

Mrs. Mop Thinks Back...

*By
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*A Little Surge of Nostalgia
Between the More Serious
Things of Life*

Mrs Mop Thinks Back

I wrote *Mrs Mop Thinks* years ago but it niggled away at me; the book was too *short*. Yet I felt that that election campaign didn't need anything more. After a while I wondered about Mrs Mop's more general response to things. Might she like to have more of a say on this and that, not necessarily world-shaking events, just things that come to her as she stands at the window or bundles the washing into the machine (yes, I'm afraid she gave up her copper and scrubbing board a while ago) or sits pondering on Modern Life ... So here are some more of her offerings ...

2014 and 2015

SCABS

When I was young we spent a great deal of time discussing scabs. How we got them. How long we'd had them. When they were ready to pick. Now this strikes me as being a strange, even bizarre, way of spending our time. Were our lives really so banal that no more exciting subject for conversation ever came to us?

Perhaps.

But I think this interest was a flow-on. Everybody ended up with grazes. Everyone got scabs. Everyone eventually picked their scabs. But these endless grazes were a natural part of an energetic outdoor life. We fell over while running. We fell out of trees. We fell off ponies, off bicycles, even out of the old rickety cars of that era. We tripped on stones and uneven ground because everything wasn't covered in smooth asphalt. We jumped off cowshed roofs and fell off windmill ladders. We went paddling in roadside ditches and old gravel quarries. We climbed through barbed-wire fences and over sagging gates. We climbed on old rusting machinery and pretended we were driving ancient superceded hay-mowers.

Scabs were the inevitable result.

Now children are more likely to be delivered safely to school, warned off climbing trees, taken to swimming pools with supposedly attentive attendants, protected from all kinds of lurking possibilities for damage and scabs.

The jury, it seems, is still out on the wisdom behind this greater concern and care for our children. To some people it is nonsense. The nanny state. Cotton wool. Let kids be kids, they cry. That's what trees are for! Though I notice they don't say that's what old gravel quarries are for. But they have a point. If kids aren't outside climbing trees and running round and falling over there is a very good chance they are inside glued to a screen of some kind and developing fat backsides and flabby muscles ...

But it wasn't all beer and skittles back then. Terrible things, much worse than endless scabs, did happen to children. I know of a young relative who killed himself by climbing over a gate with a loaded rifle. Another died from a torn liver after an adult picked him up by one arm to put him on a horse. I went to school with a boy who moved to another school where kids were throwing stones in the playground. One got him in the eye and he lost the sight of that eye. Kids got hit by shanghais, they broke bones. I cracked a collarbone and cut my leg open on rocks at one stage. I remember my brother cutting open his foot on an old piece of timber lying around the yard. Kids were kicked by cows, bucked off by ponies, broke legs, got concussed, got burnt by firecrackers, got bullied and bashed ... bad things did happen.

The Beaumont children, out for a happy unsupervised day at the beach, are the ultimate reminder that bad things did happen to children ...

Now when something happens to a child we ask where were the parents. In the old days the parents were too busy to be noticing what their children were up to all the time. And sometimes the sheer number of children in a family precluded the sort of care the two-and-a-bit children of the modern family can expect. Families really did leave children behind at shows and sports because they had miscounted their offspring. Or possibly like the parents of Hansel and Gretel they hoped someone else might take at least one of their brood off their hands ...

How do we balance that freedom and self-reliance with the greater care now advocated? If you have space and design it wisely this isn't a problem. But what of kids in inner-city apartments whose only chance to grasp nature is a chance to run in a nice neat mown park with signs not to do this and that? Or perhaps an occasional outing to a beach with plastic bucket and spade. And more signs and red flags ...

Americans send their children off to summer camps by lakes in immense droves. That has never really caught on here. A Scout jamboree maybe. A family weekend on a farm. Music festivals in bushland. A caravan to a beach site for a week. But the idea of all city children going to camps every summer ... is it that it doesn't appeal to the rugged and individualistic Aussie? Or nobody has got round to really promoting the idea? And the simple fact that summer, end-of-year, and Christmas all coincide here has perhaps given us a different way of looking at holidays.

Scabs, of course, were those dreadful people who broke strikes. Disloyalty! Treason! The very lowest of the low. But I always had a sneaking sympathy with them simply because a hundred years ago the people who signed up as scab labour often did it out of desperation. You needed something behind you to go out on strike for an extended period. A supportive union. Some savings. Owning enough land that you could keep yourself in vegetables and eggs. A family right behind you. For men with none of those things to run the gauntlet of picket lines and jeers to keep food on the table probably seemed the only way at times.

I noticed that the men who broke the wharfies' strike, trucked down from country areas by Patrick's, sometimes came to regret their willingness to take jobs. Because once the strike was broken jobs for everyone, union and non-union labour, disappeared.

The mechanization of everything seems to be a given. So perhaps that strike was a pointless strike. People disappear from banks, from offices, from supermarkets, I am not sure where our grandchildren will find jobs. So it is strange that the big shearers' strike in the late 19th century is a reminder of one of the few jobs that no one has yet found a way to mechanize. That and shoeing horses. Is it just coincidence that they are both backbreaking jobs?

You haven't had grazes on your children? I congratulate you. But a few weeks ago I slipped over in a supermarket car park and took the skin off my knee. Yes, no amount of tarmac and signs can prevent your feet going whoosh on a damp day. And as it healed I found that old desire to pick a scab come over me again. It wasn't just those endless skinned knees. There was a certain satisfaction in picking scabs. It held in it the reminder that bodies heal. I was just sorry I had no one with whom I could have a profound conversation on the art of picking scabs ...

CHRISTMAS DINNER

Why did we have hot Christmas dinners in the middle of hot summer days? Some commentators now see this as truly bizarre. But was it? When I was young farming families had their hot meal in the middle of the day. If you had to milk night and morning this was more practical. And even in the hottest parts of Australia the sun had not yet reached full strength, something it did by 3 to 4 in the afternoon. So the cooking was actually done well before the hottest part of the day. Christmas was no different. The roast went into the oven in mid-morning. The pudding, made days or even weeks earlier, only needed to be heated and some sauce or custard made.

We had big family Christmases then, twenty people or more, and there was nothing wrong with our appetites. The children were rostered to wash and dry up. Then everyone's presents, heaped on a table, were given out. Everyone could enjoy not only their own gifts but seeing what everyone else got. And then the hot afternoon brought in a sense of laziness, people talked, children went out into the shady garden, Christmas cake and dried fruit and nuts and asparagus puffs and other goodies were set out for anyone who still had room in their tummies, and then it was all over and we went home to milk the cows. It only came once a year but the memory of it lived on.

There is a popular pastime now called Sneer at the Cooks of Yesteryear. According to these people we all lived on tough chops and watery cabbage in the olden times and it was only multiculturalism and all its various foods which rescued us from this terrible culinary desert.

Apart from the simple fact that 60 and 70 years ago many families only had an icebox or if they were 'lucky' a kerosene fridge (I put the luck in inverted commas because such fridges had to be filled with kerosene every week, they often played up and smoked horribly in hot weather and in the worst scenario they burnt houses down) so keeping a lot of food was often problematical. And there were no easy takeaways, no

pizza deliveries, and most people could not afford to eat out except on very special occasions. For many women cooking was something they did at least three times a day 365 days of the year. It is not that they dished up such awful meals but that they dished up so many delicious meals.

My mouth still waters when I think back to some of the things from my childhood. We got a hot cooked breakfast seven days a week: chops, fried eggs, fritters, omelettes, toad-in-the-hole, scrambled eggs, mince, poached eggs, bubble-and-squeak ... breakfast usually began with porridge until the commercial cereals began to make inroads, and finished with toast and a hot drink or glass of milk. If you were very poor your bread might have dripping or molasses (both of which are actually very tasty on bread) but were more likely to have homemade jam, marmalade, and if you knew someone who kept bees, honey. A hot dinner came in the middle of the day and supper in the evening but gradually this got changed, work patterns, school, even the idea that only hicks had a midday dinner. So we got some soup, sandwiches, salads for lunch and meat and two or three veg in the evening followed by delicious puddings, apple dumplings, mulberry tart, queen pudding, butterscotch pudding, junket, chocolate blancmange, pancakes, stewed fruit. And many families had afternoon tea before going to the milking yards, maybe scones or Johnny cake, maybe biscuits like custard kisses and catherine wheels, or a delicious sponge with cream and jam or caraway seed cake or butterfly cakes. And for special occasions there were the peach blossom cakes, rainbow cakes, lemon meringue pies, and for very special occasions there were the rich fruit cakes or elaborate layer cakes.

My mother's meat mince pies are the best I have ever tasted. I am only sorry I am no hand with pastry. And I worked for a woman when I was very young who made the best chelsea buns I have ever tasted. And yet these were made by women who must at times have been heartily sick of the sight of their wood stove and who had few gizmos to help out in the kitchen like Mixmasters, let alone freezers.

And women did not only cook. They preserved food in all sorts of ways. Any available fruit in season went into jams, jellies, preserving jars. My mother was horrified when she visited a commercial jam factory and saw them tipping leaves, twigs, spiders and everything into the jam vats. She carefully picked over every bit of fruit before it went into the jam saucepan. Women salted meat, put eggs into waterglass, churned butter, made cottage cheese, pickled onions and gherkins, turned tired vegetables into delicious relishes ... and in the days before school canteens mothers often had to cut sandwiches for five or six children five nights a week. My mother was always on the lookout for cheap fruit, over-ripe bananas, hail-damaged apples, the idea of letting things go to waste was anathema to those much-maligned housewives.

