

Mrs Mop Thinks

By

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... And Thinks

About This and That ...

Introduction

I began *Mrs Mop Thinks* before I came upon the Grumpy Old Men and Grumpy Old Women programs. But one aspect of them has since struck me. If you are prepared to be called Grumpy and Old you can get away with saying things which otherwise people might take you to task over. Now I don't mind being called either Grumpy or Old and I can see it as a way to present all those things you think while watching the news, hearing people rabbit on, or you read in the paper or overhear in buses—and you feel an overwhelming desire to jump up and say Oh now! Hold it right there!

If you are like me you say nothing, or perhaps a gentle little remonstrance, do you *really* think ... or perhaps a cautious letter to the paper ...

But the thing which so often strikes me as people go charging off into the distance on a particular hobby-horse, even one I have some sympathy with, is that left behind is so often not only their clouds of dust but their COMMON SENSE.

So as we face up to another election I will not grumble yet again that we still do not have fixed-term parliaments—not even as a pleasant and hopeful little cloud on the horizon—and I will instead ponder on some of the things which have come up recently and which may or may not be given a run by hopeful pollies seeking a particular voter button to press.

May-June-July 2016. And later.

She's Back Again

THAT SIGN: Did you notice all the fuss made because some person with wiggly fingers wrote NO MORE MOSQUES in a football stadium and the media took its cameras off the action to take pictures of it?

Some people said it was a free speech issue and some people said it was about racism. But no one seemed to engage with some of the questions which came to me.

- a) Why did they choose that venue and that moment and that message?
- b) Why did they think that particular audience would be particularly sympathetic?
- c) Did anyone in that sporting venue collude?

What if they had written NO MORE LIVE ANIMAL EXPORTS or FOOTY FANS WELCOME REFUGEES? Would we suddenly think it is quite all right to deface footie stadiums in the way that quite a lot of people did not mind if young men protested the Iraq war by scribbling on the Opera House roof?

And should we mind if footie stadiums get defaced when their management is doing such a good job plastering everywhere, even the pitch, with advertisements for all kinds of useless items, even dangerous things like alcohol? Soon the players will have to run up and down on car ads instead of nice green grass. (While remembering that green grass, in Australia, is quite often nearly as rare as hens' teeth and a whole lot nicer.) After all, said management did not voluntarily take down cigarette ads. They had to be required by law to take them down. And I don't think anyone now doubts that smoking can kill you.

What if they had put up NO MORE CHURCHES? Would there have been an outcry? Would it have been seen as racist? Would it even have got any air play? And as several people have pointed out trying to mix racism and religion is a tricky business. Many Muslims are white. Many Christians are black.

And I still don't know if they had a particular beef with a particular proposal or a particular council. This is a far more contentious issue. Councils tend to okay the developments which come with big money behind them—regardless of whether they are appropriate, sensitive, useful, blend in with existing buildings ... No. If you've got money, bud, you can put up your monstrosity and the neighbours will just have to lump it. Developments have been pushed through so as to make people move even when they don't want to. I remember the story of an old lady in her family home, crammed round with huge towers of new flats on three sides, so that like someone in Lappland she never got to see the sun. My brother's favourite was of a Council which built three concrete toilet blocks in one small beachside park—just to make sure you wouldn't have to run more than fifty metres when you needed to 'go'. And people who want to put in appeals to planning tribunals are told that if they lose they will have to pay up to \$50,000 in costs. It is hard to think of a quicker way to undermine democracy and build eyesores.

THAT GAP: A lot of people are being exercised by the possibility that people who visit doctors should pay more out of their own pockets. (You noticed the significance of OWN? Most of us would prefer to put our hands in other people's pockets and see what we can draw out.) On one side there are people saying the poor will be worse off and on the other side are people saying the government will be worse off—depending where the bubble stops in the spirit level. There seems to be a touching belief that there is a right proportion and a wrong proportion and where you place it depends on how sympathetic you want to be seen. To the pockets of the poor or to the problems of the budget. But surely it is wrong to suggest that there can be a one-size-fits-all proportion?

A chronically ill person needing constant expensive medication is in a vastly different category to people who go along to doctors because they've got a sniffle or a tummy upset or even because they are lonely and just want a bit of attention.

I remember someone telling me her companion on a roster had had to go to the doctor. When I asked what was the matter she said, "She had an itchy nose". Perhaps an itchy nose is a precursor to cancer, emergency operations, plastic surgery, expensive reconstruction—but most of us would simply dab a bit of calamine on it.

And there is nothing in the debate which encourages people to eat more sensibly, exercise, take precautions at the beach, don't dive off rocks into shallow water, burn rubber on city streets, keep dangerous dogs, or go fishing with a dinghy full of grog ... We have a system which discourages people from taking responsibility for their own health. Now things *do* happen which no amount of sense and care can predict or avoid. But when you turn up at the emergency room with a broken leg because an idiot on a skateboard has just slammed in to you and you find you have to wait behind queues of grossly overweight people with smokers' coughs you are entitled to feel a little cheated off.

In a way doctors have created the current mess. Sixty years ago most people only went to a doctor if they genuinely couldn't fix something. But doctors went out of their way to label people who didn't come to a GP for every little thing as being downright irresponsible. If you didn't come immediately who knows what sort of problems you might present with a year down the track. So people came in their droves. They got antibiotics for things that can't be fixed with antibiotics. They weren't sent away empty-handed. Everything got prescribed for. If it wasn't nirvana for doctors it was certainly nirvana for the drug companies. The other day I was wandering along shelves and being astonished by the sheer number of preparations for the common cold. And the odd thing was that many trumpeted 'Honey and Lemon'. Is it really too difficult to make yourself a hot lemon drink instead?

Doctors and pharmacists are scathing about placebo effects—but isn't this exactly what they are doing? Something you prepare at home can't be as good and as effective as something which your GP has prescribed and for which Medicare via the taxpayer has funded and the chemist has done up in a nice packet. In other words if it's free it can't do you any good ... and vice versa ...

THAT POLL: I just heard talk of a poll on whether primary school children should be taught about transgender issues. The poll apparently found differences along gender and age lines. What nobody bothered to say was that this was a very silly poll.

Somebody else pointed out that children are leaving our schools still unable to read and write fluently. Ah but! you may say—they do know what a transgender person is. Do they? In some schools as many as a third of the class have inadequate English. Do we really assume that they will understand and take home a clear understanding of transgender? And when their parents hear some garbled story about how girls can turn into boys and boys into girls how are all those same parents—some of whom also have inadequate English—going to respond?

It raises some very big questions.

Who is going to teach about transgender? A class teacher already struggling to get all the class through the curriculum and only with the time to hand out some sheets with the instruction to take them home and discuss it with their parents? An expert brought in with little idea on how to relate to a complex group of children of varying backgrounds, maturity, and understanding? A ten minute talk in assembly in which a number of kids think it is all rather a joke, some others have failed to understand just what is being presented, some more are not listening because they have a spelling test later in the day or are secretly looking at their emails on their smart phones?

Who is going to make sure all the children understand what is being taught? Are there going to be tests, questions, requirements that essays be written? And where children clearly haven't understood what is going on who will give them extra tuition to make sure they don't now go home and stew over the possibility that their own private self is in danger of being deconstructed? I remember a little boy who had heard a teacher give a not very good introduction to global warming and then worried himself sick for weeks before finally asking "Is the world really going to end soon?"

Who is going to make sure that the issues being presented in the classroom do not clash with parental teachings? Children caught between two authority figures, teachers and parents, are placed in an invidious position. It may be hard to avoid at times, but parents do have the primary job of creating their children's moral universe. They may not do a good job. They may not even see it as part of their duties. But it is a fundamental requirement of parenthood that you look after your child's physical, mental, and moral wellbeing. The tendency to shuffle more and more responsibility off on to schools—to make sure that children are fed, dressed, clean, awake—is deeply disturbing. Someone whose daughter is a high school teacher told me one day that one of the biggest problems her daughter now faces is children going to sleep in class.

Who is going to prioritize transgender over the many other issues different people and groups are clamouring to get in to schools. As soon as anyone sees schoolchildren as a captive audience I begin to doubt the worth of what they are proposing. There are a few non-curriculum issues which would seem to be worth teaching in primary schools such as Road Safety and Stranger Danger because they will potentially impact on all children. But each time someone wants to take children out of class for a talk on yet another issue I start to worry.

And I worry about children being targeted as potentially transgender. In a tiny fraction of cases this must be so. But I am not sure that children are best placed to know what they want to be. When I was young many girls wanted to be boys. Boys had more interesting lives, more opportunities, more attention. Who wouldn't want to be a boy? And from wanting something it isn't necessarily a very big jump to believing that deep down you really are an unrecognized boy. And little girls set out to emulate little boys.

There is a more serious aspect in there. I came across the information that children who had been sexually abused as youngsters could gradually convince themselves that if only they had been the opposite sex they would have been safe from molestation. And for some of these children this deep-seated belief could harden into the conviction that they *were* the other sex. Outwardly they might be one thing but inwardly they were the other. So if they could change their outward sex then they would be forever safe. In a way it is a version of 'blaming the victim'; children who are abused are often made to feel it was their own fault. Good counseling can help them to understand that they, their bodies, their gender, anything they said or did, was not to blame for adult abuse. But children in such situations are often met with denial, accusations of lying, or punishment—rather than good counseling and support.

I am sure there are very happy transgender people out there. But I remember going to lunch with a man who had 'become' a woman. She was stiff, awkward, anxious, and very clearly unhappy. I thought of saying 'do you have any regrets?' but didn't feel it was my business to do anything other than accept her as she was. But it is one of those things where there really is no going back. It isn't like a vasectomy where a bit of micro-surgery can get you going again. A friend was telling me about a survey in the US (where children as young as four are being treated as transgender) in which teenagers who had made the change were followed up years later. Some were deeply unhappy and regretful. They felt they had been pushed into something before they really had the maturity to understand the implications. But the really frightening thing was that they were slapped down when they attempted to speak out about their regrets ...

Now people have always wanted other people to be 'just like them'. It vindicates and supports. It underpins racism, sexism, it has seen deaf women deliberately create congenitally deaf children, it is a fact of life. But questions of gender are too fundamental and the consequences of wrong decisions too profound for anyone to push any barrow ...

Should schoolchildren have lectures on leukaemia, cerebral palsy, club feet, progeria, brittle bones, face blindness, aspergers, albinism? Should they be presented with every possible medical, social, racial, religious, or physical difference?

No.

All schools need to do is urge all children to treat one another with respect, kindness, and courtesy. Our children don't need to know everything about everything while they're still children.

THAT REFORM: Isn't it funny that every time someone wants to make changes to the tax system it is always presented as a 'reform'. It may be a sensible change. It may make some people better off and some worse off. But does that make it a reform? I'm not

surprised politicians prefer the word reform. It comes with the baggage, often unwarranted, that it will change things for the better.

Then there is 'upgrade'. Roads are always being upgraded to make them safer. What isn't said is that people will now drive faster so when they have accidents they will more likely be killed. No one ever thinks to bring the speed limits down on the roads needing 'upgrades'. People say, though I am not convinced, that people driving slowly cause accidents too. What they really mean is that slow drivers make other drivers get impatient and do silly things.

And then there is 'new improved'. I always avoided any product which said 'new improved recipe'. Sure as eggs my kids would complain and not want to eat it any more. And what does 'new improved' mean anyway? If it is a different recipe why does that make it an improvement over the old one? If it is different just say so. If they have taken out some of the sugar or salt just say 'with less salt' or 'with less sugar'.

And then there is 'development'. Now turning a piece of landfill or a degraded industrial site into something attractive does constitute something worth having. But I fail to see how turning an attractive piece of bushland with nesting birds and blue tongue lizards and butterflies and a bush mouse or two into ten houses and a lot of concrete round them constitutes a 'development'. Change, yes, and a change is sometimes as good as a holiday. But if we need to continue to lose bushland to more and more McMansions then I can only see this as a backward step. Either we need to bring populations down or we need to bring aspirations down—or both.

So does our taxation system need reform? Probably. The richer you get the more interest you get on your money. (Look at all those institutions which expect you to have over \$2,000, over \$5,000, over \$25,000 to get a real return on your savings.) The richer you get the more perks you can take advantage of. The richer you get the more you can access things like tax havens. Me, fronting up with a spare \$500 and saying I would like to open an account in the Cayman Islands would not be welcomed with open arms.

Ah but, Mrs Mop, you haven't allowed for bracket-creep. We are asked to feel very sympathetic towards people suffering from bracket creep, even to sob with pity. But this implies that bracket creepers are helpless victims of circumstance. Are they? And do they have no options but to beg the government for tax relief?

The first thing that comes to me is—why not give more to charity? Charities are crying out for help. By all means choose a tax-deductible charity. There are plenty to choose from.

The second thing that comes to me is—refuse that raise. Or ask if you can work a few hours less per week and spend more time with your family or doing voluntary work for some cause you are passionate about.

The third thing that comes to me is—take a lower paying position, either in the same company or elsewhere. Someone willing to work for a bit less may sound like those people who are about to swamp us, accepting lower wages and destroying our 'way of life' for ever—but many small businesses struggling to keep going will undoubtedly thank you sincerely.

And the fourth thing is—why not pay that little bit of extra tax? After all, you probably want good roads for your nice car to drive along, better education systems for your children, a hospital emergency department that can actually cope when you have

crashed that nice car on those better roads ... Would another \$400 to the government really break the bank?

I assume you are already paying tax not putting in an objection every year to say that you refuse to pay taxes that go to the military, or to polities' pay rises, or any of the other 101 things polities squander your hard-earned money on.

But then you can say to me: who are you to say all this—when you are never conceivably going to have to face bracket creep? Why not crawl back into your cave and shut up—instead of lecturing us hard-working useful people keeping lights on in government buildings when they should be turned off and polities in big cars when they should be taking the bus and nice food in their parliament dining rooms when they should be bringing a cut lunch to work. You are not part of the real world ...

