perking up. What about putting some of that money into a campaign: Give up smoking for good and we'll give \$1,000. It's okay to bribe voters and communities but I expect it's not okay to bribe smokers, drinkers, and drug-addicts. They've got to be kept around for when we need scapegoats. That long indignant finger to be pointed. Some people (crash of thunder) don't help themselves. Some people (another crash) are their own worst enemy.

I've noticed a troubling trend lately. A man kills a woman. His excuse? She poked fun at his sexual failings. She is not around to say 'Rubbish! He's violent and out-of-control!' No. She goes down into death forever tarnished with the claim that she was a bitch who didn't treat some nasty little creep's ego (let alone his penis) with all due tact. And given that the people dealing with such cases, police, lawyers, clerks, judges, are almost all men with their own secret doubts it is not surprising to hear that these murderers are not getting life. Perhaps we will see the reverse: a whole crop of women murdering men. Please, Your Honour, he said I was frigid/ugly/dull/smelly. What choice did I have but to give him what for ... which I did with a vengeance. A woman has her pride.

## FRIDAY 19 OCTOBER 2007.

The ads I see are now up and running. Or sitting. Or glaring. But since when did scare tactics have anything to do with democracy. Surely the need, the fundamental bottom-line, is that everyone should participate. I don't like to dwell on the baggage that pollies bring with them to their seat in parliament. But quite frankly I would rather have fishnet tights and radical student memberships than the holier-than-thou brigade. John Howard might be a nicer person if he had got out and done something a little bit naughty instead of watching priggishly from the sidelines ...

And in all the shrill calls—let us have your policies!—I find something rather odd because I don't trust policies for the *future* and I am not certain that other people do either. After all, parties get in to government and immediately begin to jettison anything that seems a trifle ... awkward. The very policy that might have swayed your allegiance may be the first one to go overboard with a twee little splash. Oh no, we realize now that things have changed and we just can't do blah, blah, whatever blah blah was ... not even a genuine sorry. And you are left to gnash your teeth in silence for three years, knowing you have been conned, and the democratic process has let you down. So I have a handy little bit of advice. Judge parties on their performance, their attitudes, their tone, their willingness to give reasons for decisions to do things or their failure to question. A party which was mean last year is unlikely to change its spots. The party that treated you with contempt is going to go on doing it. The party where ministers don't bother to reply to letters will go on failing. The party which descends to smears and slander will go on descending. The party that makes the rich richer and the poor poorer will continue with that philosophy, only throwing out a sop when the gap seems too blatantly obvious.

I am not going to vote for anyone on the basis of a *promise*. What I will be doing is looking closely at the recent past.

## SATURDAY 20 OCTOBER 2007.

Affordable housing! The new catchcry. Has housing ever been affordable? Our parents and grandparents managed ... but the types of houses they struggled to buy eventually, usually after a long period of renting, living with in-laws, or living as hired labour (house provided),

would fit three times over into the Modern House. The kids in the sleep-out, usually a bit of a verandah closed in with Masonite or louvres. Three kids to a room. Baby in with mum and dad. Bathroom in a lean-to. Dunny down past the vegetable patch. Bit of money = Something added on. A kind of work-in-progress.

Affordable? Fairly. But now councils, builders, governments, financial institutions, the Public, have put up their expectations. A room each for the kids. En suite bathrooms for everybody and half of one for the dog. Wall to wall carpeting from Day One. A lounge suite to match the paint. Heavens! Our house didn't even get painted inside till years down the track. It didn't even get *lined* till times improved. When pollies point a nostalgic finger to the affordable houses of yesteryear they need to point out that most people now would turn up their modern noses. Even our *caravans* are better appointed than many of those houses. Pardon. Mobile homes.

All the solutions ... I am not sure but I tend to feel solution is not the right word ... stop-gap measures possibly ... aren't inspiring. Release more land! But more land doesn't automatically make the house built on it more affordable. And the horrible image of ever-expanding cities taking land from market gardens, bushland, birds, bees, butterflies, to cover it with concrete horrifies my soul. And as petrol gets more expensive what people may have saved on housing will go on fuel to get to work, shopping centres, and birthday parties.

Okay then. Keep interest rates down. The iron hand of the Reserve Bank called into play perhaps. Though its governor may depend on government cronyism for his appointment it is debatable how much space he has in which to play around with economic 'wisdom'. He may choose to put interest rates on hold for another month or two ... maybe to let the election go by before he upsets his long time mates in the Liberal Party ... but that's about it.

Then what about special subsidies. First Home Buyers. That sort of stuff. But if anything this encourages people into large mortgages before they are ready and puts upward pressures on land prices. More Housing Commission housing. Get people out of rental places and into a nice little place in an iffy suburb. Might help. Sorry about those arsonists next door but you have to take what comes if you want a cheap house.

My suggestion is simple. Halve the size of all new houses. If you want your monster McMansion then you have to pay a big carbon tax to run it, something you have to factor into the costs. So it really will make sense to go back to your little cottage and vegie patch. You might even consider leaving a little spot of native bush rather than clearing it for that gigantic 'games room' or triple garage with satellite dish ...

## SUNDAY 21 OCTOBER 2007.

They, Howard and Rudd, we are told will go 'head to head' this evening. Images of large rams. Clunk. Bank. Bump. Bosh. The excitement will be ... minimal. On the other hand the thought of two large lumps of mush left over only fit to be shoveled up and carted away to the compost heap in a wheelbarrow is quite a touching little one. Memo: Do TV studios have compost heaps?

And a curious thought: other nations have seen their parliamentarians mowed down; singly, or in droves. What would happen if the television studios were to blow up, taking them both with it, and leaving Peter Costello and Julia Gillard to hold high their respective flags. How would it change anything? What if the P.M., Cabinet and a few hangers-on were to leap

off a cliff in their bus while the Labor team on board a plane for Adelaide came down with only one of the cabin crew surviving? This is the real test—or *a* real test—of the depth of democracy, that it is so deeply embedded in the structures and the community that the country would simply go along on its merry way, just the hiccup of a lot of funerals, all those 21-gun-salutes to break the eardrums ...

Government Departments would continue to pay their bills. Our Consulates and diplomats would continue to invite dignitaries to tea. Government-owned institutions, from schools to prisons to quarantine stations, would continue to run. And it is very unlikely that their running would be any worse. Hospitals would muddle along. Roads would continue to get repaired. Trade attaches would continue to flog off large slices of Australia. In other words, given the cost of governments, we might think twice about bringing back a new lot. Would a government by bureaucracy be less democratic? Would the head of the Defence Department take it upon himself to bring soldiers home. He already takes it upon himself to circulate and rest them, to recruit and retire them. Would the head of the Education Department continue to let schools run down? She might. But what was saved on the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet could now be put into schools. And what about Treasury ...

What aspect of democracy is so vital that it can only be run by elected representatives? Going to war? How many of the things which shame us are the result of decisions made by unelected representatives? The running of our detention centres? And how much do those ‘faceless bureaucrats’ take their attitudes and tone and ways of responding from their Minister?

Of course a government by bureaucrats might appear more like government by commissar ... but I wonder. Places where the bureaucracy is so unhelpful, so Kafkaesque, so Orwellian, so labyrinthine, are not short of unelected politicians. Is there any society where bureaucrats do not answer to someone? Anyone at all? I cannot think of any.

Perhaps that could be the next great experiment in human organization.

## MONDAY 22 OCTOBER 2007.

Little prayers going up from the back seat of that chauffeur-driven car, no doubt. Please God, don’t let the Reserve Bank put interest rates up. Please God, ask the Iraqis, Afghans, and everyone else, not to kill any more Australian soldiers. Please God, don’t make wild storms, surges, heat waves, serious bushfires round Canberra ... or anything else which might remind the voters that I haven’t done anything to try to stop climate change. I have however done a lot of jetting around. Which is why I prefer the media to join me on my *walks* ...

And I imagine serious men with bulldog faces in back rooms sitting trying to second guess the voters. WHICH ISSUE WILL MATTER MOST? And after long discussion they have obviously homed in on GROWTH. It is like a mantra. More of same. My promise to you. Bugger the bushfires. GROWTH. Never mind the wasting of the planet under the drowning impact of useless consumer goods which all happen to require energy to run them. GROWTH. Didn’t you see me out walking the other day? Striding along. The picture of prime ministerial fitness. A role model for everyone. GROWTH. You can’t kick out a government that’s had such a caring and concerning interest in your hip pocket. GROWTH.

I have lived through nine prime ministers. My hip pocket has remained much the same through all nine. Of interest to no one. Tax cuts may benefit the rich. They have never

benefited me. My richness is of the spirit, of the imagination, of the enjoyment of small birds outside my kitchen window.

But I do have an issue which will inform my vote. This may surprise you. West Papua. That place, right slap-bang next to Australia, back door, front door, doesn't matter, there it is, a mere hundred kilometres from Australia, and our politicians simply do not care that it is a place of the most appalling human rights abuses, environmental degradation, cultural and language destruction, fear, humiliation, dispossession ... as difficult of access by outsiders and departure by insiders as North Korea ...

And a superb place in which to train jihadi boobies ...

And so, given this total lack of concern, my vote will not be flowing to the MAN of GROWTH nor the MAN of ME-TOO-GROWTH.

## TUESDAY 23 OCTOBER 2007.

What is most distinctly lacking at Federal level is even a modicum of empathy. I know that empathy is something which only tends to come with increasing maturity, rare is the child with a real sense of being able to put itself in another's shoes, so I would seem to be suggesting that our politicians rarely show high levels of maturity. I am. Political ideology and spin has overtaken that touching belief in the growth of wisdom and understanding that comes with age.

Take, for instance, the scrapping of the permit system. Minister Brough, pollies in general, the rich and powerful in our society, have homes and yards that bristle with security. Intercoms, fences, locked gates, burglar alarms, deadlocks, chains, dogs. Their contracts with Chubb and Wormald. Light sensors. Remote controlled garages. Neighbourhood Watch. On and on. But now even the limited control that Aboriginal communities had over who came on to their land has been scrapped. You can go and camp on their land and peer in their windows of a night. But they can't come and camp on the Brough lawn and peer in the Brough windows of a night. Not unless they want converging sirens ...

Full employment, the catch cry, is another area in which empathy is distinctly lacking. Not only do we have over 4% unemployment, or several hundred thousand people, but we have over a million people whose 'employment' actually only works out at a couple of hours work a week. But this is only occasionally mentioned by a passing academic. It is certainly NOT made clear by Mr Blow-Your-Own-Trumpet Costello. In fact, up to about two million Australians are in all but name unemployed or underemployed. A matter for congratulation? Perhaps. It depends on where you want to sit. And then there are all the women who would like to work or work more who aren't even listed in the unemployment statistics because their husband is either employed or listed as unemployed. Spouse statistics are kept very low key. Don't want the nice picture getting smudged. Those little arrows and percentage points which have replaced simply stated numbers of people on our television screens. Something detached and impersonal. As though point-o-five of a percentage point is immediately pregnant with meaning to us all. And yet, it would now seem that even single parents are to be hounded into the work force leaving their children to make up a new generation of latch-key-kids.

John Howard has a simple explanation on why he doesn't have empathy: he is too old. He belongs to the wrong generation. The one which saw nothing wrong with forcibly removing children, not after careful investigation and explanation, but in the 'annual roundup' to grab lighter-skinned Aboriginal children. Pat Dodson said he didn't believe Australia could be taken

back to the assimilationist era—and now he has found that it can. Yes, clocks can be turned back. Ideas go around and come around and turn up with new frills. The thing which can't be brought back are those thousands of grieving mothers. Most did not live long enough to hear anyone say sorry. What Howard is effectively saying is that he has never developed, grown, widened his understanding and his empathy. In fact he is publicly admitting that he is one of those unfortunate people who are as bigoted and narrow at sixty as they were at ten.

Surely we deserve better in the prime ministerial stakes?

WEDNESDAY 24 OCTOBER 2007.

It bothers people. The similarity in Lib and Lab policies. But in there is bi-partisan recognition that governments are now expected to 'manage' economies so as to seduce footloose international capital, skills, trade, and business. Governments have increasingly little room to implement radical financial change. Though they are at the mercy of the damage caused by this same uncommitted global market. They may, at the drop of a hat, have to intervene to prop up things ... interventions they haven't, and probably can't, budget for.

The global market likes powerful central governments. One Stop Shopping, in effect. That centralized control has not been shown to be any more efficient is not bothering anyone, it seems. The horrors of our federal quarantine system. The horrors of our federal immigration detention centres. The failures and corruptions of our federal police. But global capital and transnational corporations like to get it all organized centrally. Varying states with varying regulations are a ... put politely 'a disincentive', put less politely 'a nightmare' to global business. And if you factor in local councils ... dear me. So the states will pressure local government and the commonwealth will pressure the states and the international market will pressure the commonwealth. And I, that little stick figure in the corner, known as The Citizen will shrink back as the behemoth thunders past and I will hope, with fluttering heart, to survive another day ...

Looked at in this way we see everything is subtly geared to this understanding. Over 4% unemployment and probably more than 10% under-employment is NOT full employment. But they have a difficult balancing act. Full employment has to be sold at home while the international market has to be shown a pool of unemployed so it can be reassured that there will still be downward pressures on wages. Some of the more unpleasant aspects of policy are geared to continually topping up this pool. Threaten to push disabled people and single parents into the labour market, not because the government cares about the disabled and single parents, but because international markets need to know there is further slack in the employment market.

Break up the cohesion and social and community culture of Aboriginal settlements in the Northern Territory and send their young people out on to the job market is another way of letting the world know there is further slack in that pool. All these new full time as opposed to work-for-the-dole type of jobs, surprisingly, seem to have gone to middle-aged women who don't, in my book, go out, bored and bursting with unused energy to make trouble at night ... So moving young men out, losing language and culture, is the obvious solution. Another version of the Lost Generations. Never mind. Aboriginal out-stations and corporations aren't viable anyway and need to be quietly undermined and overturned and closed down ...

