

MRS
MOP

and
Her
Sometimes
Diary

By
J. L. Herrera

Introduction

She is a bit of a tedious old biddy, isn't she? Just when I think I can accept something as 'a settled fact' along she comes and wants to start an argument. This isn't to say I necessarily disagree with all the things she has to say. Sometimes she is like a welcome bucket of cold water, annoying when it was up-ended but refreshing in the long run.

Because it is so much easier to run with the pack. It means I don't have to think for myself. And thinking, let's face it, can be tiring and uncomfortable—especially if you come to a point where you don't feel able to complacently accept some piece of received wisdom. Suddenly you are adrift on stormy seas.

All those comforting clichés: You can't turn the clock back, I suppose so-and-so knows what he is doing, perhaps the government knows something I don't know, if it makes people happy, well, things have got better, the good old days weren't really good, and that awful one that I hear every so often: well, we won't be around when this mess, this problem, even this tree grows too big for that spot ... the assumption that death really does solve all sorts of problems, large and trivial.

But Mrs Mop never lets herself contemplate that easy cop-out. She may be here, she may not, but that doesn't mean that public figures, influential figures should be applauded when they indulge in lazy stupid sloppy 'she'll be jake' thinking full of platitudes and sops. So I am pleased she is allowing me the occasional glimpse into her diary. You too might like to see some of the things which have got her hot under the collar.

January to December 2017.

Mrs Mop's Diary

JANUARY 1st: The Queen has a cold. Dear me. Quite a lot of people around me have had colds this summer but they haven't made the news. But not a cold bad enough for her to retire. I wish she would retire. By the time Charles gets to be King he'll have to manouevre his walking frame into Parliament to do the honours.

I hated watching John Paul II on the Vatican balcony. I always looked around to see if there was someone close enough to catch him if he fell.

Lots of jobs you get sent packing when you get to a certain age. But monarchs and popes seem to be exempt. I can't think why. I always thought those Dutch Queens were so sensible when they waited till the Heir Apparent was of a dignified age, had raised the children, and could now turn to the business of being Queen (and now King). But Britain, we are told, can't be sensible because Edward VIII abdicated. Now, of all the silly reasons for going on with a silly system that takes the biscuit!

JANUARY 5th: Posters on training walls, material handed out. I didn't get to hear why the Indonesians were creating. Something to do with West Papua. But then the Indonesians have got 'creating' down to a fine art. You only have to sound offended enough to get all these pollies with their mea culpas and hands on their little hearts, yes, sir, no, sir, we'll have it fixed in no time, sir, don't you worry about that ...

Why shouldn't defence personnel and trainers put what they want on their walls? Would the Indonesians be creating if it was a naked lady? You would hope so but I doubt it.

JANUARY 7th: Sussan Ley buys a house. No, Sussan Ley buys a flat. Sussan Ley goes to a party, Sussan Ley watches the fireworks, Well, why shouldn't the poor dear have a bit of fun in her life. After all, Health always makes ministers depressed and old before their time.

In fact, I strongly suspect that prime ministers give Health to their least favourite people. They know that no one ever gets it right. So that seems to be another good reason to go round buying apartments. We wouldn't object if she solaced herself with food or a nice car. Apartments are just the next step up. For pollies.

JANUARY 9th: East Timor tears up treaty. Oh good! One of the world's more unfair and unpleasant treaties. You wait till a people, a country, have their backs to the wall, struggling to survive each day—and you nip in and steal their resources. Charming!

It also makes sense for all the world's maritime boundaries, wherever possible, to follow median lines. Imagine ships' captains trying to work out whose waters they are in when they are faced with something like the dog's breakfast Indonesia and Australia created when they were busy stealing East Timor's resources? Where should they put their fishing nets down? What do they say when they are sinking? Do they know if some cut throats are pirates or legitimate people protecting their nation's waters?

And I don't know what Australia is bleating about. We are still going to cart the oil around, refine it, sell it, get jobs for our lads on the drilling platforms. Anyone would think we were going to be left like Oliver Twist with an empty plate.

JANUARY 26th: A lot of people protest. Well, of course they do. Would you see the day, the date, when those nasty neighbours of yours did a home invasion, stole your backyard hose, chopped down your fig tree, threw their rubbish over the fence, blasted you with awful music and otherwise did their best to make you miserable—as a day to CELEBRATE?

And these weren't even neighbours. They were a boatload of strangers who had come halfway round the world to unload their flotsam and jetsam and start cutting down your trees. Not to mention shooting you when you didn't want your trees chopped down.

JANUARY 31st: Tony Mundine and the anthem. Tony Mundine is going to sit down for the national anthem. Well, why not. Lots of people do. Some even lie down and stay lying down.

There was a time when quite a lot of people wanted 'Waltzing Matilda' as our national anthem. Would we have complained if people hadn't stood up for a song about a swaggie stealing a sheep? The idea is hilarious.

When I was a kid we had to stand in the schoolyard with our hands on our hearts (or vaguely in that area) and sing 'God Save the Queen'. I couldn't understand why she needed saving. Was she very wicked and we all had to ask God to forgive her? Was she like Pauline and always in Peril? Was she getting a hard time at home and it was important that everyone from God downwards should treat her well. We belted it out (woe betide us if we didn't) but it always seemed a meaningless exercise.

FEBRUARY 3rd: The dairy industry. It needs looking in to. Yes, only don't spend too much time just looking. How about pitching in and making sure all our dairy farmers get a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. To hear that people who work seven days a week in all weathers are not even breaking even on each carton of milk or cream is absolutely shameful.

And milk, unlike wool or wheat, can't be stored till prices improve. Milk, lettuces, cut flowers and such items, are very vulnerable. But milk is in a different category to lettuces. You don't need to invest in expensive yards and bails and milking machines and vats and coolers and all such things for lettuces. Nor do you have to wait two to three years for each 'unit of production' to begin producing.

So if we want a dairy industry we have to make sure that every container of milk sold reflects that fact.

Mind you, there are aspects of the dairy industry, such as the way calves are treated, which could also do with the spotlight shone firmly on them. Calves are just as precious in themselves as dogs, cats, and other cute little furry animals and deserve to receive nothing but kindness ...

FEBRUARY 9th: Heat wave. Oh dear. Adelaide's power was out for an hour! Now this might well be a tragedy in an Intensive Care Unit but all such places have their own generators. And I am not convinced that most of us cannot survive an hour without electricity. I always keep a supply of candles on hand for when the power does suddenly go off. I assume most people do.

Of course the power going out when it is 40 degrees outside is a bit different to 20 degrees outside. Dying of heat stroke is easier than dying of cold. But we know, or if we don't I don't know where we've been, that no human system is impervious to human error and human policy-making. It took them six months to fix the Bass Strait cable. Nothing is fail-safe not even incredibly expensive space rockets.

People largely took responsibility for their power in the old days. We spent a lot of time collecting wood for the kitchen and twigs for the chip heater in the bathroom. People made cars that could run on steam. You had phones and gramophones that you had to wind up.

But the electric world seduced us all by being clean (so long as we didn't live next to a power station) and easy (if you were prepared to pay your bills on time). It saved an incredible

amount of work. I can still remember the business of filling the tank under the kerosene fridge every week and that isn't a job I would wish on anyone. But should we now spend our time grumbling because the power grid doesn't always deliver. Well, why not? Power companies are there to be grumbled at.

FEBRUARY 23rd: Tony Abbott and ex-prime ministers. We do seem to have a problem. I don't suggest that we turn to the American way of picking the president separately. Nor do I suggest we look at the more extreme measures some countries have adopted which involve a wall and a blindfold. But surely we could do better when it comes to who sits in The Lodge? I know it keeps a lot of journos in work—if they don't mind work which bores them to tears—but it just isn't very productive work. Tens of millions of words go into telling us about the spats at the top. No wonder people get bored with politics.

My suggestion is let's do away with prime ministers altogether. In fact let's do away with party leaders, CEOs and Madam Presidents and the whole rigmarole. After all we all know that it is people well down the chain who do a lot of the work. So why should one person be put up on a pedestal (and in some cases paid beyond what common sense suggests any one person's work is worth) and feted and listened to and generally made into someone to put on stamps?

FEBRUARY 27th: Those polls, who cares? Oh dear, Mr Turnbull has slumped. It always makes me think of small people in very big chairs. It is rather hard to avoid slumping. It is a curious word, isn't it?

But in fact polls are a waste of time. They pick a thousand people, mostly in urban areas, and ask them which person they prefer, Turnbull or Shorten. Someone asked me that question about preferred prime ministers twenty years ago and I said 'Neither'. But apparently that wasn't an acceptable answer. They insisted on putting me down as 'Don't Know'. If 'Don't Like' translates into 'Don't Know' then every poll is flawed before anyone even starts crunching numbers.

Crunching.

Slumping.

No wonder we don't take our pollies very seriously.

FEBRUARY 28th: So we're friends with Indonesia again. How nice! Should we be friends with human rights abusers? As we are friends with quite a lot of human rights abusers I don't suppose that is the right question. And I don't suppose friends is the right appellation, not unless we are prepared to downgrade friendship to something which has little meaning and nothing special about it ... Of course we do claim to have Special Relationships with certain countries. But as no one has ever defined Special Relationship it's a tricky one. Do I have Special Relationships with my friends? No. It implies some friends are more special than others.

MARCH 1st: That little mix-up at the Oscars. Someone said that if only Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway had had their glasses on ... Would it have been so difficult to print in very large letters on every envelope and slip? Apparently such obvious ideas don't occur to people in Hollywood.

Anyway I wasn't the slightest bit interested. Not in their clothes, not in their hair, and the only movie that interested me was 'Tanna'. I wanted it to get something and was sorry it didn't. Well, strictly speaking it got quite a lot of publicity. I hope that will give it a new lease of life. And I hope all the village people in it got paid properly. After all, they were what made it unique.

MARCH 9th: Julian Assange. He is still refusing to go to Sweden to either be convicted or clear his name. His reason—the Americans might grab him. I don't find that good enough. They are not going to send an Aussie to the electric chair for receiving stolen goods. You have to do nasty murders to go to the chair. And as he is not an American citizen he can't be convicted of treason there.

And his accomplice who did the stealing, far from going to the chair, has now been allowed to turn into a woman in jail so there must be some nice jails over there. Most jails are not so accommodating.

I know it is easy for someone like me to say that I admire the people who face up to their accusers rather than skulking in a neutral embassy, I am not likely to be called to account for anything worse than a mistake with my pension or a bit of jaywalking. But the simple fact is that I have much more time for the people who 'take it on the chin'.

MARCH 10th: Penalty rates. To Do Away With—Or Not. People say nurses and police work on Sundays without penalty rates so why shouldn't people work in cafés without. But there is an important difference. Nurses and police are rostered. They do some weekend and night work but unlike a small eatery employing one or two people they don't have to do it every week.

They say it will lead to more business on a Sunday leading to more people being employed. Now I very much doubt this. I have occasionally been in to eating places on a Sunday and staff are standing round. Why pay more staff to stand around when there is absolutely no guarantee that more people are going to shop or eat out on a Sunday.

And deep down I don't want Sundays to be treated as 'just another day'. If people don't want to take time out for contemplation, for quiet thought on the sacred, the divine, the eternal, the things that matter most, that of course is up to them—but to suggest that no one should have any reprieve from the rush and bustle and noise of modern life seems unfair and undignified.

MARCH 12th: Little man on stop signs. So Melbourne is going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to change a little man to a little woman. Hard to believe. Lots of money has to be spent repairing stop lights as people seem to have a passion for breaking them. But I don't think they vandalize them because they object to the Little Man Walking and want him replaced.

Strictly speaking you wouldn't know it was a little man. He is a stick figure. Many men have long hair and women short. Many women wear slacks and some men wear sarongs or kilts. We only know it represents a Little Man because we've been told it is a Little Man. Call it what you like. A Little Person walking. A Child's Stick Figure walking. And put all that money into really useful things like seats for the elderly and litter bins for the lazy ...

MARCH 13th: Incentives. Taxes. Someone just suggested there could be a financial incentive to leave big expensive cities, that the taxpayer could pay people to move to smaller less expensive towns. Pardon my densemness but I thought there already was a financial incentive to move. High house prices.

And a Sugar Tax to make us eat less of the stuff. If it goes into the farmers' pockets I suppose that's fine. But if it just goes into consolidated revenue then I am sure it will be wasted without improving people's health. And I'm not sure that it will make a blind bit of difference anyway. Double a kilo of sugar from \$1 to \$2. Will that really stop people eating the stuff? Put the cost of a chocolate bar up from 90c to \$1-10. Will that stop people buying chocolate bars? I sincerely doubt it.

The only thing that might help is punishing people for feeding their babies sugar. Kids who don't get hooked young on sugar are less likely to want sickly sweet things as they get older. The other day I went into a cafe where I sometimes go to get a sandwich. They had done

away with their sandwiches and only had cakes and sweet things. They have lost me as a customer. But clearly they had enough people wanting sweet things to say, 'Mrs Mop? Who cares where she goes for a bite and a cuppa?' If enough youngsters grow up without a sweet tooth that café will have to re-think. Of course I will be about a 107 by then so it won't help me but it will make people healthier and bring down our skyrocketing health bill.

I am told that parents in Taiwan are fined if they allow their kids to access a computer or similar before their fifth birthdays. I don't know how they police it. But if parents were fined for allowing their kids to eat sugar before they turned five ...

MARCH 18th: A change to legislation. Instead of saying it is an offence to 'insult, offend, or humiliate' a person it is now being suggested that it could just be 'harass' them. Now I may be using an odd dictionary but each of those terms has a different meaning. An insult is not necessarily a humiliation. All those Aboriginal people down those years who were told to wait at the end of the queue were not necessarily being harassed, insulted, or offended, the words could be said very politely—but they were still a humiliation.

Of course people are insulted, offended, humiliated every day of the week and on every ground under the sun. For their hair style. For their name. For the behaviour of their children. For their driving ability or lack of. You name it. And endlessly running to the law for help only makes the lawyers richer. Some things you take and move on. Some things can be resolved with a sharp comeback. All those women who said to men with wandering hands 'Do you mind!' and the ones who added 'You Dirty Old So-and-So' got an even faster resolution. They may have lost their jobs but you can get the dole if you're sacked. Best of all were the ones who stayed and made it clear, day in and day out, that such behaviour was disgusting—despite management's hope that they would give up and go away.

But I don't have any problem with making such legislation stronger. Make it so you cannot insult, offend, humiliate, annoy, harass, disgrace, affront, abuse, hurt, pester, stalk, tease, bother anyone on the grounds of race. And it works in all ways. Make it so you can't humiliate me just because I've got skin the colour of a dirty sock or some sour milk ...

APRIL 8th: Joe Ludwig is having trouble with his emails. It's a funny thing that people in high positions always seem to be having problems with their emails. I'll bet Hillary Clinton was wishing the jolly things had never been invented. But the odd thing is that all these people have secretaries. What are these secretaries up to that they get the emails in such a muddle? Should there be special courses for secretaries so they can make sure their bosses aren't on the front page with email messes and mix-ups?

Joe Ludwig got roasted for leaping in and briefly banning live cattle exports to Indonesia. Now I was with him on that. Did all these livestock exporters, farmers, agents, other functionaries, genuinely not know what was going on? And if not—why not?

I don't believe we should be exporting any animal for slaughter, not even a lobster or a chicken. We know that many countries equate 'dumb animal' with 'animal impervious to pain'. And the whole process is riven with cruelty. From the time the animals are yarded up, put on road trains to travel for days without water in 40 degree heat without the chance to lie down or turn around or scratch an itchy spot, then into yards for days, even weeks, where they are fed on an unfamiliar diet and chased around by dogs or electric prods, herded on to ships where they are crowded in with not so much as a leaf of green grass, two weeks of seasickness, then herded off with more electric prods, then into more yards with more stress and crowding—and finally off to a cruel and painful death. Now if human beings can't do better than that then I can only hope that animals finally say 'Down with Human Beings!' and begin a concerted program of vengeance. Either that or commit mass suicide so that we will have to be the ones to eat the grass ...

APRIL 14th: Big Sport. Major Matches on Good Friday. Isn't that why we have a holiday on Good Friday? So we can go to the footie? That seems to be the way it is going. Do they have footie in Saudi Arabia or Israel on their holiest days? I don't think so.

But we are different. We are, so we are regularly told, a post-Christian society. Whatever that actually means. Of course as soon as anything goes wrong in people's lives they want the Salvos, Vinnies, Anglicare, to fix things for them. Post-Christian? Heavens no! We want all the Christian churches to be out and about and full and financial and willing to help! Ask the Government for a hamper and all you will get will be a polite 'You want a hamper? Sorry we don't do hampers' or, these days, instructions to take your request on-line.

So if we want our churches to be there in our hour of need then how about giving Christians some respect on the holiest day of their year?

APRIL 18th: Trump and North Korea. I am not sure that Donald Trump knows what to do with North Korea. But then no one else does either. Whether his form of brinkmanship will be better than the Softly Softly process of other presidents remains to be seen. Someone said to me that they thought he was trying to encourage the North Korean military to rise up against their mad president. I also had this thought.

The trouble with this is—are the generals and admirals who run the North Korean military any saner than their Great Leader?

I heard recently that there is a fence between North Korea and China. This doesn't sound very buddy-buddy even though we are frequently told that if North Korea has a friend it is China. And I couldn't help wondering—was it to keep the North Koreans in, the Chinese out, or merely there because the Great Leader has a game park on the border where he comes to shoot whatever kind of animal hasn't yet been eaten by hungry North Koreans.

But there is a more fundamental problem. Exactly what does this Kim want? Apart from doing his best to bankrupt his country. Is he messing about with missiles so he can hold some city to ransom? I'm not sure that would work. If he tells them before he blasts off they can take preventative measures. If he doesn't tell them but just blasts away why should they pay him anything afterwards? Is he so excited about missiles (sort of compensation for something lacking in the erectile department perhaps) that he is going to play around no matter what anyone else says or does? Is it a way for a very small chicken, in world terms, to feel like a very large rooster? Or does he get a kick out of scaring the pants off people over the border in South Korea?

Whatever his reason is I think we should just ignore him. He is basking in the world's attention like a serial killer enjoying seeing the news of his latest crime on the front page. If nobody takes the slightest notice he might up the ante, he might tell us all why he has spent billions on missiles just for the excitement of seeing them fall into the sea, or he might finally realize that his little games are doing absolutely nothing for his poor benighted country.

APRIL 19th: Housing affordability. This comes up regularly. Stuck for a story? Housing affordability. That's always a goer. Like sharks in summer. But there are two different issues in there. Housing *affordability* and housing *availability*.

I heard someone say that something like 60,000 apartments stand empty because people have bought them solely for investment and re-sale—and let's face it, tenants are not always an unalloyed good. Even so, the government could step in. Any apartment which has stood empty without any attempt being made to find a tenant in, say, six months incurs a serious penalty such as higher rates.

What is the point of building more and more apartment blocks if they are just going to stand empty? What is the point of building anything if it is not geared to providing a home for someone?

Little aliens look down on our mad behaviour on roads—everyone rushing this way between 8 and 9 am and everyone rushing back the way they came between 5 and 6 pm—and express their mystification. Could we not come up with a more efficient system?

Little aliens look down on building building building in a couple of big cities and they look out over the great expanses with not a building in sight and say, ‘Ants feel lonely if they’re not falling over each other every few minutes. Wasps are similarly challenged. It is just something about certain species.’

And another little alien pipes up like the little boy seeing a naked emperor and says ‘Are you sure these funny things with two legs and hairy heads are ants?’

I lived for a year in a caravan. With children. There are worse alternatives. And caravans can be built for a fraction of the cost of a house.

APRIL 20th: Australian values. We’ve had a whirl with Don Bradman and Phar Lap. (I am not sure how you paste values on to a racehorse although many horses have nicer natures than many people.) Now we are going to have Australian values which really *mean* something. Nobody quite knows what they mean but never mind. It sometimes just takes time to determine what we mean. Talking louder and louder to people who don’t understand English, particularly foreign taxi drivers, sometimes gets you somewhere. We’ll try the same thing at home.