THAT HOUSE: The other day I was listening to people saying How on earth could a polity not know he owned a house worth several million dollars? I said, just out of a desire to play devil's advocate, that he might leave all his money issues to his financial planner and might not even know exactly what he owns at any one particular time.

I was immediately howled down. Of course he knew! And of course for most of us it would be hard not to know. We don't have spare real estate washing round in our lives. But it is an interesting question: do we all know exactly how every penny we own is invested. Are we certain it is not in armaments, in tobacco, in alcohol, in dodgy drugs and even dodgier real estate? When you put your money into a term deposit, an AMP fund, invest it with a mortgage broker or simply ask a financial whiz to do the best he, she or they can—do we really know how every penny is being invested? Even if we put it in an 'ethical account' we know that they are only interpreting ethics very narrowly. They won't put it into a clearly marked tobacco company but will they disentangle all the investments of the big tobacco companies? After all, we know tobacco companies have hugely diversified portfolios. They own food and clothing companies. They invest in services. They buy shares in pharmaceutical companies and travel businesses and transport conglomerates. Who is really going to tease out the intricacies? And more so given that big portfolios change by the day, even the hour. And that food company you just bought shares in is now going to close down their Australian factory and move to Asia. Should you immediately divest, knowing that the workers will have fewer protections, the premises will be less closely inspected, the raw materials may have been produced under inhumane conditions and the country has an appalling human rights record?

But, I can hear you saying, polities even if they don't know how their superannuation is invested, should at least know how many houses they own. Is it the number of properties or is it the more basic issue of conflict of interest? How can you vote completely impartially on questions about negative gearing, to reduce or remove, while you are benefiting?

Is it an even more basic issue? Can any politician be truly impartial?

Isn't that the whole point of politics? That people take up passionate positions, form parties and policies round those positions, and urge you to vote for them by touting their particular position? Impartiality is not only impossible but completely unwanted.

Rather than homing in on one house in suburban Melbourne would it not be fairer to require all politicians to bare their economic selves? If every one who gets elected knew it would be required of them to list their properties, their savings, their investments, their trust funds, their offshore accounts—then we would either see a massive increase in politicians putting things into the names of family members—or some members pulling up some very wrinkled socks.

THAT CRITIQUE: Projects and ‘development’ in Aboriginal communities is under the spotlight again. The group which wrote *Binan Goonj – Bridging Cultures in Aboriginal Health* was just one of many groups to remind us, “A large percentage of funds spent on ‘Aboriginal programs’ are frequently expended on consultative fees and salaries for European experts, supervisors and administrators. Sometimes such schemes fail and there’s a general outcry about the lack of Aboriginal responsibility and commitment, the waste of thousands of dollars of the tax payer’s money. This white ‘back-lash’, as it is often referred to, would be better directed towards the European superstructure which is manipulating the funds.” I have heard it said that around a third of the money earmarked for Aboriginal communities never gets out of Canberra. The percentage may vary but the problem remains.

But the latest program was looking at the way several remote Aboriginal communities have been conned. Conned. Cheated. Scammed. Signed up to inappropriate plans. I am not really surprised. Such communities are between a rock and a hard place. If they sign up for European-style buildings, lay-outs and plans they almost invariably have to employ outsiders who aren’t going to live in the buildings or the community and are there solely for the money. If they say no they’d like to maintain traditional life, with movement from place to place and just building light shelters along the way and avoiding European-style stoves and toilets they are criticized as not being sophisticated, civilized, or not doing the best thing by their children.

Seeing dreary little demountables and prefabs just dumped in the desert without power or water is to be reminded that they’ve been given the worst of all worlds.

Take toilets for instance. Now anything that requires a reliable water supply is the worst option possible in the middle of a semi-desert community and the people pressing septic systems on such communities need their heads read. The old bush dunny, just a deep pit with a simple wooden shelter built over it was quick and easy to create and when it was full a fruit tree planted next to it flourished with all that lovely moist semi-compost to poke its roots in to. There were drawbacks. Smell and flies. But dunnies well away from the house weren’t a problem. And the drier the air the less the smell. Flies of course were keen and I don’t think the dung beetles have reached Central Australia. But the old practice of putting ashes in from the stove or the copper was a good preventative.

But if people feel they deserve better than this then why not the increasingly sophisticated composting toilets on the market? Every time I see pictures of broken-down or blocked septic systems I feel like jumping up and down and screaming.

Take house designs for instance. We all know that most Aboriginal houses in remote communities are not there for mum, dad, and two kiddies. They need to be infinitely flexible to allow for visiting relatives and extended families. So why do none of the designs reflect this? Simple bedrooms built round a square for outdoor living and

socializing, a communal laundry, an ablution block with its own tanks and the water being reticulated to a community garden; a room set aside as a shop, sharing, barter, repair, a general attempt to make sure things are re-used and re-cycled and cared for as needed ...

Villages in India are increasingly sophisticated in their uses of alternative energy and recycling but here we are wedded to an outmoded European model which simply doesn't work and leaves small remote Aboriginal communities short-changed at every turn ...

THAT ISSUE: Refugees, or more correctly, asylum seekers were run for all they were worth in previous elections but this time around they have hardly got a mention. Does this mean there are fewer potential refugees around to bother our pollies? Up to a point, yes. Things are improving, slowly, in Sri Lanka and Burma. Afghanistan is still an awful mess but getting to Australia from a land-locked country hasn't got any easier.

But the real problem is that you can't get a discussion going if the major parties have almost identical policies. They have both signed up to the 'turn-back' refrain and are singing from the same song book.

And it has become even more complicated by the large amounts of money we are giving poor governments and communities in Nauru and PNG. There isn't much desire in PNG to keep Manus Island open but there is the real issue that the Nauru Government is increasingly dependent on keeping an asylum seeker camp on its soil. It has dug out most of its phosphate and big foreign companies have fished its waters, probably to near depletion. Regardless of what anyone in Canberra thinks I suspect the Nauruans regarded the asylum seekers as a blessing and would be happy to see more of them—provided, of course, that the asylum seekers behave reasonably well and the Australian Government, whatever its hue, keeps plonking nice bundles of lolly in its government coffers.

But there are two fundamental problems with what is euphemistically called 'off-shore processing', apart from the problem that a lot of processing doesn't seem to be getting done.

1. We can't keep an adequate eye on what is being done to asylum seekers in our name. Genuine monitoring, openness, transparency, and communication is inevitably problematic.

2. And it is immensely expensive. The cost of sending asylum seekers to a little dot in the Pacific, along with detention staff, bureaucrats, health officials, politicians, and other interested persons is horrendous. I have heard a figure of \$1 million per refugee. Now for that you could keep nearly 40 Old Age Pensioners. Even if you spend up to \$20,000 on 'processing' (and it is hard to see why 'processing' should be that expensive except in those cases where there is real confusion over someone's identity and home country and the story they are telling (and I would suggest that senior staff be well-trained in hypnotism; it would soon weed out the non-genuine asylum seekers) it should be possible to keep people at vastly lesser expense without compromising their safety, well-being and general health. If perhaps one-in-ten is found not to be a genuine refugee and needs to be returned home it would be hard to find an ordinary commercial flight leaving Australia without empty seats ...

This may be an over-simplification but I cannot help thinking we have turned something relatively straightforward into something much more complex and problematic.

And while I am on the subject: By all means express sympathy for people who have left their own country in the hope of finding safety elsewhere but, please, do not treat those asylum seekers like children or idiots, helplessly carried along on a tide, the ultimate in victims. These are adults, presumably reasonably intelligent, who have made decisions every step of the way. How many of their family to take, how many to leave, whether to bring wives, children, parents, in-laws, wider family, or to leave some at home. How and when and by what means to leave. Whether to pay people offering a place on a boat or stay in a camp or cross the nearest border and seek asylum. How to realize money, goods, jewelry, property, or to borrow to get the money to leave. What route to take. What country to head for. What aspirations to bring. Is safety enough or will 'a better life' be your lodestar? And if your initial plans do not look like being successful are you prepared to compromise or settle for something less than 'the good life' in a wealthy Western country?

It doesn't get mentioned but there is an element of class in the discussion. The very poor, the illiterate, peasants, labourers, herders, the landless, desperate women with babies and a few cooking pots, cross borders in Africa in search of safe havens, but those who get on boats, often paying more money than I have in my bank a/c, tend to be better educated, more likely to have a profession, more likely to come from a family where most of the relatives aren't landless peasants. We should provide sympathy and succour to people persecuted because of their religion or their ethnicity or their politics, but that is not the same as pretending they haven't made choices and decisions and plans ...

And perhaps the more fundamental: when asylum seekers begin making plans is it all about 'me-as-asylum-seeker' or do other aspects get considered carefully. When I hear a man say he has left his wife behind, or his elderly parents, or some of his six children—my first thought is, not how dangerous a voyage has he taken but are those vulnerable others safe?

The other day I saw a large sign saying 'WHAT IS A REFUGEE?' I was puzzled. I thought there were clear guidelines setting out what is a refugee. But those guidelines are getting fudged, it seems. And as refugee numbers balloon—up from around 20 million to closer to 60 million, and nearly all, you may have noticed, from around 7 countries—I would like to mention a problem which never gets any air play. Certainly we should give priority to humanitarian considerations but refugees, asylum seekers, displaced people, are very bad for the environment.

You will have seen pictures of large camps with every tree, log, branch, twig, removed for cooking fires. You will have seen a few starving animals chewing up the last few blades of grass. When such camps do get closed they leave behind eroded moonscapes which take years even decades to recover.

You may have wondered who cleans up sites contaminated with cholera, dysentery, influenza, measles, mumps, TB, anthrax, and other nasties. Who decontaminates water and soil? The answer usually is—nobody. Places are left to wreak slow havoc on the unsuspecting.

You may have heard someone say that refugees fuel population growth and thought 'that can't be right'. Intuition would seem to suggest that the reasons for refugees are reasons for population decline. But the very powerful human desire to be surrounded by your own kin promotes population growth. People in desperate situations in desperate camps go on having children. The reasons are many. They may be sexually abused. There is nothing to stop refugees from being sexual predators. They are still ordinary human beings. People may fill long hours of boredom with more babies. They may have access to sex but not to contraception. They may hope that children born on foreign soil will make it easier for them to stay and claim asylum. And the spaces they leave behind, empty homes and farms, are an inducement to others to move in and vigorously procreate

THAT SEVERANCE: So the UK goes to the polls today to decide if they will stay in or out. I noticed that many commentators said the murder of Jo Cox would help the stay in campaign. But regardless of what her killer's mental state was like, and regardless of what speech had inflamed his views, her death should not influence how anyone votes. Because everyone has to live with the decision.

Noel Coward once said he was in favour of Britain joining the Common Market because Lord Beaverbrook was against it. People *are* swayed by other people's opinions. We shouldn't be but we are.

It is a curious thing but people only seem to be given the YES and NO cases, not a carefully summing up of the pros and cons on both sides.

And I noticed that the people who wanted to leave repeatedly drew attention to overcrowding in Britain. Now, this is true. Every year buildings, roads, car parks, tunnels, bridges, ports, parks and sporting fields creep out over the diminishing countryside. Every year someone draws attention to the struggle of the nation's wildlife to survive. Every year the national parks grow more crowded, the beauty spots more congested, the woodlands smaller, the plight of migratory birds more acute ... Britain struggled to feed itself with far less people in WW2. It has probably gone beyond the possibility of real food self-sufficiency now. Does this matter? Not if you are an incurable optimist.

The Stay people dwelt on the possible economic repercussions. A dropping pound. A loss of exports and jobs. An unstable stock market. It was economics, jobs, production, exports, which seemed to tip the Scots into staying in the UK. People may have been influenced by the nebulous things once. Culture. Language. Their own parliament and king. Their own distinctive way of life. William Wallace and his cohorts could provoke passionate loyalty to such things centuries ago. But then people eight centuries ago didn't have a lot in their hip-pockets to influence their thinking. They mostly didn't even have hip-pockets. I suspect that David Cameron's appeal to financial stability and prosperity may swing the vote.

But I don't think Australia should be entering the debate. We don't belong to an economic or political union. We even tow asylum seekers back to where they come from. We enjoy our independence. We even trumpet the sanctity of our borders and repeatedly tell the world we will 'decide who comes here'. Who are we to lecture?

And then there are countries like Switzerland. They seem to be able to muddle along without being in the EU. Perhaps they are missing some benefits. Perhaps they are

missing some troubles. They don't seem to be agonizing over it. But I can see how fragile the EU is. It expanded very slowly and cautiously. Then it suddenly exploded. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry (replace these with suitable ethnic names) was suddenly lining up. The EU has struggled to support and bail out its weakest members. So what will happen if the strongest leave? Will the remnants implode? Or will they do what they have always needed to do? Stop going cap-in-hand to Brussels and really get their own houses in order.

THAT HEAT: I thought climate change would at least get a decent airing in the campaign but it seems not. Probably because neither Lab nor Lib has anything worth crowing about. The ALP did bring in its timid little carbon tax (which I fully supported and would have liked to have seen widened) but Shorten wanted it gone as much as Abbott did ... so Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee are struggling yet again to differentiate their policies. And yet during this campaign we have heard tourists saying they won't bother to come to see a bleached Great Barrier Reef and the area will potentially lose tens of millions of dollars in tourism revenue.

It seems to be a matter of gently shrugging and saying So Be It ...

I am never sure when people toss around 'billion' what exactly they mean. Do they have a thousand-million or a million-million in mind? Does a billionaire have a thousand million dollars or a million million? Either way they are very rich and should be ashamed of themselves. Does the world have seven thousand million people or seven million million people? Either way it is far too many for one small planet to be carrying. Perhaps it wouldn't matter if none of those people had aspirations. But in fact we all do.