It is strange that we have become so much lazier when it comes to cooking yet we all have cupboards or drawers stuffed with recipe books. My mother had just one home-made book into which she wrote her favourite recipes. I gave away, or tried to give away, recipe books when I moved house. In some of them, I realized rather guiltily, I had never done more than look at the pictures.

But the point I am making is that we should be proud of our foremothers and what they achieved in the kitchen. And I don't remember ever hearing of a child way back then coming to school without breakfast. So don't put them down.

But the pressure of many people criticizing the traditional Christmas dinner gradually changed things. We too gradually came to the conclusion that a buffet in the evening would make more sense. Salads, cold ham and chicken, potato salad, rice salad ... it was all very pleasant and *sensible*.

It was only slowly that we realized we had lost something by being sensible. Christmas was now a pleasant summer's meal, one among many, but it was no longer *special* ...

REFFOS

There seems to be a long-standing habit of adding an 'o' to a lot of words. Garbo. Abo, reffo ... names became Johnno, Thommo, Davo ... was it contempt, affection, laziness?

Strictly speaking most of the reffos were not actually refugees. They weren't fleeing 'a well-founded fear of persecution'. They were displaced people. They were economic migrants. They were people no longer wanted in their home country. They were afraid of what might happen if they tried to reclaim homes. They were people whose homes now lay behind an Iron Curtain. And then there were the Ten Pound Poms.

Britain has quite rightly been seen as a racist society in the fifties and sixties (and later) but I do have some sympathy. Britain had just been chucked out of its colonies and was facing the very difficult psychological turn-around: it was no longer the heart of an empire, it was a small country trying to get back on its feet after WW2 and still in the throes of rationing. Its former colonies had made it very clear they wanted Britain out and were quite willing to get them out with violence ... and now here were those colonial subjects turning up on the doorstep wanting jobs, housing, schools for their kids and healthcare for themselves. And the impact of the new immigrants was felt most strongly in the poorer areas of Britain, peopled by those who had done least well out of the empire, who had been cannon fodder in the colonial wars and then two world wars, and who were now expected to compete for jobs, to see council houses and places in underfunded schools go to new arrivals from the Caribbean, Africa, India and Pakistan ... it isn't surprising that they often responded with racist jibes and actions. And why were people who claimed the one thing they wanted more than anything else was the chance to run things themselves now deserting their homelands to come to Britain anyway? I wonder if things might have been different if Britain had had a breathing space to recover from war and accept its new status as a modest middle-ranking power?

And while Jamaicans and Nigerians were turning up in Britain white Britons were turning up in Australia to add to the post war mix. We wanted them. Officially we wanted all the new arrivals. Hadn't we been brainwashed with that *Populate or Perish* slogan? Exactly what *Populate* was meant to be no one spelled out. Ten million? Twenty million? And *Perish* was even more problematical. Yes, whole tribes had perished under the impact of British arrivals but that was a very different matter to Australia's wartime population of 7 million. And these 7 million were spread over a massive land area. It wasn't clear how they were all to perish. But it was a catchy slogan and many people appeared to believe in it.

When Idi Amin tossed out his Asians and the world was shocked at his brutality no one appeared to notice that many Africans even if they didn't like him were not against his policy. Yes, Amin was a monster and yes, there were Asian businesspeople who treated their customers and neighbours with respect and courtesy and joined in with local communities and even let their sons and daughters marry Africans. But there were many who had held themselves apart, treating their African customers with contempt and were horrified at the idea of a daughter marrying an African neighbour. People don't like to feel they exist only to make someone else wealthy. In that the Asians were little different to the Britons who had been sent packing not so many years before.

But the lesson there is that if people don't integrate then they leave themselves very vulnerable. It only takes a severe economic downturn, a traumatic natural disaster, an unforeseen instability for such people to become scapegoats. The migrants who arrived after WW2 did mostly integrate very well. Occasionally you would come upon someone who had lived here many years without ever trying to learn English but they were the exception. Young fit men were sent out to work on the Snowy Mountains Scheme or Tassie's hydro dams or the railways and later they went to mining camps. This wasn't necessarily the best way to learn English but it gave young men a sense that there was more to Australia than their own community in a big city.

But then *Populate or Perish* was dropped as a slogan and instead we got *Migrants are Good for Australia*. Again there was no actual explanation. People pointed to transport companies, buildings, marinas, factories, restaurants, to buttress their claim. But in what way is any building *good* for Australia? How can a shipping company or a coffee shop be *good* for Australia?

If we think of Australia as a society then the claim has some mileage but if we think of Australia as a place then the claim is nonsense. Every migrant who has ever come has taken and changed and damaged and altered. The jury is still out on whether Aboriginal people were responsible for wiping out Australia's megafauna, giant wombats and so on, or whether it was climate change or simply that they could no longer compete. Bringing dingoes put many ground marsupials and nesting birds at risk.

The Macassans, though they didn't actually settle, may have brought leprosy and other diseases. And then came the Europeans. The Dutch killed their own people and no doubt sea turtles and nesting birds but didn't stay long enough to make much impact. The British had hardly arrived before they were cutting down trees and blazing away at anything that moved. They had made Tasmania's emus extinct by the end of the 19th century and finished off the thylacine by the 1930s. All across the country axes and cross-cut saws were at work. Cutting and gouging the landscape was done without a moment's thought. Shallow waters were denuded of oysters and clams in the silly search for pearls.

Then the destruction got into top gear. Giant machines gouging out iron ore, bauxite, coal, changing rivers and denuding landscapes, pumping water madly, turning foreshores into concrete wastelands where once waterfowl fed among the reeds and fish spawned. Spewing industrial chemicals into the once clean air. Sending plants and animals and birds to extinction or keeping a few sorry specimens on show. Victoria was once covered by a wonderful parsnip-type native plant which fed people and animals but which now cowers in a few mountain fastnesses. Murray cod bigger than a man were once hauled out but are now nearly as rare as hen's teeth and European carp infest our

waterways. Gorse and blackberries and prickly pear and cane toads all were brought by those migrants and did their best to colonise.

The once quiet landscape where the wind in the she-oaks or the trickle of little ferny waterfalls or the occasional grunt of a kangaroo or the song of a magpie was all that broke the stillness has been converted to a place where even the outback has the roar of road trains and city living is a 24-hour cacophony.

Are you still sure that Migrants are Good for Australia? Because, long after societies and economies have gone, the place remains. And the place we will leave will be a shadow of itself.

THE DEVIL ADVOCATES

I was deeply puzzled the first time I heard it said that the Vatican had someone called the Devil's Advocate to be consulted each time a new saint was in the offing. Where did they find someone who would claim to know what the devil wanted? And if that person was only there to put the negative side each time someone else said someone was wonderful and should be made a saint then that didn't seem very devilish but merely a matter of common sense or that much touted belief in looking 'at all sides of the issue'. After all, Grumpy Old Men are at the negative bit all the time.

I don't know if I can claim much commonsense but I am certainly a believer in the stuff. Politicians should, I believe, show commonsense in their debates. And what do we get instead? First the government brings forward a proposed policy or legislation which will make them look good to their constituents, then instead of a careful discussion of the pros and cons of the idea it quickly descends into personalities and jibes and boos, then a few half-hearted objections are made to the content before the government uses its numbers to ram it through and weeks or months later we all learn that it will severely disadvantage the severely disadvantaged, it is unworkable, it will cost twice as much as expected, or it will make Australia a laughing stock somewhere. Kids on school debating teams do better.

The world is full of silliness in high places. The USA has a deficit so large it can probably never be repaid and yet it is sending rockets off to see what the other side of Uranus looks like. Now I am very curious to know what the other side of Uranus looks like but not if it means that people sleep on blizzard-swept streets. Russia let all its countries that made up the USSR leave but is fighting to the death to keep a little spot of land called Chechnya. Governments gave support to dissidents who had never proved their ability or their courage or their ability to take anyone with them and thought they could turn the Middle East and North Africa into thriving democracies. Governments keep pumping oil at greater and greater speeds in the hope of making the US's shale oil uneconomic even though they know perfectly well that they will all run out of oil quite soon and the question of shale oil will be irrelevant. All they are doing is hurrying forward peak oil and decline ... Governments dislike wind farms because they are unaesthetic and relatively inefficient. Then why not improve the aesthetics and make them more efficient? We round up sheep and cattle, cart them for days, leave them in pens for days, load and ship them in journeys taking weeks, and then let them be yarded and slaughtered in situations of barbaric cruelty ... and why? Because we get told that Indonesians cannot afford Australian-slaughtered meat. Baloney! Poor Indonesians

cannot afford Australian meat in any shape or form. We are selling to the better-off. It would be ten times more efficient to kill animals close to where they have been reared. It is kinder and you get better-quality meat—and incidentally provide jobs here. And ships that can only carry a very small amount of meat-on-the-hoof could carry ten times that amount of chilled or frozen or dried or canned meat.

(Ten times is just a plucked-from-the-air amount. It is probably an underestimate.)

Great holes are being gouged in our planet and no one is asking what the long-term effect will be. We get timid little responses about remediation. Now companies only do one of two things with holes in the ground: they either just leave them or they fill them with water. I doubt if there is a mining site around Australia which has been restored to its pre-mining state and there is no way you can bring back the worms and beetles, the whole ecosystem, nor is it possible to do more than hope that the toxic chemicals now in the land and water will gradually decay.