Someone followed this up by saying new arrivals should obey our laws. Now apart from the fact that most of us don’t obey all our laws all the time there is the added problem: most of us don’t even *know* all our laws. Each state has in excess of 200,000 of them. From little by-laws, like not sunbaking nude in your front yard, to little infringements of old traffic codes to obscure offences whose names sound like something out of a medieval mystery play and have about the same resonance for the average person.

Of course values and laws are not the same thing. But there is a deeply-embedded belief that our values underlie our laws. So perhaps if we all burrow down through our countless laws we will come to some sparkling little values at the bottom of the pile like precious stones on a creekbed ...

And when people don’t obey our laws because they are in conflict with their cultural practices we pat them on the head and say ‘There, there, you run away and go on with child sex and hurting animals and being nasty to women—we don’t want you to lose your culture’. What we probably do need to say in such circumstances is ‘You have two choices. You obey our laws and leave your culture at home or you go home and you can practice your culture to your heart’s content’. AFTER we’ve made sure they know what our laws, not our values, actually say ... and BEFORE we’ve got bogged down in interminable arguments as to how Australian values might differ from Canadian values or Irish values or Samoan values or Kenyan values or Italian values ...

APRIL 21st: Science and Silence. Scientists are complaining that we are cutting back the money they need to do research into Climate Change—and incidentally keep their jobs. Now I am sorry for anyone who loses their job, regardless of whether they are a cleaner or a shop assistant or a truck driver or a teacher ... or a scientist. Jobs aren’t easy to come by.

But there is a problem with endless scientific research, apart from the fact that it so often seems to require us to make marine animals as uncomfortable as possible, and that is the simple fact that although we know the climate is changing and the world is getting warmer most of us are unprepared to *do* anything about it.

So how about fewer scientific programs to tell us what we already know and some really tough legislation which *forces* us all into being less profligate with this precious little planet?

MAY 2nd: Salmon. All sorts of troubles. Now I need to put a disclaimer up front. I don't buy or eat salmon. My reason is simple. If I don't approve of factory farming on land why should I approve of factory farming at sea? It still herds creatures into miserable little spaces and requires them to spend the rest of their lives in those miserable little spaces. And it still feeds them on other, humanly edible, fish.

Creatures in zoos used to go round and round their pens. Then someone, I don't know who, said 'Can't we do better? Can't we try to recreate a fairly natural environment?' If it wasn't good enough to condemn creatures in zoos to the endless round and round their small cage—they why is it good enough for the creatures we eat to be so condemned? One lot of creatures gets stared at for our entertainment. Another lot of creatures ends up on our plates with sauce and salad. But surely they each deserve *some* respect?

MAY 3rd: Gonski. I just heard them throwing round some huge figures designed to make our education systems better. It is very hard to decide from these figures what is worthwhile and what is sheer waste.

So why do we send our kids to school?

1. To keep them off the street and out of their parents' hair.
2. To learn something which will be useful to both them and to society.

The first reason is very iffy. Why have children if you can't wait to send them off to school? And schools don't keep them off the streets anyway. They used to. Truancy was almost a hanging offence. Now it is merely a yawn.

The second reason is the stuff of endless drama and argument. We don't know what they should learn, how they should learn it, and whether it will actually prove useful in the unknown world our children will inherit in 10 to 20 years time.

But we do try. People would not get so angry and passionate if a lot of people weren't trying to work out the answers to this huge and complex problem.

But I am yet to be convinced that money is the answer to anything.

When I go into modern classrooms I start to feel tired. They have stuff *everywhere*. On the walls, on the windows, even hanging from the ceilings. Perhaps modern children are better at keeping focused in those over-busy places. But somehow I doubt it.

And we constantly hear complaints about school buildings, school equipment, school fittings. A huge amount of the money mentioned goes into these ephemeral things.

Yet what makes a school worthwhile and an education something to change a life for the better?

Good teachers.

Not tests, materials, fittings, computers, sports equipment, excursions, libraries, building design, and all the rest.

Just good teachers.

Good teachers are the ones who inspire and help their class as it sits under a banyan tree, as it sits in the middle of a paddock or a beach or in the back of an old truck. We have been seduced by the trappings, not the substance.

MAY 10th: That very white ad of Mr Shorten. Ads are those things which you desert to go to the bathroom, make yourself a cup of tea, let the dog in. Ads are not things you study, memorize, or dissect. But it seems that some people in the ALP think differently. They must sit eagle-eyed in front of their TVs studying ads. Well, good luck to them. And they were certainly on to a winner with this one. Most political ads drop like the proverbial stone but this one got a lot of people talking.

I remember when they began bringing in what might be called ethnic faces. There was one about a washing powder. Now, it was very nice to see a Vietnamese woman or whatever she was—the only trouble being that I couldn't understand what she was saying.

But let's face it. Most politicians and most political hopefuls are white ... or whitish. The Lebanese power brokers in the NSW ALP may have put off the powers-that-be from showing faces that are not a jolly pink. But political ads aren't about faces. They are about getting a message across. You will be better off under us. Faces are irrelevant.

There are basically two kinds of ads: the ones where you remember the product and the ones where you remember the ad but the product is a pointless intrusion and soon forgotten. Of course advertisers need to be careful to keep this in mind. That idea that a celebrity can sell anything still gets in the way. I remember Gough Whitlam promoting Leggo products. It put me off Leggo products for life. There are the ones where you focus on the celebrity but ten minutes later have forgotten what the product was. There are all sorts of pitfalls for advertisers including that hoary old chestnut that a half-naked lady can sell anything.

The best ads are clearly spoken, informative, and give you the sense that this product would really be worth looking out for.

Is a political ad any different?

I still apply the same criteria.

MAY 16th: Air B & B (bnb; which always makes me think they've put the 'u' upside-down), the massive rise of same and should it be regulated, policed, capped, restricted in any way. I was just listening to a talk on this subject and it got a lively conversation going. Someone said that Air B & B was destroying communities. That where once she knew all her neighbours they are now strangers who come and go like ships in the night. The people next door could now be lying there dead and she wouldn't know.

I don't object to Air B & B but I can see that there is a problem. Hotels and motels tend to be in certain areas of towns. Tourist hot spots. Beachsides. Along highways. They don't remove anything from a community because they have never effectively been part of a community. The people who work in them come from a community and go home to a community.

Traditional B & Bs were set up in people's homes or in the spare cottage on their property. So the owners remained part of the community. It was only their guests who came and went.

But Air B & Bs fall uneasily between these two ideas. The owners live elsewhere and just come round to check on things and tidy up when people leave. Then they go and a new lot move in for two days or a week. The house or flat has effectively been removed from the community of which it was once part.

Is this why people speak more and more about community? Because we are aware that we have less and less sense of real community?

MAY 20th: Smoking rates of young adult males are high. Very high. Oh dear. Possibly young adult males don't look at those nasty pictures on cigarette packets. Possibly young adult males think 'It couldn't happen to me' in the way that they drive badly without worrying about smashing up themselves, their vehicles, or other unfortunates who got in the way, because 'It couldn't happen to me'.

Maybe young adult males even want to die young? Maybe young adult males are deeply conscious of the over-population of our planet and are determined to do something about it?

People say they don't want a Nanny State. I assume this is a version of the Welfare State. But the odd thing is that it doesn't matter what the problem is—people immediately want 'the government' to fix it. You name it, we want 'the government' to fix it. By legislation. By personnel. By buckets of money. By higher taxes or lower taxes or different taxes. The government exists to save us from ourselves.

And what we have ended up with is a socialist state by another name. Not a carefully planned socialist state with the lines between public and private responsibilities carefully drawn but an ad hoc back-door dog's-breakfast kind of socialism. And every politician contributes to this trend because no politician is going to dare to say there are some things, like young men smoking, which aren't the responsibility of government.

You want to smoke, lad, you go right ahead but don't expect 'the government' to pay your medical bills because your smoking was YOUR CHOICE. No. That doesn't get votes.

MAY 25th: More bombs. I have never quite understood why a home-grown terrorist is in some way worse than a foreign-born one. Is it expected that he will have imbibed 'British values' or 'French values' with his rusks and pureed apple? Is it to be assumed that this exposure to 'English values' will make him a better person than exposure from babyhood to 'Libyan values' or 'Syrian values'?

I know that the bombs and mines which kill and maim little children from Laos to Angola are plastic and therefore harder to find. But urban bombers often do seem to go for metal when they create their bombs. Could we not use this fact to pick up on their lethal load?

We could all carry little bomb-o-meters to beep us safely through public spaces.

It is also assumed that all these angry young men using cars as weapons, stabbing, shooting, blowing themselves and the bystanders up, are all furious because of the US intrusion into Iraq, Libya, and now Syria. Now I didn't agree with the US involvement in Iraq. Nasty as Saddam Hussein was he was only a danger, mainly, to other Muslims. And the US wasn't out there talking with an across-the-board selection of Muslims, young and old, male and female, from the far right and the far left (if this is a relevant way to categorize Muslims), from Sunni and Shia and every other offshoot. No, the US had been 'captured' by a couple of peeved off dissidents and exiles. Their take on what was a complex situation was seen as the only take.

So are these young men angry because the US listened to a couple of angry Muslims? Are they angry because the US didn't listen to them? Are they angry because the US didn't say, 'Your problem, mate, you fix it up'? Are they angry because the US went into Iraq because it had oil? Are they angry because the US is bombing Syria because it doesn't have oil? The simple fact is that a very simplistic reason is being given for complex motivations in young men.

However we look at it, the behaviour of the US doesn't seem likely to be the key to young hooligans mowing down people in France, Belgium, and Germany. Because none of these countries has ever been fully in agreement with what the US is doing (or sometimes not doing) in the Middle East.

MAY 26th: Allan Joyce was the man everyone loved to hate when he was sacking Qantas employees wholesale and, in my view, undermining aircraft safety.

Then he came out publicly in support of same-sex marriage and suddenly he is poster boy for lots of people. I do hope all those sacked workers find some comfort in this.

Now Margaret Court has become the woman everyone loves to hate because she has said she won't fly Qantas because of Allan Joyce's views. And it doesn't stop there. People are saying that Margaret Court Arena should be renamed.

Long ago when Qantas was definitively Australian, regardless of the views on anything of Hudson Fysh and his successors, it would probably have been my airline of choice. Now it is about as Australian as McDonalds or Kraft. So there seems no reason to choose it over any other airline.

But the point that people seem to be missing, apart from the simple one of freedom to make known your own views and choices, is that we DON'T know the views of most CEOs on most things. When I rush in to buy a toilet roll or a packet of cheese or a pair of winter socks I have no idea what the company CEOs behind these products think about anything.

Do they support changes to our Constitution?

Do they have fair employment policies for women and a safe and friendly workplace?

Do they buy goods produced by sweated labour in Bangladesh?

Do they treat their partners well, are they good neighbours, are they kind to their animals?

I have no idea.

I much prefer to eat and shop in places run by friends or friendly acquaintances but it isn't always possible because:

- a) I don't have enough friends and friendly acquaintances, and
- b) none of them have got round to manufacturing toilet rolls.

To change the name of a tennis venue because a champion tennis player of the past prefers a different airline does seem to be getting pretty extreme in this Culture of Judgement. Of course we've always had a Culture of Judgement. It used to be 'Ooh waah, did you see what so-and-so did last Saturday night?' or 'He was parked in her driveway for *three hours!*' Now it is this fear that you can't say what you really think about anything in case someone jumps down your neck. So you put honesty aside and tell lies so as to sound nice and progressive and tolerant.

But, let's face it, none of us tolerate *everything*.

Nor should we.

And I am not sure that a culture of dissembling is always a better alternative.

MAY 27th: So Donald Trump is wandering round Europe saying climate change is a hoax but that his ideas are 'evolving'.

I used to think that such people were not only blind but dangerous. That they were using their influence to skew research, deny research, deny funds, and in general put a spanner in the works.

Now I don't think they are the real danger.

The real danger is human greed, human apathy, human 'she'll be jake' thinking, human hopes that God will save us from ourselves, human optimism, human beliefs that we have survived everything from the Black Death to World Wars to massive volcanic eruptions ... you name it ... we've come through ...

But there are two key differences between now and 'then'.

There are vastly more of us. The small groups of people as the ice melted at the end of the last Ice Age could simply move to safer places.

And we are locked into nations, structures, boundaries, even home ownership. We can't simply walk away from the problem. Well, we *can* but that walking immediately puts us into conflict with other people.

So what can we learn from the past?

To live more simply.

To live more flexibly.

And to bring populations down to easily relocateable numbers.

I can see the problems for Donald Trump. I can see the problems for all of us.

MAY 28th: I had been watching a documentary about waste, the disposal of, and a friend said he wasn't sure we should go out for fish and chips. The dilemma is an uneasy one. Every fish in every ocean is now imbibing plastic in one form or another. So the question is: should we let the fish eat the plastic first or should we grind it up and mix it directly in with our stews and trifles and quiches and leave those poor fish out of the equation?

It may even be that someone will find a health benefit in eating plastic in the way that everything from chocolate to fat to salt is being re-evaluated.

JUNE 1st: That unfortunate Sudanese woman in Victoria has been found guilty of murdering her children. Now she did murder them, she says so, and she will, we hope, get the support she needs in prison to deal with her many mental problems. But the question that seemed to scream for an answer was why any man could have been so stupid as to saddle her with SIX little children when she quite clearly wasn't coping. I am not sure I could cope with six little children while starting life in a new country and I haven't been through a civil war and a miserable refugee camp. It is hard to think of more selfish behaviour on his part. If he really did believe that sex was good for someone trying to learn to cope in a new country then couldn't he have got some of those little things called condoms? I believe they are not expensive.

JUNE 6th: Yesterday I was listening to people talking about 'fake news'. In fact, quite a lot of people seem to be talking about 'fake news'. No one has precisely defined it. We have had Mrs Thatcher being 'economical with the truth'. But fake implies either that we know something hasn't happened but we're going to say it did. Hitler had this down to a fine art. Remember those wicked Poles invading poor little Germany? Or that it's a dull day and we're going to go down to the newsroom and say 'Can't you all come up with SOMETHING?' And 'Man bites Dog' is *not* acceptable to the RSPCA.

But I don't think Trump is using it in either of these ways. It is fake news if it accuses him of something. All these potential jihadis could latch on. No sir, I was just driving along and the steering suddenly went wonky. No sir, I'm just carrying this hammer, this hunting knife, this bag of nails round to my brother's place. We're doing some Home Improvements.

But behind all this is a more fundamental question: What is NEWS? Why are we met with one drama at breakfast and not another? Why are we met with drama at all? Wouldn't it be nice to start the day with something inspirational?

Is it propelled by a 'Need to Know' idea? But what do we really need to know? Will people look at me in astonishment if I don't know that there was a jihadi incident in Brighton or a domestic murder in Brisbane? I might need to worry if I have friends or relatives living in the area (the Mop family is quite widespread) but me worrying until such times as names are made public isn't really helping anyone else. It's not even helping me.

I do turn on the TV in the morning, mainly to tell me whether I need to take an umbrella or a coat when I go out, and then I end up wishing I'd let the TV sit in silence in its corner and simply gone to the window and looked out at the sky.

And have you noticed, as this litany of drama rushes onwards, car accidents, fires, shootings, home invasions, night club fights, drunken brawls, that they mostly happen after 10 pm. I have been trying to think of a way for people to automatically fall asleep, like Sleeping Beauty, at 10 pm and sleep properly through to at least 6 am. Could there be some sort of switch inserted under our skin or something in our food? This is a tricky one.

In the old days pubs used to close early. That helped. Most people were in bed by ten. Now we are told that the hotel industry and most people's social life will fail if people aren't allowed to drink into the early hours of the morning. Of course early closing doesn't take into account alcohol or drugs taken home. But it is a simple fact that most GO OUT to commit crimes. Some countries have tried curfews. Some have tried blackouts. Some have taken people off the streets in Black Marias. None of these solutions quite seems to hit the spot. Never mind. I am working on it. And maybe bringing up our children to enjoy going to bed instead of seeing bedtime as a species of party-pooping might help. People used to talk of 'Sweet Dreams' as a reason for going to bed. Now 'sweet dreams' seem to hint at either drugs or alcohol.

JUNE 8th: So the Saudi soccer players upset a lot of people by wandering round during the minute of silence for the young Aussie women killed in the latest London bombing? It was

vaguely represented as the ‘minute of silence’ not being a Saudi cultural norm. But equally it could have been that these men were not going to show respect for a couple of women who did not conform to Saudi norms and cover their faces, merely peering out through a slit for their eyes. Or it may have been that there was Saudi involvement in the London bombings and they understood only too well that it would be hypocritical to turn round and if not cry crocodile tears then the next-best-thing.

It is curious that we fall over backwards to respect and incorporate other people’s cultural norms when they come here. But when the chips are down we do actually expect they will respect ‘the Australian way’. It is something all multicultural programs might like to take on board. Our tolerance only goes so far.

But what if it was the other way around? What if our boys had gone to play soccer in Saudi Arabia and were faced with the requirement that they take a minute of silence for the three thugs shot dead by police in London. What would we have wanted them to do?

Strictly speaking, the Saudis here were silent. They weren’t going about talking, yelling, singing, shouting. They just didn’t stand still. Is the standing still as important as the silence?

My thought, after long thought, was that, yes, if we found ourselves, or if our young soccer players found themselves in such a situation, that a minute of silence would be appropriate. On the one hand no one knows what you are thinking, or even if you are thinking at all, during that minute. On the other hand these men with their knives and their disrespect for human life were still children of God, very misguided children … but who had misguided them? And they all had families and loved ones who now suffer.

I read somewhere that most mosques in Britain have been built with Saudi money and I doubt that Saudi money is forthcoming unless such mosques pay lip service at least to the very conservative Saudi brand of Islam called Wahhabi. So many British mosques are in effect branches, extensions, outreach for Saudi ideas and ideologies. If Britain wants to ‘de-radicalize’ young men then it might be a good idea to start from this point. It would be helpful if the funding of every British mosque over the last fifty years was laid bare. So families can make choices about which mosque they attend and support and which ones they would discourage their sons and nephews and grandsons from becoming involved with.

JUNE 9th: It should be written up in big letters: NEVER GO TO AN ELECTION IF YOU WANT A MANDATE. Teresa May fell into the trap of believing polls and thinking that voters like to give mandates. Polls are iffy and voters don’t like mandates. She could have gone along quietly doing the homework and discussions necessary to take Britain out of Europe. She had three years up her nicely-tailored sleeves and a clear-cut referendum result.

And when she came back from communing with nature in Wales and said ‘Let’s have an election’ why on earth didn’t her party jump on her and squelch that idea stone dead?

The curious thing about it is that the Labour Party has benefited by seeing their number of seats go up but hard core Labour voters, the working people who have lost jobs to the EU and been inundated by cheap EU immigrants, want out just as much as certain Conservatives do. But young educated people like being in the EU. It provides greater ease of travel. They can work anywhere. They can get grants and scholarships. They see the benefits and not the downside. I doubt if the youngsters who flocked to vote for Jeremy Corbin live in the dying towns riddled with drugs and gangs. He is going to have to walk a fine line to keep that support but turn it into something beneficial for Britain in the post-EU era.

JUNE 13th: We are to have energy security. Bah humbug! Thank you, Mr Scrooge, I know you managed with one candle and no hot water. But the real problem is that we are

trying to squeeze two different things under the one heading. Energy availability and energy affordability are two different things. By the time we add in what actually constitutes 'clean' energy and talk about the convenience of flicking a switch we are in a minefield.

First of all no energy is completely clean. Have you been into a foundry to watch them making wind turbines? Have you seen the toxic chemicals used in the making of solar panels? Have you seen the lines of trucks delivering the thousands of tons of concrete used in the making of each hydro dam? And every use of energy expends heat.

Secondly we have traded energy self-sufficiency for energy convenience. I can remember my dad out there wielding an axe. Now I flick a switch. If anything goes wrong I ring the company and within about a month they will fix the problem in some sort of fashion.