Talk about skills shortages but do nothing about them ... simply because NO government no matter how prescient can know what skills will be in demand in five years time. If the

mineral boom fails there will be no demand for those skills. If plantation agriculture expands there will be a different demand. If tourism leaps then demands will be different yet again. Changing entertainment or communications technologies will raise yet more intractable questions. What will we do with the high priests of the internal combustion engine in an era of solar-powered vehicles. No wonder governments have put comprehensive skills training in the ‘too hard basket’. The only skills that we know will be in demand are those related to internal demographics such as the need for more geriatric nurses and makers of walking frames.

Give lip service to the environment whilst making sure environmental protection is never rigorous or radical enough to send capital and factories fleeing offshore in a mass exodus. Let it be talk of ‘wages’ which sends them ... Wages—as in ‘too high’ ...

I am cynical. Getting out and protesting at Free Trade Forums doesn’t really work ... and now puts huge imposts on all taxpayers. What does work is radically reducing consumption. The global market needs globally-minded consumers not those who prefer to consume modestly and locally.

## THURSDAY 25 OCTOBER 2007.

I imagine Mr Howard was saying some unprintable things under his breath last night when he heard an interest rate rise is likely before the election.

But then he is like most politicians now caught in a particular trap of post-modern capitalism. Big government is meant to wither away and let the market range freely. But politicians are not going to go quietly. They like to be well paid for all their regulating and legislating ... and jaunts. No politician is going to vote himself out of a job. And so long as he stays in the job he has to be seen as earning his pay. This involves publicly legislating while privately reassuring the big end of town that most of the legislation is mere paper. The voter has to be reassured that government will protect the ‘little person’ from the horrors of the untrammeled market while the market has to be reassured that it can act untrammeled and the ‘little person’ will quiescently accept all its horrors.

There is a paradox here that I don’t think I ever thought about very much. The market wants free rein and for governments and regulatory bodies to butt out (imagine the gnashing of teeth at Mattel when it realized it couldn’t simply sell lead-painted toys without demur) but the market wants governments, reserve banks and regulatory bodies to butt in as soon as there is an expensive disaster in the making. Like propping up banks and lending bodies ...

The market wasn’t going to bother with poor people in New Orleans or poor people bringing on the sub-prime lending crisis. No. Governments, i.e. ‘us’, had to rush money and blankets in. And when governments patently fail then ‘little persons’, i.e. ‘us’, with their donations are expected to house the homeless and find cures for the horrible diseases that strike the rich as well as the poor.

That old idea that the air force should hold its button days and cake stalls and bingo nights in the way that those who would help children with leukaemia have to ... It is a curious thing that big business is not demanding that governments downsize the military in the way that they want to see people kicked off welfare and hospitals privatized. What does the military have that the ‘little person’ doesn’t, apart from uniforms and hardware and an insatiable appetite for big toys, but then that is one of my most easily answered questions. And yet it too contains its paradox. The global market is about doing away with borders and letting

consumerism reign rampant across every superceded boundary ... and yet large military complexes are necessary to get these ideas into those countries which haven't yet been seduced by the obvious beauty of the free market. We need big government to spread big marketing ... by force if necessary ...

But if modern business, modern politics, modern finance, modern 'lifestyles' are all built on paradox we mustn't mind when the universe tilts and lets us slip ...

## FRIDAY 26 OCTOBER 2007.

I always wonder what they mean by 'consumer confidence'. As I consume a slice of bread can I be confident that I am consuming a product which is safe, which was created by a happy well-paid workforce in clean surroundings using the best ingredients available? I don't think that's what they mean. There are the three kinds of consumption: have to, want to, and will if the long-term forecast is good. I assume the confidence refers to the last sort. What we used to call time payment. Now it is only worth getting into this last round if you think you'll still have money in ten years time. Something which, unsurprisingly, is in the lap of the gods. Will we still have a country, a world, a universe, in ten years time? Probably. But it may have undergone such changes that only cosmonauts can vaguely recognize it from outer space. Yes, they will say with reasonable confidence, that bluish ball down there, that's still the old home planet. It is only as their spacecraft dips towards earth that they wonder why it no longer has that cool green feel. Never mind. We *have* consumed with confidence, these little human locusts ... burp ...

Another soldier 'blown away' in Afghanistan. Very sad for his wife and children. Of course, as you know, I do not approve of soldiers with wives and children, in fact soldiers under fifty being sent anywhere ... and certainly not to Afghanistan. Why do governments never learn. Bomb people, point the admonitory finger, punish, decry, warn, crow that they are done for and 'the will of the people' (whatever that means in Afghanistan) is prevailing—and you stiffen backs and harden attitudes. Ask Londoners in the Blitz. Ask the people of Hanoi. Tell people they and their ideas are done for and they will have to get to like life outside the fence ... and they will immediately set about proving you wrong and that they have just as much right to be inside the fence as you have to be outside. The terrible thing is that we are struggling in Afghanistan against rigid *ideas* without really understanding those ideas or why they have such widespread appeal. Talk about 'the people of Afghanistan' when the real problem for the country is that it has no such thing but merely antagonistic groups caught within those arbitrary borders ... but modern pollies always need 'the people' as some kind of complacent endorsement of whatever they are doing, did, might do, want to do ...

No pollie has come out and said 'we think the Taliban stink ... but we also need to ask why anything up to a third or more of the people there support them ... and how therefore we can be expected to defeat them with guns and tanks when to a major extent they *are* still 'the people', not a tiny discredited minority solely dependant on help from Iran or Saudi Arabia.'

But of course 'we the people' don't really want to have to think deeply, not now, not when quick bytes and poll results are the name of the game. But if we do not want to think deeply—should we be sending our young men *anywhere* ... other than to a week's training in Wagga Wagga ...

## SATURDAY 27 OCTOBER 2007.

Political campaigns may have changed, sending things through YOU-tube etcetera, but the need for ‘warm and fuzzy’ hasn’t gone away. Politicians do less kissing of babies. They might give the babies AIDS or herpes and get sued, not re-elected, but they are still on the lookout for good photo opportunities. It went horribly wrong for Kevin Rudd. Serve him right. Just barging into a choir rehearsal with reporters and TV cameras. But the need remains. Old folks’ homes. Fairs. Key sporting events. Places with happy families.

Now I would like to make a quite different suggestion. I would seriously consider the potential MP who decides to spend his or her entire PR budget on good causes. Instead of the incipient media-driven politician the old folks’ home would get a cheque for a couple of hundred dollars. Kids living homeless instead of kids in happy nuclear families would get real funds. And they wouldn’t have to put up with the chuck under the chin. Not Grand Finals but struggling little lacrosse teams and country athletics and payment for a coach to go round remote out-stations ...

Warm and fuzzy rules, it would seem. Take the recent move by Blundstones. It was obscene to hear the company described as ‘iconic’ and people were supposed to hold their ‘Blunnies’ in affection. We were shown retrenched workers looking and sounding politely stoic. Now I wouldn’t touch any of their products with a bargepole, even if I had one, because I think any company that wants to pay Third World wages while reaping First World sales quite simply STINKS.

Of course it isn’t just Blundstones. Three times a week I get rung up by nice sounding kids in Asia wanting to sell me mobile phones and other things on behalf of non-Asian companies. My heart goes out to such youngsters. What a grim job—cold-calling strangers on another continent. And I hope they get enough take-home-pay to survive on ... not a dependence on commissions on sales. But I don’t want their products and I think the companies that re-located to India or Malaysia to save on Australian wages should be boycotted by Australian consumers.

I read somewhere that Indonesian women get paid about 20c per shoe to make Nike products ... those same products that retail here at around 400 times the cost of production. If their CEOs were similarly getting 20c an hour I might reconsider. But I won’t hang round waiting.

It doesn’t make every Aussie company a miracle of good management, quality products, good relations with employees, and a genuinely fair operation from go to whoa. I avoid those businesses that advertise their ‘Giant Boxing Day’ sales. A neighbour who works for Myers said she was so tired when she got home late at night on Christmas Eve after setting up everything for Boxing Day that all she felt like doing on Christmas Day was sleeping, not having a lovely get-together with family and friends. And there is another thing about them I have heard people say (groan, complain, say with a resigned sigh ... ): The product you bought for \$45-95 on Christmas Eve retails two days later for \$30-50. It makes the whole idea of shopping carefully and considerately for loved ones before Christmas vaguely ridiculous. Give them each a cheque and their money will go twice as far after Christmas. Lovely Christmas spirit. Cheer. Bonhomie. If businesses want to be cynical about their customers that is their right. But I don’t like the feeling that shoppers are seen as mugs, the one-born-every-minute syndrome.

SUNDAY 28 OCTOBER 2007.

So our esteemed Minister *did* want the government to sign Kyoto. I fail to see why the government is finding the whole thing so difficult ... unless it knows beyond a shadow of doubt that it cannot or will not comply. Not, of course, that that has bothered governments when it comes to vaguely worded declarations and protocols and covenants.

It seems we can sign the things that governments don't see as very important, including those to do with the proliferation of nuclear weapons (after all we haven't got any) but we can't apologise in case it opens the door to legal recognition of people's right to compensation. We can't commit to reducing greenhouse gases ... because, dear me, we all pollute and in this regard some of us are more equal than others ... and Kyoto enforcers and shammers constantly tapping on our shoulders like a little green cricket would undermine our enjoyment of the good things of life ...

This equates such good things with pollution which rather puts the kibosh on the word 'good'. But then of course it is our enjoyment of the bad things of life that we usually cling to most tenaciously.

## MONDAY 29 OCTOBER 2007.

We are caught between 'so many days to—' and 'so many days from—' ... x-days till voting day, x-days till Christmas, so many days, months, years, since ... fill in relevant anniversary. As if we aren't dragged backwards and forwards enough ... then there are the Days of, The Year of, the Decade of ... I assume people think they are worth it ... But did the decade of Decolonization achieve anything? Not by declaring it as such. Women. Trees. Water. Children. Does anyone track these things and decide whether their big budgets, their hype, their marketing actually ACHIEVE anything? I doubt it. It wouldn't look good to say \$10 million was spent on advertising and New Caledonia is still a French colony at the end of it. It would've been more decent to give the \$10 million to the Kanak villagers to spend.

Anniversaries are simpler. The media always like a good anniversary. An ear-splitting flypast always gets the cameras out.

And by positioning us to look forwards we tend to notice less exactly what is happening in the here and now. For instance, the city is *losing* trees. More concrete and brick visible, less of the sheltering shrubs, unexciting in themselves, but GREEN. GREEN on a hot day. How I need that green everywhere around me when the sun blazes down. And instead the sun, as I walk, seems to bounce up at me, bounce from walls, from parked cars, from glass and steel ... no wonder I feel tired.

And people with green credentials are often focused elsewhere.

But the Japanese are going to smother Tokyo in vines. Now why can't people showing good sense and environmental nous in one area show it in another? Perhaps the vines round whalemeat restaurants could suddenly acquire triffid-like habits and smother those dastardly diners ... something about the smell of the cooking whalemeat making the plants go mad ...

## TUESDAY 30 OCTOBER 2007.

So Peter Garrett has backed down. No, we will not be responsible ourselves, after all, because other irresponsible countries are free to go on being irresponsible. Of course it wasn't couched like that. Jobs! Ah, jobs ...

If we are responsible that will cost jobs which will then move to those countries free to continue polluting. We could, of course, put up tariffs. We could, of course, boycott products produced by major polluters. But that idea is so deeply entrenched. Produce cheap. Sell dear. Creating the extraordinary situation that those who make cheap apparel cannot actually afford to buy it. Those that don't produce it want to continue making enough money, from other sources, to keep buying it at prices which have not come down even though labour costs have plummeted. In other words we are asked to help make the rich richer. And being a pathetic lot of people who have re-defined ourselves as 'consumers' rather than 'citizens' or 'thinkers' or even deeply ethical 'people' we will meekly continue to fall into line ... and consume ...

That Rome is burning, that the Goths and Vandals are at the gates, we care not a whit. That is the thing I do not understand. And yet when put on the spot we all claim that our search for the 'good life' is 'for our children'. Even, sometimes, 'our grandchildren' ...

The poor little beggars aren't going to have a life, good or bad, the way we're going. Never mind. No one has been able to prove that reincarnation is a fact rather than a possibility. So we, the Great Polluters, the Greedy Guzzlers, do not waste time asking what we might be re-born into ... this waste world, this wasted world. And if we find it is fact, not hypothesis or fairytale, then I'm afraid, dear people, it will be rather late to change.

## WEDNESDAY 31 OCTOBER 2007.

Bali is back in the news. Though for what its people no doubt regard as all the wrong reasons. It wasn't so long ago that Bali was a place where you could buy your big bag of marijuana in the market-place, no questions asked, and sit round stoned in your small *losmen* near the beach ... if that was what you fancied. But the United States cracked the whip ... and now we have young Australians on death row.

Talking of tourism, or an aspect of (I like that sideways glance), I have mixed feelings on that idea that 'we', meaning cashed-up Western tourists, should return as soon as we can to tsunami-ravaged and bombed-out tourist resorts to 'show our support'. (Though I notice this doesn't include Lebanon; all those unexploded bombs and waiting mines, I suppose ...) The problem, or an aspect of it, is that to cater for this re-influx, there is a rush to rebuild and re-establish ... without resolving the many problems that were so blatantly obvious with the previous situation. Jerry-built hotels on disputed lands displacing and dislocating traditional villagers and overtaking farmland, great demands for overseas imports to cater for same tourists; poor sewerage and water treatment, sometimes discharged straight on to coral reefs or fishing grounds, killing same, poorly-designed traffic systems, vehicles belching black smoke but providing 'colour' albeit smutty; sex tourism, exploitation. Etcetera. Etcetera. Always look for the etceteras.

To go or not to go. As Shakespeare might've said if package holidays to 'Romeo and Juliet Country' had been on offer then. I have a better idea. Step back. If you holiday abroad every year consider going every second year. In your off year, spent quietly relaxing with friends at home, you can put what you would've spent directly to help stamp out the exploitation of young women in Bangkok or children in Nepal. And, in the New Speak, you will have the satisfaction of being 'carbon neutral' for two weeks out of every one hundred and four weeks.

Well, not quite. I expect you'll eat, drink, drive, and watch videos in your quiet holiday at home. What about a bread-and-water silent retreat for those two weeks? Instead of consumer confidence you can come away with survivor confidence ...