Of course a lot of things are much less serious. The other morning I saw a news item about Sydney to Hobart Choas. I wondered if this was a yachting term I had not heard. But no, it was merely a misspelling of Chaos. Whenever there is a fire we are told people have lost ‘everything’; does this mean they lost their money in the bank or the car they drove away in? I am very sympathetic, I would far rather face a flood or a gale, but I don’t think ‘everything’ is accurate. And money is dragged into everything; your house burns down in the morning, by the evening news we are told how much damage has been done in dollar terms. Do reporters keep insurance analysts to hand? Do they use a rule-of-thumb? Big houses X dollars, medium ones three-quarters of that, small ones half? Some choices are more sinister. Whenever there is a news story about West Papua it becomes ‘the remote province of Irian Jaya’. Remote? Now Iceland is remote, or Jamaica. But you never hear a news reader talking about the ‘remote nation of Iceland’ or the ‘remote island of Jamaica’. Why not? West Papua is a short canoe ride from northern Australia. You could, if you didn’t mind the sharks, swim across. And when Indonesia implodes and a million transmigrants in West Papua decide to head for Australia rather than home to Java and Sulawesi we will suddenly learn that remote is the one thing it isn’t.

And we have already set a precedent. We have accepted Nepalese from Bhutan rather than insisting they return to Nepal. So how can we insist that Javanese and Sulawesian migrants into West Papua must now return to Java and Sulawesi? Still, that is a problem for a problematic future when storm surges and sea level rise make Jakarta unlivable.

If common sense doesn’t seem to be working should we turn to ridicule? What if the Americans had looked at the Europeans in their trenches and dug-outs, endlessly at each other’s throats in that great war of attrition—and said “Hee! Hee! So you idiots wants to exhaust yourselves, lose your empires, and end up poor and wrecked—just so we can be Top Dog and waltz in and grab what you can no longer hang on to, make money, grab resources, get rich? Well, if that’s what you want, you lot of boobies, here goes—and sucks to you!” Or we could laugh every time there’s another mass shooting in the US and say “Hee! Hee! We always thought there were too many Yanks in the world! So good of you to do the culling yourselves! Keep up the shootings, don’t worry about the numbers, don’t restrict guns, the more the better!”

Is that sufficiently devilish?

There is a fundamental problem with the Vatican's way of making saints. Catholics believe in a judgement day (or they did) but saints are still at large in the world beyond this one and healing and helping people rather than quietly waiting for the trumpet call. Each saint requires two miracles but how can anyone prove that it was the candidate which did the miracle and how can anyone prove that the candidate actually has the means to heal and help. Now I believe in 'faith healing' and I believe that faith *can* do miracles but I am not sure that any one recently dead person should be credited with a miracle.

I would like to think that saints are chosen because they have lived a life of sainthood in the here and now. Of course we are not sure what exactly constitutes saintliness. In the very old days it was stoicism and stern courage that enabled people to stay firm in their faith as their skin was flayed or they were put on hot griddles. Now we would look more to moral courage. And people might say that John Paul II stood up to the Communist regime in Poland but then so did a lot of other people with a lot less support and infrastructure behind them. They probably did their fair share of grumbling along the way but then who is to say that John Paul never grumbled but spent every night contemplating the Communists with kindness and loving prayer?

You do occasionally meet the rare person who doesn't seem to be able to hold a grudge or put other people down and the world is a better place because of them but they are rarely made saints. Perhaps they are the miracle?

SALES

There certainly were sales around when I was young. Auction sales. Weekly cattle and sheep sales, monthly horse sales. Closing down sales. And then there were the end-of-January sales. I don't bother to turn on the radio or TV on Boxing Day. I can't bear those news (*news??!*) stories which show a lot of grim people pushing and shoving to get to the unsold junk in certain shops. This isn't news. It is a travesty of Christmas.

I remember a neighbour who worked in a big department store telling me she was there till all hours on Christmas Eve setting up for the Boxing Day sales and she was so tired on Christmas day she couldn't enjoy having her family around or preparing food. Another neighbour said she felt it showed contempt for the customers who came in to buy a carefully selected present for, say, \$50 before Christmas and then saw the same item being flogged for \$20 two days later. She said, "We might as well all just give money or gift vouchers rather than choosing a gift with love and care." I was traveling on a bus one day and got talking to the young man next to me. He asked if I went to Boxing Day sales and I said, "No, never". He said I was very wise, that he had worked in a big store, and saw them pulling out all sorts of overpriced junk, unsaleable lines, damaged items, to sell on Boxing Day knowing that people's careful judgement seemed to go out of the window on that one day of the year.

But I notice more and more shops are also having Pre-Christmas Sales. They are also having Stocktake Sales, Summer Sales, End-of-Season Sales, Winter Sales, Old Stock Must Go Sales, you-name-it Sales. Sales are gradually becoming meaningless. Now I do watch out for Specials in supermarkets, discontinued lines, that sort of thing, and I am happy to buy yesterday's bread, and fruit and veg which are past their pristine

best. I don't mind if my potatoes have little green shoots or my bananas little black spots. There is a time to be fussy and a time to be tolerant. But I treat all sales with a jaundiced eye.

We have a way of doing it: taking a word, squeezing it till its pips squeak and it goes limp and then wondering why people no longer respond to that word. It will happen with Sales. Will it happen with Sex? Will it happen with Holiday? Will it happen with Expert? Freedom? Justice? Add in the pet words you fear for. Will they have a long and happy life or be done to death by human silliness?

We had sales at the end of January when I was young. They coincided with getting children back to school. Prices of uniforms and schoolbags usually stayed firm but all sorts of other useful items came down. My mother would make careful lists. Things she needed for the house. Items for school. I can remember her pleasure in some marked-down boxes which she said would be ideal as lunchboxes.

Money wasn't plentiful. There was the practical component. But there was also the pleasure people got in saving a few pennies on this and that. I'm sure people do at times still have that sense that they have been both lucky and clever but if the endless claims made for endless sales take away our pleasure in finding both something we feel we really need and finding it at a bargain price then the whole business will have defeated its purpose.

*And—
Mrs. Mop Thinks
Again . . .
Which is not to Say that She is not
thinking
Regularly . . .*

IN OUR CLASSROOMS

There is an outcry in Australian classrooms because some parents want Intelligent Design taught in Biology classes. The proponents of Evolutionary Theory are outraged. Why? Because Intelligent Design is not science. Oh ho! And Evolutionary *Theory* is?

Intelligent Design, they say, is religion sneaking in by the back door. And Evolutionary Theory is science invited in the front door. Now, excuse me for being dense—but the simple fact is that both are matters of faith. One is called religion. The other is called, sometimes, humanism. And sometimes it is called Being Sensible and Practical. The second we are told is all about Facts. Excuse all my capitals. After all, a skull is a skull is a skull. Yes. It normally is unless it came off the Piltdown Man. And if

Biology classes restricted themselves to careful study of skulls, how the bits fit together, where the brain goes, how eyes fit into their socket, how the nose is mainly made up of gristle, where the ears go, then I would agree that a skull is an essential part of study. But skulls are asked to carry a great weight of supposition, probabilities, possibilities, and sheer speculation. That is not Biology. That is Philosophy.

There are two things wrong in the whole debate:

1) Neither idea should be taking up the time of Biology students. They should be over there in courses labeled the Philosophy of Science. Neither of them rest on the rigorous experimental basis which has made science possible. We can test blood, skin, nerves, hair, cells, DNA, chromosomes, and all the rest of the human body (other than the mind) in the laboratory. Different people can repeat the experiments in different laboratories in different countries and get the same results. Evolution is not amenable to this kind of rigour. And not being amenable it does not fit the fundamental premise which makes science possible. To call it a science, to claim it as a science, to call people names when they say it isn't a science, is to diminish the care and rigour which makes good science possible.

2) The arguments floating round, 'hot-eared and muddle-headed', are dealing with two different issues. Evolution is trying to determine how one life form might have changed into another life form. Intelligent Design is trying to determine how life arose on this planet in the first place. Did it float here from somewhere else? Arrive on an asteroid? Brought by intelligent beings from elsewhere? Some years ago there was a great excitement when people found they could grow crystals in the lab. This, it was claimed, was how life began. We started out blinking and winking in the sunlight and hey presto! we suddenly had cells and genes. Then all went quiet. Yes, they could grow crystals from now until the Year Dot—but crystals simply produced more crystals. They didn't branch out into algae or some form of bacteria, not even a simple virus. It is a question which, so far, science cannot answer. So science should be honest and say 'Evolution does not, and perhaps can not, tell us how life began on earth'. A great deal has been postulated on the idea of primeval sludge but no one actually knows whether there was any primeval sludge *before* life began. We need some sludge because all kinds of things now grow in warm sludge (although the things that grow in the warm sludge in my back yard show no sign of evolving into anything else; they just go on happily and successfully being themselves) but we cannot postulate sludge and present it as science without evidence. We can, of course, present it as science fiction, and sci-fi has done great things with primeval sludge, but that is another matter.

So those who develop curriculums, curriculi, curry-curry-cool-'em-a-bits, need to step back. If we present faith as a science then we are just as remiss as when we present science as faith. Science is proof, rigorously tested, re-tested, peer-reviewed, science is the same in the USA, Russia, Brazil and here. Hydrogen gas does not take on differing national curiosities according to the belief systems in different countries, nor do vacuums, and although clocks run slightly slower at altitude, or so I've heard, and bathwater goes down the plughole clockwise and anti-clockwise according to where you are, these are still testable and provable aspects of science.