Once upon a time children didn't aspire to a bed, then they aspired to have their own bed, not one shared with a sibling, then they aspired to a room of their own, then they aspired to an en suite, then they wanted rooms that looked like a cross between a toyshop and an interior decoration catalogue ... and so it goes.

And then we turn around and say in rather an aggrieved voice: But I don't want much! How much is much? If seven thousand million elephants wanted what we all want we would throw up our hands in horror. But no elephant yet born has aspired to a car, a four bedroom home, and a plasma TV. In fact we would probably throw up our hands in horror at the very idea of seven thousand million elephants wanting to share this planet.

But behind all the records for hot summers, behind all the business as usual encouragements to us to WANT, WANT, WANT is that figure of constantly expanding populations. And yet, if anyone talks about bringing populations down, people throw up their hands and say that is racist. Why is it racist? Every nation should be required to put in place a sensible program to gradually reduce its population. Say a one per cent reduction every ten years. That probably won't be enough to save this poor little planet but once people start thinking seriously about reducing rather than growing populations a higher percentage should become easier to achieve.

Why do we want a constantly expanding population?

There seem to be two reasons on offer. Apart from the fact that babies are cute.

Firstly, so that they can consume. Why do we want more people to be consuming when the ones we've got are doing a pretty good job of consuming the planet to death,

using up non-renewable resources, sending species to extinction, and leaving horrible toxic waste problems for the next generation to deal with? Are we really in *that* much thrall to the advertisers and retailers? And will they find us a new planet when this one becomes uninhabitable?

Secondly, so there will be enough young people to pay taxes and care for us when we get old. But even people like me who have never taken courses in Logic can see that this argument is flawed. It places us on an ever-expanding treadmill—until finally everything implodes and old people along with taxpayers die from heat exhaustion.

It is also flawed in other ways. Just a few:

Personal income tax on wages and salaries is not the major contributor to our coffers. The GST, along with company tax and a whole raft of other taxes allow governments to throw millions at problems (though without necessarily fixing the problems). We can put up the GST. I don't object so long as it is not expanded to basics such as fresh fruit and milk.

Not every elderly person is a basket case needing full-time carers. We see healthy mobile people sitting in nursing homes while staff run around with trays. Are we really saying none of those elderly people could do anything in a kitchen, sweep the porch and paths, or run around with a duster, let alone do some weeding and pruning in a garden? Why are we treating the elderly as a mob of incapables, imbeciles, and basket cases? And if we are going to live longer is it right and proper that we should work for 40 years and be waited on hand and foot for another 40 years?

And why can our elderly only be looked after by young Aussies? We don't object to young people from overseas picking our fruit and killing our meat. Why shouldn't there be a global movement of young people involved in aged care just as there is a global movement of young people willing to work on organic farms?

THAT MANTRA: Jobs-and-growth-jobs-and-growth-jobs-and-growth. It lulls us into acquiescence. If asked we can only mumble jobs-and-growth—well of course we want jobs-and-growth—who wouldn't? But do we actually want jobs and growth? Remember how it was claimed that automation would give us endless leisure, happy leisure in sunny places, and now that we've got the automation we are demanding more jobs.

Every time we step out of the house something else seems to be automated. Getting our groceries, our money, our airline tickets, our visas, our you-name-it. Soon we will get on automated buses and send our kids to automated schools. Of course we will still require a few computer-savvy people to keep this automated world running but there won't be jobs for the hoi-polloi. I do my bit to keep jobs. I go to humans on check-outs and humans as bank tellers but the pressure to go to machines continues to grow. I remember a friend being told by a teller to go to an ATM and responding 'But don't you want to keep your job?' The teller was rather taken aback.

They, that ubiquitous 'they', keep telling us the service sector will provide jobs. Will it? It only takes a little financial downturn for people to patronize fewer coffee shops, fitness centres, florists, personal trainers, gift shops, tourism ventures, adult education classes, theatres ... Never mind. We are all, so we are told, spending more at the doctor, the chemist, the naturopath, the plastic surgeon ... and so far no one has found

a way to automate them. Though I must admit they are trying. But governments can't use health as a selling point. They can't say Spend more on Your Health and Less on Your Coffee. Think of the jobs it will create! Because the public though willing to spend hundreds of dollars on hamburgers and cigarettes is not willing to put those hundreds instead towards health. It is a curious fact of life and so far no government has put a timid toe into this pool of contradictions.

Governments are in a curious position. They are expected to provide for the people without jobs. (Hence the desire to get people INTO jobs.) But they are also, increasingly, expected to create the jobs, or create the means by which other people will create the jobs. Or tinker with the tax system in the touching belief that companies will go for bigger workforces rather than bigger profits. But governments though they can tinker with the system to encourage people to have more or less children (such as with baby bonuses or penalties on big families), they can expand or decrease migrant levels and refugee intakes, fundamentally have no ready means by which numbers of people available can be married to the numbers of jobs available.

Now I think governments do have a responsibility to pay for education if they are going to force parents to send their children to school. But do they have a responsibility to make sure your child is fed, clothed, shod, sent to bed at a reasonable hour, protected from bad language ... and do they have a responsibility to see that your children find work?

A century ago that was a parental responsibility. Parents took children into the family business, they found masters to take their children on as apprentices, they gave their children pencils or matches to sell on the streets, they looked for a suitable household wanting a kitchen maid or a cook, they indentured their sons to ships' captains, they took their children to hiring fairs ... they didn't always do it very well but they did see themselves as having an obligation to get their children 'settled' into a trade or a position. Now we constantly clamour for the government to do more. The irony was that when the government ran the Commonwealth Employment Service it had many hardworking and dedicated people who genuinely did try to get every young job-seeker into a job.

Now we have a dog's breakfast and when huge numbers of young people can't find work we blame them for not trying, for not being willing to travel, for not being prepared to tackle anything.

But do parents still have a responsibility to help find their children jobs? They have made the decision to have those children. At what point does their responsibility cease and the government's take over? Parents do have a responsibility to see that their children have the means to get a job, by being as healthy, clean, tidy and educated as possible, but does their responsibility go further? The government has said that when young people can't find jobs that their parents (or other kind friends or relatives) have a responsibility to care for them for six months until they become eligible for an allowance. (Or alternatively they can live on air, or live on the streets being a nuisance and dealing drugs ...) But six months of sitting at home doesn't seem the best way to use the energy and aspirations of a young person. Surely a much more integrated system would make sense rather than the current ad hoc approach where kids go to the occasional jobs expo,

they, by law, put in for dozens of jobs for which they are not suitable or qualified, where they turn up in droves and drive small businesses mad ... Surely we can do better?

And we'd better do better. Because the problem is only going to grow. Yes, governments have chucked buckets of money at car makers making cars buyers don't want, yes, governments are planning to chuck buckets of money at inefficient steel-makers for the sake of keeping people off the streets and off the government payroll, though it is debatable whether it is better to give a business government money to pay people or pay them directly and set them to picking up litter ...

The question of steel is a curious one. The reason given is that Australia needs to be able to produce its own steel. Does it? I assume the pollies are thinking of World War Three and that we will need steel.

But I found myself wondering how much steel we are now using. Aluminium, fiberglass, chrome, plastic, all sorts of things seem to be taking over from steel. Is the reason the Whyalla plant is going broke because of internal inefficiencies or because the demand for steel has gone down? If the former the problem is probably fixable—although it is debatable whether taxpayers should fix badly-run businesses. If the latter, then chucking more money at the problem isn't really going to fix anything.

The other day I went to get a tin of asparagus but all the tins on the supermarket shelf came from either China or Peru. I decided I could live without asparagus. But what has happened to Australian asparagus? We used to grow lots of it. And why shouldn't it be able to compete. It isn't like milk. We buy asparagus as a treat not as a basic like bread. Most people don't object to paying more for a tin of asparagus than for a loaf of bread and it is still cheaper than chocolate, cigarettes, or a coffee in a nice coffee shop. But asparagus isn't going to win World War Three for us so we will undoubtedly chuck buckets of money at Whyalla and I will continue to buy Australian produced things for my sandwiches like beetroot or creamed corn.

And growth? What exactly do the Turnbull-Shorten duo mean by 'growth'? Words like 'a strong economy' are tossed around. But I still don't know what they mean. It is of course eminently possible that the pollies themselves don't know what they mean either.

THAT PLEBISCITE: Now we are being told that a plebiscite on same-sex marriage would not be binding. Hardly seems worth the effort, does it? I am inclined to think that if the Federal Government would really get behind Civil Unions and then say, Look we've had Civil Unions for ten years (or whatever) and it hasn't destroyed the fabric of society or ushered in Armageddon then people would simply say, Then why not take the next step and allow Same Sex Marriage? But people are afraid that all sorts of other, unspecified, things will creep in under the banner of Marriage Equality. They are probably right to be worried. How can we say to the man who turns up here with his 12-year-old bride, after a perfectly legal marriage somewhere else, and says why is Australia discriminating against him when we supposedly believe in Marriage Equality. And what of the Muslim man with three wives. What of the bigamist who feels that marriage No 2 should be equal with marriage No 1. And what of the current restrictions on who you can marry. Will we be told that that is just an old throwback to religious ideas about

consanguinity? And what of the parents trying to protect a child too mentally impaired to understand consent or marriage? Will their authority, their care, their rights be circumvented in the name of Marriage Equality?

So that is my answer to the polities of all colours and none:

I can support Same Sex Marriage.

I cannot support Marriage Equality.

And who is discussing Divorce Equality? To watch news stories with young same-sex couples kissing you would never believe that *their* relationships might break down and end in acrimony or violence or need to be sorted out by over-stretched Family Courts. Lots of questions come to me.

Can a same sex couple commit bigamy?

If two men want to marry does it matter that they are half-brothers?

Do we need better control of two men making arrangements to get babies?

And does the biological mother have any say when their relationship ends?

I have heard people say they want Marriage rather than Union so they can access their partners' Super. But surely those sorts of financial arrangements should not be predicated on a commitment to love and to cherish 'as long as we both shall live'? After all anyone can make a will and leave their Super and their Mortgage to anyone they choose. And maybe all relationships would be the healthier for having all financial considerations removed.

THAT CRIME: When the shooting happened in Orlando it was immediately referred to as a hate crime. Pardon me but aren't all shootings of strangers hate crimes? When someone opened fire in a schoolyard was it not done out of hate of children? When someone entered a movie theatre and opened fire wasn't that an explosion of hate?

Can we really say Martin Bryant stalked and killed people out of love—or even out of indifference? It is probably true that most such people have a mental kink. It may be obsession or paranoia or anger or inferiority, it may be a split personality or psychopathy or multiple selves or schizophrenia or any one of a dozen other labels. But it still comes back to hate. At a precise moment someone hated someone else.

And people who try to say it was love gone wrong, those men who are jealous or possessive, and react by shooting their partner—isn't that hate? In my book it is. They not only hate the partner leaving, they hate themselves. Love is a nurturing creative emotion. It doesn't deal in blood and horror and misery. People who try to pretend otherwise are kidding themselves, refusing to face up to the destructive feelings they are carrying around, refusing to say 'I hate—'

And there are several problems with 'terror'. It seems only to be an act of terror if there is a particular religious or political motive. But are we really saying the children at Sandy Hook were less terrified than the children caught up in that massacre in Norway or in the shooting at the Charlie Hebdo office? Wouldn't it be better to ditch this label and just make sure all mass murderers, no matter what their motives, are safely off the streets for life?

Night clubs are particularly vulnerable places. There have been horrific fires and stampedes at night clubs around the world. And almost invariably when an investigation is done it is found that either there were few or no exits apart from the front door or that those exits were locked or blocked or people simply couldn't find them because they weren't marked.

I remember going to visit a friend who worked at a Kings Cross night club many years ago, during the day, and discovering that the place that looked glamorous, exciting, mysterious, at night with its darkness and flashing lights was a very different place during the day. It was dirty, shabby, old, probably structurally unsound, and with a maze of corridors and small rooms behind the main area that smelled of bad drains. It rather put me off night clubs.

And that is a fundamental problem with night clubs. So often they have this careless fly-by-night aspect to them, they are in old premises converted from other purposes. They are accidents waiting to happen. Was the Orlando night club similarly short on clearly-marked exits and did people not realize what was happening in the darkness with the confusion of strobe lighting and over-crowding? Or not realize until it was too late?

The shooter was said to have gone there regularly. Did he go there to dance, to drink, to pick up, or did he see it as the ideal place to kill a lot of people in a short time? And if older wiser heads had said, 'This place is an accident waiting to happen', would its young patrons have seen that as old fossils trying to diminish their fun?

But the interesting thing about the general Australian response was that a lot of people patted themselves on the back and said, Australia has sensible gun laws, we're not idiots like those Americans with what sounds like a gun in every house, and two for the pot.

Yes, Australia does have reasonable gun laws but they are by no means so good that people don't shoot themselves or others. There is still a feeling that there is nothing wrong with aspiring to have a gun—so long as it isn't a semi-automatic. This isn't the same thing as creating a gun-free culture, nor is it the same thing as creating a culture of peace and dialogue and negotiation.

Orlando or Sandy Hook or Columbine or any of the other tragedies could still happen here. We shouldn't become complacent.

THAT POLICY: I notice most people say they are influenced by the policies put forward by the different parties, for or against, but I am not one of this crowd. Because—sure as eggs—if you like a party's policy and feel it is a good enough reason to vote for their candidate—that will be the first policy they ditch as soon as they get into government. They didn't realize how difficult its implementation would be, it doesn't seem to have sufficient support in the community, they didn't realize just how empty the kitty is, weasel excuses—but out the policy goes.

So I vote for people. I carefully consider the candidates. What they have done. What their affiliations are. Anything I have ever heard about them. My thinking is simple. A sensible decent honest person with a good track record of work in the

community is likely to make a sensible decent honest polly who will work to get the political system to help the people in his or her electorate. It doesn't always work. People can be seduced by the trappings of power, the chance to do deals, to hold a balance-of-power, to get too big for their shoes. But it has stood me quite well over the years. I plan to go on as I've been going on ...