But the two big issues are—is there enough energy to go round a constantly-expanding population and will that constantly-expanding population be able to afford that energy. Great discussion is now centred around better batteries which are not exactly safe clean objects—but they will allow the expansion of solar and wind power. But there is no guarantee they will bring prices down. Much play is made about turning off appliances, using low-wattage bulbs etc, but this is tinkering with the problem.

In fact, two problems. We are living in a fools' paradise if we think energy prices aren't going to go up, just as we are living in a fools' paradise if we think that petrol prices won't go up.

And we are living in a fools' paradise if we think gas won't run out, coal won't run out, oil won't run out. The prices we pay for non-renewable resources should reflect their non-renewability, not the market.

So when pollies talk about energy security I feel like saying 'Caves with lots of warm leaves are very nice to bed down in for the winter'. We are all being very stupid and irresponsible—and our pollies not least.

JUNE 21st: You must divorce if you change your sex. Oh dear. I just heard that this proposed legislation will, apparently, damage loving relationships. But I very much doubt if Jim Brown suddenly wakes up on his 40th birthday and tells his wife he is really a woman and is going to go through long and expensive hormonal and surgical treatment. And therefore she is soon going to find herself married to a woman—unless the legislation says otherwise. And if she married in the firm belief that she was marrying a man then I fail to see why she should be forced to now live in a lesbian relationship. After all, no one else is forced to live in a lesbian relationship unless this is what they genuinely want.

If we take gender dysphoria as a psychiatric condition then it undoubtedly can strike anyone at any time in the way that people develop schizophrenia or people after a home invasion, military service, or a bad accident can develop PTSD. But in this case we would put someone into the care of a psychiatrist not start cutting bits off them.

If we take gender dysphoria as a medical condition, along the lines of in(de)ter(minate)sex, then an operation or a series of operations will probably be the way to go. But in this case you have obviously been born with it and it was therefore totally irresponsible to marry knowing you had real doubts and medical confusion about your sexuality. If you were completely honest with your partner, if Jim Brown told Sarah Smith before they married that he had always believed he was really Jane Brown then Sarah had some warning and the chance to decide if this was really the relationship she wanted. But if she had hoped for a loving heterosexual relationship rather than a loving homosexual relationship she might well have said, kindly, she didn't think marriage in those circumstances was appropriate, that Jim needed to really make those sorts of big decisions before they tied the knot.

And people talking about a loving relationship, and of course I would like to think all unions are loving relationships, are missing a key point. Marriage is a social, religious, sexual, emotional, and very personal relationship. But it is also a **LEGAL** relationship. If it has been contracted between Jim Brown and Sarah Smith and Jim Brown ceases to be Jim Brown then

that contract becomes null and void. There is nothing to stop Jane Brown and Sarah Smith then entering into a civil union or, when that legislation goes through, a same-sex marriage, no doubt after explaining to their children that instead of a daddy and a mummy they are now going to have two mummies and no daddy because we are not here talking about a lesbian relationship in which one woman may play a male role; we are talking about a serious medical condition which may take years of surgery to fix.

If this debate is being used as a way to get same-sex marriage in by the back door then I trust it will fail. Important legislation needs to be debated on its own merits not snuck in under another umbrella. And marriage when people, as I have heard, change sex more than once, would become a dog's breakfast without clear legal guidelines. I heard of a friend of a friend who became a woman, didn't like it, and changed back to being a man. Jim became Jane became Jim ... and I can only wonder what poor Sarah was doing and thinking and feeling ...

So is that the real agenda? When marriage already under immense threat becomes meaningless then what are we left with?

Something deep and profound and committed?

Or a game people play to enliven dull lives?

JUNE 22nd: Pauline Hanson and special schools for autistic children. Now I am with her on this. With some reservations.

I remember a teacher telling me she had a special needs student who screamed all through class. The other staff and the principal were sympathetic (quite likely they had their own problems with social inclusion) but there was nothing they could do. The directive had gone out: special needs students were to be incorporated into ordinary classes and classrooms. And being a special needs student she could not be expelled, stood in the corridor, given detention, lines, or even told to shut up. I wasn't really surprised when I heard that that teacher had resigned. I only wondered how many other good teachers, faced with that kind of impossible situation, had decided there were better jobs out there. Teachers do face a huge range of stresses. Children with poor English. Children who have come through refugee camps. Children who are being abused or neglected at home. You name it. We need to be looking at ways to reduce not add to these stresses—and if special classes can help ...

I remember when there was a decision to place deaf children into 'normal' classes and the concerns I heard raised. Now some deaf children are brilliant lip-readers and can basically cope in everyday situations—so long as people speak directly to them. But other deaf children struggle and need special help.

When people speak of 'special schools' as though we are referring to the sort of dank dark dungeons in which disabled children were hidden away in the 19th century I really wonder. Schools that put aside classroom space or a building on the schoolgrounds for children who need special care or mentoring but include such children for canteens, playground activities, arts and crafts, music, and other activities that they can cope with are hardly socially excluding them. They are simply being practical.

But when governments said such children would be included in ordinary classes so they would be able to interact with ordinary children it was presented as a high-minded policy of social inclusion, not the cost-cutting measure it really was. And when social commentators with their kids in good schools and with a variety of options available to them support 'social inclusion' they are not really looking at it from the point of already stressed out teachers, students and schools. After all, private schools can expel students who are disruptive. Public schools can't. And parents, worried that their children in public schools, are constantly having their learning disrupted, who take their children out and put them in private schools, or home school them, or pay for extra tutoring in out-of-school hours are implicitly saying there are things wrong with the education system.

So if we as a society genuinely think social inclusion should come before educational excellence then we should be upfront about it. And we should look at ways to minimize the impact of that inclusion on educational outcomes.

1. Autism, cerebral palsy, and a range of other conditions, exist along a spectrum from the most mildly afflicted to children who need constant care. We need to be clear on the level of disability we are talking about. And the level that can be included in a normal class of twenty to thirty children without impacting on the curriculum or the general learning environment.

2. We need to be clear that special classes are integrated into schools but not necessarily integrated into classes. People still have this idea that ordinary children are sent to school. Special needs children are sent AWAY to school. It has the image of segregation, exclusion, hiddenness about it. Whereas we are usually talking about another classroom down the corridor.

3. And we need to be clear that teachers are not there to cope with all the problems parents (and society) are shuffling off on to the education system. Teachers are there to teach.

JUNE 24th: So Motormouth Johnny Depp is at it. Again. He has flouted Australia's quarantine laws. Now he is making jokes about undermining democracy.

The one key point which makes democracy different to other forms of government is that you can vote out elected governments, politicians, prime ministers, premiers, presidents. It is a concept which differentiates democracy from the sorts of rule which usually require death before they can be changed. The Americans don't always seem to understand this. They brought down the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende instead of understanding that it could be voted out as easily as it had been voted in. I don't know what Donald Trump was doing in 1971 but quite likely supporting President Nixon—so he shouldn't get too holier-than-thou.

But that doesn't make Johnny Depp either intelligent or funny. The world is full of people who would be quite ready to take his words at face value. 'Johnny Depp says it's okay to kill the president. Where's my gun?' Perhaps he is intelligent enough to understand that a great many Americans see a gun as a far more exciting and sexier object than a ballot paper.

It is an offence in the USA to threaten to kill the President. I thought it was an offence to threaten to kill *anyone*. Perhaps it is a matter of degree. You spend longer in jail when you threaten the President than if you threaten Joe Blow. Or Johnny Depp.

But there is a different problem and that is that a lot of what passes for humour simply isn't funny. I was at a book fair once and there were endless tables of books about murders. I went over to the table marked HUMOUR and there were about half-a-dozen books on it. Humour which is humour and which leaves you with a smile is hard to find. And Johnny Depp certainly isn't the person to help anyone find it.

JUNE 26th: We are pleased that Tasmania's population has grown. Why? Because we are all idiots. That's the simple answer. I thought I would write a letter to the paper about this.

The polite version:

Why is Tasmania pleased that our population has grown? More people put more stress on the environment, on infrastructure and services, and add to global warming. We know our wildlife is under stress, we are in conflict over where to put our rubbish, we complain of gridlock on our streets, and are constantly told our health system is in crisis.

More people do not bring unemployment rates down, diminish homelessness or domestic violence, or protect kelp forests, giant lobsters or small penguins.

Small stable prosperous countries like Luxembourg have half our population. No one has yet proved having more people will make us richer, smarter or happier. And we have linked our population growth to things we have almost no control over: the willingness of

visitors to come and see a natural and built heritage which is under threat, of people elsewhere to buy our products, and of the rest of Australia to continue to underwrite our share of GST.

Surely we need to develop sensible policies to bring the state's population down not encourage it to keep growing.

And the less polite version:

More people. Lordy! What's to pat ourselves on the back for because there are more people around to drive cars, demand heating, want hospital beds, and want us taxpayers to fund a Victorian footie team?

You name it, it's under stress. Devils, wombats, platypodi, kelp, penguins, eagles, echidnas, blue-tongue lizards, oysters, the only thing which seems to be rampaging round the state in ever-increasing numbers are our mythical foxes. Perhaps they realize there are some ecological niches becoming vacant and are gearing up ...

Now there are some amazing saintly people who just love people and the more the better but I do not include politicians, economists, and business people in their numbers. If they were we wouldn't have any homeless people. They would all be living comfortably with our pollies and economists in their spare rooms and backyard caravans and down at their beach shacks.

But pollies, economists, and business people only like the *idea* of people. Not the actual people themselves. People as ideas on paper and in reports and on sales graphs are not really people; they are consumers, service providers, voters, polluters, prison statistics, numbers at games. And having more of them makes pollies feel more powerful (oh yes, haven't you noticed, we aren't really a *small* state), economists with greater numbers to play around with (oh yes, there is some squishy-squashiness in the economy for more people to take up the slack) and business people (oh yes, we'll have a hundred people to choose from whenever we advertise a Position Vacant; it isn't like the bad old days when only three might apply). Call me dense but none of those are good reasons to want more people.

So let's get serious about policies to bring populations DOWN not UP.

JUNE 29th: It's official. The Liberal Party does have factions. They used to be called Wets and Drys but no one dared call them factions. That was a nasty Labor word. Now they're called the Malcolm faction and the Tony faction. Their policies aren't properly disseminated and the average voter mainly hears a lot of sniping and sniping has not yet been transferred into a policy for a How to Vote card: Vote for ... We in the Liberal Party have got sniping down to a fine art, you never know when it will come in useful.

Every time you see Bill Shorten he is wearing a smug sort of smile. I'm not surprised. But don't get too cocky, Billy Boy, the ALP has a long habit of squaring off at short notice ... Just learn the key lesson: Voters may find sniping fun for a day or two but they soon get very very tired of it.

JUNE 30th: So Cardinal Pell has been caught. Now he has been around for a very long time. Why was it so hard to catch him? Was someone waiting for him to become a Cardinal so that it would do the most damage to him and the Catholic Church? It certainly looks like it. If he interfered with little boys more than 40 years ago then why has it taken people more than 40 years to come forward? And if he has pedophile tendencies then why hasn't he been up to his ears in little boys in the intervening 40 years?

A number of people interviewed pointed out that you are innocent until proven guilty. True. The media often forgets this as they set off in full cry after someone they have deemed guilty.

And I have another problem. Yes, I can believe that many parish priests and men teaching in all boy schools were constantly faced with temptations whilst knowing they were

going to live out their lives without ever experiencing sex. And so they did their little nasty furtive fumbling things with children.

But Pell doesn't seem to fit this image. He spent relatively little time as a 'hands-on' parish priest. And he was an ambitious man. If you want to administer a diocese, implement policy, take part in state funerals, have your opinions listened to, you don't get bogged down in those little nasty furtive fumblings with choir boys.

And there is another issue. The world has changed in forty years. It was not deemed wrong for a teacher or minister or policeman to give a child a pat on the head, on the bum, on the arm. I was just talking to someone who said she remembered sitting on a teacher's lap while she was learning to read. No one saw anything sexual in it. So we do need to be sure we have gone beyond what was seen as acceptable in 1960 and what was even then seen as unacceptable.

I have several questions: 1. Was this sexual assault? 2. Why did no one go to the police if it was? 3. Why did the victims wait until the perpetrator was 76? 4. Would these charges have been brought forward if he hadn't become a cardinal? And 5. He was accused years ago but those charges went nowhere. But if there were other victims why didn't they come forward then rather than let that man fight and lose a lone battle?

It seems to be the thing now: if you're in public life and have money or access to money ... Watch Out. Georges Simenon claimed he had 10,000 women. I assume he meant he went to a lot of prostitutes. No one has come forward with a tell-all book: I Slept with the Creator of Maigret. Whereas Bill Cosby presented as a happy family man now has women coming forward seemingly every month or so to say he sexually assaulted them. It has now reached fifty and rising. He would not have had time to go home and play the happy husband and father.

And wealthy famous men usually do not have to drug and tie up their women—because women fall over themselves to go out with wealthy famous men, even married ones.

So either Bill Cosby didn't drug and rape more than fifty women or Bill Cosby is a secret sadist and I feel very sorry for his wife who must have suffered from his sadism over the fifty years she has been married to him.

JULY 6th: So Cricket in Australia is in crisis over money. Yes, the days of playing purely for the love of the sport are long gone. But then I have absolutely no objection to 'a fair day's pay for a fair day's work' and standing out in the blazing sunshine waiting for a ball to come your way is undoubtedly WORK. So is standing round with large heavy things strapped to your legs. So is running up and hurling a ball down. So is traveling and getting your picture in the paper.

It seems hard to comment when I don't actually know what cricketers are paid. I have just heard that a young Aussie got \$60,000 for about an hour on court at Wimbledon. Was that 'a fair day's wage for a fair day's work'? It seems to require a rather rubbery interpretation of fair, wage, and work.

It is claimed that young professionals need to be paid well because they will only be at the top of their sport for 10 to 20 years. That's a bit like saying pollies deserve a huge super payout because they may only spend one term in parliament.

I can see this really gingering up the people who clean public toilets. Their pay should go up because they can only take so much when it comes to faeces deliberately smeared on walls, toilets and basins deliberately blocked up, unpleasant graffiti deliberately scrawled on walls, syringes and broken bottles deliberately strewn around. But most of them do not even get paid \$60,000 A YEAR let alone \$60,000 AN HOUR.

Ah but, I can hear you saying, they don't give us much pleasure and excitement of a Saturday afternoon. Well, maybe ... but I doubt if most people would get pleasure and excitement out of public toilets which *haven't* been cleaned.

JULY 9th: I just heard someone ask the question 'Is it sometimes acceptable to discriminate against people?'

Well, most of us wouldn't be here if Britain hadn't discriminated against its poor and vagrant in the 18th and 19th centuries. We would be squashed into small flats in Birmingham or Dublin or Glasgow instead of looking out on glorious sunshine sparkling on the water as we fire up the backyard barbie ...

But of course it is all right to discriminate in certain circumstances. Women's Health Groups, Maternal and Child Welfare, as well as the CWA and dozens of other women's groups don't want men muscling in any more than the Men's Shed movement wants women present. Organizations for Chinese-speakers only, Italian-speakers only, and so on know only too well that as soon as you relax the rules and have non-Chinese speakers present people start speaking in English and soon the whole thing is diluted and undermined. Children don't want adults getting in on the act when they want to play their own games or pretend to be the Secret Seven (or its modern equivalents). Groups of yachters don't want the place filled up with landlubbers asking stupid questions when they're talking technical stuff. Most organizations have entry requirements. It may only be to pay a membership due but we don't really want the police force having to cope with rookies with hearing impairments or in wheelchairs any more than we let students into First Year Med even though they can't understand plain English.

But perhaps this is only about race or religion or sexuality?

A Man of Discriminating Taste. You don't hear that appellation much these days. Either because there aren't men of discriminating taste around these days or discriminating has too much baggage. And anyway that usually referred to the pictures they put on their walls or the tobacco they put in their pipes or the wine they put in their glasses.

But should organizations, clubs, movements, churches, be allowed to retain the right to discriminate? Of course. The Boy Scout movement has suffered from the presence of men who liked boys being allowed to lead scout troops. Parents naturally don't want their boys sleeping over with men who like boys. Membership goes down.

Aboriginal groups want the right to choose who comes in, whether on an employed basis or as visitors. The old days when they had unsympathetic uncaring patronizing people foisted on them should be a thing of the past.

Churches can choose to employ or use as volunteers people of a different faith, or no faith at all, but it should be their choice. Not something a bureaucrat or a politician decides.

Even the government discriminates all the time. If you are in prison for more than a brief visit you lose the right to vote, you no longer have a Medicare card, you are limited in who you can see and who you can ring. If you put your name down for a Housing Commission place some bureaucrat decides when where and if you will be allotted a place. And you cannot tell me it is done solely on statistics and figures. Lots of people will tell you stories of the police picking on certain people, certain streets and suburbs, even people who are dressed in ways they don't like or have the sort of hair they object to. Someone told me that Sudanese men got a harder time from traffic police than other new arrivals simply because they were more visible. You mightn't notice a couple of Nepalese running away from the scene of a crash but you certainly notice a very tall very black man.

Whether it is sometimes right to discriminate depends on the situation. I think we would all agree that we do need to be able to choose who will be with our young children and how such people should be chosen. But whether there is a *right* to discriminate is another thing altogether.

JULY 12th: Al Gore has a new film. I notice he hasn't changed *his* lifestyle. He hasn't traded in his jet for a donkey and cart. I have often noticed it: people saying don't do as I do. Perhaps it is a natural human failing. And I have often noticed that people constantly jetting round the world to do 'good works', spread 'good messages', always spread their pollution in a holier-than-thou manner. They are HELPING people, you silly old bat, so don't knock them.

The trouble with all the talk is that coal has been made the one and only culprit. If we just get rid of coal, so the thinking goes, global warming will magically disappear. What planet are they on?

Can you honestly point to anyone who has left their car at home this week and walked or taken a bus to work or pleasure instead?

My suggestion is that we stop worrying about the end result of a lot of people and start worrying about the beginning. A planet with three billion people would obviously have a lot less of everything. A planet of one billion would seem positively clean and green by comparison. Having lots of people doesn't seem to make us smarter, happier, healthier ... and although it has made some of us a lot richer that comes back to that business of using huge trucks and gigantic explosions and a lot of polluting machinery to get things out of the ground and send them off in very large diesel-driven ships. So we might like to sit back very quietly, without turning on heaters, music, or coffee machines, and do some prolonged thinking. Thinking doesn't pollute the atmosphere, use up non-renewable resources, or add to global warming.

JULY 13th: It seems the AFL is suggesting that in kids' games where one side is winning by a big margin they can stop keeping the score so as not to upset the kids. As if kids don't keep a running score!

I listened to a pro and a con.

We need to train our children in disappointment. They need to learn how to deal with loss and defeat and embarrassment. Yes. They do. No one has yet worked out how to train kids in disappointment except by simply letting things happen and then telling them to get used to it.

We need to realize that kids regularly getting beaten by a large margin are soon going to give up on AFL and go and play soccer or give up sport altogether. It's about keeping kids in the game.

I hate it when the media uses words like 'trounced', 'thrashed', 'smashed', 'wiped the floor'. It is supposed to be a GAME not WORLD WAR THREE.

But although I see both those pro and con points I think a different thing is at work in kids' sport and that is not the score board but the way kids losing, making mistakes, not being very good at sport, being slow because they're overweight, not getting the hang of rules or strategies, are put down. By teachers, by coaches, by parents, by other kids. I remember a young boy who loved playing hockey at primary school. The principal was supportive and helpful and made sure all the kids had transport. The parents were supportive and understanding when goals were missed or the ball went where it wasn't supposed to. The kids understood that none of them were world-beaters but they were out to do their best.

And then he went to secondary school, signed up for a hockey team, got constantly criticized and put down. After about three games he gave up, dropped out, that was it for sport. He didn't only give up hockey. He gave up sport.

That is where we need to put our full attention.

To make sure children know the rules, what each position does, how to hold their bat or stick, how to work together as a team, so that when they run on to a field they feel confident even if they know they aren't going to win cups. Just to know that they can give their best showing and won't be called names or laughed at if they miss a shot.