But evolution is at the mercy of those who dig up things in shale beds and have their occasional Eureka moments. And even then, one scientist says 'This will change the whole way we look at things' while another says 'We just need to tweak our ideas'. By

all means, change and tweak to your heart's content but don't dump it on children as science, as truth, as the Only Way.

There is a wider problem. A great many disciplines have been trying to creep under the Science Umbrella. They get called 'soft science' but that is surely an oxymoron. Psychology. Sociology. Even Anthropology and Palaeontology. You can of course measure someone's IQ and call it science. But I would guarantee that if you tested the same child every day for a year you would not get 365 test results all exactly the same. Surely we should stop calling the disciplines that involve human ideas and opinions science and start calling them something quite different. It would not make people less interested in psychiatry but it would stop people jeering every time one syndrome or disorder is dropped and a new syndrome or disorder is suddenly being promoted—and medicated.

And, please, let us stop using our children as the little lamb patties between the bread loaves. We do not teach our children literary theory, as someone once pointed out, before they've learned the structure, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary of the English language. So why not teach Biology as the basis for a broad understanding of how bodies work, how bodies grow and reproduce and die, how they interact with their same and other species, how they fit into their environment—and leave Evolution and the Origins of Life to adults. After all we accept that children are not capable of putting numbers on a voting paper, driving trucks, killing people in the name of the state, or getting married until they are eighteen. Why ask them to grapple with far profounder issues when they are ten?

And more fundamentally—why are we so afraid of other people's ideas? Because at the heart of the debate is the simple and depressing fact that people don't want any ideas to be considered other than the ones they hold with faith and trust ...

THE MAN FROM SNOWY RIVER

The Mountain Cattlemen are flexing their muscles. They have the picturesque, the colourful, the recently traditional on their side. They don't want to be locked away from alpine pastures. The Greenie idea that this can go back to being the habitat of wallabies, kangaroos, and small wildlife, just isn't on.

Of course it is very colourful when we see brumbies galloping down fierce mountainsides in the film version of 'The Man from Snowy River'. Whether all those galloping horses got safely to the foot of that steep hill remains an unanswered question. Nor, given that it was said to be spring, did we see any foals or pregnant mares. Just as well, of course, or we might have had to call in the RSPCA.

But why are the cattle and the brumbies in the Snowy Mountains in some way more deserving of protection, retention, glamour, romance, than cattle and brumbies elsewhere?

Of course it is a fairly recent tradition. Letting animals go in new habitats. Sailors wreaked vengeance on hundreds of small islands by letting rabbits, rats, goats, pigs, even dogs and cats go. Their thinking was simple. Next time they came by there would be meat for the taking. This attitude is still alive and well. Tired of those piranhas in your aquarium in the living room? Dump them in the nearest river. Tired of feeding that small

panther cub you smuggled in. Let him fend for himself. After all, you are doing him a favour by letting him run wild again.

When deer, emus, ostriches, failed to make farmers a quick fortune they found themselves roaming the hills. What's a few donkeys out there, some goats, camels, horses, pigs ... isn't it amazing how big feral cats grow? The life must suit them.

It is something we have done with gay abandon. So what makes cattle running wild in the alps different from cattle running wild in outback plains, scrubland, desert, marginal spinifex country? I doubt if the cattle are really any happier than cattle living on fertile river flats. And the cattle themselves are only marginally different to well-fed cattle on dairy farms. A bit stringier, a bit more agile, some different breeds. But I firmly believe it isn't the cattle themselves which are the romantic element. It is the chance to chase them up and down steep hillsides and over rocky gullies on horseback which makes them seem romantic. Anyone chasing his dairy herd at top speed over hill and down dale would be seen as an idiot, not a cattleman, let alone a *good* cattleman.

At times brumbies have been looked at through the same rose-tinted glasses. There is romance in the very words 'wild horses'. We immediately picture the white horses of the Camargue or great herds on the wide pampas or the wild horses in their myriad unusual colours of the American West. People have at times rounded up brumbies in the hope of finding some good riding horses among them and occasionally they have been lucky. But more often than not many of the horses are so inbred or so scrubby and unattractive that they are simply put on the next transport to the meatworks.

And many are not even given this amount of consideration. Where do you think your petmeat came from? Quite often it was from herds of brumbies rounded up, hamstrung to prevent their escape, and whipped and electric-prodded on to road trains to spend three or four days without food or water standing in the blazing sun, their nostrils clogged with dust, and an uncaring dispatch at their journey's end.

It might be said that in one way mountain cattle and mountain horses are usually spared one horror. They are not the prime candidates for the live export trade. So I have a message to all the wild cattle and wild horses around Australia: Head for the High Country. I just wish I could think of a way to get the message out to them.

WHAT DO WE EXPECT?

When it was said that NSW Opposition leader John Robertson had, horror, oh horror, spoken to the Lindt Café murderer, people behaved as though he should've kept a watchdog at the door of his electoral office to sniff out undesirables. This, of course, was sheer nonsense. Our elected representatives are there, in theory, for all constituents, good, bad, high-powered, low-powered, decent, indecent.

The question wasn't that Mr Robertson had let him in his door—after all, what MP asks for a police check when someone vaguely suss hoves in sight?—but rather what he had offered to do for him.

And it was said that he had written a sympathetic letter for him because this man thought he had been hard-done-by when it came to Child Custody issues. So do a lot of men. But I would doubt that any politician can give such an issue the attention it deserves. That it was what we have the Family Court for. Undoubtedly it gets it wrong at

times but it has access to information that no busy MP giving a constituent a twenty-minute appointment can match. Mr Robertson was wrong to involve himself in something he wasn't qualified to pronounce upon. He should simply have referred the man to Legal Aid or told him to get himself a private lawyer.

So was John Robertson like a lot of men who automatically believe that other men have been given a bad deal by the Family Court and therefore he was evening up the playing-field a little? Maybe. But the Family Court looks at the primary care giver to the child or children of a broken relationship and the primary care giver is more usually the mother. There are wonderful men out there who change nappies, bottle feed, get up in the night, take their children to things, help with homework, buy their clothes, make sure they get good meals and all the rest of it. But all this still falls disproportionately on women. Men may say that it is unfair that they have to prove that they will be a better primary care giver than the mother but it isn't hard to see why courts have changed their thinking over the last hundred years. Men used to almost automatically gain custody—and then they would immediately hand the babies and children over to female relatives or female servants.

As children get older they are asked for their views on which parent they would prefer to spend most time with. But this can be an agonizing decision for a child to have to make. They may love both parents and not want to make such a choice. They may be afraid to go against the wishes of the more dominant parent. They may prefer to be with the parent who is moving away but be reluctant to leave friends, neighbours, grandparents, or schoolmates. They may be reluctant to change the familiar for the unknown.

However it may be, no MP is really qualified to know what is best for a child on the say-so of one parent. Mr Robertson could of course have come round to spend his evenings with the Lindt Café thug and got to know him intimately. And then we could criticize him for not seeing what may or may not have been there for 'everyone' to see.

Don't you get the feeling, each time we use the word 'terrorism' or 'terrorist' that we are in a peculiar way PROUD to belong to that big bad international club? That we wouldn't like it if we had to admit that we had no homegrown terrorists, let alone any imported ones? Everyone else has terrorists these days, it seems, in the way they have a drug problem—so we want to be in there sharing news and information with the Big Boys. Undoubtedly a man who goes into a café with a gun or two creates terror. But that isn't the same thing. Men have been threatening and holding women and children hostage down through the ages. They have casually spread terror. But they didn't get the appellation Terrorist. So if a terrorist is not just someone who provokes terror then what exactly is he or sometimes she? What is this extra quality that gets us into the world-wide club?

Everyone tiptoes up to the questions of race, culture, and religion and tiptoes away again. But, oh thanks be, this terrorist had a name which seemed to imply that he wasn't one of us. He must therefore be more than a nasty piece-of-work with an obsessive nature, a strong sense of misogyny, and a liking for guns. It doesn't have to be spelled out. He isn't Mr John Smith.

All kinds of suggestions have been made about recent arrivals and how we don't want to radicalize them but only to respect them and make them feel welcome. But we are avoiding the big A word. Assimilation. It is a dirty word now. We bend over backwards to make sure that people have their own religious, cultural, educational, and social venues. We spend taxpayers' money to help make this happen.

Assimilation is a dirty word because we had it the wrong way round for two hundred years. The people who had been here sixty thousand years were expected to assimilate into the puzzling world brought by these strangers who had rocked up without so much as a by-your-leave. And by pushing them to assimilate with us (and often making heavy weather of it) it made us feel good. Complacent. It legitimized our invasion. They were now in the process of becoming us rather than we becoming them. Of course a few rare people 'went native' and found themselves eventually consigned to a peculiar no-man's land.

So now we are nervous about suggesting that new arrivals, refugees, migrants, people of indeterminate status, should assimilate. And yet the hundreds of thousands of arrivals after WW2 did just that. The welcome mat wasn't very big, nor very obvious at times. But work was provided, hard physical work, and there was a real sense that they were gaining a stake in Australia. It wasn't always easy. Many of those migrants would have benefited from some counseling and support. But they mostly survived and made new lives.