Years ago I saw a church running a check list for aspiring pollys. I thought it was a sensible idea. And one of the things they urged every candidate to look at was: Is there anything in your background, your private life, your business dealings, which will not withstand the close scrutiny an elected polly receives? A half-forgotten investment deal that did not meet the highest standards of integrity might be an old ho-hum to you, after all there were no apparent repercussions when you were Joe Blow, but it will be fresh news to the media and the electorate when you suddenly become a new Senator ... and the standards expected by the community of their elected representatives have risen over the years. What was dismissed as a 'domestic' twenty years ago will now have your female constituents (and some of the male ones) frothing at the mouth. Do your stocktake before you put your hand up ...

POSTSCRIPT: My prophecy regarding Britain and the EU turned out to be a bit off. The various commentators chewing on the result with various shapes and sizes of teeth have mostly looked at it from an economic perspective (and the restiveness in other EU countries—which seems to suggest that the EU either hasn't met a lot of people's needs and hopes or hasn't been very good at getting its message across) but I was interested to hear that both Scotland and Northern Ireland preferred to stay in the EU. So how will this play out? Will Northern Ireland leave Britain and join with the republic and both of them stay in the EU? And as gaining its independence and then applying as an independent nation would be a long road for Northern Ireland—how much easier to simply rejoin the country that was broken asunder in the 1920s and Northern Ireland as part of the republic would automatically remain in the EU. How strange that it may be a vote in England that re-unites Ireland rather than generations of conflict and protest ...

A friend in the UK, after the vote, said she thought it was young people and the big end of town which wanted to stay in. That leaves a lot of people between those extremes. But just before I put the issue behind me (if it was ever indeed fully before me) I came across a letter written many years ago to one of the major UK dailies when Britain was hoping to join. The well-known writer made the point that joining would make it far harder for the UK to come up with innovative, even radical, ideas to address its particular problems. You can't try something truly new if you have to pass it through a bureaucracy in Brussels and translation into fifteen languages ...

And of course we now have an election result right here.
Same old ... same old ... ?

Mrs MOP
Thinks
Back

*Although not very Far Back., not to
the point of Cave People presenting
their Views...*

HIGH CLASS LOW CLASS

Have you ever noticed how the people, mostly women, who write the Happy Hooker I Was a High Class Call Girl type of books always emphasize that they were classy and their clients, presumably, were classy? No one writes I Was a Low Class Call Girl. Is this because there is no market for such revelations? Is this because there is no publisher willing to take it on? Is this because Low Class girls are assumed to be illiterate?

Or is it because there is a real if undefined push to present prostitution as a wonderful liberating money-making way of life and every book which revels in sumptuous hotel suites, rich clients, travel, beautiful clothes, the freedom to accept or knock back 'jobs' insidiously strengthens this view of women completely in control of their lives and liberated from the 9 to 5 drudgery of office or shop work? And the drudgery of having to consider narky moral issues like adultery?

When I came to think back on this I could see that there was a big gap between the sort of big-city prostitution presented in a book like *The Prince and the Premier* by David Hickie and the sort of unorganized way of doing things that prevailed in country towns and outback communities where it just did the rounds that some one was 'available' or 'easy'.

When the Americans flooded into Sydney on R and R leave during the Vietnam War girls too, professional girls, unprofessional girls, curious girls, hopeful girls, flooded into Sydney. Some wanted to make money, some wanted to meet what they thought would be exotic and glamorous men, some no doubt hoped to meet the love of their life and eventually go to that big emporium called the US of A. I am sure most of the girls were not hard-boiled and hard-hearted. But I suspect the professional girls did best out of the influx simply because they were driven by more than hope or curiosity.

One brief meeting remains with me. I forget how I met him. But he was a young American, overweight, with lank black hair and a lost air about him. The thing which struck me then and stays with me nearly fifty years later was the sense of profound misery he projected. I was sorry I couldn't offer to sleep with him as a) he didn't attract me and b) I had to work early the next morning. Now with the wisdom of hindsight I can see that he probably desperately needed to unburden himself about something terrible he had seen or done or shared in. Perhaps he would not have felt able to talk about it with a sympathetic stranger. But I can see very clearly that sex is a diversion not a solution to the kind of profound misery which was eating him up. Was he one of the many who went home and committed suicide? I do not know his fate.

And I was too young and shy to know how to sympathetically encourage him to talk about whatever was destroying his peace of mind and ability to function normally. At twenty it is easy to believe that sex is the answer to a lot of things. As a Grumpy Old Woman I can see that it isn't an answer to very much. It is like clothes. It can make you happier or sadder, more loved, more cherished—or it can make you frightened or

miserable. It can be painful, boring, used or abused. It can help you to walk out radiantly on to the water.

Well, perhaps few clothes can do that ...

Since those days there has been an increasing sexualization of our society, of most societies, and the accompanying belief that more sex, starting younger and going on longer, more openly talked about and more likely to include bizarre manifestations and bizarre positions will be the universal panacea humankind has long been looking for. Instead of a Fountain of Youth to be sought there would be a Fountain of Sex. Of course youth does still come into it. No one minds if ugly old hags miss out on sex.

So the irony is that a world supposedly happily saturated with sex is such a miserable unsatisfied discontented place, popping Prozac or alcohol, ice or ecstasy, and we are constantly told that mental illness is so prevalent that we face a crisis situation.

The other irony in there so many people seem to have missed is that those 'ugly old hags' without sex lives are more likely to be living positive and satisfying lives. Not happy at every minute of the day, no, especially if they have arthritis in their hips and hearing aids that annoy them with unwanted noise. But getting a lot out of life. As the key to this degree of content is obviously not sex we have to look elsewhere and I think a prime aspect is that they are almost invariably doing things to help others. In there too are the things they have always wanted to do but for many years didn't have the time, the money, or the opportunities to do.

Yet, insidiously, we are being drawn along by the sex industry to believe that sex, more of it, more readily and easily available, with fewer strings, is essential to the nation's physical and mental health, its economy, its social structures. Governments and Councils tinker round the edges: will they allow brothels, will they be allowed in certain areas (such as next to primary schools), should penalties for trafficking be increased, should there be restrictions on advertising, should more resources be put in to tracking down on-line purveyors and purchasers of child sexual abuse images, but we are not presenting the more fundamental issue. Ideally churches should be doing this but when they present it as an affront to the moral order and an undermining of happy family life many people simply tune them out.

I think we need to ask and ask and ask why people are seeking out anonymous, quick, uncommitted transactions in the belief that these will make them happy and satisfied.

Clearly fear of any kind of commitment plays a part. A fast-paced nomadic life-style plays a part. Curiosity. Availability. All these things play a part. And community censure is no longer strong. The men who furtively ducked round to 'visit' the divorcee in a quiet suburban street had to be very dedicated or very desperate to run the gauntlet of twitching curtains. Now there are so many alternatives—from advertisements in the paper, to that anonymous house on the next street where people (may) go unnoticed, from sex tours to Asia, to virtual reality experiences to phone sex ...

Unless human beings wish to totally divorce themselves from the animal kingdom then sex exists primarily for propagation of the species. But human beings were granted (and it doesn't really matter if you see it as evolutionary chance or God's plan) several extraordinary advantages over other creatures. They could have sex face to face. They

could have sex all year round. And they had the ability to feel and to give and to express love ...

Sex without love may be 'fun' but it circumvents that last key component of human sexual development. And it may be that the ability and the practice of giving and receiving love through sex plays an essential role in the human psyche. At its most obvious we know that children who were conceived in a loveless relationship often have real problems when it comes to seeing themselves as having worth and value just as people. If a couple do not love there is a far greater chance that the resulting child will be used as a pawn to score points rather than as someone loveable in their own right.

'Ugly old hags' may not be getting a lot of sex but I suspect that they understand very clearly that love can be expressed and felt in many other satisfying ways ...

FADS AND FASHIONS

When I think back to the things which worried people, galvanized people, made people happy, I sometimes am puzzled, sometimes wry, and sometimes I cannot help wondering about the unanswered questions.

The most obvious fashions relate to those things you put on your back—and your front, unless you are an exhibitionist. Why did women go out and buy hobble-skirts when their aim precisely was to hobble the new free-striding woman? Why did people invest in schemes that a minute's thought would raise doubts about?

Funny expressions—I wondered what people meant when they suddenly began to take 'rain checks' all the time and now every second person for some obscure reason seems to have a 'bucket list'—funny hairdos—why on earth did women tease and lacquer their hair into those ugly 'beehives'—funny food—have you ever watched yourself trying to get your mouth around some of the giant hamburgers that get advertised regularly? Dagwood eating his sandwiches isn't in the race—and anyway no parent ever said 'Look like Dagwood when you're eating lunch and people will know you have good manners'.

I remember how disappointed I was the first time I had a taste of caviar. Was this what all the fuss was about! Now I think of that when someone tells me I must try some new food or drink on the market. Will it really be worth the effort or the expense? Perhaps our taste buds have become more 'sophisticated' but I can't see that that is really of any help to a dying planet.

And then there are the truly bizarre fads and fashions. Who decided sticking their fist up someone else's bum would be the ultimate in sexual experiences? Apart from those unfortunate recipients who after various operations to repair the damage are left with leaking bums like those poor little girls in Africa who have borne children before their bodies were sufficiently mature to cope—there is my belief that any experience which involves a body orifice largely tenanted by E-coli and other nasty little relatives doesn't really strike me as a recipe for sexual ecstasy. Perhaps I am being picky. But then someone has to be picky as the train rushes on towards the next tunnel ...

Long ago kids walked or rode an old pony to bring in the cows or round up some steers. Then motor cycles then quad bikes swept the cow pony and indeed the stock horse into near oblivion. Now I watch cattle being rounded up by helicopters. It may look

exciting. It may be cost-effective though I doubt it. But what no one seems to be saying is that it is a very cruel way to farm. Watching terrified animals gallop up hill and down dale in a desperate attempt to escape from this roaring monster overhead is not an edifying sight.

Fads and fashions will always be with us. I don't mind. But the unfortunate thought which occurs to me is that despite better education, greater maturity at a younger age, an increased confidence in asking questions rather than meekly accepting what more powerful people say and do and ask for, wider media coverage, more ways of getting information, I am not sure if we are really better at asking questions when it comes to the silly things we are asked to support, to do, to accept, to buy. We are still at the mercy of that herd mentality: everybody is doing it, it must be the way to go ... I remember a teacher saying to some mums: 'If your child comes home and says he must have something because 'everyone' has it—there is a good chance 'everyone' just means the child at the next desk ... '

DON'T TRUST YOUR MEMORY

Was there really less litter around when I was young? Or is it that the Age of Plastic has seduced me into believing things were safer, cleaner, tidier then? My first impulse was to think that, yes, things *were* safer, cleaner and tidier then.

There were fewer people to be generating garbage for starters. That is a terrible indictment of the human race, isn't it? We are the only species which generates garbage. Every species produces manure which fertilizes this and that and feeds dung beetles. But nothing else produces garbage. So this is only a small nod in the way of communities sixty years ago. Fewer people = less garbage. It isn't the same as saying no one produced garbage. Even old swaggies produced garbage.

Most of the rubbish was bio-degradable. Paper. Leather. Metal. Wood. Cotton. Wool. Rinds and stalks. That old swaggie leaving behind a pair of worn-out boots when someone was kind enough to give him a slightly-better pair. Of course the metal and rubber in those worn-out boots would take a long time to rot and rust away. The factories that made boots produced their own, mostly bio-degradable, rubbish. The trucks and wagons that carted the boots had to be built and run and their carters fed and clothed and watered. All along the way bits of rubbish got strewn.

Things didn't get swathed in packaging. If you wanted one of those wonderful new gadgets called a Biro (which was certainly plastic) you went into the store and there was a big container of Biro's and a pad affixed to the front of the display. You picked up a Biro and did a little scribble. Did it work. Was it too fine a point. Did it dribble or smudge. You picked out your chosen Biro and bought it. But alas in that simplicity was its downfall. A lot of people, seemingly, just put the Biro's in their bags. So Biro's started to come in plastic and cardboard. We the public constantly grizzling about packaging created the need for packaging.

Things got recycled. Obvious things like drink bottles had threepence on them. Thousands of kids, including Scouts and poor families, collected bottles. Of course bottle-making generated waste. Bottle carting, bottle-washing, bottle re-filling all generated bits of rubbish and untidiness. But it was still a more sensible idea. But then there were several sad cases where people had reused their bottles for poisonous

substances before getting a refund and the bottle-washing machines weren't set up to scour every skerrick of herbicide, dingo baits, kerosene, sulphuric acid, and other nasties ... and people drank their soft drinks from recycled bottles and died ... Suddenly the threepence refund didn't seem such a good idea after all. But many things went on getting reused. Newspapers went on being used to start fires in stoves and chip heaters. Old pullovers kept on being unraveled and re-knitted. Unwanted furniture and old window sills kept on being turned into firewood.

But as cities grew people complained about the smog from all those wood fires and in some places just getting firewood became an issue. Trees disappeared under concrete and its ilk and there are only so many old window sills waiting to be turned into firewood.

I don't think people were tidier. Yes, there *were* very houseproud housewives around. But they didn't give a lot of thought to problems such as landfill and whether their rubbish might still be sitting around in ten thousand years' time.

I don't think people were more responsible. I don't think people were cleaner. And those old swaggies certainly weren't. But there was that key thing. You didn't see cows choking on plastic bags or seals strangling on the plastic waste that keeps six beer cans together or birds with their crops full of drink bottle tops.

Was there less graffiti around? Yes, I'm sure fewer things were covered in someone's silly scribbles. But then the spray can had not been invented and sold. Now I am almost afraid to stand still in case someone thinks I will make a good surface to hash-tag. Now you can travel for miles and not be able to get away from other people's inanities. But there *was* one kind of graffiti around back then: the apparently deeply-embedded human desire to draw moustaches on faces on posters and billboards ... I'm not sure what kind of psychological deprivation you might like to read in to that. Too early weaning of infants? Or the idea that there isn't a face anywhere that wouldn't look better wearing a moustache?