And then there is space tourism. Not the wealthy people who go up. But the small green beings with eyes on stalks who come down. Or the more aggressive ones who are hiding other agendas under tourism. You've probably met the sort. And when they arrive they see with crystal clarity, taking into account those big magnifying eyes, every broken bottle, torn plastic, junked car, polluted stream, radioactive wasteland, dying forest. After a week on Earth they will demand their money back. Or, if more militant, draw up a different strategic plan. It will require human beings to clear up their mess before they are allowed to see the benefits of c-rule with Higher Beings. By the time these beings have stood over us for years trying to instill the simple message—Your Planet is Your Home. Don't Junk It—they will have exhausted themselves. Why, they will ask each other with ever-increasing frequency, can't these earthlings understand that a planet is a precious possession to be loved and cherished and passed on in perfect condition?

Their answer will be a simple one: the only creatures which truly appreciate a planet are those that have lost one. But as they take to the skies again we will cheer and whoop. Yaaa! Beat you, you little green blobs! Yaaa! See, you didn't know best after all!

## THURSDAY 1 NOVEMBER 2007.

I see we are now to have political debate—debate? rather than the loud reiteration of policy and position?—by WORM. Now, worms are extraordinary creatures. Far more valuable *en masse* than politicians. But in this case we are told that the real movers in the debate—oops!—are ‘uncommitted voters’. Now what exactly are ‘uncommitted voters’? Disillusioned voters? Voters who do not know what kind of world they want in 50 years, a 100, a 1,000, ten thousand years? Tired-of-spin voters? Voters still hoping for a real sense of integrity? Voters who feel they got burned last time? Voters who wish they weren’t voters?

Now that might be a useful question to ask every politician. How do you envisage this world in ten thousand years? CAN you envisage this world in ten thousand years? Do you believe it will still exist as a home to humans? Because if actions taken now lead to truncating human life in the future then we must assume that we are being run by genocidal maniacs.

Take Peter Garrett’s very swift backflip. *Of course we can’t have environmental policies that lose jobs or slow development or make another mine an unpleasant prospect.* Tut. Tut. (Another tut for good measure.) To me, the only politician, or aspiring same, is the one willing to say: *Of course we are going to have to reduce jobs, slow development, and stop thinking in terms of mineral wealth as a quick fix.* If we are not prepared to do so we will not have a community, an economy, a nation, a livable world, a voter.

Those, my dear friends, says this hypothetical and hard-to-imagine candidate, are the stark choices. All I can offer you is a slow downward decline ... and no guarantee that it will be enough to halt our race to disaster.

## FRIDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2007.

They are going to town on Mr Abbott. Was he careless, unpunctual, scared of Ms Roxon ... or was it a general sort of contempt for ‘we, the audience’? It hardly matters. He has not

covered himself with glory. But in fact no one seems to have a comprehensive integrated sense of health in which all the aspects, preventative, active, reactive, come together, instead of this piecemeal business. Problem here, yoo-hoo! Mr Abbott! Over here! Okey-dokey, hold on a tick while I see if it's a marginal electorate. You're in luck, folks, so watch out, while I slosh a bucket of goodies your way.

Etcetera. Etcetera.

Every so often we get a horror story. Every so often a hospital threatens to put every fat smoker to the bottom of their treatment list.

But in all the hoo-hah over health the simple fact is overlooked. We all pay tax. Doesn't matter who we are. It is truly inescapable. Every time we turn around off comes another GST grab. We all should be able to expect to be treated equally under health care. But that is not the same as saying we all should act like irresponsible idiots. After all no amount of health care can fix up lungs full of tar, veins full of unknown adulterations, stomachs full of MSG and every other additive known to chemists, brains breaking down under the load of clashing medications ...

We could have a cut-off point. You can behave as stupidly as you like up to twenty-five. Then you have to pull your socks up. Drive like a maniac, eat like a maniac, drink like a maniac, snort like a maniac ... bottom of the list.

We could take it further. Instead of putting young people on various kinds of New Starts, work-for-the-dole, Hex and all the rest, there could be a simple decision made. If you behaved yourself up to the age of twenty-one the state then gives you one million dollars and that's it. You then use that to see you through hard times, medical problems, unemployment, disabilities, family upsets. When you get to fifty you can return for a small top-up if necessary ... if you have truly suffered ...

If you have behaved like an idiot as a teen driver, if you have been convicted of drug-dealing, drink-driving, theft, vandalism, harassment, GBH ... and so on ... you miss out. Or have to wait till you're thirty to have another chance at instant riches.

After all, look at the cost of planning, administering, staffing, chasing, carrying on. At one fell swoop the whole business of safety nets could be changed to minuscule holding operations.

So, it could. Mr Abbott and Mates could gradually do themselves out of jobs. Punctuality would cease to be an issue.

## SATURDAY 3 NOVEMBER 2007.

Mr Garrett said something off the cuff. Mr Garrett seems rather good at saying things off the cuff. Trouble is—off the cuff regularly translates into foot in mouth. The curious thing is that what politicians say off the cuff is often more honest than what their speechwriters write for them or what they say when they spout the party line. They are all promising tax cuts. Now as someone who doesn't pay tax (see above for qualifier of sorts) tax cuts are irrelevant to me. Of course it is nice that pollies want people to keep more of their hard-earned money in their pockets. Natural. Even God-given. But the simple fact remains that tax cuts benefit those who

are not down the bottom of any heap. Tax cuts in fact widen the gap between the farmer's wife and her mice as she slashes through the threads that keep all things joined.

Politicians, governments, bureaucrats, official folk sometimes *do* come up with sops to the lowly. Money off phone bills or rent, concessions if they are elderly or disabled, one off handouts like baby bonuses which, like sleeping under bridges, are available to rich and poor alike.

But back to the Shadow Minister ... and in his case Shadow Minister seems curiously appropriate. He was brought into the ALP to give some oomph to their environmental credentials. And what do they do? Every time he opens his mouth to float a good idea Rudd comes down hard on his toes. No, Petey boy, we can't run with that. No way, mate, that wouldn't be a goer—

But SOMEONE has to be honest, sooner or later, and say simply: You want to survive as a people, a nation, a species, you're going to have to stop watering everything down. Poor. Jobless. Can't have that second car or that third baby or that fourth bathroom. Think of it as doing something for your country which is *finally* carbon-neutral. All those wars you've fought with such gusto ... barging round in big diesel-belching vehicles, sending out hot bullets and hotter missiles, zooming through the sky in your F111s, cutting down trees to deny the enemy 'cover'. Now you are really going to have to do something for your country. Not the idea of it. Not the jingoistic patriotic idea of it. But the real thing. Dirt and water. Flora and fauna. Coast and inland. All its degraded spaces and toxic dumps and sun-dazzling concrete and tarmac.

## SUNDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2007.

I heard a promo: this woman has nine children and wants more. All done in one of those voices that suggest this will be a happy feel-good story. I didn't watch. I might throw things at an inoffensive TV screen. Feel good? When the single greatest problem the world faces is people. Millions and billions of them, all clamouring for their little place in the sun. It isn't the greed of the few which is the problem. It is the greed of the many. No one, not even old hermits in caves and anchorites on pillars, are devoid of *wanting*. The sooner we acknowledge that the better. Even the simple act of cooking a simple meal ... or putting on clothes ... I think I should write that CLOTHES. Of moving and watching and wanting. There is no end to our little intrusions. And as we cannot make human beings simpler, or so it seems—bit of grass, water, naked, sleeping on warm earth—the alternative is to have less of us. We all belch out carbon dioxide one end and methane the other ... sorry, but we can't help it ...

As I am not in favour of wholesale slaughter of human beings, whether behind the wheel or in any other form, it makes better sense to reduce births. Mrs Mother of Nine you are an irresponsible idiot. What if those nine chose to have nine a-piece and those eighty-one chose to have nine a-piece ... by the time she falls off her perch at the new median of ninety-five she might have 729 great-grandchildren! Heaven forbid. Another generation and the silly woman will have a small town. And then such people go round and imply that their fecundity proves they love children more than more responsible parents do. Spare us!

What Julia Gillard will prove to be as a deputy prime minister, if their plans eventuate, and if the voters come to the party, is anyone's guess. But I thought she handled the claim that her 'barrenness' made her unworthy of high office with sense and calmness. 'Barrenness'! Like something lifted from the Bible! Harking back to a time when tribes squabbled over a desert

well or traded insults round a camel! Honestly! There, I feel a whole lot better for getting some exclamation marks out of the way.

But the fact remains: no party has been willing to tackle the question of population. When my mother was born Australia had less than 4 million people (and was still degrading its land fast) and when she died it had nearly 20 million (and was degrading its land even faster). And yet we have settled our ambitions at this top end of the stream. Big is better. Why? Big will be our undoing. Are we still so fixated on that ‘populate or perish’ idea? Or are we now convinced that we have to have lots of people so we can ‘box above our weight’—whatever that means exactly. And who might be on the receiving end ... if not down for the count ...

Troops in Iraq? Yes, we must box above our weight.

Remaking Pacific nations? Yes, we must box above our weight.

Throwing our weight around in trade forums? Yes, we must ...

Must we?

## MONDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2007.

Guy Fawkes. Have we gained true tolerance across the board? Have we gained both inter- and intra- tolerance? Just when I am seduced by a widespread sense of people just getting on and letting others live I am always shocked by hearing or overhearing things about ‘them’ ... whoever ‘them’ may be. I am pretty easygoing. But there is one thing I believe should be tackled regardless of whose feet it stamps on. And that is killing sheep (or any other creature) without first rendering them insensible. You can’t tell me a sheep doesn’t suffer from having its throat cut and then bleeding to death. If anyone’s God requires this sort of suffering visited on an innocent animal then that, in my book, is a very peculiar God.

I don’t of course believe in a God that demands that kind of icky-picky nastiness anyway. It’s on a level with the kind of God that demanded women wear hats in church. PULEESE! This, we are told, by all the religious traditions, is the maker of a universe more strange, more mind-boggling, more massive than our tiny minds can comprehend ... and He, always He, wants hats on women’s heads and sheep’s throats cut just so.

I cannot become an atheist, partly because the universe *is* so extraordinary, but there are times when I feel human beings are determined to push me in that direction.

## TUESDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2007.

Mr Rudd has a cold. Dear me, it *must* be a slow news day.

Of course it is a day given over to the neddies. Good oh. No point in the pollies intruding to try and drag us away to things of more moment. Some more ad hoc promises. Casually funded ideas. Etcetera.

Mind you, we get the injuries of sportsmen day in day out. Their poor little hips, knees, ankles, groins, backs, hamstrings, Achilles heels ... Women don’t feature much. But horses get a reasonable run. Are we really interested in other people’s injuries? We offer sympathy if it’s a friend or neighbour ... but did anybody, even the most rabid of Labor supporters, feel sympathy for Mr Rudd in his cold? Or was it like a cricketer’s sore thumb? Uninteresting in

itself but we fear it will affect the team's performance ... and as a nation we are fixated on winning.

I suppose I should be glad we consent to have an Opposition. After all we very soon forget our second place getters ... let alone those that came in fourth. Natural? No, there is no sign that nature ranks anything from one to ten. We aren't even absolutely sure that the gaudiest males get the most females or that the most fighting fit actually have more offspring. After all I am yet to be convinced that the pea hen is out there measuring the tails of potential mates.

## WEDNESDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2007.

Elections are not really about social, environmental, educational, philosophical, ideological, and suchlike issues. They are all about—Who will make YOU wealthier? Who will make US wealthier? Who will make ME wealthier?

Who will create wealth fastest and most comprehensively?

But stop right there!

What do we mean by creating wealth?

Looked at closely we find it mostly means a form of value-adding to the sell-off of resources. This business puts money into people's pockets. At least in the short term. As resources decline, degrade, disappear, that money will come out of pockets again to clean up, fix up, follow up, go to war even to try to keep resources from elsewhere flowing ... More importantly we are equating money and goods with wealth. Why? Elementary, my dear Watson, whatever else could it be?

The people of Beijing might equate wealth with breathable air.

The people of mangrove coasts might equate them with the wealth of marine breeding grounds.

The people of inner cities might equate the sight of green grass and shrubs with wealth.

Or space to move. Or freedom from incessant noise. Or deliverance from noxious neighbourhood fumes. Or a walk on an uncluttered unpolluted beach.

Politicians promise to extend this contradiction into the future and make it ever less resolvable. If the wealth of current populations is based on the extraction of non-renewable resources, which it is, then the generations to follow will inevitably become ever less wealthy. Our wealth is our grandchildren's poverty. I want to see politicians who live simply and tell us the truth. Wealth is a fleeting possession in the march of time. The only honest thing they can tell us is that to live simply, quietly, self-reliantly, and unselfishly, may, just may, no money-back guarantees, help us to survive.

Then again, if survival is a quality vested in the whole system, rather than in each individual and particular species, we, like the massive overload the dinosaurs created, may be doomed anyway.

## THURSDAY 8 NOVEMBER 2007.

Election policies are a bit like someone going into an ad agency and saying ‘I want to promote my new loaf’ and the agency says ‘certainly, sir, what would you like us to highlight?’ There is the chewy texture, the warm brownish-grey tint, the crust on top, the anti-oxidants, the added fibre, the little linseed grains that look like weevils ...

Policies are similar. But the sense of a whole loaf rarely grabs anyone. Instead the ad does a slow motion shot of someone spreading butter on a fluffy slice ...

For butter—read money.

Hospitals are like that. We hear of large round numbers, always round numbers, being thrown at the health system. Then there is the sense of homing in: a particular hospital or two, more nurses, maybe we could have superclinics ...

It’s really quite fun, this choosing something to run with. Health Ministers are rarely cheery people. But the more I think about it the more I think they should be glad they are Health Ministers now and not in ten years’ time. Because hospitals are becoming more and more dangerous. In ten years time a young woman saying she wants to be a nurse will be seen like women choosing to go and nurse lepers a hundred years ago. Doomed.