So it isn't surprising that they often don't have a good word for what they see now as Australia bending over backwards to be more sensitive to new arrivals and their perceived needs. I know there is an attempt to say that we should respect new arrivals from Muslim countries because Afghan camel drivers 'opened up' inland Australia. Apart from the fact that this opening up meant disaster to many Aboriginal groups who lost land, culture, and lives—it in fact misses the point. They were invited here to do a job. They could say yes or no as they wished. There was no compulsion. They came knowingly to a non-Muslim country and did a job and made a living. They weren't like kidnapped South Sea Islanders. Their lives were an interesting and colourful part of our history. But they are only marginally relevant to the current debate.

So what were the perceived needs of the Lindt Café gunman? In fact we don't really know. Was he driven by anger at losing custody of his children? Did he feel he was unappreciated here? Was this a response to what he saw as community racism? Did he want the Federal Government to respond in a particular way to the Islamic State creators? Or was he driven by a need to create a big splash with headlines around the country and every media outlet on standby? Because he made no specific demands of anyone, other than the café employees to lie down and play dead, we as a government and a society were unable to respond in the way that we might had he asked for a million dollars and a ticket to Syria.

And that is the real problem. We are linking confused unassimilated mentally unstable brainwashed violent individuals to causes when they themselves have no clear idea what they want or how it might be appropriate to try and get it.

Now we are taking it a step further. We are going to have what-in-effect is a Minister for Terrorism. Oh pardon! A Minister against Terrorism. And his first job is

going to be to remove citizenship rights from some wild and foolish young people. I'm sure that will make him feel powerful but will it be a mark of wisdom?

We have a Prime Minister so irresponsible as a young man that he didn't know whether or not he had fathered a child. He now, Mr Irresponsibility himself, is going to pronounce on other foolish young people.

But we are missing the point. Young people do not research Cause and Effect. They do not weigh up the Pros and Cons of every action they take. They do not say 'If I do this now how will I feel in ten years time when I am a respected member of the community, when I want a responsible job, when I become a Parent, a Proper Responsible Parent?'

Of course they don't. Teenagers. Early Twenties. Burning with zeal, rebelling against Authority, whether that Authority is parents, teachers, police, courts, the State, the establishment, anyone who pronounces from on high, wanting to make a splash, wanting to engage with a Cause.

They have chosen Islamic State, not the Vietnam Moratorium, not Saving Whales, not an outlaw bikie gang, not the chance to be a Mormon missionary—and we, Authority figures, do not like it one bit. Of course we are right not to like it. Because it would be hard to think of a more effective way to ruin a young person's life and either kill them, wound them, maim them, infect them, or leave them with lifelong unassuagable regrets.

But just as young people don't look at horrible pictures of diseased lungs and rotting gums and say 'oh dear me, how horrible, I will never NEVER smoke' so the more the government fulminates the more certain people believe they are doing something wild, brave, daring, anti-authoritarian. All the things that teenagers have longed to be and do down through the ages ...

Do we really think that threatening prison and the removing of citizenship will influence young people in their time of white hot zeal for a cause? If we do then we are more foolish than I would have thought possible. All we are doing is strengthening their sense of martyrdom.

If we've got the sense God gave geese then we will be going after the recruiters, the influencers, the persuaders, the people who sit safely at home and send young people to die. *They* are the ones who do not want to end up in prison with the mugs and the hoons. *They* are the ones with respectable careers, pulpits, homes, cars, places in the community. *They* are the ones who need to be pilloried.

Pilloried. Not made stateless. Making people stateless is a crime.

Not sixteen and seventeen-year-olds who can't wait to thumb their noses at strict fathers. That they are doing the bidding of strict father figures does not seem to occur to them. But then the old men who seduce on-line don't go round to tell kids to tidy their rooms and do their homework.

Perhaps John Robertson did have a golden opportunity in that brief meeting in his electoral office to say 'here is a man who means mischief' but I doubt it. We aren't very good at dealing with lone men who, let's face it, are so consumed by a sense of inferiority that any kind of a splash is going to be better than living as the people around them are endeavouring to live. So the question we might ask of every new arrival is: Do you want to fully assimilate into Australian society and are you prepared to put the effort into understanding what this means and how you might become one of us? People who say no should certainly be given short-term asylum until it is safe to go home. But becoming

Australian is not about being able to answer questions about Don Bradman or Phar Lap. It is about making the effort to live a good and decent life in Suburban Australia. Because, as we should make clear to every new arrival, that is basically what is on offer.

THE END OF ONE ROAD

So two Australians have been shot in Bali because they chose to carry drugs through the airport in Denpasar. But before we can look at the issue we need to gain some clarity on what we are talking about. The media used three terms interchangeably:

DRUG TRAFFICKING. This involves carrying any kind of drug from Point A to Point B. It may be a crime. But even some one carrying prescription drugs could be seen as trafficking. People who took contraceptive pills into nations such as Italy which banned the contraceptive pill to share with female relatives and friends were trafficking.

DRUG DEALING. Anyone who sells any kind of drug for money, barter, IOUs, influence, ransom or other more intangible benefits is a drug dealer. Chemists are drug dealers as are shop assistants and warehouse owners. CEO's of major pharmaceutical companies are drug dealers. It is their business. And they are not held to account when people die from taking legally-available drugs. They only have to say that their drugs are safe when used in accordance with the fine print or that they were unaware that someone had an allergy to a particular substance to be given the benefit of the doubt.

DRUG SMUGGLING. This involves some form of deception. Hiding drugs in belts and strapping them to your body is a very naïve form of smuggling. I have never believed that Schapelle Corby was smuggling drugs by putting them in with her boogie board and zipping up the case. It is the first place an even moderately zealous Customs officer would look. Young travelers used to be urged to put their passport and travellers' cheques in a pouch and hang it round their neck inside their clothes. This, it was said, was much safer than using a money-belt, bag or pack. It may have been much safer from a snatch-and-grab hoodlum but it wasn't going to fool any official at any border when it came to declaring currency or digging out documents ... nor of course was it meant to.

So here is a group of young men with drugs hidden in one of the most obvious places any official might look. They weren't swallowed. They weren't shoved into body orifices. They were just strapped around their tummies. There is a naivete about it which hardly suggests hardened criminal gangs. This was not the kind of sophisticated operation where drugs are mixed with resins and baked into religious statues or garden ornaments. This was not the kind of operation where drugs are canned and labeled as Best Thai Lychees or Best Italian Tomatoes or other clever operations which suggest big money and detailed organization.

Yet clearly there was big money somewhere in the background. Not major money, the sort that runs big heroin factories owned by wealthy Pakistani businessmen, but money enough to purchase decent amounts of drugs and send them off with dozens of young couriers. The Mr Bigs when caught (which is rare) are not usually impressive people. But then they don't have to be. What young traveler on a tight budget is totally immune to the siren call of a little extra income? They have ready tools to hand. They don't have to cajole. They don't have to brainwash. They may threaten but the threats only come later. Groups of young people are usually ready to listen and to consider an

attractive offer. And no amount of older people warning, saying ‘Don’t’, are really going to deter—any more than they deter young drivers from doing silly things, teenagers from drinking till they’re legless, kids diving off cliffs … it is the nature of the beast: youth is both the time to harbour a death wish and a time to believe ‘it can’t happen to me’ …

President Widodo undoubtedly found himself in a corner and he undoubtedly had painted himself in. And yet there is an odd thing about his response. The Indonesian people were offered a tough army man and a kinder gentler civilian official as presidential candidates. The Indonesian people had every chance to go with the tough guy. But they chose not to. And having got himself elected by people who had wearied of sixty years of tough guys and hardline policies—what does he do but convince himself that the Indonesian people didn’t elect him so that they could build a kinder more compassionate more open more tolerant society but that they secretly yearned for more tough guy stuff. It is hard for those millions of Indonesians who did hope for real change to come out and say so—not least because the Indonesian military is still one of the largest and most intrusive in the world but also because it would now look like doing foreign bidding.

Forty years ago Indonesians weren’t Tough on Drugs. You could buy cannabis in the markets. You could smoke a commercial brand of cigarettes which reeked of marijuana. And Indonesia, by and large, didn’t have a drug problem. But Indonesia did have serious fiscal problems. You can’t keep more than 500,000 men under arms and provide them with the latest equipment without running up big bills. So you turn to the most obvious Big Brother figure. Sukarno tried to play tag with both the USSR and the USA. The Soviets couldn’t care less what Indonesians smoked, drank, injected, or baked into bikkies. But the Americans wanted to Americanize Indonesian society, not just influence its military; they wanted to sell American cars, American hotel chains, American mining companies, American fast foods, and pay Indonesians a pittance to make shoes and clothes. It was a package deal and the American way-of-life had come to epitomize the clean-cut image. There might be a few nasty dirty hippies wandering around but they didn’t represent the American Way. And so it came to pass and Indonesia obediently became tough on drugs. Not just tough but like a good and zealous disciple they were determined to outdo their mentors in Washington. They wouldn’t just be tough, they would be death …

One Australian MP has come out and said some of his constituents have told him they agree with the death penalty. He hasn’t said what this vague statement might mean. Two constituents? Seven? Ten? Fifteen? Five hundred? And therefore we should be having a debate about the death penalty. Should we?