It's strange, isn't it, the way we put kids off sport when they're young and then urge them to go to very expensive gyms when they're old. Now I don't play any sport or go to gyms or exercise classes, I thought I should just say that, but on the other hand I haven't been to a doctor in more than thirty years. So I must be doing *something* right.

JULY 14th: So Mr Pyne wants us to make a lot more guns, ammunition, bombs, napalm, bits for fighter aircraft, even bits for submarines—and flog them off to other countries. It would, so it was implied, be good for our export bottom line.

Of course it might not be so good for our young men and women, either as combat troops or as peacekeepers, being killed by Aussie-made bullets and bombs. But when they are very dead they won't know the provenance of what hit them.

So it will have two benefits. It will make most of us richer, particularly the multinationals making the things in Australia, with government subsidies (excuse me—with taxpayer subsidies, there is no such thing as a government subsidy) and we will still get to see those very moving occasions when a flag-draped coffin is carried along by sombre marching men while the prime minister discreetly dabs his eyes.

You might say, well, why should Britain, USA, Russia, China, France, Germany, get all the financial benefit from killing people, why shouldn't we get a little piece of the action? But each time a country ups its armament production it seems to have a flow-on effect, a sort of keeping up with the Joneses, an encouragement to other nations to think about making more weapons. It seems that nobody wants to be left behind.

Still, that may not be the worst threat to hit the world, another little arms race, because as the waters creep up our beaches and surges take away whole suburbs and hotter water destroys our marine life, including our saleable marine life ... well, we are going to have to export *something* and if it can't be oysters, abalone, lobsters, crabs, eels and salmon then I suppose some guns and bombs are better than nothing.

Except that—you can't eat them.

JULY 16th: The Case of the Drowsy Doctors. We have been told and told and told that nurses are doing double shifts. Now we are told that young doctors are going as long as 78 hours without sleep. Call me picky, but I really don't want to be treated by a doctor so tired he can't read the name on a bottle or the instructions on a syringe.

Of course if I get carted off to the emergency department in bits and pieces after walking in front of a bus, possibly after too little sleep, I am not going to be asking when the treating doctor last got a bit of a lie-down. But if I am there for something non-life-threatening the idea that someone has been forced to go without sleep just because I have turned up with a sprained ankle or a bit of a rash, is absurd.

So what idiot is making doctors and nurses work beyond a 'fair day's work', ie. 8 hours with possibly an hour or two of overtime? Are we really so desperately short of doctors and nurses that this slave-driving system is the only realistic response? And if there is a desperate shortage then why not train more people as paramedics to deal with those sprained ankles and skin rashes and keep the people who have done 7 years hard yards for the really big desperate cases.

JULY 18th: The Super Department. No, not a department to deal with your superannuation. But Peter Dutton's massive increase in power and, presumably, workload. Perhaps *he* is going to put in 78 hours without sleep? Everything to do with security and immigration is going to be bundled into one super-conglomerate like Nestlé or Westinghouse tucking a few more acquisitions under their gigantic belt. People have said this is not a good

idea—for all sorts of reasons. As we have recently seen people's health and social security details flogged on line since everything was digitized it might be asked why we feel so sure this will not happen with new Super Baby.

I have two different questions: Why Peter Dutton? He will now truly be King of the Murky Castle and effectively more powerful than the Prime Minister. Is it the PM grooming him for the top job in the near future? Malcolm might like to give up all the pointless conflict with Tony Abbott and go back to making pots of money as a merchant banker. Is it because there was no one else with the skills to take on the job? Julie Bishop is too busy and Barnaby Joyce would rather be out in the backblocks where there aren't a lot of terrorists and there is no one else the PM either trusts or believes in. Or is it because Peter Dutton has demonstrated, in private, acute skills in networking, information management, riding out media storms, or getting along with a range of tricky people with big egos? The demonstrations, if the answer is yes, must indeed have been very private.

And the second much larger question, after all, Dutton might get shot by a terrorist next week or have a little stroke or fall out with the PM, is: Do we actually NEED all this endless focus on the apparently acute threat Australia faces? In World War Two nobody put that kind of power in to the hands of the Immigration Minister. Most of us couldn't even name the Immigration Minister. If we actually had one.

A mentally ill individual who should have been pulled in by police or the courts long before he stormed into the Lindt Café.

A fifteen-year-old actually acting on someone else's winding up and killing a police worker.

A kid threatening to disrupt an Anzac Day ceremony.

A young man with some dodgy connections storming into a police station with a knife and getting shot dead.

Now all these incidents need to be treated seriously—by our police and courts—but do they really add up to a need for a 15 billion dollar makeover?

No one has actually put a price tag on us getting our very own Department of Homeland Security but things always cost more than is budgeted for. Can you ever remember a government department saying 'this is going to cost less than expected' while everyone cheers and says fervently 'Thank God!'

JULY 20th: So the Greens have just lost two senators and counting ... So people are talking of smoking guns in other parties. So people are furtively checking up and asking Granny if they did actually all renounce their citizenship from somewhere else.

Silly old ladies are always urged to read the fine print (that is why it is fine print—so as to bamboozle silly old ladies who can't find either their spectacles or their magnifying glass) and it seems rather disturbing that wannabe pollies don't—possibly while telling consumers, yet again, to read the instructions and the rules.

And yet I have some sympathy. I remember the story of someone who took out Australian citizenship and simply assumed it cancelled out his previous allegiance and citizenship. He threw away his original passport and documents from that previous existence and thought no more about it. It was only when he reached pension age thirty years later that he discovered he had spent those thirty years as a dual citizen and must now apply to his country of origin for part of his pension.

How many other people are walking round in complacent oblivion, firmly convinced they are citizens of ONE country when in fact they are citizens of TWO?

As it is not realistic for everyone to wait to be pensioned off before they discover this grim truth it might be an idea for hopeful candidates to actually read the rules very thoroughly before they put their hands up.

And check with Granny ...

It is a curious phrase: ‘smoking gun’. Because we use it to imply that a danger is lurking whereas a gun only smokes *after* it has been fired. Just a thought.

JULY 24th: It seems that someone has done a survey and found that Protestant Evangelicals who only occasionally attend church are the most likely to bash their wives. But more likely than what? More than men who never go to church? More than men who go to a synagogue, mosque or temple? More than Catholics? More than men who drink honey and live on sesame seeds while making obeisance to a holy being in the shape of a sunflower?

Of course a bit of religion, like a bit of learning, can be a dangerous thing. People have a habit of homing in on those bits which seem to reinforce their existing views. People like quoting ‘An eye for an eye’ or ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’ or ‘If you’re not for me you are against me’ ... you know the sort of thing. So the assumption might be that men who go regularly to church, unless they always wear earmuffs, are inevitably going to get a broader, deeper, more profound insight.

Nor does it take a PhD to notice that the Bible isn’t terribly sympathetic to women. It was written by men for men. You have to dig around in it to gain a sense that women mattered. So men who only come occasionally to church aren’t likely to do much digging. They can go away again with the complacent and unchallenged belief that women are not only largely irrelevant but when they do appear—they have to be kept in their place.

JULY 27th: I have just been reading an article which says that an alarming number of modern-day teachers don’t know how to teach children handwriting—and that most older teachers do.

Now, excuse me for being pedantic, but teachers a long time ago didn’t *teach* children handwriting. They thrust copybooks in front of those children (or said ‘Get out your copybooks’), told kids to find their pens (and with luck the nibs hadn’t broken or turned upwards like a Turk’s slippers), see that their inkwells were full, and to get on with it. The whole point of COPYbooks was that the children, using awful old pens with awful old nibs, copied the line above with its beautiful cursive writing and tried very hard to emulate that perfection. Of course it never happened. Those awful old nibs always made blobs and blots on your best letters. But we did try. We had the example of beautiful letters constantly in front of us. Even if our teachers did awful scrawls on blackboards we had our copybooks to remind us what perfection in handwriting really was.

How much good it did us in the long run is harder to say. I do know adults with beautiful clear aesthetically-attractive handwriting. I also know adults, including myself, with awful scrawly stuff that those famous ducks who walked across a painter’s palette and then across his canvas would look down on.

JULY 29th: Poor old Trumpie is having staff problems. It’s like a revolving door over there, it would seem, and I can’t help wondering if it was always like that and it just wasn’t considered NEWS—or if he expects more from the flunkies that surround him.

It always seems to come back to Russia. Did the Kremlin interfere in the US elections—or didn’t it? The US has a habit of interfering in other people’s elections. Is it a habit they have finally been able to kick? I doubt it. Cyberspace is too beguiling. But nobody has yet explained 1) how they interfered, and 2) who was influenced by their interference. It might be educational to learn how to interfere in elections in the 21st century as opposed to the heavy-handed approaches of the past with their furtive bribery, threats, big business getting into the act, and a general air of skullduggery, if not downright invasion.

More importantly there are endless books coming out which predict the decline of democracy, the decline of the west, the undermining of open and free society. I sometimes have the feeling that if you want to get published you need to write a doomsday book and scare the pants off your readers.

Yet there are subtle erosions of taken-for-granted liberties going on all the time. Years ago there were no CCTV cameras around. Years ago you were not constantly asked your age or to provide a hundred points of identification. Little by little Big Brother closes in and we acquiesce in the belief we will be happier and safer with more surveillance, with more people wanting to know more about us.

When we go back to living in caves without mod cons will we look back on this era as the greatest con job and PR disaster in history or will we moan 'Big Brother where are you when we need you'?

AUGUST 4th: When is a plebiscite not a plebiscite? When it is held in West Papua, you nong!

True.

But Canberra is also wrestling with that tricky question: how can you promise a plebiscite and then make sure that only a handful of people actually get to vote.

Of course there is one consolation. The Indonesian army is not holding guns to the heads of our pollies.

AUGUST 8th: I just saw a program about waste. And how our much-trumpeted recycling industry is not doing its job. But all the way through I couldn't help thinking: how much of this should actually be deemed waste in the first place. The second thing was that every different kind of waste seemed to be jumbled in together.

Surely we could get clue-y-er about sorting cans from bottles and plastic from paper before it even goes into bins. Instead of paying people to sort it why not simply require householders to do the sorting at no cost to councils. *I think* I am capable of deciding what is paper and cardboard and what is aluminium or plastic.

And then there is the point that so many of these items are used once and thrown away. It is hard to use a pop-top can twice but surely some way of creating a removable top could be found, so that like a bottle all it needs is a new lid. I keep all kinds of things for re-use. Is a bread bag really unusable after you have finished that loaf?

Less packaging to begin with.

Better designed reusable packaging to be going on with.

Better sorted and better collected packaging when it is finally worn out.

AUGUST 8th: So Betty Cuthbert has died. There is a golden halo around many of the sporting people of the distant past. I can remember admiring Herb Elliott and the Roycrofts, not because I knew anything about their private lives but because they just went out and did their best and were modest in success and generous in defeat.

But then we hadn't heard of doping. We didn't know about wild parties. Our parties were unremarkable things. A kiss outside a dance hall was exciting. And we didn't have huge expectations. We didn't pour huge amounts of money in to sports and most sportspeople were there simply because they loved running or jumping or swimming or throwing things.

Now there's all this fuss about Eusene Bolt being beaten by a drug cheat. Excuse me. Bolt came THIRD. He was beaten by a drug cheat AND by a non-drug cheat. In other words he is being sensible about retiring now.

And if a drug cheat has paid the penalty and is now clean why all the fuss? Do we hold people's mistakes against them for the rest of their lives? It seems we do. Yet it is worth remembering that athletes (and tennis players) are mostly very young when they go out on to

the track or court in international competition. And they have far greater expectations riding on them than the athletes (and tennis players) of sixty years ago.

It would be nice if they all had the pleasant demeanour and behaviour of a Roger Federer but, and this is the irony, we seem to *want* bad boys and bad girls. We *want* people we can hiss and boo and talk about. We wouldn't be half as interested in sport if everyone was well-behaved and generous and sportsmanlike/sportswomanlike. We would feel CHEATED. We are half the problem.

Of course I am not including myself in that WE ...

AUGUST 14th: Privacy. We want it, we don't want it—for ourselves. But what rights do the dead, the nearly dead, the brain dead, the senile, the small child, the person incapable of understanding—have to privacy?

Princess Di, it seems, has none.

People say 'she used the media so she obviously wanted her stories told'. But—hold hard! I use the media to try and get messages out on issues but that doesn't give the media any right to delve in to my private life. I don't like it when the media insists on printing people's ages just because they've been knocked down by a car. What does their age have to do with stupid idiots in cars—or more occasionally stupid idiots crossing streets without looking? And many older women prefer not to splash their ages over the front page of The Mercury.

I don't watch what is being called Princess Di's intimate revelations. Perhaps she enjoyed getting a grizzle off her chest on Monday—and on Tuesday regretted being so frank and then she consoled herself that it was said in private to a trustworthy friend.

My dear Di, there are no trustworthy friends when you get to be a princess.

There are no trustworthy friends when you get to be anyone in the public eye.

It was about the only thing I liked about John Howard, that he kept reiterating that he had full confidence in his cabinet, his fellow party members, in the rank and file—even as they went swoosh! down the plughole. It was a degree of loyalty which is becoming increasingly rare in any aspect of public life.

So the moral is: don't tell those private things you don't want the world to know about to ANYONE.

AUGUST 15th: So Catholic priests will now have to make public the things said in confession—if those things are about murders, child abuse, domestic violence ...

I think the Government has missed the boat on this one. How many Catholics still go to confession? Not many.

And such legislation seems a very good way to diminish that number even further.

It seems like the proverbial machine-gun to kill the mosquito. It isn't that priests didn't sometimes become the repository of crime. I can only wonder what people like Perc Galea and Tony Mochbel and Robert Trimboli might have told a priest. But there are ways around it. Surely.

Instead of telling the transgressor to say ten Hail Marys surely a sensible priest would say 'I want to see you down at the police station tomorrow morning. I will come with you if you wish.'

After all, immortal souls are not things you mess around with. If you don't want to face justice and recompense in this world then you are going to face the problematic question of justice and recompense in the next world. Your local police station and eight years in the slammer may well prove to be a better investment. And while you are in there you can meditate on the innocent people in there and the guilty people you know who are still walking around out there—simply because they weren't good enough Catholics to ever go to confession.

AUGUST 16th: Donald Trump has taken 48 hours to criticize the driver who mowed people down at a rally. And then he muffed his sympathy according to most reports. Is it usual

for presidents to be timed as to how long it takes for them to make a statement? How long did a past president take to condemn the Oklahoma bombing? I don't remember anyone counting the hours. And it was probably just as well the president didn't rush in—seeing that one heck of a lot of people were sure this was an Islamic attack rather than, as it proved to be, a White Supremacist thing.

Apart from the wider issue of whether presidents and prime ministers are mainly there as sympathy machines there were two odd things about it which no one has mentioned.

1. President Trump as a Northerner is not the most obvious bedfellow of anyone in the Ku Klux Klan. He was voted in on the strength of his promise to revitalize American manufacturing and get the rust-belt towns working again, most of which are in the North (and many of which have large Black populations)—not on a promise to revitalize the South.
2. The perpetrator was said to come from Ohio, also not an obvious hotbed of Ku Klux Klan activity, so what was he doing in Virginia? Nothing better to do?

The obvious link would appear to be White groups getting together with other White groups in some sort of messy coalition. Is this something Washington and the FBI should be looking at much more closely—or do they know from experience that most such groups could not organize a playgroup?

And what were the police doing that they allowed two opposing demos out on the streets at the same time? Surely that is always a recipe for trouble? Broken windows if not broken skulls.

The issue of fake news simmers on. But is any news genuine news—now that the PR industry has taken over determining what is and what isn't news? The days when keen-eyed reporters pounded their beat in search of a scoop have almost gone. Yes, reporters still do get sent out to traffic accidents and house fires and pub brawls but the smooth functioning of democracy is not dependent on this kind of reporting. Other kinds of 'news' come from media releases, spin doctors, massaged stories. The lines have become increasingly blurred.

When the new US president took to Twitter several people said they were pleased that a) he was obviously writing his own material rather than getting some 'faceless' man behind the scenes to do it for him, and b) by not going through any press corps and suchlike we weren't getting served up the morsels some reporter, editor, and network owner had chosen for our delight. I could see that this had a potentially good side. In a world of carefully-chosen sound bytes (and they don't always carefully choose the sound byte which would enlighten the public) this might actually be more democratic.

But far from delivering something potentially more democratic all it has done is make the President look like an idiot.

You think the world would be a happier place with more idiots in it?

I think I will have to go away and give that proposition careful thought. And then I will most likely come back and say: it depends where each making-the-world-a-happier-place idiot is domiciled.

AUGUST 18th: Pauline Hanson has been running round Parliament House in a burqa to prove that anyone can get in and throw bombs into the chamber. I think she has made her point (and I'll bet Senator Whish Wilson never offers to shake another burqa-enclosed hand in his life) and people saying it shows disrespect are surely getting things muddled. The burqa is designed to keep ravening Eves modest and hidden so they can't inflame the passions of foolish men. It has nothing to do with religion. Muslim men suffer from something English men of the Victorian era used to suffer from: as soon as they see a woman's pretty face they get an uncontrollable erection. So rather than try to control their own passions they decided

women must hide the inflaming part. Except for Victorian men it was a woman's ankle rather than a woman's face ...

And of course we take it on trust that every face hidden away behind the veil is pretty and would inflame the passions of foolish men ...

(I have heard various Aussie men say they don't know what to do when introduced to a Muslim woman. Should they offer to shake hands in the way they would with other women? Should they nod and say 'Nice to meet you'? Should they look to the nearest Muslim male for guidance? Should they put out their hand but not be hurt if it is ignored? They simply don't know what to do.

And not knowing, it becomes easier, simpler, politer, whatever you like to call it, to ignore Muslim women (and by inference Muslim neighbours, shopkeepers, etc) so as to avoid such difficult social questions.

The people who tell us to be tolerant, day in day out, need to engage with these kinds of questions which, left unresolved, bit by bit, can melt the glue that holds communities together. And confused detached disengaged unraveling communities are not the best way to face a future full of immense social, economic, and environmental problems. This is something Senator Whish Wilson is probably pondering deeply upon.)

I was reminded of Bruce Goodluck MHR, Member for Franklin, wandering round the hallowed halls in Canberra dressed as a rooster (or was it a chook?) and people wondering what sort of idiots got produced in Tasmania.

He said he just wanted to liven up a dull place. Well, he got on the front page of the newspapers so he probably achieved his real aim—to be remembered for *something*—and no one said he was disrespecting chooks.

There is a deeper question in there. To what extent should the trappings of any religion be respected? Not the teachings but the outward manifestations. Churches get bombed. Religious statues get destroyed. Sacred places get mined.

I am tempted to say that the only thing which matters about religion is its ability to transform lives into something holy and profound and beautiful.

Yet trappings do matter. It is only a few remarkable people who are capable of transcending trappings.

But there are trappings and trappings.

AUGUST 24th: I have just been in Sydney. Yes, Mrs Mop has been away. Very guilty too for flying on planes and destroying the stratosphere or the troposphere or whatever it is that planes pollute and destroy. And the thing about Sydney is its great restlessness. I almost feel I should put that in capitals. An apparent desire to tear down and build up and tear down and build up. It makes me feel exhausted even writing it. A kind of huge discontent. Are people happier when they see some old landmark reduced to rubble and carted away in trucks and the new girders going up? Speaking privately, I have this suspicion they never put new girders into buildings because the girders always look so dirty and rusty. Perhaps it is their natural look but I always have the feeling that although I believe passionately in recycling girders are one thing that I don't mind if they use new ones. It may of course just be the natural look of girders. Rather like a fashion designer saying 'I have done everything except dirty and rusty—so here goes for the new season'.

AUGUST 27th: So people who have come to Australia from Nauru and Manus for medical treatment are to be sent back. If they are well again I suppose it was part of the agreement. But it still seems an extraordinary waste of taxpayers' money. Refugees who came in the 40s, 50s, 60s, even in to the 70s were expected to go out and work in remote places for

two years. You know, nasty places like Mt Tom Price and Wittenoom and the highlands of Tasmania and the Snowy Mountains. They were expected to live in cheerless barracks and work hard in all weathers. And they did.