I am not usually pessimistic. But almost no one is tackling the question of drug-resistant bacteria. No one is saying the chances that people going in who will not come out will continue to rise by leaps and bounds. For the simple reason that you are more likely to pick up a drug-resistant germ in hospital than out of it. There is the idea that genetically-modified bacteria will in some way come to the party and the nasties will fall down like dominoes. But why should they? And instead of penicillin we will have GM drugs to fight out the titanic battles in our gut.

But what no one dares to say is that we need to step back from the whole idea of antibiotics as a treatment for everything and keep them for only the most desperate emergencies. The other day I read that more people are going to emergency departments because doctors have decided that they don’t want to bust their own guts any more and are taking life a little easier. At the same time we read of nurses constantly doing double shifts. In other words the doctor won’t be there and the nurse will be too tired. Poor you.

I have a simple solution: brainwash all children in kindergarten into believing that their health care is in their hands. Instead of nursery rhymes you learn the parts of the body. Instead of playing in the sand pit you are rigorously drilled in hygiene. Instead of looking at picture books you look at a smoker’s lungs and the leftovers from head-on collisions. Instead of playing dressing up you see the skin of meth and heroin addicts. Instead of doing bunnyhops you watch someone having their stomach stapled or their excess fat liquefied and drawn off.

By the time you leave school what you don’t know about keeping healthy won’t be worth knowing.

Is that a mighty rushing wind I hear? A plane, a speeding bullet, Superman? No, it is George W. pounding the desk in the Oval Office. We are to have, he says, with that fanatical light shining again—*A War on Bacteria!*

FRIDAY 9 NOVEMBER 2007.

I heard a commentator say the election campaign is growing ‘repetitive’. Dear me, so it is. But then ... asking politicians to keep coming up with new things for six weeks is asking a lot ... and they, of course, believe we are a load of nongs and just need a few simple key statements hammered into our wooden skulls.

Wooden hearts. Too. We aren’t assumed to really care about anything unless it touches our hip pockets.

But I notice how often politicians now refer to ‘managing’ the economy. Did Menzies or Curtin or Chifley or even Gorton ever refer to ‘managing’ the economy? Not that I remember. Although the Government (every one of them) as owner of the Commonwealth Bank and our phone lines, our schools and hospitals and roads and bridges and ports and airports, not to mention some insurance companies and our universities *was* a major investor and employer—people never thought to regard the government as the manager of the Australian economy. It was just doing what Governments do. Oops! Did.

Nor in fact is any government now a manager of the economy. To do so would be to give it powers no one has ever delineated let alone put to the electorate. The governments which manage economies exist in dismal places like Vietnam and Cuba. Yet we have allowed this idea to creep in and nestle unchallenged at the heart of our idea on what governments could and should do. We have contracted *things* out, prisons, detention centres, healthcare, trade and communications, without adequately overseeing this transition; we have contracted *ideas* in without asking whether they are the proper business of government.

We are potentially making it harder to oversee big business and harder for people to challenge the way the country is run—regardless of the complexion of any individual government—and we are making it easier for our economy to be hi-jacked, sent offshore, drowned in secrecy, and ultimately to become the very thing we were so quick to criticize in the old USSR: a state in which the people exist to serve the state. Not, as we still naively like to think, a state which exists to serve the people ...

Nevertheless there are still a couple of things not yet privatized and contracted out. Spies. Politicians. Bureaucrats. What if the secretary to the P.M. was required to start each briefing with ‘I am your friendly Australian Wheat Board sponsored secretary to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Now this morning ...’ Think of the revenue it would bring in.

## SATURDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2007.

Did I mishear? Something about the Japanese watching this election closely because it might affect car sales. Dear me. But sooner or later car sales will have to go down and the sooner the better. It’s an odd thing but we have this penchant for throwing everything out all the time. Doesn’t matter if it’s just the engine, even just a pipe or a carburetor feeling its age—out everything goes, seats, wheels, frame, chassis, doors ... talk about babies out with bathwater.

I read somewhere that Denmark has just a couple of bottle sizes and designs. I don’t know if it’s true but it struck me as very sensible. You could do the same thing with so many things. Three sizes of cars. Simple, flexible, easily interchangeable ... because although we talk a lot about the actual cost of petrol to run the jolly thing no one seems to be factoring in all the material and energy costs that go into producing each car. Carting huge shiploads of iron ore off to Japan, massive amounts of energy put into smelting, energy in every bit of the

process from making spark plugs to plastic covers for your dashboard ... and then they're driven on to ships and more energy delivers them to your Friendly Neighbourhood Showroom.

Before Joe Blow even chooses out his new car and drives it out of the showroom said car has probably used up several thousand barrels of oil. Now call me picky but I am certain we can make that process simpler ... and it would be a useful start if we completely re-designed cars so that the electrical and mechanical parts could simply be lifted out of any car body and put into any other car body.

Excuse me, madam, but you would have a lot of wrecks on the road. So you would. But I would rather be keeping an eye on the wrecks on the road than having them cramming up our bushland, our creeks, our paddocks, our yards. And given their wreckiness we would finally have to tackle that simple question: why do we need to drive so *fast*? It's the pace of life, modern life, speed is the essence of something, time is money ... you can probably do the jargon better than I can. Doesn't really matter what state the countryside, the landscape, the nation appears to be in ... we're all rushing past too fast to really thoroughly take it in ...

And then we shed crocodile tears over road kill.

## SUNDAY 11 NOVEMBER 2007.

You can see which part of the electorate the pollies are playing to ... which ones see an electoral advantage in playing the past card and which ones take out the future card. Of course the future is more important than the past. And I find much in the past too depressing to want to be reminded. The sheer folly of so many political decisions. The way almost insoluble problems have been set in train for our children and grandchildren to wrestle with.

But the elderly vote whereas the young are less likely ... and babies not at all ...

I have never thought about it deeply. How do the demented vote? Prisoners cannot vote unless they're there less than three years. In other words what gets voted in may yet concern them in more ways than 3 square meals a day and the chance to walk in a small yard. Yet this is to say loud and clear: we the government have no policies that affect long-term prisoners. The simple answer might be: why not? And it implies that long-term prisoners are little men-as-islands and therefore do not have families, children, old mothers, friends, whose fates might concern them and whose lives will be affected by the flavour of governments imposed on them.

More to the point it is unfair. If someone is a citizen of this country then a mark of that citizenship is the right to vote. If the vote is removed then citizenship becomes meaningless. This country merely becomes the place where someone lives—not the place which can demand some level of loyalty and commitment. But it is also unfair in that most people serving longer sentences are there for crimes such as murder. I do not condone murder. But many murders are committed by people who are not fully in control of themselves at the time. Many such people were drunk at the time. The government, of any flavour, is quite willing to rake in the bounty from grog ... but those who are unsafe under the influence are not seen for what they are: the pathetic victims in many cases of a society which says getting drunk is what men do. It is only wimps and wowsers who teetotal and abstain and say tut-tut, drink is the work of the devil ...

Those who are there less than three years, yes, Johnny boy, you can still vote, are often repeat offenders, nasty little burners of cars and frighteners of old ladies ... or had the best lawyers ... move over, Mr Bond ...

## MONDAY 12 NOVEMBER 2007.

Full steam ahead. Big launches. I thought they had launched their campaigns. So what was all that finger-pointing over the failure to release policies? If the policies were out there what's the point of launching them two weeks later?

Dear me, you are a bit slow, Mrs Mop, haven't you noticed that thing called the 'media opportunity'?

Oh you mean that business where some uninspiring people stand round with glasses in their hands and banners above their heads and say "This country is really going to take off!" The sort where you look around for a heavy bench to clutch before the satellite goes into orbit?

I think it would be a lovely change if someone said very quietly and soothingly: what this country really needs is a long rest. They then sway gently back and forwards until you are hypnotized into believing they have truly said something profound. Which they have.

### WHAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS IS A LONG REST.

## TUESDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2007.

We were promised a non-paper revolution. Paper, we were told, would soon be passé. I have just cleared out my mailbox. If there was anything there that I wanted, asked for, waited on, then it was hard to find it in the great mass of glossy unwanted paper. Now I don't particularly object to people using my mailbox *if* they have no other simple way to reach me; local school and church fairs, lost cats, changes to road use, very limited local issues. What I do object to is large chains using my box for masses of glossy material which I don't want, which they could advertise elsewhere if they wanted, and which soon stuffs a small box to the gills.

I would like to see all advertising material placed, for starters, on 100% recycled paper. I still wouldn't want reams of it but I would at least feel it was supporting and encouraging the recycling of paper and helping to bring recycling costs down.

Of course my box is now captive to electioneering. I will do this. I will do that. Vote for me and a new era will be ushered in. I am sure that many candidates start out genuinely caring about wanting to make things better in some way. The difficulty is (not to mention the cynicism that soon takes over) that what one person sees as an unalloyed good horrifies another person.

More roads, wider roads, bypasses, divided highways, more carparks ... all the things to tempt yet more people in yet larger faster vehicles to take to the roads. A lot of people are keen. I am not. I would like a candidate to get up and say 'I propose that we let our road system run down and develop first class rail with feeder links and small railcars round the city' or 'I propose that all cars capable of going faster than 100 kph be outlawed' or 'I propose that we ban all cars from all city centres and develop small solar-powered buses to move people over short haul routes' ... I could add to it. But of course aspiring candidates play to The Motorist. Because The Motorist has a lot of electoral clout. The Motorist comes in his-and-her millions and lives everywhere and is even more ubiquitous than The Family or The Working Family or Grey Power or The Swinging Voter.

Not please The Motorist? says my putative candidate. *That* would be electoral suicide. That it might mean planetary suicide in twenty years is not, of course, any candidate's concern.

Or child care. They are all getting on this band wagon. More childcare places in more childcare centres. And yet there are doubts about the wisdom of putting very young children in childcare for long periods. Surely the one advantage a reasonably good employment situation can offer is the chance to rethink the way we send the parents of pre-school children out to work. A whole system could be put into place to make sure all children have real access to care by both parents backed up by a range of other options from workplace crèches to childcare centres to support for relatives and friends helping with caring to genuinely flexible working conditions.

I fail to see the advantage in requiring parents to drive to childcare centres twice a day at a time when the price of oil is rising steadily and will inevitably continue to rise by leaps and bounds. A fixed centre, only accessible in many instances, by parents with their own transport, will become increasingly unattractive but will become increasingly hard to change as the resources boom dies under its own polluting weight and the surplus melts away under the imperative of making radical changes or going down the tube.

In fact fixed anythings will become increasingly problematic. From fixed schools to fixed hospitals, from fixed carparks to fixed parliament houses into which hundreds of people fly week in week out. Instead of private cars and ambulances conveying people in their millions to fixed hospitals we could be looking at mobile vans which would take health professionals to all but the most serious cases. They used to do it with the TB vans. It gets done with mobile libraries and flying doctors. It is far from perfect but no one has ever done the maths to work out both the costs and the carbon load of taking services to the people rather than bringing people to the services.

Of course rushing to build more childcare centres is inevitably pointless; another ten years and prospective parents, no matter how longing and loving, will make the hard decision: it isn't right to bring children into a massively degrading world. Little snips and tucks will become the watchword and a sensible government will subsidize same. And turn childcare centres into ... geriatric care, I suppose ... or housing for the homeless. You can go to sleep under teddy bears that count ...

## WEDNESDAY 14 NOVEMBER 2007.

It's Buckets-of-Money time! How exciting! A billion here. Five billion there. Nine billion somewhere else. And we are seduced into thinking that this is a good thing. Why is it a good thing? And what meaning do those figures have?

To me, it is a pointless exercise. It is like saying you can't keep a house clean unless you throw \$500 of cleaners at it every month. But as every Mrs Mop knows it is elbow grease and planning that does the trick. Not that I worry particularly. Now they tell us we get sick oftener because we are too clean. Easily fixed. But they also say you are more likely to come out of hospital with a nasty golden staph infection because hospitals have become less clean. Well, of course you don't come *out* with the infection. You stay in and die because they are resistant to antibiotics now.

But my point is a simple one. Saying that money will be thrown at parents isn't a sustainable idea unless the schools available are worth them being the recipients of said chucked money. Anyone can start a school. I can start a school. And if I call myself 'Christian' it is even easier. Of course it wouldn't do to call myself a madrassi but in both cases children can be brainwashed with impunity. And taxpayers' money will be put in a bucket and sloshed at the Christian version. And given that we don't discriminate in this country ...

Oops! The Christian school isn't Bible based? Oh yes, it is. Not that Jesus went to school or urged anyone to do so. No. A Christian school is where you get a view of Jesus which has nothing to do with being poor and simple with dirty feet. I'm sorry, I still haven't quite cottoned on. You mean a 'good' school where the teachers are truly an example and an inspiration? No. You mean a school where kids get whacked into a Christian view of something? A Christian view of Global Warming perhaps? You don't believe in Global Warming because it isn't mentioned in the Bible? But then neither are schools.

We need a good system of free public education. Kids can get their values at home, at Sunday School, from the media, from their friendly neighbourhood pollie. Behind all the talk of more money for the private system is a secret agenda. It says parents are no longer parenting—so they need to send their kids to schools which are up-front and over-the-top about putting value systems on to those same kids. And the government recognizes that parents are no longer parenting because those same parents do not know what they should be teaching those same kids in the first six years of life ... so the schools are to be used as a second-line of defence against chaos, anarchy, and the rise of the feral child.

Personally I think I would rather face a feral child than a child brainwashed with the agenda of any kind of Fundamentalism. Brainwashed with anything really. But given my quiet life here at the kitchen window—with luck I'll never have to face either.

Nine billion dollars? Since when has money got kids excited about learning. Since when has money got anyone excited about taking care and responsibility for their health. Since when has money made anyone drive safely and love trees—

## THURSDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2007.

What has happened to us that we are suddenly so obsessed with who leads what? And since when? Surely we are missing the point that leaders have always been spilled in times when their party stacked the numbers up against them? We didn't know, and frankly we didn't care, who led the party into elections and out the other end. It was never assumed that leadership was set in stone.

And now we hear about who wants this leader, or doesn't want, or wants that. The most obvious response is that we are importing the American presidential-style system by stealth. And the sooner we recognize this and engage with it the better. Is it what we want or not?