Human beings are going to go on generating garbage. We might as well face that simple fact. And timid little suggestions like removing supermarket bags or looking for products with less packaging aren't going to change that fundamental fact. So if we cannot help but generate garbage then it makes sense to drastically lower human populations. Seven billion people producing garbage as opposed to seven million producing garbage. Imagine the almost pristine waters. The unsullied wildlife. The end of fights over new dumps and where to put our millions of tonnes of toxic waste. Imagine our clean air.

You're an idiot, Mrs Mop, a dreamer from another planet, a silly old biddy who doesn't recognize reality even when it jumps up and bites her!

Well, I don't know about that. I just cut my hand on someone else's broken bottle and I am now expecting tetanus, septicaemia, blood poisoning, AIDS, not to mention the Curse of the Mummy at any moment ...

She died crying 'Think of the Seven Million!'

And—

Mrs MOP

Thinks About . . .

*Though perhaps 'thinks' is too
decisive a word at times . . . and
'muses'*

*has lovely poetic connotations which
probably don't belong . . .*

THE BLAME GAME

OLYMPIC GAMES: I would love watching the Olympics if it wasn't for two things: the extraordinary waste of money they represent and that awful mean spiteful attitude that creeps into anything which involves winning and losing.

They are called 'Games' but it is hard to find where the attitude of fun and enjoyment which the word implies comes into the matter. OLYMPIC COMPETITIONS. OLYMPIC BESTING. OLYMPIC BITE-YOUR-BLOODY-NOSE-OFF. OLYMPIC I'LL-NEVER-FORGIVE-MYSELF-FOR-LETTING-DOWN-MY-COUNTRY. OLYMPIC YOU-NAME-IT-BUT-IT'S-GOT-NOTHING-TO-DO-WITH-PLAYING-THE-GAME. No wonder drugs and cheating loom so large. If people from large countries and tiny dots that require a magnifying glass to find were genuinely out there for the joy of running, jumping, swimming, cycling, riding, heaving heavy things around, there would be much less incentive to cheat. There was a time when the Games were genuinely about amateurs. Now they are about professionals and lucrative contracts. How many of those soccer players, hockey players, basketballers, professional athletes are there purely for the love of sport?

Well, that horse has bolted. Nationalism, money, big deals are here to stay. But that doesn't excuse the attitude which sees us endlessly focus on how many medals we expect to win, how many we should win, how many our buckets of money thrown at sporting stars suggest we are entitled to win. It is one of the most unattractive sides to every Olympic preparation.

And then when our sporting people come home with fewer than the projected haul we see young people in tears because they believe they have let down some mysterious and nebulous entity called 'my country'. Australia as a place, as a notion, doesn't exist for gold medals, it is commentators and their public which have put forward the expectations and they should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. They couldn't get out and swim a hundred metres but there they are telling people we are a certainty for a gold medal in this or that event and then just avoiding the crass when a young swimmer fails. But even if it isn't said 'You've let us down' it hangs unspoken in the air when they immediately start talking about the need to have a better funded and more focused sports training program next time around.

We do throw buckets of money at certain sports. There is a hierarchy. Some sports seem to be more deserving of buckets than others. I don't know what the criteria is. Are they the sports we most want our little fatty children to take up? Are they the most accessible and cheapest sports for poor schools to provide? Do they somehow attract big names, big sponsors, do people visit Australia solely to see some elite swimming? I doubt it.

When I came to ponder on this I realized that the two things which bring the largest number of overseas watchers in to fill our grandstands are the Melbourne Cup and the Australian Open. To this could probably be added the Australian Grand Prix. But this

isn't very helpful to the idea that we should throw money at certain sports. Horse racing is not an Olympic sport. Nor is Formula One. I remember when the Victorian government enticed Tiger Woods with millions of dollars. Was this money well spent? Visitors may have come but did they stay in International Hotels, hire cars from International Car Hire companies, did they fly in on Australian-owned airlines (if there are any such beasts), did they eat in Australian-owned eateries and drink Australian wine and beer? I suspect quite a lot of their money flew straight back out of the country. And more importantly did Tiger Woods encourage Australians to be fitter, healthier, more active in the open air, in other words, swop the couch and the ergonomic computer chair for their nearest golf course?

Have you ever stopped to wonder, in sheer amazement, at the extraordinariness of sport, of any activity really? What if you had to plan out each movement of your muscles, how each tendon should move, before each step you took? What if you couldn't simply tell your brain to run around the track and let it get on with the job while you concentrated on staying in your lane and keeping a side eye out for your competitors. What if you had to tell your body how to move as you went out on to the hockey field or the tennis court? The more I think about it the more extraordinary the human brain becomes. And not only human brains. And yet we simply take this for granted.

I always love it when someone from a poor country without sports institutes and government funding comes out and beats the big names. I like to see people in ordinary clothes not plastered with logos from iffy international companies, out there running and jumping and throwing and relaying for the sheer wonderful joy of running and jumping and throwing and relaying. And if joy was the criteria, not winning, then perhaps we could forget about Drugs in Sport.

But the fact remains that there should be no place in an institution, a tradition, that brings together people from everywhere (at least everywhere which has achieved nationhood) supposedly for a time of goodwill and friendship, for Blame.

CAN'T YOU RUN A LITTLE FASTER?

My mother hated greyhound racing. She hated it ever since she learned, in the 1950s, that a neighbour was using stray cats to encourage his dogs to run, to keep excited about running around a small track after a tin hare. I, naively, thought that was then and things have improved. It was not only shocking to discover that things hadn't improved. It was also disillusioning. Somehow I had become convinced that, in general, leaving aside factory farming, our attitudes to animals *had* improved.

So should greyhound racing be banned? If we, as a community, as racing officials, as the RSPCA, cannot guarantee that every trainer is being adequately monitored—then yes. Thousands of farmers are going to have to take their hens out of cages and their sows out of stalls so why is it only greyhound trainers who have garnered sympathy?

I think because of that long time belief that greyhound racing is the poor man's sport, if you can't afford a thoroughbred you can afford a dog. It is the less affluent in society who own, train, breed, or go to the dogs. The wealthy are going to the Yearling

Sales to buy half-million dollar horses. This is to a considerable extent true. But since when did being (relatively) poor give you the right to be cruel to animals?

Nevertheless I have a different reason for disliking greyhound racing. I think it makes greyhounds look stupid. There they are streaking round the track in red-eyed greed after a tin hare. We know they will never catch it. And sometimes they know they will never catch it. And when they occasionally twig that they are being asked to do the impossible we put a live piglet on a pole and send them slaving after it. It doesn't just make the dogs look stupid. It makes them look brutal.

And I am not sure any sport should do this to any animal in the name of a pleasant day out.

RADICAL? WE-E-LL ...

Radical used to be a word put on people who wanted to make major changes to society. Radicals wanted to leave a tired old political system behind. Radicals wanted age-old monarchies to fall. Radicals had long discussions and finally decided that women were being discriminated against and it was high time to do something about it.

But suddenly radical is being completely recast to mean the most profoundly conservative ways possible. Beheading people is radical. Henry VIII did quite a lot of beheading but no one has ever called him a radical. He just wanted his own way all the time.

We talk about 'radical Islam' but Islam is a profoundly conservative religion. And unlike most religions it doesn't have very much 'wiggle room'. It has some. But 'radical' Muslims are not the ones seeking out ambiguities and possibilities to come up with ways in which tolerance and empathy can grow. 'Radicals' are the ones who insist on the letter of the law. Who see the Koran set in stone. Who treat questioners as heretics and infidels, just as other religions have down the conservative centuries been able to find heretics and infidels to persecute. Radicals are now those afraid of uncharted waters because it may take them ... somewhere ... somewhere where they are not in absolute control of their women and children ... where Uncertainty Principles are not matters of abstruse physics but which may see them left flatfooted and gasping.

These people are not radicals so let's stop calling them radicals. It gives our genuinely radical thinkers, philosophers, inventors, scientists and innovators a bad name.

THIS LAND

This Land is My Land, this Land is Your Land—or vice versa. We have just been told that just over 13% of our 'prime agricultural land' is foreign owned with British, American, Dutch, Singaporean and Chinese making up the top five. Our esteemed Deputy PM has told us this is equivalent to two Victorias, in other words, quite a large slice of land.

I immediately had visions of the Vestey family back in business or King Ranch with their Quarter Horses and Santa Gertrudis cattle looming over the horizon in their ten-gallon hats. (I don't mean the cattle wore hats like seaside donkeys.) But no, that wasn't what was meant. This was farmland bought by companies registered in London, New York, Amsterdam, Singapore and so on. And so any talk about nationality is

irrelevant. Companies don't have nationalities, just as they don't have race or gender. Companies are registered somewhere but that doesn't tell us very much. Companies have shareholders but that also doesn't tell us much. Most large companies are a maze of equity and hedge funds, holding companies and shelf companies, trusts, financial groups, banks, and smaller companies. Wealthy private investors can buy in. Mum and Dad investors can even buy in but are unlikely to have much clout when it comes to decision-making—even if they have mortgaged their home and their future. The Mafia and the Yakuza can buy in. So can everyone from the Saudi Royal Family to Neo-Nazis, sex-traffickers in the Philippines to drug cartel managers in Miami, from front companies for other governments to companies hidden behind impenetrable layers to Chinese triads. The billions squeezed out by Suharto and his cronies to the wealth sequestered by various African dictators all has to go *somewhere*. And a lot of it goes into legitimate companies.

A friend who lived in Singapore for nearly 40 years told me that Singapore is increasingly Chinese-controlled. So that to say Singapore comes in the top five doesn't really tell us whether that land is all owned by native Singaporeans or whether it is simply being used as a conduit for Chinese money. And Singapore which lives by trade and investment, not growing wool or apples or wheat, is hardly in a position to tell wealthy Chinese-owned companies to bugger off.

The survey was also misleading for several other reasons: it didn't include leasehold. Millions of hectares of leasehold land are held by overseas interests. The assumption seemed to be that if they don't own it then they don't matter. But a company with a 99 year lease over 10 million hectares is hardly a negligible entity. In theory the government keeps a close eye on what leaseholders do with their land but we all know that simply isn't true.

Nor did it include residential or rental properties, businesses, factories, hotels, golf courses, utilities, marinas, ports and harbours. It did not include land not rated as 'prime agricultural' which presumably means it didn't look at logging concessions, plantations, or poorer, pastoral, or degraded lands. Nor did it make any mention of land being used for mining.

Does any of this matter?

In theory land which is owned rather than leased is better cared for. Land which is home to a family is better cared for than land bought for investment or speculation. Australians owning land are more likely to care for it than a London-based company owning that same land. In practice this is not always so.

Governments, councils, animal welfare and other groups still need to keep a close eye on what is being done around Australia. The way the environment is being treated, and this includes the safety of native flora and fauna, as well as the welfare of domestic animals, the usage of toxic chemicals, keeping water clean and land free from noxious infestations, needs to be an across-the-board concern. There is no space to say 'that's okay, you can't expect a US based company to really understand Australia's environment'.

So why was the Government, or at least Scott Morrison, patting itself on the back?

Investment. These companies symbolize investment. And therefore *growth*. This is baloney. These companies aren't buying land to turn it *into* prime agricultural land. They are buying land that other people, over generations, have turned into prime agricultural land. Ordinary people mostly cleared and fenced, stocked or cropped, put up sheds and milking yards and dams, bought machinery, put on phosphates and nitrogen ... in other words, thousands of ordinary people worked very hard to turn bushland and open plains into 'prime agricultural land'.

Their work was sometimes mis-guided, mis-planned, over-zealous; it brought disaster to a number of small native creatures and saw massive amounts of soil washed or blown away. But the fact remains that the investment occurred over a long period of time and it is disingenuous for any government to present companies buying 'prime agricultural land' as doing something wonderful for the country.

Most overseas companies buying in are solely looking for a good return on their outlay. But the fear which has not really been addressed is that companies buying large tracts of land will also be able to flex their moneyed muscles in other ways. They will be able to press for the importation of overseas workers regardless of local unemployment or labour laws. They will be able to say who comes on to their property and who doesn't, with a flexibility that ordinary Australian owners don't enjoy. They will be able to use large properties in ways which go against Australian laws or Australian morals. It isn't clear who owns all the illegal brothels operating in Australia (their illegality helps to preserve them from prying eyes) but there is a widespread belief that they are increasingly Asian-owned. If young women are exploited in the middle of our cities how much more vulnerable would they be on ten thousand hectares? How good will these new owners be at keeping noxious weeds from their land? Will they respect migratory birds? Will they provide safe workplaces if they believe that poor labourers from their home countries should be grateful for any sort of work?

But there is a more fundamental problem which is being ignored. And that is that most agricultural land hosts farming communities, families, schools, churches, RSLs, Dairy Festivals and Annual Shows, small businesses, local co-ops, craft groups, playgroups, pony clubs, all the things which bring country people together to share and meet and enjoy doing things as a community. Every time a foreign company buys in and runs its operation with the smallest workforce possible, often on short term contracts or temporary visas, the community as a whole tends to miss out. Large multi-nationals pay lip-service to 'community' when it suits them to do so. Their records when put under the microscope show that they are almost invariably anti-community. It is not simply the acreage which needs to be looked at. It is the invisible aspects which come with acreage.

A QUOTA FOR HOLLYWOOD?

So a lot of people are energetically campaigning for Hollywood to provide more parts for women and greater representation of gays, lesbians, transgender, and presumably every ethnic minority in the US of A.

Quotas, like affirmative actions, have their usefulness. But we are talking about *entertainment*—not momentous affairs of state. And entertainment, to a large extent, is influenced by its entertained public ... or not entertained as the case may be.