We could resurrect that idea. You can come to Australia so long as you sign on to two years hard work in a remote and unpleasant place.

The West Papuan refugees who crossed the border into PNG were given a bit of land and told to get busy making themselves shelters and starting food gardens.

We could try that model. Tell asylum seekers that they will be provided with several thousand hectares to get busy building shelters here and planting food gardens. I don't think it would go down very well. And yet—why not? If you are truly desperate you are grateful for any help and hope. And at the end of two years' hard yards you will be free to stay. Think of the saving in paperwork.

Or we can get busy and tickle Trump up. 'Mr President, you said you would honour Obama's commitment. We have now sorted out several thousand ideal refugees for you to take. They can't wait. You can't IMAGINE how excited they are to be coming to the US of A and helping you 'Make America Great—Again' and we will now have two hundred people on Nauru who we probably should leave there till the next batch arrives by boat because the Nauruans are now dependent on us paying them to look after refugees and, after all, that all seems quite fair seeing we took away all their phosphates and left them with a pretty dreary place to live. And of course if it is all right for Nauruans then it is all right for anybody. After all, we can't all live in Point Piper and Double Bay. There just aren't the houses.'

AUGUST 28th: While I was flying I was reading a book called *Our Stolen Future** which quite frankly scared the pants off me—even more so than the thought of engine failure or being hi-jacked or getting food poisoning from airline food.

It seems very likely the Same Sex Marriage question will pass provided they couch it in those specific terms and don't allow any wriggle room. Voters don't like wriggle room, they are always afraid of that thing called a 'Hidden Agenda', and I don't blame them one bit.

But this book looks at the way the environment is increasingly saturated with oestrogen. It comes naturally in all kinds of things, it is added every time a woman on the Pill goes to the loo, but the authors were looking at the chemical compounds which can mimic oestrogen and fool the body into taking up more than it needs. This includes nasties like DDT and PCBs but it can also include things that were thought inert or benign like certain plastics used for storage.

Each substance, each new chemical compound, in theory, goes through tests to determine:

- a) does it cause cancer?
- b) does it cause birth defects?

But in fact no amount of testing can truly answer even these obvious questions because some cancers take decades to show up and some birth defects are not like being born with half an arm or three legs.

The authors point to an increasing feminization of the masculine. These oestrogen-mimicking chemicals can cause:

- a) increasing infertility in men in that their sperm count is going down steadily.
- b) stunted penises. And it is very hard to look at a baby boy and know whether he's got the sort he can use to boast with in twenty years time.
- c) undescended testicles and, more rarely, hermaproditism—which are both fixable.

and behaviours that are harder to pin down to a physical abnormality but which suggest that testosterone is being blocked. In birds and animals this includes a disinterest in mating, two females sharing a nest rather than a male and female, animals outwardly one thing but having a different set of sex organs inside. Dr Moreau would rub his hands in glee. But we have done it unconsciously, unwittingly, uncaringly, and now the Earth is increasingly

saturated with chemicals we don't fully understand, don't know how they interact, and can't remove.

A while ago a friend lent me a book called *The End of Patriarchy*** perhaps in the hope of cheering me up, and more so as the Mop family has always veered towards patriarchy rather than matriarchy, and now I find myself wondering if we are moving into what are always called 'uncharted waters' even though few waters have been left uncharted on this little planet.

If men are going to become more feminine willy-nilly then the question is: how should they react? There seem to be several ways to go:

- a) They can undergo elaborate treatments in expensive clinics to top up their masculinity.
- b) They can go the full hog and become properly feminine—also via elaborate treatments in expensive clinics.
- c) They can commit suicide. I don't recommend this option. It always leaves regrets.
- d) They can exaggerate the masculine. Become loud-mouth boors toting weapons and wearing ten-gallon hats and practising extra-deep voices. I suspect some men are already following this formula.
- e) Shrug and say 'That's life'.
- f) Demand that politicians earmark hundreds of billions to properly clean up the environment, after they have developed large machines that sweep the world like giant brooms with chemical particles clinging to them. But then, like asbestos and radio-active waste, no one knows where to put the removed stuff—though there is the consolation that chemical particles take up less room than old fibro sheets.
- g) Book on the first passenger rocket to Mars.
- h) Say sadly 'We got what we deserved'.

* By Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski and John Peterson Myers. ** By Robert Jensen.

SEPTEMBER 1st: I didn't see a black cat to bring me luck. Probably just as well. Black cats, though admirable in themselves, do hunt little birds. And I would far rather start spring with the sight of a little flock of wrens sporting.

On a more serious note, people are up in arms, whatever that precisely means, because statues have been defaced in Sydney. The plaque on a statue of Captain Cook apparently says he 'discovered' Australia and so someone has sprayed over it. I thought we had actually determined, quite a while ago, that he didn't discover Australia.

And Cook himself writes quite frankly that he saw people virtually every time he landed. He even admits to killing some of them.

Some people said why should we be worrying about a plaque when the country has far more pressing issues including Aboriginal Health, Education, and Welfare. In fact we have very large State and Federal departments of same who all are, presumably, beavering away to improve Aboriginal Health, Education, and Welfare. But municipal statues come under Councils. Of course Councils should be beavering away to improve Water, Sewerage, and Streets (not to mention Dangerous Dogs)—unless you live in Tassie where the State Government, despite regularly crying poor, wants to take over everything. Well, perhaps not responsibility for Dangerous Dogs ...

What nobody seems to have mentioned is that it would take 10 minutes to decide to change 'discover' to 'explore'. Some people have suggested changing it to something about a European discovery. But that won't wash. We know Tasman, Dampier, Hartog, Torres, and more all touched on parts of Australia. And there is the strong likelihood that Christovao de Mendonça came down the east coast centuries before Cook.

Now Cook was a very able captain and I don't mind him being remembered. But I think we might bear in mind two things:

1) even though very few people read the plaques on the statues in our parks and gardens it should be a matter of integrity to get the plaques exactly right, and

2) Cook has really done very well in the Naming Stakes. Cooks and Endeavours and other related names pop up all over the place, apart from the names he put on the map. Yet despite 50,000+ years of Aboriginal occupation there is nothing to recognize their arrival and exploration of this vast continent. I am not advocating the Irish habit of blowing up unwanted statues but I really don't think we need to get all sentimental about Captain Cook.

SEPTEMBER 2nd: So Mrs Trump is being criticized for wearing very high heels on a trip to flood-ravaged Texas? It didn't seem the most suitable sort of shoe to go squelching round in the mud. Perhaps she thought a bit of glamour would cheer people up? But it reminded me of all the hoo-hah Julia Gillard faced. Anyone would think her wardrobe was the National Preoccupation instead of an irrelevance. Do I care what colour tie Mr Turnbull wears? Does anybody? Perhaps his wife says 'no, no, my dear, not purple and red spots on a navy background—why not your nice plain blue one?'

But then I learned that Mrs Trump only wore those shoes on to the plane. When she got off at the other end of her flight she had changed into sensible walking shoes.

But the criticism seemed to have a deeper edge. She wasn't being an inspiring Role Model. She wasn't founding charities or begging the world to ban landmines or going up in small planes to show that women can do anything or visiting kindergartens to give black children hugs. Should she?

I expect Lucy Turnbull does things in her spare time, when she isn't entertaining at The Lodge, but I don't know what she does and I don't really think it is any of my business. After all, she signed on to marry a merchant banker not to be First Lady. Mrs Trump signed on to marry a property developer not a president. And Mrs Trump unlike Mrs Obama or Mrs Clinton isn't a dyed-in-the-world American with ancestors going back to Pilgrim Fathers or the First Shipment of Slaves. Nor is English her first language. That she would rather be a consort than a media star doesn't surprise me in the least. Nor do I blame her for not immediately setting up her own Foundation to help Street Kids or Abandoned Animals. We have more than enough Foundations, Trusts, Charitable bodies to make the world a better place—and yet they still keep coming ... every week, it seems, someone finds something ...

And I am not fussed on the idea of a Role Model either. Now parents are role models for little children, so are grandparents, aunts, uncles, sometimes neighbours, kindergarten teachers and lollipop men. But by the time you get to 25, 35, even 45, you shouldn't be seeking out role models. If you've had good role models when you were young you don't need them later. If you were unlucky enough to have been brought up by a lot of beer-swilling or drug-taking morons who left you all day in wet nappies and regularly said 'Education Sucks!' then I am not sure it is realistic to ask any First Lady to remedy this deficiency.

SEPTEMBER 3rd: I just heard that the rules for adoptive parents are very strict. Among them are:

1. You can't adopt if you are seriously overweight. This seems to assume that you will be a bad influence on your new child, that if you got fat by scoffing down junk food you will do the same to your new child, and that your life in the Land of the Living might not be very long. It could be asked why a couple passionate about adopting a child could not lose a little weight. But surely the vetting process can go thoroughly into questions of diet. Some people are just naturally big and heavy even if they live on lettuce leaves.

2. You can't adopt until you have been married a certain number of years. The thinking used to be, and may still be, that if you adopt quickly then have your own child, the adopted child will lose out to the biological child. Parents probably do, quite naturally, care

more about their own flesh-and-blood and the adopted child may feel it is less special and less wanted. Or, sometimes, parents go to the other extreme, spoiling the adopted child so it won't feel second-best.

Probably, this is a wise precaution but how long should a couple be asked to wait?

Though there are many unwanted children in Australia—and should we be looking at how we can ensure fewer unwanted children are actually born—only a small number are actually available for adoption. I remember a sad story of a couple who adopted a little girl. They were in their fifties and they were over the moon. Their happiness with their little girl just shone out of them. But then the mother decided she wanted her little girl back. She turned up, took her, and left that couple devastated. I don't think they ever recovered from their loss. It was said that the mother had a year in which to decide whether she wanted the adoption to become permanent. Perhaps she had got her life together and gave that little girl a good life but I don't think the child could have been more loved ... and if the natural mother went on to have other children she may at some point have regretted taking her child back. Who knows?

The newer more open adoptions seem an important step forward from all the secrecy that surrounded adoptions in the past, all the lies that got told, all the lost paperwork and unknown fathers and finger-pointing. I remember meeting a couple in the library one day. She was researching her family and had already gone back 800 years. He said he couldn't research his family because he had been adopted, the papers had been destroyed (or never kept) and he didn't even know the names of his parents. I always wondered how he felt when his wife told him about some new family discovery she had made.

SEPTEMBER 5th: Cladding. Regulations. There may be thousands of buildings in Australia with unsafe flammable cladding on them. It always seems a waste of time and money for pollies to create legislation to keep us safe (safer?) and then nobody seems to regard the legislation as something that needs to be enforced. Just a lot of wankers coming up with yet more red tape, seems to be the general response.

Yet if a dropped cigarette or a spark from a faulty frig can set this stuff inside the aluminium cladding alight then surely it doesn't take any brains to determine that this stuff is flammable? The words 'No Brainer' immediately come to mind. So if we have flammable material inside the cladding and we know that aluminium will also melt ... remember that aluminium ship that melted in the Falklands War when it got hit by a missile?

Not of course that we expect our buildings to get hit by missiles but you never know ...

Well, all I can say is that our building industry is run by a lot of idiots and I hope they are all domiciled in buildings with this dangerous cladding instead of out there in heritage houses ... and for the first time in my life I am grateful for suffering from vertigo and terror of heights because no one would get me to live in a highrise ...

But like pollutants in our oceans and soils—what do we do about thousands of dangerous buildings? It was used because it was cheap. Now we are hearing astronomical figures bandied around when it comes to fixing the problem. And like asbestos and HAZCHEM where do we put the stuff when it is taken off?

There is a lot to be said for caves. And I believe the gypsies in Spain now have TV and Central Heating in their caves ...

SEPTEMBER 6th: So there will be more Royals? Oh dear, Now it might be an accident. Though I don't suppose Royals admit to accidents. But couldn't Prince William go and have a Little Snip? Think what a good example it would set to other men. Because, let's face it, a lot of people take their cue from the Royals. If they have 3 children then 3 children is

the ideal family size. If they have 4 children then a lot of other morons suddenly want 4 children.

Charles and Anne and Andrew and Edward were sensible to stay with 2. So where did the rot creep in? The world has grown by umpteen millions since the Queen had 4. And although all those umpteen millions will mostly not have the privileges and the Material Goods of a Royal they are all adding to global warming just by breathing. How can we get it through to people that this little Planet *doesn't need more people*. It may be all the better for more guinea pigs, more magpies, more butterflies, more cod ... but people, no.

But I will give them the benefit of the doubt and assume it was one of those Oops Moments ...

SEPTEMBER 7th: The US, or more particularly Trump, is embroiled in another controversy. No, not North Korea. He is threatening to send back the children brought into the US by those illegal immigrants, mostly Mexican, who come across the border every day. Clearly all those young people on temporary visas are Mexican citizens unless they have specifically renounced that citizenship or been accepted as genuine refugees. But I am never quite clear what all the fuss is about when someone says, in a heart-breaking way, that she came to the USA so her daughter could go to school.

Are there no schools in Mexico? Does Mexico deny education to girls?

More importantly, we are talking about *Mexico*—not war-torn Syria or South Sudan. Mexico is ostensibly a democratic, God-fearing nation which has signed most of the UN Covenants and Declarations and although it treats some of its indigenous groups very badly it is not embroiled in wars, it doesn't waste its government funds on nuclear missiles, and if its farmlands are polluted and wrecked it cannot lay all blame on the big chemical companies. It was equally keen to see its farmers pour poison on everything. And farmlands north of the border are hardly chemical-free ...

Mexicans endlessly say 'So near to the USA, so far from God'. Well, Canada is equally near the USA but only has the occasional whinge. And if Mexico is far from God then it is up to them to rethink their religious attitudes. Turning out once year for a big festival following a statue around may not be the best way to end domestic violence, plan family size, and bring the drug barons back into a deeply moral and Christian society, not if such a society barely exists except as lip service.

I would be far more sympathetic to Mexico and Mexican exiles if Mexico stopped whingeing and started tackling its deep-seated inequalities, discriminations, and corruptions.

SEPTEMBER 8th: Yesterday I was at a funeral service in which the Lord's Prayer was said in the way I learned it as a child. 'Our Father which art in Heaven ... ' It brought me back to thinking about that question of saying the Lord's Prayer before Parliament gets down to business. All kinds of reasons have been brought forward for doing away with it. These include:

- 1) Not every pollie is a Christian
- 2) Not every pollie believes deeply in something beyond the next debate, the next election, his ultimate amount of super
- 3) Not every pollie is attending to anything after a late night sitting and would rather have an extra ten minutes in bed or sitting over breakfast
- 4) It is gabbled so quickly and carelessly that it might as well be a page from *The Magic Pudding* as a prayer
- 5) Political life is not about the deeper meanings of life and trying to present it as such is a waste of time

But most gatherings of disparate people start with *something*. It may be an address of welcome. It may be a remark about the weather. It may be a Welcome to Country. It may be a

brief and reflective silence. Many clubs and charities start with a reading of their Pledge or Promise or Constitution ... or merely the Minutes of the last meeting.

But in a way a prayer which strikes a deeper note and reminds us that the things of the spirit are ultimately more important than who scores what point and off whom ... And regardless of what we all believe or don't believe this remains a Christian society so it seems appropriate that the body which makes our legislation should reflect that fact.

But if we genuinely cannot accept that fact then I would like to make a suggestion:

I was just thinking of giving someone a copy of that Irish Blessing to warm her new home and I think it might appeal to various pollies.

May the road rise to meet you.

Hear, hear, from the Ministers for Transport, Infrastructure, and Employment

May the wind be always at your back.

Hear, hear, from the Minister for Energy and all Green members (with a muttered 'but replace *back* with *sails*')

May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rain fall soft upon your fields.

Hear, hear, from the Ministers for Agriculture and Tourism (with the murmured proviso 'in moderation')

Until we meet again may God hold you in the palm of his hand.

Hear, hear, from the PM and all party leaders who can never decide whether to use a palm or a fist or a pointing finger when it comes to quarrelsome factions and restive backbenchers.

SEPTEMBER 9th: Yesterday I heard people on TV saying girls should be allowed a choice between trousers and skirts when it comes to school uniforms. I didn't take a lot of notice but then I remembered back to being a kid at primary school in the country and riding a pony to school. It seems like another life now. And in a way it is.

But the key thing was—I rode in a skirt and never thought anything about it. There wasn't a school uniform but someone had given my mother a couple of old navy tunics and I wore them as money was tight and as she said 'they still had some wear in them'. Awful dreary clothes always seemed to 'have some wear left in them'.

One of the reasons given for allowing girls to wear shorts or trousers was that they would do more sport. This seems a bit like saying Scotsmen would do more fighting if they weren't confined in kilts.

Now skirts have their place especially in hot humid climates just as warm woolen trousers have their place in cold windy climates.

But why confine all the arguments to skirts? Surely ties are pointless things for students to wear? Surely berets or panama hats or boaters are a waste of money? Surely polished black lace-up shoes are not ideal for growing feet? Surely blazers need to be rethought? They are too hot for hot climes and don't keep you warm enough in cold climes. When you start to unpack all the things that might be worth changing when it comes to school uniforms—where will it stop?

And the real questions surely aren't who plays the most sport or whether children should have choice or whether uniforms encourage pride in your school—but what kinds of clothing promote the optimum learning environment. That is the real reason why kids get sent to school.

SEPTEMBER 11th: I have just heard Pauline Hanson and Sarah Hanson-Young debating the Same Sex Marriage plebiscite. Pauline said she would be voting No, Sarah said she would be voting Yes. No surprises there. Sarah managed to get the word Equality in.

Pauline put in the coded reference to polygamy, ‘multiple’ partners, which no one picked up on.

Was this because we don’t want to upset Muslims or because, like Ita Buttrose, we think there aren’t enough men (or alternatively there are too many women) and polygamy/polyandry as the next big issue in the marriage debate will be a Good Thing, or we weren’t listening very carefully or we’re all bored silly with the debate? I don’t know.

But they both made the point that the plebiscite was a giant waste of money. Now, I originally thought this. But when I stopped to consider it more I realized it is one government department passing money to another government department (a bit like multinationals moving money round internally to bamboozle everyone) but in this case the Electoral Office and Bureau of Statistics are moving money to Australia Post. I don’t know if Australia Post needs it more than the Electoral Commission does—but if it gets the post office to do a better job with letters then it can only be a Good Thing.

You feel I should be saying something about September 11 and the Twin Towers?

Years ago I read a book called *Life After Life* about people who had had near-death-experiences. Most people found it a very positive experience. When they were brought back from a stopped heart or stopped breathing and began to beat and breathe again they lived their ‘new’ life with greater happiness and verve. But people who had come close to death because of trying to commit suicide said they had felt a sense of dismay, disappointment, regret, that they were letting people down. Perhaps they had tried to commit suicide for what came to be seen as trivial reasons. That side of it wasn’t explored.

But I cannot help wondering how suicide bombers, and suicide car drivers, and suicide hijackers are received in the next life. Saying to God they did it for God might not be received with applause and thanks. ‘You went out and killed 80 people and yourself to please me? What do you think I am? A sadist? A mass murderer? No. Don’t shuffle the responsibility off on to me. You chose to do it. You take full responsibility. Oh, you went and did it because someone else urged you to do it? Like a soldier in one of those many armies that crawl all over my beautiful world trying to think up yet more reasons for killing each other and making bigger arms factories? Don’t they ever stop to think that I might prefer the sight of trees and butterflies? Don’t they realize I put just as much effort into creating trees and butterflies as I did in to giving them big brains and five fingers?’

And if reincarnation proves to be a ‘fact of life’ then those suicide bombers far from feeling pleased with themselves may be facing yet another round on this world and possibly in the body of a poor peasant in the remote highlands of Bolivia or a tiny Pacific atoll. I don’t think blowing people up is really the way to develop good karma. But these are questions too deep for a Mrs Mop resolution.