My answer is a resounding no! One of the few benefits our particular version of the 'democratic way' offers is a low-key attitude to leadership. It is the party and its policies which matter more. It is very hard to impose the 'great man' convention on us and wisely so. Running the country should not be head-and-pupils but a team effort.

'Running the country'. How easily the phrase slips out. And yet no one 'runs' the country. We expect our government of whatever flavour to run the *concept* of country by

which we mean something quite different: a pattern of socialized human organization. Curious that socialist is a dirty word in many people's vocabs but few people have major problems with social. Unsocial, antisocial, yes, but social although it comes with that connotation of 'bring a plate' is very rarely seen as problematic. It is the loner, the secretive, the ones who refuse to mix and join who are regarded with vague fears and dubious-ity.

Our country is mainly that thing that we constantly dig and move and concrete over. Perhaps we should be honest and say we don't care two hoots about country. But is it possible for modern human beings to truly cherish country when they have been brainwashed generation by generation to equate it with some aspect of money?

I depress myself.

FRIDAY 16 NOVEMBER 2007.

I just heard someone say something about 'taking this country forward' and I had the image of a little tugboat straining as it links the ropes up to a large chunk with a lot of little stick figures hopping round yelling. Probably yelling 'Here! Where do you think you're taking us, you commie bugger!'

Never mind. People will all be gone soon. Poor little country, or in Herbert's words 'Poor Fellow My Country', you will be able to have such a nice rest.

Of course that pollie, who else, was thinking about money. Funny how everything comes back to money. It isn't the will of the people, it is the purse of the corporations. And corporations, not being rooted in flesh and blood, but living in that curious space in which legal entities drift above us, will survive six metre sea rises ... even if their actual paperwork and the receptionist in the marble foyer doesn't. How strange!

The world will need to be re-configured. Oil wells in coastal zones owned by one country will suddenly be outside that country's jurisdiction. Straits will widen, islands will disappear, the shapes of harbours and bays will be changed, navigation will become a hazardous business, there will be a property rush in Antarctica. Little cold places like South Georgia and Kerguelen will suddenly become the 'in' place for summer holidays. Coastal breeding grounds will be swamped and you will have penguins trying to dig burrows in your back yard and being eaten up by your Jack Russell if not your puss. Dunes will be eaten away, mudflats disappear for good, mangroves (those few survivors) will be drowned, prawns will disappear along with mudcrabs, dugongs, and other species, the Opera House will have to be vacated at every high tide ... just in case.

What fun it will be.

But of course it won't be any fun for people in Bangladesh, Holland, or Tuvalu, not to mention the Maldives, Jakarta, and central London. Never mind. Greenland will be able to take in several thousand extra people. And we might be able to create floating cities along our coastlines. But I'm afraid for those who hoped to be safely settled in Mars by the time Armageddon came round, it just isn't going to happen.

But the good God has overseen the black plague, genocide, holocausts, destructions, and we have always come through. We were made tougher than we realize. But the other day I was thinking of an odd fact. Most lizards, which includes the dinosaurs, have an odd kink. If the

temperature changes markedly the sex of their babies also changes. Too hot you get all one sex, too cold you get all the other. You need a nice middling climate. So when that meteor hit the world and tipped it and made it colder ... suddenly all the baby dinosaurs were hatching out all one sex. And exciting as Tyrannosaurus Rex may have been I don't think they were big layers.

You need a large population for useful mutations to come to the rescue.

Human beings will probably pull through. A bit changed. A bit skewed. Mopsy may become Flopsy or Topsy or Wopsy. But we'll survive. Because, God knows, there are enough of us.

## SATURDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2007.

Things are out there in the campaign: the pulp mill pulsing on all six cylinders, but not things like the republic or euthanasia. In other words what we are asked to vote on is a selective digest of what we are assumed to find important.

Does it matter? Taking into account long time spans the answer would have to be no. But in terms of honesty I would think yes.

When we look back the decisions about wars and genocides loom large; but we don't know the employment policies of the Hittites or whether any young Inca girls were anorexic; just as we don't know how many people were in Roman slave galleys or whether the Huns sought a consensus before heading for Europe.

Our view of everything is invariably selective. Just like this new view of Australian history which will be taught to young people as lists and facts they should know. Strangely enough it has never bothered me particularly whether I can remember Cook's dates or when a small group of white men crossed the Blue Mountains. Are those things more important than 50,000+ years of relatively peaceful occupation. And if we deem they are—why do we deem that?

But that's not an election issue.

## SUNDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2007.

Pork-barrelling in the news again! Dear me. They all do it. Somehow a marginal seat becomes equated with a needy seat. Sometimes the two things coalesce. But mostly it is blatant vote-buying. Yes, we will fund this weird and wacky project of yours ... if you will vote for us.

Do people? Do people accept the quid pro quo and do as expected? I have sometimes wondered. Are some people so turned off by the blatancy of it that they change their vote the other way? Are some people so dismayed that their money paid in taxes is going to such an ill-advised project that they change their vote? I wonder if anyone really looks. And who comes back in two years' time to see if the funded project has genuinely pleased, helped, enhanced, made lives better ... or does it sit there, a neglected white elephant, growing more seedy and brown by the week ...

Remember when they sold off half of Telstra to 'fix the environment'. As it didn't get fixed I can only wonder whether:

- a) they didn't actually spend that windfall on the environment.

- b) their projects were so poorly designed they simply fell in an expensive heap.
- c) the environment is no longer fixable.

Several billion dollars later and we are still in a mess. And who audited every project to see how the money was spent and whether the trees actually grew? Nobody, it seems.

Such touching faith, my dear Mrs Mop, ninety per cent of the money never left the bureaucratic coffers. You see administering that ‘fix the environment’ campaign was VERY expensive. *Really an immense drain on the public purse ...*

And the way it circulated from department to department requiring an ever larger paper trail. But every so often the outlet pipe belched out a few hundred dollars for a little project in Woop Woop and ten pollies in government cars turned up to be photographed with the local shire chairman and half-a-dozen primary school kiddies. Very touching.

This concept of ad hockery is very powerful in our world. Nothing has a real sense of continuation and continuum. No wonder climate change landed on us like a ton of ... dirty coal. Every little aspect of it was seen as a regional aberration. I remember reading many years ago that the first person to draw attention to a warming world was a Scandinavian scientist who pointed out that the glaciers on Spitzbergen were retreating and they couldn’t be retreating unless the climate was growing warmer. The same thing was noticed in southern Chile by people such as the mountain-climber Eric Shipton back in the 1960s. So why has it taken so long for things to get put together in the one package? But then a glacier here or there is an aberration in itself. No, I think the real reason is that ‘business as usual’ is such a powerful grounding aspect of life. It doesn’t really matter about the fine details. Communist China, Islamist this, capitalist that ... they were all saying ‘business as usual’ ... and now we know that business as usual is the greatest threat this planet is ever likely to face ...

## MONDAY 19 NOVEMBER 2007.

More going of head to head. Tax cuts. The universal bribe. Except they are not. Cuts in personal income tax are of no use to the very poor, the marginalized, the welfare recipients, the people at the bottom of the pile. Hermits and ferals. Cut GST? That would help everybody. Dear me, no, we’re not going to slice into our golden goose. We get you on the swings, we catch you on the roundabouts. We don’t apologize, coming or going. But we do talk of you with suitable contempt. Even you, a hopeless lump like you, could get a job if you really wanted, really tried.

But those jobs out there digging up iron ore are not for the elderly, the greybeards, the 90 lb weaklings. No, we only want the fit and the silent and those who have signed on to the Cult of the Individual. (It has another name now.)

Very well, then, I will go on being an unemployed unwanted woman with untidy grey hair ... and you have lost my vote.

If, of course, you ever had it.

## TUESDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2007.

I overheard the TV saying: who is today’s drunken celebrity? And that, apparently, is NEWS! Surely we should make a point of ignoring such people. But I have much the same

feeling about the constant dreary repetition of what is served up as election NEWS. Could I ignore it too? I try.

The fortunate thing, I tell myself, is that electioneering is finite, drunken celebrities are not, but there isn't a lot of comfort in it because this election will hardly be over before they're polling and speculating and carrying on about the next. As if we haven't got more important things to worry about.

The climate change people and their reports grow more shrill, more panicky, more dramatic. Every mention seems to suggest things are moving faster than we realized ... no doubt since the last report that said things were moving faster than we realized. And yet, terrible admission, humankind has never taken kindly to such pressures. What did the Romans say as the Sahara advanced? Not our business. What did colonial powers say as whole families, clans, tribes and nations disappeared? Not our business. Not our responsibility.

If it were not for the innocence of children, and of the natural world, I would say simply: bring it on. It is about time we faced the consequences of our own actions. But that is not something political parties can say; because we would all then turn round and say, much miffed, 'And what about our poor children? Why don't you show some concern and compassion for them?'

The Bible says the poor are blessed. Perhaps we could now re-jig this to equate the poor with the carbon quiet. Because the poor often have to cut down trees constantly and depend on small smoky fires just as we depend on large smoky fires powered by coal and usually called power stations. So the true poor are those who step very daintily, very quietly, and ask nothing. The Penan in Borneo maybe ... before they were shoved off their land so the trees could be cut down.

Who will we learn from—when we have destroyed all those who might teach us the art of happiness with very little? Not nuns. They depend on the outer world to fund their lifestyle. Not hermits. There are not, it seems, enough caves to go around. Not beach-combers. All beaches are now too crowded and too polluted to be worth combing. Nor can we move to tiny simple coral atolls as they are a threatened species. I am afraid we are faced with the dire consequences of our own inaction.

Yes, Freddy, I will go out later. If you would bring the car to the front door at one ...

No, Freddy, I will not be returning home. I have decided to throw myself off a cliff. Someone has to start lightening the load on Lifeboat Earth ...

You may have my car.

## WEDNESDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2007.

Every election it seems has a few key phrases that wander around without ever being fully pinned down. Take Mr Rudd and his frequent statement that he doesn't have a 'silver bullet'. Now is he using it as a euphemism for 'miracle'? I don't have a 'silver bullet', ergo, I can't do 'miracles'. I doubt if anyone ever assumed he could. But I couldn't help wondering if he was instead thinking of the silver bullets used to take out werewolves and vampires? And, in which case, who and what is the vampire?

John Howard may not have very long teeth but I expect there are people out there who see him as someone who springs back from the dead ... or at least near defeats and close shaves. A stake through the heart then?

Or it might be some other aspect. Perfectly pleasant and fluffy during the day, sharp and howling of a night.

Or the silver bullet may be a reminder that no mining boom lasts for ever. He doesn't have a silver bullet ... meaning that he can't persuade China and Japan to buy Australian minerals in perpetuity.

Or it might have something to do with fairy tales. Rags to riches. But there are limits. Gold lumps. Silver and rubies. These are the staples of the Seven Dwarfs. Possibly it is old Labor stalwarts like Graham Richardson and Paul Keating. He wants them to butt out. Quite a few of them around and all free with their advice—which didn't do them much good when they were in power and there is no absolute guarantee that they have learnt anything since. But couching it as a tale ... 'Once upon a Time' ... always ends up as 'So they lived happily Ever After'. Maybe.

## THURSDAY 22 NOVEMBER 2007.

On and on they go. Managing the economy. But what precisely does this mean?

I read somewhere that there are more than ninety thousand sites in Australia recognized as contaminated. Ninety thousand! And who has factored in their clean-up? No one, I wouldn't think. And yet if we could contaminate 90,000 places in 200 years how many will we contaminate in 1,000 years? The thought horrifies me. And if we have done this with a relatively small number of non-indigenous people in 200 years ... how many contaminated sites does the Earth lay claim to?

Many millions certainly. God's Good Earth? Hah! God's Big Mess.

Those contaminated sites are many-faceted. Like diamonds, I expect. Sheep dip and old asbestos. Lead paint. PBCs and PCBs and PVDs and DPVs. You name it. DDT and TTD. So many obsolete chemical compounds still hanging round ... somewhere. You hear of horrible things bubbling out of the ground in suburban back yards and you wonder—what are those compounds turning into now that they are marrying and inter-marrying down there. But we continue with the touching belief: send it up into the air, out to sea, or down below ground and somehow it ceases to exist. Now they want to capture carbon, that nice image of people running round with butterfly nets, and put it in rustable and corrodible drums underground ... just as we have done and still do with our radioactive waste. I wonder what happens if you go out to take the clothes off the line and see sequestered carbon rising through your carrot patch. Who do you call? The Prime Minister?

The only real solution to our problems is a drastic reduction in people. If we could bring it down from say six billion to say twenty million ... we might have a chance. It is a bit hard to see how we might do this (and all living on mild pleasant liveable areas, nothing marginal) but we act as though we want to bring human populations down in the most drastic way possible—by ecosystem crash and mass contamination—whilst all the while burbling on about people being good for the economy. Does it never occur to these morons in politics that the way we are going we may eventually not have an economy.

Only a little cave-door-barter.

## FRIDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2007.

Dirty tricks out and about. Literally. I wonder what would have happened if they had been exposed after the election. It would've left an even nastier taste. But a Liberal contacted a Labor to tell him the Liberals were out and about at midnight putting lying leaflets into letterboxes.

Lovely little bit of alliteration there.

They could've run with it. Instead of claiming the leaflet was a joke, and I have yet to find anything funny in any election pamphlet but I suppose there is always a first time, they could've said it was a literary production or a social engineering questionnaire or even an attempt to see if voters would come forward and ask that an enquiry be carried out.

We, they might say, were doing an experiment to see if people actually read the stuff that gets stuffed into mailboxes or whether it gets thrown unread into the rubbish. I would like to say into the recycling bin to be turned into more paper to be turned into more stuff to be stuffed into mailboxes but alas we are not very good at turning one lot of paper into another lot of paper, content irrelevant ... and I can't understand why. The thing seems self-evident.

Now that hasn't been an election issue. Recycling. Why not? Our record on recycling is abysmal. Even dung beetles do it better.

The only thing we seem to be keen on recycling is spouses. Which far from helping the environment probably adds more stress. All those broken plates and demands for extra households, not to mention extra, non-recycled, paper served up in family courts and lawyers' offices ... and reports by school counselors: Little Bobby is not working as well as he should because he is kept awake at night by shouting and hates going on access visits to a place where he has no friends.