We are told that women only get around 35% of speaking parts. Is this because the most popular and highest grossing movies tend to be he-man action movies, thrillers, space adventures, or cop shows? Or is it because a number of movies created to appeal to women just don't hit the mark. Or is it because in most tender romances the hero does most of the talking?

The other day I was watching a video of 'Steel Magnolias'. It had a half-dozen very well-known female leads. But if you take them away you have an unremarkable story, filmed in a pretty unexciting location, with dialogue no more sparkling than anything I overhear on a Hobart bus, and pretty ho-hum sets and costumes. Take out those six women and the film would've fallen flat on its face.

And that is the problem Hollywood, and by extension anyone who wants to bring in quotas, faces. It is stars, not gender or sexual orientation, which makes movies profitable. And only a tiny minority of dedicated people bother to make unprofitable movies.

The question this brief news item did not engage with, perhaps no one has as yet got round to thinking it through, is—did they mean there should be *more* movies *about* people realizing they prefer lovers of the same sex or going through the process of changing gender—or did they mean that more of the actors chosen for roles in the usual round of offerings, from the next James Bond to the next Walt Disney, should be gay or transgender? And how could the people doing the auditioning actually *know* unless they ask intrusive personal questions? Hollywood has always been besieged by thousands of pretty girls every year hoping to find a role in *something* whether by talent or luck or seduction. Perhaps thousands of transgender people are now besieging Hollywood and if so I can't help wondering: do they hope to get there by talent, luck, or giving in to importunate directors and talent scouts—or will they rely solely on quotas to find their place as the credits roll?

And if so—will the resulting movies be better or will moviegoers keep their money in their pocket or even say grumpily 'I could've been home watching the footie'—'reading a good book'—'ringing a friend' ...

Rock Hudson was one of those who kept his private life very private but got a very nice income by being many women's heart throb for his romantic movies, often with Doris Day. Should he have insisted that he only play in movies which provided sympathetic plots about male bonding and affection? Or was he always going to go where the money and the popularity and the fans were? It seems very unlikely that thousands of male fans would have flocked to his movies and sent him adoring letters and made him big box office. No matter how good the plots of 'gay' movies and how honest and frank his portrayal of men in love with men it seems unlikely he could have engendered the same response from male fans.

Did he sell his soul by playing a heart throb for women to adore and for moviemakers to keep casting him and for movie patrons to keep him in a very nice lifestyle and constant work? Is there now a sufficiently large audience for nothing but homosexual entertainment? Or will actors have to do what they have always done—look for parts which use their acting talents and will appeal to the public?

It will be interesting to see how Hollywood responds to this call and how the movie-going public will see it.

Transgender seems to raise a range of very different issues. You could have a man who has become a woman playing opposite a woman who has become a man. But if they are playing themselves we are looking at a different kind of story to the traditional love story in which the leads just happen to have changed sex but in which this fact is irrelevant to the story.

Hollywood is full of people who have changed their bodies, nips and tucks, larger lips, bigger boobs, smaller tummies, but how will it respond to people whose surgical history is far more than a face lift? And is Hollywood the best place, with its stress and its pollution, its habit of taking most of its clothes off, to take seriously-challenged bodies?

Women are advised to take great care about taking hormones throughout their reproductive life because of the increased risk of cancer and blood clots but now people are potentially going to spend a lifetime on hormones, and eighty years on hormones must surely raise greater risks of cancer. And what happens if such people have to, for health reasons, give up taking the hormones their bodies can't make? Will they play in strange movies called 'I was a Child of the Revolution until I Grew Hairy Boobs'? And there is the concern that transgender people as opposed to transvestite people are rarely wildly attractive. As a generalization, men who become women tend to cake on the make-up and the false eyelashes to 'prove' they are actually women. Women who become men don't have Adam's apples and they rarely have attractive voices.

None of these are insuperable problems. They may even be an advantage when it comes to quirky movies. And sufficiently quirky movies like 'The Rocky Horror Show' can be box office hits. But moviegoers by and large are not wild about innovation. I suspect it will go on being the James Bonds and the fat girls—oops! the size-challenged girls—finding love against the odds which go on drawing the audiences in.

The best and most memorable movies and TV shows, in my humble opinion, are those in which the actors are truly convincing in the parts they play—and in which the parts they play are unforgettable, fascinating, funny, sad, moving ... all the things you ask from a great book where you imagine the person into the character.

Hollywood in the fifties changed people's hair, dying it blonde, changing the hairlines, curling it, shining it—and then a more natural look crept in. Now we are back to the plastic age. But it is teeth now which are the prime focus. You can't play anything, not even an historical drama from an age when people had appalling teeth or no teeth at all, unless you have perfect even shining-white teeth now. Someone said to me she enjoyed the Antiques Roadshow because it had ordinary people with ordinary teeth, not the dentists' dream patients.

So does it really matter that budding actors are going down the Michael Jackson path to be something it is rather difficult to believe in? Probably not. Hollywood has always been about fantasy.

But the script is changing. Now there is a curious conflict between fantasy and identity. You can be who you truly want to be (if you know who you truly want to be) but you will have to play an imagined you in movie after movie until you may start to believe you are 007 or Indiana Jones or their latest counterparts—in which case how you identify may be as confusing as the parts you play.

Hollywood isn't the place to go if you are already a prey to confusions. It is not renowned as the place in which to find your sanity and your self.

The other day I was pondering on a slightly different question. You will find it very difficult now to advertise in the paper or on-line for a Girl Friday. Asking for a particular sex, a particular look, a particular age, a particular religion or race is becoming increasingly difficult. Yet in that same paper you will find dozens of ads for women offering their services as 'petite', 'size 6', 'Asian', 'Thai', 'Japanese', 'gorgeous', 'busty', all the words which are no-nos in other ads. In other words you can be as sexist and racist as all-get-out in one section of the Classifieds and you must use careful non-discriminatory language in another section of the Classifieds or you will find yourself hauled up by the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner.

Imagine turning to the lists of prostitutes being advertised (or advertising themselves) and finding: 'Person under 40, health-checked, 10 years experience, guarantees satisfaction in bed'. Would you immediately grab your phone and book a session? You could perhaps argue that there is a key difference between someone offering a job and someone offering a service.

A friend, and she is not alone in this, is upset at finding prostitution being advertised in what is after all a family newspaper. Kids turn to it to find their next hockey fixture, to see if they can get a cheap secondhand scooter, to see what their footie team is doing, to see if any good movies are coming in the school holidays. And it would be naïve to think that their eyes never alight on: 'Cute, size 8, just arrived from the Philippines, will give you the time of your life' and ask awkward questions or fantasize about what that 'time of your life' might mean.

But do you really want your twelve-year-old thinking about sex in terms of a commercial transaction with a woman who sees you solely as her meal ticket? Or do you want your twelve-year-old to grow up with the belief that sex is just part of a loving and caring relationship?

My thought was rather different. Will advertisements for auditions for films, plays, TV docos, soap operas, all need to change? Will it become illegal to actually request a male for a particular part, let alone a male of a particular colour, height and build?

Presumably when a mixed bag of male, female and intersex people turn up the casting directors can very cautiously weed out the ones who will not fit the part they have in mind. I say 'cautiously' because it will get very hard to make movies if such directors have to spend more time defending their decisions against claims of discrimination than actually making good films.

Director: Tell me your sexual orientation?

Hopeful Starlet: I just did but you insisted on pretending I am actually a man in a woman's body. I pump iron for my health not to fool you.

If people jump up and down and say tut-tut! you have not put a sufficient number of bi-sexual people into your movie even if you are constrained from asking people about their private lives by a Privacy Act you may feel that there is only one way to go.

Computer-generated actors in computer-generated films.

Those who want quotas for Hollywood may have a valid point.

They may also be hastening the demise of the film which actually uses real people.

BACK, BACK, AND BACK

Comebacks always seem to be news. ‘Mrs Mop is back!’ ‘Really?’ ‘So what?’ ‘Who is Mrs Mop?’ I should say ‘high profile comebacks are usually news’.

I was at something on Sunday and some of the others started grumbling about having Pauline Hanson back. They didn’t want her back because she says out loud what other people are only thinking—and what other people are sometimes vaguely ashamed of thinking. It is a freedom of speech issue but it has its dangers. Hitler encouraged people to put nasty thoughts into action. He, of course, was the extreme. But as a species we never seem to know where to draw the lines.

I said the government could have defused the situation by tackling head-on people’s often un-articulated fears. Instead of letting Pauline Hanson do what most of us do but not so blatantly: extrapolate from a tiny number of things into a national crisis—

The two things that urgently need to be done are:

1. The PM, the Leader of the Opposition and the minor parties and Independents need to stand up and say unequivocally that Sharia Law will not be introduced in Australia in any shape or form, not in part, not by adaptation, not creeping in the back door or allowed in by an idea here and an intimation there.

Voters are understandably terrified by images of women stoned to death for adultery, beheadings in the name of Sharia, petty thieves with hands chopped off, cruelty to animals. Yet the government just makes a few nice noises about how multicultural we are and how we have settled more refugees than X number of nations around the world. How is that putting people’s fears to rest?

2. People are understandably afraid of attacks which come out of nowhere and are seemingly unrelated to anything about their victims, their circumstances, their behaviour, or their relationships. Most murders have motives and a degree of logic, even if it is bizarre logic, to them. They occur in families, in gangs, in relation to people’s wealth, their neighbourhood, their employment history, their general behaviour. They rarely have the feeling of something totally random and inexplicable about them. To be attacked simply because a young man has gone on-line or listened to a particular imam is frightening because it suggests that no one is immune, no one no matter how wisely, kindly, generously, law-abidingly they live their lives is immune, there is no way, other than living alone on a desert island, to protect yourself or your family ...

Here again governments, state and federal, should have tackled the issue head-on. First of all by bringing all the data on such attacks together to show how *unlikely* it is that you will be a target. Secondly, to remind people that they are far more likely to die on the roads, from obesity, or at the hands of a family member. Thirdly to stop talking about radicalization and start talking about the things which take young men’s minds off violence: a job with potential and a degree of satisfaction, healthy activities, sport, and, dare I say it, things which actually encourage them to use their brains. Morons follow demagogues. Intelligent people think through issues for themselves.

Instead people are left with ill-defined poorly-documented fears. They won't be able to walk safely on their streets, go to a café, go to the beach. My suggestion would be: put sensible reliable information out there and then *stop talking about it*. Anything which constantly gives people the impression that they are being 'swamped' is hardly helping.

There is a fundamental problem underlying all of this. And it is simply that Australian society cannot win in the current situation.

People who wish to keep to what they might call old-fashioned values, who don't want change, who resent mosques in their street, who want to retain a society as it existed fifty years ago are an easy target. They are not sympathetic, they are not tolerant, they are rigid in their thinking and their behaviour. Yet their behaviour is actually closer to that in most Moslem countries which have also clung to a view of society from times past.

But those who claim to be kind and welcoming and tolerant and multicultural appall many conservative Moslems. In their trendy liberal views about freedoms there are many freedoms which Moslems fear will infect their society, their families, and their view of the world. From equality for women to children's rights, from democracy to a degree of freedom of speech we move on to even more shocking things in Moslem eyes: an engagement in pornography and public sex, nudity, casual attitudes to money, blatant consumerism, public drunkenness, in-your-face advertising, a lack of respect for elders, parents, and the elderly.

Indonesia is seriously thinking about banning pre-marital sex and caning those who engage in it. How this will play out in Indonesia's massive sex trade and whether tourists will be exempt remains to be defined. Yet we are told ad infinitum that Indonesia is a 'moderate' Moslem country.

We have this touching idea that people resettled as refugees from hardline Moslem countries will be so grateful to be safe at last and provided with some support and welfare, if not education and a job, that they will just drop all the baggage they have come with and immediately and totally embrace what, confusingly, is called the Australian Way of Life. They will leave behind bitter divisions between Sunnis and Shias, they will stop hating Hezaras or Yezidis, (hating for reasons which are inexplicable to us) and love living next door, they will cease admiring their versions of the old hellfire-and-brimstone preacher, they will accept girls in bikinis as part of the Australian landscape, and they will stop killing sheep in nasty ways in their backyards.

We do have the right to spell out what we expect from new arrivals, regardless of how and why they have come, but as we don't know what we expect—apart from a vague hope that they will not annoy us—this is very hard for anyone to sign up to.

The Governor of Tasmania took a discreet swipe at Ms Hanson at a refugee rally and the clouds burst—or at least drizzled on her. There were two problems, it seems. Should she have made a personal criticism and should she have entered into what is called 'the political sphere'.

I do not think anyone, regardless of the public role they take on, should be required to give up talking from a personal perspective. If they believe something then telling them they can't say so and must confine themselves to bland and boring

statements which mean virtually nothing goes against all our talk of freedom and democracy. Perhaps there is something in the job description for Governors which precludes saying anything but the bland and the boring but I doubt it. After all, the quickest way to get people to see Governors as pointless and the next thing on the list to be abolished is to confine them to the bland and the boring.

THAT TAX

You probably noticed all the to and fro when it came to the backpacker tax. Should they be charged 32% on their earnings, 21%, 19%, 15%, 10%, you name it, some pollie probably did.

The two driving forces were: to make the government some more money and to keep the supply of young backpackers willing to pick fruit and vegies constant. The two things were rightly seen as incompatible and therefore those who spoke squarely in favour of compromise got the best hearing.

There are Aussies who go round the country in caravans and small trucks doing the same work. What do they pay? It surely depends on how much they earn. So shouldn't foreign backpackers be subsumed under the same tax laws? If you make more than the non-tax threshold then you pay the same tax as an Australian worker. That would still allow young visitors to earn up to \$18,000 before they had to pay any tax, other than the GST. That suggests a pretty good working holiday.

But then, despite all that is said and written about making our tax laws simpler, I notice an opposite thrust at work. If anything our tax laws get more complicated by the year.