Schools, debating clubs, even parliaments debate things—in a sort of a fashion. But is this the best way to use public time, public officials, public money? After all, we aren’t going to bring back the death penalty any more than we are going to start sacking women the moment they get married. There is nothing to stop people writing letters to their MPs, their newspapers, starting FaceBook pages, going to chat rooms, boring their relatives silly with their views on the death penalty. So why divert attention from the really

important issues like budget deficits, resource depletion, climate change, over-population—

Stop right there, cry the diehards. The death penalty! Why are you objecting when this is an ideal way of saving the prison service money and reducing the population. But then—how would ordinary Australians, even diehard ones, have felt when the matinee jacket was found at Uluru? Clever as we are, and brilliant as some new technology may be, we cannot bring executed people back to life. Still, never mind. Every system, no matter how good, makes the occasional mistake.

Other Australians have been executed. Other Australians have been incarcerated in jails so bad they might well have longed for death. But it struck me that we have moved on. There was a sense that ordinary Australians had lifted the bar when it came to acceptable behaviour.

I heard someone say that to keep people on death row for ten years, constantly talking about firing squads, reprieves, new appeals, possible prisoner exchanges and all the rest of it was a form of torture. I agree. That old saw ‘while there’s life there’s hope’ might make anything acceptable. But to let people experience the ups and downs of hope and despair, of possible continued life and possible abrupt death, for ten years, is truly a horrible thing.

And at the end of the day, awful phrase but perhaps suitable, we can never win any War on Drugs. We have to accept drugs in the same way we accept other dangerous things like petrol and metho and look for more innovative and helpful ways of both discouraging people and dealing with addiction. As someone recently said it is pointless to spend vast amounts on detox units and programs if the lives people return to are unmitigatedly awful. Drugs start out as a curiosity. But they often turn into an escape. So long as people want to escape then ...

UNCHARTED SEAS

So Ireland has voted in favour of Same Sex Marriage. This didn’t surprise me. As soon as it was redrawn as Marriage *Equality* I felt certain the Yes vote would win. Because however unfair life may be we, ie. Western democracies, cling to the belief that the law treats everyone fairly.

When children, adoption, surrogacy and so on were mentioned the speaker was quickly slapped down and told that children weren’t relevant. Perhaps children aren’t relevant in marriage now and any discussion which includes them needs to be nipped in the bud.

But I noticed that no one mentioned Divorce *Equality*, no one mentioned Custody *Equality*, and I wondered if this had been carefully thought through. In theory divorce, separation, annulment, custody, child care, bigamy, and so on are the same no matter who you are. But they are not *quite* the same. Can same sex couples commit bigamy? I assume so. Will the Family Court treat them identically when it comes to determining custody—and what might ‘identically’ mean in this context? If the children of a male couple are predominantly cared for by female relatives, friends, neighbours, or paid help, who should be designated the ‘primary care giver’? Where two men have used a surrogate

woman, or two women have used a surrogate for sperm, should that third person have any rights, either to custody or even to having a say when the marriage breaks up?

None of these, and many more questions that occur to me, require Einstein to resolve them but the quickness with which they were dismissed does suggest that the debate was deliberately confined to who can front up to a marriage celebrant. Does this mean that everyone believes any later problems can be sorted out with commonsense and compassion or does it mean that dozens of unresolved questions will now lie in wait for the courts to eventually grapple with?

And I think it is important to point out that Same Sex Marriage and Marriage Equality are two very different things. Even though the media seemed to see them as interchangeable. In many parts of the world multiple partners in marriage is legal. If we are to have Marriage Equality then surely their rights are being trampled on. In many parts of the world children can be married off quite legally. The horrible frequency of fistulas in little girls in places like Ethiopia can be traced back largely to children becoming parents before their bodies are ready to give birth. But couples married as children elsewhere feel aggrieved when Australia tells them they are not now married. They might rightly ask why they are being discriminated against when they have complied with the law, admittedly a stupid law, somewhere else.

But my concern is different and is about parenthood more generally. Over the last forty years reproduction and parenting have changed so dramatically that it is truly a new world. Various questions have been asked about the safety, the cost, the long term impact of IVF but this seems the least worrisome of the many questions. To create a baby outside the womb and then implant it may have long-term questions for the vigour of the human race—if in fact sex is more than procreation and pleasure but actually has a biological aspect to it—but it doesn't seem to have the ethical aspects of, for instance, donor sperm or cloning.

The secrecy round AI using unidentified donors almost certainly has, or will, result in the marriage of half-siblings. Opening the whole situation up to the scrutiny of the resultant children is long overdue. We are told that cloning is not currently permitted. But do we *really* know what happens to every cell being fiddled round with in a laboratory? It is hard to see how we could adequately monitor such activities. I see those people with their pipettes, or even machines doing it en masse, and I always wonder exactly what they are doing and what is going into the solution.

People worry about the identity aspects of cloning but I think we are haring down the wrong road. Surely the problem is that each cloned child (or animal or bird) has only one biological parent. And for better or worse humanity has developed as the child of two biologically different parents. Even incest, however unattractive we find it, does provide that difference.

Can any one person anywhere guarantee that their genetic health is so superb that they deserve to be the sole provider of genes to their child?

And of course we are not asking for Marriage *Equality*. You can marry as children in some countries. You can marry two women in some countries. All quite legal. But when you come here you will find that it isn't legal and that you are going to have to face the fact that you are not legally married to that second wife.

There is no reason why we shouldn't change the definition of marriage from being a man and a woman and the procreation of children to something much less precisely defined. Words are constantly changing their meanings.

But there is a problem no one mentioned. And that is that as words change and expand they run the risk of losing any precision of meaning. Eventually they may become meaningless. I remember hearing people discussing icons one day. One person said they were those little 'things' on a computer. Another person thought they were prominent people. Someone else suggested important 'things'. Icons (or more correctly ikons) were once religious objects.

Now it seems they are what you want them to be.

Does it matter if marriage becomes what anyone wants it to be?

Perhaps not. But words as they lose their precision risk losing any sense that they describe something special.

TODAY'S HEADLINES

Do you ever get the feeling as you listen to commentators, read opinion pieces, listen to political comment, see the big headlines, that the one thing missing in most commentary is that apparently simple commodity: commonsense?

This is only a taste, not a detailed overview.

A school in Sydney planned to show a film in class time about a lesbian family and it was said there were no complaints from students. I would be very surprised if there were. Kids are only too happy to get some relief from the grindstone! It would take stern commitment for a student to say, 'No, we should be doing maths and essays, not watching a film. We can watch films while we eat lunch. Class time is too important to be frittered away.'

Was the intention of those promoting the film to create tolerance? Or to say this is a desirable lifestyle?

The first seems irrelevant. Only two or three per cent of those girls are likely to find themselves living that particular lifestyle. And girls tend to be more tolerant of homosexuality than boys anyway. And I still doubt whether teenagers can really be said to be 'set' in their sexuality and therefore need to see such films in class. Many girls go through stages of having thrills and crushes on other girls, many girls dream of setting up house with a close female friend, but that is not the same as being a girl who cannot even bear the thought of any kind of relationship with a boy.

Several commentators drew attention to the very poor literacy levels of students finishing school and thought that might be where more time should be spent. If a student after ten years in school cannot write a coherent letter to a potential employer then clearly we have prioritized tolerance and entertainment over basic life skills.

But I think there is a more fundamental problem and that is that more and more of the burdens of parents have been put on to the shoulders of schools. Hardly a week seems to go by but we hear someone saying 'The schools should—' The list seems endless: teach basic driving skills and road rules, teach nutrition, educate about sex, teach first aid, introduce kids to the legal system, civics, the duties of citizenship, how to vote, what's in the Australian Constitution, fitness and exercise, CPR, Asian languages, hygiene, caring

for the environment, caring about endangered animals, how to budget, drug education ... you name it.

We might as well rear our kids in incubators and send them off to school the minute they can walk. Parents are clearly not doing the things they once did. They might not have done it very well but fathers taught their kids to drive, mothers reminded them to wash their hands before sitting down at the dinner table, kids were told to eat their beans and drink their milk.

Is the problem perceived as a lack of parents, in a world where so many children either grow up in single parent families or confused blended families where basic skills are getting overlooked—or is the problem perceived as a lack of parenting skills? There's no such thing as a perfect parent. But I remember suggesting to a boy of nine or ten that he might like to tie his shoelaces so he wouldn't trip over. To my astonishment he said he didn't know how to tie shoelaces. What had his parents been teaching him for the last nine or ten years?

I have a simple suggestion. Teach kids the 3 Rs year-round and on the one or two days of the year that teachers go off on refresher courses invite in a range of people: an hour spent on nutrition and hygiene, an hour spent on sexual health and understanding, an hour spent on basic 'handyman' things, how to fix a fuse, how to read the road rules, how to look after tools and equipment, an hour spent on aspects of public life including how and when to enroll to vote. And then you say to your students 'You are all good readers, go down to the library and take home some of the pamphlets you'll find there and do some more reading in the areas where you'd like to gain a deeper understanding'.

I've just been watching some discussion on religious instruction in state schools. The fear apparently is that the volunteers who come in to take a half hour or one hour class will evangelise and convert students. Now if they can do that in half an hour once a week they deserve to be snatched up by the biggest and best advertising agencies round the nation. Clearly they have persuasive powers above the ordinary.