Of course Little Bobby is also being recycled. By the time he is twenty he will have been through three households, four lots of siblings, five schools and two dozen counseling sessions. Little Bobby will be a mess and will drown his sorrows in the unrelenting consuming of unrecycled goods.

Never mind. Little Bobby is good for the economy.

## SATURDAY 24 NOVEMBER 2007.

D it now seems stands for Destiny. I think I will worry about things that need to be worried about.

Saudi Arabia. I was horrified to learn years ago that a girls' school caught on fire there, the girls naturally rushed to get out, they hadn't had a chance to grab up their headscarves, and so they were beaten back by the waiting men and died horrible deaths in the flames. Now it seems a *victim* of rape there has been sentenced to 200 public lashes.

I find such evil mind-boggling. But the evening news praises Saudi Arabia for taking part in a peace process ... the Saudis saying they won't shake any Israeli hands. True, there's quite a lot of blood on some Israeli hands. But I would imagine most Israelis are saying 'be thankful for small mercies'. The thought of having to shake a Saudi hand would make any decent person puke.

Oh, so you're going to stand firm, are you, Madam Mop? Not a word about electioneering. The peace of ending it all. Not a word on last polls. Not a word about seeing people you know at the polling booth. Not a word about hopes and fears.

I don't think so. Not tonight. I'll have two tickets for The Madness of King Lear, thank you.

So you're not going to sit up till all hours to hear the results come in? You're not going to pick your fingers as a few votes seem to separate them in some marginals? You don't think democracy requires any further involvement on your part?

No. Tomorrow will be soon enough. And writing figures in squares hardly equates with 'the Voice of the People'. I know, without being told, that I will still have to write letters, and sign petitions, and all the rest of it. The curious thing, don't you think it is a curious thing, is that even if all my choices were to get in I know perfectly well that they will not do all the things I want ... nor not do the things I don't want.

And whoever wins will announce his success by promising to 'grow' this poor bloody country. Xavier Herbert had it absolutely right when he called Australia a 'poor fellow'. There never was a politician prepared to leave the poor bloody fellow-read-country alone. You see how election night loosens something and I feel a great need to write a bloody here and there. I wonder if it is a measure of my understanding, even my despair, that neither of our contenders will truly tackle the things that need to be tackled and leave the poor bloody country alone to have a little snooze, a short siesta, a quiet sense of hibernation.

## SUNDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2007.

And so, my dear, the excitement is over. Excitement? I would rather rest any day on my window sill looking out on nesting birds and flowering bushes.

But Kevin Rudd has promised to rule 'for all Australians'. What does this fatuous promise actually mean? That he will be swayed by letters from an old biddy complaining that his climate change rhetoric is hot air? That he will continue on the Libs' merry way and alienate Aboriginal land and treat them, as the missionaries and bureaucrats did, as 'children' incapable of doing anything about their own problems? That he will continue to up the speed at which Australia gets dug up and sold off?

I wonder if, when we've dug up enough, the world will turn turtle? After all it has acquired a kind of balance what with Antarctic ice and Australia both helping to keep everything in place. But with the ice disappearing and large chunks of Australia turning up in China and Japan the balance may be altered and the world may decide to become ... rather unstable and queasy.

I never had much time for Paul Keating. And anyone who would even consider keeping sows in crates too small to turn around in whilst swanning comfortably round the country

handing out advice, gratis, should be in prison. But he did come up with one bit of wisdom. That recession ‘we had to have’; we do need to have recessions to put the brakes on rampant consumerism. We don’t seem to be capable of using that old standby, will power. What we need to do in such recessions, and the more the merrier, is make sure that their burden doesn’t fall hardest on those least able to withstand them. If the world is to survive the amount of spending power each global citizen has needs to be dropped to a point where they can cover the basics with nothing left over for luxury and ostentation.

Just a thought, Mr Rudd. Call a recession immediately. Take advantage of this little window of opportunity, this period of grace ...

## MONDAY 26 NOVEMBER 2007.

Am I in some way obsessed? Stasis. We desperately need to halt the rush into ever bigger and bigger, to find a form of stasis, of stability, of holding the centre while we rein in the excesses, then we can begin the slow process of moving backwards—not to a superstitious bigoted age but to a carefully chosen way of life without waste. Is that possible? I do not think we were shining examples, this society, in my childhood. But obsolescence wasn’t an issue. Things didn’t come in swathes of pointless packaging. Plastic wasn’t an issue. People didn’t drive, or powerboat or joyride or jet-ski, except as they needed to get from A to B. I’m sure there were exceptions. But we re-used without needing to be told. I remember the big flour bags that my mother made into pillow cases or used for repairing sheets ...

Now that would strike many people as absurd. But I am sure we slept just as soundly.

Someone this morning was mentioning new housing developments—and the fact that they have banned clothes-lines. You put your wet clothes in the dryer. This in one of the driest sunniest nations on earth! I despair. I really do.

Never mind ...

Never mind!

If the things which seem so obvious to me, a woman of few talents (I’m not even very good with a mop), are not obvious to everyone else—then this world truly is doomed.

Never mind. God can go back to the drawing board. Evolution is not about the brainiest nor even the fittest. It is about the little quiet unnoticed things. Grass. And ants. Next time around God can elevate ants to the number one position on this planet and see what they make of their elevation.

## TUESDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2007.

I have often noticed that those who get out at the height of their career tout their decision in terms of their deputy or successor, giving them a chance to establish themselves before the next election, that kind of thing—while those who get out when their career has hit a hurdle always posit it in terms of spending more time with their families. Whatever would pollies do without families in the wings, waiting to be brought forward as needed?

Julia Gillard had better adopt half-a-dozen Rwandan children forthwith to be brought forward as necessary.

So children are going to get their personal computers in schools. No messing round. Straight in. Yes, kids, I do keep my promises. But no one has truly engaged with the question of whether computers in the classroom are genuinely a benefit. Do children learn better, faster, more comprehensively? Do computers enhance their social skills? Or do they begin the alienation process much earlier? Is it necessary for human beings to be provided with technology at the earliest possible opportunity? Do we make youngsters less flexible, less self-sufficient, less able to cope with the truly awful future creeping up on them? Legion are the older people worried that children cannot work out a simple sum without having recourse to their battery-powered calculators. Never mind. Batteries will be around a bit longer.

But if we take that desert island and the proposition ‘we must live with technology’ ... what might we choose to take? I would certainly want knife, scissors, tweezers. But it might be argued that EPERB, mobile phone and laptop would be more useful. Perhaps they would—if the castaway is hoping to be rescued. But my assumption is that we are here for the long haul. There is no escape. And given that—we must find simple ways to adapt.

Speaking of computers on every desk I read an American study which suggested most children thus provided spent much of their time playing games or trying to get on to suss sites when their teacher wasn’t looking. Perhaps American children are little horrors and Aussie kids are patterns and examples? But what happens when computers take over and teachers become obsolete? Not a lot. Kids just play more games and surf more single-mindedly. Never mind. Let no one suggest our children are not computer-literate.

## WEDNESDAY 28 NOVEMBER 2007.

They’re out doing their ‘homework’, these new members of the government, though whether the people at the receiving end of these compulsory visits are thrilled or dismayed is not known. Still, it will be a novelty for kids. Yes, Mum, the Minister-Elect for Industrial Relations came round to our school as her homework. Do you think we could go to Parliament House as our homework? I hate sums!

Of course pollies are always going on ‘fact-finding visits’ to this and that. It is seen as one of the perks of the job.

Yes, mate, (to homeless man) I’m here as a perk. You perk up. I perk up. The taxpayer, not funding a trip to see paper mills in Finland or mines in northern Canada, may also perk up. But now that I’m here I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be doing. Haranguing you. Or letting you harangue me. We can harangue together and after that I will go back to parliament and suggest that ... well, that there must be a better way. I am reminded of an elderly gentleman who lived like a pig in a private house but after being moved into an old men’s shelter run by a charity perked up no end, cleaner, tidier, more cheerful. The mantra ‘your own home’ has its downside. Of course a small cheap flat isn’t quite what’s meant when pollies speak of ‘your own home’.

Now we’re told we’ll need 200,000 more of them. Whatever happened to the old idea of sharing space? Of course it wasn’t very marvelous to have to share with your in-laws yet fewer marriages broke up in those days. Was that because the young couple realized that each other, considered carefully in that confined space, did not compare in awfulness with their in-laws? All things are comparative.

And another 200,000 homes creeping like a brick and concrete blight over the land ...

Spare me!

## THURSDAY 29 NOVEMBER 2007.

As Peter has dropped by the wayside, Mopsy, Flopsy and Cotton-tail will now fight out the Liberal leadership. Liberal compliments about each other will not be a feature. Abbott has signaled his dropping out. Possibly he was the afterthought, Cotton-tail. I cannot pretend to great liking or admiration for the remaining contenders but they do have one advantage: they know they may still be alive in 2050 ... and that being a possibility they have no real choice but to tackle climate change. It is not their children or grandchildren (if they have any) but their own hides which, like Rudd's, will be on the line.

Funny how people give lip-service to their love for their children but don't do anything to make those children's futures safer. But put our own miserable hides on the line and we will start to make suitable noises. Of courses noises do not always translate into action. Past generations defined a better future for their children as more money and a better education. We should be defining our children's future by their right to a future. Not much help to them as they lean out the windows of the university or the stock exchange and watch the waters rise inexorably all around them. Ark-building courses instead of getting an MBA?

## FRIDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2007.

We don't get to choose. They did. We could have Malcolm Turnbull who would sign Kyoto and say sorry to the Stolen Generations. Or we could have Brendan Nelson who probably won't.

It doesn't matter. Except that what Oppositions do and say reflects on a country. A sharp bright strong ethical, deeply decent, hard-questioning Opposition may be worth its weight in gold when it comes to public relations.

Who knows?

But when I look around the world I realize that half the problems are because so many countries don't have an Opposition worth the name.

Half?

I haven't done a survey. Of course there are Oppositions which aren't—but would be if allowed to be ... as in Zimbabwe or Burma or Pakistan. But parliamentary democracy if it is truly to be such needs to hold all proposals, all speeches, all legislation up to close scrutiny. Rubber stamps rarely bode well. But more than that it is only a clear calm discussion of possibilities which deserves the name democratic. I get so wild when the media only focuses on parliament when they are calling each other schoolyard names or behaving like morons and bullies. Surely those are the times when the media should be off finding news that is news—not pandering to immature egos.

## SATURDAY 1 DECEMBER 2007.

We saw it, the handover of the keys to a piece of desirable real estate, smiles all round. But then it's not a home, just a place to camp for a couple of years. The Lodge. An appropriate name for it. A glorified lodging house with its lodgers. Shades of an English seaside place with poor families coming for their week and a paddle ... or a leak and a piddle ...

But do we get good government when those who govern have the status of well-off lodgers? The very impermanence of their living arrangements, the constant to and fro between electorate and Canberra, the unsettledness of spouses and children, all this precludes a sense that each government governs for the long term. The decisions it makes this week will be affecting the country in eighty, maybe a hundred or more years. The decisions made about land in the nineteenth century, the way to chop it up and parcel it out, still precludes good land stewardship in the twenty-first century. The decision to kill and kidnap Aboriginal people still lies like a stain over every Australian life. The decisions on where to plant towns and hamlets, schools, railways, roads, airfields, meatworks, government buildings, still influence lives. All those planning decisions signed off on with hardly a thought to the future.

I feel quite gloomy thinking on this.

I think I'll go and have a nice piece of cake. And that decision will affect my cells, my longevity, my brain power, my blood pressure ...

Don't mention it.

## SUNDAY 2 DECEMBER 2007.

I was going to draw attention to Brendan Nelson Read-My-Lips Opposition Leader and his voting history. Then I thought: Heck! Why!

Not very much more interesting the visit of a large cruise ship. Presented in terms of what it might inject as cash. Is that the best we can do! Not a word about how lovely to have new people visiting, the chance of new friendships, new experiences, new sights ... from both angles.

No. Everything gets brought back to money. People, shopkeepers, restaurateurs, all need to make a living. But I prefer not to go back to businesses which treat me as though the only interesting thing about me is what is in my purse.

Frankly I would rather do without.

## MONDAY 3 DECEMBER 2007.

Photo opportunities. Every incoming government wants them. The team. The cabinet. The inner workings. The executive.

The truly ugly need not apply. Or only after plastic surgery.

But there will be a whirlwind of activity. Well-judged, sensible ... who knows? But Kyoto is going to be first cab off the rank. I have no problem with that. Why shouldn't we set ourselves benchmarks—whether or not other major polluters are willing to do so? Legion, of course, are the articles saying what we do is irrelevant. It is China, USA, India, Russia, the big polluters that matter. I wonder. Just as women were shamed into ceasing to buy leopard skin

coats or seal skin hats ... so too countries can be shamed by the better behaved and more responsible. In the end anything coming from a major polluter will be seen as so utterly disgusting, unwelcome, and inappropriate that not even rock-bottom-prices will see it shift off the shelves.

Oh, some people will say, I got this bargain. And they will demonstrate their latest 'Made in China' or 'Made in the USA'. Only to be met with the sort of stony silence and pointing finger that would meet someone lighting a cigarette in a 'No Smoking' zone or, more likely, a horrified 'You didn't!' People will find it isn't their BO that loses them friends but where and how they shop.

No matter how nicely it is perfumed and wrapped people will accept it uneasily, afraid that the stench of smoke and fumes will be noticeable to all their friends in a place where good earth, clean air, and fresh vegetation has revitalized our sense of smell ...

People will sneak into places like Chickenfeed through a back door in the way that they once sneaked into places offering 'adult books' and 'sex toys'.

(In passing I have never actually discovered what sex toys are; they always make me think of those catnip mice that were, and may still be, popular.)

Shame is a difficult and unwieldy beast to harness in the cause of a cleaner world but it will play an important role. Our great-great-grandchildren will say: they had to be shamed into caring; that is why we took great-grandpa's name off the family tree. Had he been left to follow his inclinations we wouldn't be here.