SEPTEMBER 14th: Irma. Mr Trump went to Florida and put his foot in it again—his mouth I mean, not the Florida mud. First off he said ‘only’ 23 people died. Now he was probably expressing a widely-held view, that many thousands of people might have died, and instead ‘only’ 23 did. And he should have followed that with his heartfelt condolences to the families of those 23. But that wasn’t what upset people. He then said Irma wasn’t the result of global warming and that *did* get people’s backs up.

Yet, strictly speaking, we cannot draw the sort of precise cause and effect we use with smokers. Lung cancer = You smoked = Therefore:- It seems very likely global warming contributed to the ferocity of Irma but we cannot pin it down to a precise cause and effect and we would also need to explain why the following hurricanes like Jose were much less ferocious. We can make a hurricane fit into categories but we are more muddled when it comes to attributing cause let alone stopping a hurricane in its tracks.

Some years ago I saw a photo of a hurricane-proof house. There it was standing firm while all around it was devastation. It was high up on stilts but otherwise just looked like a square wooden house so I don't know what other special features it had. But if a house *can* be hurricane-proofed then what are we waiting for?

Of course poor people living in a wood-and-thatch shack can't afford such houses but they can rebuild more easily and with less angst than the luxurious homes of the rich in the Caribbean. So how might governments respond to hurricanes? There seem to be 2 main options:

1. Move people to less dangerous exposed storm-surge-prone areas. This might run into all sorts of problems with title deeds and crowding in the most desirable sheltered areas.

2. Provide the means to build less vulnerable buildings. When I look at the pictures of devastation two things strike me. The two most vulnerable points are roofs and outbuildings. Now roofs in hot places are usually dumped on leaving wide eaves for coolness but this is exactly what spells disaster in strong winds so changing designs and ways of meshing roofs and walls need a lot more thought. After all, beehive huts in hottest Africa seem to be remarkably stable, easy to build, and tenacious. And tossing up a tool shed, carport, rabbit hutch, chookhouse, without saying 'will this withstand a hurricane?' usually means your shed or chookhouse chases you round the yard next time there is a big blow.

Mr Trump hasn't done anything about global warming. In more than 30 years of warnings neither has any other US President.

SEPTEMBER 15th: So a Presbyterian minister is copping a lot of stick for canceling the marriage of a young couple because they posted on Facebook their support for Same-Sex Marriage? But a number of questions come to me.

1. The Presbyterian Church has never hidden its disagreement with Same-Sex Marriage. So why did they ask that minister to conduct their wedding if they knew he and the church he represents didn't share their feelings?
2. Why did they not simply discuss things with him at the time they made their arrangements? Posting it on Facebook seems a sneaky way of going about things. Did they hope he *would* or *wouldn't* see? Did they hope to make him look a fool? Were they being deliberately provocative? Did they hope to embarrass the Presbyterian Church? But then why go there to get married if you don't approve of church views?
3. Or were they just being young and irresponsible?

This may be a storm in a teacup but there are deeper questions. Beautiful old heritage churches with lovely stained-glass windows and wood carvings are chosen as a marriage venue by people who have virtually no connection with the church. Though understandable, this to me is simply treating a church as a venue in the way you might treat a hotel function room—rather than as a congregation, a community, the people who will be there for you throughout your marriage, there for your children, there if you have to face sorrows and difficulties.

Many churches have agonized over that question of whether they should agree to marry people who are not part of their congregation. In the old days when people had to turn up to church three Sundays in a row to have the banns said it didn't stop the occasional spot of bigamy, incest, or coercion, but it did give minister, couple, and congregation some chance to get to know each other.

Though we talk a great deal about 'community', 'communicating', 'reaching out', people very often trivialize this. People wandering round with balloons to say R U OK? are no doubt doing it with the best of intentions. But if someone came up to them and said 'I will be in prison by next week unless I can come up with the \$10,000 I stole from my employer. My kids

will be taken by Welfare and it will be the end of our family life' that person with the balloon would most likely just urge them to ring Lifeline. They are not really going to *engage* with the person or the problem.

But if that same person went to his or her minister or priest and said the same thing then a caring cleric is going to say 'In that case we need to work out a way for you to repay the money, to say sorry, and for you to tackle the underlying problem which led to the thefts in the first place.' The person might feel embarrassed about baring his or her peccadilloes but would also receive support, help and practical ways out of the mire.

There are communities and communities and we need to look for communities which give us both support and a standard of behaviour worth trying to emulate.

SEPTEMBER 16th: Over and over again people say 'Love is all that matters'. It has a nice fuzzy warm feeling to it, doesn't it? It reminds me of various pop songs from my youth. Perhaps nostalgia mixes with the warm glow. But there are problems:

- a) It isn't true.
- b) Legal issues need to be debated on legal grounds.

All kinds of virtues are important, alongside love, including honesty, integrity, transparency, and compassion. Yes, the Bible gives priority to love but it places it alongside faith, hope, and charity. And love is one of those emotions we can toss around for ever without actually being able to prove. Yes, people do do extraordinarily brave and selfless things out of love. But you can get food poisoning just as easily from a cake your gran has baked with love as from a cake made in an impersonal factory run by robots. A toy bought with love and care can prove to be just as dangerous as one snatched off a shop shelf to quiet a screaming toddler. And the marriage service though it has changed is still predicated on the idea of commitment. The bigamist who professes undying love for his new partner because he has fallen out of love and is planning to 'do the dirty' on his previous one may be an extreme case but in a nation where almost half of relationships, married, de facto, casual, homo or hetero, end, and despite the fact that most of the relationships at some time professed love, it is clear that love is not always the best guide to an enduring relationship.

Or it may be that we have trivialized love.

In general.

In this debate.

Yes, when someone mentions love in one sentence and in the next says changing the Marriage Act will give them access to their partner's estate and their super I do begin to wonder. Apart from the fact that most people didn't have super when I got married the idea that marriage would give me access to someone else's estate did not even enter into the equation. Love was love—not a way to dispose of your assets. And Super, regardless of marriage or wills, goes first to anyone who was dependent on you when you died. Underage children. Disabled people you have a responsibility for. An elderly parent. Changing the Marriage Act doesn't change that.

Laws are changed for all sorts of reasons. a) they have become obsolete. We no longer need laws to tell us the required standards to make and sell suits of armour or donkey carriages. b) community attitudes change. To assist at a suicide or carry out an abortion was once a serious crime. We now see people openly discussing such issues and in some cases carrying out legal abortions—and you can't tell me hospitals don't give terminally-ill patients more than the stated morphine dose. c) laws are found to be unworkable. Police used to wait outside Gents toilets but nobody would pretend that everyone engaging in homosexual activities in private was likely to be found or charged. Tens of thousands of schoolboys had a homosexual experience at school down through the years. Nobody would suggest that police should have been clumping through the dormitories at elite boys' schools. d) laws are changed because they

were poorly expressed, led to confusion in the courts, had unexpected or unforeseen loopholes, or were simply seen to be inappropriate.

Councils which put up signs to say Wheeled Vehicles were banned from using their footpaths soon realized they had made an awful boo-boo. It was one thing to try and keep bicycles and motorbikes off footpaths. It was another to have mothers wheeling their prams out in the traffic or postmen trying to deliver mail without setting a tyre on the footpath.

Marriage, of course, has a venerable pedigree. In one shape or form it has existed in most human societies for a very long time. But it was what we might now call a 'civil contract'. It had nothing to do with love. The Elders, usually men, in a community or tribe decided the marriages for their children. Their criteria was very different to rosebuds and lots of kissing. Marriage was designed to regularize social relations within the community. It was designed to avoid inbreeding. It was designed to conceive, bear, and rear the community's children in safe and planned ways. It was designed to protect vulnerable women. It was designed to avoid having any unattached 'outsiders', 'loners', people not enmeshed in the tribal or group structures. It had nothing to do with love. If a man and a woman happened to like the partners chosen for them then that was a bonus. If that state of affairs had continued we wouldn't be having a plebiscite.

But religion, both Judaism and Christianity in particular, thought that the most intimate relations possible should also be embedded in a relationship which was more than an arrangement made by parents or elders. It was also to be marked by fidelity, kindness, caring, and affection. Marriage was raised above other kinds of relationships. Marriage gradually drew to itself the idea that it was a manifestation of love. Not something your elders arranged when you were two-years-old. Not something designed to bring social or economic benefits. Not something to join the lands of two warring factions.

But the manifestation of love was more than the sentimental thing we now present as bluebirds sing. It had a stern component. Love kept you together in sickness, in poverty, in the face of temptation, even in the face of snoring, addiction, in-laws ... It is not an image of love we're fussed on now ...

So when people say, in any context, 'Love is all that matters'—are they thinking of bluebirds or snoring?

SEPTEMBER 18th: So Prince Charles would like to remain where he is and see Buckingham Palace used like a stately home: open to visitors in the tourist season but there for special banquets and functions. It seems very sensible. Britain's economy is in a parlous state and anything which brings in new tourists, after all looking at lions and tigers in the grounds of various stately homes has grown rather passé now that everyone is doing it, seems to be worth a whirl.

In fact a part of Buckingham Palace, the Mews, has been open to tourists for many years. You can pay to go in and see the Royal Horses, the Royal Carriages, the Royal Harness and the Royal Gifts, you know, all those howdahs and camel whatnots that sheiks and maharajahs have given the monarchs over the years. You can even see Queen Victoria's donkey carriage and Princess Margaret's first saddle for her pony. So if this could go on even when the Queen was in residence I don't see why they couldn't rope off a few rooms right away and let the public in. I don't see why everything has to wait on the Queen dying.

It reminds me of those books of yesteryear where people had to wait on the curmudgeonly old patriarch to die so they could pull down an old shed or make helpful changes to their farming practices. As the Queen is always whizzing off to Balmoral, Sandringham, Windsor, I really don't think she should be the deciding factor. No one looks round the 700 rooms of the place they only live in when they're opening Parliament or welcoming the US President and says with a catch in their voice, 'I love my little home, I couldn't bear to see strangers wandering through it!'

SEPTEMBER 19th: So Donald Trump, with a chorus of Bishops, would like to reform the UN? There are a lot of things wrong with the UN but I always worry when I hear the word ‘reform’. It usually means someone wants to change things to suit themselves—and sucks to everyone else. The UN has a moderately bloated bureaucracy. The US does very well out of that UN bureaucracy. It sells them food in its supermarkets. It rents them accommodation. It sells clothes for their backs, and toys for their toddlers, and petrol for their cars, and entertainment for their families, and school books for their schoolchildren, and tours for their spouses. A lean trim bureaucracy has its attractions for every country which pays into the UN coffers and sells no hamburgers in return. But the US would be wise to say to every UN bureaucrat: ‘We love you! Do stay and spend!’

But perhaps he has a different kind of reform in mind?

Two ‘reforms’ have had a long shelf life.

1) Removing the Security Council veto. The Five Big ‘Uns cling to their right of veto, the US not least. So that may not be what Trump has in mind. But looked at objectively the veto does nothing to enhance the fairness of the UN. The largest most powerful nations can veto decisions. The smallest most vulnerable countries cannot.

2) Bringing in some form of proportionate voting to reflect world population distributions. But this has always faced a simple difficulty. How do you compare the populations of China and Tuvalu? You can give China one vote and Tuvalu one one-hundredth of a vote. You can give Tuvalu one vote and you can have China pressing its buzzer for the next half hour to register its proportion of votes.

But as Tuvalu will soon cease to exist it isn’t its number of people. It is its right to exist which is in question. So its vote is not something to be tampered with. When all its people have been relocated to New Zealand they will simply be subsumed under New Zealand’s one vote and in effect become voteless people. I am not sure just how Donald Trump is planning to tackle that moral dilemma.

A few less trips in his corporate jet might be a good place to start.

In fact the UN might like to begin running all its sessions by Skype rather than flying everyone in and out of New York every day.

So how about it, Trumpie, old boy, how about striking a blow for a cleaner, greener, safer, quieter world? Now that would really be a reform worth having.

SEPTEMBER 28th: Waiting, waiting, waiting—for Mount Agung to blow. Or not blow, as the case may be. There is something both fascinating and frightening about volcanoes.

And unlike earthquakes or tsunamis they are not an unalloyed disaster. They leave rich soil for future generations. The trouble is—the short term is likely to be very difficult and dangerous. Visitors go to Hawaii to view its volcanoes. And like creatures in a zoo its volcanoes seem to be amenable to viewing by silly people who ‘want to get up close’. Whereas Mount Agung is promising ash clouds and visitors don’t like ash clouds. They throw travel plans into chaos.

But when I stop to think about travel plans and all the breast-beating and claims of missed connections and lost money and worries over insurance and all the rest of it I wonder if we ever stop to think how privileged we are to be able to fly out to some exotic place for several weeks holiday and think nothing of it. When I look back at ancestors the first thing that strikes me is that most of them didn’t have the pleasure of holidays. If they got to sit for a quiet hour in church or take a brief walk of a Sunday afternoon they probably felt blessed in having the moment to themselves.

The ancients didn't have holidays. Some worked harder than others. If they sat around eating some roast meat or hearing some stories they probably enjoyed the moment. But they didn't say 'we'll be off on our holidays next week' ...

In the 19th century, with the awfulness of the Industrial Revolution clear for people to see (if they happened to be looking in the right direction), a two-pronged movement developed: to give people an annual holiday and to give them shorter working hours. Hours gradually got shorter. Annual holidays gradually got longer. And so the multi-billion dollar tourism industry grew up. Holidays weren't just for the privileged. They were now for everybody. Or almost everybody.

But we wouldn't be worrying about ash clouds and planes if many good people had not agitated for that right to take an annual break.

We would be worrying about other things. Wouldn't we?

SEPTEMBER 29th: Pokies. To have or have not. Hamlet, dear boy, step inside and have a look at the zombies and the ring-a-ding-ding ...

Your thoughts, dear boy?

Hard to think with all that racket going on.

But behind all the ads telling us gambling is good for everyone because it funds schools and hospitals and bad for everyone because we get addicted and can't get unaddicted and next thing we're stealing money and neglecting our families is a question which I also heard raised in the smoking debate.

Is there any kind of 'right' to do what we want with our lives?

We are guaranteed certain freedoms.

But that isn't quite the same thing.

We don't have a 'right' to kill ourselves—or anyone else. Unless we have declared war on them.

We don't have a 'right' to beggar ourselves—or anyone else. Although certain governments, banks, CEOs, and economic systems have played with this.

So if we don't have a 'right' but we do have freedoms to make certain choices, buy certain products, waste our own money, wreck our health, be a burden on everyone else—then do we have certain responsibilities?

This gets airplay every time there is a crisis in the health system. Should we be required to fix the health of people who have been irresponsible? It is very tempting to say no. But the trouble is—we can't. A reasonably decent democratic society has given its people the freedom to do stupid things and therefore it seems to have an obligation to pick up the pieces when those freedoms lead to sickness, addiction, family breakdown, becoming bed-ridden ...

Governments can tinker round the edges—putting up the price of cigarettes, suggesting a cap on what can go in the poker machine—or they can ban things. Banning certain drugs hasn't been a roaring success.

But there is one comfort. No one has yet worked out how to ingest, smoke, inject, or snort a poker machine. So banning poker machines, except for the people paid to make them, would probably be fairly successful.

They weren't all over the place thirty years ago. We all, governments and treasuries included, seemed to cope.

OCTOBER 1st: Catalonia. Breakaways. Separatists. Rebels. Freedom Fighters. Self-determination. It is curious how the words used subtly define our responses. The Rohingya were called 'rebels' before they turned into refugees. But I am still not certain exactly what they were asking for or rebelling against. Autonomy? An independent nation? The chance to become part of Bangladesh? Freedom of religion? Just to be left alone?

There is a tendency to think that if the nation states as they currently exist begin to disintegrate dreadful things will happen. People point to Yugoslavia. They might as easily point to Czechoslovakia. Scotland. Quebec. Chechnya. The southern Philippines. The Basque territory. There is no perfect model. Nor does Catalonia look like being a triumph of respect and courtesy.

But I am on the side of referendums. People who have been accorded the chance to choose may regret that the result has gone this way or that. But their wishes have been respected. The nations that get out the Big Stick, give it a good polish up, and then go into action to see how many heads they can crack and how many buildings (usually called 'rebel strongholds') they can knock down tend to leave a festering sore. And festering sores do not make for harmonious social, political, or economic bedrocks. And we are going to need harmonious bedrocks if we are to weather the looming environmental, social, and economic disasters lying in wait.

Postscript: Spanish Police have just given a textbook example of how to turn anti-independence people and waverers into firmly pro-independence people.

Memo: Is there a textbook on this?

OCTOBER 8th: Defacing billboards. All the billboards I have seen that the No campaign in the marriage debate have put up have been defaced. It may just be the usual mindless graffiti but I think it is the Yes campaign having a go at them. As I have already sent my voting form back it makes no difference to me. But I wonder if it would've changed anything if I hadn't?

Two friends threw away their ballot papers because they noticed they had different bar codes on them. So much for anonymity, they thought. Other people have given various reasons for their choices.

But my thoughts were slightly different. It is that sneaky anonymous thing with defacing things, sending anonymous letters, making anonymous phone calls, putting up 'messages' but not your name. I have a deep and abiding dislike for anything done anonymously. If you are not prepared to sign your name to your message, regardless of whether your 'message' is a scribble, a rude word, a hash tag, a political or social comment, a poison pen letter, then so far as I am concerned you are down there in the gutter.

I can understand citizens not wanting to upset the Indonesian army, the North Korean army, the Chinese army, but pushing sticks into those sorts of grim wasp nests is a far cry from sending messages in a democracy. If your 'message' is not something you can put your name to—then don't send it.

OCTOBER 9th: The Australian Dream. Or one Australian Dream. Home ownership. It is constantly called The Australian Dream. And yet the odd thing is that I don't remember ever hearing people say so when I was young. Was it that I wasn't listening, that I was off in some dream where such mundane things as houses did not intrude? No, I just don't think country people aspired to a house of their own. I think it was a suburban dream.

Country people, whether on farms or in small country towns, did at times build houses. I remember my father with some help from his brother-in-law built a house for us. Neither of them were registered builders, just capable bush carpenters, who put together a simple weatherboard house and then over the years my father added on rooms as and when he could afford to, likewise he lined and painted the rooms as and when he could afford to.

Many houses were like that. Works-in-progress. It was the height of luxury when you could have your laundry or your toilet inside instead of in a shed in the back yard or an old bush dunny tucked away by the back fence.

But then someone, some real estate whiz, discovered that there was money to be made by selling land for ‘development’, packaged homes, completed houses for which people would sign up for and spend their next twenty years paying off a loan. And people had to be encouraged to want these packages and the huge commitment they constituted. You couldn’t have people satisfied with some old worker’s cottage or a house once used by a sharefarmer or a caravan behind their parents’ house or a converted shed or something knocked up by someone handy with a hammer. It had to be sold as an aspiration.

And so people started talking about the Australian Dream.

And like other dreams it grew bigger and better and fancier and more expensive.

And then one day people started saying ‘I think I will dream about something different’ ... in the Year 2021 ...

OCTOBER 10th: So President Trump has started taking a few asylum seekers from Manus Island and the Chosen Few are delighted. Not for *them* any statements about not wanting to live in Trump’s America.

It is the remaining ones who are all jumping up and down and saying they cannot possibly remain in PNG and to make them do so is the height of cruelty. I don’t understand this. I would happily live in PNG if someone would care to pay my fares there, point me to a thatched hut, and help me through the Immigration formalities. And I am not coming from a situation of persecution, torture, and misery. Nor am I desperate for any kind of help, no matter how small.

PNG is a poor country. But it is a democracy. It has reasonable standards of governance. It has some conception of human rights. It provides a degree of religious tolerance and some, though undoubtedly not enough, care for its women and children. But then very few of the asylum seekers are women.

Nevertheless, Australia very stupidly did not make careful choices when it sent asylum seekers there. It sent mainly Muslim men—all the while knowing that most people in PNG are only too aware that Indonesian Muslims have been used to swamp the Melanesian population across the border in West Papua. It would not be surprising if people believed this was all part of the campaign against ‘Melanesian-ness’ and more so given Australia’s kow-towing attitude to Indonesia. And Australia made no effort to consult with the local community which would have these strangers suddenly dumped in their midst.