Still, never mind, so long as kids in China or the UK or Denmark or Canada keep rolling in that's all that matters, so long as they bring their useful strength and enthusiasm and don't complain about accommodation, hours or conditions. Bully for them.

But what no one seems to be saying is that this is an extraordinary way for Australia's huge horticultural sector to be run. To depend on the holiday choices of unknown kids on the other side of the world to bring the crop in. The more I think about it the more bizarre it becomes.

Commentators focused on whether we would still be seen as a 'competitive destination' as compared with New Zealand. Well, if NZ is equally dependent on foreigners to bring its apples and strawberries to market then it is being equally stupid. Because all this is predicated on young people being able to take the time to travel, the money for airfares, the visas to allow them to go to the countries of their choice, no changes to Gap Years, no Depressions and Downturns and Coups and Instabilities and Blowing up Aircraft ... in other words a dependence on things which are outside our control.

Surely it would make better sense to see these young people as a bit of decoration on an already iced cake? Surely we should have plans and Centrelink arrangements which allow young unemployed kids here to travel the country doing useful disciplined work until they can find permanent jobs close to home. It isn't rocket science to allow a degree of flexibility into New Start arrangements which would see young men out picking grapes or sorting potatoes rather than hanging round malls and filling up our magistrates' courts every Monday morning.

Yes, there are kids who are going to resist working no matter what carrots and sticks are built in to the system. But there are also a lot of kids who would genuinely like to be out there doing something worth getting paid for, meeting people, getting some skills, getting fit, seeing what country life is like—and the two things which make it hard for them to do so are a) the complexities round Centrelink payments and b) a lack of transport.

If they get two weeks work picking blueberries and then have to wait six months to get back on to New Start when the job finishes—well, it would be hard to think of a bigger disincentive to work. So why shouldn't there be greater flexibility within New Start and why shouldn't Centrelink work closely with farmers, agricultural companies, and farmer's organizations to enable young unemployed here to go from one job to the next before coming back on to New Start during the brief times when there is nothing to be picked or drought or floods have wiped out the expected crops?

And if farmers can pick up and accommodate overseas kids why can't they pick up and accommodate Australian kids?

And if there are not enough carrots able to be germinated in the system then, and only then, the government can begin discussing sticks. I don't like to talk of sticks but fifty years ago you took a job when it came up. You didn't loll around like some prima donna saying you didn't feel like working this week. If you had arrived from Italy or Colombia or Greece or Slovenia and you were told you had to work at Mt Tom Price or Wittenoom you didn't say it would be hard on your fingernails or you didn't want to live so far away from home. You were on the next west-bound transport.

I hope we've left behind the bad old ideas about workers expected to be grateful for a job no matter how dirty dangerous noisy or exhausting—but when I see fit young men mooching around not willing to do *anything*, paid or unpaid, while elderly ladies cart heavy boxes around or put in long days sorting jumble for nothing more than a cup of tea I can't help thinking we're helping no one by raising generations of uneducated unskilled unenthusiastic youngsters who know all about taking but the only giving they fancy is money into bar tills or babies into teenage girls ...

And we're not helping them ... not when they now will face sixty to eighty years of uselessness, boredom, and the pointlessness of life. I think it would make me turn to ice and alcohol too ...

SYRIA MON AMOUR

Someone must love Syria. I don't know who. I don't know where they are hiding. But none of the destruction is aimed at making Syria a happier or a more beautiful place. In fact when the fighting does finally stop, if only because everyone is heartily sick of fighting, Syria as a place to live in or visit will come last in those lists of a 100 Places to See before You Die.

I remember reading T. E. Lawrence's book about the Middle East, probably because I had seen the David Lean film and got interested—and his snapshots of Syrian towns suggest an almost mind-boggling ethnic and religious diversity. To try to hammer together a few simple political groups out of that complexity and say 'we will support this one' or perhaps 'that one' suggests an incredible naïveté.

But that is what we have. A President, tough, conservative, devoid of love for his country, but to some extent supported across the Middle East. And whose ability to reconstruct his country when people finally put down their arms and park their tanks out of sheer exhaustion is debatable.

Some rebel groups whose philosophies we are not told and whose willingness to work together are deeply suspect. And their ability to run a wrecked country is untested. In fact that seems to be an untestable proposition. It usually comes down to money. But money, though it can build buildings, cannot build community out of hate and intolerance.

A hardline Islamic group with connections to various terrorist groups which wants to turn the clock back and which has no reconstruction credentials. Indeed no construction credentials. No one has yet run a program about the beautiful buildings that Islamic State is putting up. They may be able to use a hammer to batter people's poor little fingers with. No one has proved that they can reliably hit nails into boards.

My first thought is: Poor Syria.

But then it could not have got to this point without the Syrian people, or a considerable number of them saying, Poor Syria Nothing! We have plans!

And at the end of it it will truly be Poor Syria. Because Syria, unlike Iraq with its oil, unlike Egypt with its scads of tourists, has relatively few resources. A bit of oil, a bit of agriculture (but reconstructing a country on the sale of dates, figs, and barley is unrealistic), a bit of tourism (do come and see an even more wrecked Palmyra). The world will be asked to pour billions into the reconstruction. It may say yes, but with strings, it may say yes, but not this year, it may say we'll think about it, it may say when we've fixed the damage caused by the latest earthquake or hurricane in ... and it may say no, haven't you noticed, buddy boy, that we're heading into another recession. You'll have to do it yourself.

You knocked 'em down. You put 'em up.

Not long ago I read somewhere something which gave me pause. The water table in Syria has already dropped by ten metres in general and continues to drop. Turkey wants to dam its rivers which flow into Syria, It isn't clear how climate change will impact on Syria but I don't think we can say with confidence that the country is going to get wetter and greener.

If a modern nation state runs out of water—what then?

If you are small and wealthy like Singapore you can buy water from your neighbour. If you are large and poor ...

Perhaps the war was a strange conspiracy to get millions of Syrians to run away to other countries with more water ...

But this isn't a long-term answer no matter how many conspiracy theories I may float or you may sign up to ...

Various commentators are worried about Russia getting increased influence, bases, client states, puppet rulers, the usual, in the Middle East. I for one would not waste my concern on this likelihood. Yes, Russia may believe it has got a very well-shod boot in a splintered door. But what then?

Will it therefore be honour-bound to provide much of the funding for reconstruction? Will its star be so tightly tied to the Assad regime that it will not be able to handle any sudden change? And will it grow increasingly mired in a region which does not seem prepared to work out what it wants, what it believes, how it wants to live, how it will treat its minorities, what to do about millions of restive women, whether to welcome back its refugees—and how it will handle a post-oil future.

Russia may find that Syria is about as tasty and pleasant as Eeyore's thistles.

THE EMPEROR'S TOGS

The other day I came upon this statement: "In simple terms: when sex doesn't 'deliver', where do we look next?" (Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, in *Lost Icons*.) I don't know if Archbishops of Canterbury are wise when it comes to matters of sex. Probably wiser than Popes. But not what you would call 'workers at the coal face'. Except that the word 'deliver' raises many questions. And is of itself a hard word to define unless we are merely thinking of delivery vans, delivery men, and a pizza or a parcel at your door ...

And the other day I was browsing in a book about famous composers. It seems they mostly had syphilis or gonorrhea. They still managed to get some composing done but unfortunately they all seemed to do their best to pass on some nasty germs in between. It is a comforting feeling to know that antibiotics have now largely got round that particular problem. Now a few composers have to take drugs for AIDS but in general they can compose and in between feel quite safe to enjoy themselves with wives, girlfriends, boyfriends, small children in Asian brothels ... or even those 'ladies of the night' ...

They can feel even better if they avoid watching programs which tell us in grim voices and scary statistics that we may be facing a future in which more and more diseases will become resistant to antibiotics.

There is of course the comforting thought that it will bring world populations down and give the planet a breathing space but there isn't a lot of comfort in relying on *germs* to do what supposedly intelligent human beings with brains and willpower have refused to do. Germs have a way of not thinking before they attack your system, system in all ways and measures. They aren't Hitler deciding which country to attack first. They are creatures of the cough and the dirty hands and the hot food and the hotter genitals. They live at the whim of human beings when they are being their most unintelligent most unthoughtful most careless most she'll-be-jake-ish ...

It is hard to blame germs. They aren't specks of life steeped in pros and cons. They don't understand words like 'ethics' and 'responsibility' ...

So what about human beings?

The massive downturn in childhood mortality owes much to two simple things: hygiene and vaccination. One day I was washing my hands in a public toilet block and I was shocked by the number of women and girls who came out and went straight out without washing their hands. Was it just a bad day and if I had come on Monday instead of Tuesday I would've had the pleasure of seeing everyone at the washbasins? I don't know. But if we neglect the simple inexpensive ways of keeping ourselves healthy then perhaps we deserve the worst the world of germs can throw at us.

Vaccination too is simple and relatively inexpensive. I have one caveat. I think every parent does need to be warned that the occasional child can have an adverse reaction to a vaccination. If there is any sign of a fever or a rash come straight back. Whooping cough vaccine has occasionally killed children. Some children are allergic to the serums used to grow vaccines. Occasionally vaccines have not been stored properly. Occasionally laboratories make mistakes.

But in general vaccination is a quick easy and inexpensive way to protect our children from all sorts of nasty diseases. So neglecting it simply because you couldn't be bothered doesn't impress me. Sometimes religious reasons are cited but I cannot think of anything in the Bible which disallows putting things in your body via a needle rather than a spoon. There are possible exemptions if you want to make sure the vaccines haven't been prepared using egg whites, blood serum or some other material to which you have either a social, religious, physical or moral allergy. But in that case discussing it with a doctor who understands allergies or attends your church to help you find a suitable alternative seems a more sensible way forward. There are problems with babies too young to be vaccinated or babies with serious medical conditions which would leave them unable to fight off even an attenuated form of a disease. But again care and discussion should be a way forward. I know there are problems if you are traveling, if you live in a country town where you only have access to one unsympathetic doctor, where some clinics are set up with about as much sympathy and chance to talk as a process line in a factory.

But diphtheria, whooping cough, measles, and all their relatives *are* nasty. It is worth looking carefully for alternatives if you really believe vaccination isn't safe.

So where was I? Oh, the coming crisis. Yes. Well, if you've taken the obvious precautions and you still get sick and are faced with the need for antibiotics ... I hope you will find that honey, now that they say it has amazing antiseptic antibacterial properties, is all you need ...

I am not sure if you should smear it on your toast or on your wounds ...

NO TRUMPS

I lost count of the number of people who harangued me about the awfulness of Donald Trump winning the US presidency. What did they expect me to do? Rush over there to say, wagging an admonitory finger all the while, 'Mr Trump, I really don't think you should step into the Oval Office'? I assume they wanted me to commiserate but I didn't really see the point.

The other day I came upon the suggestion that white Americans of European descent will soon, ie, in the next fifty years, become a minority in the United States. This is probably true. Places like Los Angeles are increasingly Hispanic. Rust-belt places often have large Black minorities and getting larger all the time.

The simple fact is that these two minorities tend to have larger families than either White Americans or Native Americans. But it probably does not matter. America has huge problems and I am not sure that the ethnic make-up of the population is really the biggest of the nation's problems.

Donald Trump is putting jobs, employment, growth, prosperity, right to the top of his wish list and people are obviously responding. But again, though employment is important, should it be trumping (couldn't resist) profoundly life-changing issues like climate change. The one nice thing that can be said about rust-belt towns is that they are not going to be inundated by rising seas any time soon. They may even find themselves booming, not because of Trump's shot in the arm for America's car industry but because they are safe places to move to.

Poor old Florida may find that its sun-worshippers are looking elsewhere. Oh, he has a house there, has he? And you think this may make him more aware of climate change as the sea water creeps over his beautiful manicured lawn?

I do like your optimism.

And the people, complacent people who didn't bother to turn out to vote, are now asking just what democracy is and how it can be safeguarded. It is a curious question. We can see what a dictatorship is. But we are not quite clear on what a democracy is. The will of the people. The voice of the people. If it is either of those then there is no point in grizzling about Trump. But the Americans have a complicated electoral college system which has the rest of the world bamboozled so it may not be as democratic as all that. Some countries have the first candidate past the post, some have complicated systems of preference voting, some offer parties and you take pot luck with individuals, some have multiple representatives in the one electorate, some have a mess and will re-run the election next year.

But all this is predicated on the idea that voting for people is what democracy is all about. And you can't vote anyway if you are prison, other than for a very brief sentence, you can't vote if you are on a bridging visa, you can't vote if you're off the planet, under age, or not registered.

Surely, you are now saying, democracy is about more than marks on papers or pings on screens which we will undoubtedly have very soon and which may have the same sorts of problems our census just had.

All kinds of other things go to make a nation in which people can all make their voices heard. Free speech. Access to the media. Access to parliament. We-e-ll, ye-es ... up to a point. But none of us can wander into Pine Gap and none of us really knows just what goes on behind the scenes. And speech is only moderately free and you do have to put your name down for Question Time in the House of Reps and polities can quite legally refuse to see certain of their constituents. Never mind. We are way ahead of oppressive places like Indonesian-occupied West Papua and North Korea ...

We are even ahead of the US of A. We very sensibly let the parties choose their leaders and put up the next prime minister after he has had the knife removed and the bandages whipped on. We just grizzle. And let me tell you: grizzling is not nice and it is not democratic ... because grizzling implies our democracy is far from perfect ...

A LOVELY SUNNY DAY

I did not expect Donald Trump to talk about the climate. Nor, actually, do I remember Hillary Clinton mentioning it. But I did expect it to get some mention here. After all Australia is vulnerable to climate change much more than some countries, less

than tiny Pacific atolls, but more than the US of A. But no, not a peep out of them, not even the Greens raised it as THE big election issue.