## TUESDAY 4 DECEMBER 2007.

So our new P.M. is prepared to stick his neck out and say the basics will get more expensive? About time too. What gives us the *right* to a disposable income after our basic needs are met. Which other species on this planet expect to get room and board—and an overseas holiday every year? Not to mention the latest fashion and the newest gadgets?

Why should human beings expect to get the goodies we would never regard lions, tigers, or the mouse in our kitchen cupboard as deserving? Not even pampered pets get to have their own CD player or mobile phone, let alone a kennel worth a mortgage.

Surely the possession of a superior brain should be an excitement in itself—without needing to constantly translate into material goodies? The Indian on his bed-of-nails is said to be a happy fellow. I haven't tested this belief for myself. And I suppose a bed-of-nails is a silly waste of the world's finite resources. But it is a reminder that he does not feel a need to have a television set propped up at the end of his bed. Mind over matter is its own excitement and indeed entertainment.

Instead of two or three bathroom houses we can go back to the basics. What does a family home actually need to keep said family happy?

## WEDNESDAY 5 DECEMBER 2007.

Do we switch now from our elections to the American ones? Primaries, new candidates, dark horses, the media will run them all relentlessly. And for what purpose? We can do nothing

to change or influence the outcome. I could, of course, stand here at my kitchen window and pray hard. Somehow I don't think God is terribly interested in who wins elections.

One of these latest American dark horses (my apologies to horses) is raving on about the number of Americans lost to the work force via 'liberal' abortion. The assumption in this being, yes, Mr Huxley, something of your Brave New World hangs around, that women have babies so that they can grow up to WORK.

I suppose it is marginally better than growing up to be CANNON FODDER. What a waste of scarce resources! All that food, all that medicine and dental plates and BMX bikes and toys and DVDs and first cars ... all wasted. We regret to say your son died in the course of duty ... etc ...

Yet there is a fundamental flaw in any argument that aborted babies are 'lost' in terms of employment statistics. Women usually know how many children they would like to have. Force them to have more than they want and those children are at risk—of neglect, poverty, abuse, not-being-loved. Force them to have that chosen family before they are ready and those children are resented. Force them to see themselves as filling vague political quotas as to what the country is deemed to need at any one given moment and those children start out on a back foot.

No, Mr Presidential Hopeful, if you want a bigger population of workers (and God knows why you do when you can't employ all you've already got) then raving on about abortion is not the way to create happy families. If you really want workers you can look to more robots or, now this idea really appeals to me, you can give up your political aspirations and go to work on a noisy tiring fumy production line with a nasty foreman and nastier boss. Try it.

Oh, that's why you want more poor women to have to have their babies? You think they will not be able to aspire to anything better than FACTORY FODDER? But then, there is that other point: who in twenty years will be buying the things your factories produce? Our appetite for the pointless has surely peaked and will now go down. The downward run may be harder and faster than any politician truly likes ... but it will have its exciting challenges ... and happy children, much wanted, will deal better with those challenges ...

## THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER 2007.

So we are going to cut greenhouse gases? Yes, it is official. Did you hear that, you CEOs in your ivory towers? I shall lead the way. I will reduce my time at the computer and I will walk more. Someone said to me what a relief it was never having to see Mr Howard out power-walking any more. Of course it was the media's presence which undermined the carbon status of his walks. They would insist on coming in *vans* ...

It is so nice to know that people's lives can be improved so easily. She, they, also bemoaned the way the media has dumbed down politics. Clever country? No. We need to be told simple bite-size things like 'a computer for every child'. You grasped the message? I did. You grasped the implications? No. Did you? Because in all this discussion about what's on computers and how they can interact and send homework to and fro—no one is engaging with real issues like damage to children's eyesight or posture, undermining time spent out of doors, reducing social interaction and questions and a general sense of class cohesion ... does it matter? There is something curiously furtive about teachers coming round and peering over

students' shoulders to see what they are doing with their laptops. Rather than teachers we will now need people who are good at monitoring and better at fixing the things ...

But I cannot roll back 'progress' and as I hated school I am not going to resist the introduction of any ideas which may make school an exciting challenging thought-provoking wonderful place ... except that I think we are taking a major step towards making school obsolete. Is this what we want?

Maybe. It would save on all those carbon-emissions involved in getting several million kids to school and back again every day ...

## FRIDAY 7 DECEMBER 2007.

So we are to get a ministerial code of conduct. I thought we had one. But then it doesn't really matter. A watchdog for this and that, rules, codes, bottom lines. They are all irrelevant—if people ignore them. Or if we, the public, do not ask for accountability. We get spurned, we get fobbed off, and usually we do as we are told. We go away and play. Or watch TV. Or go to sport. Or sit down at the computer. We rarely stick at anything. And when someone does we react with amazement. You mean, we say, he's been fighting for compensation for asbestos victims for ... (insert 10, 20, 25, 30 ... or possibly only 8 years) and we find such people heroes simply because we know we don't have that sort of staying power.

That is the trouble with most things. We have staying power as consumers, home-buyers, purchasers of new cars, people locking ourselves in for the very long haul ... so that we may possess ...

But our staying power if it undermines our lifestyle, requires us to put hands in pockets, or worse still sees us abused and humiliated, is small. Yet it is a Biblical injunction: when people *revile* you ... for my sake. Yes, Jesus, but most of us don't fancy being reviled. Politicians sometimes put up with it for the sake of a very decent pay packet at the end of the week ... and knowing they've got support in the party room. That is why we need more independents; people who don't have support and don't have a party room to retreat to, slamming the door on the naturally inquisitive, tend to bite on tough issues. It's not a given. Some go into parliament and are never heard of again. For all we know they sit, skeleton still upright, in a plush chair at the back and the cleaners work around them ...

But our descendants will revile us if we don't get serious about taking life more quietly. And we cannot know for sure if we only get the one life, the one bite at the cherry. If we find, too late, that we are expected to come back again and reap the oats we have sown, we may find ourselves in the extraordinary situation of reviling, unknowingly, our recent selves in the form of our ancestors ... what you do comes back to bite you ... or choke you ...

## SATURDAY 8 DECEMBER 2007.

FLOPSY BUNNY: Will America now take action to make itself gun-free?

MOPSY BUNNY: No, America will not.

GEORGE W. BUSH: I resent the assumption that we do not know what to do with our guns. Guns won us this very large very rich land. Guns are better than nuclear when it comes to winning land. And they don't leave it contaminated. We can bomb Iran and spread radioactivity everywhere because we know we will never have to live in Iran. We just want it to behave itself and join the Big C Club and buy our products in enormous quantities including

our nasty little Hollywood offerings in large enough quantities to send all its film studios and factories to the wall.

FLOPSY BUNNY: Will you reciprocate by buying Iranian products?

MOPSY BUNNY: He doesn't know what reciprocate means, love, but a different kind of tit-for-tat, eh Mr President?

GEORGE W. BUSH: Of course not! All their products are contaminated from those exploding nuclear plants.

Win some. Lose some.

## SUNDAY 9 DECEMBER 2007.

Climate change, as they like to say, is 'on the agenda'. My agenda? Yours? Everyone's? God's? I wonder what those who believe in pre-destination feel about Bali Summits? Do they find them pointless?

And it is becoming very clear that Australia has missed the boat this time round. We are just signing up to Kyoto as the rest of the world, or a considerable proportion of it, is preparing to move on to something much tougher. We are like that little boy who drags his shoes in the dust, scuffing and scratching them, because he doesn't want to go to school. Because school is where tough questions are asked and he doesn't know the answers.

Of course our tough questions are not truly being asked. What would You, what would I, be prepared to forego to make sure that our children and all subsequent generations have a future?

Strictly speaking, if we survive, we have a future. The question might be better couched: Do we want that likely future? The one where human beings live underground and creep out at night when the fierce heat has abated. Of course we might not want to creep out into our 'Sahara Desert' of a country.

Heigh ho! Never let it be said that human beings were less than resourceful. Oops! I think that was an infelicity. One species of all the millions on this planet has helped itself to all the resources and left them depleted, degraded, and polluted. An extraordinary record. Is this proof of our importance to God? Or proof that God doesn't exist and we set ourselves up instead on that vacant throne?

Or simply proof that we are greedy little gits and deserve everything nature may now choose to throw at us?

## MONDAY 10 DECEMBER 2007.

Should I keep my eye on the main game? It hardly seems to matter. Watching a leprechaun may keep him visible and present. Watching politicians doesn't keep them decent and non-corrupt. They have WAYS ...

But I did think, hearing this evening that John White, former Minister for Health, used a defence, that he didn't know his behaviour was against the law, which is rarely allowed for naughty teenagers. Do we expect too much of our teens and too little of our adults? Perhaps.

Every so often public behaviour comes under the spotlight. A Minister, a judge, a CEO, a Bishop swims into the headlights on that dark country road ... and then swims, usually peacefully, away again. They may lose something but they very rarely are left destitute in the ways that people down the bottom of the heap who misbehave—and get caught—sometimes do. There is always the feeling that the seaside villa and the nice superannuation is waiting to cushion the fall of the mighty. Whereas there is only cracked asphalt and uneven curbing waiting on the unwanted and the dismal and the pathetic as they ask the court to allow them to pay off their fines over a period ...

Of course some have cars and videos and all the rest that they could sell to pay. But they rarely have the lovely plump cushions ... and they very rarely get told that, yes, surprise, surprise, ignorance *is* an adequate defence.

## TUESDAY 11 DECEMBER 2007.

It seems we are to be treated as the naughty little boy who came late to school and then offered up a feeble excuse as to why he had not properly tackled his homework. Please, Sir, Mr Rudd will say to the collected folk in Bali, I didn't realize that the school clock has been ticking away while I was merely talking about emissions, of one sort and another. I will try to do better. But it isn't realistic to ask me to make up for so many missed lessons.

It would be far better to praise me for trying.

Very well, the stern world might say. We accept you and your folk back home are trying. But we don't think you are trying VERY HARD. Even little nonentities of states noticed quite a while ago that homework is made up of two important words: HOME and WORK. Not, as you lot seem to think down there in Oz, PLAY and TALK.

You've had your chance to play and we don't really want to listen to you talking; and more so if it is only going to be this continuing string of pathetic little excuses and exculpations.

Exculpations? I don't think that word is likely to go down very well here. Once we go and look it up in dictionaries. We are more likely to decide that that mob in Bali are merely another lot of wankers and can be safely ignored. Who wants to belong to their club. Sucks to them!

I did notice the other day when I was out walking that the sea seemed a little further inshore than I had ever noticed before. It might, of course, be my imagination overheating.

## WEDNESDAY 12 DECEMBER 2007.

Something about the local being the particular. I see our esteemed premier is re-thinking his blanket 'No' to tardy wards-of-the-state who want an apology, recognition, compensation, whatever. And so he should. If something was done wrong(ly), as it very clearly was, I do not believe any child should ever be seen as slave labour let alone free sex to some domestic tyrant, then there should not be a statute of limitations on it. A kind of window of opportunity you climb through when the government says 'Go!' or find the window slammed in your face if you weren't fast enough out of the blocks.

It is not only about people knowing. It is also about people having to psych themselves up to talk publicly to strangers about the things that were done to them. That is always difficult. If it takes people years to get to the point that they can do so ... then those years should be available to them.

We still haven't fully taken on board that the most vulnerable, the least loved, the most neglected, the least cherished, the most abused—were the same children the government, churches and charities felt they had to 'come down hard on' instead of trying, or at least making the effort, to make up something of what they had already lost. The children were double losers. For the government to now say 'bad luck, you've missed the boat again' seems to me not only cruel but downright immoral.

Of course morality is only brought out in public when a pollie or a party feels themselves on the high moral ground, the impregnable position, the machine-gun nest that cannot be stormed unseen ...

I have the feeling that the general public tends to see immoral or amoral behaviour in the political arena much more often than pollies seem to see it.

Something to do with beams and motes? Or does it have a Freudian connotation?

## THURSDAY 13 DECEMBER 2007.

Indigenous issues back on the board; though I think the media should have been prevented from giving out so much information on her background, that ten-year-old, because no one will have the slightest difficulty now in identifying her. How is the poor kid expected to cope with school with everyone hanging round for every salacious detail?

And Aurukun is like other small towns. No jobs, few things for kids to get their teeth into. But what it needs, if it can't have jobs and opportunities, is decent caring parents whose ten-year-olds aren't out after dark. And decent caring parents, teachers, police and clergy, who teach the next generation right from wrong ...

They used the words 'childish experimentation'; I assume they meant along the lines 'if you show me yours I'll show you mine' ... but this obviously went well beyond showing. But for the hundreds, even thousands, even more young Aboriginal women who were raped on stations, in service, in institutions, no one can claim that it was 'childish experimentation' yet no one has ever been charged. No apologies were ever made ...

State and Federal are tossing Indigenous Affairs around again like a hot potato. I don't see why. Basic decency is what is needed. Not blame shuffling. And when it comes down to the wire federal and state bureaucracies and policies are about a much of a muchness; there are no shining lights.

Of course while they shift blame to and fro the real damage is being done in Cape York as the low swampy coasts gradually go under water and the industries like prawning disappear. Someone told me many years ago that it is as easy as falling off a log to get a job at Karunda dealing with prawns. I do have a problem. I don't eat prawns. I disapprove of boiling any creature alive ...

## FRIDAY 14 DECEMBER 2007.

There is an assumption that rich countries will be able to cope with climate change because they are rich. Yet a lot of that apparent wealth is actually trillions of dollars of debt that we naively and hopefully sit upon as though it was a solid couch and not an air cushion.

In one sense our inability to ‘fix’ it may be a good thing … because almost all fixes seem to require more energy, more science, more technology … and a debatable outcome. People, corporations, nations, all struggling with debt might at least realize that the simplest thing is to do less, use less, want less, buy less, move less. The assumption that a growing economy is automatically better able to tackle greenhouse gases is an unproven assumption. We may grow beyond fixability.

Of course nature has built-in fixability.

Is that comfort? Or isn’t it?