One suggestion was that kids could be introduced to comparative religion in primary school so they could be tolerant of all faiths. No. This is fine in high school but small children are looking for safety, guidelines, clear directions, something they can accept with certainty. I have met four-year-olds who can speak four languages fluently. This amazing ability to learn works well when each language is clearly linked to a person or a situation. Where their 'primary caregivers' chop and change, mixing languages, failing to present different languages as discrete things children can become so confused at the worst they can opt out of speaking altogether. They need a sense of certainty. If a small child asks a parent or teacher what Buddhists believe by all means give them a simple introduction. But primary school is not the place for comparative religion.

Another suggestion is that religion should be replaced by ethics. Now a good religious educator links religion to behaviour. But teaching ethics often degenerates into a list of rules. A class which is not much removed from signs saying 'Don't Run in the Corridors' is not going to engage children's interest let alone their whole-hearted commitment.

Certainly parents need to be sufficiently engaged in what their children are learning to, firstly, give their permission and, secondly, look at the materials their children are using. In the old days religious instruction was given in primary schools by ministers of

religion. Catholic children went to the priest, Anglican and Presbyterian and others went to classes taken by their ministers. In country areas, parents told their children which class to go into if their own religion was not being catered to. In some cases children were told to sit out during that time. My own memory of just such a school is that this time was looked forward to; not because most ministers of that era were particularly good and engaging when it came to children but that it was a welcome break from schoolwork.

But I realize now that it had two profound benefits which never occurred to me then. Firstly it helped to ground my understanding of culture, literature, every day commentary. Ruth and Naomi, David and Goliath, John the Baptist, the Garden of Eden, the Twelve Apostles, the cock's crow, Jezebel, Solomon, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, the Good Samaritan, Lazarus, Love Thy Neighbour, the Road to Damascus, the loaves and the fishes, the Cross, the Last Supper ... we use these words, and many more, almost without thinking. But in a hundred years will children simply look blank? And by looking blank will they be denied the richness of a long tradition which was once taken for granted?

And it is very difficult to find a Christian who has absolutely no involvement in what I might call 'compassionate work'. Almost all the charities which people turn to when governments and bureaucracies fail them are either run by Christians or were founded by Christians. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, the RSPCA, St Vincent de Paul, Lifeline, World Vision, City Mission, Amnesty International, OXFAM, Mission to Seamen (Seafarers), the CWA, and many many more. Of course there are Jewish charities, Muslim charities, Hindu charities ... but they tend to be set up for their own people. No one, no matter their religion, walking into a Vinnies is denied the right to buy cheap clothes or if in serious need to get a food voucher. Almost all op shops round Australia are run by Christians.

Of course people volunteer for all sorts of reasons but one of the most powerful is their underlying commitment to Jesus' words 'Do unto others'. Good religious instruction inspires young people not only to set high standards in their own lives but to reach out compassionately and generously. It would be a pity to close programs down on an unfounded fear that a child here or there might be, against their will, against their parents' will, 'converted'.

Our Prime Minister has just described as 'lame' a stupid joke made by his Immigration Minister about climate change. And he followed this up with his own stupid remark that Pacific nations should be willing to overlook this because we are going to take 12,000 Syrian refugees.

I'm not surprised small Pacific nations were not impressed. I wasn't either. And Tasmania is not going to disappear under the waves any time soon. When (and if) things finally settle in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, the countries will still be there. Mountains, rivers, farmland, even if the infrastructure is a mess it is re-buildable. Not so for Kiribati. In ten years time it may be a few dead trees still poking above the waves. As a nation, a country, a homeland, a much loved place, it will simply have ceased to exist.

If Mr Abbott had followed up by saying 'every person at risk in the Pacific is welcome in Australia' he might have received a better hearing.

So why on earth was he looking for a pat on the back? No Pacific nation has ever done anything to destabilize the Middle East. No Pacific nation has ever bombed so much

as a tiny oasis or rock or bridge in the Middle East. No Pacific nation drew unwise borders or bundled unsympathetic people into the one country in the Middle East. So why should their very frightening future be pushed aside, denigrated, joked about, so casually?

I notice leading figures saying we should not be ‘cherry-picking’ refugees. Excuse me! Unless we are willing to take the world’s pool of more than twenty million refugees then of course we are going to cherry-pick. When Australian officials went to camps in South-East Asia to choose Indochinese refugees of course they made choices based on various criteria. People’s ages, health, the size of their families, whether they had skills, whether they already spoke English, and other criteria. Do we really think they just used a megaphone to say ‘Line up now! First come, first served!’ Of course not. And those who decided not to wait patiently to be processed in effect cherry-picked themselves. They did not take the very elderly, the very sick, lone mothers with ten children, the mentally unstable. No, it was the young, the strong, the fit, the determined, who got on board small boats and headed for Australia.

People say the Vietnamese boat people integrated well. In general that is true. Though I remember a neighbour telling me a horrifying story. Her niece got married in Sydney. As bride and groom came out of the church a group of Vietnamese youths was passing. One pulled a knife, rushed up to the happy couple and stabbed the bride in the stomach. Instead of going on her honeymoon she spent several months in hospital. And the reason why he did that was never forthcoming. Drunk? Drugs? A pack mentality? Mental problems? Resentment of their happiness? And in the general sympathy for refugees some people actually implied that he should not have to take any responsibility for his actions.

Of course need is the most compelling reason to take one refugee over another but then the very act of being classified as a refugee implies that someone has met this particular criteria; that they can’t go home because of a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’. The hundreds of thousands of people who sit patiently in refugee camps in Kenya and other parts of Africa (people always ‘sit’ in camps, not stand or squat or kneel, is this because they are so weak from lack of food that sitting is all they can manage?) seem to me to be the forgotten refugees of our world. In some cases there is a realistic chance that peace will come to their homelands and a return home will be a genuine option. But in the meantime they sit.

There are fashions in refugees, just as there are fashions in most things, and our compassion is mediated through the stories the media chooses to show. Bread being thrown to Syrians in Hungary is apparently a shocking thing, ‘how can they treat us like animals’, but desperate Africans rushing trucks for rice or tankers for water and fighting each other to get these scarce supplies are apparently some kind of animal and this behaviour is only to be expected.

And there are refugees who are never seen on our TV screens at all. The media rushes from one crisis to another. Have people recovered and been able to go home after typhoons in the Philippines, nuclear disaster and tsunami in Japan, cyclones in Vanuatu, civil war in the Congo, terrorism in Nigeria, ebola panic in Sierra Leone ... what of the nearly one million Afghans who fled to Iran? Have they gone home or is Iran still hosting them? When hundreds of thousands of people from now Bangladesh fled into India in

1971 the world basically provided some aid to India, some Red Cross help to cope with the cholera epidemic that came with the overcrowding, and left India to cope.

But two questions don't get sufficient air play. The first is population. No one is willing to talk about population for fear of being branded a racist. Why? Every country should be setting targets to reduce their population. The world, as more and more people are pointing out, is finite. When we have raped this planet there is nowhere else to go. Yet the world refugee population alone is greater than the combined population of at least fifty of the world's nations. Surely that should be telling us that unbridled population growth places its own stresses both internally and on the international community's ability to cope.

And the second is that the vast majority of the world's refugees are being generated by about six countries. In other words it is not a general habit of most countries to turn their populations into refugees. So we need much more targeted responses to the misbehaviour of leaders who do generate refugees. Any such leader who leaves for the UN, an international conference, even a holiday or medical treatment, should be placed under immediate arrest as soon as he touches down outside his home country. We need to be looking much more closely at the funding of terror, at the quiet back-door sympathy that dictators and monsters receive from other countries. When IS beheads people and shows the severed heads they are rightly seen as barbaric. When Indonesian soldiers posed for photos with the severed heads of East Timorese they were treated as 'our good mates in Indonesia'. We should not be making policy based on whose severed head is more politically advantageous.

Debt: That stuff politicians talk about before elections. Of course they put a positive spin on it. They will have the budget back in surplus at x date or y year. But, yes, it will happen. And then everything goes quiet. No more mention of government debts. It is left to economists and commentators to talk about private household debt, about current account deficits, and more esoteric things they know we, the hoi polloi, don't understand.

But there is the simple fact that the world floats along on a sea of debt and we hardly give it a thought ... unless we can't pay our hydro bill. The other day I was astonished to learn that China is billions of dollars in debt. Astonished because I had believed that China was one of the few nations 'in the black'. Because they have loaned money elsewhere including to the USA. So the two things are not mutually exclusive. You can be in debt yourself but still lend money to other in-debt nations. Curious.

But it begs the question: are there any nations actually 'in the black' and if so—why do we never hear about them and what they might (or might not) be doing right?

I can remember hearing, when I was young, that rich people are always in debt. That, it was implied, was how they got rich. They borrowed money, used it to create some useful product, and made their millions; they then borrowed more money and expanded. And so on. People are still borrowing at a great rate but we rarely hear anyone mention a 'useful product'. So what is a 'useful product'? They used to be things like vacuum cleaners or cars. Now most people would assume some IT gadget, or perhaps a more environmentally friendly washing powder or toilet paper.

But if debt needs to be underpinned by the criteria of usefulness, as it is obviously not underpinned by the criteria of sound financial practices, then we need to be giving a lot more thought to what is actually useful. We know that every product, useful or not,

takes its toll on the environment, uses up non-renewable resources, and adds to the level of pollution, so useful genuinely needs to be useful and I doubt if we are putting enough thought into what we mean by useful.