If you believe in God you probably believe we have been given a beautiful and wondrous planet as home. A planet so amazing, so astonishing, that to view it spinning in space is like watching the ultimate in contentment. But, curiously, religious people are no better than anyone else when it comes to respecting this planet, nurturing it, taking from it only the essentials of life. Religious people are as careless about pollution, waste, destruction, as anyone else. So if the idea of a Divine Gift is not enough to hold us back then what is?

The most obvious answer is—self interest.

If we are determined to wreck it then I suppose there is nothing more to be said. Mass suicide. Excuse me, you may be saying, we can't destroy a planet no matter how stupid, no matter how profligate we may be.

True. Something will continue to spin in space. But will it be livable as far as human beings go? Space is full of spinning rocks but we aren't wild about visiting them.

You can point out that we are adaptable, we can evolve. We have evolved, we are evolving, therefore:—

It is quite a nice assumption. There is within us the ability to change into something which can cope with a very hot world. A very cold world. A very dry world. A world with less and less dry land. An unstable world. A world of howling winds.

We are, after all, an intelligent species. We are the only species which has set up Intelligence tests to measure our own Intelligence. That must surely make us unique. Horses aren't always testing their IQ. And frankly I don't think the idea has ever occurred to butter grubs. Monkeys may have a vague inkling that there is more to life than bananas but I think it will be a while before they sit each other down with pencil and paper and twenty tricky questions. And monkeys may find this planet as unlivable as human beings are about to ...

So why have we been so unwilling to use our intelligence to diminish the danger we pose to this beautiful planet?

I think the answer lies in a version of evolution. Whatever the planet has thrown at us we have coped with, we have prospered, we have spread.

Ice Ages? Child's play. Large dangerous creatures with lots of teeth? Where are they now? Huge volcanic explosions? Well, it was a bit scary there for a while but we came through. It encourages complacency. We came through. We will always come through. Maybe we will go back to heavy brow ridges and larger teeth. Maybe we will go back to more body hair. Maybe we will go back to being shorter and squatter. These are things we can all handle. Unless we are Vogue models.

We are regularly told that an asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs. Nobody knows this for absolute certain. After all, no one has found huge masses of dinosaur bones all piled up in one place. Dinosaur bones have been found all over the world and belonging to different eras.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say: An asteroid put cold-blooded creatures under extreme stress. (It could be argued that something so severe also put warm-blooded creatures under extreme stress; but, as always, our remote ancestors came through.) But various cold-blooded creatures did come through too. Crocodiles. Lizards. Snakes. Fish in the sea. Insects. Algae. (Are caterpillars cold-blooded?) No one can accurately depict

the course of events. Never mind. One thing we are sure of is that our very remote ancestors came through.

It makes for confidence, doesn't it? That very warm humid earth like a sauna, like a terrarium on a sunny window sill, was jolted slightly, it wobbled slightly, it became cooler. The first snow fell. Those furious rushing winds of a very hot earth, like the ones we are contemplating with such equanimity, and which encouraged dinosaurs to grow very large and heavy so they wouldn't be blown away every time they poked a head out of the valley or the cave or the thickets of primitive cycads, moderated.

We, when I say we I mean those timid little furry creatures in our family tree, could go out for evening strolls. It encouraged confidence. Even if there were still large things like Muttaborrasaurus around there was more room to spread out, to grow, to expand our diet. Instead of snacking on a few little forest insects and some fungi we could become adventurous. We could try new culinary treats.

We could *grow*. Upwards. Outwards.

Perhaps it is in our genes. Perhaps it is a kind of race memory.

Climate change has been good for human beings.

Of course we don't care about climate change!

Far from getting rid of us it will simply turn us into something new and exciting. Homo Novo. Lead on, Brave New World, we are waiting ...

FOXES IN BOXES

Do we, don't we, have we, haven't we, did they, didn't they ... see a fox, hear a fox, smell a fox ...

If it wasn't so serious it would be almost as good as a traveling circus.

Every so often someone finds a fox by the side of a Tasmanian road. It is a funny thing how Tasmanians manage to hit these very rare and almost invisible foxes whereas people on the mainland with hundreds of thousands of foxes to choose from almost never manage to hit one on the road.

The answer seems very simple. Foxes rarely turn into road kill because unlike silly creatures like crows and devils they do not eat *in situ*. They grab road kill and immediately hie themselves off to their dens. This has the added bonus of making fox dens very smelly places with bones of dead animals around them. Not very hard for a good fox hound to find.

But foxes, it seems, are always getting hit on Tasmanian roads and tossed off on to the verge. It has taken us more than fifty million dollars to work out that these foxes are *probably*, some people are still reluctant to accept this probability, not road kill at all but carefully placed there before someone makes a phone call to say 'there is a dead fox beside the road—just where motorists are likely to see it—and it being a wily animal, couldn't possibly see the motorists'.

For Tasmania, always crying poor, this must stand out as one of the most expensive hoaxes in our history.

Now foxes are not like tiny beetles that need a magnifying glass, they are not shy silent virtually invisible animals. They bark, they mate, they leave scent, they like to make dens in hollow trees, they smell, they create havoc in chook yards and more so in a

state where a lot of people don't bother locking up their poultry come sundown ... in other words foxes are not shy and shrinking little violets.

You don't even need fox hounds to follow their scents. Many other breeds are quite capable of doing so. And you can't mistake a fox barking for a dog barking. So why were so many people drawn in? Why were so many people willing to put the local wildlife and their domestic animals at risk by a massive baiting campaign which didn't catch or kill a single fox?

It is not impossible for a live fox to catch a ride on a boat. One live fox may be a nuisance but it isn't a breeding population and it doesn't strike me as an insuperable problem. But that isn't what the massive eradication program was based on. No. It was based on dead foxes by the side of roads.

I think we have all been played for fools and I, for one, would like to know why and how and who colluded to make us all look like fools ...

CHRISTMAS

Christmas starts earlier and earlier. That seems to be a fact of life. A lot of people rail against it. Haven't you heard people saying without enthusiasm 'Soon we'll be told in July how many days to Christmas'? I've probably said just that myself. And this pushing Christmas, preparing for same, back into early spring is hard on little children. They're told Christmas is coming ... but Christmas comes and comes ... and comes ... and they can be forgiven for wondering if Christmas is ever actually going to get here.

So if the 'Season to be Jolly' is going to last for four or five months then we need to change the way we look at everything. I like the sense of brightness, good cheer, planning, hoping, being nice to people ... but let's take the hype and the pressure out of it and simply treat it as a nice time in itself. We talk about the Season of Advent. Or at least some people do. I notice Advent calendars now seem to have nothing about the birth of Jesus and are instead all about Santa Claus and chocolates. So why not treat Christmas as a season in the way we treat Spring as a Season? Christmas obviously has its high point, its climax, but it is a lovely time when people are just that bit kinder, more thoughtful, more generous ... and if we can manage that for three or four months then maybe it will become such a habit it will gradually spread out to fill the year ...

It doesn't mean that I am going to become reconciled to that bane of mine: the Boxing Day sale. I still find the whole concept crass, vulgar, insensitive, anti-Christian, and just plain unpleasant. And I absolutely refuse to believe that images of hard-eyed harpies stampeding towards displays of unsold and shop-soiled goods like a herd of thirsty bullocks sighting a trough is NEWS.

So I make a point of not turning on my radio or TV on Boxing Day. It saves power and all those states, companies, utilities worried about load shedding, rolling blackouts, the failure of price hikes to rein people in, too many people using too much power, can at least have a little break from worrying on Boxing Day. They could even thank me. 'Mrs Mop,' they can minute, 'has shown us the way of the future.' After all, someone has to ...

Many people say the nice thing about Christmas is that it is a family time. This sounds nice and reasonable when they say it and I am sure they are sincere. But it does raise the query: if Christmas is a time for catching up with family does that mean people have ignored their family all through the year and suddenly realize they have some catching up to do? After all, families which stay in close touch don't feel the need to set aside a special time or day or week to catch up. Still, whatever the motivation, I always like to see families keeping contact even if it is only one day in the year. I always find those stories of families broken apart and only finding each other many years later so very sad.

People sometimes say, either sincerely or because they feel they should, that Christmas is a time of thinking about the birth of Jesus and all that that has meant in their lives, in others lives, in history, in the spiritual development of human kind. But very few people take real time on Christmas Day for contemplation. It is a Go-Go-Day. Jesus gets squeezed in between Christmas stockings and starting to cook the turkey.

Of course it is better to be squeezed in than not remembered at all. But how many people really take the time to contemplate all that is involved in the Christmas Story? As we down roast and rich pudding do we stop to ask what Mary had after those hours of painful labour in uncomfortable surroundings. Perhaps a piece of bread. Perhaps a drink of water.

It is not that we are going to give up all that food, nor perhaps should we, but perhaps to take out a half hour in the busyness of the day for quietness and contemplation?

Speaking of food I notice people being urged not to eat meat on Christmas Day. (But they haven't said no one should eat little lambs on Australia Day or fish at Easter.) I understand the sentiment. Why should any other thinking feeling breathing creature suffer for our Christmas dinner? But if we take it as a one off—that we will eat chicken or pork or fish on Christmas Eve or Boxing Day but not on Christmas Day itself then it seems hypocritical. It reminds me of the hyperbole that surrounds British and German soldiers singing 'Silent Night, Holy Night' together on Christmas Day during World War One. Far from seeing this as something to praise it gives me cold shivers up the spine. How can you sing holy songs with the 'enemy' one day and kill them the next? War only becomes understandable if it is motivated by outrage. You have done something unspeakably evil and despicable and therefore as you refuse to desist we are going to kill you.

If you say, well, they're really quite decent chaps after all and probably don't hate us or anyone else—but we are still going to kill them, it takes war to whole new heights of hypocrisy, absurdity, and sheer mindless brute instincts.

Christmas lunch has hardly gone down when all eyes (well, some eyes) are on the yachts. I said to someone I felt sorry for the Wild Oats crew for having to retire. She snorted and said, Rubbish, they're rolling in money, they don't need to be pitied! I have said something very similar in other contexts but when I stopped to think about it I had the disconcerting thought: at what point are we poor enough to deserve pity? Is there a point at which we sink below not the Poverty Line but the Pity Line? Should we feel

sympathy for the very wealthy when things go wrong for them? When they lose loved ones?

And are we feeling sorry for the things that go wrong in the lives of the poor simply because they are poor or because something about their lives says they deserve pity and sympathy? The more I pondered on this the harder it became to make any sort of definitive statement. We don't feel particularly sorry for the poor if they have smoked or drunk themselves to death. We don't feel sorry if they have binged on McDonald's any more than we feel sorry for the wealthy who have smoked cigars or drunk expensive champagne or binged on caviar or roast quails. But in there seems to be the thought that the poor can't help doing stupid things and making bad lifestyle choices. Someone told me that the poor don't know any better than to live on McDonald's, that it hasn't occurred to them that they need to eat vegetables and have some fruit.

This worries me because it is equating poverty with ignorance and stupidity. Anyone can become poor. I read once that the single most common factor leading to bankruptcy in the nineteenth century was ill health. All kinds of things can make people poor. And the people seen as poor aren't always as poor as the people whose pride or dignity does not allow them to ask for charity.

Many people, particularly women, did not apply for the aged pension until long after the date they became eligible. My own mother, and she was certainly not alone in this, was well into her seventies before the family managed to pressure her in to applying. Her position was simple: 'I haven't paid tax therefore I don't deserve to receive money from the government.' Thousands of women who had not been in paid work felt the same. They could not point to a monetary contribution therefore they could not convince themselves they deserved to be paid for 'nothing'.

We used various arguments:

1. That everyone pays tax. You simply can't get away from it. The GST has raised the profile of indirect taxation but it has always been there. Retail Sales taxes, stamp duty, customs dues on imported goods, and their furtive ilk.
2. That the women who did not seek paid work not only did not take jobs away from young people just starting out in life but contributed in dozens of other ways. They didn't see themselves as Volunteers but simply people who saw things needing to be done and pitched in and got them done.
3. That no one in the late years of their life should live in poverty just because they did not feel they were entitled to anything. That in one of the wealthiest countries on earth elderly women should not be making and mending, living on the cheapest cuts and old bread and asking their children for a bit of help here and there and leaving medical conditions untreated simply because they didn't feel they deserved a government handout.

We have now gone to a different almost opposite extreme. But there are still people who would rather go without than complain or demand. And these people still tend to influence how we see those who have very modest lives, very modest wants, and very modest requests. This sense of the elderly poor still invites pity. Even if the number of them who have to be pressured in to applying for a pension grows smaller by the year.

But I still think people who have trained, planned, worked on their skills and their fitness, put their lives at risk, all that, still do deserve sympathy when it all falls apart. Their bank balances should be irrelevant.

You have probably heard this phrase on a Christmas Day: 'The Word was made flesh'. I have heard it countless times but never really stopped and thought: exactly what does it mean?

All procreation is preceded by thoughts, wishes, desires, plans, and Words. It is hard to imagine precious new life made without a Word being uttered. It might not be a loving Word but still a Word. And so the Word became Flesh.

Flesh too is a word deserving thought. Because we are more than flesh. Within flesh is thought, hope, love, hate, kindness, compassion, and of course WORDS. Strange that flesh can create Words but it can and does.

Perhaps we could say: 'The Word became Human' but apart from the fact that theologians have spent two millennia arguing over the humanness of Jesus, it raises questions about other beings, it raises questions about words, about the thoughts that precede words, it creates questions about whether the Word became Spirit and flesh was just the outer covering.

And it raises questions that go beyond this little planet.

Did the Word become Flesh on hundreds, millions, of other planets across the universe? Did other species, beyond our imagining, come via birth to the understanding that they were more than flesh, that they were immortal and that the universe must certainly hold other beings conscious of both their planet-bound self and their spiritual self that can travel in, towards, through, into unknowable dimensions?

It is a humbling thought.

And so, with that, I will leave you. Because you may wish to go away and ponder on more than Words and Flesh. You may even wish to give your attention, briefly, to the make-up and mysteries of our latest parliament ...

THE END