PNG has already taken in around 20,000 West Papuan refugees, given them some land and left them to get on with building shelters and starting food gardens. Providing them with electricity and clean running water didn’t get a mention. Still it would not hurt PNG to take in small numbers of refugees from much further afield—provided they are carefully selected so as to be able to assimilate into a Melanesian, pig-loving, predominantly rural Christian society.

OCTOBER 13th: I was impressed by the Syrian soccer team being able to hold Australia to a 1-all draw in Malaysia and go down by a goal here. After all, we are told, or at least we were told, that Syria is a basket-case, a war-torn place of misery and deprivation. So how and where and when did its soccer players train together? Were they all safely with European clubs? Or did they creep out at night and practice between the rubble of bombed grandstands and wrecked changing rooms?

It is a curious thing how we hear about a particular war day in and day out and then it suddenly seems to fall off our screens. I always hope this means that a ceasefire is in place, that negotiations are moving ahead, that things are improving—but I suspect it is a kind of media-weariness. Even if viewers aren’t tired of a particular issue, journalists and editors are.

Sometimes we are left in mid-story. I remember the story of a small boy stuck down a deep well. A rescue effort was in place. But then—dead silence. I expected to hear the result of the rescue effort but no. Did they think it would be too sad for viewers to cope with? The worst

such cut-out of news I can remember was the case in Bangladesh where a news story said the army there had burnt a thousand Assamese alive in a building. I expected to hear more about it on the next news. But—nothing. A while after there was a vague mention that the story wasn't verified. But quite some time later I found that the story was true. So had something quite different come into play?

'Bangladesh is a basket case, so don't say anything bad about its government or army or people might stop donating to charities working there'. Something like that. It was all right to run with stories about garment workers getting killed because there Western companies could be blamed for the sub-standard conditions. But it seems the Bangladeshis themselves are sacrosanct and can burn people alive as and when they feel like it.

OCTOBER 16th: A surprising number of books, articles, and programs are about the Working Poor in the USA. These are people who have full-time jobs but which are so poorly-paid they require food stamps to survive. Everyone suggests that companies and governments should raise the minimum wage. Certainly this sounds sensible. But I always wonder why there is so little discussion of other things which would help. Just a few ideas:

1. Unions. Americans seem to have forgotten that steps forward, better wages, better conditions, an 8-hour-day, all needed to be fought for. They weren't handed over on a plate. People struggled for years, they suffered privation and discrimination and threats to achieve these outcomes. But Americans not only don't seem to want unions but actively avoid them.
2. Boycotts. Companies and businesses have sometimes had to be severely boycotted to raise their game. But what do we see? People boycotting little main street shops in favour of Walmart. And when the little shops and businesses have closed people turn around and complain about Walmart's practices. How about boycotting Walmart instead of Ma and Pa in the Main Street?
3. Co-ops. The Co-operative movement was still around when I was young and then it gradually died under pressure from Big Business—and because not enough people supported the Co-operative way of life. So if we all prefer Big Business then what are people belly-aching about now?
4. Sharing. It used to be that if someone had a spare room in their house and needed money they rented it out or took in a boarder. All kinds of sharing went on. (No, I don't want to hear your smutty suggestions.) My father used to say he had seen more real kindness and generosity in the years of the Depression than at any time since. Hard times can bring out people's sharing instincts—or crush and deform them.
5. Family size. It is a simple fact that the people hardest hit in the US are one-parent families. If you are a Single Mom with three kids you don't have a lot of options. You can't go off and earn big money in remote mining or lumber towns. You can't do a lot to upgrade your skills or follow the money. You are pretty well stuck.

Of course employers want a lot of desperate people competing for the same jobs. It doesn't really matter if those people are illegal immigrants or single moms, they are all fighting and clambering for the same low-paid jobs. So not being held hostage by kids does give you more options. I know people aren't going to go back to a world in which people were engaged for seven years while they SAVED (and sewed doilies and tablecloths) but kids, no matter how cute, can tie people to low wages and food stamps.

And then there is the looming question: what will happen as the population of the USA (and Australia) goes up while automation and robots take over? What happens to millions of unwanted and expendable people?

OCTOBER 20th: So the Victorians are going to go ahead with their euthanasia bill. All hedged around with ‘safeguards’ of course and fighting off all those who talk about ‘legalised murder’.

But many of us are still going to have to work out how to end our lives anyway. So it is only a modest step.

On the one hand we already have legalized murder. We call it ‘organ donation’. As soon as you have flat brain waves your heart and lungs and liver can be taken. You are still alive but it is assumed that a) you can’t come back from near death and b) that the only use of the brain dead is to provide body parts. The simple fact that this is murder is brushed over. Murderers ‘out there’ could take it up. “Sorry, sir, but she was brain dead when I finished her off, so it isn’t murder”. “No, of course it isn’t, but you should’ve got on to your nearest hospital, they like the organs while they’re fresh.”

And on the other hand the assumption that the only people who want to do so are a) the terminally ill and b) those in chronic pain. This simply isn’t true. People want to die for all sorts of reasons, not least the simple one of feeling that they’ve had enough. They’ve done the things they wanted to do, they’ve seen their family and friends die, they’ve grown tired, they live with constant discomfort, they can’t bear the thought of strangers doing intimate things to them, they can no longer do any of the things that made life meaningful, they have simply had enough and would like to slip away without any fuss and bother.

Legislation does provide for fuss and bother. It probably has to. But most of us would much rather go to sleep one night and not wake up and we envy those of our friends and relatives who are given this gentle way forward.

OCTOBER 23rd: So Old Trumpie is in hot water again. He hasn’t been ringing the bereaved. It seems now that the President is supposed to ring the families, or at least the next-of-kin, of every deceased serviceman or servicewoman.

When did this expectation come in? The families of soldiers in Vietnam got a form letter and some bits returned to them. This was probably to spare the president from being on the phone to the bereaved night and day. He would not have got much governing done. Whether this might’ve been a good thing or a bad thing is debatable.

Now it seems the bereaved are to have the president expressing his unctuous regrets. Now call me picky but that is the last thing I would want if I had just lost a loved one. You can’t have a good cry on the president’s shoulder. You can’t tell him what you really think of the military. You can’t really let fly with some foul language to relieve the ache in your heart. You can’t really ask the important questions about this death that you want answered. The whole thing reeks of an artificial insincerity and wastes everybody’s time.

I was going to tell my family that if I am ever in a major accident or natural disaster I DO NOT want to be visited in the hospital by the prime minister. My son said he didn’t think the prime minister would be very likely to want to visit me anyway but I thought I should make my feelings known, just in case.

Imagine lying in a hospital bed trying to think of nice cheery things like being able to get up and go out and sit in the sun and enjoy the birds singing (that is if there are any birds round the hospital rather than screaming sirens and delivery vans) when along comes the PM with all his minders and asks you: HOW ARE YOU FEELING! Can you say ‘Well, how d’you think, you old fool? Why d’you think I am lying here with lots of plastic tubes coming out of me and a few of my essential bits missing!’

But no, this is the PM closely followed by a television camera.

So you say in a meek little squeak: All the better for seeing you.

It is, of course, a blatant lie. But in this world where no one is expected to be sincere and truthful he will smile and say something equally insincere like he hopes I will be home soon.

To which I can say a further meek and insincere 'Thank you' ...

Or I can say 'Yes, the hospital system always wants patients to go home as soon as possible and stop costing the government money. So why don't you emulate Jesus and say 'Take up your bed and walk'?''

No. Please keep presidents and prime ministers out of my life if I am ever injured or bereaved ...

OCTOBER 26th: Ms Michaelia Cash, Minister for Unemployment, says 'The Buck Stops Here' now that it has been shown her staff leaked details of police operations to the media. We don't know Who. More importantly we don't know Why.

Pollies get two kinds of staff. Those they import who presumably share their ideas and aims. Those who simply come with the office, like windows and rest rooms, and who are presumably career bureaucrats of impeccable behaviour.

So if the first—then why would a person supportive of Ms Cash and the Liberals want to bring her down and abort a raid on a union office? If the second then the public service needs to vet its employees much more carefully.

But what should a minister be expected to know and observe and understand about the day-to-day running of her office? If her work is getting done, reports produced, constituents responded to (this is a dodgy one; most pollies don't bother to respond to the people who write to them), speeches written, appointments kept, answers produced in Question Time, should she be expected to know what some of her staff are apparently cooking up in the tea room or doing while she is not looking?

OCTOBER 27th: Harvey Weinstein. So another Groper Bites the Dust! But my first response was puzzlement. These women coming forward were clearly not uneducated, unsophisticated, inarticulate young women. Not simple peasant girls arriving in the big bad metropolis and with no idea what the film industry is really like. They would have known where to go and how to lodge a complaint twenty years ago.

But someone enlightened me. You have to put up with producers groping you, touching you inappropriately, all that, if you want a job in their movies.

Have to? You do have a choice. You can put up with this disgusting stuff for the sake of good parts and a career that takes off. Or you can say that your bodily integrity matters more, that you intend to stop a monster in his tracks, that some behaviour is simply unacceptable no matter what the promises ...

After all, most women who get raped or assaulted don't get that kind of choice. I remember an elderly lady coming to court. She had been raped by some young wastrel. Apart from the pain, the psychological damage, the ongoing fear, the publicity she dreaded, she also faced an agony most young starlets and hopefuls would not even think about: she had never talked about sex in her life and now she was going to have to talk about intimate things in front of a lot of strange men. Not surprisingly she was hyperventilating and in a bad way. But she put herself through all this partly so as to have a sexual predator taken off the streets.

I take my hat off to her and all the women who didn't wait twenty years and didn't put their careers before the importance of stopping certain men from offending again and wrecking other bodies and other lives ...

NOVEMBER 6th: Another pollie in the spotlight. I wonder who is actually sneaking round trying to dig up people's ancestors. Some sort of frustrated genealogist? Or someone determined to bring the Turnbull government down? No one seems to be answering this question.

But I thought that whoever it is, whatever group it is, whatever frustration drives he/her/them/it, surely did a callous thing when they targeted Josh Frydenburg. Far from being, potentially, a Hungarian citizen his mother came here as a stateless person. Now the other definition of a stateless person is surely that no state wants, cares, welcomes, regards you as one of theirs.

When there was much talk of stripping potential terrorists of their citizenship someone sensibly pointed out that we cannot make people stateless. And that particular issue seemed to fade away.

So if a person was made stateless by Hungary, by circumstances, by World War Two, by an Act of War, by confusion and lost papers—then surely the obvious point is that they are not a citizen of the state which has made them stateless. It seems a No Brainer. So suggesting Mrs Frydenburg should now claim Hungarian citizenship is like saying 'there's your wound, here's the salt to rub into it'.

I am reminded of the Duke of Wellington supposedly saying, 'if you were born in a stable it doesn't make you a horse'. No, it doesn't. In some circumstances it makes you Jesus Christ. In other circumstances it makes you just plain unlucky. Particularly if the stable was tenanted by a restless horse at the time.

NOVEMBER 9th: A jockey has been banned for a fortnight for punching a horse and animal activists and racegoers are up in arms. I quite agree. But why is it okay to whip a horse but not okay to punch that same horse? You can be fined for 'excessive' use of a whip. But that 'excessive' is a very subjective judgement and I am not sure the horse is counting the whacks.

Surely we need to be saying 'cruelty is cruelty', no ifs and buts, and this is okay and that isn't. We have a graded response to cruelty. If it is to pets we are stricter than if it is to sheep in the outback. If it is to expensive racehorses we are a bit more rigorous than if it is to brumbies in the Far West. Bad luck if you are sheep at the end of your woolly life. Very bad luck if you are a cow somewhere beyond Mt Isa. Good luck if you are a pet shop budgie. Bad luck if you are a crow in the wheat belt.

Now there is a good claim to be made for killing creatures, for all sorts of reasons, quickly and humanely. But we waffle all over the place long before we get to that point.

So every person, group, club, safari, government department, remote tribe, film crew, *et al*, which deals with animals, birds, fish, whales, *et al*, needs to have that simple message drummed in: CRUELTY IS CRUELTY.

Oh, you think it is okay to be cruel to cane toads?

Well, let me tell you something, buster, IT ISN'T. Cane toads have a right to be dispatched quickly and humanely. Oh, you hit one with your car and you didn't mean to? Then why did you run your car backwards and forwards ten times? Oh, you were just making sure no other motorist would hit that little bump in the road and flip?

So kind of you.

NOVEMBER 12th: A little girl killed driving a dragster. Only eight years old. I immediately had a picture of the sort of billy-carts kids made and which could only get up any sort of speed if it had a steep downhill run—or perhaps a little put-put go-kart. But no, this machine was said to be able to get up to 90 kilometres per hour. That is serious speed in anybody's book.

So what was an 8-year-old doing in a vehicle able to go 90 kph? You tell me. Her parents sounded distraught. Though presumably they bought the bloody thing and taught her how to drive it.

But no one, neither the ones who criticize the nanny-state-attitude or the ones who want intervention on every possible safety issue, seemed to be asking why any body, group, club, mob of enthusiasts, was putting 8-year-olds into seriously powerful machines.

It is hard being a parent. All kinds of things can happen in the blink-of-an-eye. Take your eye off the little darling and he has scalded himself, fallen down the steps, caught his finger in a door, eaten a fly, got the battery out of a toy and swallowed it. It is hard to prepare for every eventuality.

I am sympathetic. No one can do more than try to make their child's environment safe. And no one can foresee every remarkable thing which may occur—such as the neighbour's kids putting a ball through the window and a glass splinter into your baby's eye. Or all those vehicles which always seem to be leaving the road to crash into buildings full of children.

But I think we can assume that 90 kph dragsters are dangerous to 8-year-olds and plan accordingly.

NOVEMBER 13th: I am sorry to see Jacqui Lambie step down from her senate seat. Should she have known she was a dual citizen? Quite possibly. But I think we are missing a key point here. People's allegiances aren't primarily predicated on the documents they may or may not have tucked away in a suitcase under the bed. People's allegiances are things of their upbringing, family attitudes, things of the heart.

There are plenty of people with sole Aussie citizenship but as soon as a country they have a connection to—Italy say or Tonga—turns up to play soccer or rugby—who do they barrack for? Australia? No way. See an Irish team win something here and all those people suddenly dusting off their passion for Ireland—

Does it matter? Probably not. Or only if we think our Constitution matters.

Or only in the face of National Emergencies.

Many people faced agonizing decisions during wartime. They might solely be Australian citizens but it didn't stop them having friends and relatives back in Germany to whom they owed no allegiance but whose safety and wellbeing still mattered on a personal caring plane. They might not have seen Great-aunt Helga in half-a-century but they still didn't want her blown-up or squashed flat.

NOVEMBER 20th: That call for a Banking Royal Commission refuses to go away. Of course some things refuse to go away because someone keeps winding them up and letting them go, like clockwork mice. But other things just seem to take on a life of their own. I suspect this call belongs to the first reason. Stop winding, Billy Boy, and the whole thing will fade away. And incidentally save the taxpayer a lot of money.

But there are clearly problems, inefficiencies, even criminal acts in the banking sector. So how should they be tackled?

I am not sure that Royal Commissions, any kind of commission or enquiry, is always the best way to go. People have gone to various ombudsmen, to the media, to their local bank branch, even to the police. Some questions have probably been resolved or partly resolved. Would an enquiry go over ground which has already been well-ploughed?

And when people repeatedly call for investigation they seem to be asking for different things. Some people want shonky financial advisers rooted out. Some people obviously don't want banks and insurance companies to be too cosy. Some people object to the huge bonuses and salaries paid to CEOs. Some people grizzle about poor service and closed branches. So should a commission be set up to hear every complaint or are there better simpler quicker cheaper ways to deal with complaints?

I think a key problem is that people no longer see banks as there to provide a service but there purely to sell them something. And they don't like the way the 'something' is being sold and they don't like the 'something' when they get it.

Of course someone investing a hundred thousand dollars is not some poor old pensioner putting a fiver in to a dodgy scheme touted by some bank's financial advisers. We should assume someone clever enough, or canny enough, or hard-working enough, or lucky enough, to amass a hundred thousand dollars has shopped around carefully looking both at the advisers and the products they are touting. If they aren't then I can't help wondering how they managed to put a hundred thousand together.

Among the simple commonsense advice offered by both financial gurus and my grandparents are these points:

1. Never put all your eggs into the one basket—and if any FA is suggesting that, get up and walk out.
2. If a scheme, a company, an investment, sounds too good to be true then don't believe in it. Anything purporting to offer you more than a 3 – 4% return on your investment at the moment needs to be looked at with great care. There are sure to be some provisos.
3. Have a mix of investments. If you really do have a spare hundred thousand sitting around then I assume you would like to get some enjoyment out of the money itself as well as any interest it might generate for you. So putting money into various things, some chosen solely for sound performance and some chosen because they are interesting in themselves, like artworks or becoming part-owner of a golf course, makes sense.

The problem with Royal Commissions is that although people and companies and institutions are put 'on notice' it may be years before they hand down their findings. I hope you have gone to your local police, consumer watchdog, ombudsman, or the media, long before then. And by the time anything is handed down we may be in a differently configured financial world, one in which some institutions are 'too big to fail' and others have gone splat! into the nearest wall.

When things melted down in 2008 and humpies were found to be safer than three-storey mansions I have heard that Norway which had quite a lot of its oil wealth in stocks and shares lost quite a lot of their value. East Timor which had put its oil dividends into US Bonds didn't lose a penny. They hadn't opted for big returns. And instead they had stayed safe. My only caveat is that I am not absolutely convinced of the safety of anything coming out of the US—or staying there, for that matter.

NOVEMBER 21st: I was listening to what was supposed to be an interview with Dick Smith this morning. The interviewer instead turned it into a chance to have an argument and hog most of the air time for himself. I came away from it not a lot the wiser on what Dick Smith was trying to say—and he was probably wondering whether it had really been worth struggling through the traffic to the TV studios to have two minutes of being over-ridden.

I have noticed this propensity with various interviewers. I expect they are nice people but they are breaking the cardinal rule of interviewing. They are doing most of the talking. Why bother to invite a guest if you would rather use that time to air your own views? I tend to tune out such interviews, or change channels, or turn off. It isn't that I don't want interviewers to ask tough and topical questions but anyone who has given up their time to come and be

interviewed surely deserves *some* respect? And in this case I did want to hear Dick Smith's views.

I do agree that we need to discuss population from every angle, both imported and home-grown population. And a Population Policy seems a sensible idea. It doesn't mean everyone will agree but I would like ordinary people to have a chance to have a say. After all, they have to live next door to bigger or smaller populations. New arrivals aren't all rushing off to live in Yarralumla and Potts Point. They tend to end up in already stressed Housing Commission suburbs. So Mr and Mrs Joe Blow in such suburbs should surely have some input.

My suggestion would be: Let's start with a clean slate, ZERO IMMIGRATION, and then ask ourselves just who do we want and why do we want them. Are there skills we genuinely can't provide (and if so, why not?) and do we want people with those skills to come temporarily or permanently. Are there family reunion programs which run well without burdening the health system and which clearly make people who have already come here happier and more productive. Are there numbers of refugees we are either obligated to take or believe we should take—either because we have a moral responsibility (as in the case of people from Vietnam or East Timor) or because we believe that refugees from certain conflicts and persecutions will be both a boon to Australia and will settle in happily. Are our various exchange, working holidays, temporary protection programs, invited experts (we seem to have been keen on inviting in senior police from overseas—and then making sure they couldn't even get to clean out a cowshed let alone an Augean stable) and Filipina Brides Inc. all working out satisfactorily or are people rorting the system, going underground, overstaying visas ...

And when we've looked at all the reasons why people come and whether we are getting the people we *really* want then we can do some sums and see what sort of numbers all this is adding up to.