And debt? Debt is seen as useful. But no one seems to be asking the key questions on whether we can continue to float on a sea of debt. Floating is one of those things—look, mum, I'm floating! Wheeee!—that don't always continue as planned. A big wave, cough, splutter, oops, I've lost my li-lo float! Help! Somebody help! But who will come to the rescue of the world? Small countries like Bolivia have declared themselves bankrupt but large credit facilities in the USA were propped up on the grounds 'they were too big to be allowed to fail'. If that is the criteria, rather than their usefulness, then I think we are going down a strange and uneasy road in which normal commonsense seems not to be used. If we have allowed things to get too big to fail then we can hardly expect to see sound financial behaviour because we have allowed organizations to move into an esoteric world where their behaviour and their financial soundness are no longer the criteria on which they are judged.

In the depression years financiers and businessmen jumped out of windows. Now they get a bonus for failing. It no longer seems much point in talking about debt because we have moved into a Looking Glass World and we might as well just enjoy the images in the glass.

Domestic violence is again making politicians throw their arms (as opposed to their hats) in the air. Vague promises as to better funding. Talk of better education. Disquiet that somehow the Australian character lends itself to domestic violence.

It is a simple fact that domestic violence has always been with us. Men have always had a habit of beating up on those who are smaller and weaker. It seems to go directly against the image of manhood. But then men coming home drunk have never taken the time to contemplate their image of manhood.

I would like to put forward a couple of thoughts for consideration. We are constantly told 'Man is a social animal'. We-e-ll ye-e-es. Up to a point. But no other creature on the planet, above an insect, lives a social life as intimate and intense as a human being. And insects manage this intense proximity by living lives of such rigorous order that no human being outside of prison or boarding school would consent to exist in that fashion.

No male and female creature, not birds, not lions, not baboons, not elephants, live in the kind of proximity that a couple in an inner-city flat or a small suburban home experiences. Or if they do, it is only very briefly in the mating season. Yet we somehow expect that all human beings are designed for this intense intimacy and if they can't cope and blow up then the fault is entirely theirs.

Years ago most couples had long engagements. A year. Three years. Even seven years wasn't unusual. Young men were getting on in their careers so they would reach a point where they could afford to start a family. All kinds of things, wars, army service, working in remote places, living in single men's quarters, encouraged this thinking. It is sometimes said that young couples despite these long engagements married with little knowledge of sex. True. But they had a much better knowledge of their intended spouse's personality, habits, likes and dislikes, and faults. It is hard to hide an explosive temper for seven years. It is hard to pretend to a cheerful outgoing personality for seven years. It is

hard to claim an erroneous religious belief or family background or technical skill or consuming hobby for seven years.

I have just one message to young women planning to marry, to shack up, to stay in a relationship: if you have doubts, leave now. Don't kid yourself that you can change his drinking habits, his mates, his bad temper, his laziness, his dishonesty, his wild driving, his wandering eye. I remember saying to a young woman that if her boyfriend was always abusing her before they got married there was no way in the world marriage would make things better. Even if it means starting again with nothing your safety and peace of mind matter more.

In a way domestic violence seems to me less serious than child abuse. Adults, even despite the many difficulties and problems in leaving an abusive partner, can make that choice. A small child has no choices.

What I would like to do is for every high school, after a long day of schoolwork, to require every male and female student to stay behind and spend an hour listening to tapes of new-born babies crying non-stop. The teenagers have no choice but to sit and listen. If they can't take it, then re-think themselves as potential parents. Young people see cute pictures on nappy advertisements, they see their friends out with babies in prams, they see the outer accoutrements of babyhood, cute clothes, toys, cots, formula, disposable nappies, but they are never asked: how will you respond when your new baby won't stop crying?

A school in Philadelphia invited new mums to bring their babies into the classroom to show what changing a nappy involves, to talk about sleepless nights and crying babies. Teenage pregnancies went down.

Now, not having a baby is treated as a major disaster and huge amounts of money are put into overcoming fertility problems. But we also need to be honest and say that not everyone wants, or even perhaps should, become a parent. Before reliable contraception people became parents despite being ambivalent about children. Now there should be only one criteria for becoming a parent: a passionate desire to have a child and a willingness to take on a lifetime commitment.

ANOTHER DAY. ANOTHER PM. OR NOT.

Why does the media choose one story over another? It might be said they want us to respond to need, send donations, or respond to folly and send critical letters. But I doubt it. Then there are stories about ten car pile-ups in the USA. What is their criteria? It is easier to get pictures of a ten car pile-up in the US than in Turkestan. But that is not a good enough reason. I can pray for the injured but I doubt if that is the media's rationale. Perhaps they want us all to drive more safely? But I doubt if that was the reason for choosing that story over a dozen others.

And then, after half-a-dozen gloomy stories about death and mayhem, they say 'that is all the news' ... All? Still, it is time for sport which will cheer me up. After all, even a team with a ten game losing streak is still alive and kicking. And the weather is sure to be good news for someone. And then they finish with a cute story about a giant panda cub even though it comes with the reminder that giant panda numbers continue to decline and that those which remain are increasingly inbred. Still, someone in a back

room has made the choice that that is news ... and other equally or more important stories aren't.

I never noticed it when I was young but now stories about problems always come with the proviso that some money needs to be chucked at a particular problem. Probably it does. But once you start the chucking you need to keep on chucking. Problems have a way of generating a limitless appetite for funding. People have jobs dependent on more funding. People immediately set up offices, buy computers, create web-sites, head-hunt 'experts'. It is a self-generating business. You almost never hear anyone say that a problem is fixed and we can move on.

As I have grown older I have come to much greater sympathy with people who don't embrace change willingly. Change is constantly foisted on them. And they, understandably, often resent this.

I mentioned to someone that washrooms no longer simply have taps. Sometimes you have to press down, or lift up, or pull sideways, or simply hold your hands out in the touching hope that the remote control is working and water will appear. She laughed and said she had been caught in the airport in Singapore wondering how to get water out of the faucet.

Some people embrace emails. Others do it reluctantly to please, or perhaps appease, a child or grandchild ... and sometimes to discover that for the sake of an occasional message from same child or grandchild they have the constant worry of whether or not to open an attachment, the worry of losing something worthwhile as they delete wads of spam and nonsense and unwanted ads.

Now I am not on the internet, skype, email, but I see older people being pressured to sign up for packages which aren't what they want. My next door neighbour said she had been required to take a hundred gigabyte package despite pointing out that she was retired and ten gigabytes would be more than enough.

We are not discussing the vulnerabilities the new technologies are opening us up to. A prolonged period of dramatic sunspots and flares could play havoc with global communications and a couple of asteroids ploughing into a couple of communication satellites would see a lot of people left helpless in a world where many people define themselves by the number of hits on their blog sites.

Someone said to a bank teller who was directing people to the ATM machine: 'Don't you want to keep your job?' The young woman was taken aback. She had accepted the new technology as an unalloyed good and was startled to realize that it might have unintended consequences.

Those unintended consequences of course are out there in Third World countries. Pollution, degradation, children poisoned, toxic waste, conflict. But we live a safe and sanctioned life where our new technology is a gleaming good.

Despite Grey Power, or perhaps obliquely because of it, I feel that people aren't really listening to what older people want or don't want when it comes to technology. I was just listening to someone talking about the 'need' to get the elderly over their fear of going on-line. Has it not occurred to these bright young technocrats that many elderly people would still prefer to deal face-to-face with another human being rather than try to navigate through the minefield that many web-sites actually are? It is like those phone

things which first confuse you with endless buttons to press and then leave you on hold, blasting your ears with music, for twenty minutes.

Various people pointed out that most of Pauline Hanson's supporters were *white* Australians but far fewer people pointed out that her supporters were mostly *older* Australians. She had tapped into this sense of dissatisfaction, this feeling the rat race had rushed on by and left them gasping, that they didn't want things thrown away simply because they were old, that they still wanted to get something fixed rather than replaced, that they still felt there were traditions and ideas and customs that were worth keeping ... and I don't think she really knew what to do with it.

It is curious that it was always the young who were going to 'drop out', go somewhere else more technologically simple, opt out of the world the oldies had created, find a peaceful commune where you washed from an old drum and cooked over an open fire, and left behind the people who had become a Settled Fact and didn't appreciate your desire to leave modern technology behind. Now the young opt out with the help of technology, all those kids alone in their bedrooms with their FaceBook 'friends' in cyberspace. And people like myself find the idea of dropping out, opting out, going somewhere where no one will jump up and demand that I embrace the gadgets of the twenty-first century, a kind of relief.

I would like to think that the twenty-first century's mindset is more compassionate, more profound, even more interesting, than that of the last century. But when I hear people dismissed as 'rednecks', 'hicks', 'old farts', 'stick-in-the-muds' and other put-downs I am not so sure. Someone once pointed out that we can see that villagers in Third World countries deserve to achieve the kind of self-determination, autonomy, freedom to choose that they seek. But we are less willing to extend the same thing to country towns and remote settlements in Australia. The decisions they make, if given the freedom to make them, may be unwise ... but are we sure that our solutions, particularly our high-tech solutions, will really be better, more appropriate, wiser ...

Another day, another prime minister. I can only hope that he doesn't bring his fix-it ideas for Australia Post, poorer service, higher charges, to the Australian economy as a whole.

I may be a cynic but there is something underneath which is incurably optimistic. 'God's in his heaven' and though things aren't all right with his world, yet the world still spins, with or without us, as a beautiful gleaming blue sphere in space. God *is* in his Heaven. We might like to consider giving greater love, respect, and gratitude for his Earth.

THE END