## SATURDAY 15 DECEMBER 2007.

Someone said to me one day she was frightened of what might happen if she stopped consuming. I don’t mean she was afraid of starvation … but she was afraid that if people did stop consuming the economy would collapse. And on our heads would be ‘it’. Someone, quite rightly, would shake a stern finger at us and tell us we were naughty for stopping the endless rush to buy buy buy …

The same psychological imperative underlies the information ‘revolution’ though I am not sure that we really know more that is of any real use to us. But it is driven by a fear that if you are not hooked up to the latest in ‘information’, in news and events and sales pitches and scientific breakthroughs and what’s-on-telly-tonight, you will somehow be left behind. If you, God forbid! opt out of the system altogether and cease listening and reading and talking about ‘events’ you will go beyond the pale, a total dead loss. You may be happier not knowing about that bus crash in Venezuela or that war in Afghanistan but you will become a social pariah, not even able to talk knowingly about what the premier said and the new fashions downtown, and someone to be dismissed with a pitying kind of brush-off.

Yes, well, it’s no good asking HER …

And somewhere in there will be both a kind of spurious sympathy and a firmly repressed curiosity; how does it feel not to KNOW …

Ah, but I might know other things … like the sound of the wind in the trees or the way a wren builds its nest or the unfurling of rose petals …

But that, I fear, is not doing my bit for the economy; the economy being rather like a large unwieldy caraval with warped timbers and unmanageable pumps …

## SUNDAY 16 DECEMBER 2007.

Compromise, it seems, is the order of the day in Bali. All the delegates came home from climate change to talk of compromise. It sounds better than ‘watering down’. Marginally. When the Earth as a place for humans to live goes down the gurgler you can blame compromise—that is, if you’re up to blaming anyone.

Of course compromise used wisely is a nice concept. But I do not think global warming is the arena to drag it into. ‘Look, folks, we’re doing you proud! We COMPROMISED.’

You WHAT?

Of course I might be quite wrong and completely on the outer—and everyone else is delighted that a compromise was reached. But I cannot help thinking that it would be better not to have an agreement and for some countries to live up to the tough targets they have set—and, with luck, shame the rest of the foot-draggers into doing something.

MONDAY 17 DECEMBER 2007.

Why do they call it ‘the Silly Season’? Not because of Christmas but because the pollies have gone home to domestic bliss (or otherwise) and the media no longer has a focus? Or simply because the media assumes we have all gone away to the beach for a month and they might as well re-run the cheapest programs they’ve got on hand?

The trouble with this is—it places the media as the arbiter of what we hear and watch and think and discuss with our friends and feel interested in and passionate about … or vice versa … or merely groan and say ‘so be it’ … In other words the media has become the inescapable decider. We are what the media tells us to be. We think what the media wants us to think. We go or don’t go according to the media. We care about the things the media wants us to care about. In other words we have become zombies who cannot think for ourselves until we have turned on the radio or TV or read the newspaper, of a morning, and been primed to see the day in a certain way. What if we were all confined to solitary confinement in which the world never intruded? What would we think about? Would we find ourselves unable to formulate anything much to think about? Would we die of boredom?

Or would we find that inside every skull is a brain which is not a receptacle to be filled from outside sources but which contains intrinsic connections to the universe it didn’t know it had …

Men are said to masturbate endlessly in solitary. Do women? I have never seen this discussed. But either way it suggests that what people carry into solitary is usually more important than what they actually do in there. In other words, how we stock our minds matters. If it is a superficial ‘fix’ of news and current affairs then it is about on a par with anything else we are encouraged to think about. So what happens to people who say: what I have brought in is not worth thinking about. I will therefore stop thinking. And see what happens.

The difficulty of course is that it is very hard to stop thinking. The empty mind is equated with the stupid mind in our society. And yet all great thinkers appear to have had the ability to completely close off thought and allow other ‘talents’ to come into play.

Instead of a silly season we could have a season in which we turn off the radio, TV, and put a stop to all written matter entering the house.

What would happen?

TUESDAY 18 DECEMBER 2007.

So AWAs are going to be abolished and in the meantime employers are rushing to get them under the wire? Surprise surprise! And yet I have never actually been able to work out why employers are so keen. They might be able to whip away a few benefits under the guise of flexibility ... but the added paperwork and having to go through the Fairness business probably removes a lot of the benefits. One employee, it might not be an issue. Three hundred. I can't help thinking that the blanket provisions of an award make a lot more sense. Imagine trying to remember which employee has signed up for what detriments and benefits. Imagine the bad feeling when one employee realizes he or she has got a better/worse deal than another. All the comparisons, envy, questioning and back-bitings that probably go on.

It seems amazing now but when I started work my parents came to each interview with me. It seems another world. Of course it was partly not having a vehicle and them driving me there. But there was a feeling that a teenage girl was vulnerable and needed that kind of oversight. I don't think they really believed the world was full of ravening wolves. But they did believe I was a shy little moppet who wouldn't know what questions to ask and wouldn't know how to find out the details of any arrangement.

Now I find myself wondering if reinstating parents might be a good idea. If all teenagers going for their first job were accompanied by parents or surrogate parents it would put employers on notice. This youngster is not a lone hopeful ready to be exploited. I'm sure exploitation would still happen. That notorious business of putting people off the minute they get old enough to warrant an adult wage ...

(Some) Work places would still be dirty, noisy, dangerous, full of sexual innuendo, rude, vulgar, and unpleasant. But the sort of parent who looks around with a sharp eye and says this place is not the right place for my sixteen-year-old might actually get some places improved. After all, no parent wants little Johnny to come home minus a hand in his first week at the works ...

## WEDNESDAY 19 DECEMBER 2007.

Have you noticed how when a minister or frontbencher gets demoted to the back bench or even the opposition benches—they immediately get in a pet and say they won't serve out their full term? So much for keeping faith with the poor sods silly enough to elect them. The whole thing is pathetic. And it is a clear reminder that such people were there for the power, the prestige, the influence, the money—not because of a deep commitment to the democratic process. And if they don't care about 'the people' should 'the people' care about them?

Perhaps more important as an issue is what the new government will do about the culture of compliance, buck-passing, keeping the old head down and the old nose clean—that permeates all our public institutions. We are becoming like a banana republic or the Vicar of Bray, and loyalty to the government of the day not to the taxpayer, the public, the system, is all that matters. Anyone would think we are in the habit of taking our public figures out and putting them blindfolded up against a blank wall.

So why do we have a democracy by leaks? How absurd. And sometimes someone chooses to leak and sometimes they don't ... and so, somewhere down the line we get dreadful things like the Wheat Board scandal and Ms Solon. But should anything in the public sphere paid for and therefore accountable to the public BE SECRET? Why is so much hidden behind screens? All kinds of screens. Paper screens. Classified screens. Fear screens. No right-to-know screens. Silly screens. Get ahead and kick the other fellow in the teeth screens.

The actual number of things that should be secret is tiny. So far as I am concerned they could fit on one hand. Instead they surround us like an unnavigable thicket with deep pits containing stakes and thorn bushes filling in the spaces between the scrubby trees. And behind those screens hide all sorts of dreadful conflicts of interest, stupidities, cupitudes, greeds and sheer unadulterated incompetencies.

But it goes deeper. We constantly praise our soldiers as bronze heroes, brave, fearless, spoiling for a fight. We praise mutedly our larrikin tradition—which, let's face it, is of the type 'knock the bobby's helmet off' or, here, break windows and deface walls ... it isn't about courage or moral strength. That is what we have always lacked, not just the occasional person who leaks a document or the reporter who pursues a story of corruption, but a culture of fearless questioning, strong moral probing, a willingness to look a fool and get vilified in the pursuit of truth, justice, and honesty. An occasional person popping a head over the parapet is worthwhile but why do the rest of us stay hunched in our trench? A culture of openness and truth-seeking would make it much easier for the people with specific knowledge of wrongdoing to come forward. Why are most of us moral cowards?

And speaking of those bronze heroes—it is curious the way we have airbrushed out of our history books any mention of mutiny, desertion, suicide, rape, looting, incompetence, mistreatment of civilians, racism, environmental destruction, waste, and stupidity. Yet there are clear cases of all. But we have a public culture which so distrusts 'we, the people' that it fears to tell the truth in case we lose all faith. Yet we would all have greater confidence in our public institutions if we believed they were fearless in questioning and sometimes prosecuting themselves—than to live, as we live, with the vague unease that we have never been trusted enough to be told inconvenient and sometimes repellent truths. Unease is a much greater underminer of trust and confidence than truth-telling.

## THURSDAY 20 DECEMBER 2007.

Fires. Fires are in our conscious and subconscious thoughts. That vague worry. What will this year bring. Well, this summer will bring fires. It already has. We know that. And yet we still haven't truly come to grips with the simple fact that it is not a few Muslims studying radical and unpleasant ideas which are the danger to us but *fires*. We are spending massive amounts on 'counter-terrorism' (so-called) while small voluntary groups are left to fight many of the nation's fires. And all fire brigades, voluntary or paid, are vastly under-resourced and under-funded.

I guarantee if you went round to every Australian household and asked them which they feared most—bushfires or Islamic terrorists—in their neighbourhood they would all answer fires. You wouldn't know it to listen to the politicians.

Water bombers are extremely expensive and can't fly in heavy smoke. So why not put down pipelines, buried, into every area of bushland close to homes—with easy to access taps and side hoses?

All fires are easily defeatable—if caught soon enough. A fire spotting service using both professional spotters and a hot-line for people to ring in as soon as they see a sign of smoke on fire-ban days would help. The whole population needs to be mobilized to believe that fires aren't an inevitability and something which just has to be *put up with*. There should be rewards

for dobbing in firebugs and penalties for others in a group where one person set fires and others knew.

The things which start fires all need to be tackled in a range of ways.

1. Lightning. Weather forecasts for dry lightning in particular areas need to be accompanied by a high alert to all services.
2. Firebugs. We need to make it clear to all young people, particularly youths in the dangerous ages, that setting fires is a mark of serious sexual inadequacy and that the people who set fires, unless so seriously mentally ill they can't grasp that their actions have results (in which case they aren't safe to be out wandering the streets), are utterly contemptible. Far from fines and short prison terms a more appropriate answer would be to place all their belongings, clothes, hi-fis, car, camera, mobile phone and all the rest on a bonfire and ask them to watch. This is what their unfortunate victims have to face.
3. Carelessness. People, from those wanting to burn toilet paper to those careless with cigarettes and barbeques and welding equipment and exhausts and back-burning, have all managed to burn out thousands of hectares. Why anyone wants to inhale hot smoke or heat food on a blazing fire danger day I cannot imagine. And think of all that broken glass in bushland ...
4. To hide crimes. Fires have been started to burn bodies, clothes, papers and books, but principally to burn stolen cars. Making it harder to steal cars would help. To require that every person wanting to register a vehicle has to demonstrate that it is both roadworthy and has a dis-enabling device of some kind would not be difficult and would save a lot of police time and public expense. To limit access by vehicles to near-city bushland would help.

Of course there will still be a few freak events such as spontaneous combustion of persons and vehicles ... but we could drastically reduce the numbers of fires.

A number of plants are more fire-resistant than others. Planting breaks of willows round small towns close to bushland would help. Pumping sewerage, gray water, and storm water, back into ponds in bushland, rather than pumping it out to sea, would enable the development of small wetlands to serve as sanctuaries for threatened animals, birds, lizards and insects.

Oh, and a ban on public smoking during the fire season. No more cigarettes, cigarillos, cigars, or pipes. No sales. People could still smoke. There would be special smoking rooms in public malls and shopping centres; their décor mainly planned around fire extinguishers and coiled hoses. Really quite tasteful. People seen smoking elsewhere would be instantly press-ganged into volunteer fire brigades in Woop Woop. Of course children would still do silly things with matches and lighters. I can see a ban on lighters working. Matches are more tricky. I'll have to give that one some thought. A new kind of match perhaps. One flare and they're gone, none of this burning down the stem business ...

This is just a start. Why not run essay competitions in Australian schools every year. Ten Good Ways to Stop Bushfires ... or something along those lines, with all entries read carefully both for writing quality, ideas, and the warning signs for the incipient development of tendencies towards pyromania.

FRIDAY 21 DECEMBER 2007.

They are all nipping off home for Christmas but I see the new PM is promising that next year they are really going to work, no lifting the head from the grindstone, in which case I have a subject crying out for a legislative response.

I was always in the habit of getting all my cartridges re-filled. An average cartridge would do me six times before losing definition. Now the companies, like Canon etc, have done the dirty on consumers. Re-filling is set to become a thing of the past. Instead of Terminator seeds we now have Terminator cartridges. Of course people are encouraged to feel they are doing the right thing by dumping the now useless cartridges into a Planet Ark bin which I am told sends them straight off to China where a little bit is removed and the rest dumped into China's teeming toxic dumps. Both Europe and North America, it seems, are starting to legislate to require that all cartridges sold be refillable. A simple example to follow. How about it, Kev baby?

Of course if I really sat down to think about some more useful legislation for you and the team to get your teeth stuck into I'm sure I could draw up a long list. If I asked around, instead of just pondering on it over the washing up, the list would grow. And grow. Of course legislation is only as good as the enforcement of it. I sometimes stand on the corner up the road and watch the cars that turn without using indicator lights. Sometimes it is as high as four out of six. It's a wonder I'm still here! And the others often wait till they're turning to suddenly think 'hey, a light might be useful'. Of course if you put traffic cops on said corner the behaviour of motorists would suddenly improve out of sight. It might be better to park an old Mrs Mop in key locations. Motorist thinks: old biddy, or they don't even notice or think at all. Turns. Old biddy takes down number plate. Motorist receives summons. Required to do an hour community service as lollipop person on busy street night and morning.

But I am inclined to think I am tired of politics, legislation, stupidity of public figures, media dumbing us all down, and similar dreary subjects. I think I will just go away and spend Christmas worrying about climate change. All those over-fed long-haul turkeys. All those rellies coming by jet. All those cars clogging supermarket car parks. All that wasted wrapping. All those rushed trips to doctors and emergency wards afterwards. I think I will have a very quiet Christmas. A very very quiet one.

Unless a subject comes up and begs me to write ... just one more paragraph.

After all Scrooge and the Cratchit family managed a happy Christmas which was *almost* carbon-neutral.

So, in the words of small boys everywhere ... 'Leave something for me!'

## **I MIGHT END HERE AND DRY UP NOW**