And I think that added to environmental degradation (and I am very glad I am not a little bird in what was once bushland on Sydney's western outskirts) we should be asking very tough questions about economic degradation. Even Blind Freddy can see that 25 years of continuous growth is not something which will go on for ever—nor should it. Just ask those little birds. If you can find them.

NOVEMBER 29th: So someone doesn't want children to see Snow White because the prince kisses her while she is in a coma, asleep, in suspended animation, this isn't quite clear—but what *is* quite clear is that this is not a consensual kiss and therefore not acceptable.

This is true. But then people, particularly babies and small children, are always receiving non-consensual kisses. Politicians rarely go round kissing babies these days, for which I am sure the babies are grateful, but a lot of other people spend a lot of time kissing babies. And I am not sure that their breath is any fresher, that they are any freer from cold sores, mouth ulcers, incubating flu germs or anything else. And it remains non-consensual.

So how do we get round this problem?

Well, first of all, I am sure Snow White, along with kids in backyard pools, ocean rips, and all kinds of other sudden crises, was extremely grateful for the Kiss of Life. So would I be if I am lying there unconscious on the footpath and some kind person comes along and gives me mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I haven't consented but that seems a minor detail. Of course I might prefer to just expire quietly, if rather publicly, and certainly don't want to be 'brought back'. But there is no way that Good Samaritan can know that, any more than the prince could know that Snow White was hoping to quietly expire.

Secondly, unless we are prepared to give up all kissing of babies then we are going to have to over-ride this question of consent. After all, we shove food down babies' necks and bottles in their mouths and put them down to sleep whether they want to sleep or not. So what's a kiss?

But perhaps that person making a complaint saw an underlying hint of necrophilia and felt uncomfortable. Do children read the same things into folk and fairy stories that adults do? I doubt it. I really can't see eight-year-olds, even very sophisticated eight-year-olds, reading that into the story.

I think Snow White was a brilliant piece of animation when it was made in the 1930s but I do have a beef with the story, all versions of the story, and that is: where was Snow White's father, the king, while all this was going on. First he marries very unwisely, then he apparently turns a blind eye to his daughter working as a drudge in the castle kitchens, then he seemingly doesn't even notice that she has disappeared. That is to cavil, of course, because most kings in fairy tales are remarkably uncaring and obtuse.

Perhaps no one ever remarked on this fact because they believed that the creators of the tales were drawing from real-life models and this was a subversive way of making a particular point?

DECEMBER 1st: Some people are telling the British Prime Minister she should not invite Donald Trump to visit because he is a racist and an idiot.

It is hard to see what they are worrying about. Do they really think that when Commonwealth Heads of Government turn up for meetings in London, or when foreign dignitaries come to London for everything from the Olympics to having their hernias fixed that there are no racists and idiots among them? PULEESE! I don't know what the criteria is? How do we rate racists and idiots? How do we decide what level of groping is OK? Do we really think no Italian leader ever pinches a female bottom and no French president ever makes a suggestive remark? Do we honestly believe that every African leader is a model of dignity and rectitude when it comes to his relations with women? Do we find Arab visitors with their slaves and concubines 'on the nose'? Do we believe that leaders of nations with appalling human rights records should be prevented from visiting those august shores?

Yes, Donald Trump says an awful lot of things better left unsaid on Twitter—but at least we know what he is saying. Do we really think that the behind-closed-doors meetings, if not the mentality, of past presidents is preferable? Is Bill Clinton really *persona non grata* in Britain, if not Australia?

By all means pick on Donald Trump but all this sound and fury, I suspect, is drawing our attention away from more important issues—including human rights abuses and institutionalized racism ...

DECEMBER 4th: A female soldier has suggested that prostitutes be provided to men on active duty. The news story said it was just as well the suggestion had come from a woman as there would be an outcry if it came from a male soldier. In fact this point does not add up. The losers and wankers going to prostitutes aren't the men accused of groping young starlets. It is precisely because these women haven't consented to being groped that there is an uproar. Sex workers are supposed to put up with groping and worse in return for money.

What the story didn't say but which immediately occurred to me was that it was almost certainly a female soldier putting the idea forward *because she was sick and tired of being groped by male soldiers and having to put up with their smutty and suggestive remarks*. Perhaps naively she was hoping that some professionals would take the pressure off ordinary women in the military.

But would it? I can see all kinds of problems—apart from the simple one that not every streetwalker is hankering to go to Afghanistan or other places where she would need to shroud herself from head to toe in black cloth.

Would such women, and I assume that young men are not going to be sent either to service female soldiers or to carry on with other male soldiers, be required to join the military? After all, they are going in to a danger zone, they are going to become privy to some military

secrets, and they are now going to face the double-whammy of PTSD brought on by prostitution (I have read that 70% to 90% of sex workers become drug addicts or alcoholics and suffer PTSD) and by living ‘under fire’. They are almost certainly going to be in line for compensation pay-outs. This raises interesting questions. Will they, for instance, be eligible for promotion? Our new Lance-Corporal has got there from the bedroom. Oh, has she? An interesting new take on modern warfare.

It was said that the stress of the battlefield can be eased by sex. But should the military no matter how concerned about stress be actively encouraging fornication and/or adultery? As opposed to turning a blind eye to what goes on when men are not on active duty.

And what about the wives and girlfriends left behind? We have just seen touching pictures of reunions of men and sweethearts (and new babies) on the dockside. But now every one of those women will face the worry that not only might their partners get killed overseas but that they will be unfaithful, that they may return with nasty antibiotic-resistant diseases, and they may even under stress and loneliness fall for women who see them purely as a business proposition. I wouldn’t want to look into the hearts and minds of those sweethearts.

And will it be a ‘business proposition’? Will the military set rates, provide insurance, make sure condoms and disease checks are regularly carried out, and counsel distressed prostitutes?

The Tasmanian Government sold the Tote because it said it should not be in the business of encouraging gambling. Perhaps the ADF will feel uncomfortable about being in the business of encouraging loveless sex, fornication, and adultery.

And think of the ad campaign they could run: ‘Wonderful opportunity to travel and see unusual places and meet handsome fit young guys’ and then in very small print: Position may involve exposure to rifle fire, grenades, heat, dust, suicide bombers, diarrhoea, kidnap, boredom, abuse from foreign men, and toxic chemicals.

DECEMBER 8th: So President Trump is at it again. Upsetting people, I mean. The general understanding seems to be that he is an idiot. But there are a number of things which need explaining. If he tells us that our capital is not Canberra but Sydney we can tell him politely he’s got that wrong. If he is telling the Israelis that their capital is not Tel Aviv but Jerusalem they can say, no, sorry, you’ve got that wrong. But he is apparently ‘recognizing’ Jerusalem as the capital which isn’t quite the same thing.

I was surprised to learn that most embassies, not all, are in Tel Aviv. After all Jerusalem *is* where most visitors go and where a considerable amount of government and religious affairs happen. So why haven’t most Israelis pulled him up short? I think because they mostly see Jerusalem as the heart of their nation, their culture, their religious life, their history. He is only ‘recognizing’ what a great many people feel.

If the Palestinians want East Jerusalem as their capital should they object to the Israelis having West Jerusalem as *their* capital? It seems so. (No Israeli objects to Mecca as being the focus for all Muslims—and certainly can’t live there or even visit—so it seems natural to me that Jerusalem should remain at the heart of Judaism.) But is Trump putting the Two State ‘Solution’ into jeopardy? And is the Two State a Solution? And if it is why is it so difficult to implement?

And why has Trump leapt in?

Of course people were probably looking for an issue to run with and he has conveniently provided them with one. This is a curious phrase. Some issues stand about getting bored and boring. Some get up and then lie down again. Some wander off into the hazy distance. Some run with lots of yelling and cheering and starting guns going off. Politicians probably need to be trained in how to recognize the different types of issues and whether they are the running sort or the stay-at-home sort.

But the constant chorus that regards Trump as a dangerous idiot begs the question: how did he last so long and do so well in the cut-throat business of New York real estate? I think in

there might be a clue. You don't wait 70 years to do a deal. He is looking round at issues that have fizzled along for 70 years without resolution and his impulse is to jump in and try to bring things to a head. 'Here's the issue, gentlemen, now I want to see some action by next week at the latest.'

And international diplomacy doesn't work like that. The people of East Timor can attest to that. So can other people who saw their tragedies put on the back burner for years even decades, like the people of Namibia, and the question instead becomes: is Trump's way likely to be better or worse than the diplomatic inaction which allowed attempted genocide in Rwanda and which has seen problems fester for generations in the Middle East and the Korean peninsula? Ask me in a month's time.

DECEMBER 12th: So Senator Dastyari bites the dust. In the various comments swirling around I noticed people saying he apologized to the Labor Party but not to his electorate. It raises the question of what responsibility do politicians have in this regard—to a) the electorate, b) the people who actually voted for them, c) the party, d) the parliament? You could add in more nebulous things like 'democracy' but I think that will do for starters.

a)

Any electorate will include a large number of people who didn't vote for that particular candidate but to whom he (or sometimes she) does have a responsibility to bring their needs and concerns to parliament, to help them through his electoral office, and to create legislation which, at the very least, won't disadvantage them. The Hare-Clark system in Tasmania with multiple pollies for each electorate does provide a voice for a greater range of opinion (though you wouldn't always know it) but in most cases around Australia you have 40,000 to 80,000 people of widely varying needs and views being represented by one person. That person does have a responsibility to listen to those views. But when we get to the Senate it gets even more rubbery. A senator represents a State rather than an electorate and cannot realistically listen to everyone. But he does have a responsibility to at least try to be available and accessible. Did Sam Dastyari try to do this?

b)

The people who voted for that representative obviously hope that person will try to give a voice in parliament to the particular concerns of those people. But this is always going to be a difficult juggling act. Did the people who ticked Dastyari's little box believe he brought their issues, their state's issues to Canberra or did they think he was mainly there to provide a youthful pleasant accessible face to Islam in parliament so they could feel good about electing him and good about multifaith multicultural multiethnic trends. Or did they vote for him because they were not impressed by the other candidates on the ballot paper. It would be interesting to know.

c)

The party, in this case the ALP, has warbled and waffled around unwilling to lose that friendly personable young face of Islam in their ranks. And has finally decided 'Sam Must Go!' I cannot help wondering what Bill Shorten knew and when. In the old days young Sam would probably have been called in and given a thorough talking to. I don't think party leaders do that now. But as soon as there was the slightest hint of impropriety I hope Shorten was on the telephone to tell Dastyari to lift his game. Because accepting money from *anyone*, Chinese businessman or casino owner or environmental group or Joe Blow, runs the risk of compromising that person and worse may be seen as a bribe (and accepting bribes is a crime—unless it is Mum saying 'If you don't behave yourself you won't get an icecream') and even worse may make that MP a party to fraud, theft, or other felonies. Clearly Sam Dastyari got himself into a pickle when it came to bribery. But then one heck of a lot of Australia's police find this a similarly challenging temptation. Do we expect more from our pollies than our police? I think we do.

d)

What precisely does any MP owe to both parliament as a group of people and parliament as an institution? Sitting in parliament is a privilege. Only a tiny proportion of Australians get to sit in those hallowed seats (unless they

do a guided tour of parliament when the Houses aren't sitting) so it does bring with it a certain honour, fame, and prestige. You would like to say you think the idea of calling pollies 'Honourable' should be phased out? Yes, honour is a tricky word in this modern world. And with the perks and the salary come responsibilities to be honest, to work hard, to inform yourself as best you can, to speak clearly and informatively, and to provide your electorate with a sense of genuinely being represented. I would also include qualities such as dignity and courtesy but quite a lot of pollies seem to think that if they call a slanging match 'robust discussion' they can get away with anything.

And then there is the question of what constitutes treason. As a constant mob of pollies, state and federal, troop off to China to be wined and dined, to wine and dine, all in the name of trade and who actually keeps rigorous accounts of what was said, what was promised, what carrots were held out and what sticks were kept sheathed I am not sure this is a path Australia might want to go down. Sam Dastyari was just more blatant. Or more greedy. Or more gullible. Or more naïve. Take your pick.

DECEMBER 13th: I have just heard that Australian kids are failing their spelling tests and can't spell words like NOISE. So people are jumping up and down and saying, believe it or not, that parents should read to their kids more. Now, since when has being read to ever taught a kid to spell? A parent constantly dwelling on how each word is spelled would soon bore any kid to tears.

The reason kids used to learn to spell reasonably well. I won't put it more strongly than that, was that they did spelling tests EVERY WEEK. You had a spelling book, you were expected to learn a few spellings every week. If you were lucky or tried hard or had a good memory those spellings stayed in your mind till the next test came around. And spelling was backed up by dictation tests, a brief foray into derivation, writing sentences to use the new words, and with luck a clear description of word and meaning.

Spelling was simply a part of everyday school life. Now, I expect it is just an add-on. And a few more parents reading to a few more kids won't make much difference.

I rarely got read to as a child. My parents were too tired, we had too few books, we were expected to go to bed early and get up early, and we only had kerosene lamps anyway. Teaching spelling was seen as school business. Now schools are expected to do a 101 other things while parents are apparently expected to take over the teaching of spelling. Well, it's a topsy-turvy world so I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.

DECEMBER 14th: The Saga of Sexual Impropriety grinds on. Is there any public figure who hasn't been accused of an inappropriate touch, a smutty joke, a suggestive comment, of baring more of himself than anyone should have to look at? It begins to seem as though nobody is immune.

I began with some sympathy. There are some pretty unpleasant men out there. But I have gradually become more and more uneasy.

Firstly, it is only men in public life who are being accused. No one is coming out and accusing their Uncle Alf or their boss at the local plumbing business of being a groper. Why? Is nobody's uncle a groper unless he's made a name in public life for himself? Or is it that the media is only interested in high-profile gropers? And if men, famous and un-famous, are carrying on an orgy of groping then are there any men out there who have never groped, never even *thought* of groping? I think I would like to meet some of them.

And secondly, we are seeing trial by media and trial by allegation. None of these allegations (other than Rolf Harris) have been heard in a court of law. We have no idea if every allegation would stand up in court or whether women are just jumping on a bandwagon suddenly. It would be unrealistic to suggest that no woman has ever wrongly accused a man. Women accuse men all the time, for revenge, for amusement, to flex their muscles, to assert

their new-found power, to get back at someone else, such as a supplanting wife or lover, or because they have been carried along. In the old days such 'trials' were called 'witch-hunts', then it became 'dirt sells newspapers' and now ...

I would like to think that every one of those allegations is absolutely true. Because if they aren't then a growing number of men are having their lives and reputations destroyed. And their only redress seems to be to pay very expensive lawyers and go through a long process of trying to prove they are innocent even though they haven't been proven guilty.

And, let's face it, once your reputation has been dragged through some very public mud you can never get it to shine brightly again.

DECEMBER 16th: I love the lead-up to Christmas and the thing which puzzles me is that we have all this fun beforehand and then the minute Christmas lunch is out of the way, Christmas is forgotten. It is almost as though people say, 'There, the baby is born, the turkey is eaten—on to the next thing'. I much prefer that idea of The Twelve Days of Christmas. After all it isn't just the birth of a baby which makes for a special occasion. It is the growth and development of that baby which is the excitement. But once Baby Jesus is lying in a manger with a few grubby old lice-ridden shepherds peering at him we seem to think that is the end of the story. I wonder why? Baby Jesus Fatigue?

And talking of fatigue—have you noticed the number of shops which advertise sales coming up to Christmas. It seems we are to live in a perpetual atmosphere of Sales. The other day I said to someone that I thought we were overdoing the use of the word Vulnerable. Words which get used ad infinitum, and without qualification, tend to lose their power. It would be a pity if a word like Vulnerable loses its power. But I really don't mind if Sales loses all power as both a word and a concept, let alone an occasion.

So what if we did it the other way around? Have Christmas and then all the decorations, carols, hoo-hah, and sending cards could come afterwards. Instead of Baby Jesus in a manger we could have Baby Jesus toddling, Baby Jesus learning to feed himself, Baby Jesus kicking his little feet on a rug, Baby Jesus learning to read ... Don't you think that would lead on to lots of nice happy thoughts and people greeting each other with 'Jesus is Here and the family is home safely, isn't that Wonderful News?'

DECEMBER 28th: So our cities are to bristle with bollards, bumps, sirens, and more cameras. Well, why not? They bristle with ads, litter, cars, noise, homeless people and all sorts of other things which don't enhance the concept of 'city living'.

Except that in all the anguished breast-beating we seem to be missing two key points.

1) We can't keep everyone safe from everything, and more particularly from maniacs behind steering wheels, so let's be honest about it. When you step outside your front door you are in danger. Come to think of it, you don't even have to step outside. The number of people who have woken to find a car in their living room and their house threatening to fall down around their ears is constantly escalating. So let's just tell people that life is a dangerous business, death is awkward, painful, and messy. And that you might as well get on with life and stop worrying about what may, but more likely may not, happen.

2) We constantly ask WHY and the answers on offer are not exactly illuminating. We are told with the latest Let's-Mow-Down-Some-Pedestrians moron that drugs and mental issues are to blame. But if every ice addict takes out 3 pedestrians there soon won't be many pedestrians at our intersections. So that is a cop-out. Ditto for mental issues. Some 'whys' never get answered.

We are told that certain people have 'been on police radar', or 'ASIO radar'. But then radar is not the best way of looking inside people's tormented and gruesome thoughts. After all, all sorts of odd little blips turn up on radar and never get explained. They may be UFOs. They may be a speck of fly dirt on the screen. They may be a malfunction. They may ...

Come in X-files and other speculations.

But it isn't the best way to deal with anti-social behaviour.

So what is the best way?

Strangely enough, the old recipe of solid full-time work for the young, and community involvement for everyone else may still be about the best we can do. And if that is beyond us—well, instead of Neon City or Harbour City or Garden City or Never-Sleeps City we can have Bollard City and we could put cute little garden-gnome-type caps on those bollards.

DECEMBER 31st: Someone said to me he was glad to leave 2017 behind because it had been a Horrible Year, shades of the Queen and her Horrible Year, and I said, when do you think we last had a Good Year. He was rather taken aback and said he would have to think about that.

And then he said it also probably had something to do with Instant News. A hundred years ago you might have heard about a war or a terrible train crash three or four months after it had happened. The very gap between action and response somehow seemed to mute the awfulness of it. And of course there were many awful things we never heard about at all.

I thought it also had something to do with Live Action in Full Colour. I am sure cars ploughed into pedestrians regularly in the early days of motoring. But it didn't have the same impact, unless you had a very vivid imagination, if you only saw a grainy black-and-white photo in a newspaper. Those black shapes might be people but then again they might not.

Still Full Colour, Live Action, and all the rest of it is probably here to stay so we need to find productive ways to deal with the awfulness of what we see in the media and sometimes as witnesses. I have two responses: 1. For the things which can be responded to by letters, petitions, demands, visits to pollies, donations to charities etc—go for it. 2. For the things which cannot be responded to in this way I believe strongly in prayer. It costs nothing but the time and quietness and focused mind.

And someone else said he felt immensely grateful for what we have. He lives in a little Housing Commission flat on a disability pension but he is always cheerful and positive. He said 'Clean air, clean water, people out enjoying themselves—what more could anyone want?'

It is true that we rarely take time out to be deeply and truly grateful. It is so much easier to grumble than be grateful. Maybe grumbling is as good as a holiday (and a whole lot cheaper) but, yes, I am grateful for many things. Given the number of my friends who now have awful arthritis in their hands I am even grateful for the way my fingers get around a keyboard.

Would the world be a different place if every function began with a word of gratitude? Or would it seem twee and insincere? Perhaps. But the very act of beginning things with an expression of gratitude might be just what we all need to change every year from a Horrible Year to a Beautiful Year.

So May You Have Some Happy Memories from 2017 and Many Happy Moments to Come in 2018.

(Did Mrs Mop actually write that last sentence? Yes indeed. She was feeling particularly happy, benign, and forgiving as she debated whether she wanted to see yet another lot of fireworks going off—and she didn't even mention her peeve about sending money up in smoke when it could be better spent on other things. I think it had something to do with all the rum she'd sloshed into the fruit cake she was making ... a little might have been diverted ...)

THE END